Must Epistemic Values Conflict?

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In his rich and expansive paper, Wright argues that the introduction of skeptical scenarios does not move the needle in the debate between internalist and externalist accounts of perceptual justification. To evaluate whether a subject in a skeptical scenario is justified, we need to evaluate the relative importance of different epistemic values. But the disagreement between the internalist and externalist can be traced back to a difference in which epistemic values they prioritize. Internalists, who value rational coherence, argue that an agent in a skeptical scenario ought to align her beliefs with her evidence, and therefore *ought* to believe that the world is as it seems. Externalists, who value the acquisition of knowledge, argue that an agent in a skeptical situation *ought not* believe that the world is as it seems because doing so will lead her into error.

I think Wright is correct that if we conceive of the situation thusly, we arrive at something of a standstill. But in these comments, I want to suggest that reframing some aspects of the dialectic reveals options that Wright does not consider. Crucially, Wright seems to presuppose that an internalist (or externalist) view of justification goes hand in hand with an internalist (or externalist) view of perceptual experience. He describes the internalist as committed to the thesis that “doxastic justification is conferred on a (perceptual) belief by other (*narrow*) phenomenal states of the subject.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Similarly, when developing the externalist’s view, he writes:

Bear in mind, however, that we are seeking an *externalist* conception of perceptual justification. So how should registration states [pre-doxastic experiential states] be conceived if their role is to be compatible with externalism? …For an externalist…a registration state has to be a *world-involving* dyadic state, involving real relations between the subject and external circumstances.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Contrary to Wright’s presupposition, one can hold an externalist account of experience while nonetheless accepting an internalist account of justification. On this kind of view, one holds that the character and content of a perceptual experience are fixed by facts external to the skull, but also that the subject ought to align her beliefs with the evidence that is available to her. I’ll argue that metaphysical disjunctivism—a particular brand of externalism about experience—is best understood as motivated by an internalist conception of justification. I will argue that this combination of commitments places disjunctivism in the unique position of simultaneously accommodating the epistemic values of both rationality and knowledge.

One of the key motivations for a disjunctivist view of perceptual experience is the claim that extant forms of *both* internalism *and* externalism about experience fail to explain how our perceptual experiences can represent the world as being some way *to the subject.* The problem for the internalist, famously pressed by the likes of Putnam, is that an item cannot intrinsically represent anything.[[3]](#footnote-3) A line drawing in the sand cannot, just in virtue of its intrinsic characteristics, constitute a drawing of Churchill. And mental items are no different from physical items here. A mental state cannot, just in virtue of its intrinsic properties, represent anything outside of itself. So, on an internalist view of perceptual experience, it can never so much as seem to the subject as if the world is some way. If a subject’s internal states do not intrinsically represent anything, then experiences, construed as internal states, cannot supply a subject with any evidence for P, and so the subject cannot act rationally when she forms the belief that P on the basis of her perceptual experience. Wright assumes that the internalist is able to secure a notion of justification on which a subject is justified even in cases in which her resulting belief is false. What the reasoning outlined here suggests is that, on the contrary, a view on which the subject has the *same evidence* across veridical and delusive experiences in virtue of the evidential state being intrinsic to the subject, collapses into a view on which the subject has *no evidence* in either case.

What is required for representation to get off the ground is some kind of contact between the item doing the representing and the item represented. The standard move, at this stage, is to argue that some kind of causal connection is necessary for representation. A pattern in the sand comes to represent Churchill only if there is some causal chain that links the production of the pattern back to the individual himself. Similarly, a perceptual experience comes to represent a bowl of fruit on the table only if it is typically caused by bowls of fruit. The content of an experience, on this standard variety of externalism, is fixed by the causal etiology of the experience.

According to the disjunctivist, this kind of garden-variety externalism fails just as much as traditional internalism at securing the possibility of representation *for the subject*. If some experience represents a state of affairs only in virtue of being caused by that state of affairs in the right way, and if the subject of the experience has no access to what causes her mental states, then the subject has no access to what her experience represents. And so we still cannot explain how it can seem *to the subject* that there is a bowl of fruit on the table. As McDowell famously put it, on this species of externalism, “there is a serious question about how it can be that experience, *conceived from its own point of view*, is not blank or blind, but purports to be revelatory of the world we live in.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This brand of externalism about experience, then, cannot respect the epistemic value of rationality, according to which a subject must form beliefs solely on the basis of the evidence that is accessible to her (because no such evidence is accessible). At best then, it can aim for *knowledge* in place of rationality and argue that the subject’s perceptual beliefs are nonetheless justified because they are formed on the basis of experiences that reliably lead the subject to true beliefs and knowledge.[[5]](#footnote-5) So, as Wright suggests, the standard externalist about experience relinquishes the value of rationality and replaces it with truth or knowledge.

What is crucial to recognize is that the disjunctivist finds this picture of subjects alienated from their own mental contents deeply problematic precisely because she has strongly *internalist* inclinations when it comes to justification. The disjunctivist is motivated by the desideratum that the evidence on the basis of which the subject forms a belief must be available or accessible to the subject herself. The only way to make the worldly contents of experience available to the subject is to allow the world to *constitute*, and not merely cause, our experiences. This is what leads to the disjunctivist thesis that there is no experience in common across veridical and delusive experiences: if a worldly scene constitutes a veridical perception of that scene, that same experience *cannot* obtain in the absence of that scene. The payoff: insofar as the relevant worldly states of affairs are actual constituents of the subject’s experience, they are not extrinsic to those experiences. And so there is no longer any alienation from the states that constitute a subject’s evidence for her perceptual beliefs.

The important point to note here is that valuing rationality as an epistemic norm does not *require* that one treat the justification that a subject has as identical across veridical and non-veridical cases. Given that on disjunctivism, the experience that a subject enjoys when perceiving is distinct from the experience she enjoys when hallucinating, the evidence that is available to her on each occasion will be different. Like the standard externalist, the disjunctivist argues that in the good case, the subject possesses justification that she lacks in the bad case. So, like the standard externalist, the disjunctivist secures the value of truth and knowledge. But crucially, this should not be taken as privileging truth as an epistemic value *over* rationality. Rather, the view *also* makes room for a modified version of the epistemic value of rationality. On disjunctivism, a subject is justified just in case she believes what it is reasonable to believe in light of the evidence that is accessible to her. In the good case, the subject is justified in believing that the world is some way, not because of some extrinsic fact about the experience’s etiology, but simply because that is how the world seems to her to be. In anchoring the notion of justification to what is subjectively available to the agent, the disjunctivist values rationality just as much as knowledge. She secures this role for rationality precisely by rejecting the faulty assumption that the subject must be in the same justificatory situation in both good and bad cases, on the grounds that this leaves the subject with no justification at all.

References

Putnam, H. 1981. “Brains in a Vat”, in *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–21.

McDowell, J. 1986. “Singular thought and the extent of 'inner space.” In John McDowell & Philip Pettit (Eds.), *Subject, Thought, and Context*. Clarendon Press, 137-168.

1. Wright (this volume), 2, my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wright (this volume, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Putnam (1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McDowell (1986, 152). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Though how beliefs formed on the basis of “blind” experience can themselves be not blind or blank is a further problem that such externalists face. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)