

International conference on Inferential Internalism

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1 Scientific motivation and aim

1.1 Summary

Inferential Internalism is, on a rough characterization, the claim that an inferred belief isn't justified, unless the reasoner rationally takes a stand on the question whether her premises provide her with an adequate reason for her conclusion. Concerning the question whether Inferential Internalism should be accepted or not, important considerations pull in different directions. On the one hand, regress- or circularity arguments seem to show that such a requirement on inferential justification is either incoherent or at least impossible to satisfy for human reasoners, so that scepticism about inference ensues. On the other hand, the connection between the notion of justification and that of responsibility renders the claim that the subject need not have a view on her reasons suspect. The aim of the conference is to discuss the prospects of reconciling these considerations. In particular, the question which versions of Inferential Internalism fall prey to the regress objections and which not, if any, is to be addressed.

The question whether to accept Inferential Internalism raises for the exemplary case of inference a number of fundamental issues in current epistemology. These include at least the following:

- (i) *basic justification*: Are there cases where justification obtains, in spite of the fact that the thinker has no justified view on such questions as whether the belief-formation is reliable, the reasons adequate, and so on?
- (ii) *the nature of norm-guided belief-formation*: What distinguishes norm-guided belief-formation from mere belief-formation? Is it that in the former but not in the latter the thinker's cognitive grasp of the norm plays some psychological role in the belief-formation? And, if yes, what role, and what kind of cognitive grasp? Is the cognitive grasp constituted by explicit or implicit higher-order belief or merely by a stable disposition to form first-order beliefs according to certain patterns?
- (iii) *responsibility and justification*: Is it right that the connection between justification and responsibility supports requirements to the effect that the reasoner must have a justified attitude towards the grounds of her

beliefs? Or are there less demanding ways to behave in an epistemically responsible manner?

At the conference these issues will be discussed as they arise for the specific case of inference and inferential justification. Some specific problems for Inferential Internalism are developed and discussed, e.g. the regress appealed to in traditional inductive sceptical arguments and the regresses alluded to as versions of the “Lewis-Carroll-Problem”. Alternatives to Inferential Internalism are tested for their capacity to do justice to the responsibility-justification connection.

1.2 Inferential Internalism: the problem

It is very plausible that the question whether someone has justifiably deduced a conclusion from a set of premises is connected to the question whether she believes, justifiably believes, has evidence against or bears some sort of attitude towards the proposition of the form *[premises] entail [conclusion]*. The claim that there is such a connection can be loosely expressed by the following intuitively compelling requirement: If someone justifiably infers a conclusion from a set of premises, then *she must not be indifferent to the question whether the premises entail the conclusion*. But given this loose but intuitive claim is acknowledged, two further questions arise. First, *why* must she not be indifferent to the question whether the premises entail the conclusion? Is this because, if she were indifferent, then she would not have *deductive justification*? Or, is it because, if she were indifferent, she would not be *deducing* at all? Second, *how much* “not indifferent to the question” must she be in order to justifiably deduce, resp. to be deducing at all? Does she need to *justifiably believe* that the premises entail the conclusion, or is it enough that she *believes* it? Or, is it even enough that she *does not have evidence to the contrary*?

Inferential Internalism is the view —about inference in general, not only deduction— that the reasoner must “not be indifferent” to the proposition of the form *[premises] support [conclusion]* in a demanding sense: The reasoner must *justifiably accept* that the premises support the conclusion, in order to justifiably believe the conclusion. This rough characterization leaves still room for many variants of different strength: (i) Variants may differ with respect to the demands put on *justifiably accepting* a proposition. (ii) And they may differ with respect to the interpretation of the connective, i.e. the *in order to*, in the requirement of Inferential Internalism (Is it merely a material conditional, or something stronger, e.g. temporal antecedence?). But the rough characterization excludes for instance that the reasoner need only believe that the premises support the conclusion (without that belief having a positive epistemic status), or that she must merely not have evidence against it.

Inferential Internalism in this sense is a traditional thesis implicitly endorsed by many philosophers (arguably by Hume, Russell and Goodman). It has been explicitly endorsed in the 1990’s by Fumerton [1995], Bonjour [1998] as a reaction to the influence of non-traditional epistemology in the form of externalism. Epistemological externalism takes in general a critical stance towards all requirements on the reasoners ability to assess her grounds. It is the cooperation between the environment and the belief-forming mechanisms itself which bestows a belief with justification, rather than the thinkers own capacity to view

her belief in a positive light. Due to the influence of externalism (but also due to a new interest in the sceptical arguments—in some of which, particularly inductive scepticism, it is an important premise—, [cf. Stroud, 1984]) Inferential Internalism lost its status as orthodoxy during the 1980's [e.g. Van Cleve, 1984].

