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 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 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 con-
stitute 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.

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 justifica-
tion, 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,
thruths 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 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.

Arguments against Internalism

As already noted, there are many recent epistemologists who reject internalism in favor of externalism. What reasons or arguments do they give? Though others have sometimes been suggested, by far the most important and widely advocated objections to internalism are the following two.

First, there is the claim that the internalist cannot give an intuitively acceptable account of the cognitive or epistemic condition of unsophisticated epistemic subjects: higher animals, young children, and even relatively unsophisticated adults. Take higher animals first, as perhaps the clearest case. I once owned a German shepherd dog named Emma. Emma was, judging from her behavior, a remarkably intelligent dog. She understood a wide range of commands, seemed to exhibit an excellent memory for people and places (even those that she had not encountered for a long time), and could be amazingly subtle and persistent in communicating her desires and preferences and in responding to novel situations. Anyone who observed her very closely would, I think, have found it impossible to deny that Emma had conscious beliefs and desires, together with other conscious mental states such as excitement or fear. But did Emma have any reasons or justification for her beliefs? Did she have any knowledge?

No one viewing Emma from the outside could, I think, have been entirely sure of the answer to this question. But despite her intelligence, it is hard to believe that Emma engaged in very much or indeed any reasoning, and still harder to believe that she was capable of understanding complicated argu-
ments. Indeed, it is doubtful whether Emma could have even understood the basic idea of having a reason for a belief, an understanding that seems to be required for her to have had fully explicit access to any reasons at all. Thus it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Emma had no justified beliefs and hence no knowledge, a result that is alleged by the proponent of this first objection to be highly implausible. Surely, it is argued, Emma was justified in believing and, perhaps even more clearly, knew such things as that there was a squirrel on the other side of the quad (as she skulked carefully toward it, freezing if it should happen to look in her direction) or that the person at the front door was her good friend Marc (as her initial hostile barking at the person’s approach gave way to yelping and jumping with excitement and joy). (Think about this issue for yourself, using whatever dogs or cats or other higher animals you have known as examples. Is the objection right about both of the points in question: (a) that animals like Emma have no access to internalist reasons or justification; and (b) that they undeniably do have justified beliefs and knowledge?)

This objection to internalism, already at least reasonably compelling in relation to creatures like Emma, seems perhaps even more forceful when applied to relatively young children and to unsophisticated or cognitively limited adults. Surely, it is argued, no one in either of these categories is really able to understand complicated arguments of the sort, for example, that we have seen to be apparently required to arrive at a good reason for accepting an inductive conclusion or one about the external material world (assuming that direct realism doesn’t work). Indeed, most fully mature and capable adults have not in fact even encountered such arguments or formulated them for themselves, making it hard to see how an internalist can consistently say that the beliefs of even individuals like these about such matters are justified or constitute knowledge. But surely, it is alleged, it is much more obvious that some or all of these various kinds of relatively unsophisticated individuals (and surely the mature and capable adults) do have justified beliefs and do have knowledge of the sorts in question than it is that internalism is true. And thus if internalism yields such implausible results, it should be rejected.

Second, while the first objection in effect concedes, for the sake of the argument, that successful internalist justifications for inductive beliefs or beliefs about the external world or other beliefs that common sense regards as justified can be in fact found, denying only that these are accessible to unsophisticated subjects (and possibly even to most of the mature and capable ones), the second objection argues that it is in fact far from obvious that any acceptable internalist justification, whether generally accessible or
not, can be found for many of these beliefs. This is a point that any reflective reader of this book should be able to appreciate. Because of the various problems discussed in earlier chapters, it is at least possible from an internalist perspective—and perhaps even, as many would argue, likely—that no adequate justification for many or perhaps even most of our beliefs can be found, in which case no one would have justification or knowledge concerning the matters in question if internalism is correct. But this is again, it is alleged, an extremely implausible and intuitively unacceptable result, making the internalist view that leads to it equally unacceptable.

