

Why Internalists Need an Enriched Theory of Perceptual and Conceptual Awareness to Escape from Bergmann's Dilemma

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ABSTRACT: Michael Bergmann (2006) has argued that an internalistic view of justification faces a dilemma. Assuming as internalism does that to have a justified belief, subjects must be aware of the justifiers of the belief and of their relevance to the truth of the belief, Bergmann notes that one is either aware of this relevance conceptually or not. But, says Bergmann, if the required awareness is conceptual, internalism is encumbered with an infinite regress. If it is not—if it is only “weak awareness”—then internalism lacks any dialectical advantage over externalism. In this paper, I explore DePoe’s (2012) defense of the dialectical advantage of weak awareness, and show how the case for its ability to account for awareness of the relevance of the justifiers can be improved by supplementation from a direct realist theory of perception and a theory of concept-formation and application informed by that theory of perception.

Too often philosophers treat problems in epistemology—and in philosophy more generally—in isolation from other problems in other areas of their field and their discipline.

The dispute between internalists and externalists is one prominent example: it is a dispute about whether knowing subjects need to be aware of the justifiers of their knowledge in order to be justified or in order to know. But both sides of the dispute often assume that the form of awareness available for such a purpose is little more than the introspection of internal mental objects described by representationalist philosophers of perception. While the term “internalism” may bias philosophers towards this interpretation, awareness of internal mental states is not essential to the internalistic view of justification, which only requires that justified subjects have *some* form of awareness of the justifiers of their beliefs.¹ As Bonjour (2002) has pointed out, a direct realist view of perception could allow the internalist to suppose that external perceivable objects also count as justifiers (2002, 223). Others have explored how this supposition could empower answers to the standard objections to internalism.²

Recently, defenders of internalism have debated another influential objection to internalism by Michael Bergmann (2006). Bergmann’s argument poses a dilemma for internalism, and his critics have responded that neither horn of the dilemma is as damning as it would first appear. But even when these solutions, which involve positing forms of awareness that circumvent Bergmann’s regresses, are rhetorically effective, they do not connect their solutions to known psychological mechanisms.

¹ Whereas *mentalist* internalists assume that only mentally internal objects can serve the role of justifiers, *access* internalists only require that we have conscious access to whatever serves the role of a justifier (Conee and Feldman, 2001).

² Bayer (2012) has pointed out that if we assume direct realism, we can explain how on access internalism there are many more consciously accessible justifiers than previously believed, including not only the external objects of perception, but even the past objects of memory (because lessons drawn from direct realism about perception help us to see how the lack of *simultaneous* conscious access does not rule out the relevant kind of conscious access). This allows the internalist to answer many of the objections to internalism posed by externalists like Goldman (1999, 2009).

It is my intention to remedy this problem in the current paper. In order to do this, I will briefly review Bergmann's statement of his dilemma and then what I take to be the most persuasive attempt of an internalist (DePoe 2012) to answer it. I will then explain why I think the answer falls short, and how I would supplement it by drawing on the same theories of perceptual and conceptual awareness used elsewhere by Bayer (2011, 2012) to defend internalism and foundationalism against other objections.

Bergmann's Dilemma

Bergmann's objection begins with the assumption that what makes a view of justification internalist is its assumption of the following requirement:

The Awareness Requirement: S's belief B is justified only if (i) there is something, X, that contributes to the justification of B—e.g. evidence for B or a truth-indicator for B or the satisfaction of some necessary condition of B's justification—and (ii) S is aware (or potentially aware) of X.

Bergmann sees this requirement as necessary to avoid what he calls the "Subject's Perspective Objection" (SPO), which plagues various externalist theories that fail to show why a subject's belief is justified if she isn't aware of what differentiates her belief from "a hunch or an arbitrary conviction." I think this is a fair requirement to impose on any internalist theory, so I agree that the SPO is a persuasive objection to externalism.³

The question then becomes what it takes for an internalist theory to satisfy this awareness requirement. Bergman notes that one's awareness of justifiers will "either involve *conceiving* of the justification-contributor that is the object of awareness as being in some way relevant to the justification or truth of the belief or it won't" (13). He calls the first form of awareness "strong," and the second "weak." With this disjunction in mind, he offers the following dilemma for any internalist theory that meets the awareness requirement:

