

# EXTERNALIST RESPONSES TO SKEPTICISM

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[pre-print; published in *Oxford Handbook to Skepticism*,  
ed. John Greco (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 504-38.]

## I. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to consider epistemic externalist responses to skepticism. But what is epistemic externalism? I think the best way to answer this question is by contrasting externalism with two other views and then giving a few examples.

The other views I have in mind are internalism and mentalism. All three views (internalism, externalism, and mentalism) are views about justification or warrant.<sup>1</sup> For convenience, I'll focus mostly on justification. The central thesis of internalism is that a belief is justified only if the person holding the belief is (actually or potentially) *aware* of what that belief has going for it. It isn't enough for justification that a belief has something going for it; in addition, the person holding the belief must be (actually or potentially) aware of what her belief has going for it. The central thesis of mentalism is that a belief's justification is a function solely of (i) which mental states the subject is in and (ii) which mental states of the subject the belief in question is based on. (I.e., if two possible subjects are exactly alike in terms of which

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<sup>1</sup> By 'warrant' I mean whatever, in addition to true belief, is required for knowledge. Gettier (1963) has shown that justification is distinct from (because not sufficient for) warrant so understood.

By 'justification' I mean doxastic justification, not propositional justification. Doxastic justification is a property beliefs have only when they are formed in the right way. Propositional justification is a property a proposition *p* has for a person *S* if *S*'s evidence is such that if she were to believe *p* on the basis of the appropriate part of her evidence, that belief that *p* would be doxastically justified (in other words, her evidence includes what could serve as an appropriate ground for the belief that *p*). A proposition can be propositionally justified for a person even if the person doesn't believe that proposition. Moreover, a belief can be propositionally justified for a person (in virtue of its content being so justified) while failing to be doxastically justified; this would happen if the belief is supported by the subject's evidence but she doesn't base it on the appropriate part of her evidence (in which case it won't be formed in the right way). See Firth (1978: 217-20) for a discussion of this distinction.

mental states they are in and which of their mental states their beliefs are based on, then they are exactly alike justificationaly.) Mentalism differs from internalism insofar as it imposes no awareness requirement on justification. However, neither does it *reject* an awareness requirement on justification. So some views count as both mentalist and internalist, whereas others are mentalist without being internalist.<sup>2</sup> Externalist views deny both internalism and mentalism. They deny that there are any awareness requirements on justification. They allow for a belief to be justified even in cases where the believer isn't in any way (actually or potentially) aware of what makes the belief justified. And they deny that justification supervenes on one's mental states together with which mental states one's beliefs are based on. They allow that justification can depend on other factors; they allow that there can be two possible subjects who are exactly alike mentally and in what their beliefs are based on while differing justificationaly.

Standard examples of externalist views are reliabilism, certain virtue theories, tracking accounts, and proper function accounts. (These externalist views tend more often to focus on warrant than justification, though sometimes they focus on both.) Reliabilists say justification or warrant depends on the belief's being formed in a reliable way.<sup>3</sup> The virtue theorists I have in mind say that justification or warrant depends on the belief's being formed by stable and reliable dispositions that make up the believer's cognitive character.<sup>4</sup> Tracking accounts say justification or warrant depends on the belief's tracking the truth (S's belief that p tracks the truth just in case S would believe p if p were true and S wouldn't believe p if p were false).<sup>5</sup> And proper function

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<sup>2</sup> Conee and Feldman (2001) are defenders of mentalism. But they want to equate internalism with mentalism as it is defined above. For objections to this view of theirs and a defense of the account given above (according to which internalism and mentalism are not equivalent), see Bergmann (2006b: ch. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Goldman (1979, 1986) and Alston (1985).

<sup>4</sup> Sosa (1991) and Greco (1999, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Dretske (1971) and Nozick (1981).

accounts say justification or warrant depends on the belief's being formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties.<sup>6</sup> There is no requirement that the subject be (actually or potentially) aware of the reliability, cognitive virtue, tracking, or proper function. Moreover, two possible subjects can be exactly alike mentally while differing in terms of reliability, cognitive virtue, tracking, or proper function. So these views are neither internalist nor mentalist. They are typical externalist views.

Now that we have some idea of what externalism is, we are almost ready to turn to a consideration of how its proponents respond to skepticism. But first, let's narrow our discussion a little. There are plenty of externalist positions in the literature. One way of categorizing them is in terms of whether they endorse reliabilism, a tracking account, a virtue theory, a proper function account, or some other externalist analysis of justification or warrant. But they can also be divided into contextualist, closure-denying, and neo-Moorean camps.<sup>7</sup> Contextualists say that 'knows' functions like an indexical term with its semantic content varying across contexts of attribution.<sup>8</sup> Invariantists deny this. Closure-*affirmers* endorse the closure principle according to which knowledge is closed under known entailment—i.e., if one knows that p and believes q because one knows that p entails q, then one knows that q. Closure-*deniers* reject that closure principle.<sup>9</sup> Neo-Mooreans are invariantists and closure-affirmers. Moreover, they are Moorean in a broad sense where that just means that they think we know most of the things we commonsensically take ourselves to know. This threefold division (into contextualists, closure-

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<sup>6</sup> Plantinga (1993) and Bergmann (2004b, 2006b: ch. 5). Plantinga focuses on warrant and I focus on justification.