It is obvious that these two arguments are closely related and similar in their basic thrust. One way to put them together would be to argue that if internalism is correct, only at best a few epistemologists and students of epistemology will have access to good reasons for the vast majority of the beliefs that common sense regards as justified and as constituting knowledge (see again the list in chapter 1). But this once again seems extremely implausible, and so, it is claimed, internalism must be mistaken.

The problems that these arguments point to are real, and there is no very simple and straightforward reply available to them from an internalist perspective. Here, as so often in philosophy, we will have to see what the alternative view looks like before we will be in a position to decide which of the two views is really more plausible overall. But there is one issue worth raising at this point for you to think about as we proceed, and that is the issue of what the specific content of the common-sense intuitions with which internalism is allegedly in conflict really is. Is the common-sense view merely that ordinary people or children or beings like Emma have knowledge and justification in some unspecified sense or other in relation to the beliefs in question?—in which case, the accounts of justification or knowledge offered by the externalist (which we have so far indicated in only the sketchiest way) might be enough to satisfy those intuitions. Or is the content of the relevant intuitions not rather that the beings in question have knowledge and justification in just the specific senses that the internalist advocates: that they have true beliefs which they have good reasons for thinking to be true?—in which case showing that the beliefs in question are justified in an externalist sense wouldn’t really help to avoid a conflict with those intuitions.5

**A Leading Version of Externalism: Reliabilism**

It is time to look more closely at a specific externalist view. Though a number of different such views have been proposed, we will focus here on the one that has been perhaps the most widely discussed and advocated,
namely reliabilism. Reliabilism has been mainly advocated as a view concerning the nature of epistemic justification, and it is in that form that we will consider it here.

The central idea of reliabilism, as already briefly noted earlier, is that what makes a belief justified is the cognitive reliability of the causal process via which it was produced, that is, the fact that the process in question leads to a high proportion of true beliefs, with the degree of justification depending on the degree of reliability. If the belief-producing process is reliable in this way, then (other things being equal) it will be objectively likely or probable to the same degree that the particular belief in question, having been produced in that way, is itself true. But what makes the view a version of externalism is that, as we have seen, reliabilism does not require that the believer in question have any sort of cognitive access to the fact that the belief-producing process is in this way reliable in order for his or her belief to be justified. All that matters for justification is that the process in question be in fact reliable, whether or not the person believes or has even the slightest inkling that this is so or any understanding of what specific sort of process is involved.

The clearest and most initially plausible illustrations of reliabilism involve belief-producing processes like sensory perception. Thus suppose that a particular individual is so constituted, as a result of natural endowment and various sorts of previous training and experience, that a very high proportion of his or her visually induced beliefs about medium-sized material objects (such things as tables, trees, buildings, automobiles, and the like) and processes in his or her immediate vicinity under favorable conditions of perception are true. If this is so, then, according to the most straightforward version of reliabilism, those beliefs are justified. The individual in question need have no belief or any other sort of awareness that the visual process in question is reliable, nor indeed any very specific conception of what that process involves. Neither he nor for that matter anyone else need have any very direct or easy access to the fact of reliability should the issue somehow be explicitly raised. All that matters is that the actual causal process via which such beliefs are generated is in fact (under those conditions about that sort of subject matter) highly reliable—whether or not anyone is aware of this at the time in question or indeed ever. And this is obviously a condition that might be satisfied by any of the unsophisticated cognitive subjects considered earlier: by unsophisticated adults, by young children, or by animals like Emma. When Emma came to believe that there was a squirrel across the quad, then if her eyes were functioning in such a way that this reliability condition was satisfied (under the then existing conditions of lighting, distance, and so on), then her belief was, according to the reliabilist, justified.
The reliabilist’s reliable belief-producing processes are not limited, however, to processes like sensory perception in which no prior beliefs or other cognitive states are involved in any very obvious way. For example, if the process of logical or probabilistic inference from other justified beliefs is also a reliable belief-producing process, then the beliefs that are produced by this process will also count as justified according to the reliabilist account. Here too, however, what matters is reliability itself and not any awareness on the part of the subject that the process is reliable nor any understanding of why a belief arrived at in this way genuinely follows from the relevant premises. Thus if Emma made reliable transitions of this sort—for example, came to believe when she heard the can opener in the late afternoon that she was about to be fed—even though with no clear or explicit awareness of why or how she was doing so, her resulting beliefs would still have counted as justified. Of course, it might turn out that a more specific process that involves explicit and critical reflection on the logical relations and principles involved is even more reliable, in which case beliefs that result from a process of this more specific sort would be even more highly justified.

