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## **Alston's concept of justification**

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### RESUMEN

La controversia entre “internismo” y “externismo” es una de las más candentes de entre las que tienen lugar en epistemología. Lo que está en juego es lo que puede conferir justificación (o puede garantizar) o lo que puede convertir una creencia verdadera en conocimiento. Aunque muchos epistemólogos son internistas o externistas epistémicos, un puñado de ellos intentan reconciliar esas posiciones epistémicas aparentemente dispares. Uno de los más notables sintetizadores es William Alston. Alston argumenta que estar justificado para creer que  $p$  consiste en que esta creencia esté basada en un estado psicológico (internismo) que es un indicador fiable de la verdad de  $p$  (externismo), y que esta justificación no esté superada por nada que el sujeto experimente o crea (internismo). En este artículo argumento que, aunque una crítica reciente de Plantinga milita en contra de la teoría de Alston de la justificación, su teoría puede modificarse sin abandonar, como Plantinga recomienda, el internismo.

### ABSTRACT

The controversy between “internalism” and “externalism” is one of the most heated in epistemology. At stake is what confers justification (or warrant) or on what converts true belief into knowledge. Although most epistemologists are epistemic internalists or externalists, a few purport to reconcile these apparently disparate epistemic positions. Most notable of these synthesizers is William Alston. He argues that to be justified in believing that  $p$  is for that belief to be based on some accessible psychological state (internalism) that is a reliable indicator of the truth of  $p$  (externalism), and for this justification not to be overridden by anything else the subject experiences or believes (internalism). In this paper, I argue that although a recent criticism of Plantinga's counts against Alston's theory of justification, his theory can be modified so as to accommodate this criticism without at the same time abandoning internalism, as Plantinga recommends.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The controversy between “internalism” and “externalism” is one of the most heated in epistemology. At stake is what can confer justification (or warrant) or on what can convert true belief into knowledge. Internalists restrict justifiers to what is accessible in some special way to the subject, while externalists deny this.<sup>1</sup> The result is that internalists accuse externalists of violating the “internalist constraint,” thereby conflating justification with

truth, while externalists blame internalists for constructing epistemic theories that are insufficient for justification.

Although most epistemologists fall either on one side of this debate or the other, a few purport to reconcile these apparently disparate epistemic desiderata. Of these hybrid theories of justification, William Alston's (1989) and (1991) is the only one to do so with a truth-conducive rather than a deontological conception of justification.<sup>2</sup> He argues that to be justified in believing that  $p$  is for that belief to be based on some accessible psychological state (internalism) that is a reliable indicator of the truth of  $p$  (externalism), and for this justification not to be overridden by anything else the subject experiences or believes (internalism).

Alvin Plantinga (1993) says that this (or any) synthesis fails. While he believes Alston is on the right track in embracing a variety of externalism, his account of justification "is by no means either necessary [...] or even sufficient up to Gettier problems" [Plantinga (1993), p. 190]. (According to Gettier, a belief may be justified and true, but still fail to be knowledge.) A belief or experience may in fact be a reliable indicator, but only accidentally — as a result of cognitive malfunction or the wrong kind of cognitive environment.

In this paper, I argue that although Plantinga's criticism, as well as a related one I will propose, counts against Alston's theory of justification, his theory can be modified so as to accommodate these criticisms without at the same time abandoning internalism.<sup>3</sup>

## II. AN INTERNALIST EXTERNALISM

Briefly stated, Alston's position "is that to be justified that  $p$  is for that belief *to be based on an adequate ground*" [Alston (1989), p. 227]. This definition divides into three correlative terms: "based on;" "ground;" and "adequacy" of grounds. I will say a word on each, followed by an explanation about what is internalist and what is externalist about this position.

The basing relationship is a difficult one, Alston confesses. Although it has yet to be given an adequate and illuminating explanation, it is clear that it involves some kind of causal dependence. If my belief that I am sitting at my desk is based on my experience that I see the desk before me and feel the chair beneath me, then I hold that belief *because* of my experience; my experience *causally explains* my belief, Alston says. It is likewise clear, though, Alston continues, that not every kind of causal dependence is relevant here. Although my belief that I am sitting at my desk is causally dependent on certain physiological processes of my brain, the former is not based on the latter. How is the basing relationship to be distinguished from other sorts of causal dependence? Here Alston contents himself with a suggestion. "Wherever it is clear that a belief is *based* on another belief or on an experience the belief-

forming 'process' or 'mechanism' is *taking account* of that ground or features thereof, being *guided* by it, even if this does not involve the conscious utilization of a belief in a support relation" [Alston (1989), p. 229]. To say, therefore, that my belief that I am sitting at my desk is based on the way things look and feel is to say that in forming a belief about my location I am aware of my experience; I am so constituted that the belief formed about my location will be a result of particular experiential input. Even where there is no explicit belief in a support relation, "the belief formation is the result of a *taking account* of features of the experience and forming the belief *in the light* of them, rather than just involving some subcognitive transaction" [Alston (1989), p. 229].

