Missing the Obvious: Reply to Moon

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Abstract

In Gibbons (2006), I presented a counterexample to epistemic internalism, the view that justification supervenes on the internal. Andrew Moon has replied to this paper, asking what generates the intuition behind the counterexample. In this note, I try to answer that question.

What is the epistemic significance of the line around the mind as that line has traditionally been drawn? According to epistemic internalism, justification supervenes on the internal properties of the believer, where internal properties are understood as those determined by your non-factive mental states, especially your beliefs and experiences. Facts about your liver may be internal to you in some sense, but not in the epistemically relevant sense. If you have any epistemic responsibilities that make a difference to justification, they too must be determined by your inner life. So according to the internalist, the traditional line around the mind has a great deal of epistemic significance. It determines the supervenience base for justification, and it sets an outer limit to things for which you may be held epistemically responsible.

In Gibbons 2006, I argued against internalism on the basis of thought experiments. The basic idea behind the thought experiments was not that complicated. When the fact that not-p is out there in the world but staring you in the face, we hold you epistemically responsible for it. Regardless of whether it makes a difference to your inner life, you ought to know that not-p. I think this kind of epistemic responsibility makes a difference to justification. If you ought to know that p is false, then you shouldn't believe that p, and you're not justified in believing if you

do. Since the obvious but external fact need not make a difference to your inner life, we can tell two stories, one with and one without the external fact. This will generate a case of two individuals who are the same on the inside, different on the outside, and who differ with respect to justification. One of them is and one isn't justified in believing that p because one of them isn't but the other one is epistemically irresponsible. The basic idea behind the stories is that at least some of your epistemic responsibilities reach all the way out to the world.

Andrew Moon (20??) doesn't think the counterexamples work. He's not specifically concerned in this paper about whether the relevant epistemic responsibilities make a difference to justification. The worry is about how I generate the intuition that you ought to know that p is false in cases where the fact that not-p is staring you in the face but all the way out there in the world. Moon's idea seems to be that if it doesn't make a difference, even an unnoticed difference, to your inner life then we can't hold you epistemically responsible for it. Moon doesn't explicitly defend this view. But it seems to be the motivating idea; it's not an uncommon reaction; and it seems to be what's at stake.

Moon tries to cause trouble for the stories by claiming that there are only three factors that could motivate the intuition that in the relevant cases, you ought to know that not-p. First, the fact that not-p might have made an unnoticed difference to the inner life, and that's why it makes a difference to the epistemic responsibilities. But if we go with this option, eliminating the external fact without changing the inner life is going to become more delicate. Second, I might be relying on some general principle about available evidence. But Moon has his own counterexample to show that that general principle is false. And third, it may have something to do with background beliefs and the responsibility to check for evidence as opposed to the

responsibility to know that not-p. But that one doesn't work either. Of the three options, the correct answer is closest to the second.

In my paper, I used an example involving a note on the door of my refrigerator. I didn't notice the note, but by any ordinary standards, I should have. And I should have known that we were out of cream cheese, because that's what the note said. But there's nothing particularly special about notes on refrigerator doors. You're in a bar with your friends, and you get up to go looking for the restroom. There's a sign on the wall clearly pointing the way, but you don't notice it. Does the size of the sign make a difference to how amusing this is to your friends? Absolutely. If it's the size of a postage stamp stuck in among a bunch of other things, no one will hold you responsible for not seeing it even if it does make an unnoticed dent on your inner life. But if it's clearly written on a sign the size of the wall and you still manage to miss it, your friends will find this hilarious. And if your friends are anything like my friends, they'll use a term in the normative vernacular with a distinctively epistemological flavor. They'll call you an idiot, and when you finally notice the giant sign that's been staring you in the face all along, you'll feel like an idiot. If your epistemological theory is incompatible with feeling like an idiot, you'll feel like an idiot anyway. And the question of whether it made an unnoticed dent on your inner life will be absolutely and completely irrelevant to both you and your friends.

This is how it is. Maybe this is unfair. Maybe people shouldn't hold us responsible for really obvious facts that are staring us in the face. But the fact is that they do. I thought the question was whether or not internalism has counterintuitive consequences. People's intuitions are shaped by their actual normative practice. And the actual normative practice is to hold us responsible for really obvious facts that are staring us in the face, even when those facts are all

the way out there in the external world, and questions about unnoticed dents on the inner life never come up. Since the normative requirements generated by internalism are incompatible with our actual normative practice, internalism has counterintuitive consequences.

Fine. But what is it that's generating that intuition that you should have known where the restroom was? If what's generating the intuition is some kind of mistake, perhaps internalists should embrace the counterintuitive consequences of their view and try to reform actual practice. So what does generate the intuition? One way to think about this is to ask why the size of the sign matters. Suppose the sign is the size of a postage stamp; it's jumbled in among a bunch of other things; and it makes no difference, not even an unnoticed difference to your inner life. Do you get the intuition that you ought to know where the bathroom is? Presumably not. Now suppose that it does make an unnoticed difference to your inner life. Do you get the intuition yet? Presumably not. Why not? You don't get the intuition because it's no easier to find the phenomenal postage stamp than it is to find the noumenal postage stamp, just as it's no easier to count the phenomenal speckles on a phenomenal hen than it is to count the real ones on a real one.