For the simplest versions of reliabilism, the account given so far is essentially the entire story. But it is also possible to have more complicated versions of reliabilism, still fundamentally externalist in character, that add further qualifications of various sorts to ward off potential objections. The rationale for these will emerge as we consider the objections that have been raised against reliabilist views.

Objections to Reliabilism

Does reliabilism provide an acceptable account of epistemic justification, one that can replace the internalist view and thereby avoid the objections to internalism discussed earlier? In this section, I will consider three main sorts of objection that have been offered in relation to reliabilist views specifically. With only minor modification, at least the first two of these also apply to the other leading versions of externalism, but only the versions that apply to reliabilism will be discussed explicitly here. The first two objections question, on broadly intuitive grounds, whether the satisfaction of the reliabilist condition is (i) necessary or (ii) sufficient for the justification of a belief, while the third pertains to a difficult problem that arises within the reliabilist position.

The first objection challenges whether the satisfaction of the reliabilist condition is necessary for beliefs to be justified, that is, whether only beliefs that satisfy that condition are justified—as would have to be the case if reliabilism were successful in providing a complete account of epistemic
Imagine a group of people who live in a world controlled by a Cartesian evil genius of the sort earlier in chapter 2. The evil genius carefully controls their sensory and introspective experience, producing in them just the experiences they would have had if they had inhabited a particular material world, perhaps one exactly like our own, containing various specific sorts of objects and processes that interact and influence each other in a lawful way. The people in this position are, we may suppose, careful and thorough investigators. They accumulate large quantities of sensory evidence, formulate hypotheses and theories, subject their beliefs to careful experimental and observational tests, and so on. Perhaps they even formulate philosophical arguments of the sorts considered in Part I of this book for the likely truth of their resulting beliefs.

Are the beliefs about their apparent world that the people in such a Cartesian demon world arrive at in these ways justified? (Stop here and think about this issue before proceeding.) From an intuitive standpoint, it seems hard (doesn’t it?) to deny that they are. After all, their epistemic situation may, from their standpoint, well be entirely indiscernible from or even superior to our own. But in fact, because of the pervasive influence of the evil genius, the cognitive processes that produce their beliefs are in fact at least mostly unreliable: their perceptions and observations produce beliefs that are mostly or entirely false, and even if their further reasoning is impeccable, it begins with these false premises and so does not lead to reliable results. Thus the reliabilist apparently must say that the beliefs held by such people are in fact largely or entirely unjustified, a result that seems intuitively quite implausible.

How do reliabilists respond to this objection? Some simply dig in their heels, “bite the bullet,” and insist that this is the correct result and that the intuitive impression to the contrary is somehow confused or misleading. Others, however, have found this result too implausible to accept and have instead proposed modifications to the reliabilist view that are aimed at avoiding it. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the suggestion that the reliability of a cognitive process, in the sense relevant to justification, should be assessed, not necessarily in the world that the believer whose beliefs are being considered in fact inhabits, but rather in “normal” possible worlds—that is, in possible worlds that actually have the features that our world is commonsensically believed to have. Thus if the cognitive processes employed by the victims of the evil genius would be reliable in a world of the sort that we believe ourselves to inhabit (one that thus, among other things, contains no evil genius), then those processes count as reliable in the relevant sense. And if reliability is understood in this way, then the reliabilist can agree that the
beliefs of the people in the evil genius world are justified.\(^{13}\) (This is a tricky view, and you will have to think about it carefully.)

