Phil. 159: Epistemology
Apr. 19, 2022

Lecture 23: Defending Internalism

I. The Internalism/Externalism Divide

Two ways of defining internalism about epistemic justification:

1. *accessibilism*: The epistemic justification of a person's belief is determined by things to which the person has some special sort of access.

2. *mentalism*: The epistemic justification of a person's belief is determined by things that are internal to the person's mental life.

Conee & Feldman advocate mentalism:

> Their main argument for mentalism is that it yields intuitively plausible verdicts about a range of representative examples ("Internalism Defended," pp. 409–10). They generalize from these examples to the conclusion that "every variety of change that brings about or enhances justification either internalizes an external fact or makes a purely internal difference" (p. 410).

II. Goldman's Attack on Internalism

The general form of internalist theories: "a belief B is justified just in case there is some combination of internal states—typically featuring an experience or another justified belief—that is suitably related to B" ("Internalism Defended," p. 410).

Thus we can distinguish between two types of objections to internalism:

- Those that focus on the *internal states* that allegedly confer justification on a given belief.

- Those that focus on the *connection* between the justification-conferring internal states and the belief that they allegedly justify.

Here are two of Goldman's objections that focus on the *internal states*:

- *the problem of stored beliefs*: "At any given time, the vast majority of one's beliefs are stored in memory rather than occurrent or active. . . . Furthermore, for almost any of these beliefs, one's conscious state at the time includes nothing that justifies it" ("Internalism Exposed," p. 382).

Two varieties of mentalism:

> *strong mentalism*: The epistemic justification of a person's belief is determined by that person's current conscious mental states.
>
> *weak mentalism*: The epistemic justification of a person's belief is determined by that person's current conscious mental states, as well as whatever that person has retained in memory.

Weak mentalists have no problem with this objection.

Strong mentalists can reply by distinguishing between *occurrent* and *dispositional justification*:

> A belief is *occurrently justified* for a person iff the person's current conscious states justify it.
>
> A belief is *dispositionally justified* for a person iff (roughly) were the person to consider the matter, the person would be in conscious mental states that would justify it.

- *the problem of forgotten evidence*: "Many justified beliefs are ones for which an agent once had adequate evidence that she subsequently forgot" ("Internalism Exposed," p. 383).

  In reply, both strong and weak mentalists can appeal to the vivacity of one's recollection and one's concomitant feeling of confidence. Weak mentalists can also appeal to bits of readily retrievable evidence that support the belief, and to stored beliefs about the general reliability of memory.

  > *Goldman's counter-reply*: This can't be the whole story, or else someone who first learned that *p* from a disreputable source (but then forgot the evidence) would have as justified a belief as someone in the same mental state who learned that *p* from a perfectly reliable source.
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  > *Conee & Feldman's counter-counter-reply*: The difference in these two cases is not that one person's belief is justified whereas the other person's is not; rather, the difference is that one person's belief constitutes knowledge, whereas the other person's does not (for it is a Gettier case).

Here is an objection of Goldman's that focuses on the *connection* between the internal states and the belief:

- *the problem of support relations*: ". . . every traditional form of internalism involves some appeal to logical relations, probabilistic relations, or their ilk. . . . None of these logical or probabilistic relations is itself a mental state, either a conscious state or a stored state. So these states do not qualify as justifiers according to [mentalism]" ("Internalism Exposed," pp. 384–85).

  The issue: does there need to be an internal representation of the support relation?

  > (Conee & Feldman, somewhat mysteriously, take this question to be equivalent to the following: does the subject need to have evidence that there is such a relation of support?)

  In more complex cases, Conee & Feldman think that there does need to be an internal representation of the support relation (or, equivalently for them, the subject does need to have evidence that there is such a relation of support).

  In simpler cases, Conee & Feldman think internalists can go either way:

  > The internalist can claim that if a person has a justified belief in proposition P, and Q is an extremely simple logical consequence of P, then that person does not need to have a separate internal representation of *the fact that Q is a logical consequence of P* in order for her to be justified in believing Q.
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  > > "Perhaps it is part of understanding P [well enough to believe it] that one grasps the connection between P and Q" ("Internalism Defended," p. 416).
  > >
  > > But this still raises the question: is the fact that one grasps such a connection determined entirely by the mental states that one is in?
  >
  > Or the internalist can insist that the person does need to have an internal representation, but this internal representation can take the form of evidence that such a relation of support exists.
  >
  > > "This evidence can come from direct insight or from any other source" (ibid.).
  > >
  > > But then we can ask: what about the (new) relation of support between that evidence and the claim it supports? A regress threatens here.