

External Justification

The traditional view says that a person has knowledge if they have a true belief which is sufficiently supported by an awareness of good reasons and evidence. Disputes are about the level of sufficiency required, and how to be sure that the reasons are 'good'. Once this idea of 'true justified belief' was challenged by some tricky counterexamples, it was suggested that the justification needed for knowledge lies outside the mind, and not within it. Support for this approach came from the idea that the content of language might also be outside the mind. For example, if I refer to a chemical about which I know very little, what I mean is not what is in my mind, but what is in textbooks, or in the minds of experts. Similarly, the justification for my knowledge may be external rather than internal.

One aim here is to give a more naturalistic account of knowledge, less dependent on the private mind, and more on links with the world. The most radical approach is to entirely drop the idea of 'justification'. For example, ants drag material across country and build nests, and seem to 'know' what they are doing. They don't know that they know, or have reasons, but they are plugged into the facts, so we can say they possess truth, or even that they 'believe' truth, in a non-conscious way. Maybe all that matters in knowledge is true belief, or (even more radically) just having the truth, without even believing it. In this way epistemology becomes science rather than philosophy, with careful studies of how brains link to the world. One externalist theory says that knowledge just is the **tracking of truth**, because that demonstrates a close link with the relevant facts, and that is all knowledge requires. Of course life goes horribly wrong if you track falsehoods, so successful living is the criterion for good tracking, which makes it a form of pragmatism. Pragmatism approaches knowledge through the feedback from active living, both in the success of projects, and in the social endorsement given to some beliefs (e.g. in exams), and private reasons for belief don't matter much. An interesting aspect of this is that we don't usually choose what we believe (as internal justification may imply), so we might even manipulate what we believe (by sticking to one newspaper), and then any resulting truths (if you choose the right paper!) will be externally generated knowledge.

These pragmatic and scientific approaches focus on the causes and results of knowledge, but inputs can cause falsehoods, and false beliefs sometimes have good results, so most externalists would still like a criterion for distinguishing genuine knowledge. An early proposal was that if a **causal** chain led from the fact to the belief, then this would be sufficient endorsement for knowledge (and would be attractively naturalistic). For example, seeing a cat in front of me produces knowledge, because the cat causes the belief. Critics soon replied with an array of problems: triggering a belief (perhaps by a 'deviant' chain of causes) is not the same as justifying it, and causal links won't validate belief in general truths, or truths about the future, or mathematical truths.

A later proposal was **reliabilism**, which is now the best known version of externalism. Causal chains which are deviant may only occasionally result in knowledge, and seem to involve luck, which undermines any claim to knowledge. If, however, the knowledge resulted from a process which was agreed to be consistently successful, this would offer the security we need. Hence we can say that a true belief is knowledge if it results from a process which has generally proved reliable. For example, seeing nearby objects in a good light is reliable, and simple sums in arithmetic rarely go wrong. Obviously reliable processes can occasionally fail, but there is a requirement that the knowledge be true (which is partly an external matter). Externalists tend to be sympathetic to the correspondence theory of truth, because it requires the link between mind and the external world which grounds their theory. Assessments of reliability are also largely external, since my beliefs about the reliability of my private belief-formation should probably not be trusted. Externalists are more interested in the third-person than the first-person view of knowledge, and ultimately a consensus of experts will decide which processes lead to reliable true beliefs.

Objections to reliabilism are that it struggles to say whether there is knowledge in a hypothetical case (where no actual process has occurred), and that it has no response to the sceptic who says that all processes are unreliable. It is most clear that something is missing from the theory if I imagine reliably guessing or dreaming a series of true beliefs. This is unlikely to happen, but the theory would compel us to say that the beliefs were knowledge, where common sense suggests otherwise. We certainly can't assert that a belief is true just because it results from a normally reliable process, whereas we might want to commit to its truth if the internal justification seemed very good.

Reliabilist and causal versions of externalism may be too individualistic, because they focus on the connection of a mind to a fact. An alternative is to focus on the **social** aspects of support for beliefs. Just as I defer to experts for my talk of chemistry, so I might defer to general social usage for the meanings of ordinary words, and this offers a different parallel for our concept of justification. Internalism is also very individualistic, so social epistemology may offer a third way. When a new proof appears in mathematics it has to be verified by others, and a dubious sighting of something needs to be confirmed by other witnesses. Peer review is the most important strategy among scientists for achieving high standards of accuracy. We might more willingly accept reliable belief-forming processes if they had this sort of social support. It may be that all knowledge is dependent on co-operation in this way, both to generate sufficient justification (by pooling support), and also for deciding what qualifies as knowledge.

The idea that the standards for knowledge vary in different social contexts is called **contextualism**. Someone may be an expert in one context but not in another. Contextualism says that there is no fixed point at which a belief qualifies for knowledge (a claim rejected by 'invariantists'), but the standard varies, so that justification is largely a social matter. The standards for knowing something are fairly low in pubs, and very high in university seminars. It may be that the word 'know' varies in meaning, or it may be that the standard for 'justified' is variable. Invariantists say you either know or you don't, but you may willingly assert in a pub what you become shy about in a seminar. Contextualism allows ordinary people to have a great deal of knowledge, but rather devalues the status of being very knowledgeable. One attraction of the view is that it says global scepticism need not worry lovers of knowledge, because that is only met in contexts where the bar of justification has been set exceptionally high.