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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Internalism and Externalism: A Brief Historical Introduction Hilary Kornblith	1
1 EXTERNALIST THEORIES OF EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE Laurence Bonjour	10
2 THE INTERNALIST CONCEPTION OF JUSTIFICATION Alvin Goldman	36
3 INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM IN EPISTEMOLOGY William P. Alston	68
4 HOW INTERNAL CAN YOU GET? Hilary Kornblith	111
5 UNDERSTANDING HUMAN KNOWLEDGE IN GENERAL Barry Stroud	126
6 RELIABILISM AND INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE Ernest Sosa	147
7 WHAT AM I TO BELIEVE? Richard Foley	163
8 EPISTEMIC PERSPECTIVISM Frederick Schmitt	180

INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM: A BRIEF HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Hilary Kornblith

A central focus of work in epistemology for more than the last twenty years has been the debate between internalism and externalism. At issue is the very form of an epistemological theory, and with it, competing conceptions of the epistemological enterprise. This reader brings together ten essays which have played an important role in shaping the debate. In this introduction, I provide some historical background to help orient the reader.

1 The Terms “Internalism” and “Externalism”

The terms “internalism” and “externalism” are used in philosophy in a variety of different senses,¹ but their use in epistemology for anything like the positions which are the focus of this book dates to 1973. More precisely, the word “externalism” was introduced in print by David Armstrong² in his book *Belief, Truth and Knowledge*³ in the following way:

According to “Externalist” accounts of non-inferential knowledge, what makes a true non-inferential belief a case of *knowledge* is some natural relation which holds between the belief-state, Bap, and the situation which makes the belief true. It is a matter of a certain relation holding between the believer and the world. It is important to notice that, unlike “Cartesian” and “Initial Credibility” theories, Externalist theories are regularly developed as theories of the nature of knowledge *generally* and not simply as theories of non-inferential knowledge. (157)

So in Armstrong's usage, "externalism" is a view about knowledge, and it is the view that when a person knows that a particular claim *p* is true, there is some sort of "natural relation" which holds between that person's belief that *p* and the world. One such view, suggested in 1967 by Alvin Goldman, was the Causal Theory of Knowledge.⁴ On this view, a person knows that *p* (for example, that it's raining) when that person's belief that *p* was caused by the fact that *p*. A related view, championed by Armstrong and later by Goldman as well, is the Reliability Account of Knowledge, according to which a person knows that *p* when that person's belief is both true and, in some sense, reliable: on some views, the belief must be a reliable indicator that *p*; on others, the belief must be produced by a reliable process, that is, one that tends to produce true beliefs. Frank Ramsey⁵ was a pioneer in defending a reliability account of knowledge. Particularly influential work in developing such an account was also done by Brian Skyrms,⁶ Peter Unger,⁷ and Fred Dretske.⁸

Accounts of knowledge which are externalist in Armstrong's sense mark an important break with tradition, according to which knowledge is a kind of justified, true belief. On traditional accounts, in part because justification is an essential ingredient in knowledge, a central task of epistemology is to give an account of what justification consists in. And, according to tradition, what is required for a person to *be* justified in holding a belief is for that person to *have* a certain justification for the belief, where having a justification is typically identified with being in a position, in some relevant sense, to produce an appropriate argument for the belief in question. What is distinctive about externalist accounts of knowledge, as Armstrong saw it, was that they do not require justification, at least in the traditional sense. Knowledge merely requires having a true belief which is appropriately connected with the world.

But while Armstrong's way of viewing reliability accounts of knowledge has them rejecting the view that knowledge requires justified true belief, Alvin Goldman came to offer quite a different way of viewing the import of reliability theories: in 1979, Goldman suggested that instead of seeing reliability accounts as rejecting the claim that knowledge requires justified true belief, we should instead embrace an account which identifies justified belief with reliably produced belief.⁹ Reliability theories of knowledge, on this way of understanding them, offer a non-traditional account of what is required for a belief to be justified. This paper of Goldman's, and his subsequent extended development of the idea,¹⁰ have been at the center of epistemological discussion ever since.

