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Abstract

Epistemology has experienced an explosion of diversification over the past hundred years regarding the concept of justification. Internalists claim that they hold the intuitive support, often in the context of the New Evil Demon Problem. In this paper I challenge the notion that externalism claims no support from intuitions. I further argue that internalists and externalists are talking about two completely distinct types of justification and show that internalists shift the focus onto the excusability of a believer for holding a belief rather than the justification of the belief itself and in fact frequently equivocate the two. I finally appeal to several arguments against the possibility of justified false beliefs to further bolster the general reliabilist position.

Excuses, Equivocation, and the New Evil Demon Problem

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Abstract

Epistemology has experienced an explosion of diversification over the past hundred years regarding the concept of *justification*. Internalists claim that they hold the intuitive support, often in the context of the New Evil Demon Problem. In this paper I challenge the notion that externalism claims no support from intuitions. I further argue that internalists and externalists are talking about two completely distinct types of justification and show that internalists shift the focus onto the excusability of a believer for holding a belief rather than the justification of the belief itself and in fact frequently equivocate the two. I finally appeal to several arguments against the possibility of justified false beliefs to further bolster the general reliabilist position.

Assume Sophie is capable of knowing true propositions, that she possesses reliable belief-forming processes, and that she is actually interacting with the external world. Now imagine Sophie's epistemic twin. Twin Sophie has the same preferences and tastes, the same beliefs and the same sensory experiences, and Twin Sophie thinks that she is interacting with the external world. However, Twin Sophie is actually being deceived. All of her sensory experience (the exact same sensory experience that the real Sophie experiences) is being manufactured by a highly sophisticated computer simulation. Although the real Sophie and Twin Sophie are otherwise epistemically indistinguishable, the problem that arises is this: some intuitively want to say that both Sophie and Twin Sophie are equally epistemically justified in their beliefs, even though Twin Sophie's beliefs are false. This intuitive claim made by internalists about justification, sometimes referred to as *parity*, seems to be a contradiction of the definition of reliabilism, which would assert something like "S's belief that *p* is justified if the processes that produced S's belief are reliable in the kind of environment in which S's belief was formed and there is no reliable process the subject has such that if this process were used as well this would result in the subject's not believing *p*."¹

There are varying degrees of response to this perceived problem, but the extent to which it is truly a problem for reliabilism may lie simply in that it is a knee-jerk intuitive response. This paper will argue that, contrary to what internalists would have us think, there are scenarios that elicit intuitions which broadly support externalism. Further, it will demonstrate that there is a valid distinction between personal and doxastic justification, showing in the process that internalists and externalists are talking about two completely distinct types of justification and that internalists shift the focus onto the excusability of a believer for holding a belief rather than the justification of the belief itself, and in fact frequently equivocate the two. This distinction, in turn, will show that parity has no claim to entailing internalism. Finally the paper will appeal to several arguments against the possibility of justified false beliefs to further bolster the general reliabilist position.

Clayton Littlejohn makes several arguments in his paper *The Externalist's Demon* for scenarios which elicit intuitions favoring reliabilism, two of which seem especially problematic for internalist appeals to intuition. The first of these involves a principle which Littlejohn refers to as *asymmetry*, which claims that it is possible for there to be a pair of epistemic counterparts, S and S', of which (a) only one of the pair has good reason to believe *p* and have a justified belief about *p* or (b) S has better reasons to believe *p* than S' does. Suppose that Andrew and Jonny are epistemic twins. If Andrew knows that Jonny is completely deceived about his experiences, Andrew might think (1) "if my reasons for believing I have hands are no better than Jonny's reasons for believing he has hands, I shouldn't believe I have hands," (2) "if my reasons for believing I have hands are no better than Jonny's reasons for believing he has hands, I really have no good reasons for believing I have hands." Now imagine if he said something like (3) "even though I have no better reason to believe I have hands than Jonny does to believe he has hands, there is nothing wrong with me continuing to believe I have hands." While (1) and (2) are fine, (3) intuitively seems wrong. Littlejohn is quick to point out that this is not some sort of trickery; it is borne out by empirical studies that folk intuitions seem to indicate that what justifies action depends on more than just the mental states of the agent.² Asymmetry doesn't expose any weakness in the internalist line of reasoning; rather its intended effect is to demonstrate that internalism does not have the sole claim to folk intuitions.

The second scenario that appeals to intuitions claims there is a meaningful distinction to be made between personal justification and doxastic justification. This distinguishes personal justification, stated as "S is justified in believing *p*," from doxastic justification, stated as "S holds the justified belief that *p*." Littlejohn contests the idea that the former entails the latter, and sets forward an argument for justification as a defense. S can be defended from criticism for Φ -ing if there is a way to properly excuse him for Φ -ing. S can be excused for Φ -ing even if his Φ -ing was wrong. If S's Φ -ing is wrong, it cannot be justified. Therefore, S can be justified for Φ -ing even if the Φ -ing itself is not justified. An interesting consequence of this argument for the personal/doxastic distinction is that it is impossible to state, "I am justified in believing *p*, but there is no justification for believing *p*." However it seems completely fine to say "Bill believes *p* and I can defend him for believing that. However, I cannot defend the belief that *p*." It also helps us see why from an internalist perspective, the distinction has disastrous consequences – if the justification of a belief depends on something other than the non-factive mental states of the believer, then the internalist conception is in trouble.

