

Adopting Bacon's Approach to Reconciling Internalism and Externalism Rift

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Abstract

Internalism and externalism are two rival theories of epistemic justification. For obvious reasons, they are fundamentally different on the grounds and methods of justification to be considered and adopted – internal disposition of the epistemic agent or some factors external to the epistemic agent. This paper contributes to the debate by playing a reconciliatory role. It does not hybridise or fuse the two theories to become one. It, however, argues, using Bacon's analogy of the insects as a paradigm for this sort of reconciliation. It concludes that their agitations can be taken care of by giving both avenues to assess and justify knowledge claim.

Keywords: Externalism, internalism, Bacon's insect analogy, cognitive blamelessness

Introduction

Externalism and internalism have been adopted as evaluative theories to examine some epistemic claims, where such claims are usually linked with epistemic activities in a epistemic community. Hence, in this sense, externalism, on the one hand, is the view that tends to hold back the right to accessibility to the basis of experts' evaluation. On the other hand, internalism is when each member of the community has to evaluate the reliability of the experts from first person perspective.¹ Prior to the period of being adopted as evaluative claims, they were meant to contribute to the idea of resolving, so to speak, the problem already created in the area of epistemic justification,

1. Tomoju Shogenji, "Internalism and Externalism in Meliorative Epistemology" *Erkenntnis* (1975-), Vol. 76, No. 1 (January, 2002), 59



which is that of infinite regress.² In those attempts, focus has been on just one epistemic subject; thereby making discussions of scholars revolve around an epistemic agent. But, introduction of internalist-externalist debate over the issue makes it a social discussion, having realised that no matter what, epistemic discourses should not be a one man enterprise.³ It is one this ground that scholars are divided over which of the theories is a viable alternative.

John Greco and John Turri seem to have dragged the debate which apparently elongates rivalry and makes people think the two theories are irreconcilable. Prior to Greco's publication⁴ and that of John Turri,⁵ the scholarship atmosphere was not tensed, which would have suggested that the debate was a trivial one. In other words, it should not have arisen. This implies that Greco and Turri intensified academic enmity to make the debate become a serious one. This does not mean that those who have contributed to the debate have not taken it seriously. It means, however, that their disagreement is not a 'closing eyes' one.

². Infinite regress is a perennial problem associated with, especially, foundationalism as a theory of epistemic justification. It has put many theories of epistemic justification into disrepute all because of their inability to find solution to the problem. In that regard, the theories, *abinitio*, thought to be viable alternatives turn out to be otherwise. For details on Infinite regress, see A. Cortens, "Foundationalism and the Regress Argument" *Disputatio*, Vol. 12, (May, 2002), 22-37

³. A one man show philosophy is described as arm chair philosophy. This is the case in which one individual sees it all. D. A Masolo has, however, cautioned against this practice. This is because any analysis here is going to be subjective; hence, it is at the discretion and mercies of the author. For details, see his "African Philosophy and the Postcolonial: Some Misleading Abstractions about "Identity"" in E. C. Eze (Ed), *Post Colonial African Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), 283-299

⁴. John Greco, "Is Justification Internal?: Justification is Not Internal" in M. Steup, J. Turri and E. Sosa (Eds), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, Second Edition, (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2005) 257-269

⁵. John Turri, "On the General Argument Internalism" *Synthese*, Vol. 170, No. 1 (Sept. 2009), 147-153

Nicholas Silins has suggested that the externalist internalist debate should be reconfigured. For him, both are not infallible.⁶ There are two components to Silins' view. While one is considered tenable, the other one is not a plausible position. That which is not plausible is the one that claims that both are infallible. One needs to ask that if they are infallible, then, why the debate? What are generally known of argument are;

- (a) both arguers can be wrong;
- (b) only one of the two arguers can be correct;
- (c) both arguers cannot be correct.

Given this, the latter component, which is relevant to this discussion is taken. 'Would be reconfigured' as used by Silins, should be, and is, interpreted to mean that there should be a way such that their differences would be amenable.⁷

Externalism and internalism are no doubt rival theories in both epistemology and philosophy of mind. The paper assesses their epistemological relevance. It makes case for possible reconciliation, although the reconciliation meant is not to formulate another theory. It is meant to give both theories some chances in justificatory roles having discovered that none of the two can be jettisoned easily.

