

**Frame Text:**

**Internalism and Externalism**

A second conspicuous feature of the Cartesian approach to epistemology, one that has also been the object of serious challenge in recent times, is its internalist character. For Descartes and those who follow his lead, epistemic justification or reasonableness can, as we have seen, depend only on matters which are within the cognitive grasp of the believer in question, that is, of which he or she is or at least can be in some way justifiably aware: matters that are, as it might be put, accessible from within his or her first-person cognitive perspective. (This is a rather vague formulation that will need to be amplified and clarified.) Indeed, though this has sometimes been disputed, it seems plausible to say that until very recently an internalist approach was assumed without question by virtually all philosophers who paid any serious attention to epistemological issues.

But in spite of this historical consensus, many recent epistemologists have argued that the internalist conception of justification is fundamentally mistaken, that epistemic justification can depend in part or perhaps even entirely on matters to which the believer in question need have no cognitive access at all, matters that are entirely external to his or her cognitive viewpoint. Thus, to take the most widely-held recent externalist view, a belief might allegedly be justified for a particular believer simply because the causal process that led to its adoption is cognitively reliable, that is, is a process of a general kind that in fact produces true beliefs in a high proportion of the cases in which it occurs—even if both the nature of the process and its reliability are entirely unknown and cognitively inaccessible to the believer in question.

Think very carefully about this externalist conception of justification. Having read this far in the present book, the idea that justification could result in this way from things that are external to the believer's cognitive perspective might seem puzzling or even bizarre. How, you may want to ask, can a belief be justified for someone in virtue of a feature that he or she is entirely unaware that it possesses? Indeed, if features of a belief that are in this way external to the believer's cognitive perspective can yield justification, why could truth itself not play this role? Surely the fact that a belief is true is, in a way, the best possible reason for holding it, so that if access to the justifying feature by the believer is not required, why shouldn't we conclude that any true belief is justified simply by virtue of being true, no matter how or why it was arrived at or how irrational or careless or even crazy the person in question may have been. In

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fact, no externalist is willing to go quite this far, but in a way that merely heightens the puzzling character of the externalist view: why should some external facts and not others be relevant to justification?

The aim of the present chapter is to explore the recent controversy between internalist and externalist views of epistemic justification. I will start by elaborating and clarifying the basic idea of internalism, and then proceed to consider, first, externalist objections to internalism, second, a leading example of an externalist view (the reliabilist view just briefly adumbrated), and, third, some major objections to externalism. This will put us in a better position to understand what is really at stake between the opposing views and to attempt on that basis to arrive at a tentative resolution of the issue.

### **What Is Internalism?**

The fundamental claim of internalism, as already noticed several times above, is that epistemological issues arise and must be dealt with from within the individual person's first-person cognitive perspective, appealing only to things that are accessible from that standpoint. The basic rationale is that what justifies a person's beliefs must be something that is available or accessible to him or her, that something to which he has no access cannot give him a reason for thinking that one of his beliefs is true (though it might conceivably provide such a reason for another person viewing him from the outside). But there are some possible misunderstandings of this basic idea that need to be guarded against. First, although the general Cartesian point of view that we have largely followed in this book holds that what is available in a person's first-person cognitive perspective is initially limited to (i) facts about the contents of his or her conscious mental states, together with (ii) facts or truths that are self-evident on an a priori basis, this rather severe limitation is not mandated by internalism as such. Thus, to take the most important alternative possibility, if it were possible to defend a version of direct realism<sup>2</sup> according to which some perceptual beliefs about material objects are directly justified without the need for any inference from the content of sensory experience, then the facts about the physical world apprehended in this way would also be directly accessible from the first-person cognitive perspective and would thereby constitute part of the basis for internalist justifications. I am doubtful, for reasons indicated briefly in the earlier discussion, that any view yielding this result can in fact be successfully defended, but that is a separate issue.

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Second, the basic internalist requirement is sometimes misconstrued as saying that justification must depend only on the believer's internal states, that is, on states that are, from a metaphysical standpoint, properties or features of that individual person. This would make it easy to understand why facts about the contents of conscious mental states can contribute to internalist justification, but would make it puzzling why facts pertaining to other sorts of internal states, such as dispositional or unconscious mental states or even states that are purely physical or physiological in nature, cannot do so as well. And it would be even more puzzling why self-evident truths that have nothing specifically to do with the individual person and his or her internal states (for example, truths of logic and mathematics) are also supposed to be acceptable as part of the basis for internalist justification. But in fact this understanding of the internalist requirement is simply mistaken. As already briefly indicated, the "internal" of internalism refers to what is internal to the person's first-person cognitive perspective in the sense of being accessible from that perspective, not necessarily to what is internal in the sense of being metaphysically a state or feature of that person. Thus the contents of conscious mental states satisfy the internalist requirement, not simply because they are features of internal states of the person, but rather because those contents are arguably (see chapter 9) accessible in the right way. And if self-evident a priori knowable truths are also accessible from the first-person cognitive perspective (as both moderate empiricists and rationalists hold), then those truths are equally acceptable as part of the basis for internalist justification.

Third, the internalist need not deny that facts of other sorts can also come to be accessible in the required way from the first-person cognitive perspective. Thus, for example, if the reliability of certain sorts of testimony can be cogently established by reasoning that begins from what is initially available there, perhaps along the lines discussed in chapter 8, then the supposed facts reflected in such testimony become indirectly available as a basis for internalist justification. The internalist's insistence is only that such indirect availability must be grounded in reasons or arguments that begin from what is directly available—that is, available initially, before such further reasons or arguments are invoked.

Fourth, and most fundamentally of all, what is available from the first-person cognitive perspective must provide a complete reason for thinking that the belief in question is true, and whatever is needed to fully grasp this reason must be included in what is accessible. Thus, for example, to have internal access to some fact that could provide the basis for a justifying reason

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without also having access to whatever logical or inferential connection that reason also depends on is not to have full internal access to the reason in question.