What sort of grounds are beliefs based on? According to Alston, it is the subject's other beliefs and experiences. As he is using the term, the "ground" of a belief is not the total input to the relevant belief-forming mechanism, but simply those inputs "that are actually taken account of in forming the belief, in, so to say, 'choosing' a propositional content for a belief" [Alston (1989), p. 231].

Not every grounded belief will be justified, though, Alston continues, but only those that have an "adequate" ground. Alston reminds us that for a belief to be justified, is for it to have a favourable status vis-à-vis the aim of believing truly rather than falsely. This suggests that "for a ground to be favorable relative to this aim it must be 'truth conducive'; it must be sufficiently indicative of the truth of the belief it grounds" [Alston (1989), p. 232]. In other words, "the ground must be such that the *probability* of the belief's being true, given that ground, is very high" [Alston (1989), p. 232]. It is an objective probability that he is appealing to here. The lawful structure of the world is such that, at least in the sorts of situations in which we normally find ourselves, the ground is a reliable indication of the truth of the belief.

Now what precisely is internalist and what is externalist about this position? I will begin with the former. The view is internalist, Alston explains, "most basically, and most minimally, by virtue of the requirement that there be a ground of the belief" [Alston (1989), p. 233]. A ground, as you will recall, is a psychological state of the subject (a belief or experience) and therefore "internal" to the subject. Facts that are independent of the subject's psychology cannot be grounds in the required way, however relevant they may be to the truth of the belief in question.

Alston supports such an internalism because he finds "widely shared and strong intuitions in favor of some kind of accessibility requirement for justification" [Alston (1989), p. 234]. Most of us, he says, "find something incongruous, or conceptually impossible, in the notion of my being justified in believing that *p* while totally lacking any capacity to determine what is responsible for that justification" [Alston (1989), p. 235]. We balk at the pure externalist notion that any reliably formed belief is ipso facto justified, without the subject being able to determine this in some way.

Why do we take some sort of accessibility to be required for justification? Alston says that it has to do with the concept of being justified in holding a belief: we want to know when and if people are justified in holding ordinary perceptual beliefs, beliefs about one's own state's of consciousness, ordinary memory beliefs, inductive beliefs, religious beliefs, and so on. The concept of being justified in holding a belief, he explains, "was developed, and got its hold on us, because of the practice of critical reflection on our beliefs, of challenging their credentials and responding to such challenges — in short the practice of attempting to *justify* beliefs" [Alston (1989), p. 236]. If no one ever challenged the status of anyone's beliefs, or if no one ever critically examined their own beliefs, we simply would not be interested in determining whether a belief is justified or not. "It is only because we participate in such activities, only because we are alive to their importance, that the question of whether someone is in a state of *being justified* in holding a belief is of live interest to us" [Alston (1989), p. 236].<sup>4</sup>

There is another internalist feature to Alston's position that I have not yet mentioned. A belief based on an adequate ground is sufficient only for *prima facie* justification, justification that can be canceled "by sufficient overriding reasons from the subject's stock of knowledge and justified belief" [Alston (1989), p. 238]. These reasons can be of two sorts. The first is sufficient reason to suppose that the belief is false (a rebutter). The second is sufficient reason to suppose that in this instance the belief's ground is not sufficiently indicative of its truth (an underminer or neutralizer). Hence, even if it clearly looks as if there are sheep in my backyard, I will not, all things considered, be justified in believing that there are sheep in my backyard, if I have stronger reasons for supposing that there are no sheep there (rebutter), or if I have stronger reasons for supposing that my visual apparatus is presently malfunctioning (an underminer or neutralizer). I am *ultima facie* justified in believing that *p* only if all of my knowledge, justified belief, and experience provide an adequate ground for that belief. This is an additional internalist feature because, just like *prima facie* justification, *ultima facie* justification "is determined by what is in the subject's perspective on the world" [Alston (1989), p. 239].<sup>5</sup>

Now for the externalist component of Alston's theory. Here we move from the presence of grounds to their adequacy or truth-conduciveness. While an internalist would require for justification that the adequacy of the grounds be accessible to the subject in some special way, the externalism in Alston's position rejects this requirement.

