

Notions of epistemic
internalism and
externalism
philosophy essay



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Epistemic justification is the basis for both internalism and externalism as they relate to knowledge. Until the onset of the Gettier problems, knowledge had been commonly held as justified true belief, that is, justification added to true belief makes knowledge. However it is more commonly recognized now that there must be another element to the equation. What kind of justification? It is this question that brings forth the notions of epistemic internalism and externalism, and this question which will be critically addressed in this essay.

Epistemic internalism refers to justification as an “internal” matter of various mental states and their relation to knowledge. Internal matter consists of memories, perceptions, reflections, etc., all of which can give rise to justification irrespective of how they relate to the external world. In other words, if you know some premise (p) then you must also know that you know (p), which is the justification of your belief. To be assessed further in this essay, internalism is supported by the related principles of evidentialism, the conclusive justification theory, virtue epistemology, and the deontological conception of epistemic justification.

Inversely, epistemic externalism upholds that a decent theory of knowledge should involve a component of external justification, instead of, or in addition to internal justifications. Justification must come from some form of reliable logical process or cognitive faculty, not merely to be inferred by reflection. You can know some premise (p), if and only if your belief that (p) is i. True, and ii. justified. Again, with further investigation of the externalist foundations of reliabilism, the casual theory of knowledge, and the truth

tracking condition of belief, epistemic externalism will be examined and evaluated.

Internalism is primarily influenced by appealing to evidentialism as premise. Evidentialists, true to their name, require evidence to support the justification of a belief. As aforementioned, this evidence is of an internal nature, meaning, “ if a person S is internally justified in believing a certain thing, then this may be something he can internally know just by reflecting upon his own state of mind” (Chisholm, 1989: 7) Chisholm means that something must be what he calls “ directly recognizable”, or recognizable upon reflection, and on any occasion. When these two qualifications meet, then they, “ constitute grounds, or reasons, or evidence for thinking that we know [something]” (Chisholm, 1977: 17). He takes this theory further and separates his justification requirements into “ accessibility internalism” in which justification is recognizable upon reflection, and in terms of the accessibility of the justification, and “ mental state internalism”, which requires that ‘ justifiers’ must be internal to the mind (i. e. mental states or events). These theories extend a constraint over justification, making it necessarily directly recognizable. Matthias Steup gives the equation example, “ any time at which S holds a justified belief B, S is in a position to know at T that B is justified” (Steup, 2001). This means that because S is able to directly recognize B, then T is the time at which direct recognition takes place. This claim, however, is refuted by external justification and will be addressed in the externalist argument to follow.

Some support for internalism includes the deontological conception of epistemic justification, which is a concept of epistemic (not ethical) duties <https://assignbuster.com/notions-of-epistemic-internalism-and-externalism-philosophy-essay/>

which arise in the pursuit of truth (Pappas, 2005). An equation to exemplify this, “ S is justified in believing P if in believing P, S does not violate any of his epistemic duties” or, “ if in believing P, S does not fail to do what he ought to in the pursuit of truth” (Steup, 2001). According to George Pappas, justification is a matter of epistemic duty fulfilment, making what determines justification identical to what determines epistemic duty. Subsequently, if what determines justification and duty is directly recognizable, then justification is directly recognizable (to one’s self).

Internalists argue that reliable belief formation is neither necessary nor sufficient for justification or knowledge, when added to true belief (unless supported by adequate evidence). Take the example of Descartes’ most sceptical theory, the Evil Demon argument, in which one cannot be sure of anything but one’s own existence, due to the fact that there is no way of knowing whether or not you are being deceived. To prove that reliable belief production is not necessary for justification, internalists appeal to the possibility of deception by this demon. According to the argument, one’s beliefs in the normal world would mirror that of the evil world, thus making it impossible to detect deception. However while beliefs in the normal world would be true, beliefs in the evil world would be false and, according to externalism, thus unjustified. According to internalism however, beliefs in the evil world are also supported by adequate evidence (there is no difference as far as your evidence is concerned) and so are in fact justified. And so, according to internalists, beliefs in the evil demon world, are also usually supported by adequate evidence and are thus justified. Internalists reject the

claim that being produced by reliable cognitive faculties is a necessary condition of epistemic justification (Steup, 2001).

In the case of externalism it is important to understand the underpinning theories which comprise this epistemic view. Reliabilism as a theory of knowledge does not require justification, but requires truth and a reliable belief formation, for which internal reflection does not suffice. A defender of reliabilism and thus externalism as well, Frede Dretske argues that justification is not a necessary element of knowledge. By asserting that an animal is able to possess knowledge for example and that by acting on inherent beliefs enables it to know something, “ what additional benefits are conferred by a justification that the beliefs are being produced in some reliable way? If there are no additional benefits, what good is this justification? Why should we insist that no one can have knowledge without it?” (Dretske, 1989: 95). Because of some cognitive origin of the animal’s belief, a reflection based internal justification becomes unnecessary and obsolete. It is however imperative that the ‘ cognitive origin of belief’ is reliable. Without the reliability constraint the connection between justification and truth becomes too tenuous. Externalists as a whole believe that it is because of the link between justification and truth being so flimsy, that they demand proof of a strong likelihood of truth. This thing (x) which produces or provides reliability to a belief must, “ yield mostly true beliefs in sufficiently large and varied run of employments in situations of the sorts we typically encounter” (Alston, 1993: 9). It is this truth factor of reliability (absent from the internalist requirements for justification) that rules out a system of beliefs perceived to be justified, but which are in fact being

produced by an evil demon who creates falsity within our lives. Since the beliefs held in the evil world would not be true, and thus reliable, then they cannot be known. This proof then begs the question, of what use is internal justification if it is the sort that an evil deceiver may possess. (Steup, 2001). Externalists refute internal justification as valid, a position that does seem to make sense practically. Simply because someone can perceive of something or reflect upon something in their mind, does not necessarily make that thing knowledge.

In support of externalism is the premise of the casual belief theory, which suggests that some extra condition must be placed upon justified true belief solely comprising knowledge. This extra condition is held by externalists to be a reliable cognitive process. The truth tracking condition, developed by Robert Nozick in his 1981 work *Philosophical Explorations*, claims that knowledge must be true belief plus a truth tracking condition, articulated in terms of a “subjunctive connection to the world”. To summarize, it seems that knowledge is just a foundational concept to which we can apply various theories to provide justification in certain instances. Externalism as a theory recognizes this and instead of requiring justification by mental evidence, instead simply calls for a logical process of understanding which then leads the subject to the attainment of knowledge.

Due to the convincing elements of Dretske’s assertion about an animal’s ability to possess knowledge without the ability to reflect upon it, and the two epistemic notions of Descartes’ evil demon argument, it does seem that externalism is a more plausible theory of knowledge. The ability to know that you know something in your own mind remains unconvincing in terms of <https://assignbuster.com/notions-of-epistemic-internalism-and-externalism-philosophy-essay/>

knowledge requirements and true belief. Externalists view justification as an evaluative term of appraisal, meaning that it is used to judge the nature of a belief, not to determine whether or not a belief can be knowledge.

Internalists on the other hand require justification, but limit this justification to mental processes. It simply seems illogical to suppose that memories, beliefs, and reflection can be requirements for knowledge, when truth and a reliable external reasoning process is a much more valid and solid approach to gaining knowledge.