

Internal Justification

If I claim to know that 'Goethe was born in Frankfurt', the justification for this truth extends from past events in Frankfurt, through written and verbal reports, and into my mind, where it connects with my knowledge of literature, Germany, the past, and so on. If we say that the only part of this justification that matters is within my mind, and only the state of my supporting knowledge for this truth will decide whether or not I know it, then this is 'internalism' about justification. If you take the chain of events and facts outside my mind to be more important, you are an 'externalist'.

The externalist challenge is fairly recent, and traditional theories of justification are internalist. The standard picture is of the mind taking in experiences, treating them as 'evidence', and applying some internal criterion which decides whether the evidence leads to belief, and whether the evidence sufficiently meets the criterion for the belief to qualify as knowledge. It is always presumed that a belief must also be true to qualify as knowledge, and most accounts of truth take it to be a relation which is partly internal and partly external. People often have beliefs which are true, but don't come up to our normal requirement for knowledge (if they are luckily true, for example). The main interest in justification is not in what triggers belief, but what ensures knowledge. Internalists normally assume that we know the justification for a belief, or can recall it when required, and can explain it to other people.

The leading internalist accounts are **foundationalism** and coherentism. The dream for all seekers of knowledge is complete certainty about the belief, and confidence that nothing will ever undermine that certainty. The obvious way to achieve this is to clearly and securely anchor the belief to some simple foundation which is indisputably true. The important distinction here is between 'basic beliefs', and those which are derived from them, or which depend on them. The theory also needs principles of inference to derive the dependent beliefs from the basic beliefs. It is implausible to suppose that strict logic is working in each of our minds to achieve this derivation, so there is presumably a more informal or conceptual kind (such as induction, or inferring 'it is coloured' from 'it is red').

Foundationalism comes in rationalist and empiricist versions. The rationalists seek self-evident certainties to get started, but since good sceptical questions can be asked about the reliability of sense experience (by pointing to illusions, for example), it is reason which will provide the fixed starting point. A famous claim is that nothing is more certain than my own existence when I am thinking. This may not be sufficient as a basis for knowledge, so the theory also requires the obviousness of 'clear and distinct' thoughts, and modern rationalists base knowledge on simple a priori truths which are obvious to reason. The core ideas of classical logic and simple arithmetic, and those axioms of plane geometry which are undisputed, are candidates for such truths. The empiricists say that such a priori assumptions may well just be human conventions, and hence open to revision, whereas simple experience by acquaintance with physical objects is not up for discussion. Both camps nowadays have doubts about the certainty of their foundations, and usually present their accounts of basic beliefs in a 'fallibilist' form.

Most discussions focus on the status of basic beliefs. It is said that some sorts of knowledge require no justification or further inference, such as seeing a seagull, or seeing that ten seagulls are more than five seagulls. If there exists knowledge which is non-propositional, immediately evident, needing no further justification, and as certain as anything can be, then that is bound to have a special status. Critics say in reply that basic beliefs are the problem with the theory, because to give them this very immediate status they have to be drained of almost all of their content. Seeing seagulls cannot contain the concept 'seagull' or the concept of 'five', or the proposition that five is less than ten. If it did, then further support or justification would be needed, which would lead to a dreaded infinite regress. What is basic for seagulls may be no more than patches of white, but then it is hard to describe such things as 'beliefs'. In defence it might be replied that if something isn't basic then knowledge can never get off the ground, and the immediacy or 'given' nature of basic beliefs is obvious to us. Facial recognition by infants, for example, is so immediate that it appears to be non-conceptual and non-propositional, yet still count as knowledge.

If we abandon basic beliefs as a secure anchor, we are faced with a head full of ideas that lack the structure to support a belief. The rival proposal is that the familiar concept of **coherence** can do the job. Foundationalists compare justification to a securely grounded building; coherentists talk of repairing a ship while it is at sea. The first problem facing this approach is that it is hard to achieve coherence among a large number of ideas, but keeping the number of justificatory ideas to a minimum is contrary to the spirit of enquiry. In the background are what are now called 'epistemic **virtues**', such as self-criticism and diligence in pursuing evidence. On the other hand, coherence among a wide range of evidence is particularly impressive. Justification is like making a good legal case in court, where the winner builds for the jury an overwhelmingly consistent mosaic of witnesses and evidence.

Critics say coherence is a vague concept, often only endorsed by an intuition that the assembled picture 'feels right'. And why should coherence be any guarantee of truth, given that a good novelist can create a highly coherent fiction? Foundationalists object that all of the evidence starts with equal status for coherence, but in reality immediate experience (or a priori obviousness) has an overwhelming authority which takes priority over any sense of coherence. Defenders of coherentism look for criteria of success among the evidence, such as non-contradiction, mutual explanation, and ordered priority (with the strongly obvious coming first). Where testimony from other witnesses is a separate issue for foundationalists, the coherence theory can include this in a wider circle of coherence. The coherence view can fit with a more social and less individualistic account of how knowledge is created.

A different approach focuses on the concept of evidence, which seems to be central to a warrant for knowledge. The proposal of **evidentialism** is that justification is entirely a matter of appropriate response to evidence (rather than being rooted in foundations, or a pattern of coherence). The idea of coherence can be added, as when two independent sources endorse the same evidence. As an account of knowledge that there are mice in your kitchen, or a monster in Loch Ness, this seems promising, but the theory struggles with a significant absence of evidence, or with knowledge of moral, political or logical principles.