

Internalism externalized. Doxastic Change, the Body, and Causation

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One important element of a reliabilist account of knowledge is the causal production of beliefs about the external world. If such beliefs are thus produced they are likely to be true. This is a strategy that is not available to internalism. A strong link to Humean accounts of causation may be implicit in internalist doctrines about justification since they seem to assume the impossibility of justified beliefs about genuine causal facts. But if it can be shown that beliefs about causal facts are justifiable in the internalist sense then this would decisively modify the unsatisfying position of internalism regarding knowledge about the external world. It will be argued that knowledge presupposes doxastic change and that (i) beliefs about doxastic change are indefeasibly justifiable, that (ii) such change is not itself a doxastic entity, and (iii) that it involves causal facts.

The argument against scepticism then turns on the possibility of knowledge about doxastic change, where the latter is construed as a non-doxastic, i.e. an "external" entity – and where "external" is intended to refer to an extended mental domain. This argument plus the intuition about the causal constitution of somatic experience are supposed to render the standard external world hypothesis more plausible relative to its sceptical alternatives.

Introduction

Epistemological internalism tells us that justification as such is essentially an inferential relation between doxa in a doxastic system. Coherentism, one internalist variant, assumes that this is all there is to justification and its role regarding propositional knowledge: all doxa are equal in principle regarding their possible justificatory status; foundationalism, the other internalist (and classical rationalist) option, admits of foundational doxa that somehow ground a doxastic system, e.g. perceptual beliefs (Bonjour 1985). Internalism is compatible with naturalism where the causal production or change of beliefs is admitted. But causal matters can only enter into an explanation of knowledge and not into its justificatory aspects (Davidson 1984). There seems to be a close relationship between a Humean account of causation and internalism. If causation is seen as a mere constant conjunction of similar facts instead of a genuine relation between certain types of relata then causal facts are unable to have any special role in the production of knowledge. On this account causes and effects cannot be perceived as such and beliefs about causal facts supervene on the beliefs about the experience of regularities. Could internalism profit from realist accounts of causation or are such accounts reserved for externalists?

The conceptual separation of justification from explanation in internalism makes this doctrine attractive and vulnerable at once. The attribution of truth-conductivity to justification is attractive since it makes justification relevant in the evaluation of knowledge claims. Since this attribution is further linked to criteria regarding the permissibility of justification (direct epistemic access to justifiers as well as to criteria), internalism is a complete account of epistemic justification. An important problem that derives from this attribution is the question of how beliefs about non-doxastic things are justifiable. Put more to the point,

how can it be that beliefs about external things could become justified without external justifiers and their relevant connection to the domain of doxa?

Epistemological externalism gets much of its persuasiveness from this relative weakness of internalism (Armstrong 1973; Dretske 1981; Plantinga 1993a). After all, beliefs are seen as intentional objects and how could beliefs ever change or new beliefs be produced if all they ever did were to exclusively point logically to other, even foundational, beliefs? Externalism has thus abandoned the essential connection between justification and truth-conductivity in contending that it is not justification but the process by which a belief has been generated that is primarily truth-conducive. If it is a reliable process it will be truth-conducive and vice versa. But this is done at the cost of being unable to name general conditions of the reliability of some such process. Consequently, reliabilism is seen as an account of a concept of knowledge (true belief, produced by a reliable process) rather than as an account of justification. On the other hand, externalism is strong where it involves important and basic intuitions about the constitution of our knowledge. We tend to think of the causal aspects of belief production or belief change as somehow bearing on the justifiability of knowledge (Dretske 1969, Goldman 1979, Plantinga 1993a, 1993b). But this, too, presupposes that the causal (i.e. external) facts involved in the production of reliable beliefs are knowable.

1. An argument from doxastic change

All human knowledge production essentially involves doxastic change. I contend that beliefs can be formed about such change. If there is a doxastic change d and a corresponding belief p_d (' d has occurred') then p_d will be indefeasibly justified by doxastic change d iff p_d is about d since d and p_d both are directly epistemically accessible. I contend, therefore, that p_d will be indefeasible because it would be impossible to obtain evidence to the effect that p_d is false. (It should additionally be possible to construe an account of a belief about doxastic change to involve properties of d , e.g. q_d ' d involves perception v and inference s '.)

The next step towards the argument from doxastic change is an ontological interpretation of doxa as opposed to doxastic change. I propose that doxa and doxastic changes belong to different and non-overlapping subclasses of mental entities each. They are, so to speak, external relative to each other. This is so because doxastic changes as such – in contradistinction to doxa – necessarily involve causes and effects (whatever the exact character of the latter may be). It is important to note that this construal of doxastic change can remain unchanged in all hypothetical frameworks regarding the "external world" – whether this be a standard natural world, a world of minds controlled by a *génie malin* or a supercomputer, or simply the environment of a self-organizing system.

With a concept of justified beliefs regarding doxastic change and an ontological interpretation of doxa and doxastic change, the argument (DC) now runs as follows.

- (1) Doxastic changes are non-doxastic entities.

- (2) There are indefeasible, justified beliefs (doxa) about doxastic changes.
- (3) There are indefeasible, justified beliefs about non-doxastic entities.

I now want to suggest that (DC) renders an initial plausibility to the claim that there are justified perceptual beliefs regarding an external world. The plausibility in this case is derived from (DC) in that the latter demonstrates that there is knowledge about non-doxastic entities. This initial plausibility for the claim that there are justified perceptual beliefs regarding an external world needs further support. I will argue that beliefs about doxastic change are perceptual beliefs.