How successful is this response? It avoids the objection in question, but only, it might be thought, at the price of rendering the reliabilist position seriously ad hoc. It is clear enough why genuine reliability should be thought to be cognitively valuable, whether or not it is the right basis for justification: beliefs that are arrived at in a genuinely reliable way are thereby objectively likely to be true. But why should we value what might be referred to as “normal reliability,” whether or not it is correlated with genuine reliability? After all, beliefs that result from processes that possess normal reliability are not, on that basis alone, to any degree likely to be true.

The second objection is in a way the complement of the first. Instead of imagining a situation in which the cognitive processes that we take to be reliable are in fact unreliable, it imagines one in which there is a cognitive process that is in fact highly reliable, but which we have no reason to regard as reliable and perhaps even good reasons to regard as unreliable. Thus suppose that clairvoyance, the alleged cognitive ability to have knowledge of distant occurrences in a way that does not depend on sensory perception or other commonsensical cognitive processes, does in fact genuinely occur and involves a process of some unknown sort that is in fact highly reliable for certain specific people under certain specific conditions (which might include a limitation to a certain range of subject matter). And suppose that some person who in fact has this ability arrives at a belief on this basis and that the requisite conditions for reliability, whatever they may be, are satisfied. Such a belief seems to satisfy the reliabilist requirement for justification, but is it in fact genuinely justified?\(^{14}\)

There are several different possible cases here, depending on what else is true of the person in question. Such a person might (a) have no belief or opinion at all about the cognitive process involved or its reliability, or (b) believe, though without justification, that the belief results from a reliable process, of which he or she may or may not have any very specific conception, or (c) possess good reasons or evidence of an internalist sort that the belief in question is false, or (d) possess good reasons or evidence of an internalist sort that the process in question is not reliable, again with or without a specific conception of its character.\(^{15}\) (If he or she possesses good reasons of an internalist sort that the process is reliable, that would of course provide a basis for an internalist justification.) All of these possibilities are worth thinking about (and you should try to imagine specific examples of each of them); but it is the first that seems most favorable to the externalist. It is hard to see how a further belief about the process that is itself unjustified
can contribute to the justification of the initial belief; and it seems obvious that a belief that is held in the face of contrary reasons pertaining either to its subject matter or in the way in which it was arrived at is more suspect as regards its justification.

Imagine, then, a specific case of sort (a). Suppose that a certain person, Norman, is in fact a reliable clairvoyant with respect to the geographical whereabouts of the president of the United States. He frequently has spontaneous beliefs or hunches, which he accepts without question, concerning the location of the president on a particular day, and in fact these are always correct. But Norman pays very little attention to news reports and other sorts of information about the president and his or her whereabouts and has never made any effort to check his hunches independently. Nor does he have any real conception of how these hunches might be produced or any general views about the reliability of such a process. Clearly (or at least pretty clearly—see the next objection) Norman’s beliefs resulting from his spontaneous clairvoyant hunches satisfy the reliabilist’s requirements for justification, but are they really justified? Or, or the contrary, doesn’t it seem as though Norman is being thoroughly irrational and so is not in fact justified in confidently accepting beliefs on this sort of basis? (Think about this question on your own. One way to develop the issue further is to ask whether Norman would be justified in acting on one of these beliefs if an urgent occasion should arise: perhaps someone is trying to contact the president on an urgent matter and asks Norman if he knows where to find him.)

Here again some externalists simply dig in their heels and insist that Norman’s clairvoyant beliefs are justified, dismissing intuitions to the contrary as misguided. But others respond to this sort of case (and to other, similar cases of the sorts enumerated earlier) by imposing a further requirement that amounts to a significant qualification on the reliabilist position: roughly that the believer not have immediate access to good reasons of an internalist sort for questioning either the specific belief in question or his or her own general ability to arrive at such beliefs in the way in question. The way that this applies to Norman is that arguably he should have been suspicious of his beliefs about the president’s whereabouts, given that he has no reason to think that he has any sort of reliable cognitive access to such information and given that people in general do not apparently possess the ability to arrive at reliable beliefs in such a way.

