

2005

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Recommended Citation

McBain, James, "Epistemological Practice and the Internalism/Externalism Debate" (2005). *Faculty Submissions*. Paper 28.
http://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil_faculty/28

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Facta Philosophica

Offprint from:

International Journal for Contemporary Philosophy

edited by Alex Burri and Klaus Petrus

Volume 7 Number 2 2005

Peter Lang

Epistemological Practice and the Internalism/Externalism Debate

James McBain

The dialogue between internalists who maintain a belief is a case of knowledge when that which justifies the belief is within the agent's first-person perspective and externalists who maintain epistemic justification can be in part, or entirely, outside the agent's first-person perspective has been part of the epistemological literature for some time with one side usually attempting to show how the other side is mistaken. Edward Craig argues the internalist/externalist debate is flawed from the outset. Specifically, both internalism and externalism should be incorporated into the correct analysis of knowledge once we revamp that project. The epistemological project, according to Craig, is a practical explication of what both our epistemological practices and the concept of knowledge do for us. My purpose here is to evaluate this proposal, as well as Ram Neta's attempt to generalize this proposal to cover all epistemic appraisals, in light of the internalism/externalism debate. I argue the Craig/Neta proposal does not actually 'solve' the internalism/externalism debate, but rather pushes it back a level or assumes that one side is correct; hence, the Craig/Neta proposal is not an adequate 'solution' to the internalism/externalism debate.

1 Craig's Proposal and the Good Informant

Craig eschews the traditional questions and methodology of epistemology and proposes to approach epistemology by investigating the value of knowledge, i. e., what the concept of knowledge does for us.¹

1 I will not at this time go through Craig's arguments for rejecting traditional conceptual analysis as the appropriate methodology for epistemology. His methodology is that of explication. For Craig, to explicate a concept is to "construct a new version of it satisfying certain standards, with the proviso that to count as a new version of that concept it had to emerge with many of its principal features intact" (1990, 8). His method is similar to Rudolf Carnap's rational reconstruction al-

Craig recognizes that one may object to his proposal on the grounds that agents can know even when they are unwilling to tell what they know and even when inquirers cannot detect any property that correlates the agent with having a true belief. It is here that Craig introduces the “objectivising” of the concept of a good informant. Objectivisation is where agents start from simple, self-interested concepts and progress to more and more general, “objective” concepts. Our concept of a knower is the objectivised concept of a good informant. A good informant is one that is in *my* interest to find. She supposedly would have information for *me*, has information that is in *my* concern, will be able to communicate with *me*, and is accessible to *me* (1990, 85). Yet, such a concept will not serve a community’s needs. A community will objectivise the concept. We will subtract what is relevant to me at a particular time. Once we objectivise the concept of a good informant, we are left with the true belief requirement and the requirement of having a property correlating well with true belief on the issue in question, but the requirement of having a detectable property will be “diluted” (1990, 90). This diluting results in our ability to recommend good informants to others who detect in ways different than our own. I can recommend informants to others that they might not normally detect and vice versa. So, a good informant need not have a property that I can detect as long she has a property that someone can detect. The bottom line of Craig’s proposal is that an agent who is a good informant is a good informant whatever circumstances the inquirer is in and whatever attitudes the inquirer has towards the matter (1990, 91). A good informant is an agent that has a very high probability or degree of possessing a true belief. This high degree must be for all, not just for one person in particular circumstances. And the more we objectivise the concept, the closer we get to the concept of knowledge.

Ram Neta proposes that we extend Craig’s proposal to epistemological status generally (Forthcoming, 19). All terms of epistemological appraisal are to be thought of as flagging informants which are credible in various ways. As he states, “to possess an epistemological status with respect to a particular proposition *p* is a matter of being a more or less creditable informant as to whether or not it is the case that *p*” (Forthcoming, 19). Thus, Neta sees Craig’s proposal as not only viable for appraising knowledge, but also for any epistemic appraisal.

beliefs. Yet, Neta notes that this assessment misses the contractarian element in Craig's proposal. The question is not one of whether Mr. Truetemp is justified in his beliefs, but rather what principles of epistemic practice we are permitted to use when attempting to acquire information. In relying on good informants, our reliance is part of the cooperative endeavor in which all parties are collectively engaged (Neta, Forthcoming, 22). When we use someone as a source of information, we ought not to exploit that source. Our goal is to acquire the information we are interested in while preserving cooperation and communication. Once we understand these interests, then we go about figuring out what principles best serve such interests. We select the principles that best serve the interests of cooperation and communication.

