

IN DEFENSE OF WEAK INFERENCEAL INTERNALISM: REPLY TO ALEXANDER

ALAN R. RHODA

INDIANA UNIVERSITY, BLOOMINGTON

ABSTRACT: David Alexander has argued that “weak inferential internalism” (WII), a position which amounts to a *qualified* endorsement of Richard Fumerton’s controversial “principle of inferential justification,” is subject to a fatal dilemma: Either it collapses into externalism or it must make an arbitrary epistemic distinction between persons who believe the same proposition for the same reasons. In this paper, I argue that the dilemma is a false one, for weak *inferential* internalism does not entail internalism *simpliciter*. Indeed, WII is compatible with *modest* externalism, and so is consistent with what Armstrong calls “Type II justification,” the rejection of which leads to the arbitrary epistemic distinctions to which he rightly objects.

This is a response to David Alexander’s “Weak Inferential Internalism” (this volume). Following some clarifications, I will argue that the dilemma Alexander poses for weak inferential internalism (hereafter WII)—that it either collapses into externalism or makes an epistemically arbitrary distinction between persons who believe for the very same reason—is a false one. Both horns of the dilemma are problematic. With respect to the first, there is no need for WII advocates to repudiate *modest* externalism. With respect to the second, Alexander argues that to avoid the first horn they must reject the possibility of “Type II justification” (i.e., unreflective inferential justification by way of inference). But since they can embrace the first horn, WII proponents can happily accept the legitimacy of Type II justification. In the end, Alexander gives us no reason for abandoning WII. Indeed, it is hard to see that there is much distance between WII and the modest externalism that he espouses.

I. WEAK INFERENCE INTERNALISM, SOME CLARIFICATIONS

An *inferential internalist* is one who accepts Richard Fumerton's principle of inferential justification:

- (PIJ) To be justified in believing one proposition P on the basis of another proposition E, one must be (1) justified in believing E and (2) justified in believing that E makes probable P. (Fumerton 1995, 36)

Of PIJ's clauses, (1) is uncontroversial, whereas (2) is widely rejected on account of the skeptical difficulties to which it seems to give rise. Recently, however, a group of philosophers whom Alexander calls "weak inferential internalists" have offered a qualified defense of PIJ, arguing that so long as its application is *suitably restricted*, not only is PIJ platitudinous, but it also poses no skeptical threat. In contrast with Fumerton's unrestricted or "strong" inferential internalism, which applies PIJ to all beliefs that derive positive epistemic status from other beliefs, or, in Alexander's terms, to all "epistemically inferential" beliefs, WII, says Alexander, applies PIJ *only* to "psychologically inferential" beliefs, ones that "[result] from a process of reasoning."

But WII is actually both broader and narrower than this characterization allows.¹ It is narrower because WII doesn't apply PIJ to beliefs formed via unconscious or subconscious reasoning, but only to those formed via *conscious, reflective reasoning*, in which the reasoner engages in "controlled deliberation" (Hookway 2000, 396) and has a "conscious perspective on the evidential relation between premises and conclusion" (Rhoda 2008, 222). It is broader because sometimes beliefs that were not *formed* via inference, and thus which are not psychologically inferential, subsequently become inferentially justified.² According to WII, in *some* such cases PIJ applies as well. But which ones?

Here Alexander introduces some helpful terminology. Let us follow him and take "inference" to be a belief-forming cognitive process that takes other beliefs as inputs,³ and let us say that an inference from E to P is "reflective" just in case "one's transition from E to P depends on one's *awareness* that E supports P" (my emphasis). With this notion of reflective inference in hand, Alexander articulates a "complementary" principle of reflective inferential justification:

- (PRIJ) To be *reflectively* [inferentially] justified in believing P on the basis of E, one must have justification for believing that E makes probable P.

But PRIJ is somewhat weaker than what WII proposes.⁴ In the first place, the phrase "have justification for believing" suggests (without implying) that reflective inferential justification only requires *propositional* justification for the belief that E makes probable P. WII, however, makes the stronger claim that reflective inferential justification requires *doxastic* justification for that belief. That is, one must *justifiably believe* that E makes probable P, not merely "have justification for" believing it, whether one actually does so or not.⁵ In the second place, PRIJ omits mention of the "awareness that E supports P" that characterizes reflective inference, whereas for WII that awareness is a crucial component of reflective

inferential justification. I submit, then, that WII is committed not to PRIJ, but to the following *revised* principle of reflective inferential justification:

(PRIJ*) To be reflectively inferentially justified in believing P on the basis of E, one must (1) justifiably believe E and (2) justifiably believe that E makes probable P, in virtue of one's being aware of the fact that E makes probable P.

