**Access Internalism and the Guidance Deontological Conception of Justification**

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One historically prominent idea in epistemology is that what a person is justified in believing is a matter of *what duties she has to guide her beliefs*. This is the “Guidance Deontological conception of justification”, or henceforth, GD.

Another historically prominent idea in epistemology is that the factors that determine whether someone is justified in believing something are factors that are internal to the doxastic agent herself. This is “internalism”. Some internalists think that the internal factors that determine whether someone is justified in believing something are factors to which she has the kind of privileged epistemic access that she enjoys to, for instance, her own present states of consciousness. This is “access internalism”. There are other versions of internalism, such as “mentalism”, according to which the internal justifying factors do not need to be factors to which the doxastic agent has such privileged epistemic access, though they do need to be internal in some other sense (e.g., in supervening on the agent’s mental states).

Finally, a number of philosophers have been led to hold that some version of access internalism is true by inferring it from some version of GD. One important task for externalists in epistemology has been to show what is wrong with this argument from GD to access internalism. Among the externalist writings that have attempted to carry out this task, none has been more influential than Goldman 1999. In that paper, Goldman attempts to show that the argument from GD to access internalism is not sound. He does this in two ways. First, he surveys different versions of internalism that might be thought to be motivated by the GD conception, and showing that all of them are subject to clear counterexamples. Second, he presents a dilemma that faces any argument from the GD conception to internalism.

Even prominent internalists, such as Feldman and Conee 2001, have granted that Goldman’s argument tells against access internalism. Such internalists defend other versions of internalism (e.g., mentalism).

In the present paper, I show three things:

1. Goldman overlooks a particular kind of access internalism in his survey,
2. this particular kind of access internalism can avoid both horns of Goldman’s dilemma, and
3. this particular kind of access internalism is motivated by the GD conception.

If the GD conception of justification is correct, then so too, I argue, is a particular form of access internalism that I describe below. If they are going to find reason to reject access internalism, I argue, epistemological externalists will also need to reject GD.

**1. Goldman on the argument from GD to internalism**

Here is how Goldman formulates the argument from GD to internalism. I will summarize his formulation only after quoting it at length, so the reader can judge for herself whether my summary is fair:

"It can be reconstructed in three steps:

1  The *guidance-deontological* (GD) *conception of justification* is posited.

2  A certain constraint on the determiners of justifiers is derived from the GD conception, that is, the constraint that all justification determiners must be accessible to, or knowable by, the epistemic agent.

3  The accessibility of knowability constraint is taken to imply that only internal conditions qualify as legitimate determiners of justification.  So justification must be a purely internal affair.

"What motivates or underlies this rationale for internalism?  Historically, one central aim of epistemology is to guide or direct our intellectual conduct... .  ...The guidance conception of justification is commonly paired with the deontological conception of justification.  ...

"The guidance and deontological conceptions are intimately related, because the deontological conception, at least when paired with the guidance conception, considers it a person's epistemic duty to guide his doxastic attitudes by his evidence, or by whatever factors determine the justification status of a proposition at a given time.  Epistemic deontologists commonly maintain that being justified in believing a proposition p consists in being (intellectually) required or permitted to believe p; and being unjustified in believing p consists in not being permitted, or being forbidden, to believe p.  When a person is unjustified in believing a proposition, it is his duty not to believe it."

"...justifiers [are what] determine whether or not a proposition is justified for an epistemic agent at a given time.  It seems to follow naturally from the GD conception of justification that a certain constraint must be placed on the sorts of facts or states of affairs that qualify as justifiers.  If a person is going to avoid violating his epistemic duty, he must know, or be able to find out, what his duty requires.  ...Thus, if you are going to choose your beliefs and abstentions from belief in accordance with your justificational requirements, the facts that make you justified or unjustified in believing a certain proposition at a given time must be facts that you are capable of knowing, at that time, to hold or not to hold."

"The knowability constraint on justifiers which flows from the GD conception may be formulated as follows:

KJ:  The only facts that qualify as justifiers of an agent's believing p at time t are facts that the agent can readily know, at t, to obtain or not to obtain."

"Given the KJ constraint on justifiers, it becomes fairly obvious why internalism about justification is so attractive.  Whereas external facts are facts that a cognitive agent might not be in a position to know about, internal facts are presumably the sorts of conditions that a cognitive agent can readily determine.  So internal facts seem to be the right sorts of candidates for justifiers.  ...Only internal facts qualify as justifiers because they are the only ones that satisfy the KJ constraint; at least so internalists suppose." (Goldman 1999, 272 – 5)

Goldman devotes his essay to criticizing this three-step argument from GD to KJ to internalism: those facts that are readily knowable enough to serve as guides for our intellectual conduct, Goldman argues, need not be only those facts that qualify as “internal” by the lights of the internalist.