<sup>7</sup> This categorization comes from Pritchard (2002).

<sup>8</sup> The most prominent defenders of contextualism are DeRose (1995, 1999), Cohen (1988, 1999), and Lewis (1996). See also Heller (1999) who is quite explicit about combining externalism and contextualism. For an interestingly different view that is similar in spirit to contextualism, see Jonathan Schaffer's papers (2004, 2005) on contrastivism.

<sup>9</sup> The most prominent closure-deniers are Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981), both of whom also endorse tracking accounts which naturally fit with the denial of the closure principle.

deniers, and neo-Mooreans) isn't meant to be exhaustive. But most externalists fall into one of these three camps.

In this paper I will be ignoring contextualists and closure-deniers and focusing solely on neo-Moorean versions of the externalist response to skepticism. There are a couple of reasons for this. For one thing, other papers in this volume are focused explicitly on contextualist and closure-denying responses to skepticism, so there's no need to cover those responses in detail here.<sup>10</sup> But in addition, although contextualists and closure-deniers are intent on avoiding what they view as weaknesses of neo-Mooreanism—in particular, the neo-Moorean willingness to say we know that skeptical hypotheses are false—they are still faced with some of the same objections that are directed at the neo-Moorean externalist response to skepticism.<sup>11</sup> And of course these alternatives to neo-Mooreanism have incurred some additional costs of their own too. In what follows, therefore, when I speak of externalist responses to skepticism, I'll have in mind neo-Mooreans externalist responses. But it's worth keeping in mind that the objections I'll be considering sometimes apply to contextualists and closure-deniers too.

I will be focusing on two prominent theses about externalist responses to skepticism, one positive and one negative. The positive thesis announces an alleged virtue of externalism: that externalism *alone* avoids skepticism. The negative thesis identifies an alleged defect of externalism: that externalism *implausibly* avoids skepticism. I will be critical of both theses, though I will try to uncover the truth in the neighborhood of each. In section II I'll examine the positive thesis. In section III, which will take up the bulk of this paper, I'll evaluate the negative

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<sup>10</sup> See the articles in this volume by Stewart Cohen and Jonathan Kvanvig. For the origins of *some* aspects of the neo-Moorean externalist response to skepticism, see the articles in this volume by James Van Cleve and Noah Lemos.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Fumerton's objections to externalist responses to skepticism (1995: 173-80)—to be discussed in more detail below—which he applies to Nozick, a closure-denier, as well as to neo-Moorean externalists. Fumerton also discusses and criticizes other aspects of Nozick's views (1995: 118-27).

thesis. I'll close, in the final section, by arguing briefly that the conclusions reached in sections II and III give us a reason to endorse externalism.

## II. The Positive Thesis: Externalism *Alone* Avoids Skepticism

In 1985, while trying to identify the main argument for endorsing externalism, diehard internalist Laurence Bonjour expressed the positive thesis as follows:

The basic factual premise of this argument is that in many cases which are commonsensically instances of justified belief and of knowledge, there seem to be no justifying factors present beyond those appealed to by the externalist. An ordinary person in such a case may have no idea at all of the character of his immediate experience, of the coherence of his system of beliefs, or of whatever other basis of justification a nonexternalist position may appeal to, and yet may still have knowledge. Alternative theories, so the argument goes, may perhaps describe correctly cases of knowledge involving a knower who is extremely reflective and sophisticated, but they are obviously too demanding and grandiose when applied to these more mundane cases. In these cases *only* the externalist condition is satisfied, and this shows that no more than that is really necessary for justification, and for knowledge, though more might still be in some sense epistemically desirable. (1985: 52)

In the very next paragraph, Bonjour goes on to concede the basic factual premise he describes above—i.e., that only externalist conditions are satisfied in many of the cases commonsensically identified as justified belief or knowledge—though he denies that this gives us a good reason to endorse externalism. Twenty years later, after switching from internalist coherentism to internalist foundationalism, Bonjour reaffirms this concession (Bonjour 2003b: 199-200), though there too he concludes that “the commonsensical implausibility of skepticism turns out to offer no good reason at all for preferring ... any broadly externalist view” to his own views.<sup>12</sup> Note that his concession isn't just that the falsity of externalism implies that we don't know or justifiably believe quite as much as we thought we did. Rather, he concedes that the falsity of externalism threatens skepticism, though he insists that that isn't a good enough reason to endorse externalism. Externalists have made this same sort of point (i.e., that the falsity of

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<sup>12</sup> Bonjour (2003b: 200).

externalism threatens skepticism), defending it in a variety of ways. In this section, I'd like to consider some of those defenses and explain why I think they fall short of establishing the positive thesis.