II. TYPE II JUSTIFICATION, EXTERNALISM, AND ALEXANDER'S DILEMMA

In order to set up his argument against WII, Alexander next asks "what kind of inferential justification is PIJ-exempt?" To address this, he distinguishes four types of "inferential justification":

- I. Belief in P is reflectively justified by an inference from E.
- II. Belief in P is unreflectively justified by an inference from E.
- III. Belief in P is reflectively justified by being based on E, but not by way of an inference.
- IV. Belief in P is unreflectively justified by being based on E, but not by way of an inference.

I and II are fairly straightforward. Given Alexander's broad notion of inference, some inferences are reflective and some aren't. Type I inferential justification comes via reflective inference, whereas Type II comes via unreflective inference. As for III and IV, what Alexander means by these becomes clear when he discusses the case of Helen, who noninferentially (i.e., perceptually) forms a belief that there is a sparrow in her yard and then subsequently acquires further evidence (e.g., that there is a bird in her yard with such-and-such markings) that provides inferential justification for that belief. It does not provide that justification "by way of an inference," however, because the belief has already been formed. If Helen appropriates this new evidence reflectively (e.g., if she consciously attends to the fact that a bird with such-and-such markings is very likely to be a sparrow), then she acquires Type III inferential justification for her belief. Otherwise, if she appropriates it unreflectively, then her belief acquires Type IV inferential justification.

It seems to me, though, that what we have here are not four types of inferential *justification*, but rather four ways in which one may *acquire* inferential justification for a belief. All inferential justification is either reflective or unreflective. The difference between Type I and II cases, on the one hand, and Type III and IV cases, on the other, is simply that in the latter the belief isn't formed by an inference, whereas in the former it is. As for Alexander's question about which kind of inferential justification is PIJ-exempt, for WII the answer is simply: the unreflective sort. Hence, the distinctions between I and III and II and IV, respectively, are strictly irrelevant to an assessment of WII. The distinctions, however, are important for Alexander's dilemma argument because he wants to show that WII is committed to saying that Type II cases cannot yield justification whereas Type IV cases can. If he were right about that, then WII would be untenable because, as he argues and

as I have just conceded, the Type II/Type IV distinction is epistemically irrelevant (in the present context).

But why does Alexander think that WII rules out justification in Type II cases? His central contention is that otherwise WII reduces to a version of externalism, a result he assumes the WII proponent must strive to avoid. There are several reasons why this is a natural assumption to make. In the first place, Fumerton, the chief defender of PIJ, is a well-known anti-externalist. And insofar as WII has sometimes been presented as a defense of PIJ, rather than as a defense of a related but weaker principle such as PRIJ*, it is natural to suppose that it must inherit Fumerton's anti-externalism. In the second place, most externalists who have considered PIJ have wound up rejecting inferential internalism altogether, in favor of one or another version of inferential externalism. And so, for those acquainted with the literature, it is rather natural to suppose that externalists *as such* would be opposed to WII, just as they are to strong inferential internalism. Third and finally, WII stands for "weak inferential *internalism*," suggesting that it is a species of internalism. And since internalism and externalism are standardly defined in opposition to one another, this naturally suggests that WII must remain anti-externalist in order to preserve its "internalist credentials," as Alexander puts it. Nevertheless, all of these reasons aside, the claim that WII is inherently opposed to externalism is mistaken, as I will now explain.

Alexander writes, "Strong internalism denies that there is any unreflective justification. In contrast, externalism holds that some justification is unreflective. Where is the middle ground between these two positions?" Quite clearly, there isn't any. But if all that is meant by "externalism" is that "some justification is unreflective," then WII straightforwardly qualifies as a version of externalism, because it affirms the possibility of unreflective justification. If, however, by "externalism" is meant *strong* externalism—the position that *all* justification is unreflective—then, clearly, WII is opposed to that. In contrast with both strong internalism and strong externalism, WII is a kind of modest externalism, one that concedes to internalism that *some* justification is reflective. Likewise, it is a kind of modest internalism, one that concedes to externalism that *some* justification is unreflective.