Alston distinguishes two main varieties of internalism: *Perspectival Internalism*, according to which only what the subject justifiably believes (or knows) can be a justifier; and *Accessibility Internalism*, according to which only what the subject has some special access to can serve to justify. Although he adopts a version of *Accessibility Internalism* with regard to the

grounds of a belief,<sup>6</sup> he takes both varieties of internalism concerning the adequacy of grounds to be neither necessary nor sufficient for justification.

Perspectival Internalism fails as a necessary condition for adequacy because it requires “an infinite hierarchy of justified beliefs in order to be justified in any belief” [Alston (1989), p. 239]. While Accessibility Internalism fails in the same role because it mistakenly assumes either “that the subject of a justified belief is capable of determining the adequacy of his ground,” [Alston (1989), p. 240] or that the subject “actually be able to acquire a justified belief about adequacy, whether just on reflection or otherwise” [Alston (1989), p. 241]. Finally, both varieties of internalist sufficient conditions of adequacy fail because, in order to motivate adequacy internalism, Alston argues they will have to use a non-truth-conducive conception of justification at the meta-levels. In this case, “the fact that S is justified in believing that the ground of his belief that *p* is adequate has no tendency to imply that the ground is adequate, and hence no tendency to imply that *p* is (likely to be) true” [Alston (1989), p. 243]. And so, Alston concludes, “in order for my belief that *p*, which is based on ground *G*, to be justified, it is quite sufficient, as well as necessary, that *G* be sufficiently indicative of the truth of *p*” [Alston (1989), pp. 243-44]. Although we sometimes do possess justified beliefs about the adequacy of our grounds, this is in no way required.

### III. TWO OBJECTIONS

Plantinga (1993) argues that although Alston's account of justification “look[s] in the right direction,” [Plantinga (1993), p. 184] it fails as an account of justification or warrant (that which in addition to true belief makes knowledge). While Alston does not take justification to be necessary (suggesting that a spontaneously occurring belief might be knowledge without being grounded and so justified), “neither is it sufficient, or even sufficient up to Gettier problems” [Plantinga (1993), p. 190]. *S*'s belief that *p* could be based on a ground that is both a reliable indicator of the truth of *p* and accessible to *S*, and yet still have little or no justification.

To establish this point, Plantinga gives a number of examples. I give two below:

1. Suppose (contrary to what most of us believe) the *National Enquirer* is in fact extremely reliable in its accounts of extraterrestrial events. One day it carries screaming headlines: STATUE OF ELVIS FOUND ON MARS!! Due to cognitive malfunction (inducing the “epistemic incontinence” Alston speaks of elsewhere), I am extremely gullible, in particular with respect to the *National Enquirer*, always trusting it implicitly on the topic of extraterrestrials. (And, due to the same mal-

function, I don't believe anything that would override the belief in question.) Then my belief that a statue of Elvis was found on Mars is in fact based on a reliable indicator which is appropriately accessible to me; and I don't know or believe anything overriding this belief. But surely the belief has little by way of warrant [Plantinga (1993), p. 191].

2. Imagine... that I suffer from a rare sort of malady. A certain tune is such that whenever I hear it, I form the belief that there is a large purple animal nearby. Now in my cognitive environment, this is not in fact an indicator of the truth of this belief; so the belief has no Alstonian justification. But imagine that I am suddenly transported without my knowledge to some foreign environment — Australia, say; and imagine further that there, when that tune is heard, there is almost always a large purple animal nearby. (The tune in question, as it turns out, is the love call of the double-wattled purple cassowary.) In my new cognitive environment, the tune is indeed a reliable indicator of the truth of the belief; but of course the belief in question would (initially, at least) have no warrant — it would have no more warrant for me in Australia than it did in my original cognitive environment [Plantinga (1993), p. 191].

The recipe for constructing these examples is easy, Plantinga explains. “All we need are cases where some phenomenon is in fact a reliable indicator of the truth of a proposition, but my believing the proposition in question on the basis of that phenomenon arises from cognitive malfunction” [Plantinga (1993), p. 192]. In such cases, the ground of the belief that *p* is in fact a reliable indicator of *p*, but only *accidentally* reliable — “reliable in a way that from an epistemic or cognitive point of view is merely accidental” [Plantinga (1993), p. 192]. As such, Alston's epistemic theory is insufficient for justification.

