

# Generalizing Epistemic Internalism and Externalism

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The internalism-externalism debate about justification probably does not have a solution. The internalist says the justification of my beliefs is always reflectively accessible to me, while the externalist denies this. As I see it, the internalist mistakes justification as independent of the world, and the externalist mistakes justification as a mere state of the world. Pessimism about the debate's prospects is not a new sentiment, but I think we still lack an understanding of what makes the debate so insoluble. The central thesis of this paper is that the internalism-externalism dilemma is an instance of a much more general problem, one that we find in all areas of normative philosophy. Roughly, the problem is that in considering *any* evaluative judgement, we must ensure both (i) that the agent is sufficiently 'involved' in the judgement, and (ii) that the judgement has sufficient connection to the way things are. And accomplishing this proves tremendously difficult.

To these ends, I first argue that neither internalism nor externalism alone is satisfactory, and the conciliatory theories on the market are implausible (§1). I then show what's gone wrong in this debate is not unique to justification, but that the problem arises in all areas of normative philosophy. I do so by defining internalism and externalism as positions one can take toward any given virtue, and then arguing that the problem made precise in §1 is equally insoluble for virtues other than justification (§2). I conclude with a sketch of a positive proposal, according to which we must embrace both internalism and externalism when

reasoning about justification: we must follow the internalist in treating the lack of reflectively accessible reasons as sufficient for a lack of justification, and we must follow the externalist in treating these reflectively accessible reasons as not exhausting the sources of justification (§3).

## §1— Internalism and Externalism

*Primer:* In what follows, we will make heavy use of a distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ reasons, and our use of the distinction will be non-standard. For our purposes, a ‘reason’ is simply any source of justification. A reason is ‘internal’ if one can become aware of it through reflection alone. Else, the reason is ‘external’. Colloquially, internal reasons are ‘first-personal’, while external reasons are ‘third-personal’. Given these definitions, internalism becomes the thesis that all reasons are internal, and externalism becomes the thesis that there are external reasons.

(a) *Two Features of Justification:* There are two features of justification which appear to be in tension. On the one hand, we often infer from a person’s lack of internal reasons for a belief that they are unjustified. If you ask me why I think the president is in New York, and I am unable to give you a reason, then you might worry that my belief is unjustified—after all, I appear to have no reason to think it. So, it seems that a lack of internal reasons for a belief is sufficient for the belief to be unjustified. Call this the ‘internal reason’ requirement on justification. On the other hand, we care about justification because we think justified beliefs are likely to be true. And it is hard to see how the mere possession of these internal reasons can satisfy this requirement. (I defend this below in 1*b*.) If this is true, then it seems that a belief’s lack of independent warrant, of being likely to be true, might also be enough to render it unjustified—something we might call the ‘external reason’ requirement.

As I see it, the internalism-externalism debate regards which of these features should take primacy over the other. The internalist takes the internal reason requirement at face value, concluding that the justificatory status of an agent's belief must be reflectively accessible to them; while the externalist takes the external reason requirement at face value, concluding that the mere possession of internal reasons isn't enough. If both of these features really are requirements on justification, then we should anticipate that neither theory alone will be satisfactory. I now wish to show that this is indeed so.

(b) *Internalism*: The internalist is motivated by the apparent truth of the internal reasons requirement. We often infer from an agent's lack of internal reasons for a belief that their belief is unjustified. If this inference is to be valid, then all reasons must be internal. So the internalist has a direct account of this apparent feature of justification. Unsurprisingly, however, the internalist fails to account for the external reasons requirement.

We care about justification because we think justified beliefs are likely to be true. If this is so, and if an internal reason cannot dictate whether a belief is likely to be true, then there must be external reasons. Internal reasons cannot dictate whether a belief is likely to be true because, for a belief to be likely to be true, my internal reasons must in fact be trustworthy. This trustworthiness is not reflectively accessible to me—it is an external reason.

Now, internalists have given replies to this worry. For instance, according to Lehrer [1990], although it is true that our reasons and evidence need not be trustworthy, it is sufficient that we take them to be so. So, on this view, it is sufficient to capture the external reasons requirement that we take our reasons to be connected to the truth. After all, if you press me on why I think

my reasons suggest my belief is likely to be true, I will probably cite my belief that these reasons are trustworthy.

But this suggestion has just pushed the problem back a step. For, my belief that my reasons are trustworthy does not make them in fact trustworthy. The external reason requirement demands that justified beliefs be connected to the truth. Therefore, my belief that they are thus connected does nothing to ensure this.