³ Unlike Bergmann I don't think that avoiding the objection is the only motivation for adopting internalism. Another important motivation is the argument outlined by Goldman (1999) from what he calls the "guidance-deontological conception of justification," which maintains that the "central aim of epistemology is to guide or direct our intellectual conduct." This conception is often taken to imply that we must have conscious access to the justifiers of our beliefs, since it is assumed that one cannot benefit from guidance unless one knows what one's guidance is. Many have challenged the guidance-deontological conception, particularly on the grounds that it assumes a form of doxastic voluntarism—the view that we form our beliefs voluntarily. Perhaps somewhat unconventionally, however, I assume that the guidance-deontological conception is sound, and that doxastic voluntarism has been persuasively defended by Steup (2011) and Salmieri and Bayer (unpublished).

1. An essential feature of internalism is that it makes a subject's actual or potential awareness of some justification-contributor a necessary condition for the justification of any belief held by that subject.
2. The awareness required by internalism is either strong awareness or weak awareness.
3. If the awareness required by internalism is strong awareness, then internalism has vicious regress problems leading to radical skepticism.
4. If the awareness required by internalism is weak awareness, then internalism is vulnerable to the SPO, in which case internalism loses its main motivation for imposing the awareness requirement.
5. If internalism either leads to radical skepticism or loses its main motivation for imposing the awareness requirement (i.e. avoiding the SPO), then we should not endorse internalism.
6. Therefore, we should not endorse internalism.

Recall that for Bergmann, "strong awareness" means *conceiving* of the relevance of one's justifiers. Given this understanding, it is not hard to see why there is potential for a regress here and why premise (3) might be true. If conceiving of the relevance of one's justifiers is to have a *belief* that this justifier is relevant, then presumably that belief must itself be justified, and the awareness requirement for justification applies to it also, and an infinite number of increasingly complex beliefs is then required to justify any given belief.

There are internalists who respond to Bergmann's dilemma by challenging premise (3), such as Thomas Crisp (2010), and Jason Rogers and Jonathan Matheson (2011). In the interest of space, I will not describe their responses. I find DePoe's (2012) criticisms of both of these papers to be persuasive, and would rather evaluate his response to premise (4).

The Weak Awareness Response and Its Potential Shortcomings

Challenging premise (4) means alleging that some form of "weak awareness" of the relevance of one's justifiers is adequate to satisfy the awareness requirement. Weak awareness of the relevance of one's justifiers is *nonconceptual* awareness of this relevance. DePoe describes this as a kind of being aware *of* something's being the case, rather than being aware *that* something is the case. Borrowing from Bertrand Russell, he suggests that this nonconceptual awareness can be understood as a kind of direct acquaintance.⁴ DePoe then uses Richard Fumerton's (1995) account of non-inferential justification to explicate the idea of nonconceptual awareness of the relevance of a justifier to the truth of belief. Fumerton says that a belief that *p* is non-inferentially justified when one has direct acquaintance with the fact that *p*, the thought that *p*, and the correspondence that holds between the fact that *p* and the thought

⁴ Russell's characterizes "direct acquaintance" as being "without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths" (Russell 1912, 46)

that p (Fumerton 1995, 75). Both DePoe and Fumerton think that direct acquaintance with these three elements is adequate to account for weak awareness of the relevance of one's justifiers.

Of course Bergmann himself had already anticipated a Fumerton-style critique, and DePoe takes time to respond to Bergmann's response. In essence Bergmann thinks that only strong (conceptual) awareness of the relevance of one's justifier to the truth of one's belief is adequate to fulfill the awareness requirement. He thinks that the kind of direct acquaintance described by Fumerton doesn't rule out that, from the subject's perspective, it might be a complete accident that the belief that p is true. DePoe, I think, rightly criticizes Bergmann for assuming in advance that only strong (conceptual) awareness can accomplish this task and avoid the Subject's Perspective Objection: indeed Bergmann's response to Fumerton seems to assume uncritically that "awareness of relevance" is virtually synonymous with "conceptual awareness of relevance." And I think DePoe correctly points out that even if a subject cannot conceptualize the relevance of the justifier, it does not follow that she can't tell the difference between that belief and an arbitrary conviction, or that it may be for all she knows the belief might be accidentally true.

