

Metaphysics and Epistemology

(HPPH5037/HPPH6037)

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What is meant by the 'internalist' approach to issues of knowledge and justification? What do you consider to be its chief philosophical advantages and/or drawbacks?

Introduction:

The internalism – externalism debate in epistemology concerns what it is for a belief to be justified, more specifically, whether justification is dependent on factors accessible to the subject. Internalism holds that justification needs to be grounded in reasons or evidence available to the believer's perspective, whereas externalism appeals to factors such as reliability that might lie beyond reflective awareness. As Richard Feldman and Earl Conee argue, epistemic justification depends on the evidence a subject possesses, such that the justified attitude is the one that fits the evidence.¹ What is at stake in the debate is not merely a technical disagreement but a philosophical question about the nature of knowledge as something which agents can be held rationally accountable.

The issue arises against the backdrop of a more fundamental problem about justification itself. As Roderick Chisholm frames the central epistemological question, we must ask: What am I justified in believing?² Yet the task becomes unstable if no satisfactory structure of justification can be secured. The challenge, often associated with Agrippa's trilemma, suggests that attempts to justify belief lead either to infinite regress, circular reasoning, or

¹ See Conee, R. F. (1985). Evidentialism. *Philosophical Studies*, 48(1), pp. 15-16, where they argue that a belief is justified iff it fits the subject's total evidence.

² See Chisholm, R. M. (1989). *Theory of Knowledge 3rd Edition*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, United States of America, p. 1, where he formulates epistemology in terms of what we are justified in believing.

arbitrary stopping points.³ This raises the question of what counts as a rationally acceptable belief.

This essay argues that internalism provides a compelling account of justification insofar as it captures its essentially normative, reason-giving character. However, it faces significant difficulties concerning accessibility and its relation to truth. Externalism is introduced primarily as a critical contrast to highlight these limitations, while the focus remains on evaluating internalism itself.

What Agrippa is doing:

Abélé: You ask me what makes a belief justified. But I wonder why you think every belief needs a justification at all?

Blairé: Because we can always be asked for a reason. If I say it is raining, you can ask, "How do you know?"

A: And you answer with: "I see it."

B: Yes.

A: But then I may ask: Why trust your sight?

B: Then I present another reason. That is, my vision is usually reliable.

A: And that too can be questioned, no? Why do you think your vision is reliable?

³ See Comesaña, J. 2026, January 11. *Skepticism*. Retrieved March 2026, from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/#Bib>. Esp §6, beginning 'The Pyrrhonian skeptics sought suspension of judgment...' and the subsequent analysis of regress, circularity, and unsupported assumption.

B: To that, I would have to give further reasons.

A: And so, we begin to move. Tell me, where does this end?

B: It seems it does not. Each reason asks for another.

A: A path towards infinite regress. One that will never be complete, so your belief then is never fully justified.

B: That cannot be right...

A: Please, try another path then, suppose at some point you say: "This belief needs no further justification!"

B: Then the regress stops.

A: But on what grounds? If no reason is given, the belief appears arbitrary.

B: That is unsatisfactory.

A: Then perhaps you turn in a circle. You justify one belief with another, and eventually return to where you began.

B: That explains nothing; it only repeats the claim.

A: It appears we have three options: Infinite regress, arbitrary stopping, or circularity. None seems acceptable.⁴

B: It appears justification itself is under threat.

⁴ For discussions of Agrippa's trilemma within Pyrrhonian scepticism, see Comesaña, 2026, esp. §6.

A: Exactly. The issue epistemology asks is what we are justified in believing,⁵ but that question becomes unstable if no adequate structure of justification can be secured.

B: Then the problem isn't simply whether beliefs are true, but whether they can be justified at all.

A: Yes. The challenge forces us toward a deeper question: What could make a belief rationally acceptable?

B: The task at hand is not just about giving reasons now, but to explain what counts as a good reason.

A: And, what could bring the demand for reasons to an end without arbitrariness?

B: Then any adequate theory of knowledge must answer this.

A: That is precisely where internalism enters. It claims that justification must lie within what the subject can access – within the space of reasons available to them.⁶

B: So, the regress isn't escaped by abandoning reasons, but by locating them within the subject's perspective.

A: That's the promise; whether it succeeds is another matter.

Internalism:

⁵ For traditional epistemological questions on justification, see Chisholm, 1989, chap. 1, 'The Skeptic's Challenge', p.1.

⁶ For a classic statement on evidentialism, see Conee & Feldman, 1985, pp. 15-16, where justification is determined by the evidence a subject has.

A: We ended things last with a demand: Justification must avoid arbitrariness without collapsing into regress. Internalism was brought up as a way forward, but what does it actually claim?

B: At its core, something simple. A belief is justified by what the subject has access to – by their reasons or evidence.