Goldman argues for this point in two ways. First, he surveys various possible ways to spell out the “ready knowability” constraint that can serve the internalist’s purpose, and he shows that none of those ways of spelling it out is extensionally correct: this is an inductive argument against internalism. While I agree with the premises of Goldman’s inductive argument against internalism, I disagree with the conclusion, because, as I will argue below, there is a version of access internalism that he does not consider in his survey.

Second, Goldman presents a fully general dilemma for the argument from GD to KJ to internalism. Here is the dilemma (again, with my summary statement offered only after quoting the passage on which my summary is based):

“Here is the core dilemma. The minimal, unvarnished version fo the KJ constraint does not rationalize internalism. That simple constraint merely says that justifiers must be readily knowable, and some readily knowable facts might be external rather than internal. If all routes to knowledge of justifiers are allowed, then knowledge by perception must be allowed. If knowledge by perception is allowed, then facts of an external sort could qualify for the status of justifiers. … Thus, the unvarnished version of the KJ constraint does not exclude external facts from the ranks of the justifiers.

“The simple version of the KJ constraint, then, does not support internalism. Tacit recognition of this is what undoubtedly leads internalists to favor a ‘direct’ knowability constraint. Unfortunately, this extra rider is not rationalized by the GD conception. The GD conception at best implies that cognitive agents must know what justifiers are present or absent. No particular types of knowledge, or paths to knowledge, are intimated. So the GD conception cannot rationalize a restrictive version of the KJ constraint that unambiguously yields internalism.” (Goldman 1999, 288 – 9)

So, by Goldman’s lights, either GD does not imply KJ, or KJ does not imply internalism. But however we fiddle with the three-step argument, we will not get a successful argument from GD to internalism.

This is a powerful challenge to what I take to be the most important argument for epistemological internalism. But, as I will now argue, the challenge is unsuccessful.

**2. Goldman’s example of an “external” justifier, and variations on it**

To see why Goldman’s challenge is unsuccessful, let’s begin by considering Goldman’s own example of an “external” justifier – a fact that can serve to justify us in holding a belief, but that does not, by any standard, satisfy the internalist’s constraint on justifiers:

“epistemologists should surely be interested in identifying the features of conscious memory impressions by which people are made more or less justified… in believing things about the past.

“Epistemologists have said very little on this subject. Their discussions tend to be exhausted by characterizations of memory impressions as ‘vivid’ or ‘nonvivid’. There is, I suspect, a straightforward reason for the paucity of detail. It is extremely difficult, using purely armchair methods, to dissect the microfeatures of memory experiences so as to identify telltale difference between trustworthy and questionable memories. On the other hand, empirical methods have produced some interesting findings…

“Johnson and Raye… propose four dimensions along which memory cues will typically differ depending on whether their origin was perceptual or imaginative. As compared with memories that originate from imagination, memories originating from perception tend to have (1) more perceptual information (for example, color and sound), (2) more contextual information about time and place, and (3) more meaningful detail. When a memory trace is rich along these three dimensions, this is evidence of its having originated through perception. Memories originating from imagination or thought, by contrast, tend to be rich on another dimension: they contain more information about the cognitive operations involved in the original thinkings or imaginings (for example, effortful attention, image creation, or search). …Johnson and Raye therefore suggest that differences in average value along these types of dimensions can form the basis for deciding whether the origin of a memory is perceptual or nonperceptual.” (Goldman 1999, 290 – 1)

By providing this example, Goldman seems to render his case against internalism even more powerful. Not only does the argument from GD to internalism fail, but GD in fact seems to motivate externalism. If GD is correct, and so justifiers must be facts that help us to guide our intellectual conduct, then it seems that, in so far as empirical inquiry can disclose facts that serve to guide our intellectual conduct, empirical inquiry can also disclose justifiers. But the facts disclosed by empirical inquiry are typically not the facts that qualify as “internal”, by the lights of the epistemological internalist.

Thus, Goldman suggests, if GD is correct, we should expect externalism to be true.

Goldman’s example seems to provide a very persuasive case in favor of externalism. Suppose you have a memory impression as of some past event (e.g., dropping the Torah at your Bar Mitzvah) and now you wonder whether that memory impression is veridical – whether the event that you recall having happened really did happen. Given Johnson and Raye’s findings, it seems clear that you could gain additional justification for believing that the recalled event did happen if you notice that your memory impression scores high along the first three dimensions of variation, and scores low on the fourth dimension. And so, contrary to internalism, there are at least some justifiers that are not internal.