There are two questions that need to be asked about this response. One is whether it is possible to interpret it in such a way as to handle the Norman case without also creating an analogous problem for the reliably caused beliefs, for example those resulting from visual perception, that the reliabilist
Chapter Ten

does want to say are justified on that basis alone. If our only justification for visual beliefs is of the externalist sort (something that an internalist will of course deny), shouldn’t we be equally suspicious of them? If not, why not? The second question is whether it is possible to find a clear rationale for such a further requirement that is compatible with externalism. Why should internalist reasons be relevant in this negative way if they are not required for justification in general? I cannot pursue these questions further here, but you should think about them for yourself.

The third objection, known as the *generality problem*, pertains to the very formulation of the reliabilist position. What the reliabilist says, as we have seen, is that a belief is justified if the *general sort* of cognitive process from which it results is reliable in the way indicated. But at what *level of generality* should the relevant process be characterized? Consider my present visually produced belief that there is a white cup sitting on my computer table, and consider some of the different ways in which the cognitive process from which it results might be described (assuming as a part of all of these that my eyes are functioning normally): as the visual perception of a cup under good lighting at close range, as the visual perception of a cup (allowing for varied conditions and distances), as the visual perception of a “medium-sized physical object,” as visual perception in general (including the perception of much larger and smaller objects), or just as sense perception in general—and this is only a small sampling of a much larger range of possibilities. Which of these various descriptions of the cognitive process in question is the relevant one for applying the reliabilist’s principle of justification?

What makes this question a serious problem for the reliabilist is the fact that the proportion of true beliefs that is produced by the processes specified in these various ways seems to vary quite widely: I am much less likely to make a mistake about a cup that is perceived at close range under good conditions than I am about cups under all circumstances or objects of visual perception or sense perception in general. Indeed, it seems possible, on the one hand, to specify the process in such fine detail as to make the description fit only this single case, so that the process thus described would be either 100 percent reliable (if the belief is true) or 100 percent unreliable (if the belief is false). And it also seems possible, on the other hand, to specify the process so broadly, including perceptions of objects that are much harder to identify and perceptions under very poor conditions, as to yield a very low degree of reliability. But *which* of these widely varying characterizations of the process and corresponding degrees of reliability is the right one, according to the reliabilist view, for assessing the justification of this particular belief?
Without some way of answering this question in a specific and nonarbitrary way, the reliabilist has not succeeded in offering a definite position at all, but only a general schema that there is apparently no nonarbitrary way to make more definite. Certainly some ways of specifying the relevant process are more natural than others; but the epistemological relevance of such naturalness is questionable, and even these more natural specifications are numerous enough to result in significantly differing degrees of reliability. Though reliabilists have struggled with this problem, no solution has yet been found that even a majority of reliabilists find acceptable.18

Of these three objections, it is the third that is the most immediately serious, since it in effect challenges the very existence of a definite reliabilist position. One externalist response to this problem has been the development of other versions of externalism, positions that on the surface at least seem to avoid this issue—though it is open to question whether it does not still lurk beneath the surface. An adequate consideration of these other externalist views is impossible here, but you may want to investigate some of them on your own.19

Internalism versus Externalism: A Tentative Assessment

The issue between internalism and externalism is still very much alive in current epistemological discussion. One thing that makes it difficult to resolve is that apart from the generality problem (which may perhaps be set aside on the grounds that it might possibly be solved or avoided by adopting a different version of externalism), the arguments and objections on both sides are fundamentally intuitive in character, and reasonable people may differ with regard to both the genuineness and especially the weight of the intuitions involved. In this concluding section, I will try to sort through the competing considerations and suggest a resolution of sorts. But I want to emphasize in advance that it is presented here only as a suggestion, one that would at best take a lot more reflection and argument to defend, so that you will have to evaluate it for yourselves by thinking carefully about all of the strands of this complicated issue.