A: Access sounds vague. Do you mean they are consciously aware of?

B: Not necessarily at all moments. But at least what they could, in principle, reflect upon. Their justification needs to be available from their own perspective.

A: So, if I believe it is raining because I see the rain, my justification lies in that experience?

B: Yes. And more precisely, in how that experience supports the belief. As is often put, what one is justified in believing depends on the evidence one has.⁷

A: Then justification is not about how the world causes belief, but about how the subject can *answer* for it.

B: Exactly. The internalists think justification is essentially normative. It concerns what one *ought* to believe given one's reasons.⁸

A: Let us test this. Suppose two people have the same evidence. Must they be equally justified?

⁷ See Conee & Feldman, 1985, p. 15, where epistemic justification is grounded in the quality of the believer's evidence in said belief.

⁸ Laurence, B. (1980). Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, p.55. Where justification is described as a fundamentally normative concept.

B: On this view, yes. If justification depends only on what is internally available, then shared evidence yields shared justification.

A: Even if one of them is in fact deceived?

B: Even then. Internalism separates justification from truth. One can be fully justified and yet mistaken.

A: Why detach justification from truth?

B: Because justification concerns rational responsibility, not mere success. If a belief is formed in a way that the subject can defend with good reasons, then it is justified – even if the world happens to mislead them.

A: So, it shifts the focus from *getting it right* to *being reasonable*.

B: Yes. Think back to our earlier exchange when I asked for your reason. I was not asking whether reliable processes caused your belief. I was asking whether you would give an account of it.

A: And internalism takes that demand seriously.

B: It does so. It treats justification as something belonging within what is, in Sellarsian terms, the space of reasons – a domain in which beliefs stand in relations of support, challenge, and defence.⁹

A: Then justification is not a hidden mechanism, but something articulated in discourse.

⁹ See Sellars, W. (1956). Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind. In *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. 1*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 128-129. Where knowledge is distinguished from mere sensing and tied to conceptually structured, inferential relations.

B: That is the idea. To be justified is to be in a position to respond to questions like, " Why do you believe that?" With reasons that are intelligible and assessable.

A: Suppose I form a belief through a highly reliable process, but I have no idea that it is reliable; am I Justified?

B: Internalists typically say no. Reliability alone is not enough; if you cannot access the reasons that support your belief, you are not in a position to justify it.

A: So, justification requires not just good origins but reflective accessibility.

B: Exactly. That is the core commitment. Justification needs to be available to the subject as a reason.

A: Then internalism offers a response to Agrippa. The regress is halted, not through abandoning reasons, but by grounding them in what the subject can access.

B: Yes, the chain of reasons terminates, not arbitrarily, but in what is immediately available – experience, evidence, reflection.

A: Whether that truly avoids arbitrariness remains open.

B: Indeed, internalism promises a great deal: that justification is both non-arbitrary and fully answerable to reason.

A: Let's see if it can deliver.

Strengths of Internalism:

Internalism's primary strength lies in its ability to capture the fundamentally normative character of epistemic justification. With this view, justification is not simply a matter of how beliefs are caused, but of whether they are *rationally acceptable* from the subject's

perspective. This closely aligns with ordinary epistemic practices: when asking someone, why do you believe that? We are not inquiring into the causal history of their belief, but asking for reasons that can justify it. Internalism takes this demand earnestly by insisting that justification ought to be grounded in what is accessible to the subject, typically in the form of evidence. As Feldman and Conee argue, the epistemically justified attitude is the one that fits the evidence a subject possesses.¹⁰

This accessibility requirement is of the utmost importance as it preserves the connection between justification and rational responsibility. If a belief were justified solely by factors external to the subject's awareness – such as the reliability of the process that produced it – then it'd be unclear how the subject is to be held accountable for holding that belief. Internalists, therefore, maintain that justification is something the subject can, in principle, reflect upon and defend. With this view, justification is not simply a property of belief, but of believers as rational agents. As Chisholm emphasises, epistemic evaluation clings to the idea that one ought to believe in accord with one's evidence, thereby grounding justification in epistemic responsibility.¹¹ Not only that, but internalism explains why justification is distinct from mere epistemic success. A belief may be true or formed by a reliable process, yet still fail to be justified if the subject lacks access to the reasons supporting it. In contrast, a belief formed based on good reasons may be justified even if it turns out to be false. This separation allows internalism to preserve that justification concerns *being reasonable*, rather than just *getting things right*. As Bonjour argues, epistemic justification is inherently normative, concerned with what one has reason to believe rather than a mere production of true beliefs.¹²

¹⁰ Read McDowell, J. (1996). *Mind and World: With a New Introduction*. Cambridge, United States: Harvard University Press. Chap. Introduction, pp. xiii – xv, on the 'space of reasons' and the normative character of knowledge; see Conee & Feldman, 1985, p.22, where justification is treated as independent of how one came to possess one's evidence.