2. Perceptual beliefs and doxastic change

What seems awkward in the internalist picture of knowledge is that it is a static picture of doxastic systems that corresponds badly to our intuitions. If only doxa and the logical relations between them can contribute to the justification of beliefs how is genuine change in a doxastic system to be explained? It seems to me that if something genuinely changes in a doxastic system (e.g. a new belief is formed) then an epistemic agent can have non-inferential knowledge both of the fact of change as well as knowledge about this new belief (e.g. that it was produced in the course of this change). Good examples for this are subjective somatic perceptions which illustrate the point about an intrinsic connection between doxastic change and the corresponding perceptual experience.

Strolling out in the green in spring is relaxing because, among other things, the air is fresh and there are lots of agreeable smells in it. The sudden appearance of a characteristic foul smell under such circumstances will cause a focusing of ones attention. A series of doxastic changes occurs that may result in one searching for the source of the smell. Maybe one finds a dead animal beneath a tree stump and further doxastic changes occur. I suggest that one can have non-inferential knowledge of these changes as well as of the particular things that caused them (smells, views etc.).

When I ride a bicycle I continuously balance out the movements of my body mass in order to ride smoothly. After a little practice it is easy for me to ride thus with no hands. One day it appears that the balance doesn't work and the bike is not following lead. Again, several doxastic changes occur instantly and noninferentially and eventually the belief is (inferentially) formed that the bike is oversteering by itself. A visual check shows that the back wheel is tilted out of its correct axis. It is adjusted and the ride continues smoothly, with several doxastic changes following swiftly from my somatic perception that there is proper balance again.

To my mind, such examples show it to be a compelling intuition that I am in fact able not only to inferentially interpret all these doxastic incidents as connected, complex causal chains but that in the singular case of an event in the system of doxa I am able to perceive that this is an instance of a singular causal relation. The experience of smelling something new (construed as the experience of a doxastic change of a certain kind) seems to me to be able to ground the possibility of non-inferential knowledge about causal facts involved in the event of this change. Beliefs of this sort cannot exclusively be justified by other doxa because if a change occurred then something non-inferential and non-doxastic has happened to this doxastic system. Hence the suggestion that doxastic

change is perceivable and that beliefs about such change are beliefs about a special kind of perceptual experience.

If beliefs about causal facts were reducible to beliefs about the constant conjunction of similar things (as in Humean causation) then there would be no interesting interpretation of these examples. The compelling intuition that, in cases such as these, causes and effects (qua chains of doxastic change incidents) are indeed perceived would have to remain unanswered. A realist account about singular causation explains this intuition and thus contributes positively to the respective account about beliefs formed on perceptual experience. (Maybe it is precisely such kinds of perceptual and doxastic incidents that are basic for the formation of any concept of causation. In other words, when we talk of causes and effects and their intrinsic connection we mean types of things that are similar to the types of things that I have just mentioned. But I am not suggesting that this could be a substantial account of singular causation; cf. Fales 1990, Tooley 1990).

3. The case against Cartesian Scepticism

Provided a realist account of singular causation, since doxastic change involves causal facts it is plausible to assume that non-inferential knowledge about causal facts is possible. But knowledge about causal facts is knowledge about the external world. Now, doxastic change could either be a somatic entity, or a mental entity, or it could represent some sort of interface between the mental and the somatic. I am uncertain about these options but I want to suggest that it is enough to assume that doxastic change is external in the sense of being non-doxastic to increase the plausibility of the external world hypothesis.

A classical but flawed treatment of the question about the external world is this:

- (1) There is (non-inferential and fallible) knowledge about sense experience.
- (2) The object of sense experience is the external world.
- (3) There is (non-inferential and fallible) knowledge about the external world.

Conclusion (3) is problematic mainly because premise (2) is problematic. The internalist argument from doxastic change in sec. 1 above connected to an externalist, reliabilist epistemological scheme in sec. 2 facilitates a reworking of the above argument. I suggested that we view doxastic change as an entity that is itself not a doxastic entity and that it incorporates causal facts. I further suggested that there are indefeasibly justified beliefs about doxastic change. Furthermore, justification of such beliefs is conferred through the perception of such facts. The reworking of the argument above will thus be:

- (1*) There are indefeasible and non-inferential beliefs about doxastic change.
- (2*) Doxastic change is part of the non-doxastic world.
- (3*) There are indefeasible and non-inferential beliefs about the non-doxastic world.

The examples in sec. 2 all involve perceptual experience and I have tried to illustrate how such experience – qua experience of doxastic change – can have justificatory force for the corresponding perceptual beliefs. But these

and other examples show something more than the existence of justified beliefs about singular causation. Perceptual experience delivers a wide range of qualities and we are able to respond to these diverse inputs in a corresponding wide range of behavioral options. If we were brains-in-vats or something similar then the super-computer would not only have to deliver the impressions we have of the world as passive perceivers but it would have to tackle all the contingencies that continuously occur originating from our behavioral repertoire and, additionally, the corresponding perceptual experiences that result from our illusionary interventions in the non-existent standard external world. I conclude that, since it is plausible to regard doxastic change as a subclass of the class of entities of the external world, and since causal facts and other qualities are putatively involved in beliefs about such entities, knowledge about doxastic change is substantial knowledge about aspects of an external world.

Literature

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