

Justification Problems

If we all had a substantial range of useful and true beliefs, and we lived by them, it is hard to see what else we might want. Other animals seem to be in that position. However, the scope of reliable human beliefs is quite limited, and we want to extend our true beliefs beyond what is obvious. Hence we seek the criteria which entitle us to believe more obscure and general truths, and these criteria are the justifications and reasons for the beliefs. Attempts to define knowledge have not gone well. One response is to treat knowledge as a primitive concept (the 'knowledge first' strategy), but another response is to switch to an attempt to define justification. Since being sure that a person 'knows' something is almost impossible, it may be that epistemology should focus entirely on justification. If we don't attend to the reasons for our beliefs, we are in danger of succumbing to fantasy and brainwashing. There may exist knowledge which needs no justification (such as perception, or what is self-evident), but people's reasons for their beliefs looks central to intelligent life (and may be the main subject-matter of philosophy).

We should first note that there can be justified beliefs, but also justified people. A person might be justified either in their beliefs, or in their actions. I would be justified in extinguishing a kitchen fire, but philosophy focuses on the justification of beliefs, propositions, sentences and theories. Justification comes in degrees, and a person may have 'some justification' for an unusual belief. At one end of that scale are beliefs which are quite well justified but false, and at the other are justifications so strong that they imply certainty. When a justification is strong enough for the belief to qualify as knowledge, it is known as a '**warrant**'. A warrant must first persuade the believer that they really know something, and then convince other people to accept it. The main focus of discussion is on what triggers this conclusive stage in justification. Is it causal links, understanding, full coherence, inference from foundations, elimination of rivals (or 'defeaters'), successful processes, or are we stuck with a mere gut feeling? We might think that a belief is intrinsically justified by the facts (irrespective of whether any person believes it), but that isn't very helpful, since every potentially true belief would be equally justified. We might say that beliefs are intrinsically better justified if more evidence for them exists, but what counts as evidence seems to depend on people. Hence the main issue is whether people are justified in believing, and the notion of a justified belief seems to be secondary.

The earliest crisis in discussions of justification came when the danger of an infinite **regress** was spotted. I may say that belief A is justified by belief B, but what justifies belief B? A chain of justifications is implied, and if we ask where this chain leads, there seems to be a 'trilemma': either the chain goes on forever, or it goes round in a circle, or it stops at some arbitrary (and unjustified) point. Sceptics gleefully conclude that knowledge is thus impossible, but each horn of the trilemma can be defended. If the chain is infinite, this may still imply good justifications, which increase (without limit) as the chain extends. If the chain is circular, we say that while tight circles are 'vicious', a wide and comprehensive circle counts as coherence, with the circle revealing the unified structure of the justifications. (A second strategy from coherentists is to deny that justifications form a chain). The arbitrary stopping point is defended by foundationalists, by either invoking unjustified direct knowledge (known a priori, or by perception), or by denying that the starting point needs to be knowledge.

A later crisis came when it was spotted that a true belief might qualify as justified, and yet still be rejected as knowledge. The main problem was that **luck** might be involved. If the chain of justifications contained two unnoticed falsehoods which cancelled one another out, the justification would be successful but flawed. If my belief is 'A or B', and I believe it because I believe A, it might turn out to be a true belief because A was not actually justified, but B was justified. I then seem to know something, but not understand it. This crisis led to proposals either for a fourth condition to be added to true justified belief, or for radical reconsiderations about justification, or even for major shifts in how we understand the idea of knowledge. Must we eliminate all possible 'defeaters' of the belief, or understand and reject all relevant alternatives? Maybe beliefs must connect more closely to the facts (or 'truthmakers').

If I know there is a zebra in the zoo because I can see it, does that mean I know that it is not a cleverly disguised mule? If knowledge is '**closed** under known implication' (that is, if you know what your knowledge implies, you must also know the implication) then we can be surprised to find that we know such things. This raises problems about the scope of knowledge. The direct observations is justified by perception, but the consequence is justified by implication. I can see a zebra, but cannot see a clever disguise. We thus have further questions about how different types of justification fit together, or transmit to one another.

The most important response to the problems about justifications is the proposal that they can exist outside of the mind. I'm justified in saying 'that is barn' if I see one in a field I am driving past. If, however, I am unaware that all the other barns in the area are fakes (built for a film set), then it is pure luck that I saw a real barn, and my knowledge is undermined. In this case the simplest sort of perceptual knowledge turns out to fail, and the failure is not because of what is happening in my mind, but what is happening in the local countryside. '**Externalists**' say this is typical of all knowledge, and the justification is in the available information, and not in my awareness of it. Thus animals and small children can know many things, without being able to give reasons, since those are external. **Internalists** reply that the point of knowledge is not to simply possess well supported accurate information, but also to be able to act on it, adjust when the justifications change, and defend and explain our beliefs. It may even be a requirement that we know that we know something, which is presumably beyond infants and animals.

For internalists the criteria of successful justification are the traditional ones of coherence, or rational or experiential foundations. If justification is internal, though, must it be conscious or easily recalled, or could it now be forgotten? Externalists face the challenge of distinguishing between lucky and secure beliefs, and explaining why we take reasoning and the evaluation of evidence to be so important. Are the reasons for a belief some facts in the external world, or must they be other internal beliefs? A third view, '**disjunctivism**', explores the view that both internal and external criteria must be met for successful knowledge.