We may begin by asking whether it is really as clear as I have in effect been assuming (and as those on both sides of this issue typically assume as well) that the internalist and the externalist views of justification are incompatible in a way that means that one must be simply right and the other simply wrong. Some philosophers have in fact suggested that perhaps there are instead two (or even more) different conceptions of knowledge or
justification, one (or more) of them internalist and one (or more) of them externalist: conceptions that simply address different issues and serve different purposes, and that are thus not in any meaningful sense competitors between which a choice must be made. ²⁰

This is a possibility that it is not easy to assess, but that surely has at least some initial plausibility. We have already seen (in chapter 3) how difficult it is to arrive at a clear and univocal account of the concept of knowledge (or of the uses of the terms “know” and “knowledge”). Thus the idea that there might simply be different conceptions of knowledge or justification, varying among each other in different dimensions of which the internal-external distinction might turn out to be one, cannot be easily dismissed. The situation as regards the concept of justification is somewhat different, in that justification is to some extent a technical concept within epistemology, albeit one that connects with more ordinary concepts such as reasons and rationality. But this makes it if anything even more plausible to suppose that there might simply be different concepts of justification, or at least of something that plays the same general role, which do not compete with each other in any very direct way.

Moreover, it should be clear on reflection even to an internalist that there are genuine epistemological issues for which an externalist approach is entirely reasonable and appropriate. As an example, it might be important to ask whether one or another of a range of alternative methods of organizing and structuring scientific research is more likely to succeed in finding the truth in a given area, and it would be entirely reasonable to investigate this issue by studying many cases of research organized in the various ways in question and seeing how frequently and how readily cognitive success has apparently attained. Such an investigation would be naturally conducted from a third-person perspective, looking at the people employing the various methods from the outside and assessing their success from that perspective. ²¹ And if someone should choose to formulate the results of such an investigation by saying that the more successful methods and so also the beliefs to which they lead are more justified in what would be essentially a reliabilist sense, it is hard to see why even an arch-internalist should want to object. Thus there is plainly room in epistemology for investigations whose results could be formulated (though this hardly seems essential) by using an externalist conception of justification (or perhaps instead of knowledge).

None of this has, however, any tendency to show that the internalist conception of justification and its correlative conception of knowledge are not equally legitimate in their own way. As we have already noticed above, the internalist approach pertains to epistemological issues that are raised from
what is essentially a first-person rather than a third-person perspective, that is, to the situation where I ask what reasons I have for thinking that my own beliefs, rather than someone else’s, are true.

It is worth noticing that even first-person questions can sometimes be usefully dealt with in a partially third-person way. If the epistemic issue I am concerned with pertains only to a narrow range of my beliefs, for example, to my memory beliefs concerning previous alleged episodes of sensory perception, then it might be appropriate to take advantage of third-person psychological studies of the ways in which various identifiable features of such beliefs are correlated with accuracy or inaccuracy. The point is that if only the beliefs in that limited range are under scrutiny, then I am free to appeal to other beliefs that I may have about such things as the reliability of such studies, the very existence of the studies (given the written reports), the existence of other people and of the written reports themselves, and so on, without worrying about whether and how these beliefs can themselves be justified.

But if the scope of the first-person inquiry is expanded, and I ask the global question of whether I have good reasons for thinking that any of my beliefs are true, such an appeal to third-person investigations is no longer available without begging the essential question. In this situation, as we have seen, I can only appeal initially to things that are directly or immediately known or justified for me, justified in a way that does not rely on other beliefs that are themselves in question—which is, of course, precisely the situation in which Descartes found himself. As noticed above, this in no way precludes my justifying the use of further cognitive resources by arguments that begin from what is immediately available: thus, for example, if the existence of other minds and the reliability of testimony apparently emanating from them can be established in a non-question-begging way on the basis of my more foundational beliefs, then justification that relies on testimony would become available from the first-person cognitive perspective. But the merely external fact that, for example, testimony of a particular sort is indeed reliable is simply not relevant by itself to the global first-person epistemological issue and can play no role in resolving it.

