

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM OF EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

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Abstract

The notion of knowledge as justified belief was, for centuries, the acceptable analysis of the justification of knowledge claims. This was the traditional analysis of the concept of knowledge and it has its origins in Plato's 'Theaetetus'. However, Gettier's 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?'¹ challenged this notion of knowledge as justified true belief. Employing the method of counter-examples, Gettier argues that the satisfaction of the three conditions traditionally associated with the verification of knowledge claims (first, the given proposition is true; second, the condition that the epistemic subject believes the proposition to be true and third; the epistemic subject is justified in believing that the proposition is true) does not guarantee justification or knowledge. Employing the hermeneutic and argumentative methods, this paper attempts an examination of the problem of epistemic justification.

Keywords: Epistemology, Justification, Knowledge, Hermeneutic, Gettier

The Problem of Epistemic Justification

The notion of *knowledge as justified belief* was, for centuries, the acceptable analysis of the justification of knowledge claims. This was the traditional analysis of the concept of knowledge and it has its origins in Plato's 'Theaetetus'. However, Gettier's 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?'² challenged this notion of knowledge as justified true belief. Employing the method of counter-examples, Gettier argues that the satisfaction of the three conditions traditionally associated with the verification of knowledge claims (first, the given proposition is true; second, the condition that the epistemic subject believes the proposition to be true and third; the epistemic subject is justified in believing that the proposition is true) does not guarantee justification or knowledge.

There is a lack of unanimity in discussions about the concept of epistemic justification. Epistemologists disagree on a wide variety of concerns. They are: the meaning of the phrase 'to be justified' or 'justification' in epistemology, the nature of epistemic justification, is justification internal or external? how can a

¹ See Gettier, E. L. (1963) Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? In: *Analysis* 23: 121–3. Reprinted in Roth and Galis (1970)

² See Gettier, E. L. (1963) Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? In: *Analysis* 23: 121–3. Reprinted in Roth and Galis (1970)

claim to knowledge be justified in the epistemic sense? What is the goal of epistemic justification?

The term 'justify' has been the topic of discourse amongst philosophers concerned with epistemic justification. A philosopher's notion of epistemic justification is usually influenced by how the term 'justify' is understood. It is therefore necessary to attempt to review some conceptions of the term. Chisholm views the term 'justify' as; "a term of epistemic appraisal- a term that is used to say something about the reasonableness of belief."³ Chisholm relates the term 'justify' to other terms such as 'reasonable', 'evident', 'probable', 'gratuitous', 'certain', 'unacceptable' and 'indifferent'. Chisholm also claims that when beliefs are compared in order to ascertain which belief is justified and which belief is unjustified, the goal is usually to assess the reasonableness of beliefs; in other words, what makes a belief *more reasonable* than another?⁴

Chisholm's attempt at classifying the term *justify* along with other evaluative terms, does not clearly elucidate the question of what it means to be justified; while it offers a general conception of the idea of justification and the appraisal of beliefs, it begs another series of questions; what makes a proposition more certain /evident /probable/ unacceptable/ reasonable/ indifferent than the other? To Chisholm then, to answer what it means to be justified in epistemology is to ask any or all of the preceding questions.

Another conception of the term 'justify' is that of Plantinga. According to Plantinga;

To say that a proposition is justified for a person is to say that his believing or accepting it has positive epistemic status for him... we may speak of a person's beliefs as warranted, or justified, or rational or reasonable, contrasting them with beliefs that are unwarranted, unjustified, irrational, or unreasonable.⁵

Plantinga adopts Chisholm's characterisation and views *justification* as a term of epistemic appraisal, an evaluative term intended to bring about a 'positive epistemic status'. However, for Chisholm, the phrase 'epistemically better than'⁶ is employed to denote a justified belief. By appraising or evaluating a claim to knowledge, an epistemic subject assesses the claims and the grounds upon which the claims are based to ascertain whether (or not) the grounds provide the kind of support the claim requires to be deemed justified. The

³ Chisholm, R. (1977). *Theory of knowledge*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, United States of America. P. 6

⁴ Ibid. Pp. 6-7

⁵ Plantinga, A. (1986). *Epistemic Justification*. NOUS 20 (1), P. 3

⁶ Chisholm, R. (1977). *Theory of knowledge*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, United States of America. P. 6

justification of the claim is what confers a positive status on the epistemic subject.

