

Module 8: Internalism vs. Externalism

1. The Theories

A theory of epistemic justification is *internalist* =Df. S's belief that *p* depends solely on factors that are directly accessible through S's internal reflection.¹

A theory of epistemic justification is *externalist* =Df. S's belief that *p* **does not** depend solely on factors that are directly accessible through S's internal reflection.

Internalist	Externalist
Coherentism	Reliabilism
Cartesian (Classical) Foundationalism	
Givenist Foundationalism	
Virtue Epistemology	

2. An Argument for Internalism

- (i) A is epistemically justified in A's belief that *p* provided a belief in *p* is epistemically responsible (whatever that means).
- (ii) A's belief that *p* is epistemically responsible depends upon factors that A has cognitive access.
- (iii) Everything that A has cognitive access to is *internal* to A's perspective.
- (iv) A is epistemically justified in A's belief that *p* only if *p* depends upon factors internal to A's perspective.
- (v) Likewise, if A believes *p, q, r* on factors *x, y, z* (all internal to A's perspective) and B believes *p, q, r* (all internal to B's perspective), then A and B are equally justified in their beliefs.

3. Objections

Rejection of (i), why?

Rejection of (ii), why? An alternative formulation of (ii) might read that A is not epistemically responsible for factors beyond A's cognitive access.

¹ There are a number of other possible formulations of internalism, e.g. (i) S can show that *p*, or (ii) S's belief that *p* is accessible from an internal standpoint, or (iii) S's belief that *p* depends upon a factors that are internal to S's perspective. See Alvin, Goldman. 1980. The Internalist Conception of Justification.

4. An Argument for Externalism

A theory of epistemic justification is *externalist* =Df. S's belief that *p* **does not** depend solely on factors that are directly accessible through S's internal reflection.

An externalist theory might argue that S's belief that *p* is justified provided it was formed in a reliable belief-formation process *R* (reliabilism) or by an intellectual virtue *V* (virtue epistemology). Since it may be the case that both *R* and *V* are outside (or not accessible) to S upon reflection, S is justified that *p* on the basis of factors external to S's perspective.

Consider (v) from the argument for internalism.

(v) Likewise, if A believes *p, q, r* on factors *x, y, z* (all internal to A's perspective) and B believes *p, q, r* (all internal to B's perspective), then A and B are equally justified in their beliefs.

One argument for externalism claims that how *p, q, r* were formed (or caused) are relevant for justification. If A's beliefs were formed by *perception* and *valid reasoning*, while B's beliefs were formed by guessing, an externalist claims that A is justified but B is not. Therefore (v) is false, and externalism is true.

Here is a concrete example. Suppose that A and B are both tasting wine. Suppose that A was trained to distinguish varieties of wine whereas B is not. That is, A has a unique intellectual virtue. Suppose that both A and B believe that a certain wine is a certain vintage of merlot. Here, we suppose that A is justified and B is not.

Here is a different example. Suppose that A has a unique power that A does not know about (clairvoyance) and B does not have such a power. Suppose that both A and B believe that 'The stock market will crash tomorrow', A's belief formed by clairvoyance while B's by guessing. We might say that A's belief is justified (or apt) but B's belief is not. And, since the justification of A's belief depends upon a factor external to A's perspective, internalism is wrong and externalism is right.

5. Splitting the Difference?

Much like how the virtue epistemologist distinguishes between a belief being *apt* (produced by an intellectual virtue) from it being *justified* (a belief being coherent), one could argue that S's belief that *p* is *justified* on the basis of internal factors, S's belief that *p* is *responsible* on the basis of external factors.

The idea here is that there are multiple ways in which one might epistemic evaluate one's belief. We might argue that some factors should be understood in an externalist fashion, while others should be understood in an internalist fashion.

The difficulty with this is giving an account of which kinds of beliefs should be justified by an internalist standpoint while which kinds should be justified by an externalist one.

Epistemic Circularity

How do we know if a particular belief-forming faculty produces justified (reliable) beliefs? What justifies our belief that a particular faculty (e.g. perception) produces justified beliefs?

One Answer: Perception itself tell us that beliefs formed by perception are reliable.

Perception

1. I see a man, from far away, and I think he is John.
2. I walk up to him and see that it is John.

In order to determine my perception is reliable in (1), I made use of perception in (2). I use perception to justify the reliability of perception.