That’s Goldman’s argument for externalism. But I believe that we can see what is wrong with this argument if we probe Goldman’s memory example a bit more deeply.

Suppose you have a memory impression as of dropping the Torah at your Bar Mitzvah. You notice that this memory impression has lots of perceptual, contextual, and meaningful detail, but very little information about what people were thinking or feeling at the time. Johnson and Raye’s findings would suggest that this memory impression is very likely to have originated perceptually rather than imaginatively. But suppose that you don’t know anything about Johnson and Raye’s findings, and you don’t know whether the specified features of the memory impression serve to make it more likely or less likely that the impression originated perceptually. Consequently, you suspend judgment on the issue of whether your memory impression originated perceptually or imaginatively.

I do not propose to argue with reliabilists like Goldman about whether or not your suspension of judgment on this issue is justified in the envisaged scenario. But notice that, even if a reliabilist wants to claim that your suspension of judgment is unjustified, she must at least grant that you have an *excuse* for unjustifiably suspending judgment on the issue – namely, your ignorance of Johnson and Raye’s findings. (When I speak here of your “ignorance of Johnson and Raye’s findings”, I don’t mean simply your ignorance that *these are* the findings of Johnson and Raye, but rather your ignorance of the facts which, as it happens, were discovered by Johnson and Raye.) Even if your ignorance of those findings leads you to conduct yourself intellectually in an unjustified way, your conduct is nonetheless excused by your ignorance.

Now suppose your read Johnson and Raye’s findings, but, because of a systematic malfunction in your memory of scientific findings (a malfunction that renders your memories of such findings grossly unreliable), you end up misremembering those findings as claiming that memory impressions that have lots of perceptual, contextual, and meaningful detail are more likely to have originated imaginatively, and memory impressions that have lots of psychological detail are more likely to have originated perceptually. Consequently, when you consider the features of your memory impression as of having dropped the Torah at your Bar Mitzvah, and noticing that this memory impression is rich in perceptual, contextual, and meaningful detail, and poor in psychological detail, you end up believing that the memory impression originated imaginatively rather than perceptually.

Once again, I do not propose to argue with reliabilists like Goldman concerning whether your belief in the imaginative origin of your memory impression is justified. Notice, however, that your belief, while it may be unjustified, is nonetheless excusable. You have a good excuse for believing that your memory impression originated in imagination, viz., your false recollection concerning Johnson and Raye’s findings. Just as ignorance can excuse, so too can false belief excuse – and this is something that no reliabilist need or should dispute.

But do ignorance and false belief *always* excuse? No. Let’s consider an example in which false belief does not excuse. You carefully review all of Johnson and Raye’s data, and then (appealing to no additional data) reason counter-inductively, from that data, to the false conclusion that, in the future, memory impressions that have more perceptual, contextual, and meaningful detail, and less psychological detail will be more likely to have resulted from imagination rather than perception. Arriving at this conclusion, you then believe that, since your memory impression as of dropping the Torah at your Bar Mitzvah contains lots of perceptual, contextual, and meaningful detail, and very little psychological detail, it is likely to have originated imaginatively rather than perceptually. In this case, like the case above, you believe something that Goldman would (rightly) regard as unjustified, and you fail to believe something that Goldman would regard as justified. But your failures here, though again attributable to a false belief, are not excusable, for the false belief in question was not itself excusable – it resulted from your counter-inductive reasoning, and failures of intellectual conduct that result from such reasoning are not thereby excused, at least when such reasoning occurs in an agent who is in possession of her faculties.

Of course, if you are not fully in possession of your faculties – if, say, someone has slipped you a drug that causes you to reason counter-inductively, and prevents you from noticing, or at least from correcting, your error – then you have an excuse for doing so. But for an agent who is in full possession of her faculties, and so who can exercise those faculties without hindrance, such reasoning is inexcusable.

But wait: suppose an eminent scientist purports to demonstrate to you, from a broad survey of observed cases, that counter-inductive reasoning has been highly reliable. Don’t you then have an excuse, even if not a justification, for reasoning counter-inductively? No. For if the scientist’s demonstration persuades you of the reliability of counter-induction, then, by virtue of being so persuaded of its reliability, you are *rationally committed* to reasoning counter-inductively from the past reliability of counter-inductive reasoning to its future unreliability. (This is because you are rationally committed to reasoning in those very ways that you yourself believe to be reliable.) And so, even then, you are rationally committed to the unreliability of counter-inductive reasoning. And when you are rationally committed to the unreliability of reasoning in that way, you cannot have an excuse for reasoning in that way – at least not so long as you are in full possession of your faculties.

