

What is the epistemic externalism/internalism distinction? Which view is preferable, do you think? Defend your answer.

By Miles Fender

In the half-century since Gettier (1963) demonstrated that the traditional tripartite account of knowledge was perhaps not sufficient after all, much scrutiny has been placed on the relationship between true belief and justification. In this essay I will provide a brief summary of the two possible approaches to defining this relationship, highlighting some of the arguments for and objections to each. I will conclude by arguing that the externalist path in this debate may be more likely to arrive at a satisfactory account of justification than the internalist one.

Something like the traditional “justified true belief” (hereafter JTB) account of knowledge is first introduced in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, and (implicitly) establishes the long-standing *internalist* viewpoint by suggesting that one must possess “good reasons” for holding their true beliefs in order to consider them knowledge. This is appealing since it both caters to the intuition that one must arrive at knowledge “responsibly” and also allows for the straightforward dismissal of “accidental” true beliefs as knowledge. More specifically, internalism states that *all* of the factors that make up an agent’s justification for belief must be internal to their cognitive perspective. This position breaks down into further debate about whether the relevant mental states must be reflectively accessible (*accessibilism*; Chisholm, Bonjour), or whether it is sufficient for them simply to *be* mental states, without stipulating that they must be accessible via considered reflection (*mentalism*; Feldman).

Perhaps the most immediate objection to internalism is that it faces strong counterexamples from quite ordinary states of affairs, such as Gettier cases that turn on the notion of “seeing is believing.” To take one of Chisholm’s own examples, we might see what looks like a sheep in a field and thus justifiably form a true belief that there *is* a sheep in the field. Unfortunately, what makes the belief true in this case is that there is a sheep hidden from view behind a hill in the field, and what we are looking at is actually a dog disguised as a sheep. Intuitively, we are very reluctant to allow that our JTB in this instance counts as knowledge (Chisholm 1966).

Attempts to shore up the JTB account with supplementary conditions that solve for such cases have been many and varied, including requirements that beliefs not be *inferred from any falsehood* or be epistemically *lucky*. Unfortunately, such attempts have tended to fall to further counterexamples almost as quickly as they have been proposed, leading some to conclude that an altogether different approach may be required: one that allows for justification to consist (at least partially) in *external* factors.

Thus, *externalism* is - at its core - simply the denial of internalism, suggesting that justification may rely on some condition that is outside of the self. In this sense it is a weaker claim; after all, the externalist need only find a single case of knowledge where the element of justification cannot be accounted for purely in terms of our own cognition. If any such instance can be irrefutably described, then a line can be drawn under the whole business.

A strong argument for externalism concerns the ascription of knowledge to conscious creatures other than rational adult humans, such as infants or animals. For example, we feel intuitively compelled to say that a pet cat *knows* when its food bowl is empty, yet it is difficult to argue that the animal is reflecting upon some epistemically rational internal state.¹ A proponent of mentalism may push back and remind us that the relevant mental states need not be reflectively accessible, and thus we need only grant that the creature *has* some necessary mental state. However, this seems to admit of a casual disregard for which particular mental states may or may not be relevant to the problem of epistemic justification at all.

In any case, trading such examples back and forth is easily done, and thus seems unlikely to yield any significant consensus without wider consideration. Indeed, it is by reflecting on the broader notion of externalism that we may find further clues as to the more plausible position.

Recall that although the internalism/externalism debate is primarily a reaction to the Gettier attack on JTB, the broader concern remains that of providing a sufficient account of knowledge. Justification aside,

¹ I exempt my own cat from this argument, since he does seem to be capable of internally justifying a belief that any bowl less than fifty percent full is, in fact, quite empty.

the requirement of *truth* is one that we cannot conceivably abandon, and (assuming that at least *some* epistemic facts are objectively true) is also one that must involve some degree of external grounding. No amount of internal reflection or arrangement of mental states can change what is objectively true about the world.² Though we may wish to keep this wholly separate from the account of justification, we should arguably feel some discomfort in suggesting that our justifiers for believing what is true *cannot* reside in the external domain.

A useful illustration as to why we might feel this discomfort can be found in the famous Twin-Earth argument for semantic externalism (Putnam 1975). Here we are asked to consider the case of a planet that is exactly like Earth in every respect, except that on Twin-Earth, water is XYZ rather than H₂O. We are further asked to consider that Oscar travels from Earth to Twin-Earth (critically in 1750, before anyone knows about chemical composition) and is shown a glass of water, as is his Doppelgänger Twin-Oscar (a native of Twin-Earth). When each of them points to the glass and says “that’s water”, they clearly have equivalent mental states (justifiably believing that they are looking at a glass of water). However, Oscar’s utterance is *false*. Therefore, in addition to Putnam’s famous conclusion that “meanings just ain’t in the head,” it follows for our purposes that internal states alone are insufficient to distinguish true beliefs from false ones (and thus *justification* is not doing the work that we need it to do).

To push this further, let us consider another concept of externalism. In *The Extended Mind* (Clark 1998), we are introduced to the case of Otto, who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease and is completely reliant on a notebook that he carries with him everywhere. Being unable to form reliable memories on his own, Otto writes every new piece of information he learns in this notebook, and consults it whenever he needs to recall something. In this sense, the notebook plays the same functional role that is ordinarily played by biological memory. Clark argues that when Otto desires to visit the Museum of Modern Art and consults his notebook (which says that the museum is on 53rd Street), his situation is exactly analogous to that of Inga, who has the same desire and instantiates the same true belief by consulting her own memory (having previously learned the location of the museum from a friend). Clark uses this example to make a case that the environment plays an *active role* in cognitive processes, but perhaps we can also draw on it here to make the epistemic internalist just a little more uneasy about the conditions for justification. For arguably, if the internalist wishes to maintain the position that justification consists *only* in internal states, it seems they are faced with two possible choices in the case of Otto and his notebook:

1. Deny that Otto is justified in his belief that the museum is on 53rd Street.
2. Accept that Otto is justified, but deny that this justification has a necessary connection with his notebook.

Neither option seems palatable. If Otto is *not* justified about this belief, then it seems unlikely that he can be justified about *any* belief involving the external world, and it seems rather stubborn to suggest that Otto is simply incapable of expressing propositional knowledge about his environment. However, if Otto *is* justified, then the only way to maintain a purely internalist stance is to dismiss the role of the notebook. Yet without the notebook, Otto could do no more than make a wild guess as to the location of the museum; this would hardly be a responsible way of forming a belief, and would thus undermine the very motivation to argue for internalism in the first place (namely, the strong intuitive reluctance to pull justification and responsibility apart).

Ultimately, it may simply be that the question of whether internalism or externalism provides the correct account of justification depends strongly on what we take knowledge to be. On internalism, the set of propositions that *are* true and the set of propositions that *we can know to be* true are necessarily the same. On externalism, we admit that the former set may be the larger. This admission, while not the most pragmatic, at least protects us from *knowing* something that is not in fact the case.

References

- Chisholm, R. M. 1966. *Theory of Knowledge*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall
Clark, A. 1998. *The Extended Mind*. *Analysis*, 58
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² I deliberately set aside any possible mind-dependent empirical truths here, such as might emerge via the quantum-physical “observer effect.”

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