Memory

3. My memory did not fail me on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday.

The justification of (3) assumes that *I am remembering correctly* that my memory did not fail me on those days. I use memory to justify the reliability of memory.

Question:

Is it acceptable to use a faculty *F* to justify the reliability of *F*? For instance, is it epistemically acceptable to justify perception by citing beliefs formed by perception?

YES	NO
<p>Track Record Argument</p> <p>At t1, I formed belief <i>p</i> by <i>F</i>, and <i>p</i>. At t2, I formed belief <i>q</i> by <i>F</i>, and <i>q</i>. At t3, I formed belief <i>r</i> by <i>F</i>, and <i>r</i>. . . . <i>F</i> is a reliable source of belief.</p>	<p>The Liar Argument</p> <p>Suppose you wanted to know if John is honest. You ask John, 'are you honest?' It is pointless to rely on the man himself. If he is not, then he will say yes. If he is, then he will say yes.</p>
<p>Reply to the Track Record Objection #1</p> <p>The objection is absurd for two reasons.</p> <p>#1 If you need to be justified that faculty <i>F</i> is reliable in order to be justified in particular beliefs (<i>p</i>, <i>q</i>, <i>r</i>) formed by <i>F</i>, then it is impossible for animals or children to be justified for they don't have beliefs about <i>F</i> in</p>	<p>Objection #1 to Track Record Arg. #1</p> <p>You cannot have justification that <i>p</i>, or <i>q</i>, or <i>r</i> unless you already assume that <i>F</i> is reliable, for if <i>F</i> was not reliable, then it could very well be <i>not-p</i>, <i>not-q</i>, <i>not-r</i>. In order to be justified in the particular <i>p</i>, <i>q</i>, <i>r</i>, you have to assume that the faculty that produces them is reliable in general.</p>

<p><i>general</i>. That is, animals and children have particular beliefs (p, q, r) but don't necessarily believe anything about the faculty F in general. Therefore they cannot be justified about p, q, r, because they cannot be justified about F. But, animals and children are justified about p, q, r, therefore the objection is absurd.</p> <p>#2 There are many particular beliefs (e.g. $2+2=4$, I am in pain, I exist) that we are justified in but we don't know if we are justified in the procedure that produces them.</p>	<p>The argument is logically circular.²</p>
<p>Reply #2 to Track Record Argument (the argument from Practical Rationality)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forming beliefs on the basis of perception is very different than by a crystal ball. The former is out of our control, the latter is not. 2. It would be extremely difficult to change how we normally form our beliefs. 3. The crystal ball method offers no theoretical advantage (since it is also subject to the same objections as perception). 4. We should continue to form our beliefs based upon firmly-established, time-tested methods (perception, memory, reason, etc.). 	<p>Objection #2 to Track Record Argument</p> <p>The track record argument is absurd because it makes every belief-formation process reliable (i.e. justified).</p> <p>For example, consider a set of beliefs formed by a variety of suspicious belief-formation processes (e.g. crystal ball, method of tenacity, method of authority, a priori method). In using the crystal ball, John believes p, q, r. If John wants to determine whether or not p, q, and r are the case, in order to do this, John uses the crystal ball to check. This is absurd.</p>
<p>Reply #3 to the Objection from Practical Rationality</p> <p>There is an obvious difference between forming one's belief by a crystal ball, the method of authority, or the method of tenacity, <i>and</i> forming one's belief on the basis of <i>perception, memory, reason</i>. The former are only <i>thought to be reliable</i>, while the latter are actually reliable.</p>	<p>Objection #3 to Argument from Practical Rationality</p> <p>The argument is absurd for two reasons.</p> <p>#1 The argument is circular. How does one know that perception, memory, reason are firmly-established, time-tested methods without assuming to <i>perception, memory, and reason</i>.</p> <p>#2 The argument is not convincing. A crystal ball user will argue that using a crystal ball is firmly established in <i>him/her</i>. Also, there are other methods that are (perhaps) more firmly established, e.g. the method of authority.</p>

² A justification/argument for the reliability of a faculty F is *epistemically circular* = Df. (1) the beliefs b that justify F are formed by F . That is, assuming the reliability of the source of belief in order to argue for the reliability of the source of that belief. A justification/argument for the reliability of a faculty F is *logically circular* = Df. (1) the conclusion of the argument is identical to one of the premises.