I’ve just described a certain kind of reasoning as one to which you are “rationally committed” if you are persuaded by the scientist’s empirical argument. While there is plenty of room to dispute concerning the nature and sources of rational commitment, there is no dispute that rational agents are rationally committed to various things: we commonly describe someone as “committed to” a particular conclusion, whether or not she actually accepts that conclusion. To point out what someone is committed to is a common way of persuading her either to accept the conclusions to which she is committed, or to revise those features of her thinking in virtue of which she is committed to them. All of us who engage in philosophical argument accept that there are rational commitments.

Not only do we all agree that there are rational commitments, but we also all agree, at least more or less, on their epistemology. How do you discover what someone is rationally committed to? By finding out what they believe to be true, or by finding out what rules of inferences they treat as good, and then inferring consequences from the conjunction of those beliefs, in conformity with those rules of inference. What someone is rationally committed to believing is simply what follows from the conjunction of her beliefs, according to rules of inference rules that she is committed to following. What inference rules someone is committed to following are just those inference rules to the cogency of which she is committed, either by virtue of her beliefs, or by virtue of the pattern of inferences that she is willing to make. Similarly, we can speak of someone’s being rationally committed to certain preferences, or choices, or feelings, in virtue of other features of their psychology. We find out what people are rationally committed to by reasoning, in the ways that they’re committed to reasoning, from the things to which they are committed.

There is a connection between when you have an excuse for unjustified intellectual conduct, on the one hand, and what you are rationally committed to, on the other hand. Intellectual conduct that results from ignorance or false belief may be excused – at least so long as the fact concerning which one is ignorant, or concerning which one has a false belief, is not itself a fact that one is rationally committed to accepting as a fact.

Having introduced the notion of rational commitment with just the few remarks above, I now want to use it to formulate a version of access internalism that Goldman does not discuss in his survey. Furthermore, the argument from the GD conception of justification to this version of access internalism can avoid both horns of Goldman’s dilemma.

**3. A version of access internalism that is motivated by the GD conception of justification**

Consider the following version of access internalism, which I will call “Rational Commitment Internalism”, or RCI:

(RCI) The credal attitudes that an agent is justified in holding at a time are those that the agent is rationally committed to holding, given the evidence that she has at that time.

In this section, I will explain a bit more fully what RCI amounts to, why it is a version of access internalism, and how it is motivated by the GD conception of justification. Then, in the next section, I will argue that Goldman’s criticism of the argument from the GD conception to access internalism does not cast any doubt on RCI, or on the argument from the GD conception to RCI.

RCI is a theory of propositional justification, not doxastic justification.[[1]](#footnote-1) It speaks of what credal attitudes an agent is justified in holding at a time, not of what credal attitudes an agent justifiably holds at a time. So, in particular, RCI tells us nothing about what sort of basing relation must obtain between an agent’s credal attitudes, on the one hand, and her propositional justification for them, on the other, in order for the former to be justifiably held.

RCI gives an account of propositional justification in terms of what evidence an agent has at a moment. Of course, the issues of what sorts of entities get to count as “evidence”, and what sort of relation they must bear to an agent in order for them to be evidence “had by” that agent, are both hotly contested. I have argued elsewhere that the only sorts of entities that get to count as evidence are propositions. I will not rehearse those arguments again here, but, for the sake of simplicity of exposition, I will assume their conclusion. What relation must evidence propositions bear to an agent in order for them to be evidence that the agent “has”? Must the agent know them to be true (as Williamson 1997 claims)? Be non-inferentially propositionally justified in believing them to be true (as Goldman 2009 claims)? Or bear some other relation to them altogether? I will not address this issue here, beyond making one point about the functional role of evidence: in order for you to have evidence E, it must at the very least be possible for E to impose constraints on what credal attitudes it is rational for you to have.[[2]](#footnote-2) If you form your credal attitudes in a way that does not satisfy these constraints, that will constitute a failure of rationality. Rationality therefore requires that the reasoning that you do from what you take to be your evidence – at least the reasoning that results in the formation of your credal attitudes – proceed from propositions that actually are in your evidence set, and not from propositions that you mistakenly believe to be in your evidence set.