However, many people are uncomfortable with an outright rejection of Inferential Internalism. Critics of externalism think that it generally overlooks the connection between justification and responsibility [Bonjour, 1985, Boghossian, 2001, 2003]. A responsible reasoner, some of them claim, ought to have some view on what constitutes her grounds for believing. In particular, while relying on an inferential belief-formation she ought to accept that her premises support her conclusions. Other critics think that externalism is in general unable to answer satisfyingly the challenge posed by traditional scepticism [Wright, forthcoming].

However traditional sceptical arguments about induction themselves seem to show that Inferential Internalism (at least for inductive inference) imposes a requirement on justified belief such that no belief can ever be inferentially justified. Externalism paves the way for a conception of justification that does not need such strong requirements. In addition, some newer arguments inspired by Lewis Carroll [1895] point in the same direction [Van Cleve, 1984, Boghossian, 2001, 2003]. If these arguments are sound, then we face an uneasy choice between rejecting Inferential Internalism outright and accepting scepticism about inferential justification. On the assumption that scepticism about inference is unacceptable this dilemma prompts the need to re-evaluate either the arguments against Inferential Internalism or the negative assessment of the externalist's capacity to account for the responsibility-justification connection.

1.3 Inferential Internalism: prospects

With a re-evaluation of the arguments against Inferential Internalism goes an assessment of the many different possible variants of it. It may be the case that once the correct kind of acceptance-state and the correct kind of connection between the thinker's acceptance and the thinker's property of being justified in believing the conclusion have been found (see above), Inferential Internalism does not fall prey to the objections alluded to above [Leite, forthcoming].

Both sorts of specifications of the requirement of Inferential Internalism, i.e. the kind of acceptance-state involved and the kind of connective used, are connected to a larger question about the *source* of the requirement. In order to justifiably believe something, (i) one must have an adequate reason and (ii) believe for that reason (believe in response to that reason). A belief is not justified simply whenever the thinker has a good reason in its favor, —it is not justified simply whenever the belief-formation is in accordance with an epistemic norm. The belief must be held as a *response to a reason*, the belief-formation must be *guided by a norm*. According to (i) and (ii) the acceptance of the the proposition of the form [*premises*] support [*conclusion*] may enter a requirement on justifiably believing the conclusion in two ways:

On the one hand, there may be a requirement on having adequate reasons. In this case, one claims that the reason provided by the reasoner's justified

beliefs in the premises is bound up with the reasoner's justified acceptance of the proposition of the form *[premises] support [conclusion]*.

On the other hand, one may think that the reasoner's belief-forming behavior is a response to a reason, only if she accepts it as her reason, where this implies that she accepts the proposition of the form *[premises] support [conclusion]*.

In the first case, Inferential Internalism follows (perhaps with additional claims) from a thesis about the constitutive facts of having inferential reasons. In the second case, Inferential Internalism follows (with additional claims) from a thesis about how reasons and norms guide belief.

The question of the 'source' of Inferential Internalism in this sense has not yet been fully addressed. Discussion of the nature of inference (normative guidance in the case of inference) and discussion of Inferential Internalism are often held in isolation of each other. But according to some accounts of inference a belief-formation counts as an inference partly in virtue of the reasoner's (actual or potential) attitudes towards propositions of such forms as *[premises] support [conclusion]* [Audi, 1993, Leite, 2004]. According to such a view on normative guidance, it may be the case that the belief in the conclusion isn't justified, unless the reasoner justifiably accepts such a proposition. Hence it may motivate Inferential Internalism. There are contending accounts of inference that do not involve any such acceptance [e.g. Harman, 1964, Wedgwood, 2006]. Even so, discussion concerning both issues, the nature of inference and Inferential Internalism, may profit from being brought together. This has already been done to some extent in certain discussions of the "Lewis Carroll Problem" [Engel, 2005, 2007, Stroud, 1979].

The aim of the conference is to discuss the prospects of developing a variant of Inferential Internalism that at the same time avoids scepticism and incoherence and does justice to the intuitions that motivate the rough and unqualified version of it. This may include proposals of specific versions of Inferential Internalism, but also proposal of ways to be more comfortable with a rejection of Inferential Internalism, i.e. proposals for alternative ways to account for the connection between responsibility and justification. Such a discussion will among other things consist of

- (a) an elaboration and assessment of the best versions of arguments to the effect that Inferential Internalism leads to scepticism (or is incoherent or otherwise unacceptable), in particular the famous "Lewis-Carroll-Argument",
- (b) a discussion of different sorts of attitudes which may count as acceptances of the proposition of the form *[premises] support [conclusion]*,
- (c) a discussion of normative guidance for the case of inference, that is, a discussion of the nature of inference,
- (d) an investigation into the source of the internalist intuitions supporting Inferential Internalism.