Bacon's analogy of the insect is used and adopted as a paradigm for this sort of reconciliation. It is observed that epistemic agent cannot justify his/her knowledge claim of the external world without appealing to some internal disposition/facts. It must be pointed out that both theories have their challenges. One can decide to ignore both given the fact that they are not problem free. This will, however, not be a good decision. It implies that any theory that is problematic should be thrown away. Despite their shortcomings there are still some good things about them. It

⁶. Nicholas Silins, "The Evil Demon Inside" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (March 2020), 325-343

⁷. See Nicholas Silins, "Reading the Bad News about Other Minds" *Philosophical Issues*, (2020), 293-310 and D. Smithies, "Access Internalism and the Extended Mind" in A. Carter Et al (Eds.), *Extended Epistemology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 17-41

is on this ground that the paper recommends this idea of reconciliation, which is allowing both theories to function.

Bacon's Analogy of the Insect

Bacon's analogy of insect was partly an attempt to reconcile the position of the empiricist and the rationalist. Although, he was an empiricist, his version of empiricism can be considered a moderate one.⁸ His use of insects to illustrate and drive home his points further proves this. He selects three insects to explicate this. His selection of the insects might be informed by the basic and distinctive features of these insects.⁹ They are bee, ant and spider.

For ants, their nature is to gather and accumulate things in their environment to do whatever they want to do. In actual fact, they do not add from their inner part to whatever they might have gathered. They only work on the available substances before them. This could be referred to as extreme externalist.

There is the second category of people who can be likened with spider. Spider has the ability to make cob-web. Within a twinkle of an eye, it would have produced more web than imagined. All these are from within spider. It does not get anything from outside; it uses all it has within itself to produce cob-web. For Bacon, this is also not good enough.¹⁰

The third kind of insect is bee. While it cannot be denied that bees have inner ability and capacity to produce honey, the taste of the honey is not gotten from the internal part of the bee, rather it is sourced for from outside, from plants. Hence, the taste of any honey produced depends on the plants under which bees are reared to produce a certain taste. Bacon regards this as the best of the insects. This is also similar to Kant's attempt at reconciling

⁸. Joseph Agassi, *The Very Idea of Modern Science: Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle*, (New York: Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg, 2013), 34

⁹. Perez Zagorin, *Francis Bacon*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8-11

¹⁰. Cathrine D. Bowen, , *Francis Bacon: The Temper of a Man*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 82

empiricism and rationalism.¹¹ Looking at the analogy above, it is not as if it does not have its own problems. The problems are, however not to be discussed here for its non-important role. What is intended is to look at externalism and internalism, not as rival theories of epistemic justification, although, it has always been, but how they can be reconciled in a way.

Internalism vs. Externalism

The debate between epistemic internalists and externalists is about whether what confers justification on a belief is necessarily internal to the agent. All epistemic internalists agree that justification consists in reasons or evidence that are somehow internal to the agent's cognitive perspective, and upon which s/he bases her belief, so that she has a justified belief, but they disagree over how to understand the notion of being internal.¹²

There are two distinct kinds of justification. On the one hand, beliefs seem to be the subject of justification. On the other hand, epistemic agent is the focus of justification.¹³ If this is the case, then, why controversy? Is the controversy not pseudo? The formal is referred to as doxastic justification which is attributed to externalist. The latter is personal justification which is that of internalist. In this regard, it appears they are not concerned about the same subject matter.

The upshot of the famous "twin earth" arguments has been that meaning and content are in part in the world and in the language community.¹⁴ This is the debate between internalism and externalism one can know via sense perception only if one knows that sense perception is reliable. Similarly, one can know by inductive reasoning only if one knows that inductive reasoning is

¹¹. Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early Modern Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 34

¹². John Greco, "Internalism vs Externalism" in Donald M. Borchert (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Second Edition, Vol. 4, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2006), 718

¹³. David Reiter, "Engel on Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology" in *Erkenntnis* (1975-), Vol. 49, No. 2, (1998), 175