This is not the only way to demonstrate the insufficiency of Alston's theory. Another can be seen by exploiting his internalist conditions for *ultima facie* (or all things considered) justification. *S*'s belief that *p* could be based on an adequate ground which is not overridden (rebutted or undermined) by anything *S* knows or justifiably believes, and still not be *ultima facie* justified. Consider two more examples:

3. Suppose that in addition to the four forces of the universe (gravity, electro-magnetic, and strong and weak force) I believe that there is a fifth and unifying force, and I believe this because I once heard it reported on a reliable news programme — CNN Science Edition. Although it has since been widely reported (by CNN among others) that fifth force theories are no longer taken seriously within the physics community, I have heard none of these reports. In fact, I have heard nothing about such theories since CNN's initial broadcast. Surely in

this case, my prima facie justified belief that there is a fifth force is overridden by these facts, whether or not I know, justifiably believe, or am even aware of these facts.

4. Suppose that my friends and family are holding a surprise birthday party for me tonight in the parish hall. And in order to get me to the party by 8:00 p.m. (without giving away the surprise), my wife tells me that we have tickets for a concert at the church tonight. Suppose further that, as a matter of fact, my wife has never lied to me before. My belief that I am going to attend a concert tonight is, therefore, based on an adequate ground that is not overridden by anything I know or justifiably believe. But as with the above example, this belief is surely not *ultima facie* justified.

Examples like these are also easy to construct. All we need are cases of prima facie justified belief (beliefs based on an adequate ground) that are not overridden by anything the subject knows or justifiably believes, but *are* overridden by facts that the subject is ignorant of. In the case of (3), my (prima facie) justified belief in fifth force theories is *rebutted* by the fact that such theories are false or probably false. In the case of (4), my (prima facie) justified belief that I will be attending a concert tonight is *undermined* by the fact that my wife's word was, on this occasion, an unreliable indication of the truth of my belief.

I suspect some may object to my line of attack here, accusing me of trading on an anachronistic understanding of the relationship between justified belief and true belief. Alston (along with almost every other contemporary epistemologist) is a fallibilist about justification. In other words, a belief can be justified and false. My criticism of his theory, however, seems to turn on the idea that a justified belief must necessarily be a true belief. While I believe this to be the case,<sup>7</sup> my criticism in no way depends upon this unorthodox view. My point is rather to show that there is a fairly easy way of generating Alstonian justified beliefs in which ignorance has a positive epistemic value. On such occasions, it is only in virtue of what *S* does not know or justifiably believe that *S*'s prima facie justified belief *p* is converted to *ultima facie* justified belief *p* (in (3) I didn't know that fifth force theories were largely discredited, and in (4) I didn't know that my wife was lying to me).

So we have two ways of showing up the insufficiency of Alston's theory of justification. Plantinga has shown that an Alstonian justified belief can be only accidentally reliable. And I have shown that Alstonian justification can sometimes treat ignorance as a positive epistemic value. What now? Plantinga thinks that his examples can be handled only by his own theory of warrant or justification. I disagree. In the next section, I will show how Alston's theory of justification can be modified so as to neutralize both varieties of counter-

examples given above. My strategy has the advantage over Plantinga's of embracing both internalist and externalist components of justification, rather than just the latter.

#### IV. A MODIFIED INTERNALISM/EXTERNALISM

The modification I have in mind leaves Alston's notion of prima facie justification untouched, dropping instead his internalist constraint for ultima facie justification. Rather than restricting overrides to what are within a subject's perspective (knowledge, justified belief, or experience), I broaden it to include any and all rebutters or underminers. So modified, Alston's justification is sufficient for justification (at least up to Gettier).<sup>8</sup>

Consider again Plantinga's examples above. In both instances, the beliefs in question are prima facie justified (because they are based on an adequate or truth-conducive ground), but not ultima facie justified (because there is reason to suppose that the belief's grounds are not sufficiently indicative of their truth). In (1) the belief that there is a purple animal nearby is based on the adequate ground that in Australia the tune *S* hears is a reliable indication of the presence of the double-wattled purple cassowary, but the adequacy of this ground is undermined by the fact that the disposition(s) and mechanism(s) causally responsible for producing this belief is not aimed at the truth. In (2) the belief that a statue of Elvis was found on Mars is based on the adequate ground that the *National Enquirer* is extremely reliable in its accounts of extraterrestrial events, but is undermined by the fact that the mechanism or disposition causally responsible for producing the belief in question (my gullibility) is not itself aimed at the truth.