1.4 Wider issues

Inferential Internalism is a rather specific thesis. But it is tightly linked to a number of fundamental questions in contemporary epistemology:

Basic justification: The requirement imposed by Inferential Internalism is an instance of a more general (real or alleged) requirement: A cognizer must justifiably accept that her grounds for a given belief are adequate, if the belief is to be justified. The dominant view in epistemology is that the general requirement must be rejected. This is the view that there is *basic* justification and knowledge. That is, there are some cases in which a belief is justified, even though the subject has no justified view on the question whether the belief is reliably formed, supported by adequate evidence, and so on. Many philosophers think that basic justification (or “entitlement” as it is sometimes called [Burge, 2003, Dretske, 2000]) must be part of any sensible epistemological theory. However the view has also been criticized for allowing forms of justification that are intuitively to be excluded [Cohen, 2002]. The question whether to reject Inferential Internalism is the question whether to accept basic *inferential* justification.

The issue of basic justification is, as may already be clear from the above, closely linked to the question of scepticism. Most (but not all) proponents of basic justification think that it’s main motivation is that it is required in order to avoid scepticism [e.g Field, 2000]. Some even think that accepting basic justification provides the solution to the sceptical paradoxes. If basic justification is allowed, then no further problematic justification (for the falsity of sceptical scenarios) is required in order to be justified and the sceptic’s demand to do so can be dismissed. And if basic justification is allowed, then the justification of such further propositions may not be that problematic: the further propositions may be *rule-circularly* justified [Van Cleve, 1984], i.e. justified by a use of the method the adequacy of which is under question without thereby relying on a belief that the method is adequate. “Dogmatist” responses to scepticism [Pryor, 2000] rely on countenancing basic justification. If basic justification is rejected, then some other response to scepticism must be given [e.g. Wright, 2004]. This is thus one of the wider issues which bears on Inferential Internalism and vice-versa.

The nature of norm-guided belief-formation: As said, one motivation for Inferential Internalism may come from the idea that a belief-formation will not count as an inference, unless the subject links her premises to her conclusion via an acceptance of the proposition of the form *[premises] entail [conclusion]*. In general, a justified belief must bear a certain specific relation to those states—these may be beliefs, but also perceptions, memories, and so on—that provide the adequate reason for holding that belief. In traditional terminology: the belief must be *based* on these states. Even more generally, everything supported by an adequate reason, whether this is a belief or a practical act, is justified, only insofar as it occurs *because of*, or *in response to* the reason. For the case of belief, one can distinguish two traditional views of the basing-relation, *causal* and *cognitive*. On the one hand, one may think that the right relation is to be specified in causal terms: there is a sort of non-deviant causal chain connecting the beliefs in the premises or the other states with the belief in the conclusion (or the perceptual belief, and so on). On the other hand, one may think that the right relation obtains in virtue of the cognizer’s accepting that the one state (or its content) supports the belief. Someone wanting to motivate Inferential Internalism from a view on normative guidance must defend a cognitive view of the basing-relation. Thus, the general issue of the nature of the basing-relation is directly relevant for this line.

A connected general problem about normative guidance is that of reconciling the

objectivity of the supporting reason with its motivational impact [e.g. Dancy, 1995]. Is responding to a reason (being guided by a norm) something which is itself outside or inside rational cognitive control? If it is outside such control, for instance partially the effect of non-cognitive pro-attitudes [Gibbard, 1995, Field, 2000], then relativism threatens; if it is under such control by further reasons, then a regress threatens (see below)[Blackburn, 1994, Engel, 2005]. Connected to the issue of normative guidance is the question of the nature of belief and acceptance. If belief is guided by acceptances of propositions about what supports what, how are we to conceive of these states. Are these simply dispositions to connect certain contents or are we to conceive of them in a more substantial way (as Inferential Internalist's must claim in order save the distinctive feature of their view)?

Responsibility and justification: The third wider question —besides basic justification and normative guidance— to which the discussion of Inferential Internalism is directly relevant is one of those involved in the Internalism-Externalism debate. The unspecific motivation for Inferential Internalism is the idea that justification is linked to the notion of responsibility and control. This idea is the driving force behind many recent attacks on externalism. There are a number of attempts to reconcile basically externalist epistemologies with this idea —for the case of justification in general, as well as for inferential justification in particular. One strategy is to divide justification into *reflective justification* being under the constraints imposed by internalist intuition and *animal justification*, a pure externalist kind of justification [Sosa, 1997, Bonjour and Sosa, 2003]. Another strategy is to appeal to epistemic or intellectual virtues in addition to (or instead of) simple reliability [Greco, 1999, 2002, Sosa, 1985]. The issue of Inferential Internalism is thus an instance of the wider issue of how to account for the (alleged or real) link between responsibility and justification.