For instance, suppose a person believes that he or she has a fever and; to justify this claim, the person carries out medical tests: first, the person uses a thermometer to test his or her body temperature; and second, the person further tests his or her blood samples in a medical laboratory. These tests reveal an anomaly in the person's anatomy and confirm their initial suspicion. In this hypothetical scenario, the claim of having a fever has been evaluated scientifically and confirmed, thereby justifying the beliefs that led to the tests being carried out. In "*What is Justified Belief?*" Goldman subscribes to the idea that justification is appraisal.⁷ The idea of justification as appraisal of beliefs is fairly common amongst epistemologists, who also agree that in epistemology, the target of justification is beliefs⁸

The terms: *warranted*, *justified*, *rational* and *reasonable*, that are contrasted with the terms *unwarranted*, *unjustified*, *irrational*, or *unreasonable* in the statement above are terms denoting epistemic appraisal of beliefs or propositions. A person's belief that it rained will upon scrutiny and examination be deemed either 'warranted' or 'unwarranted' depending on the level of support provided by the reasons the person adduces. For instance, if the person bases his claim on the wetness of the ground, the pertinent question would be: is the wetness of the ground is sufficient reason for holding the belief that it rained? Since it is possible that the ground gets wet by other means, for example, a nearby river breaking its banks, a leaking water tank, and other similar counter-examples, the claim would fail. Epistemology is concerned with, for example, the justification of the belief that it rained through citing a set of conditions that are both necessary and sufficient. This is the task of epistemology. However, Plantinga, conceding the difficulty in discussing epistemic justification, has abandoned the term in favour of 'warrant' and 'positive epistemic status'⁹

Alston, rather differently, claims that the term 'justification' has been imported into epistemology from talk about voluntary action.¹⁰ According to him, the relevant norms of a given place may simply permit a person to carry out an action without requiring him to do so. For instance, the norms of a society may permit a person to demand compensation from a vandal. These norms may, however, not require the victim to demand the compensation; it is entirely the discretion of the victim to decide whether or not to charge the vandal. In this sense, the person has 'voluntary control' over his preferred course of action.

⁷ Goldman, A. (1979). What is Justified Belief? In Pappas, G. (Ed.). *Justification and Knowledge*. Dordrecht, Reidel. Pp. 1-23

⁸ Kvanvig, J. L. (2011). Epistemic Justification. In Sven, B. and Duncan P. (Eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. New York: P. 26

⁹ Plantinga, A. (1988). Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function. In: *Philosophical Perspectives*. P. 2

¹⁰ Alston, W. P. (1993). Epistemic Desiderata. In: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol.53. P. 532

Alston claims that because of the voluntary control inherent in the origin of the term *justify*, it has become a feature of the term in epistemology. According to him, justification in epistemology has developed two meanings: the first meaning, justification connotes a sense of voluntary control, being permitted to believe a proposition because of certain facts, norms or considerations.¹¹ For instance, a person could be justified in believing that God exists because he or she subscribe to any of the Abrahamic religions. The second meaning perceives justification as the notion of having adequate grounds for believing a given claim; in this sense, the grounds may be sufficient or insufficient.

Alston's attempts at explaining the concept of justification is rather sceptical, the explanations proffered imply a vagueness about the term. First, there is no evidence that the term 'justify' has been imported into epistemology from talk about voluntary action; second, there are other conceptions of the term 'justify' that are not rooted in voluntary action. For instance, Chisholm's notion of reasonable grounds for a belief is devoid of voluntary action. Instead, his emphasis is on the evaluation of the evidence before the cognitive subject. Third, the epistemic conception of the term 'justify' is an attempt at improving any and every notion of the term; it is devoid of any of the limitations of the non-epistemic notions of justification.