If the ‘external reason’ requirement really is a feature of justification, this seems to leave internalism untenable. There is no reflectively accessible factor which could yield the required truth-connection. Plainly, part of what it is to be justified in a belief is for the belief to in fact be likely to be true, and no internal reasons can satisfy this.

(c) *Externalism*: We have seen that the external reasons requirement leaves internalism untenable. Given this, we may plausibly conclude the factors which determine the justificatory status of one’s beliefs’ needn’t be reflectively accessible—the externalist thesis. But this creates problems of its own—externalism fails to account for the internal reasons requirement.

The problem with externalism is that it allows for the conceptual possibility that one can have a justified belief, in spite of an utter ignorance of the external factors which determine its justification.<sup>33</sup> If I believe that the president is in New York and, when pressed, I have no reasons to cite, then, for the externalist, it is still an open question whether my belief is justified. For the justificatory status of my belief needn’t be reflectively accessible

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33 Importantly, the externalist needn’t say that such a belief would enjoy any admirable degree of justification. For example, the externalist could say that external reasons alone cannot yield the degree of justification required for knowledge.

to me. This result is undesirable, as it fails to account for the internal reason requirement—it allows for me to have a justified belief without possessing any reason to believe it.

In sum, justification seems to require at once solely internal reasons, and somehow external reasons as well—internalism fails to capture the external reason requirement, and externalism fails to capture the internal reason requirement.

(d) *Reconciling*: Various versions of the above reasoning have been noted,<sup>34</sup> and it has led theorists to try to somehow reconcile the two positions. Unfortunately, I do not think there is a satisfactory conciliatory theory on the market. (Part of the problem is that the theorist proposing the conciliatory story tends to be of an either internalist or externalist leaning, and this contaminates the reconciliation). The template conciliatory approach is to say that the internal and external reason requirements are features of different ‘conceptions’ of justification—and this is usually followed up with a claim that one or the other kind is more theoretically interesting. To give us a flavour of this tendency, I consider the conciliatory theory of Lehrer [2000]. Much of my dissatisfaction with Lehrer’s account will be easily transferable to other prominent conciliatory theories.<sup>35</sup>

Lehrer suggests that internalism and externalism are motivated by distinct conceptions of justification. The internalist’s justification—the kind which requires solely internal reasons—is the kind of justification that would figure in an account of what Lehrer calls ‘discursive knowledge’. Discursive knowledge is the knowledge that figures in reasoning, used to confirm and refute hypotheses; critical evaluation and a possession of internal reasons

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34 For example, Zagzebski [2011], page 288.

35 Some of these include Foley [1993], and Goldman [1988].

are essential to it (Lehrer [2000], p. 638). In contrast, the externalist's justification is the kind of justification that would figure in an account of what Lehrer calls 'primitive knowledge'. Primitive knowledge is a kind of bare information possession—enough to get by, as it were. It is in this latter sense that a dog knows where their bowl is.

I think Lehrer's conciliatory approach faces insurmountable difficulties, but the strongest of these are peculiar to his theory.<sup>36</sup> I will focus on the problem which faces it *qua* conciliatory theory. The problem, as I see it, is the very suggestion that there are two conceptions of justification at work. The epistemologist studies *knowledge*, full stop. So we shouldn't allow our disagreements over its nature to give us reason to posit different conceptions of knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Plainly, I think the internalist and the externalist are in genuine disagreement. They disagree about *justification*, that honorific title we give to beliefs which are epistemically praiseworthy. It just turns out that part of what gives these beliefs this status is a purely internal matter, and part of it is an external matter. This fact should not lead us to posit a kind of justification for each of these requirements. It is simply that

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36 For instance, it is unclear that Lehrer's picture does not yield a decidedly externalist theory. For, if discursive knowledge requires primitive knowledge, and primitive knowledge requires external reasons, then *ipso facto*, discursive knowledge requires external reasons. Now, Lehrer denies that discursive knowledge does require primitive knowledge, but I think he is plainly mistaken about this. After all, we should hope that part of what it is to possess *good* discursive reasons for a belief is, at least, to have enough information to get by. If I am so informationally inept that I cannot even navigate my home, then I presumably do not have good reasons for my belief about the location of my refrigerator.

37 Of course, this is only true to an extent. If epistemologists disagreed over whether knowledge was of a proposition or of a skill, the right reaction would be to posit two kinds of knowledge (namely, propositional knowledge and 'know-how'). But as I have said, I do not think this is the right reaction here.

justification, as with everything of philosophical interest, is of a puzzling nature.