Let's look first at Dretske's defense of his conclusion that "if skepticism is false, externalism is true".<sup>13</sup>

There are always things my knowledge depends on, facts without which my beliefs would be false, that I cannot justify. So the knowledge, if I have it, must be the product of things I need not know or be justified in believing, facts that skeptical possibilities (targeted at what I can justify) do not undermine. This is externalism. (Dretske 2003: 106)

The idea here is that, first, it's possible (as skeptical hypotheses show us) to have the evidence we do while our perceptual beliefs are false and that, second, we cannot justifiably believe that such possibilities aren't actualized. Since we can't justifiably believe that those skeptical possibilities aren't actualized, it follows that if such justification is required for knowledge, skepticism is true. And only externalism refrains from requiring such justification for knowledge. So externalism alone avoids skepticism.

The main problem here is that there are internalists who (like externalist neo-Mooreans) reject Dretske's premise that *we can't justifiably believe that those skeptical possibilities aren't actualized*. Such internalists won't be moved by Dretske's argument. Chisholm, for example, is a clear case of an internalist. And yet he is also a particularist and a fan of Moore's and Reid's responses to skepticism: he's an internalist neo-Moorean who thinks we can justifiably believe that skeptical possibilities aren't actual.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, an evidentialist such as Moser also clearly rejects externalism while arguing that—because the commonsense view (that our sensory experience is caused by the external world) provides the best explanation of our evidence—we

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<sup>13</sup> Dretske (2003: 105).

<sup>14</sup> See Chisholm (1982: ch. 5). For a discussion of particularism, see Richard Fumerton's article in this volume.

can justifiably believe that skeptical possibilities aren't actualized.<sup>15</sup> And Feldman points to internalists like Pryor (who takes a line like Chisholm's) and Vogel (who takes a route similar to Moser's) as examples of those who reject externalism while thinking we can justifiably believe that skeptical hypotheses are false.<sup>16</sup> Thus, until it can be shown that such philosophers can't coherently combine their rejection of externalism with their view that (contrary to what Dretske claims) we *can* justifiably believe that skeptical possibilities aren't actual, Dretske's argument that externalism alone avoids skepticism will remain unconvincing.

Another argument that externalism is the only way to avoid skepticism is given by Van Cleve. He starts off by saying that the core tenet of internalism is that "there is no first-order knowledge unless there is also higher-order knowledge with respect to the factors that make first-order knowledge possible".<sup>17</sup> He then says that externalism, as he understands it, is "tantamount to the denial of KR"<sup>18</sup> which is understood as follows:

KR: A potential knowledge source *K* can yield knowledge for a subject *S* only if *S* knows *K* is reliable.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, he argues that the only way to avoid skepticism is to deny KR, which, as I just noted, Van Cleve thinks is sufficient to make one an externalist.

The problem here is similar to the problem faced by Dretske's argument. Just as there are internalists who reject the assumption that we can't justifiably believe that skeptical hypotheses are false, so also there are internalists who reject KR. This is because there are internalists who refrain from imposing *any* higher-level requirements on knowledge, contrary to

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<sup>15</sup> See Moser (1989: 69-77) for his rejection of externalism and Moser (1989: 158-64, 255-65) for his view that we can be justified in believing that skeptical possibilities don't obtain.

<sup>16</sup> Feldman (2003: 145-52). See also Pryor (2000 and 2004) and Vogel (1990).

<sup>17</sup> Van Cleve (2003: 45).

<sup>18</sup> Van Cleve (2003: 50). See also Van Cleve (2003: 46) where he says that to be an externalist in the sense that matters for his paper is to say "there are sources of justification or knowledge that deliver their goods even if the subject does not know they are reliable".

<sup>19</sup> This principle, from a paper by Cohen (2002), is quoted by Van Cleve (2003: 49). Van Cleve makes it clear on the next page that, in characterizing externalism as the denial of KR, he's understanding KR in such a way that the necessary condition it lays down is a *prior* condition saying that *S* can gain knowledge through *K* only if *S* *first* knows that *K* is reliable.

what Van Cleve says in explaining the “core tenet” of internalism. Internalists who are worried about regress problems that arise from imposing such a requirement demand only a sort of awareness that doesn’t involve knowledge or belief or conceiving of any kind. Moser and Fumerton are internalists who require awareness or direct acquaintance with justifiers but they think it would be a serious mistake to view this awareness or acquaintance as involving knowledge or belief or conceiving.<sup>20</sup> So even if Van Cleve is right that the only way to avoid skepticism is to reject KR, it doesn’t follow that only externalists can avoid skepticism; for, as we’ve just seen, some internalists reject KR.