The appeal to a distinction between personal justification and doxastic justification is not original or unique to Littlejohn. In fact, it appears implicitly in the literature as early as Catherine Lowy's article *Gettier's Notion of Justification*. Although she doesn't explicitly draw a distinction between personal justification and doxastic justification in those terms, she does point out that "it is important to note that Gettier uses the locution 'S is justified in believing *p*,' rather than, for instance, 'S has the justified belief that *p*,' consistently."³ On this formulation Gettier is not really saying that there can be justified false belief, only that a person can be excused for having a false belief that she has no way of discovering is false. Mylan Engel makes this distinction abundantly clear by presenting it as a biconditional, which he calls the *equivalency thesis* – "S is epistemically justified in believing that *p* iff S's belief that *p* is epistemically justified."⁴ In fact, he goes so far as to blame the entire internalist/externalist debate on the "flip-flopping" from one side of the equivalency thesis to the other in the literature, and that the two sides of the biconditional do not even "purport" to explain the same thing. It surely seems like the left side of the equivalency thesis, or claims about S's justification in believing *p* is typically the explicit

definition favored by internalists (stated above by Lowy), and the right side, claims about S's belief that *p* being justified is the definition favored by externalists. Engel's account of personal justification is set out in the form of two claims. The first is that S is personally justified in believing that *p* iff S is worthy of epistemic praise for believing that *p*. The second is that S is personally unjustified in believing that *p* iff S deserves epistemic blame for believing that *p*. As shown previously, it seems counterintuitive to claim that the demon's victim (or Twin Sophie, or the observer of Gettier's fake barns) deserves epistemic blame for her beliefs, but this does not entail that the false belief is itself justified, only that the victim does not deserve blame for her false belief.

Some internalists object that there cannot possibly be this other type of positive epistemic status that we want to call personal justification. David Reiter declares that on Engel's conception of justification, personal justification must just be a type of doxastic justification. Further, if personal justification is indeed a type of doxastic justification, it fails because if positive epistemic status confers high objective probability, and we want to say that a person can be personally justified in a demon world, it seems obvious that the demon's victim is not lending herself to a high objective probability of getting at the correct beliefs.⁵ However, this is not really a criticism of Engel's equivalency thesis; it is merely an attempt to conflate the two sides. Certainly the demon's victim is not lending herself to a high objective probability of getting at the correct beliefs, but referring back to Engel's criteria she deserves no epistemic blame – she simply is in no position to appreciate that she is being deceived.

We can evaluate the validity of the equivalency thesis independently of Reiter's confounded criticism. Engel's example is this – “Sally is told by her incompetent logic instructor that modus ponens is an invalid argument form. Not realizing her instructor's incompetence, she comes to regard modus ponens as an invalid form. One day, in a moment of wanton logical abandon, she comes to hold a belief on the basis of a modus ponens argument with obviously true premises. Here we have a situation where Sally's belief is perfectly reasonable (since it follows from obviously true premises), but Sally is unjustified in believing it (because, given her situation, she is being epistemically irresponsible in using modus ponens).”⁶ Using this example, Engel shows that it is possible to independently evaluate a believer and her belief, contrary to what Reiter claims. It is also useful because it is the exact inverse of the typical examples given to illustrate this distinction, such as the example of Twin Sophie being excused for holding a clearly false belief simply because she has no access to the fact that she is being deceived. Engel's example presents us with a scenario where the belief is justified, but the believer is not. This further underscores the possibility of independently evaluating a believer and her belief set forth in the equivalency thesis.

The problem shared by most reliabilist solutions to the Gettier problem and the New Evil Demon problem is that they ignore the distinction between personal and doxastic justification and attempt to add some additional qualification for knowledge. Engel himself falls into this trap by committing himself to a reliability thesis. The odd thing about this is that, as Littlejohn's and Engel's arguments show, it should be abundantly clear that there is in fact a legitimate distinction in the first place. A reliabilist account that attempts to add a further qualification for knowledge is doomed from the start because it is an attempt to give an externalist answer for the internalist side of the biconditional. The failure in most of the literature to explicitly distinguish between personal and doxastic justification results in what Kent Bach describes this way – “people seem to be bothered by the very idea of reliabilism...yet its supporters can't seem to understand its opponents' complaints.”⁷ When Laurence Bonjour describes the difference between the internalist conception of justification as requiring that the believer is rational and

epistemically responsible in holding his belief, and the externalist conception of justification allowing that the source of justification may be external to the believer's "subjective conception of the situation,"⁸ what he seems to be describing is the exact distinction Engel argues for.