¹¹ Chisholm, 1989, pp. 12-14, on epistemic justification as a matter of rational evaluation; see also Bonjour, L. (1985). *The structure of empirical knowledge*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States of America: Harvard University Press, pp. 7-9, where justification is tied to epistemic responsibility and reflective access.

¹² Bonjour, 1985, pp. 32-33, where justification is treated as a matter of having adequate reasons rather than the mere production of true beliefs.

Finally, internalism brings forth a principled response to the regress problem raised by Agrippa. Rather than leaving the demand for reasons, it sought to ground justification in what is immediately available to the subject, such as experience or evidence, which in turn halts regress without arbitrariness. In doing so, internalism situates justification in what Sellars famously alludes to, the space of reasons, a domain in which beliefs are evaluated through relations of support, challenge, and defence.¹³ This encapsulates the idea that justification is not a hidden mechanism, but something spoken within rational discourse.

Drawbacks of internalism:

Despite internalism's appeal, it faces significant philosophical difficulties, many of which stem from the features that make it attractive. Among these is its commitment to accessibility: if a belief is justified only by reasons available, in principle, to the subject, then justification requires a capacity for reflection.¹⁴ But this requirement induces a tension with ordinary cases of belief. Consider a young child who sees a dog and forms the belief that there is a dog before them. The belief is formed immediately, without deliberation, and yet it seems plainly justified. The child cannot articulate reasons, nor reflect on their evidential basis, but their belief is nonetheless appropriately responsive to the world. The point carries over to non-human animals: a dog that avoids a cliff appears to act on a justified belief about danger, despite lacking the capacity to access or endorse reasons. If internalism requires that justification be grounded in reflectively accessible reasons, it risks excluding such cases, thereby over-intellectualising what it is to be justified.¹⁵

A related difficulty concerns what might be called basic or unmediated¹⁶ beliefs. Suppose a subject looks at a red apple under normal conditions and forms the belief that it is red. This belief seems justified immediately, not based on further reasoning, but through perception itself. Due to internalism's insistence on accessibility of reasons, it must either treat such

¹³ Sellars, 1956, §36-38, pp. 168-170, where Observational knowledge presupposes conceptual capacities and belongs to the logical space of reasons, not a pre-conceptual given.

¹⁴ Conee & Feldman, 1985, p. 22, where justification concerns the evaluation of beliefs in light of the evidence one has, and may involve the ability to reflect critically on one's beliefs.

¹⁵ Bonjour, 1985, p. 20, where justificatory reasons are treated as available to the subject, but may require reflective effort to be made explicit.

¹⁶ Bonjour, 1985, p. 65, where basic beliefs are characterised as non-inferential beliefs whose justification does not derive from other beliefs.

beliefs as supported by further reasons – thereby inviting regress – or allow them to stand without support, risking arbitrariness. As Bonjour acknowledges, this pressures justification as it appears to depend on non-inferential elements.¹⁷ Further concern arises when we consider the relationship between justification and truth. Imagine two subjects with identical experiences: one perceives a real tree, while the other is the victim of a perfect illusion. From the internalist perspective, both possess the same evidence and are therefore equally justified, even though one is systematically mistaken. While this consequence is often accepted, it raises the question of whether internalism adequately captures what is epistemically valuable about justification.

Conclusion:

Internalism offers a compelling account of epistemic justification by capturing its normative character.¹⁸ It explains why beliefs are not merely caused states, but commitments that agents can be held rationally accountable for. By grounding justification in what is accessible to the subject, internalism preserves the idea that belief must be answerable to reasons, and thus reflects our ordinary practice of asking for and giving justification. In this respect, its core insights – that justification belongs to the domain of rational assessment – are difficult to refute.

However, the very features that give internalism its strength also generate its limitations. Its emphasis on reflective accessibility risks over-intellectualising justification, excluding ordinary cases of knowledge, and weakening the connection between justification and truth. It starts to become unclear how it remains adequately responsive to the world if it hinges on the subject's perspective alone. A more satisfactory account needs to retain internalism's insight while avoiding its excesses. Justification is best understood not as wholly internal, but as a practice in which subjects are answerable to reasons, both accessible to them and responsive to the world. In this sense, internalism is not mistaken, just incomplete. The dialogical form adopted in parts of this essay is not merely stylistic, but

¹⁷ Bonjour, 1985, pp. 64-66, on the difficulty of grounding justification in non-inferential beliefs without arbitrariness.

¹⁸ Bonjour, 1985, pp. 7-9, where epistemic justification is treated as governed by standards determining what one is justified in believing.

reflects this central claim – that justification emerges within a practice of giving and asking for reasons, rather than from a hidden internal state.

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