

THE JUSTIFICATION OF BELIEFS:

INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM

- What does 'justification' in epistemology mean?
- How are beliefs justified?
- Is justification internal or external to one's own mind?

JUSTIFICATION

'Knowing is not just a factual state or condition but a particular *normative status*. Such statuses are related to appropriate factual states: winning depends on crossing the line before any other competitor. But they also depend on meeting certain norms or standards which define, not what you *do* do, but what you *must* or *ought* to do. To characterize someone's claim as expressing or not expressing knowledge is to pass judgement on it. Epistemic judgements are thus a particular kind of *value-judgement*' (Williams, 2001, p.11).

Epistemic justification is concerned with 'whether we have acted well or badly... in forming the beliefs we have'. It's concerned with whether the strategies we adopt in forming our beliefs are ones which we have done well to use – whether they are good strategies, appropriate, and whether they are ones to which we have a right (Kirwan, 1995, p.245). In this way it is generally held that the concept of epistemic justification is in some sense normative (is a concept regarding the norms of belief).

HOW ARE BELIEFS JUSTIFIED?

Reliabilism

Leading proponents include Alvin I. Goldman, and Alvin Plantinga.

Reliabilism can be presented as a theory of knowledge and of justified belief:

- One knows that p if and only if p is true, one believes that p is true, and one has arrived at the belief that p through some reliable process.

- One has a justified belief that p if and only if the belief is the result of a reliable process.

An objection

Some might object that reliabilist theories of justification entail that one can have a justified belief even if one is not aware of the evidence or does not have ‘access’ to the evidence (the evidence which makes the belief justified). But is this problematic?

In response, reliabilists could give examples of acts of perception through which we acquire beliefs about the things we see, and could say that such beliefs are justified even though we do not have ‘access’ to the processes that led to us having those beliefs and which justify those beliefs.

Evidentialism

Evidentialists claim that it is the possession of evidence that makes a belief justified. ‘What is it, though, to possess evidence for believing that p ? Some evidentialists would say it is to be in a mental state that represents p as being true... [E]vidence consists of perceptual, introspective, memorial, and intuitional experiences, and to possess evidence is to have an experience of that kind. So according to this evidentialism, what makes you justified in believing that p is your having an experience that represents p as being true’ (Steup, 2012).

Feldman & Conee’s evidentialism in relation to propositional justification (1985):

S is justified in believing p at t if and only if S ’s evidence at t on balance supports p .

‘ S ’s evidence at t ’ refers to the evidence *that S has* at that time for or against the truth of proposition p , not the evidence *that there is* at that time for or against the truth of p . What does such evidence include? The evidence is ‘internal’, and includes beliefs and experiences: ‘As to what constitutes evidence, it seems clear that this includes both beliefs and sensory states such as feeling very warm and having the visual experience of seeing blue’ (Feldman & Conee, 1985, p.34).

An objection

Critics sometimes reject the claim that a belief is justified only if one’s evidence supports that belief. It may be said that in some situations it can be permissible for one to believe a proposition in the absence of sufficient evidence. Consider, for example, the proposition that God exists. William James argues that one can justifiably believe that God exists in the absence of evidence if believing that God exists and failing to believe that God exists are both options. Believing that

God exists, however, is the option that can offer us something significant that cannot be gained from failing to believe (James, 2003).

Evidentialists may respond by appealing to a distinction between different kinds of justification. They may, for e.g., say that a belief may be pragmatically justified, yet epistemically unjustified.

IS JUSTIFICATION INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL TO ONE'S OWN MIND?

Internalism

Evidentialism is usually associated with internalism. Internalism is the view that what justifies a person's belief depends entirely on internal states, for instance a perception of a thought-process that establishes the belief. A justified belief is one for which one has good reasons; reasons that are bound up with internal states. Further, if a belief is justified, the believer is aware that it is. As the name suggests, an internalist position restricts justifiers to items that are *within* something; specifically, within the subject.

Why support internalism? We might think that justification is a matter of fulfilling one's intellectual duties and that whether or not one has fulfilled one's intellectual duties is entirely an internal matter. Relatedly, an evidentialist might say that one fulfils one's intellectual duties when one has properly taken into account the evidence one possesses.