This does not imply that if p is in your evidence set, then you are rationally required to believe that it is. Nor does it imply the luminosity of evidence doctrine, *viz*., that if p is in your evidence set, then you are in a position to know that it is. But it does imply that if you treat p as if it is in your evidence set (by reasoning from p, and thereby forming credal attitudes), then, you are doing so irrationally if p is not in fact in your evidence set. Evidence might not be luminous, but are beliefs about our own evidence cannot be both false and rational – at least not if those beliefs guide the formation of further credal attitudes (as beliefs typically do). That, at any rate, is an implication of RCI, and one I will say a bit more to defend below.

When we treat a proposition as our evidence, rationality requires us to be right in so treating it. But rationality also commits us to various things that follow from our evidence – at least in accordance with those rules of inference that we are rationally committed to following. According to RCI, then, a person is justified in believing the following things at any given time: first, the propositions that she treats as his evidence, and second, everything that can be inferred from those propositions, in accordance with rules of inference that she is rationally committed to accepting. That’s what RCI amounts to. We may, therefore, think of RCI as a version of the view that Feldman and Conee call “evidentialism”, though it is very different from Feldman and Conee’s version of that view in several respects. Most obviously, Feldman and Conee think of a person’s evidence not as a set of propositions to which the person is related, but rather as a set of conscious mental states that the person is in. Also, Feldman and Conee do not give an account of the kind of support that one’s evidence must bear to a possible credal attitude in order for the agent to be justified by that evidence in holding that credal attitude, whereas RCI describes such support as a form of rational commitment, generated by one’s evidence, and by means of inference rules that one is rationally committed to accepting.

Feldman and Conee are at pains to deny that their version of evidentialism is a form of access internalism, for they do not think that agent’s have any special, non-empirical access to the kind of support relations that obtain between their evidence and the credal attitudes that such evidence justifies an agent in holding. So why should we think that RCI is a version of access internalism? Precisely because the question of what one is rationally committed to, and of what rationality requires of one, is a question to which each agent has a special, non-empirical access. If I want to find out what you are rationally committed to, or what rationality requires of you, I will need to rely on some empirical information that I have about your current attitudes and evidence. But if I want to find out what I am rationally committed to, or what rationality requires of me, I need not rely on any such empirical information. This is not to say that I cannot rely on any such information in finding out what I am rationally committed to, or what rationality requires of me: of course, I may rely on such empirical information, as when I trust an informant to tell me about such matters concerning myself. But even if I can rely on such empirical information, the point is that I need not rely on it in figuring out what I am rationally committed to. In that way, finding out what I am rationally committed to is a different sort of enterprise than finding out what you are rationally committed to.

I conclude that RCI is a version of access internalism. How is it motivated by the GD conception of justification? Let’s recall Goldman’s exposition of the motivation:

"The guidance and deontological conceptions are intimately related, because the deontological conception, at least when paired with the guidance conception, considers it a person's epistemic duty to guide his doxastic attitudes by his evidence, or by whatever factors determine the justification status of a proposition at a given time.  Epistemic deontologists commonly maintain that being justified in believing a proposition p consists in being (intellectually) required or permitted to believe p; and being unjustified in believing p consists in not being permitted, or being forbidden, to believe p.  When a person is unjustified in believing a proposition, it is his duty not to believe it."

"...justifiers [are what] determine whether or not a proposition is justified for an epistemic agent at a given time.  It seems to follow naturally from the GD conception of justification that a certain constraint must be placed on the sorts of facts or states of affairs that qualify as justifiers.” (Goldman 1999, 273 – 4)

Goldman goes on to say that the constraint in question is that justifiers are “readily knowable”. But I do not see how this constraint follows from the GD conception. Rather, what follows from the GD conception is this: that when one treats something as a justifier that is not a justifier, one ends up violating one’s epistemic duty. In other words, although one might fail to know what justifiers one has, one cannot rationally hold and act on false beliefs concerning what justifiers one has. Acting on false beliefs about what justifiers one has will involve violation of some rational requirement. So the knowability constraint that follows from the GD conception should be spelled out as follows:

KJ+:  An agent cannot act rationally on false beliefs about what justifiers she has at a given time.

But KJ+ tells us that our access to our own justifiers must be a kind of access which, unlike empirical access, cannot produce rational false beliefs. This sort of access must be non-empirical. And so access internalism follows from the GD conception of justification. But not just any old access internalism: rather, the specific form of access internalism that treats the special sort of epistemic access that we have to our justifiers as the kind of access that cannot itself result in rational false beliefs. This is not to say that we cannot hold rational, false beliefs about what justifiers we have. But it is to say that we cannot gain such rational, false beliefs about what justifiers we have by means of the distinctive kind of non-empirical access that we enjoy to those justifiers.

