

‘Internalist’ and ‘externalist’ theories of justification

INTERNALISM AND EVIDENTIALISM

Evidentialism is the theory that justification is about having evidence. To have evidence for the belief that *p*, some argue, is to have another mental state that represents *p* as true. It could be sense experience – you believe the rose is red because you see the rose, and it looks red. Or a memory – you remember where you left your keys. Or it could be that *p* is ‘self-evident’ – you just ‘see’ the truth of ‘if the dog is behind the cat, the cat is in front of the dog’.

Evidentialism is a version of internalism about justification. Internalism claims that if your belief is justified, then you can know what justifies it directly. You have direct access to, and directly recognize, your grounds for that belief. So whenever your belief is justified, you can know that it is justified. It could be that justification is a matter of evidence, and evidence takes the form of a mental state you can access and recognize as evidence.

Internalism and knowing that you know

Internalism is very similar to the view that if you know something, then you know that you know it. It is different in two ways. First, it doesn’t apply just to knowledge, but more broadly, to justified belief. (Not all justified belief is true. It is possible to have very good evidence for a belief, but it is nevertheless false – think of trials in court.) Second, it doesn’t claim that if you know (or have a justified belief) that *p*, then you do know that you know it; it only claims that you can know what justifies it. The process of reflection by which you come to know the grounds for your belief may take some time, and could be difficult. But it is always possible, claims internalism.

EXTERNALISM AND RELIABILISM

Externalism about justification simply denies internalism. It argues that, at least sometimes, you can have a justified belief without knowing what justifies it. The most common version of externalism is reliabilism. (A different (and more popular) form of reliabilism is reliabilism about knowledge, not justification. This is discussed in the handout ‘Responses to Gettier’.)

In its simplest form, reliabilism about justification claims that someone’s belief in *p* is justified if and only if it is produced by a reliable cognitive process, i.e. one that has a tendency to produce a high percentage of true beliefs. Usually, what makes a process reliable is a causal connection between *p* and the belief that *p*. For example, it is that fact that the rose is red, or more accurately, the rose’s redness, that causes me to believe that the rose is red.

Reliabilism rejects evidentialism. It is not the evidence that the person is able to produce that justify a belief; it is the source of the belief. Second, reliabilism doesn’t require the person to know that the process is reliable. The fact that a process is reliable is not

evidence the person needs to have that their belief is true. The person may have no idea how their belief was caused and whether it is reliable or not.

DISCUSSION

Internalists object to reliabilism's separation of justification from evidence. First, in order for your belief to be justified, you must be able to justify it. But this means that you must have access to what justifies your belief. So internalism is true.

Externalists point out that this entails that animals and babies cannot have justified beliefs. Justifying your beliefs requires considerable intellectual ability and self-awareness, which animals and babies don't have. But surely they do have justified beliefs – because the way in which they form beliefs is reliable.

A second objection is that reliability is not necessary for justification. Suppose you are a brain in a vat, and that the computer is programmed so that most of your beliefs are false (e.g. you believe that grass is green, but actually it is red, and so on). Your beliefs are formed in a very unreliable way; yet we should say that your beliefs are justified. You have all the evidence for your beliefs that you have in the real world. So reliability is not necessary for justification; evidence is.

Externalists reply that this has nothing to do with what justification is in the real world. The concept of justification internalists are defending might be philosophically interesting, but it doesn't help us understand non-sceptical cases.

A famous thought-experiment presented by Laurence Bonjour is intended to show that reliability is not sufficient for justification (*The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Ch. 3). Norman is clairvoyant. He is a very reliable clairvoyant – most of the beliefs he has through clairvoyance are, in fact, true. But he's never checked up on these beliefs, and has no idea how he comes by them. He doesn't even believe that they are usually true. Norman no evidence for his beliefs. He even has evidence against his beliefs, given what he knows about science and how we normally come to know things. Suppose he suddenly believes that the head of McDonalds is in a secret meeting about the recipe for burger sauce. Is this belief justified? It just doesn't seem right to say that it is. Why? Because Norman has no evidence.

Some reliabilists insist, counter-intuitively, that Norman's belief is justified. Others reply by adding an additional condition: not only must the process be reliable for the belief to be justified, but the person must not have evidence that their belief is unreliably caused. That the belief is caused in a very unfamiliar way, going against a general scientific understanding of how the world works, is evidence that the belief is unreliably caused (even though, in fact, it is reliable). So it is not justified.

This reply allows that the justification of beliefs produced by a reliable process can be undermined by evidence against them. But it maintains that in the absence of evidence against a belief, the fact that it is produced by a reliable process is enough to justify it. So this is still a form of externalism.