Roderick Chisholm is well-known for his internalist stance:

‘The internalist assumes that, merely by reflecting upon his own conscious state, he can formulate a set of epistemic principles that will enable him to find out, with respect to any possible belief he has, whether he is justified in having that belief. The epistemic principles

that he formulates are principles that one may come upon and apply merely by sitting in one's armchair, so to speak, and without calling for any outside assistance. In a word, one need only consider one's own state of mind' (Chisholm, 1989, p. 76).

Alvin Plantinga's attack (in Warrant: The Current Debate, 1993, chs. 1-3):

- Argues that we have no epistemic duties for the reason that we have no control over our beliefs.
- Offers counterexamples to the 'notion that epistemic duty fulfillment is necessary and/or sufficient for positive epistemic status' (Plantinga, 1993, p.182).
- Points out that we can have sufficient evidence for a belief without a warrant for it. An example would be a cognitive malfunction or an evil genius producing a false reality. In such cases, our beliefs would be false even though we may have lots of evidence for our beliefs.

Externalism

Externalism is the view that factors other than internal states of the believer are relevant to justification. Reliabilism is one kind of externalism – what matters in terms of justification is that our beliefs are produced by a reliable process. Importantly, and in contrast to internalism, the conditions necessary for a belief to be justified can be fulfilled even if the believer is unaware of the fact.

Why support externalism? We may say that 'what we want from justification is the kind of objective probability needed for

knowledge, and only external conditions on justification imply this probability. So justification has external conditions' (Steup, 2012).

Laurence Bonjour presents the case of Norman to illustrate a problem with externalism:

'Norman, under certain conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against his belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power, under circumstances in which it is completely reliable' (1980, p.62).

Many of us would say that Norman's belief is unjustified. However, since Norman's belief is produced from a reliable process (a process of which he's unaware), on some externalist accounts, his belief would be justified. (Internalists are able to say that because Norman lacks any internal reason for thinking his belief is true, his belief is not justified.) However, the externalist could respond by saying that justification 'tracks' actual facts about the world, and such 'tracking' does not happen in the Norman case. As such, Norman's belief is unjustified.

TO CONSIDER...

An interesting issue concerns whether we ought to adjust our beliefs to fit the available evidence. W. J. Clifford thought this was an obligation. But there may be things we cannot bring ourselves to believe, besides cases where we lack sufficient evidence. In some cases we may have an obligation to seek out evidence (e.g. before acting on a belief, or on ignorance).

You should think about all this in preparation for the webinar.

Bibliography

- Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- Alvin Goldman, 'A Causal Theory of Knowing', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.64, 1967, pp. 357–72.
- Matthias Steup, 'Epistemology', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2012 Edition, accessed at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/epistemology>, on 10/6/13.
- Christopher Kirwan, entry on 'Epistemology, problems of.', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, edited by Ted Honderich (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- William James, 'The Will to Believe', in *The Theory of Knowledge*, third edn, edited by Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), pp.519-26.
- Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, third edn. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989).
- Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: the Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chs. 1- 3.
- Laurence Bonjour, 'Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge', in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 5: *Studies in Epistemology*,

edited by French, Uehling, and Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

-Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, 'Evidentialism', in *Philosophical Studies*, Vol.48, No.1, 1985, pp.15-34.

READING FOR STUDENTS

Essential reading

- Duncan Pritchard, *What is This Thing Called Knowledge?* (London and NY: Routledge, 2006), chs.5 and 6.

Recommended reading

- Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London and NY: Routledge, 1998), pp.221-29 and pp. 231-35

Further reading

For a more challenging read, choose from the following articles:

- John Greco, 'Justification is not Internal', in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, eds. Steup, and Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), ch. 9.

- Richard Feldman, 'Justification is Internal', in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, eds. Steup, and Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), ch. 9.

- Kent Bach, 'A Rationale for Reliabilism', in *The Monist*, Vol.68, No.2, 1985. (If you are interested in doing further reading, see the

other articles in this volume of *The Monist*. This volume contains many relevant papers.)