The 1980 volume of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* was devoted to work in epistemology; and two papers in that volume, both reprinted here, inaugu-

rated the current use of the terms "externalism" and "internalism." Laurence Bonjour's "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge"¹¹ presents an argument against accounts which identify knowledge with reliably produced true belief. But while Bonjour claims to be following Armstrong's use of the term "externalist," and while his paper is entitled "Externalist Theories of *knowledge*" [my italics], Bonjour's use of the term is, in fact, importantly different from Armstrong's. For Bonjour, what is important about the theories he is targeting is that they seem to offer – whether their authors put it in these terms or not – reliability theories of *justification*. The term "externalism," as Bonjour uses it, primarily applies to accounts of justified belief, and only derivatively to accounts of knowledge. Thus, Bonjour notes:

When viewed from the general standpoint of the western epistemological tradition, externalism represents a very radical departure. It seems safe to say that until very recent times, no serious philosopher of knowledge would have dreamed of suggesting that a person's beliefs might be epistemically justified simply in virtue of facts or relations that were external to his subjective conception. Descartes, for example, would surely have been quite unimpressed by the suggestion that his problematic beliefs about the external world were justified if only they were in fact reliably related to the world – whether or not he had any reason for thinking this to be so. Clearly his conception, and that of generations of philosophers who followed, was that such a relation could play a justificatory role only if the believer possessed adequate reason for thinking that it obtained.¹²

Bonjour argues that reliability theories of justified belief – which he terms "externalist" theories of justification – fly in the face of important intuitions about justification, and worse, fail even to address the most central issues of epistemology. Externalist theories of justification are not merely mistaken in detail, according to Bonjour; they are fundamentally misguided in conception.

In the same volume, Alvin Goldman introduces the term "internalism."

Traditional epistemology . . . has been predominantly *internalist*, or ego-centric. On [this] perspective, epistemology's job is to construct a doxastic principle or procedure *from the inside*, from our own individual vantage point. To adopt a Kantian idiom, a [doxastic principle] must not be "heteronomous," or dictated "from without." It must be "autonomous," a law we can give to ourselves and which we have *grounds* for giving to ourselves. The *objective* optimality of a [doxastic principle],

on this view, does not make it right. A [doxastic principle] counts as right only if it is "certifiable" *from within*.¹³

Goldman argues that an internalist conception of justification is entirely untenable.

Goldman and Bonjour thus independently and simultaneously named this fundamental distinction. Goldman argues that any tenable theory of justification will have to reject internalism; only externalism will do. Bonjour argues that any tenable theory of justification will have to reject externalism; only internalism will do.

The debate over the proper form of a theory of justified belief has occupied center stage in epistemological discussions ever since this apt bit of terminology was coined. As the papers in this volume attest, this issue is connected in fundamental ways with questions about the very nature and goals of epistemological theorizing.

2 Descartes' Legacy

Although the terminology of "internalism" and "externalism" is a relatively recent coinage, the question at issue is a longstanding one. Perhaps the best way to understand the debate between internalists and externalists is to see how the issue arose out of the failure of Descartes' epistemology.

Descartes' understanding of the nature of epistemological problems locates them squarely within the first-person perspective. *The Meditations*, written in a confessional style, presents the reader with Descartes' concerns: Descartes recognizes that he, like all of us, has had mistaken beliefs in the past, and thus it is inevitable that his current body of beliefs should contain mistakes as well. Descartes wishes to have an accurate understanding of the world around him, and simply building on the beliefs he already has, taking them at face-value, would surely involve building on those very mistaken beliefs. Thus, in order to improve his understanding of the world, he resolves to suspend belief in any claim which might be wrong; this idea leads very quickly, by way of the Dream Argument, to total suspension of belief. Descartes must begin again; he must form his beliefs anew, "from the very foundation," as he puts it.