Alston, like Chisholm, highlights the evaluative nature of justification in epistemology. Unlike Chisholm, Alston argues for the abandonment of the entire program of epistemic justification. His argument can be stated as follows:

- a. Philosophers have no common understanding of the concept of justification in epistemology
- b. There is no uniquely identifiable concept of epistemic justification about which philosophers hold *different* views
- c. Therefore, epistemic justification should be abandoned.¹²

This first premise can be faulted on the basis that it is generally impossible to find unanimity amongst scholars in philosophy. In fact, the question: *What is Philosophy?* remains a contentious issue. However, this has not justified calls for the abandonment of the field of philosophy. The second premise, which claims that there is nothing uniquely identifiable as epistemic justification, can be criticised for ignoring the fact that knowledge generally requires justification.¹³ When a claim to knowledge is made, the question: '*how do you know?*' is asked. The task of the philosopher concerned with the theory of knowledge is to look

¹¹ Ibid. P. 533

¹² Alston, W .P. (1993). Epistemic Desiderata. In: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.53. P. 532

¹³ See Goldman, A. (1979). What is Justified Belief? In: Pappas, G. (Ed) *Justification and Knowledge*. Dordrecht, Reidel. Pp. 1-23

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into the variety of approaches aimed at answering this question. We appraise our beliefs in order to evaluate the reasons we have for holding them. For instance, if someone tells me that unicorns exist, I may require some proof or reasons from that person before believing his or her claim. I would then naturally evaluate the reasons, to see if they satisfy the reasonable requirements for believing that unicorns exist. Whether the reasons we have for holding or rejecting our beliefs are good or bad is the domain of justification. How can justification be understood in epistemology?

Different conceptions of justification exist, some philosophers such as Bonjour¹⁴ and Goldman¹⁵ explore a normative idea of justification. They claim that the term 'justify' has its origins in ethics and so, any analysis of the concept of epistemic justification should be carried out with ethical considerations.¹⁶ Some other philosophers emphasize the veridical character of epistemic justification. Employing different arguments but in an apparent consensus, epistemologists such as Alston¹⁷, Chisholm¹⁸, Moser¹⁹, Kvanvig²⁰ and Sosa²¹ state that epistemic justification is aimed at the goal of truth²², the minimisation of falsity in a large body of beliefs and the avoidance of error.²³ There is an extensive debate regarding the goal of epistemic justification. Although truth appears to be part of the considerations in discussing the concept of epistemic justification, other aims have been considered equally relevant.²⁴ Epistemologists are reluctant to define epistemic justification exclusively in terms of the goal of truth²⁵ since doing so will reduce the goal of justification in epistemology. The concept of truth is problematic in philosophy because epistemologists agree neither on the concept of truth as the ultimate goal of justification in epistemology nor on a unified notion of the concept of truth. The concept of truth is open to various interpretations, definitions and perceptions; it is equally a subject of great disagreement among epistemologists.

¹⁴ Bonjour, L. (1980). Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge. In: *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5. Pp.53-73.

¹⁵ Goldman, A. (1980). The Internalist Conception of Justification. In: *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5. Pp.27-51.

¹⁶ Ibid. Pg. 27

¹⁷ Alston, W. P. (1989). *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*. Cornell University Press, New York

¹⁸ Chisholm, R. (1977). *Theory of knowledge*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, United States of America. P. 9

¹⁹ Moser, P. K. (1985). *Empirical justification*. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht.

²⁰ Kvanvig, J. L. (2011). Epistemic Justification. In: Sven, B. and Duncan P. (Eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. New York: P. 21

²¹ Sosa, E. (1980). The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge. In: Uehling, T. and Wettstein, H. (Eds.). *Midwest Studies In Philosophy: Studies in Epistemology*. French. P. 9.

²² Moser, P.K. (1985). *Empirical justification*. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht. Pg. 5. *see also*, Chisholm, R.(1986). The Place of Epistemic Justification, In: *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 14, nr.1. Pg. 90

²³ Kvanvig, J. L. (2011). Epistemic Justification. In: Sven, B. and Duncan P. (Eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. New York: P 25

²⁴ For instance, knowledge has been advanced as a probable goal of pursuing epistemic justification.

²⁵ According to Feldman, epistemologists avoid defining epistemic justification as "S is objectively epistemically justified in believing p if and only if p is true" *see* Feldman, R. (1988) *Subjective and objective justification in ethics and epistemology, in Monist*, Vol.71. Pg. 409 Feldman is of the opinion that equating epistemic justification with truth would narrow the scope of epistemic justification and it is for this reason that epistemologists avoid defining it as such.

There exists a wide range of literature on both the normative and veridical conceptions of epistemic justification; however, in ordinary usage, the concept of justification enjoys diverse applications beyond limitations to any particular field. It is possible to justify beliefs socially, logically and legally - to mention but a few. Assessing the arguments relevant to these claims falls outside the scope of this paper. This paper will rely upon the evaluative nature of epistemic justification. This is because it highlights the nature of justification it deals with, the evaluation of beliefs in order to ascertain which is more reasonable or acceptable, and why. The concept of epistemic justification is nonetheless fraught with many other complications, at the fore of these problems is the question: Is justification internal or external?