John Greco argues that externalism is “not only sufficient for rejecting skepticism, but necessary as well”.<sup>21</sup> To establish this, he argues that each of the following claims is necessary for rejecting skepticism and sufficient for externalism:

*Rb.* There is no requirement on knowledge that one knows (or even believes) that one’s belief is the result of reliable cognitive processes.

*Rc.* Where S knows p on the basis of reasons R, there need be no necessary relation (logical or quasi-logical) between the truth of R and the truth of p; it is sufficient that the truth of R is a contingently reliable indicator of the truth of p.<sup>22</sup>

In the previous paragraph, I noted that there are internalists (Moser and Fumerton) who reject higher-level requirements on knowledge and justification. Because these internalists (along with certain mentalists) consistently affirm Rb, we can see that Greco is mistaken: endorsement of Rb isn’t sufficient for externalism.

As for Rc, endorsement of it isn’t sufficient for externalism either. It’s true that mentalists such as Feldman and Conee agree that if one’s evidence E for a belief B is such that B is a fitting response to E (with the result that believing B on the basis of E makes B justified),

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<sup>20</sup> See Fumerton (1995: 60-79) and Moser (1989: 71-88, 173-6).

<sup>21</sup> Greco (2004: 54).

<sup>22</sup> Rb and Rc appear in Greco (2004: 53-54). For a summary of his argument, see Greco (2004: 62-3, including nn. 21-22).



then it is a necessary truth that B is a fitting response to E.<sup>23</sup> But although mentalists think the *fittingness* of B as a response to E is noncontingent, this doesn't commit them to thinking that E's *truth-indicativeness* with respect to B (supposing E is a belief whose truth reliably indicates B's truth) is noncontingent. Mentalists will think that B is, of necessity, a fitting response to E even if E isn't, of necessity, a reliable indicator of B's truth (though it may in fact be a contingently reliable indicator of B's truth). Mentalists consider this possible separation of truth-indicativeness from fittingness to be a virtue of their accounts because it allows them to say that demon victims with the same type of evidence base we have (whether in terms of experience or inductive reasons) are as justified in their beliefs as we are in ours. So Greco is mistaken about Rc too.

In the spirit of the concern alluded to by BonJour in the quotation at the beginning of this section, Alston and Goldman have objected to internalism on the grounds that internalist standards are often not met by the typical beliefs of ordinary people.<sup>24</sup> However, Alston and Goldman don't give any argument for the conclusion that this is a problem faced by *all* versions of internalism. In fact, one is left with the impression that they think there are or may be ways of being an internalist that don't commit one to skepticism. And I think this is the reasonable conclusion to draw from the literature: although externalists rarely if ever seem forced by their positions to admit the truth of skepticism, many (but not all) internalists *do* seem to face this consequence. This is a more modest conclusion than the positive thesis according to which externalism *alone* can avoid skepticism.

It is, however, worth highlighting one form of internalism—Strong Awareness Internalism—that *does* seem forced to admit the truth of skepticism. The reason this is worth

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<sup>23</sup> See Conee and Feldman (2001: 232-34) and Feldman (2004: 155). Notice that to say that B is a fitting response to E isn't to say B is a fitting response to an evidence base that includes E and more besides.

<sup>24</sup> This sort of claim comes up a number of times, for example, in Alston (1986b) and Goldman (1999).

highlighting is that part of the attraction of the positive thesis is due to the temptation to think that (a) internalism is equivalent to Strong Awareness Internalism and (b) the only way to avoid Strong Awareness Internalism is to be an externalist.<sup>25</sup> And due to the fact that there's good reason to think Strong Awareness Internalists can't avoid skepticism, (a) and (b) will naturally lead one to think externalists alone can avoid skepticism. Thus, understanding why Strong Awareness Internalism can't avoid skepticism will help us appreciate the appeal of the mistaken positive thesis.

Strong Awareness Internalism can be stated as follows:

*Strong Awareness Internalism:* S's belief B is justified only if (i) S is aware (or potentially aware) of something that contributes to B's justification and (ii) this awareness involves either *judging* that the object of that awareness is in some way relevant to the appropriateness of holding B or *conceiving* of the object of that awareness as being in some way relevant to the appropriateness of holding B.

Clause (i) makes it clear that there is an awareness requirement on justification. Clause (ii) makes it clear that this awareness requirement is a *strong* awareness requirement. The reason Strong Awareness Internalism results in skepticism is that it implies that the justification for any belief B requires the ability to make an infinite number of judgments or concept applications of ever-increasing complexity. But it's clear that we lack that ability. So it follows that if Strong Awareness Internalism is true, none of our beliefs is justified.