Now one of the interesting things about the Cartesian epistemological project is that Descartes holds that he can figure out, from this internal perspective, precisely how it is that he should go on. Moreover, Descartes

holds that the principles of belief acquisition which he comes to endorse are guaranteed to result in accurate beliefs about the world around him. This is far more optimistic than any philosopher has been ever since, but it is precisely Descartes' optimism about the powers of human reason that lays the foundation for the debate between internalism and externalism.

On the one hand, Descartes proceeds from the first-person, thinking about epistemological problems as any internalist would. He is concerned to figure out which principles of reasoning appear to be best; he then wishes to take those principles and apply them so as to form beliefs which conform to the principles he has endorsed. In so doing, Descartes forms his beliefs in a thoroughly responsible way: he is not merely acquiring beliefs will-nilly, but in a careful, self-conscious, and calculated manner, designed to get him at the truth.

But this is not all which Descartes claims to achieve. Descartes does not believe that he has merely discovered a set of principles which *seem* to assist him in his goal of coming to understand the world as it actually is. Rather, Descartes believes that he has shown, from within his own subjective perspective, that these principles must in fact succeed in getting him at the truth.

If Descartes could have done this, he would have achieved something quite remarkable. First, he would have discovered a set of principles for forming beliefs which, from his own subjective perspective, appear to be optimal in getting at the truth. He would not form a single belief which did not meet his own subjective standards. Second, he would have discovered a set of principles which, in fact, are optimal in getting at the truth. Thus, all of the beliefs formed would in fact meet these objective standards. Third, he would have devised a proof, from within his own subjective perspective, which would assure that those principles meeting his subjective standards are in fact objectively successful. The fact that his subjective standards are objectively correct would thus in no way depend on lucky accidents; all of the necessary conditions for objective validity would be fully available and certifiable from within Descartes' subjective perspective. This combination of features would allow him to effectively respond to the skeptic on the skeptic's own terms: Descartes could conclusively prove that his beliefs are true.

Now the problems which arise for this project do not depend upon Descartes' optimism in thinking that he had discovered principles which would guarantee that his beliefs be true. For if Descartes had only thought that he had discovered principles which guaranteed the likelihood,

in some objective sense, that his beliefs be true, his position would still have been problematic. For consider an individual who reasons very badly. Imagine that this individual is not someone who is unconcerned about getting at the truth. Rather, he cares deeply about having true beliefs, and before forming any belief, he very carefully scrutinizes his evidence for and against it. Or rather, he scrutinizes the evidence for and against it to the extent to which he is capable; and he is not very capable at all. From the inside, he is aware of trying very hard to form true beliefs, and indeed, he is trying very hard. He is thinking about epistemological issues as hard as he can. But his reasoning ability simply does not meet any reasonable objective standard. Unfortunately, he lives in a fool's paradise: he believes that he is reasoning well; he believes that he is reasoning perfectly, but in actual fact, he is reasoning very poorly indeed. Although this individual has fully met his own subjective standards for good reasoning, and although he has shown to his own satisfaction that his own subjective standards cannot fail to have a real purchase on the truth, he is reasoning so poorly that a very large percentage of his beliefs are thoroughly mistaken.

Now it surely seems that there could be such an individual, and, if this is correct, then we need to know how it is that Descartes could possibly show that he is not in the very position which our fool finds himself in. And it seems quite clear that he cannot. For to show that he satisfies his own subjective standards does not distinguish him from our fool, and to show that, by his own subjective standards, he genuinely does have a real purchase on the truth does not distinguish him from our fool either.

Now if one grants that this is correct, one will have to grant that the project Descartes attempted to carry out could not possibly have succeeded. On the one hand, there is the laudable goal in Descartes to form beliefs in a way which manifests a kind of intellectual integrity: he wishes to form beliefs which fully satisfy his own subjective standards. On the other hand, he has another laudable goal: he wishes to form beliefs in ways which have some objective purchase on the truth. The internalist is someone who identifies justified belief with beliefs satisfying something like the first of these goals. The externalist, on the other hand, is someone who identifies justified belief with something like satisfying the second. Descartes thought he had a proof that whatever satisfies the first goal automatically satisfies the second as well. But it now seems that that is not so. And if it is not so, then the idea that we might have a conception of justified belief which answers to both of these goals simultaneously must be rejected as well. But where then should we locate the concept of justified

belief? The debate between internalists and externalists attempts to answer this question.