But DePoe's case is weakened by his explanation for *why* that inference doesn't follow. He claims that the subject after all, is not just aware of the fact that p , but also the correspondence relation between the fact and her thought, and that knowledge of this correspondence relation indicates that the resulting belief is true.⁵ But there is a serious question about what it *means* to be directly acquainted with these elements, especially with the correspondence relation. Many philosophers have found the correspondence relation highly mysterious, enough that they saw it fit to reject the correspondence theory of truth as such. Even if they are mistaken in doing this, the fact that they find the nature of the correspondence relation so mysterious does suggest that it's not obviously something with which we're directly acquainted. The correspondence relation is surely not something like a line bracket we see drawn between a written sentence and a fact in the world that is (somehow) isomorphic to it.

So advocates of the weak awareness response to Bergmann owe us some kind of realistic psychological explanation of what awareness of the correspondence relation consists of. I hope to offer just such an explanation in what follows.

⁵ It might seem at first that Bergmann has an easy response here: acquaintance with the correspondence between the belief and the fact could still be acquaintance with *accidental* correspondence between the two. So a subject could have this acquaintance even in a Gettier case. However this response is too easy. First, we are talking about a criterion of justification, not knowledge. Gettier cases *do* involve justification. Second, if *recognizing* the correspondence is itself part of the awareness necessary for justification, it is hard to imagine what is accidental about the correspondence, *epistemically* speaking. What robs beliefs of justification in the cases that pose problems for externalism is the fact that a belief corresponds with a fact without the believer's knowing where the belief comes from (as in Bonjour's example of a clairvoyant). Technically, it is not an awareness the correspondence between the belief and the fact that Fumerton is concerned with anyway. Rather it is an awareness of the correspondence between the *thought* or the *proposition* and the fact: the *belief* in that proposition is only generated once one notes the correspondence, making the relation between the belief and the fact quite non-accidental, epistemically. Arguably, the cases in question would also be Gettier-proof, since they involve direct acquaintance with the fact in question, not inferences to the fact, which are usually involved in Gettier examples and which facilitate the possibility of *semantic* accidents.

Empowering Weak Awareness with a Theory of Perceptual and Conceptual Awareness

To account for the psychological reality of nonconceptual awareness of something equivalent to a correspondence relation, I will draw on a theory of concepts that is equipped to answer a dilemma for foundationalism, often posed by Sellarsians, that is similar to Bergmann's.

To solve the traditional epistemic regress problem, the foundationalist needs to outline a form of justification that supports basic beliefs but does not require support of these by additional beliefs. A natural candidate to fill this role is direct perceptual awareness. Now this candidate is successful as a regress terminator only if perceptual awareness has no propositional content and is not a state that is either true or false.⁶ As BonJour (2004) points out, if perceptual awareness could be true or false, then in order to accept any perceptual state as a justifier one would need to have further justification to believe that the state is veridical, thus occasioning another regress. But if perceptual content were non-propositional, the question would then be how non-propositional states could justify propositional beliefs, and also how the subject would recognize the relevance of these states to the belief without occasioning any additional regress. As you can see, BonJour's criticism of the epistemic relevance of non-propositional perception is effectively the same as Bergmann's criticism of the weak awareness response to his dilemma.

Bergmann, in fact, acknowledges that his dilemma is similar to the anti-foundationalist objection, but contends that it offers an independent problem for internalism that is not circumvented by typical foundationalist responses (2006, 25). This may, in fact, be true of many foundationalist responses to the Sellarsian dilemma. In my view, however, there is at least one foundationalist response that *also* equips us to characterize the psychology of our awareness with an equivalent of the correspondence relation.