So why does Alexander think it crucial to WII that it be anti-externalist? As I've noted, terminology is an issue here. "Weak inferential internalism" can easily sound like a species of internalism. But it is important to stress that we're discussing weak *inferential* internalism, not internalism *simpliciter*. Alexander seems to overlook this, I think. Ostensibly for convenience, he drops the term "inferential," referring to WII simply as "weak internalism," presumably to oppose it to strong internalism, on the one hand, and externalism, on the other. But this terminological choice unfortunately keeps the emphasis on "internalism" rather than on "inferential," where it should be, for WII is only committed to internalism with respect to reflective justification; it is compatible with externalism everywhere else. Thus, one can affirm PRIJ* and hold that reflective justification must meet certain internalist conditions (e.g., having an awareness of, or conscious perspective on, the evidential relation between E and P) while being an externalist about unreflective and noninferential justification. Given that most of our justification is of the latter

sort, WII is arguably more externalist than internalist. At any rate, the idea that WII is inherently opposed to externalism does not withstand scrutiny. WII is opposed to strong externalism, not externalism *simpliciter*.

Perhaps there are other reasons for thinking that WII proponents must deny the possibility of Type II inferential justification (i.e., unreflective inferential justification by way of inference). Alexander cites Hookway (2000, 397) as someone who denies it, but I believe the attribution is mistaken. As far as I can see, once we control for differences in terminology, Hookway nowhere makes the denial that Alexander attributes to him. Speaking for myself as a WII advocate, I'm quite happy to accept Type II justification, and I'm very confident that Hookway does too. Be that as it may, Alexander has a couple arguments to offer.

First, against my proposal that WII is compatible with a modest externalism, Alexander would charge that this renders WII vulnerable to many of the same objections that count against (inferential) externalism. He employs an example from Adam Leite to make the point:

Suppose that someone claims that his lawn has moles. Being ignorant of gardening and curious by nature, I ask why he believes this. He says, "Because it is riddled with holes, hillocks, and collapsed tunnels." I ask whether these things are good reasons for thinking that one's lawn has moles. He replies, "Oh, I haven't the faintest idea. No views on that at all." (Leite 2008, 423)

Leite's example is intended to offer intuitive support for clause (2) of PIJ. Somewhat more modestly, it offers intuitive support for the WII contention that *reflective* justification requires satisfying clause (2) of PIJ (or, better, PRIJ*), since it seems that the gardener is *not* justified in believing that the lawn has moles on account of his *not believing* upon reflection that the presence of holes, hillocks, and collapsed tunnels in the lawn is good evidence for the presence of moles. But while this example seems to support PIJ (i.e., *strong* inferential internalism), Alexander thinks it poses a *problem* for WII in light of the latter's commitment to the possibility of unreflective inferential justification:

[I]f weak [inferential] internalism is correct, then the individual in Leite's example . . . could be justified in believing that his lawn has moles despite lacking justification for believing that his evidence supports his conclusion. His justification would merely be unreflective. If so, then the intuition that the gardener is not justified in believing that his lawn has moles supports strong internalism. Otherwise put, if the gardener is unjustified simply because he lacks reflective justification, then it must be that there is no unreflective [inferential] justification, contrary to weak [inferential] internalism.

Unfortunately, the last sentence of this argument is a non sequitur, as Alexander himself ironically shows elsewhere in the paper when he considers WII's implications for cases when a person "attempts to transition from having unreflective to reflective justification, and fails."