It is here we can see the Craig/Neta "solution" to the internalist/externalist debate. The debate is not about the property, but rather about what principles are being employed to serve the interests of cooperation and communication. The question is not whether the epistemological justificatory perspective is internalist or externalist. It is rather the question under what conditions one can take credit for being a reliable informant. To resolve such a dispute is simply to determine which epistemological practice is best at regarding people as good informants in certain situations. Some of the solutions will be internalistic, some will be externalistic. Since epistemological practice is widely dynamic, there will be equally good ways to fashion the practice (Neta, Forthcoming, 23). So, essentially, there is no debate since both would be correct for different epistemological practices.

3 Does Shifting the Debate 'Solve' the Issue?

The key to understanding the Craig/Neta proposal is the shift in focus from the debate over justification to the debate over epistemic practice. The traditional debate focuses either on theories of justification or theories of knowledge and asks the question whether all the factors which need to be present for a belief to be epistemically justified are within the agent's subjective perspective (where internalists claim yes and externalists claim no). The Craig/Neta proposal is that both the internalists and externalists are correct by allowing each side to have equally plausible answers to the question of what the conditions are in which someone can take credit for her reliability. By embracing each side and allowing each to designate different, equally good epistemic practices, we see there is no debate to be had. As Neta puts it, "If [this is] the case,

one is a good informant, we need to determine whether she has the detectable property. In order to do this, we must first know what the detectable property is that we are attempting to establish she has. If we are to pick out a good informant and flag her as credible, we must know what the property is that determines she is a good informant. Here we are back to the beginning of the internalism/externalism debate. Is a good informant credible because she has good reasons (in the internalistic sense) or because she is reliable in her belief formation? Craig and Neta tell us that to answer this question we need only turn to our interests in flagging credible informants. Yet, without a story as to how to determine credible informants, we do not have a solution to the debate. The debate has simply been pushed back.

Second, Craig and Neta maintain that our epistemic appraisal will yield some internalist practices as being equally as good as some externalist practices. Given this, we should not worry about whether internalism or externalism is true, but rather worry simply about how best to fashion our epistemological practice to determine whether one is a good informant. This is problematic in light of the first-person/third-person issue raised earlier. Craig does not want to commit himself to either internalism or externalism, but rather to accept both. He concedes the easiest way to read his proposal is to see the third-person case as being externalistic and the first-person case as being internalistic. He maintains his view does not commit him to internalism because simply being in this "extra state" does not "oblige us to build it into the concept" (1990, 65). As Craig notes:

The self-directed, or first-personal, inquiry brings us into the neighborhood of internalism because it forces on us the question "Do I meet the third condition?"; and to decide that we do, or that we are good informants, we must satisfy ourselves that the answer is "Yes" (1990, 65).

Craig does not think this *commits* him to internalism. He maintains that the fact that we are in an "extra state" which internalism characteristically adds to the externalist account.

Yet, there is no question as to an internalism being demanded in first-person cases. For first-person cases, the detectable property must be internalistic. No agent is in a first-person position to determine an externalistic epistemic property. Craig maintains this line of response is confused. He claims one cannot get into the position to certify oneself as a good informant unless she considers whether she meets the epistemic condition and responds positively. This, for Craig, is not the same as a good informant being aware that one has fulfilled the epistemic

dent solution to the debate so as to inform our epistemological practices or a story as why the question of epistemic properties does not matter to our epistemological practices. I maintain Craig and Neta have not given us a satisfactory story to that end.³

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3 I would like to thank Jared Bates, Douglas Patterson, and Donald Wayne Viney for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.