I have been intentionally vague in saying just what internalism and externalism are committed to. While the broad outlines of these two views are clear enough, precisely what each position comes to is itself a subject of current controversy. It would thus be a mistake to provide precise accounts of these two views in this introduction; the state of the art will not allow it.

3 The Essays

The essays contained here show the evolution of this debate over the past twenty years. Reading through them will bring the reader up to date. The volume begins with the essays by Bonjour and Goldman which placed this issue at the center of epistemological discussion. Chapter 3, by William P. Alston, "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology," distinguishes two different kinds of internalism: perspectival internalism and access internalism. According to the first of these, only features which are, in some appropriate sense, within an agent's perspective may serve to determine the justificatory status of that agent's beliefs; according to the second, only states to which an agent has appropriate access may determine a belief's justificatory status. Alston examines the motivations for each of these kinds of internalism and argues that, in the end, "existing forms of internalism are in serious trouble." In chapter 4, "How Internal Can You Get?," I further explore the motivation behind internalism and argue that the very coherence of the position depends on an implausibly strong Cartesian premise. Barry Stroud examines the nature of the philosophical enterprise in chapter 5, "Understanding Human Knowledge in General." A philosophical understanding of the nature of knowledge differs in important ways from the scientific enterprise of understanding human knowledge, and Stroud develops a view about what a successful philosophical understanding of human knowledge would entail. Stroud argues that neither traditional Cartesian views about knowledge nor their externalist rivals can provide a satisfying account of knowledge in general. In chapter 6, "Reliabilism and Intellectual Virtue," Ernest Sosa makes the case for a kind of virtue epistemology which blends both internalist and externalist elements. On Sosa's view, no successful epistemology can ignore either of these two dimensions of epistemic appraisal. Richard Foley develops an internalist perspective on epistemology in chapter 7, "What Am I to Believe?" Foley argues that the most fundamental questions

in epistemology must inevitably be addressed from the first-person, or egocentric, perspective. In chapter 8, "Epistemic Perspectivism," Frederick Schmitt presents a thorough account of the many different views which identify justified belief with belief somehow sanctioned by the agent's perspective. Schmitt argues that none of these views is defensible. Alvin Goldman presents a case against internalism in chapter 9, "Internalism Exposed." Goldman argues that internalism faces insurmountable problems, not only of detail, but of fundamental conception. The case in favor of internalism is taken up by Earl Conee and Richard Feldman in chapter 10, "Internalism Defended." Internalism, they argue, survives the many assaults mounted against it.

There is an extensive literature on this subject, and anyone interested in pursuing this issue in more detail should consult the Further Reading section at the end of the volume.

Notes

- 1 Aside from their use in epistemology, these terms are used as labels for quite different pairs of positions in moral philosophy and in philosophy of language and mind. The issue which divides internalist from externalist theories of mental content, now very widely discussed, is not entirely unrelated to the subject of this reader – both hinge on questions about the extent to which the first-person perspective is epistemically privileged – but neither is it identical with it.
- 2 Armstrong gives credit to Gregory O'Hair for introducing the term in unpublished work.
- 3 David M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).
- 4 Alvin Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing," *Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (1967), 357–72.
- 5 Frank Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics, and Other Logical Essays* (Routledge, 1931).
- 6 Brian Skyrms, "The Explication of 'X knows that p'," *Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (1967), 373–89.
- 7 Peter Unger, "An Analysis of Factual Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (1968), 157–70.
- 8 Fred Dretske, "Conclusive Reasons," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 49 (1971), 1–22.
- 9 Alvin Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?," in G. Pappas, ed., *Justification and Knowledge: New Studies in Epistemology* (Reidel, 1979), 1–23.
- 10 See especially Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Harvard University Press, 1986).

- 11 Laurence Bonjour, "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5 (1980), 53–73.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 13 Alvin Goldman, "The Internalist Conception of Justification," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5 (1980), 32.