In discussing externalism and internalism in epistemic justification, philosophers have been primarily concerned with the nature of justifiers. To Goldman, the entire question of epistemic justification can be reduced to how a theory of epistemic justification classifies the justifiers of a belief.²⁶ In other words, what determines if an epistemic theory of justification is internalist or externalist is primarily the nature of the justifiers or factors that it employs in the justification of a belief. A justifier broadly defined, is anything that positively or negatively affects the justification of a belief. While Goldman views justifiers as any property, condition or state of affairs that is either positively or negatively relevant to the justificational status of a belief or any doxastic attitude²⁷, Alston states that a justifier is anything that affects the justificational status of a belief. Alston, despite being general does not extend the scope of justifiers beyond beliefs in the same way Goldman extends it to doxastic attitudes. Regardless of these differences, Goldman and Alston maintain a shared aim: identifying the factors necessary and sufficient for justification in epistemology.

In summary then, a justifier is any factor that affects the justification of a belief or doxastic attitude either positively or negatively; this could be a property, condition or a state of affairs, it encompasses the variety of factors that can positively or negatively affect the justification of a belief. Goldman submits that the question of ascertaining the nature of an epistemic theory of justification is, first, a question of identifying the justifiers of a belief or claim to knowledge and second, classifying these justifiers as either internalist or externalist. The classification of a justifier as either external or internal determines whether a theory of epistemic justification is internalist or externalist. What then is Internalism?

²⁶ Goldman, A. (2009). Internalism, Externalism and the Architecture of Justification. In: *The Journal of Philosophy* 106 (6). Pg. 1 DOI 10.5840/jphil2009106611

²⁷ Ibid. Pg. 1

Internalism

There are a wide range of views as to what exactly an epistemic subject must have access to, the kind of justifiers that can be termed 'internal' and on the kind of access an epistemic subject must have to these justifiers. According to Alston, Internalism requires that;

In order to confer justification, something must be within the subject's 'perspective' or 'viewpoint' on the world, in the sense of being something that the subject knows, believes, or justifiably believes. It must be something that falls within the subject's ken, something of which he takes account.²⁸

What this means is that for a person to be justified in believing something, the factors that such a person considers must be accessible to his consciousness. Justification cannot be dependent upon factors outside a person's intuitive control or domain. To be justified in believing a proposition therefore, the reasons a person has for a belief must be reasons the person holds, knows and are easily accessible to him or her upon reflection. Alston further adds that the access a person enjoys must be some 'special', 'direct' or 'infallible' access.²⁹ Internalism emphasizes the perspective of the epistemic subject, the emphasis on the mental accessibility of the epistemic subject to the justifiers leans towards the subjective claim to justification.

Alston's conception of internalism emphasises that the believer must know, believe or justifiably believe whatever factors positively affect the justification of a belief. Other philosophers hold less stringent views. Plantinga for instance, states that all that is required is that the epistemic subject must have cognitive access to justifiers whether or not the epistemic subject is justified in knowing or believing the justifiers."³⁰ Generally then, the internalist argument can be stated as follows:

- a. There are factors that affect epistemic justification
- b. All these factors that are internal
- c. No factors are external
- d. Therefore, the factors that affect epistemic justification are internal

Internalism restricts justifiers to factors that are within a subject's perspective, ken or are accessible to the subject upon reflection. It is an exclusionary theory

²⁸Alston, W. (1986). Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology. In: *Philosophical Topics XIV*. Pp. 179 - 221

²⁹ Ibid. P. 46

³⁰Plantinga, A. (1990). Justification in the 20th Century. In: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. supplement to Vol.50. Pp. 48-49

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that rejects all factors that are not *within* a subjects ken. To disprove internalism therefore, the externalist only needs to prove that at least one factor or justifier is not internal to the epistemic subject. However, the concerns of internalism extend beyond the justifiers; the nature of the access the epistemic subject has to the justifier appears equally important. Audi³¹ and Sennett,³² among others, emphasize the need for “reflective access”. By this, they mean that the justifiers of a belief must be accessible to the knower or epistemic subject upon reflection. Audi contrasts this with externalism. He states thus that this is ‘as opposed to perceptual observation or testimony from someone else’³³ Emerging trends in epistemology recognise the possibility of external sources of knowledge,³⁴ it has therefore become increasingly difficult to defend the internalist claim that justifiers are exclusively internal.