¹⁴. Robert Pierson, "Alston's Concept of Justification" in *Teorema*, Vol. 22, No. 3, (2003), 50

reliable. This creates problems for the internalist, because it is hard to understand how one can mount a noncircular argument to the desired conclusions about the reliability of one's cognitive powers. There is, however, no such problem for the externalist since the externalist can deny the initial assumption of the sceptical argument. For example, an externalist can insist that sense perception gives rise to knowledge so long as sense perception is in fact reliable. There need be no requirement, on an externalist account, that one know that one's perception is reliable. What is more, on an externalist account one seemingly can know that one's cognitive powers are reliable, and easily so.¹⁵

Internalism

Internalism is the view that considering a particular claim is determined by intrinsic primary properties and involves no extrinsic properties.¹⁶ It is what is referred to as personal justification. This type of epistemic justification is applicable to persons. What is evaluated is the epistemic agent. So, if the epistemic agent is evaluated as personally justified in believing what he claims to believe. For Engel, he is evaluated positive from the epistemic point of view.¹⁷ It can be said that an epistemic agent is personally justified in believing whatsoever he believes expressively on the condition that s/he has a high objective probability of being true.¹⁸ Thinking in this direction is thinking in an absurd way. The claim that an epistemic agent will be objective in an internalist perspective will be mistaken or erroneous. It can be strongly doubted that an individual can possess an objective probability. Its possibility is doubted even in Kantian *noumena* world or Plato's intelligible world.

To rescue internalism from this, and to give it a more probable soft landing, it can be said that the epistemic agent is worthy of epistemic praise for believing in what he believes. What is meant

¹⁵. John Greco, "Internalism vs Externalism", 718

¹⁶. Ernest Sosa, "Between Internalism and Externalism" *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 1, Consciousness, (1991), 179

¹⁷. Mylan Engel, "Personal and Doxastic Justification in Epistemology" *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 67, (1992), 139

¹⁸. David Reiter, "Engel on Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology", 176

by praise-worthiness is that of epistemic responsibility. The epistemic agent believes “in an epistemically responsible fashion.”¹⁹ An implication can be drawn here, that is, one can think of the reverse, which is epistemic blame. In other words, the negative implication of this can be drawn. This further complicates the whole process. It equally leads to these following possible objections.

Bearing in mind, the idea of epistemic point of view which concerns itself the goal of maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs, pressure is to be felt, especially when the epistemic agent has to justify his claim such that the question “is the status of having come to believe p in an epistemically responsible fashion a positive status relative to epistemic goal?” can be raised. There seems to be some kind of epistemic relief of sort if truth-conducive is introduced. In that case, one will be talking about the fact that a “belief is a positive epistemic status only if coming to believe p in an epistemically responsible fashion of *objectively* truth conducive.”²⁰ What is referred to as objectively truth conducive is “only if coming to believe p in an epistemically responsible fashion helps one to maximize truth and minimize falsity in a large number of beliefs.”²¹ Here again, the epistemic relief surfaced will hit the rock for there is the problem of understanding epistemically responsible belief to mean truth conducive. It can equally not be understood or interpreted to mean something else.

Given the controversial nature of the understanding of the link between epistemically responsible fashion and truth conducive as property, further explications may be of help. It must be understood that truth conducive is in a strong sense being truth entailing where the epistemic agent’s belief may even be false.²² It means internalism will be concerned about justifying and rationalizing the beliefs an epistemic agent has for his knowledge

¹⁹. Reiter, 177

²⁰. Reiter, 177

²¹. Jeeloo Liu, “Physical Externalism and Social Externalism: Are They Really Compatible?” *Journal of Philosophical Research* Vol. 27, (2002), 385

²². David Reiter, “Engel on Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology”, 178

claim which is determined by internal facts. Is 'internal facts' not problematic? The phrase used is problematic. James Pryor defines internal facts as "facts to which one has a special kind of access."²³

An epistemic agent possesses special kind of access to a fact if one is in a position to know such fact by reflection alone. Reflection is an "*a priori* reasoning introspective awareness of one's own mental states and one's memory of knowledge acquired. When an epistemic agent claims that a belief is rational, s/he is saying that holding onto such belief is proceeding to cognitively blamelessness fashion. This is because one cannot fairly be blamed for not responding to a fact that one was not in a position to know.²⁴