To sum up: RCI is a form of access internalism, where the access in question is the same sort of non-empirical access that each of us has to her own rational commitments. Furthermore, RCI is motivated by the GD conception, though via KJ+, rather than KJ.

Does the argument from the GD conception to RCI suffer from either of the problems that Goldman points out in his paper? In the next section, I argue that it does not.

**4. How RCI escapes unscathed from Goldman’s argument**

Goldman’s first objection to the argument from the GD conception of justification to access internalism surveys various versions of access internalism and shows that each version of access internalism cannot withstand scrutiny. Here are the different versions of access internalism that Goldman considers:

KJdir

The only facts that qualify as justifiers of an agent’s believing p at time t are facts that the agent can readily know directly, at t, to obtain or not to obtain.

Two questions face the proponent of KJdir. First, what justifies the imposition of the “directness” requirement on the knowability of justifiers? And second, what modes of knowledge count as “direct”? Goldman considers a few answers to the second question. One specification of directness would be in terms of introspection. In other words, KJdir would then amount to:

KJint

The only facts that qualify as justifiers of an agent’s believing p at time t are facts that the agent can readily know *by introspection*, at t, to obtain or not to obtain.

Is KJint true? Not according to Goldman, who argues that KJint faces “the problem of stored beliefs”. This is the problem that, for many of my uncontroversially justified beliefs – e.g., concerning my social security number – I have no introspectible justification for them. What justifies my belief that my social security number is …, is something about the genesis of that belief, and not anything that I can presently introspect.

Given the failure of KJdir, perhaps we should conclude that the directness requirement on knowability is too stringent, and so accept:

KJind

The only facts that qualify as justifiers of an agent’s believing p at time t are facts that the agent can readily know at t, either directly or indirectly, to obtain or not to obtain.

The problem with KJind is that it’s not clear what constraint, if any, this imposes on the knowability of justifiers. And if KJind imposes no constraint on the knowability of justifiers, then it’s not a version of access internalism at all. Better for the internalist to explore other interpretations of KJdir in order to find a view which, unlike KJint, can avoid the problem of stored beliefs. The obvious fix is to allow memory retrieval, along with introspection, to serve as ways in which justifiers can be known. This yields:

KJint+ret

The only facts that qualify as justifiers of an agent’s believing p at time t are facts that the agent can readily know at t, to obtain or not to obtain, *by introspection* *and/or memory retrieval*.

One problem with KJint+ret is what Goldman calls “the problem of forgotten evidence”. This is the problem that, for many of my uncontroversially justified beliefs – e.g., my beliefs concerning various historical dates – I have no introspectible *or even remembered* justification for them. What justifies my belief that, say, the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066, is not something that I can remember, let alone introspect. A second problem with KJint+ret is what Goldman calls “the problem of concurrent retrieval”. This is the problem that, while lots of states can be introspected and/or retrieved, they cannot all be introspected and/or retrieved at the same time. But then how can, say, coherence across an agent’s whole belief set help to justify any of the agent’s beliefs, given that such coherence is a relation among states that are not all concurrently introspectible and/or retrievable?

It seems that the KJ constraint needs to be liberalized beyond KJint+ret. But how to liberalize it, without abandoning access internalism? Goldman considers the possibility of liberalizing it by allowing that justifiers are knowable not only by means of introspection or retrieval, but also by means of some standard set of computational operations (COMP) that implement our abilities to use certain inferences (e.g., truth-table inferences) to draw conclusions from the information that we can introspect and/or retrieve. This would yield:

KJint+ret+COMP

The only facts that qualify as justifiers of an agent’s believing p at time t are facts that the agent can readily know within a suitable doxastic decision interval via *introspection*, *memory retrieval*, *and/or COMP.*

The problem for KJint+ret+COMP, as Goldman notes, is this: if COMP includes computational operations that ordinary agents don’t know themselves to possess, then KJint+ret+COMP is not a version of access internalism. But if COMP is to include only those computational operations that an agent knows herself to possess, then what beliefs one is justified in holding will be implausibly relativized to one’s knowledge of one’s own computational powers. Either way, KJint+ret+COMP is not a plausible version of acces internalism.