Bayer (2011) has proposed that the key to understanding how non-propositional states could support propositional beliefs, and do so with the recognition of knowing subjects, is to be found in a suggestion referenced by BonJour (1985) himself, reporting a proposal of Quinton (1973) that he seeks to critique: if the meaning of our beliefs is established ostensively by reference to some sort of external state of affairs, then "a subsequent direct awareness of the same sort of external state of affairs would provide an adequate, noninferential justification for the assertion of a statement whose meaning was thus specified" (1985, 71).

This proposal has each of the elements we need to slip between the horns of BonJour's own dilemma: potentially it could account both for how a non-propositional perceptual state could support a

⁶ Bayer (2013) defends in greater detail the direct realist claim that perceptual states are neither propositional nor representational, admitting of no kind of "truth values" or epistemically significant evaluative differences.

propositional belief *and* how one could recognize the authority of the perceptual state without further regress, *provided that there is a non-propositional form of recognition of the “sameness of sort” between the meaning-generating states and those providing evidence for a current belief.* Bayer argues that there is. Presently, I will argue that this form of awareness serves the same functional role as direct acquaintance of a correspondence relationship between a proposition and a fact, though the psychological reality of such an acquaintance is more complex than Fumerton or DePoe’s account lets on.

Bayer argues that it is *the direct perception of simple similarity relationships* that explains the origin of conceptual content *and*, in foundational cases, the ability to recognize something akin to sameness of sort.⁷ We might, for instance, form the concept “table” by observing perceptual similarities among various tables. Then, when one sees another table, one applies the same concept and in doing so forms a rudimentary justified belief amounting to “There is a table.”⁸

Interestingly, one of Sellars’ objections to invoking awareness of similarity as a source of foundational justification is that to recognize similarity one would need to have the *concept* of “similarity.” This is curiously parallel to Bergmann’s claim that in order to recognize the relevance of a justifier to the truth of a belief, one would in effect have to have the concept of “relevance” and “justifier,” etc. In response to Sellars, Bayer invokes the work of J.J. Gibson (1986) and other direct realist theorists of perception to urge that our direct perception includes awareness of *particular* relationships in the world (such as spatial and causal relations), which includes everything we need to grasp similarity relations without the concept of similarity—just like direct realists think we can be aware of particular objects without the concept “object.” Especially important here is the fact that perceptual similarity works through the awareness of a kind of comparative difference: two similars are seen as such against the backdrop of a third “foil” that differs more from each than each does from the other.⁹

By the same token, in response to Bergmann I would argue that in recognizing the similarities one needs to in order to justifiably apply a concept, one has everything one needs to see the relevance of one’s justifiers to the truth of one’s belief, without needing to have or apply concepts like “relevance” or “justifier.” Notably someone who believes “there is a table” is not *only* aware of a table. In grasping the similarity to another table in the present or the past, the subject has a rudimentary epistemic perspective on that justifier, and sees its relevance to a belief relating it to past tables. This subject may not conceive of this data as providing “relevance”; she may not even have a concept of “belief.” But she is nonetheless

⁷ It is important that not all awareness of sameness of sort is perceptual: if it were, we would be trapped in a crude empiricist theory of concepts. But because this is a foundationalist theory, it is only necessary to explain how foundational beliefs get their justification from the simple forms of awareness described here. Higher-level beliefs may indeed be subject to a regress of sorts, but if it is one that terminates in basic beliefs, there is no problem, and this is exactly what the foundationalist expects.

⁸ There are, of course, questions about how we succeed in picking out the *relevant* similarity. See the end of this section for more about this.

⁹ See Kelley (1984, 336–342).

aware of the data that this relevance consists in. This is why it is not an accident that her belief is true: there is data in her perspective that amounts to a rudimentary awareness of the justifier and its relevance, because she sees the relationship between the current application of a concept and the previous facts that gave the concept meaning to begin with.

So, the epistemic perspective which DePoe describes as direct acquaintance with a correspondence relationship between a fact and a thought is a fair bit more complex: it is constituted by the direct acquaintance with a great many perceptual similarity relationships which allow the subject to conceptualize the “sort” their belief is about, though they cannot yet conceptualize the conceptualization (their belief as such). This means they probably cannot even grasp in a rudimentary way the correspondence between the fact and the belief as such. But they don’t need to, because they grasp the elements that make that correspondence possible: a belief corresponds to a fact or refers to an object because the fact or object is similar to facts or objects by which the belief was given meaning in the first place.