It is, however, doubtful whether the claim that rationality is just a matter of cognitive blamelessness explains internalism. If one cannot be blamed actually for not responding to a fact that is not within the reach of one to know.²⁵ This poses more problems. That rationality is simply a matter of mere cognitive blamelessness seems false. Wedgwood gives two ways in which an act can be considered blamelessness. It is either the act is justified or excusable. If A kills B all in the process of the former defending himself against being murdered by B, then, A's act may be justified. If on the other hand, A kills B because the former is insane and confirmed so, then, his act is excusable, although it may not be justified. If linked with blamelessness, either of the two cases could not be blamed for their act.

Another serious challenge pointed out by Dionysis Christias is that

internalist argumentative model of
justification is the justification of a
cognitively spontaneous belief (however
obvious its content may seem to us)

²³. James Pryor, "Highlights of Recent Epistemology" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 52, (2001), 103-104

²⁴. William Alston, *Epistemic Justification*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989)

²⁵. Alvin Goldman, "Internalism Exposed" *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 96, (1997), 271-293

presupposes an epistemically prior justification of the (meta) belief to the effect that content (and origin) of the cognitively spontaneous belief in question is what the subject thinks it is and not something else.²⁶

Given these challenges faced by internalism, it is obvious that it is not a viable theory, hence externalism.

Externalism

Externalism as opposed to internalism holds that the content of various mental states such as beliefs and desires may at least in part constitutively depend on features of one's physical or social environment. This is a moderate version of externalism, which is referred to as content externalism. There is active externalism (be it in the form of the extended mind thesis or the extended and distributed cognition hypotheses) holds that mental states and cognitive processes extend beyond the agent's biological organism to the artifacts or even to other agents that he or she mutually interacts with.²⁷ In either of the two, the external world is necessary in justifying. This is the reason its justification is being referred to as doxastic, and internalism is associated with personal justification.

For the externalists, their mode of justification appears objective. The epistemic agent is not the focus, instead his beliefs are what are considered whether they are truly condition that will qualify for knowledge. "In this case, a person's belief is evaluated from the epistemic point of view; this epistemic point of view is defined by the goal maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs."²⁸ The agent's beliefs epistemically evaluated from the epistemic point of view iff it is a sufficiently

²⁶. Dionysis Christias, "A Critical Examination of Bonjour's, Haack's and Dancy's Theory of Empirical Justification" *Logos and Episteme: An International Journal of Epistemology*, Vol. 6, Iss. 1, (2015), 13

²⁷. D. H. Prichard, "Cognitive Ability and the Extended Cognition Thesis" *Synthese*, Vol. 175, (2010), 135

²⁸. Mylan Engel, "Personal and Doxastic Justification in Epistemology", 137

high objective probability of being true.²⁹ For a belief to have objective probability it must be the case that it is the product of a cognitive belief forming process and most of the outputs/results are true. The probability mentioned is not to be seen as confusion. A belief is to be justified whether it can serve as knowledge or not; its status is still under probability. Its being justified or not makes it knowledge or otherwise.

The cognitive belief forming process informs the externalists to conceive that an individual's thought contents, according to Kirk Ludwig³⁰ are particularly logically determined by his/her relations to events, objects, kinds and so on in his environment. The externalist thesis can then be summarized thus: content properties are in part relational properties where "a property P is a relational property just in case, necessarily for any object O, if O has P, then there is an X such that X is (i) not an abstract object and (ii) X is not identical to O or to any part of O."³¹

From the above, two forms of externalism are distinguished, bearing in mind the initial kinds. These new ones are constitute externalism and modal externalism. The modal externalism is the thesis that no internal properties are logically sufficient for mental content.³² For constitute externalism is the thesis that relations between an individual and his environment are constitutions of his contents.³³ The second form seems to explain better what externalism is really is. Although, the two are interconnected, for they both purport what the core of externalism is. The core of externalism is that justification must be sought in relation with the external world. The mental content referred to here is the justificatory ability that is purely a mental act.

As expounded so far, the core of externalism, irrespective of any form or kind is the appeal to the external world for justification.

