

'Memory, Epistemic Responsibility, and the First-Person Perspective'

David James Barnett, May 2016

1. Introduction

Internalism: Whether an agent is justified in holding a doxastic attitude depends solely on factors internal to that agent's first-person perspective.

But what factors count as "internal to the agent's first-person perspective" at a time?

diachronic internalism: only factors internal to the agent's mental life up to that time

synchronic internalism: only factors internal to the agent's mental life at that time

Cartesian internalism: only factors internal to agent's *conscious* mental life at that time

I'll consider an argument for internalism that Alexander Jackson calls the "Argument from Irrationality", and claim it does not support Cartesian internalism over its competitors.

2. The Argument from Irrationality for Internalism

Unreliable Testimony: Mario is told by Maria that Dean Martin is Italian.

Although Maria's belief is in fact based on transparently bad reasons (e.g., a crystal ball), Mario has no reason to doubt Maria's testimony, and indeed has every reason to believe that she is a trustworthy source.

A (non-skeptical) internalist will say that Mario is justified in believing that Dean Martin is Italian, since he would have been justified in a "good case" where Maria had good reasons.

But some externalists might claim that Mario's belief is unjustified on account of being based on an objectively unreliable/unjustified source, even if he'd be justified in a good case.

Argument from Irrationality for internalism about testimony (Feldman, Huemer, myself):

- (1) Mario is not in a position to justifiably withhold belief that Dean Martin is Italian.
- (2) If Mario is not in a position to justifiably withhold belief that Dean Martin is Italian, then Mario is in a position to justifiably believe that Dean Martin is Italian.
- (3) Therefore, Mario is in a position to justifiably believe that Dean Martin is Italian.

Premise (1) is hard to deny, but what is the rationale for (2)? Answer: justification is a *prescriptive* (as opposed to merely evaluative) notion. This motivates a **No Epistemic Dilemmas** principle: At least one of an agent's options must be epistemically permissible.

3. The Argument from Irrationality for Cartesian Internalism

Fallacious Inference: Kim recently came to believe that *q* via fallacious reasoning, but he is not currently conscious of that reasoning. He has not forgotten or changed his mind about anything in the meantime.

A (non-skeptical) Cartesian internalist must say that Kim's belief is now justified, since it would be justified in a good case where the reasoning stored in memory is not fallacious.

Other internalists can say Kim's belief is unjustified, despite being justified in a good case.

Argument from Irrationality for Cartesian internalism (Huemer, Weatherson):

- (4) Kim is not in a position to justifiably revise his belief that *q*.
- (5) If Kim is not in a position to justifiably revise his belief that *q*, then Kim is in a position to justifiably believe that *q*.
- (6) Therefore, Kim is in a position to justifiably believe that *q*.

But this argument is unsound, since (4) is false. In prior work, I took this to be obvious. But Brian Weatherson has replied with what is in effect an argument for (4). (He does not endorse Cartesian internalism, but instead rejects (5) and the ban on epistemic dilemmas.) Here are Weatherson's premises (with minor tweaks):

- (i) Kim cannot rationally re-open inquiry regarding q .
- (ii) Kim cannot now withhold belief unless he re-opens inquiry regarding q .

But (i) and (ii) alone do not logically entail (4). This requires an additional premise:

- (iii) If an agent cannot take a given doxastic attitude unless she As , and the agent cannot rationally A , then she is not in a position to justifiably take the doxastic attitude.

Perhaps (iii) is true when one's reasons for an attitude derive from one's reasons for A -ing:

Missing Lemma: A mathematician could prove a potential theorem if only she could prove a lemma.

But (iii) is false when A -ing is a precondition for forming an attitude for *other* reasons:

Up Late: While staying up later than I should, I form a new belief.

4. The Argument from Irrationality for Synchronic Internalism

Forgotten Evidence: Last year, Maria came to believe that Dean Martin is Italian for transparently bad reasons. But she has long since forgotten what her reasons were for this belief, and she has no other reason to doubt it.

A (non-skeptical) synchronic internalist must say that Maria is justified in believing that Dean Martin is Italian, since she'd be justified in a good case where her reasons were good.

A diachronic internalist can say Maria's belief is unjustified, even if justified in a good case.

Argument from Irrationality for synchronic internalism (Feldman, McGrath):

- (7) Maria is not now in a position to justifiably revise her belief that Dean Martin is Italian.
- (8) If Maria is not now in a position to justifiably revise her belief that Dean Martin is Italian, then Maria is in a position now to justifiably believe that Dean Martin is Italian.
- (9) Therefore, Maria is now in a position to justifiably believe that Dean Martin is Italian.

But why accept (8)? Synchronic internalists must be thinking "Maria has only two options, to revise her belief or to retain it. So it cannot be that she is obligated to do neither."

But this view of Maria's options begs the question against the diachronic internalist, who can say that Maria's options are temporally extended. Her options might include:

- (a) come to believe Dean Martin is Italian last year and retain the belief today
- (b) come to believe Dean Martin is Italian last year and revise the belief today
- (c) withhold belief that Dean Martin is Italian last year and continue withholding today

Option c is the one Maria ought to take, and thus she ought not to believe that Dean Martin is Italian today—in contradiction with (9). (Note: This is consistent with granting that among option a and b, the better option is a.)