1.5 Specific issues

There are the four following main obstacles for a proponent of Inferential Internalism:

Classical Regress: First, the requirement imposed by Inferential Internalism seems prone to the classical regress problem exploited in traditional sceptical arguments. If the inference is only justified, if something else is justified (*inferential internalism*), then, if this something else is inferentially justified, as well as everything that is required by any further inference (*inferentialism about the reflective acceptances*), then the initial inference is only justified, if infinitely many things are justified. There are a number of responses to this regress problem: (i) One might reject *inferentialism about the reflective acceptances* and claim that this acceptances are the result of and justified by non-inferential a priori insight [Bonjour, 1998]; but this is less plausible for induction than for deduction. (ii) One might accept the conclusion and adopt infinitism, the view that (inferential) justification obtains only once a certain infinite number of acceptances is acquired (in the right way) [Klein, 1999]; but this faces the problem to have to account for the fact that there is a psychological dependence, i.e. the basing relation, between an infinity of states.

Justificatory Lewis-Carroll Problem: Second, there is a problem concerning the

justificatory import of the acceptance of the proposition of the form *[premises] support [conclusion]* (henceforth “reflective acceptance”). (This is one aspect of the Lewis-Carroll-Problem) How does the (granted to be justified) reflective acceptance bear on the justificatory status of the belief in the conclusion? This must be by way of inferential support, for the propositional content of the reflective acceptance is not identical to the content of the conclusion. But if the support is inferential, then according to inferential internalism a further justified acceptance is required, and again a regress ensues [Boghossian, 2001, 2003]. This problem needs a careful evaluation, because it probably applies only to some variants of Inferential Internalism. Inferential Internalism need not countenance the claim that the reflective acceptance partially constitutes (or explains) inferential support. But even if it does apply, it has been suggested that the acceptance need not be propositional and hence need not support the inference inferentially [Wright, 2001, Bonjour, 2005].

Psychological Lewis Carroll Problem: Third, there is also a problem concerning the psychological import of the reflective acceptance. (This is another aspect of the Lewis-Carroll-Problem, [Cf. Stroud, 1979]) Even if the reflective acceptance is itself not based on any other belief, one may ask how it partially explains the belief in the conclusion. If it is inferentially, in the way a belief in a premise explains a belief in a conclusion, then a regress looms. For a further reflective acceptance would have to explain this further inferential connection, and so on. A defense of Inferential Internalism must be able to secure for the reflective acceptance a distinctive (not premise-like) psychological role.

Alternative strategies: Fourth, even if none of the aforementioned problems proves to be insurmountable, one may ask whether Inferential Internalism is necessary in order to take the intuitions on responsibility into account. There are proposals to capture such intuitions in other ways. For instance, it has been argued that—even lacking the view on her reasons demanded by Inferential Internalism—a subject is inferring in a responsible manner when behaving in accordance with the inference-pattern is constitutive of the subject’s possessing some of the concepts involved in the premises [Boghossian, 2003]. Or, it may be claimed that if the inferential dispositions qualify as epistemic virtues, then it can thereby be said that the reasoner behaves in a responsible manner [Greco, 1999]. Or, one may claim that in some cases it is practically rational (and thereby not irresponsible) to indulge in an inference in the absence of a reflective acceptance [Enoch and Schechter, forthcoming]. Inferential Internalism must compare favourably with these views.

2 Organisation

Program, duration, date, place. The conference will extend over two days. A session of about two hours duration will be reserved for each of the seven participants and the presentation and discussion of their most recent research. There will be a final session for a wrap-up discussion in which the most pressing questions for future research on the topic are selected and discussed. The conference is planned to take place at the University of Fribourg. The earliest provisional date is May 30-31, 2008. The exact date will have to be decided in further correspondence with the participants.

Organisation. The conference will be organized by Gian-Andri Töndury in close collaboration with, on the one hand, the *chaire de philosophie de l'homme et des sciences humaines* of Prof. Martine Nida-Rümelin at the University of Fribourg, on the other hand, the SNF-funded research-project “Properties and Relations” based at the University of Geneva and directed by Prof. Kevin Mulligan.

Attendance. We expect the attendance of most researchers and students in epistemology at Swiss Universities. These include the collaborators of the newly created Episteme-group based at the University of Geneva. Attendance will also include many of the PhD-candidates of the Pro-doc project entitled “Mind, Normativity, Self, Properties”. The participants in the “Properties and Relations”-project mentioned earlier will also attend. Apart from the seven participants, we expect that between 15 and 30 further researchers and graduate students will attend.

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