To illustrate, he gives the example of Suzy playing poker with Jim. On a given hand, Suzy unreflectively comes to believe that Jim is bluffing because "[s]he has played poker with Jim on numerous occasions, and has developed a reliable sensitivity to his tells." Because her belief is grounded in a reliable sensitivity it

is unreflectively justified. But suppose that Suzy now “questions whether Jim’s fiddling with his drink is a reliable indicator of his bluffing, and upon reflection, cannot recall any evidence that supports this conclusion.” She then lacks reflective justification for her belief. So far so good, but what is the resultant epistemic status of her belief? Is it still unreflectively justified, or does the subsequent reflective failure mean that her belief is no longer justified in any sense? Alexander argues that both answers have considerable intuitive pull and leaves it an open question as to which answer best accords with WII. It seems to me, however, that Alexander’s poker example shows that the second answer—that her subsequent reflective failure leaves her belief unjustified—is the one that WII proponents ought to give. For this same type of answer can be used to defuse the objection based on the gardener example. Thus, in asking the gardener whether the presence of holes, hillocks, and collapsed tunnels in a yard is good evidence for the presence of moles we are asking him to *reflectively consider* the evidence. If, after doing so, he hasn’t the faintest idea whether his evidence is any good, then his belief lacks reflective justification. And given that subsequent reflective failure cancels prior unreflective justification, the gardener is left unjustified in his belief. The non sequitur of the above argument is now apparent. The mere fact that the gardener *post*-reflectively lacks justification doesn’t imply that he wasn’t *pre*-reflectively justified.

Alexander’s second argument for the claim that WII precludes Type II justification (i.e., unreflective inferential justification by way of inference) is that otherwise WII proponents cannot maintain the strong internalist’s objection to epistemic circularity, thereby unacceptably compromising WII’s “internalist credentials.” Due to space considerations I won’t go into the details of this argument. Suffice to say, so long as we consistently use “inference” in the broad way that Alexander prefers, and not in the narrower way preferred by Hookway (2000, 396–397) and Rhoda (2008), the claim that “all psychologically inferential justification is reflective” has zero plausibility for either Hookway or Rhoda. Both of us believe that we routinely perform psychological “inferences” that are not reflective because they aren’t subject to conscious, deliberative control. If that compromises our “internalist credentials,” so be it. Maintaining such credentials was never a core ambition of WII.

Given what I’ve said in this section, I think we can see that Alexander’s dilemma argument against WII does not succeed. It is premised on assumptions about WII that its proponents need not, and do not, share. Chief among these is the supposed need of WII to avoid reduction to (modest) externalism, a supposition that stems (I suspect) from a conflation of *inferential* internalism/externalism with internalism/externalism *simpliciter*. Once that confusion has been set aside, the case that WII precludes Type II justification falls flat. In reality, WII is fully compatible with unreflective inferential justification by way of inference.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

So far my reply to Alexander has been largely critical, so I want to close on a positive note. Despite its flaws, his paper significantly advances the discussion of both strong and weak inferential internalism. Especially helpful are the distinctions he

introduces between reflective versus unreflective justification, propositional versus doxastic justification, epistemological versus psychological inference, and inferential justification by way of inference versus inferential justification acquired after a belief is formed. Perhaps surprisingly, these important distinctions haven't figured prominently in past discussions of PIJ and inferential internalism, but I found them very helpful in trying to think through these issues more carefully. I hope that my response will be as profitable for him as his paper was for me. As I hinted near the beginning, I think that once the terminological differences are ironed out and the rhetorical dust settles, there isn't much difference between WII and Alexander's modest externalism.

ENDNOTES

1. Hence, Alexander is mistaken that for WII "all psychologically inferential beliefs are subject to PIJ" (my emphasis).
2. In Rhoda (2008) I failed to consider such cases. I thank Alexander for calling this oversight to my attention.
3. For a contrasting suggestion on how to think about inference, see Rhoda (2008). Cf. Hookway (2000, 396–397).
4. Alexander does not make clear what he takes the relation of WII to PRIJ to be. That he rejects WII while taking PRIJ to be a platitude suggests that he would agree with me that WII is stronger than PRIJ.
5. Whether Fumerton intended PIJ to apply primarily to propositional or doxastic justification is not immediately clear. His phrase "be justified in believing" admits of either interpretation. If he has propositional justification centrally in mind, then WII's shift to doxastic justification amounts to a further restriction on PIJ.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fumerton, Richard. 1995. *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hookway, Christopher. 2000. "Replies." *Philosophical Issues* 10: 395–399.
- Leite, Adam. 2008. "Believing One's Reasons are Good." *Synthese* 161: 419–441.
- Rhoda, Alan R. 2008. "Fumerton's Principle of Inferential Justification, Skepticism, and the Nature of Inference." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 33: 215–234.