To see why it requires this extravagant ability, notice that if the required strong awareness involved actual judging or believing, it would presumably require *justified* belief. (How could an unjustified belief about B's appropriateness help?) But then the regress problem is obvious: S's belief B is justified only if S also justifiedly believes that something makes B appropriate; and that obviously implies an infinite regress of ever-increasing complexity. Would it help if the required strong awareness required only the *potential* to judge or believe? No,

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<sup>25</sup> The temptation to endorse (a) is evident in Van Cleve (2003), which was discussed above. And it is very common to think that all views that aren't internalist views are externalist views—which, together with (a), implies (b).

because even then the justification for any belief would require the *ability* to make an infinite number of judgments of ever-increasing complexity.<sup>26</sup> Would the regress problem disappear if we distinguished believing from conceiving (or concept application) and said that what is required is only that S *conceive* of the object of awareness as being something that makes B appropriate (rather than that S believe this)? No, because it would still be the case that the justification of any belief requires the ability to apply an infinite number of *concepts* of ever-increasing complexity. This shows that Strong Awareness Internalism implies skepticism.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the positive thesis, then, we may conclude that there seems to be no good reason for thinking that externalism *alone* avoids skepticism. (I'm assuming that good reasons to think that externalism is true and that mentalism and internalism are false don't automatically count as good reasons to think externalism alone avoids skepticism.) But the truth in the neighborhood of the positive thesis is this: externalists are rarely if ever forced by their views to endorse skepticism while this is a common problem for internalists; and there is one form of internalism—Strong Awareness Internalism—which clearly must be rejected if one is to avoid being committed to skepticism.

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<sup>26</sup> An additional worry is that *doxastic* justification (see note 1 above) requires that one's belief be formed in the right way. And since the mere potential for the relevant awareness seems to have nothing to do with how the belief is formed, it's difficult to see how the mere potential for such awareness will be relevant to doxastic justification. Why think that the fact that one is able, *after* time *t*, to become aware (for the first time) of some reason for believing *p* will have any affect on whether one is doxastically justified in believing *p* at *t*? Clearly, the subject's first-time awareness of that reason after *t* played no role in the formation of the belief at *t*. One could avoid this problem by modifying the potential awareness requirement so that potential awareness that *p* satisfied the requirement only if the subject was in the past *actually* aware that *p*. But then the potential awareness requirement would suffer from the same problem as the actual awareness requirement: it would require actual awareness (now or in the past) involving a degree of complexity humans are incapable of.

<sup>27</sup> For a more extended presentation of this argument, see Bergmann (2006a: 140-4 and 2006b: 14-19).

### III. The Negative Thesis: Externalism *Implausibly* Avoids Skepticism

The positive thesis is an overstatement. It says that externalism *alone* avoids skepticism when in fact some nonexternalist views also avoid it. The negative thesis turns this supposed advantage against externalism by saying that the way in which externalism avoids skepticism is utterly *implausible*, thereby giving us a reason to reject externalism. I will begin our examination of this negative thesis by explaining its motivation, which is evident in the objections that have been proposed against externalist responses to skepticism. Then, before thinking about how externalists can respond to these objections, I will consider whether these same objections apply to *nonexternalist* views that have a chance of avoiding skepticism—i.e., to nonexternalist views other than Strong Awareness Internalism. After concluding that they *do* apply, I will respond to these objections on behalf of both externalism and the nonexternalist positions to which they apply.

#### A. Four Objections to Externalism's Handling of Skepticism

The skeptic asks how you know there's an external world and demands that your answer include a good reason for thinking that when you have sensory experiences of the sort you're having, there really is an external world causing them (rather than the Matrix or a deceptive demon). The reliabilist response is to point out that the skeptic is wrongly assuming we need such a reason in order to know or justifiably believe there is an external world. In fact, all we need is reliably formed beliefs that there is an external world: justification and knowledge supervene on reliability not on our epistemic access to or ability to give good reasons for such reliability.

The main complaint about this externalist response to skepticism is just this: *it is philosophically unsatisfying and that suggests that externalism is false*. To understand this reaction, let's consider the case of reliabilism. The reliabilist says that the skeptic is wrong to think we need a good reason for thinking that our sensory experience isn't deceptive—in fact, all that's required is that our beliefs are reliably formed. And, it is added, they *are* reliably formed. Problem solved. The natural response that immediately comes to mind is something like this: “But how do you know your beliefs are reliably formed? If you can't answer that in a satisfying way, then you haven't adequately responded to skepticism.” And these very same concerns arise for nonreliabilist versions of externalism as well. They will say that what's required for justification or knowledge isn't access to or ability to give good reasons. What is required is cognitive virtue or proper function or truth-tracking which, in fact, *are* present in our typical belief formation. It is the presence of such things—not good reasons to believe in their presence—that makes skepticism false. But again, the natural question that arises is: “How do you know your beliefs typically involve cognitive virtue, proper function, or truth-tracking?” The implication behind this question is that the externalist's initial response was unsatisfying and that if (as seems likely) further externalist responses merely give more of the same, they will be unsatisfying too.

