

Philosophical Definitions

FALLIBILITY: The philosophical idea that no belief can ever truly be supported and justified. This is not to say that there is no such thing as knowledge; rather, this idea claims that even if an individual's true belief is false, it is still possible to have knowledge.

As evidenced by the Gettier problem, the idea of knowledge becomes problematic. We run into further problems when discussing the idea of justification. In thinking about how justification is construed, philosophers discuss two major approaches: internalism and externalism.

Internalism

Internalism is the idea that since beliefs and the forming of beliefs are mental processes, justification depends entirely on internal factors. According to this theory, an individual's other mental states are the only factors involved in determining the justification of a belief.

Externalism

Some claim that if one only focuses on internal factors, beliefs will be mistakenly justified and luck will occur. Externalism claims that there must be at least some external factors that help determine whether or not a belief is justified. The most popular form of externalism, reliabilism, states that the source of beliefs should be taken under consideration. The source can come from a variety of things, like testimony, reason, sense experience, or memory. According to reliabilism, a belief can be justified if it comes from a reliable source.

TWIN EARTH

Taking meaning out of the head



Imagine the following scenario:

There is an imaginary planet, known as Twin Earth, that is absolutely identical to planet Earth down to the smallest detail, with even the inhabitants on both planets being the same. However, there is one difference between Earth and Twin Earth: Wherever there is water on Earth, Twin Earth has a substance, known as XYZ, in those places. For the purposes of this story, this is Earth circa 1750, before the discovery of H_2O (the chemical makeup of water). On this imaginary planet, instead of water in rain, lakes, and oceans, it is the substance XYZ. Furthermore, XYZ has similar observable properties to water, but it has a different microstructure. Inhabitants of Twin Earth (who refer to their own planet as Earth), who are identical to the inhabitants of Earth, speak their own "English" and refer to XYZ as "water."

Now, when Oscar, an inhabitant of Earth, and his twin, an inhabitant of Twin Earth (also named Oscar), say the word *water*, do they mean the same thing?

According to philosopher (and creator of the Twin Earth thought experiment) Hilary Putnam, Oscar and Twin-Oscar do not mean the same thing because while Oscar is referring to H₂O, Twin-Oscar is referencing XYZ. From this, Putnam concludes that the mental processes from the brain cannot suffice in determining what a term references and that one has to understand the causal history that led to the meaning of that term being acquired.

Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment is one of the most popular examples of his theory in philosophy of language known as "semantic externalism."

SEMANTIC EXTERNALISM

Hilary Putnam attempts to understand how syntax, the arrangement of words, gains meaning (semantics). According to Putnam's semantic externalism, the meaning of a word is determined (either partially or entirely) by factors that are external to the speaking individual. While other theories believed the process of gaining meaning was internal (within the head), Putnam's semantic externalism claimed that the process of gaining semantics is outside the head. In other words, as Putnam famously stated, "meanings' just ain't in the head!"

According to Putnam, the meaning of any term in a language consists of a specific sequence of elements:

1. The object that the term is referring to (in the case of Twin Earth, this is the substance with the chemical makeup of H₂O).
2. The typical terms (known as "stereotypes") that are often associated with the term (like the terms *odorless*, *colorless*, and *hydrating* that water is often associated with).

3. The semantic indicators that categorize the object (like *liquid*).
4. The syntactic indicators (for example, a mass noun—a type of noun that has terms being referred to that are not considered to be separate entities).

Based on his ideas of semantic externalism, Putnam goes on to explain his causal theory of reference. He claims that words gain their referents as the result of a chain of causation that ends at the referent. For example, one still has the ability to reference the pyramids in Egypt even if he has never seen them because the concept of what the pyramids are still exists. How can this be? It is because the term has been acquired as a result of interacting with others (who, to acquire their knowledge, had interacted with others, who had acquired their knowledge by interacting with others, etc.). This pattern continues until it eventually reaches a person who had firsthand experience with the subject matter. Because of this chain of causation, one is able to discuss something without ever having experienced it firsthand.

NARROW MENTAL CONTENT

Hilary Putnam's thought experiment, Twin Earth, is part of a bigger topic of discussion known as "broad content," which is the opposing viewpoint of "narrow mental content." The idea behind narrow mental content is that mental content is internal (or intrinsic), and therefore, unlike Putnam's semantic externalism, it does not depend on one's environment at all; rather, it is a property that is intrinsic to that particular thing. (For example, an intrinsic property of a penny is that it is round, while a penny being in someone's pocket

is an extrinsic property). The narrow content of one's belief about an object has to be shared by every duplicate of that individual object.

Some who believe narrow mental content to be true claim that mental content and behavior are the results of a causal consequence from our beliefs. In other words, we act the way we do because of our beliefs and desires. Others claim that people have introspective access to their thoughts, meaning we should have the ability to determine whether the same content is contained in two of our thoughts. According to this claim, the two Oscars, unaware of the chemical makeup of H_2O and XYZ, have no way of knowing whether their thoughts are H_2O -related thoughts or XYZ-related thoughts because they are not even aware of the other water-like substance even exists. To make sense of this, philosophers created the notion of "slow-switching." What if Oscar were to move to Twin Earth? At first, he will continue to have water-thoughts about this substance, but the longer he interacts with XYZ and the longer he is away from H_2O , he will come to just think of XYZ and not about H_2O . Over time, his water-thoughts will have a different broad content (and Oscar would not be aware of this change because his thoughts would seem to have the same content as it always did). In order to have introspective access and see that these contents are different, we need narrow mental content and not broad content.

Narrow mental content is controversial to philosophers; many reject it in favor of broad mental content. Putnam's Twin Earth is the most famous example of why broad mental content makes more sense. Both Oscars have the exact same intrinsic properties; however, they are referring to different substances. Therefore, intrinsic properties are not enough to determine what the Oscars are referring to. And this brings us back to Putnam's famous quote, "meanings' just ain't in the head!"

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER (1788–1860)

The pessimistic philosopher

Arthur Schopenhauer was born on February 22, 1788, in Danzig (present-day Gdansk), Poland. When Schopenhauer was a young man, his father, a merchant, offered the academically inclined Arthur a proposition: he could either prepare to go to a university, or he could travel across Europe with his parents and then take an apprenticeship with a merchant upon returning from their travels. Schopenhauer chose to travel with his family, and on this journey he witnessed firsthand the terrible suffering of the poor throughout Europe. This experience would greatly influence the pessimistic worldview he would later become known for as a philosopher.

Upon returning from his trip across Europe, Schopenhauer began to prepare for his career by holding up his end of the bargain and becoming an apprentice for a merchant. When Schopenhauer was just seventeen years old, his father died (in what is believed to have been a suicide), and two years later, Schopenhauer left the apprenticeship and pursued his academic career.

While Schopenhauer attended school, his mother, who had moved to Weimar, started to become frequently engaged in intellectual and social circles. As she worked as a writer and hostess for a salon that was frequented by many influential thinkers of the time, she introduced her son to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (with whom he would eventually write a theory on colors) and Friedrich Majer (who sparked Schopenhauer's interest in Eastern thought).