That summarizes Goldman’s survey of the various versions of access internalism, and his argument against each of them. Notice that not a single one of the versions that Goldman considers is equivalent to, or entails, or is entailed by, RCI. While we can become aware of our rational commitments by means of introspection and/or retrieval, we can also become aware of our rational commitments by means of reasoning. And while we may not know anything about the computational processes that operate when we reason, we can still know that we are reasoning when we are reasoning. Ignorance of the computational processes operating in our brain does not constitute a rational failing, but ignorance of what reasoning we are performing does constitute such a failing, and so the difference between reasoning, on the one hand, and the computational processes that occur in our brain, on the other, is epistemologically significant.

So RCI, although it is a version of access internalism, is not equivalent to any version of KJ that Goldman considers in his survey.

Now, let’s turn to Goldman’s other argument against access internalism: How can the argument from the GD conception of justification to RCI escape both horns of Goldman’s dilemma?

Recall that Goldman’s dilemma goes as follows: either we interpret KJ so liberally (e.g., as KJind) that it is entailed by the GD conception, but it does not entail access internalism, or else we interpret KJ more narrowly (e.g., as KJint+ret) that it does entail access internalism, but then it is not entailed by the GD conception. Either way, we cannot construct a valid argument from the GD conception of justification to access internalism, via a version of KJ.

For RCI to avoid both horns of this dilemma, it must follow from a version of KJ that is implied by the GD conception. And here is why it does so. Recall that, according to RCI, the credal attitudes that an agent is justified in holding at a time are those that the agent is rationally committed to holding, given the evidence that she has at that time.

Let’s recall what (we agreed above) is involved in having evidence: if you have evidence E, then E imposes constraints on what credal attitudes it is rational for you to have. If you form credal attitudes that do not satisfy these constraints that will constitute a failure of rationality. But then you cannot be justified in holding credal attitude C if your holding C violates a constraint of rationality. So the only credal attitudes that you can be justified in holding are those it is rational for you to have, given the evidence that you have. But those are just the credal attitudes to which you are rationally committed, given your evidence.

So the argument above shows that an agent is justified in holding *only* those credal attitudes to which she is rationally committed, given her evidence. Can we also show that an agent is justified in holding *all* of the credal attitudes to which she is rationally committed, given her evidence? The argument for this is simple: if an agent is rationally committed to holding a particular credal attitude, then that credal attitude could be unjustified for her only if her rational commitment to it was itself the upshot of her having some other unjustified attitude. (For instance, if you believe that Obama was born in Kenya, and you know that Kenya is in Africa, then you are rationally committed to believing that Obama was born in Africa. The latter belief is one to which you’re rationally committed, but it is nonetheless unjustified. You are rationally committed to it, though, by virtue of holding another unjustified belief.) You cannot become rationally committed to holding an unjustified belief solely by virtue of the justified beliefs that you hold. And similarly, you cannot become rationally committed to holding an unjustified belief solely by virtue of the evidence that you hold. Of course, you can be rationally committed to holding an unjustified belief by virtue of the unjustified beliefs that you may hold about your evidence – but that is a different matter. I conclude that all of the beliefs that you’re rationally committed to holding, given your evidence, are justified. And I already argued that the only beliefs that you can be justified in holding are those to which you’re rationally committed, given your evidence. Therefore, RCI is true.

And notice, in this argument for RCI, I’ve relied only on the following premises:

1. If you have evidence E, then E imposes constraints on what credal attitudes it is rational for you to have.
2. You cannot be justified in holding credal attitude C if your holding C violates a constraint of rationality.
3. If an agent is rationally committed to holding a particular credal attitude, then that credal attitude could be unjustified for her only if her rational commitment to it was itself the upshot of her having some other unjustified attitude.

The first premise, (a), states a fundamental and uncontroversial fact about how the evidence that one has constrains one’s rational attitudes. The second premise, (b), says that propositional justification cannot attach to a credal attitude that it would be irrational for you to hold. And the third premise, (c), tells us that justified attitudes cannot rationally commit us to unjustified attitudes. The conjunction of these premises is one way to spell out the GD conception of justification. Recall that the GD conception “considers it a person's epistemic duty to guide his doxastic attitudes by his evidence, or by whatever factors determine the justification status of a proposition at a given time.” Premise (a) tells us that evidence determines propositional justificatory status. Premises (b) and (c) tell us that rationality (or, equivalently, rational duty) requires holding all and only the credal attitudes that enjoy positive status of this kind.

Thus, I have shown that there is a valid deductive argument from one specification of the GD conception of justification (namely, the conjunction of (a), (b), and (c)) to RCI. Since this argument is valid, it avoids both of the horns of Goldman’s dilemma.