But what exactly is it that makes the externalist's response philosophically unsatisfying? To this question, there are a number of answers in the literature, each of which can be viewed as an objection to externalist responses to skepticism—an objection that supports the main complaint about their being philosophically unsatisfying. I will lay out four such objections below.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A fifth objection is proposed and discussed in Bergmann (2006b: 233-8).

1. *Conditional Answer*: The externalist's response to skeptical questions merely points out that *if* the beliefs in question satisfy the externalist conditions, then those beliefs are justified. But that conditional answer to the skeptic's question is philosophically unsatisfying. The real question is whether the antecedents of such conditionals are true.<sup>29</sup>

2. *Epistemic Circularity (or Bootstrapping)*: Externalists are committed to approving of epistemically circular responses to skepticism. We can see this by considering the following track record argument for the reliability of perception.

*Track Record Argument*: In the past, whenever I was appeared to in this way and formed the belief that there was a tree, I was right—there was a tree there. Something similar applies with respect to my other sense perceptual beliefs. Therefore, sense perception is reliable.

Notice that this inductive argument relies on memory, introspection, and perception (the latter was used to confirm that there really was a tree there). Now suppose that the memory, perceptual, and introspective beliefs employed as premises in this argument satisfy the conditions the externalist says are required for justification. If that were the case, then the externalist should agree that the beliefs in the premises of that inductive argument were justified. But surely a belief in an argument's conclusion, where that belief is based on a respectable inductive argument relying on justified premises, is itself justified. So the externalist is committed to allowing that one can satisfactorily respond to the skeptic's question (which asks how we know that perception is reliable) by relying on this sort of track record argument. But there's an obvious problem with this track record argument: it relies on perception to establish the reliability of perception. This makes that argument, as well as the belief in its conclusion, epistemically circular. (A belief is epistemically circular when one depends on a belief source to sustain a belief that that very belief source is trustworthy.) And being committed to approving of

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<sup>29</sup> See BonJour (2002: 236-7) and Stroud (1989: 46).

such epistemic circularity, especially in response to the skeptic, is a bad feature of externalism, one that makes it philosophically unsatisfying.<sup>30</sup>

3. *Uncomfortable Moving up a Level:* Externalist accounts of justification, if true, should apply just as much to higher-level beliefs (i.e., beliefs about another belief's epistemic credentials) as they do to lower-level beliefs such as ordinary perceptual beliefs. But when pressed by the skeptic to say how they justifiedly hold the higher-level belief that their beliefs are reliably formed, externalists feel uncomfortable appealing to the fact that these higher-level beliefs are themselves reliably formed.<sup>31</sup> The fact that externalists feel this discomfort—when, in response to the skeptic, they follow out the implications of their position as it applies to higher-level beliefs—reveals how implausible their externalist views seem, even to themselves. That's the basic complaint.

One way to explain this discomfort is to say it arises simply in virtue of the fact that the externalist realizes that her position (when applied to higher-level beliefs) commits her to permitting epistemic circularity of the sort discussed above.<sup>32</sup> The problem with that explanation is that just as externalist foundationalists allow that perception can be used to justify the legitimacy of using perception and that memory can be used to justify the legitimacy of using memory, so also certain internalist foundationalists (e.g., Fumerton) allow that direct acquaintance can be used to justify the legitimacy of using direct acquaintance.<sup>33</sup> So why doesn't this sort of internalist position give rise to the same discomfort that is associated with

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<sup>30</sup> See Fumerton (1995: ch. 6) and Vogel (2000). This objection is sometimes applied independently of worries about responding to skepticism in a philosophically satisfying way. In such cases, the concern is just that by allowing for justified epistemically circular beliefs (whether in response to the skeptic or not), externalism is unacceptable.

<sup>31</sup> See Alston (1993: 16-17). It's true that Alston sometimes speaks (see his 1986a) as if an externalist account of the justification of higher-level beliefs is perfectly fine. But, as Fumerton notes (1995: 178-9), Alston also seems to show (in his 1993) some discomfort with doing so.

<sup>32</sup> Fumerton explains the discomfort in this way in his Fumerton (1995: 179-80).