²⁹. David Reiter, "Engel on Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology", 176

³⁰. Kirk A. Ludwig, "Externalism, Naturalism and Method" *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 4, Naturalism and Normativity, (1993), 251

³¹. Ludwig, 251

³². Ludwig, 253

³³. Ludwig, 253

In other words, if externalism is to be understood, its basis is the denial of internalist thesis that reflective, careful agents are able to make assessments of their reasons for a belief in order to determine whether such belief is justified.

Externalism is not without its own shortcomings. While moderate externalism can have a place in justification, extreme externalism cannot have any place. One will then ask which one is moderate and which one is extreme. Modal externalism is the extreme, while constitutive externalism is the moderate one. The extreme is too harsh in giving way for the position of internalism, for instance. The moderate one that tends to accommodate internalism will be going out of its boundary.

It may be argued that the externalist notion of justifying is more objective than the internalist. Those who want to justify a claim have access to what they want to justify. It does not mean, however, that the internalist mode of justification should be disregarded. An instance is the law court where both modes of justification are applicable.

Conclusion

Bacon uses the analogy of the insect to explain the fact that, although rationalist and empiricists are at logger heads over which of the two schools actually has a genuine claim for source of knowledge. Bacon's analogy suggests that empiricism alone cannot lay claim to this, because there are important aspects of human life that cannot be wished away. In fact, an individual that sticks to empiricism alone is the same as somebody that does not think or reflect on issues. Such a person may not be relevant in the society; for s/he has no meaningful contribution to his/her environment. If, on the other hand, the person is like a spider, his existence in the society is also not helpful. S/he may decide to live alone without minding co-habitants; Bacon also condemns this saying although, he may be knowledgeable, but his impact of knowledge is not felt in his environment. If one looks at the two insects, they are not doing any good thing.

The nature of bee allows hybridization of what it gets from outside and what it gets within itself. Externalism and internalism are rival theories of epistemic justification, each

agitating for method suitable for each to explicate knowledge claim. Externalism appears to be objective than internalism; hence, the former should be adopted. However, there is a room for internalism as a theory. Since it deals with mental reflective aspect, it cannot be jettisoned. If externalism alone is given consideration, then, it will be like ant that relies on the external world alone. On the other hand, if internalism alone is given priority over and above externalism, it will be like spider that thinks it does not have anything to do with the external world. This will not be of help as well. But if the method of bee is adopted, it then means both will work together.

Let us pause for a while and think about a scenario of wetness of ground. If an individual sees a ground that is wet, the best is to reason whether the wetness of the ground is as a result of rain or that somebody pours water or tanker carrying water fell. Any of the options finally as the last option will be as a result of some reconciliatory attempt which must have taken place. The reconciliatory attempt is reconciling the individual's thought with the physical occurrence that has happened to see whether his/her thought is true or not. For the externalist, interpretation of physical events is inevitable. It must be borne in mind that interpretation of an action is nothing but a mental act. In other words, while the external world/environment is helpful in determining some thought content in the environment, which is a different thing from the purely abstract thought.

This paper is not suggesting a new theory, perhaps combination of internalism and externalism to read an epistemic theory like Haack's foundherentism. There may not be room for that, for if what is intended is not to form any theory that will be problem free. I doubt if there can be a theory in philosophy that will be problem free. If this is the case, the new theory to be formed will not be problem free. This is, however, not the reason why a new theory is not proposed. Both theories under consideration have their merits and demerits. What is, therefore, suggested is that both should be given their places when trying to justify epistemic claim by epistemic agents.

Another reason for this is that the feature of rationality does not give support for internalism alone. It will not be a good defence for an epistemic agent to argue that rational beliefs supervene on

purely internal facts about his mental states. Belief can be likened to desire, decision, choice. Borrowing Kirk A. Ludwig's idea,³⁴ which is found useful here, when epistemic agent assesses a choice, or decision as rational or irrational, he is assessing such on the basis of some kinds of relations to some other beliefs which may be located in the external world. Therefore, reconciling the two theories will be by naturalizing the mental, that is, by showing how it can be integrated successfully with the rest of the picture of the natural world

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³⁴. Ludwig, 250

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