It has sometimes been argued that there is something fundamentally misconceived or illegitimate about the global first-person epistemological issue that in this way seems to clearly demand an internalist conception of justification, but it is hard to find any very compelling argument for such a claim. Perhaps it is true, as the externalist alleges, that in the internalist sense of justification, the beliefs of animals, young children, and unsophisticated adults turn out not to be justified—though it could still perhaps be argued
that some or all of these epistemic subjects have a tacit or implicit grasp of the relevant reasons and thus are justified in a weaker but still significant sense in at least many of their beliefs. But supposing that the externalist is right that the beliefs of unsophisticated subjects are not justified according to an internalist account, that is then simply a philosophical result to be respected, like any other, and not one that is altered in any real way by pointing out that such subjects may at the same time be justified in a quite different, externalist sense. Similarly, if it should turn out that, as alleged by many externalists, the internalist epistemological project leads finally to a largely skeptical result, this would again be a philosophical result that would have to be accepted, and that would not in any significant way be altered by adding that many of the beliefs in question are still justified—or rather, as we shall see shortly, may be justified—in a different, externalist sense.

Such a skeptical conclusion is admittedly very hard to accept from an intuitive, common-sense perspective. But this, I believe, is a reason (whose strength is not easy to assess) for thinking that the externalist must be wrong about the skeptical implications of internalism, not a reason for adopting a quite different conception of justification and knowledge. My suggestion would be that the common-sense intuition in question is not to be understood as holding merely that our beliefs are justified and constitute knowledge in some largely unspecified senses (which might then turn out to be the externalist ones)—or, still less, that it is an intuition about specifically externalist justification and knowledge (of which common sense seems to have little or no inkling). Instead, I submit, the common-sense intuition in question is precisely that we do after all have good reasons in our possession for thinking that our various beliefs are true, that is, that those beliefs are justified in precisely the sense upon which the internalist insists—even if we have a surprising amount of difficulty articulating explicitly just how this is so. And if this is what the relevant intuition really amounts to, then an appeal to externalist senses of justification and knowledge is simply irrelevant and can do nothing at all, possible obfuscation aside, to accommodate that intuition or to avoid unpalatable skeptical results. (But whether I am right about this is a very difficult issue, one which you should consider carefully for yourselves. What do the intuitions in question really say?)

Finally, even if it is the case that the internalist and externalist conceptions of justification and knowledge are each legitimate and valuable in their own spheres, as defined by the rather different epistemological issues toward which they are aimed, it remains true that the internalist approach possesses a fundamental kind of priority. No matter how much work may be done in delineating externalist conceptions of knowledge or justification or reliabil-
ity and in investigating how those apply to various kinds of beliefs or areas of investigation, there is a way in which all such results are merely hypothetical and insecure as long as they cannot be arrived at from the resources available within a first-person epistemic perspective. If, for example, an epistemologist claims that a certain belief or set of beliefs, whether his or her own or someone else’s, has been arrived at in a reliable way, but says this on the basis of cognitive processes of his or her own whose reliability is at best an external fact to which he or she has no first-person access, then the proper conclusion is merely that the belief or beliefs originally in question are reliably arrived at (and perhaps thereby are justified or constitute knowledge in externalist senses) if the epistemologist’s own cognitive processes are in fact reliable in the way that he or she no doubt believes them to be. But the only apparent way to arrive at a result that is not ultimately hypothetical in this way is for the reliability of at least some cognitive processes to be establishable on the basis of what the epistemologist can know directly or immediately from his or her first-person epistemic perspective. If this cannot be done (as the externalist in effect claims that it cannot), then the proper result is only that our beliefs may be justified (in the externalist sense) if in fact they are reliably arrived at, but that we have no reason at all to think that this is so. And this is, I suggest, itself a very powerful and commonsensically unpalatable version of skepticism—one that is quite unavoidable from an exclusively externalist standpoint. In this way, I suggest, the claim that externalism makes it possible to avoid skepticism, on which the main arguments for externalism are based, turns out to be largely empty; and internalism remains the only viable approach to the deepest and most important epistemological issues.