So what do you have to add to making a difference to the inner life to generate the intuition that you should have known? It seems that the difference made must be sufficiently obvious. If you can't notice the difference, we won't be at all inclined toward the judgment that you should have noticed. And the more obvious the difference is, the more likely we are to think that whether you noticed or not, you should have. So even when we restrict attention to differences in the inner life, the things we require you to notice have to be sufficiently obvious. But if you have obviousness anyway, what good does internality do? The whole point of the

retreat to the inner is an attempt to restrict attention to things to which we have a special kind of epistemic access. If there are sufficiently unobvious internal facts, they are beside the point. And if there are sufficiently obvious external facts, they are prima facie more epistemically relevant than the unobvious internal ones.

The folk have naïve views about the external world. They don't just think it seems as though the external world is so close that you could touch it. They actually *believe* the external world is so close that you could touch it. So when they hold you epistemically responsible for some fact that's staring you in the face, they don't think of it as something all the way out there in some shadowy realm that you may or may not know anything about. They think of it as something right in front of you that you could quite easily know if only you were paying attention. And the line around things you could quite easily know if only you were paying attention does not come close to approximating the line around the mind as that's traditionally been drawn.

But perhaps the folk and I are relying on a false general principle when we hold you accountable for failure to notice the obvious. This brings us back to Moon's second option. Moon says that I'm committed to a principle very roughly along the following lines. If there's relevant, available evidence, then you ought to know about it. I'm inclined to think that something along these lines might be true, but it obviously depends on what availability comes to. If availability comes to introspective accessibility, then you have a principle that will tempt many internalists. If availability includes anything you can find out on the Internet, then you have a principle that won't tempt anyone. I think the relevant kind of availability or accessibility is a matter of what you're already in a position to know, and since going online involves

substantively changing your epistemic position, the things you could easily learn there are not things you're already in a position to know. You can argue with me about these details if you like. But that's not what Moon does.

Moon takes the principle at face value and presents a counterexample. Suppose that an angel, holding a sign that says that God exists, hovers silently behind Bertrand Russell's head for five minutes while he's reading a book. Surely, Moon thinks, this would be sufficient evidence for the belief in God's existence. The evidence is relevant because Russell has a view on the question, and it's available in some sense. But we don't have the intuition that Russell should have known that God exists. At this point, Moon's argument can go in two directions. Either the falsity of the general principle matters, or it doesn't. Since it seems as though the falsity of the general principle is supposed to matter, let's try that way first.

Moon has presented a counterexample to the general principle, so the general principle, at least on Moon's interpretation, is false. If I believe that stupid thing, then I'm a bad person, and I deserve to be shunned. But does it follow that my counterexample deserves to be shunned along with me? It just doesn't seem that way to me. Suppose your theory is that all Ps are Qs. I come up with a P that's not a Q, and you come up with a P that is a Q. Despite the apparent symmetry, this is not a tie. I win, and you lose. Now suppose that when I came up with my P that's not a Q, I thought that all Ps of some general sort are not Qs. But you point out that only half of the Ps like that are not Qs. Do you win yet? I'm afraid not. There are still all those Ps that aren't Qs that constitute counterexamples to your original theory. My ability to generate non-circular, necessary and sufficient conditions for being a P that's not a Q seems to be independent of my ability to generate a P that's not a Q.

So maybe the falsity of the general principle is irrelevant after all. Maybe Moon's argument is really far more straightforward. If his story is not a counterexample to internalism, and if his story is like mine in all relevant respects, then my story isn't a counterexample either. But is his story like mine in all relevant respects? Well, there's at least this much difference between the stories, even if it is a difference of degree. The external facts in my stories are just more obvious than the facts in the Russell case. If you already agree, which I think you must, that when it comes to internal facts, obviousness makes a difference to when we hold you responsible, you're simply not in a position to discount the epistemic relevance of obviousness. There's the story where the sign for the bathroom is the size of a postage stamp, and the story where it takes up the whole wall. Are these stories supposed to be alike in all relevant respects? Your friends and I don't think so, and if we're making a mistake when we think this, that mistake remains to be isolated and explained. As far as I can tell, the only reason for thinking these cases must be alike in all respects despite the difference in the obviousness of the facts, is the fact that you're the same on the inside in both cases. But that's not an argument for internalism. That's just the assumption of internalism.

Claims about what you ought to know are factive. If you ought to know that p is true, then p is true. If there are ever things about the external world that you ought to know, then there's simply no mystery at all about how these epistemic responsibilities could reach all the way out to the world. And there's really no chance that your inner life is always going to determine the truth of those claims about what you ought to know that entail all those particular facts about the external world. If these epistemic obligations make a difference to justification,

perhaps, for example, because you shouldn't believe things you ought to know are false, then it looks as though internalism is in pretty deep trouble. And quibbling about exactly how obvious something has to be before we hold you responsible for it seems a little beside the point. I guess I would have thought that the real question is just how seriously we ought to take these worldly responsibilities. To be perfectly honest, I think the folk are onto something important here. I think that the requirement to pay attention to the external world and to hold yourself accountable to the facts, and not just your take on the facts, are essential parts of the epistemic point of view, and quite possibly implicitly involved in the very idea of having a view about the mind-independent world. But that's a story for another day.

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