Externalism

Externalism has appeared in many forms with many variations, the unifying feature is the denial of the central thesis of internalism, the claim that the justifiers of a belief must be internally accessible to the epistemic subject. To the externalist, some (if not all) of the factors contributing to the justification of a subject’s belief can fall outside the perspective of the epistemic subject and, thus, be unavailable upon reflection.³⁵ Unlike the internalist, the externalist is not exclusionary, externalism accepts that some justifiers, (if not all), fall outside the subjects ken or perspective. It further accepts that internalist factors are equally valid in the determination of the question of justification. The externalist argument can be formulated as follows;

- a. There are factors that affect epistemic justification
- b. Some factors are internal
- c. At least one factor is external
- d. Therefore, the factors that affect epistemic justification are both internal and external.

Externalism is a much more recent approach to justification in epistemology, it represents a shift from the traditional and historical internalist approach that has been predominantly employed. It manifests in a variety of approaches to

³¹ Audi, R. (1993). *The structure of Justification*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. P. 3

³² Sennett, J. F. (1992). Towards a Compatibility Theory for Internalist and Externalist Epistemologies. In: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.52, no.3, pp.1-15.:1

³³ Audi, R. (1993). *The Structure of Justification*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. P.279

³⁴ See Social epistemology

³⁵ Vahid, H. (2011). Externalism/Internalism. In Sven, B. and Duncan P. (Eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. New York: P. 145

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social epistemology as espoused by Goldman,³⁶ and adopts an antithetical approach to internalism. Externalism refutes the internalist claim that all the justifiers of a proposition or belief must be within a subject's ken. The externalist would claim that an epistemic subject is justified in believing a belief or given proposition if the belief is true (even if the subject does not know that the belief is true). The internalist, on the other hand, would demand that the subject be at least capable of becoming aware of the relationship between the belief and epistemic subject's reasons for holding the belief.³⁷ The internalism versus externalism debate in justificatory epistemology remains a divisive issue, it however is not the central thesis of this paper.

Externalists maintain that what determines justification is not the perspective of the agent or observer but things as they are, independent of such perspective that the observer has.³⁸ This, however, is a radical departure from traditional epistemology; which is person-oriented, as knowledge is tied to a person's perspective of an object or subject. Goldman, in his *The Internalist Conception of Justification*,³⁹ claims that traditional epistemology has been predominantly *internalist*, or egocentric. Internalism, applied to epistemic justification has a history that is as old as the subject of epistemology. In his *Meditations*,⁴⁰ Descartes' foundation of knowledge, 'the Cogito', ultimately rests in the individual human person or what is termed the epistemic subject. Such person-centred epistemology or what is generally referred to as perspectival epistemology has been the dominant approach to the study of the theory of knowledge and by extension, justification. Rorty however claims that although epistemic justification is historically internalist, it is not necessarily internalist.⁴¹

Conclusion

On the issue of justification, epistemology is concerned with the conditions that are necessary and sufficient for knowledge claims to be justified. Epistemic justification is distinct from other notions of justification, such as social justification, historical justification and legal justification among others. From the discussion in this dissertation, it is clear that there are numerous views, theories and arguments about epistemic justification. Each of these views, theories and arguments present philosophical issues that are far reaching and worth, of academic inquiry.

³⁶ Goldman, A. (1979). What is Justified Belief? In: Pappas, G. (Ed.). *Justification and Knowledge: New Studies in Epistemology*. Reidel, Dordrecht. Pp. 1-23

³⁷ Dancy, J. (1985). *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*. Basil Blackwell, Dordrecht. Pp. 46-47

³⁸ Vahid, H. (2011). Externalism/Internalism. In Sven, B. and Duncan P. (Eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. New York: P. 144

³⁹ Goldman, A. (1980). The Internalist Conception of Justification, In *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5. Pp.27-51.

⁴⁰ Descartes, R. (1984 [1641]). *Meditations on First Philosophy* (trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch). In: *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. I. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

⁴¹ Rorty, R. (1980). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Basil, Blackwell, Oxford.