In this section, I have shown the Goldman’s objections to the derivation of access internalism from the GD conception of justification are unsuccessful: in fact, the derivation is valid, at least given certain specifications of the GD conception and of access internalism. In the final section, I will address other objections to RCI, in the hope of encouraging the reader to use this derivation of RCI from the GD conception to perform a modus ponens, rather than to perform a modus tollens.

**5. Further objections to RCI, and replies**

Objection 1: RCI tells us about empirical propositional justification, i.e., the propositional justification that we enjoy by virtue of our evidence. But it tells us nothing about a priori propositional justification. Right now, I have propositional justification for believing various theorems of logic (some of which I actually believe, and others of which I don’t). But the propositional justification that I have is not provided by any evidence that I have. It is instead provided by my understanding of logic. How can RCI account for propositional justification that is provided not by means of evidence, but rather by means of understanding?

Reply: RCI tells us that the credal attitudes that an agent is justified in holding at a time are those that the agent is rationally committed to holding, given the evidence that she has at that time. But RCI does *not* tell us that the credal attitudes that an agent is justified in holding at a time are those that the agent is rationally committed to holding *in virtue of* the evidence that she has at that time. It is consistent with RCI that the latter are a proper subset of the former, and that there are many credal attitudes that we are committed to holding *not* in virtue of the evidence that we have, but rather in virtue of our understanding. RCI does not say otherwise. A full account of rational commitment would have to spell out how rational commitments can arise from our understanding, from our evidence, and perhaps from other sources. But I cannot give such an account here, nor need I do so for the purposes of defending RCI from present objections.

Objection 2: If RCI is correct, then I am justified in believing all of the propositions to which I am rationally committed. But that list of propositions is vastly more complicated than anything I can understand, let alone believe. So RCI is inconsistent with the plausible view that “ought” implies “can”.

Reply: Let’s grant that “ought” implies “can”. But precisely which “can” does it imply? As I lie asleep in bed, is it true that I can run a mile in under 6 minutes? I have the competence, but I cannot manifest that competence right now, while asleep. The “can” that is implied by “ought” is the “can” of competence, not the “can” of opportunity. But if we restrict our attention to the “can” of competence, then on what grounds should we deny that I can believe all of the propositions to which I am rationally committed? To the extent that I enjoy competence with English grammar, I have an ability that allows me to parse English sentences of arbitrary length – but it is impossible for any creature to exercise this ability on more than a finite number of sentences. This is a limit not on my grammatical competence (which is infinite in domain), but on my opportunities to manifest it in performance.

Objection 3: According to RCI, I cannot be justified in believing a proposition to which I am not rationally committed, given my evidence. But, clearly, it’s possible to have justified false beliefs about what evidence I have. And if I do have such justified false beliefs, and proceed to reason from the propositions that I justifiably but falsely believe to be in my evidence, rather than from the propositions that actually are in my evidence, how can I fail (as RCI predicts) to be justified in reaching the conclusions that I reach, even if my actual evidence does not make me rationally committed to those conclusions?

Reply: In fact it’s not possible to have justified false beliefs about what evidence I have. If it seems to be possible, that appearance is generated by our imagining a situation in which we not only have some first-order empirical evidence, but we also have some misleading second-order evidence about that first-order evidence (e.g., the testimony of a trusted authority on what evidence people have). In such a situation, we might reason from the evidence that we take ourselves, on the strength of the second-order evidence, to have, rather than from the evidence that we actually do have. But note that, typically, the presence of a proposition in your evidence set is defeasible: a proposition that is in your evidence set at one moment might cease to be in your evidence set at a later moment if your circumstances change. This can happen through forgetfulness, through the mechanisms of indexicality, or – I will now add – through the presence of higher-order evidence as in the case envisaged here. Of course, higher-order evidence cannot *always* effect such a change (the testimony of even the most trustworthy of logical experts cannot make it rational for us to believe a proposition that is inconsistent, though it can put us in a position in which, no matter what our credal attitudes, they will be less than fully rationally). But the cases in which higher-order evidence makes it rational for us to change our overall view concerning what we are rationally committed to are also cases in which higher-order evidence changes which propositions are in our evidence set.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I conclude that RCI is a version of access internalism that follows from the GD conception of propositional justification, that the argument from GD to RCI avoids all of Goldman’s criticisms, and that RCI can meet the most obvious objections. Contrary to popular belief, access internalism concerning propositional justification turns out to be alive and well.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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1. I take no stand here on the relation between propositional justification and doxastic justification, though I am inclined to accept the argument of Turri 2010 that doxastic justification cannot be defined in terms of propositional justification along with basing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Neta 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a fuller defense of the present view, see Neta forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on an earlier draft. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)