

## Must good justification be internal to the mind?

By Tony Walton

There are two commonsense intuitions about the nature of knowledge which are captured by various versions of epistemic internalism and externalism. One of those intuitions is that for a person to be said to have knowledge is to say something about the mental processes going on within the mind of the knowing subject - internalism. The other intuition is that for a person to be said to have knowledge is to say something about their relationship with the world of which they have knowledge - externalism. For some philosophers these different intuitions point to what are taken to be incompatible epistemological theories. That is, either one is an internalist or an externalist. In this essay - through a primary focus on the strengths and weaknesses of internalism - I will attempt to show that the two commonsense intuitions both have some merit. While achieving a dialectical resolution between internalism and externalism is beyond the scope of this essay, the implication of what follows is that such a resolution is to be preferred to any claims that the two positions are incommensurable with one another.

According to internalism, epistemic justification lies with cognitive processes internal to the knowing subject. Laurence Bonjour is a well-known exponent of internalism and describes internalism as making 'epistemic justification depend on elements that are internal to the believer's conscious states of mind in a way that makes them accessible to his conscious reflection...' (Bonjour and Sosa 2003, p.7). Pritchard says that 'epistemic internalism ensures there is a significant degree of reflective *transparency* in the epistemic standing of our beliefs which makes it easier to make sense of how we could properly be held to account for those beliefs' (Pritchard 2014, p.2). For Sellars, for example, knowledge is dependent upon the knower being able to set out the reasons for holding a particular belief.<sup>1</sup> Another way in which the internalist idea has been developed involves the KK (Knowing that One Knows) Principle.<sup>2</sup> This is the idea that to know that *p* is to know that one knows that *p*. What all these formulations have in common is a high level of internal reflectiveness on the part of the knowing subject. (What these formulations do *not* have in common is a consistent commitment to either foundationalism or coherentism. For example, Bonjour has shifted his epistemic internalism from a defence of coherentism in Bonjour 1985 to a defence of internalist foundationalism in Bonjour and Sosa 2005).

What does internalism get right? What is the kernel of truth contained in the internalist's standpoint? The key point here is that a defining property of a knowing subject is the capacity for a first person perspective<sup>3</sup>. It is an 'I' that knows. It makes no sense to speak of knowing without reference to a knower that is doing the knowing. Hence the importance of belief as an aspect of knowledge. *S* cannot be said to *know* that *p* unless *S* *believes* that *p*. Knowing involves some level of first person engagement by an active knowing subject.

The internalist's insistence on internal cognitive processes is borne out by the contrast between knowing subjects and machines such as thermostats. Because a thermostat lacks a first person perspective and cannot be said to believe, it would be a mistake to suppose -except in a metaphorical sense- that it *knows* that it should adjust the temperature.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See O'Brien 2017, p.88

<sup>2</sup> See Hemp's article in the *International Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

<sup>3</sup>The general and metaphysical importance of the first person perspective is discussed by Baker, 2007. In relation to epistemology, see Bonjour in Bonjour and Sosa 2003, p.174

<sup>4</sup> The thermostat example glosses over some controversial issues in the philosophy of mind relating to the extent to which computers and programmed devices can be said to think or not.

An obvious objection to internalism - in both its coherentist and foundationalist forms - is that it over-intellectualises knowledge<sup>5</sup>, and consequently denies knowledge to, for example, children and animals. The dog that barks when it hears the distinctive footsteps of its owner walking up the garden path *knows* that the owner is arriving home, but it does not have the mental capacity to know that it knows, or to be in any way reflective on the reasons for its belief. Similarly, much of ordinary adult experience involves unreflective direct knowing. For example, if I am temporarily blinded by oncoming headlights while driving I simply know that I've been dazzled by the lights. No reasoning or reflection is involved, yet I have knowledge.

There are two points to be made about the above. The first is that we can have knowledge which involves minimal and sometimes only tacit reflective understanding. The internalist's over-intellectualisation of the nature of knowledge misrepresents much of our experience of knowing and of what it is like to be a knowing subject. Bonjour, Pritchard, Sellars and others all set the bar too high. As Williamson puts it: 'One is surely not always in a position to know whether one knows *p* (for almost any proposition), however alert and conceptually sophisticated one is' (Williamson 2000, p.23).

Second, according to this line of argument, to have knowledge is to be immersed in the world, to have learned from experience through engagement with it, and to have the ability to recognise, often tacitly, what the world is like and what to expect from it.<sup>6</sup>

The above point connects the discussion with the other main objection to internalism, namely its failure to deal adequately with the knowing subject's engagement with the external world. It is this failure which makes internalism peculiarly prone to Gettier-style objections. In the case of, for example, the stopped clock scenario, however thoroughly someone may have thought about the time, have carefully checked the clock, and responsibly compared the time with other clocks etc., if the clock has stopped, albeit at the correct time, the knower is not in a state of *knowledge*, but in a state of being lucky. The facts of the world - i.e. the stopped clock - vitiate a state of knowledge. As Williamson puts it: 'Knowing is a *factive* attitude; one knows *p* only if *p* is true...' (Williamson 2000, p.21). And as Pritchard says: 'In a nutshell, by internalist lights one can enjoy an excellent epistemic standing for one's worldly beliefs and yet it won't thereby follow that any of these beliefs are even likely to be true' (Pritchard 2014 p.2).

This point can be further elaborated by considering the Evil Demon or envatted brain scenarios. For the internalist, because knowledge claims supervene on internal mental processes alone, there can be no difference between veridical and hallucinatory experiences of the kind generated by the Evil Demon or the brain envatting mad scientist. But there is a difference because the envatted brain stands in an entirely different relationship with the external world from the non-envatted knowing subject. I cannot *know* that I am typing on my computer if my experience is purely hallucinatory. This point gives force to the epistemological disjunctivist thesis and its insistence that hallucinatory and veridical mental experiences are qualitatively different from one another. 'What's important is just that the agent in the good + case sees that certain facts obtain, while the agent in the corresponding bad case, while having experiences which are introspectively indistinguishable from the experiences had by her counterpart, does not see that these facts obtain' (Pritchard 2014, p.41).<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, the key point to emerge from the above discussion is that the knowing subject's connection with the external world is critical to an account of epistemic justification. How that connection is achieved - whether through Goldman's causal

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<sup>5</sup> See Sosa in Bonjour and Sosa 2003, p.212

<sup>6</sup> This sort of approach is developed at length by Dreyfus and Taylor in *Retrieving Realism*, a work heavily influenced by Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger.

<sup>7</sup> See also Pritchard 2016, p.84

connections, Nozick's tracking, or Goldman's later account of reliabilism - is open to debate. However, the epistemic implications of interconnectedness with the external world are fundamental. As Ernest Sosa has put it: If 'the "external" is thus involved in such justification... why not involve environment-involving perception, and even neighbour-involving testimony' (Bonjour and Sosa 2003, p.155). In short, we need a concept of the knowing subject that recognises the constitutive role of interaction with the external world, and indeed with other knowing subjects. Internalism may be a necessary condition of knowledge but it is not sufficient. The most fruitful way forward is to eschew philosophical exclusivity in respect of either internalism or externalism, and to recognise the truth of commonsense intuitions which point to the importance of both internal mental processes and the relationship between knowing subjects and the external world.

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