This puts us in a position to see why parity does not necessarily entail internalism. While internalism about justification in general claims that the justification of an agent's beliefs is entailed by that agent's non-factive mental states, parity assumes that if two individuals are epistemic counterparts they are justified in believing the same things. Sophie walks to the park, Twin Sophie thinks she is walking to the park – while Sophie is correct in her assessment, Twin Sophie surely is not. However, there is something weird about claiming that the justification of the belief is fixed by the non-factive mental states the two Sophies share. Yet it would be equally strange to blame Twin Sophie in any way for her belief that she is walking to the park. Employing the distinction between personal and doxastic justification, it is clear that the claim of parity is simply referring to the fact that Twin Sophie is excusable for her mistaken belief – she is personally justified, but she is not doxastically justified. This application of parity is a far cry from entailing internalism.

Richard Foley has a well-known aversion to reliabilism. He alleges that it is either too general to work or too narrow to be interesting, and that it fails as a necessary condition for rationality. Littlejohn has two responses to these objections. When he first sets out the general externalist view, he does so in a way that accommodates all the intuitions involved. For Littlejohn's broad conception of externalism it is not the case that the justification of S's beliefs is fixed completely by S's non-factive mental states. If justification is a defense against criticism, "whether that is criticism based on considerations available to the believer or available only to those who appraise the believer's beliefs, it seems to follow the conditions that determine whether a belief is justified include those that supervene on our non-factive mental states but are not limited to such conditions."⁹ This claim is borne out by the personal/doxastic distinction set out by Engel. If Littlejohn's argument that parity does not entail internalism is correct, he is free to claim that justification is inherently an externalist notion "because defensibly believing something is an externalist notion," since the justification of a belief depends on something besides the non-factive mental states of the believer. Foley, however, sees no meaningful distinction between what it is rational for S to believe and what S is justified in believing. For Foley to criticize a belief is to criticize a believer for having that belief. Littlejohn's and Engel's arguments allow us to say that justification simply does not work in this way. According to the distinction set forward in Engel's equivalency thesis, it is just fine for an internalist to say that personal justification is an internalist notion, but that claim does not entail that doxastic justification is also an internalist notion.

Foley also claims that in a demon world, our ordinary beliefs are false but justified. In addition to the previous arguments against this sort of claim (the argument for justification as a defense, the argument from the equivalency thesis, and the argument from parity), which show that an excusably held belief may not necessarily be a justified belief, there is another argument available which concentrates solely on doxastic justification. Littlejohn argues in *The Myth of the False Justified Belief* that the notion of a false justified belief violates the obligation to refrain from believing falsehoods. His argument rests on two main points - that the justifying reasons for belief consist of true propositions, and that if justifying reasons are facts then justification ascriptions are factive. It surely seems odd to contest the first point. Who could claim that one of the justifying reasons for a belief could be false? The second point can be summarized in the same sort of way as an argument covered previously – that the belief that *p* is not justified unless *p* is true.¹⁰

There is a clever and concise formulation of the first point. If p is a justifying reason, it explains some normative feature of a belief or action. Falsehoods explain nothing. Therefore, falsehoods cannot possibly constitute justifying reasons. Littlejohn argues this way – “if p is a reason to Φ , it explains why Φ -ing would be favorable. If p plays such explanatory roles, p must be true since falsehoods explain nothing.”¹¹ From this argument it is clear how to derive the second point, that S 's belief that p is not justified unless p is true. S cannot justifiably believe p without believing for good reasons. Remember the asymmetry example of Andrew and Jonny. The justification of a belief depends on both the reasons in support of the belief and the absence of reasons against the belief, and it makes little sense to believe something that you cannot appreciate any of the logical consequences of or reason from. If Andrew has no better reasons than his deceived epistemic counterpart Jonny to believe he has hands, then he shouldn't continue to believe that he has hands. Conversely, if Jonny were to suddenly come to the belief that he had no hands, while the belief might be true he would be unjustified in believing it since he is in no position to apply this belief in any sort of practical reasoning, and further (as Engel's example of Sally shows) he would be epistemically irresponsible in holding the belief that he has no hands because none of his normal reasons or beliefs would ever lead to that conclusion.

Littlejohn demonstrates that the internalists' first argument, that their view is the only one supported by folk intuition, is incorrect. The principle of asymmetry clearly elicits a particular response in favor of the externalist conception of justification, and the presentation of justification as a defense accommodates those intuitions as well. In addition, the most common internalist objections about reliabilism, which rest on the assumption that parity necessarily entails internalism, are shown to be incorrect using Engel's equivalency thesis. Further, the reliabilist can go on the counter-offensive by using the argument of justification as a defense to argue that justification itself is inherently an externalist notion. This brings us to the final internalist claim that the beliefs of the demon's victim are just as justified as our own. Arguing that justifying reasons are facts and justification ascriptions are factive, the false justified belief is banished to myth. While these arguments certainly won't close the door on the internalist/externalist debate without further work on answering skeptical problems and the relationship between justification and knowledge, by embracing folk intuitions in the sometimes-secluded field of epistemology they avoid “constant obsessive repetition of the same small range of jejune examples.”¹²

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¹ Goldman 1979

² Knobe 2006

³ Lowy 1978

⁴ Engel 1992

⁵ Reiter 1998

⁶ Engel 1992

⁷ Bach 1985

⁸ BonJour 1980

⁹ Littlejohn 2009

¹⁰ Littlejohn 2012 (forthcoming)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Austin 1962