<sup>33</sup> I make this point in Bergmann (2000: 171-2) and Fumerton (2006: 175-7) concedes it.

externalism? The difference, it is argued, is that we are in need of philosophical assurance about the legitimacy of using memory and perception; and we don't get such assurance by appealing to them again in epistemically circular ways. But we aren't in need of philosophical assurance about the legitimacy of using direct acquaintance because when we use it, our philosophical curiosity about the justification it produces is fully appeased. It's true that we could get assurance about the legitimacy of direct acquaintance by appealing again to direct acquaintance and that doing so would itself be philosophically satisfying. But no such assurance is required. Because externalism (unlike internalist positions appealing to direct acquaintance) fails to appease our curiosity in this way by giving us the assurance we want, it is philosophically unsatisfying. It's their tacit recognition of this fact that explains why externalists are uncomfortable moving up a level.<sup>34</sup>

4. *Anything Goes*: The externalist responds to skepticism about the external world by noting that our perceptual beliefs are justified simply in virtue of their satisfying external conditions; there's no need for the believer to prove or know or even to be aware that those conditions are satisfied. But if pointing this out is a permissible move in a philosophical exchange with a skeptic, then it seems that almost anything goes. It's easy to see, for example, how a crystal ball gazer can offer the same kind of externalist response to those who are skeptical of beliefs so formed.<sup>35</sup> Believers in the Great Pumpkin or voodoo might also offer an externalist response to those who find their views doubtful. So long as these nonstandard beliefs are internally consistent and there's no way to falsify or confirm them without appeal to the sorts of faculties allegedly producing these beliefs, it won't be difficult for externalist defenders of them to say "Look, my crystal ball (or Great Pumpkin or voodoo) beliefs satisfy externalist

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<sup>34</sup> In Fumerton (2006: 184-6), he offers this amended explanation of the externalist's apparent discomfort.

<sup>35</sup> See Alston (1993: 17) and Sosa (1997: section VI).



conditions and that's enough to make them justified, even if I can't offer you any argument proving those beliefs satisfy those conditions".<sup>36</sup> But that sort of response is philosophically unsatisfying, to say the least. And since there's no relevant difference between such responses and the externalist response to skepticism about the external world, externalism itself is philosophically unsatisfying.

### ***B. Applying the Four Objections to Nonexternalist Views***

Before looking at how externalists might respond to those four objections, let's consider whether nonexternalist views are similarly vulnerable to such charges. We can begin by dividing nonexternalist views of justification into two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive camps: the radicals and the moderates. The radical camp includes all nonexternalist views that endorse either Strong Awareness Internalism or Inferentialism—the view that *all justification is inferential*. (These two positions are classified as 'radical' because they lead very quickly to radical skepticism.<sup>37</sup>) All other nonexternalist views count as moderate. We can go on to divide the moderate nonexternalist views into the following three categories:

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<sup>36</sup> Examples of voodoo and Great Pumpkin beliefs have come up in connection with Plantinga's externalist defense of noninferentially justified theistic belief which he develops in response to religious skeptics. See Plantinga (1983: 74-78 and 2000: 342-53) for his development of this defense and see Martin (1990: 266-78) and DeRose (unpublished) for criticisms. Fumerton has identified Plantinga's externalist response to religious skepticism as one more implausible consequence of externalism (2001: 343-4). Fumerton's suggestion is that if we allow the externalist response to skepticism about the external world, then we have no good principled reason to object to Plantinga's externalist response to religious skepticism.

<sup>37</sup> For an argument that Strong Awareness Internalism implies radical skepticism, see the latter part of section I of this paper and also Bergmann (2006a: 140-4 and 2006b: 14-19). For an argument that Inferentialism implies radical skepticism, see Bergmann (2006b: 185-7). The basic idea of the latter argument is this. If all justification is inferential, then either (a) circular reasoning can produce justification or (b) our beliefs can be justified on the basis of an infinite (non-repeating) chain of reasoning or (c) our beliefs can be justified on the basis of inference from unjustified beliefs or (d) none of our beliefs can be justified. But each of (a)-(c) is manifestly false. Hence, if all justification is inferential, (d) is true—which is just to say that Inferentialism implies radical skepticism.

*Low Standard:* Moderate nonexternalist views according to which it is sufficient, for the justification of S's beliefs, that either (a) S thinks that all is well with her beliefs epistemically speaking or (b) some other equally undemanding (or even less demanding) condition is satisfied.

*Medium Standard:* Moderate nonexternalist views that impose a standard more demanding than the one imposed by the Low Standard position but say that beliefs can be noninferentially justified even if they are not about facts that are directly before one's mind (perceptual beliefs are typically viewed as beliefs of this kind).

*High Standard:* Moderate nonexternalist views that impose a standard more demanding than the one imposed by the Low Standard position and say that beliefs can be noninferentially justified only if they are about facts directly before one's mind (introspective and a priori beliefs are often viewed as beliefs of this kind).