Let me explain the way I am using the phrase, "aimed at the truth." A doxastic (belief-forming) practice or mechanism may be aimed at the truth, but miss it, thereby producing a false belief. Conversely, a doxastic practice or mechanism may produce true beliefs only accidentally, because it was aimed only at producing comfortable or satisfying beliefs. Now for belief *p* to be prima facie justified, it is sufficient that *p* be based on an experience or another belief that is adequately indicative of the truth of *p*. For belief *p* to be ultima facie justified, though, it must also be the case that the truth of *p* was the result of a doxastic practice or mechanism aimed at the truth. If belief *p* is the accidental result of a practice or mechanism that is not aimed at the truth, this is sufficient reason to suppose that in this instance the belief's ground is not sufficiently indicative of its truth.

My examples can be handled in a similar way. In both cases, the beliefs in question are prima facie justified, but not ultima facie justified. Unlike Plantinga's examples, though, the prima facie justification that accrues to my beliefs is rebutted rather than undermined (in other words, there is suffi-

cient reason to suppose that they are false). In (3) my belief that there is a fifth and unifying force in the universe is based on the adequate ground that CNN Science Edition is a reliable news programme, but it is rebutted by the fact that such theories are no longer taken seriously by the physics community. In (4) my belief that I will be attending a concert tonight is based on the adequate ground that my wife is a reliable source of information, but is rebutted by the fact that on this occasion she was lying to me.

## V. CONCLUSION

Alston offers a half-way house between internalism and externalism, arguing that a belief is justified if it is based on an adequate or truth-conduciveness (externalism) ground (internalism) that is not overridden by anything the subject knows or justifiably believes (internalism). As it turns out, though, this definition is insufficient for justification. Both Plantinga and I show this to be the case. It would be premature, however, to conclude from this that Alstonian justification is not repairable. By simply dropping the internalist constraint on what can count as an overrider to *prima facie* justification, I show that Alstonian justification can be modified to meet the available objections, while at the same time incorporating both epistemic internalism and externalism.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a nice summary of the diverse ways in which “internalism” and “externalism” are used in epistemology, see Kim (1993).

<sup>2</sup> The deontological conception of epistemic justification construes justification in terms of freedom from blame in adopting a particular propositional attitude. While this has been far and away the most popular conception of justification since the time of the Enlightenment, Alston says that this position is untenable because it requires “a degree of control over our propositional attitudes that we do not enjoy” [Alston (1989), p. 152].

Edmund Gettier’s three-pages paper [Gettier (1963)], argued that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. Today, it is commonly supposed that “a fourth condition” that accounts for Gettier-type counterexamples would make justified true belief sufficient for knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> In *Perceiving God* Alston omits the internalist constraint. He writes: “I believe that as a matter of fact almost everything our beliefs are based on is a sort of thing that

is typically reflectively accessible to its subject; if our beliefs are based almost entirely on other beliefs and on experiences, that thesis will be secured. But I will not build that conviction into my account of justification. I will take the justification of belief to be a function of the adequacy of whatever the belief is based on, whether reflectively accessible or not. However, this distinction is of little importance for our central concern in this book, where the beliefs in question (M-beliefs) are based (at least in part) on experiences of which the subjects are obviously directly aware" [Alston (1991), pp. 75-6].

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean, though, Alston cautions, that being justified in holding a belief requires that you must first successfully justify the belief. After all, many people are entirely justified in many of their beliefs without ever having justified them, or even possessing the required cognitive or verbal skills to justify them. For more on the distinction between "being justified" and "justifying" see Alston's (1988).

<sup>5</sup> Alston says that accessibility internalism applies only to prima facie justification, not ultima facie justification [Alston (1989), p. 238 note 13].

<sup>6</sup> He argues that a justifier must be "fairly readily available to the subject through some mode of access much quicker than lengthy research, observation, or experimentation" [Alston (1989), p. 239].

<sup>7</sup> For reasons similar to those given in Peter Unger (1979).

<sup>8</sup> I leave Gettier to the side, because there is no agreed upon way of characterizing Gettier-type counterexamples.

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