## §2—Generalizing

So far, we have seen good reason to doubt the prospects of either internalism or externalism alone, at least as long as we have correctly described the internal and external requirements on justification. Moreover, we have cast doubt on any conciliatory approach which posits ‘two conceptions’ of justification. It is now time to take a step back and ask ourselves what has gone wrong.

I have suggested that the problem is not peculiar to justification, but rather arises in all areas of normative philosophy. It will be most natural to carry out this generalization using language from virtue theory, though its use is ultimately dispensable. If we allow ourselves to think of justification as a ‘virtue’—some excellent characteristic in a person and their beliefs—then we quickly see that the internalism-externalism debate is an instance of a more general problem, one that arises in considering any virtue. Call ‘virtue internalism’ the view that we can infer from a person’s lack of reflective access to their virtuousness, that they in fact lack the virtue. ‘Virtue externalism’, then, is the view that one can possess a virtue without having reflective access to this fact. The general problem is that neither virtue internalism nor externalism alone is satisfactory. The former has the unwieldy consequence that I am virtuous so long as I think I am. Somehow, virtue internalism gives the agent too much ‘authority’. The latter has the unwieldy consequence that I can be virtuous in spite of an utter ignorance—even upon reflection—of the external factors which determine my virtuousness. Virtue externalism seems to give the agent too little authority. We want to know how much authority one should have

in assessing one's own virtuousness, and neither theory seems to predict the right answer.

This problem has been noted in the case of various individual virtues. Perhaps most generally, McMullin [2018] notices the problem in the case of happiness or 'flourishing', a kind of general positive character of one's life. We do not want to allow for someone to be flourishing so long as they think they are; nor do we want to allow for someone to be flourishing in spite of being convinced they are miserable. So neither internalism nor externalism about flourishing will do. The symmetry with the internalism-externalism debate continues, as this difficulty has motivated the positing of 'two conceptions' of flourishing (see Haybron [2008]).

So, if we see justification as a virtue, then we can view the internalist-externalist debate as an instance of the general problem that neither virtue internalism nor externalism is satisfactory. Moreover, the language of 'authority' applies nicely to justification. We want to know how much authority one should have in assessing the justificatory status of one's beliefs, and neither internalism nor externalism predicts the right answer. This gives us a satisfying account as to why the internalism-externalism debate about justification is so difficult. The debate is an instance of a problem that faces all of normative philosophy: neither internalism nor externalism about any virtue is satisfactory. It is no surprise, then, that neither internalism nor externalism about justification is satisfactory.

### **§3—A Sketch of an Answer**

This generalization explains why the debate has been so insoluble, but it would be nice if it suggested a positive theory. Unfortunately, it may seem that we are even worse off than we had



been. For, in generalizing the problem, we have raised the bar accordingly for what counts as a solution. This is because when one encounters two deeply analogous philosophical problems, one should be wary of a solution to one which is not analogous to a solution to the other. So, whatever solution we provide for the internalism–externalism debate about justification, it should mirror a solution for the analogous debates about the other virtues. And that sounds like quite the task.

I do think our finding suggests a positive theory, but I do not think it is particularly satisfying. The positive theory is that there is no reconciliation to be had between the internal and external reason requirements on justification, and so no reconciliation to be had between internalism and externalism. Our finding suggests this precisely because the underlying problem has been found to be so pervasive; so the prospects for a genuine reconciliation of virtue internalism and virtue externalism are bleak.

Although I have expressed dissatisfaction with the various ‘two conceptions’ solutions to the debate, we see now that there is some truth to be found in the approach. What is right about the approach is it accepts there is no genuine solution to the debate. What is wrong about the approach is that it takes this to require that there is no genuine disagreement—rather, there must be ‘two conceptions’ of justification at work. So the question, now, is this: how are we to make sense of this genuine disagreement about justification that does not seem to have a genuine resolution? The rough answer I’d like to give is that we must somehow incorporate both internalism and externalism about justification into our epistemic reasoning. In forming beliefs, we must give ourselves enough authority to take our internal reasons seriously, and to judge those without internal reasons as unjustified; but we must also acknowledge that our internal reasons needn’t be

enough for justification, and that we do not in fact have the ultimate authority on the justificatory status of our beliefs.

This answer seems to apply to other instances of the problem as well. In evaluating, say, the status of our happiness, we must give ourselves enough authority to take our internal feelings seriously, and to infer from our internal misery that we are in fact unhappy; and yet we must also acknowledge that these internal feelings needn't on their own determine the status of our happiness.

This is far from a final theory of internalism and externalism. But once we recognize that the debate is an instance of this more general problem, and that this more general problem probably does not have a genuine solution, I think it will be something like this picture to which we are irresistibly led.

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