(Note that to the extent that memory is involved in applying a previously-formed concept to a new case, not all of the awareness involved is “direct” in the sense that perception is direct. Even so, it is “direct” in the sense that it does not itself require previous concepts: memory of the relevant similarities need only be episodic rather than semantic. ¹⁰)

There is, of course, much to pick at in the proposal above. Sellarsians would be quick to respond that the allegation that we can form concepts from perceptual awareness of similarity is an instance of the “Myth of the Given,” and claim that the formation of one concept presupposes the possession of a raft of other concepts. John McDowell (1996), for instance, has insisted that the ability to form concepts in this manner involves the ability to “abstract out the right element in the presented multiplicity,” an ability he says we do not possess independent of any other concepts, citing the arguments of Geach (1957).

But in a series of responses there is no time to rehearse, Bayer suggests that Geach’s critique targets only a classical empiricist theory of abstraction—one that assumes the very representationalist

¹⁰ This may raise the question of whether a knowing subject needs to grasp the general reliability of the faculty of memory in order to grasp the relevance of the justifiers that are the objects of these faculties. Bayer (2011, 372–4) contends that this understanding of the needed epistemic perspective is based on a confusion. Note that the same objection would apply not only to the faculty of memory but to the faculty of perception, as well. According to the school of direct realism assumed here, however, perceptual acts as such (as distinguished from perceptual judgments) are neither true nor false. (See Bayer (2013).) Therefore, there is no knowledge of the reliability of the perceptual faculty that is necessary: it is only particular *judgments* about the material of perception that are either true or false, reliable or unreliable. Furthermore, the simplest cases of episodic memory can be understood along the lines of simple, delayed perception. (See Bayer (2012) for why the time-lag involved in either perception or memory is a barrier to its being an awareness of facts in the near or far past.) The broader point here is that while the operation of many different mechanisms is necessary for our awareness of the world and of the justifiers of our knowledge, not every factor (or faculty) relevant to justification is itself a justifier. Bayer 2012 delineates between the two by drawing on the direct realist’s distinction between the form of awareness and the object of awareness, a distinction frequently conflated by representationalists: while justifiers are objects of awareness, factors relevant to justification (such as entire faculties like perception and simple memories) are forms of or means to our awareness. It is true that one needs to have sensitivity to the reliability of broader policies or habits of knowing when they become increasingly complex: Bayer gives the example of reliance on testimony. But reliance on testimony is, on this view, not a *foundational* form of knowledge.

theory of perception that McDowell and Sellars themselves are loathe to endorse. He highlights a newer theory of abstraction that is founded on a direct realist view of perception and lacks the standard flaws of the Lockean theory, for instance. This theory does not assume, for instance, that *every* concept would need to be formed from direct perception. Instead it assumes this only of basic concepts of directly perceivable entities, from which other concepts of characteristics and higher-order genera could then be abstracted. The order in which we form concepts is dictated by the relative obviousness of the similarities involved, which is dictated first and foremost by the nature of our perceptual apparatus: this helps explain how we abstract out the “right” element to begin with—we often have no choice in the matter. Particularly distinctive to the theory is its view of abstraction from the perceived similarity, which utilizes forms of post-perceptual processing to grasp the range of potential varying instances to which a given concept will apply.¹¹ This enables the theory to follow Sellars’ own prescriptions for a theory that overcomes the limitations of Locke’s theory, while still making sense of concept-formation using non-conceptual resources.

Conclusion

So, one’s ability to carve out the right form of awareness to serve both the foundationalist cause against Sellars and the internalist cause against Bergmann really does depend on theory of perceptual and conceptual awareness one adopts. To explore this dependence fully—and to defend the theories in question in greater detail—is far beyond the scope of this paper. But I hope that by showing if only briefly how the theories in question have the potential to unravel Bergmann’s dilemma using the same trick by which they unravel others, we can now see how these theories are if nothing else, rhetorically powerful, and deserving of further examination.

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¹¹ See Rand (1990), Kelley (1984), Gotthelf (2013), and Salmieri (2013).

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