In what follows I will argue that all three versions of moderate nonexternalism are as philosophically unsatisfying as externalism. (I will be ignoring radical nonexternalist views because the fact that they so obviously imply radical skepticism makes them seem rather implausible, even to internalists who want to be open to the truth of skepticism.<sup>38</sup>)

The first thing to notice is that concerns about externalism's allegedly unsatisfying response to skepticism won't be put to rest by turning to the Low Standard view. That sort of view attributes justified belief far too liberally. It suggests that the *only* requirement for having justified beliefs is something as undemanding as optimism about the epistemic quality of one's beliefs. Such a response to skepticism will hardly seem like an improvement over externalism in the minds of those concerned about views that seem philosophically unsatisfying. We can, therefore, safely ignore the Low Standard position in seeking for a version of moderate nonexternalism that avoids the main complaint against externalist responses to skepticism.<sup>39</sup> Our

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<sup>38</sup> See Fumerton (1995: 80-1) and Bonjour (2003a: 65).

<sup>39</sup> Michael Huemer (2001 & 2006) defends a view that initially seems to be a Low Standard view. It's called 'Phenomenal Conservatism' and he defines it as follows:

PC: If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p. (Huemer 2006: 148)

A natural first reading of this principle suggests that it's claiming that a belief is justified so long as it seems to the believer to be true. That *would* be a Low Standard view. But a more careful reading of the principle (and the places in which Huemer defends it—see especially Huemer 2006: 156) makes it clear that one's belief that p won't be justified (all things considered) if the prima facie justification one has for p (derived from how things seem to the believer) is defeated. And the factors that can result in defeat are things such as epistemic irresponsibility (Huemer mentioned this factor to me in personal communication) or a failure to cohere with one's other beliefs or seemings (see Huemer 2006: 156). But these are things the believer can *think* are absent—things which can even *seem* to the

focus should instead be on those views that admit the possibility that, though all seems well to the subject epistemically speaking, things aren't as they seem. Let's call versions of moderate nonexternalism that admit that possibility—i.e., those which reject the Low Standard view—‘*serious moderate nonexternalist*’ views.

The problem is that once we allow for that possibility, a worrisome consequence arises. For we know that all moderate nonexternalists allow for noninferentially justified beliefs (this follows from the fact that Inferentialists are all in the radical camp). This makes it natural for them to think there is something that counts as a supervenience base for noninferential justification. But if the Low Standard view is mistaken, then no matter what is selected as a supervenience base for noninferential justification, it will be possible for it to seem to the subject as if all is well (i.e., for nothing to seem amiss) epistemically speaking with her noninferential beliefs, even though the supervenience base for their justification is absent.<sup>40</sup> And that possibility suggests a troubling sort of skeptical scenario. It's troubling for the serious moderate nonexternalist because her only answer to the question “how do you know you aren't in such a skeptical scenario?” is an answer that is just as philosophically unsatisfying as the answer the externalist gives to the skeptic.

It's easy to see how this problem arises for Medium Standard views. Suppose, for example, that the supervenience base for noninferential justification of perceptual beliefs is that one's beliefs *fit* the subject's sensory experience or that the sensory experiences in question are

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believer to be absent—when in fact they're present. Hence, according to Huemer's Phenomenal Conservatism, a believer can think all is well with her beliefs epistemically speaking (and her beliefs can seem fine to her epistemically speaking) when in fact they aren't justified (all things considered) due to the fact that their *prima facie* justification is defeated by epistemic irresponsibility or a failure to cohere with her other beliefs or seemings. In short, given what Huemer builds into the no-defeater requirement included in PC, that principle demands more for justification (all things considered) than a mere seeming that the belief is true.

<sup>40</sup> When I say “everything seems fine to the subject epistemically speaking” I mean that she has a felt inclination to believe everything is fine epistemically speaking and no inclination to think otherwise. And when I say “nothing seems amiss epistemically” I mean she has no inclination to think something is amiss epistemically.

*best explained by* the truth of the beliefs based on them.<sup>41</sup> It seems possible for a clever demon to arrange for those supervenience bases to be absent while at the same time guaranteeing that everything seems to the subject to be epistemically hunky-dory: her perceptual beliefs *seem* to her to fit her evidence (though in fact they don't); her perceptual beliefs *seem* to her to be the best explanation of the sensory experiences on which they are based (though in fact they aren't). After drawing attention to this possibility, the skeptic will ask the Medium Standard moderate nonexternalist how she knows she isn't in such a skeptical scenario. And the skeptic will add that the fact that it seems to this nonexternalist that she isn't doesn't help since that's exactly what one would expect if she were in such a skeptical scenario.

Similar remarks apply to High Standard moderate nonexternalists. For even supporters of High Standard versions of moderate nonexternalism (such as BonJour and Fumerton) acknowledge that one can *think* one has some fact directly before one's mind when one doesn't.<sup>42</sup> As a result, one can believe that *p*, thinking one has the fact that *p* directly before one's mind, when in fact one doesn't. This suggests the following skeptical scenario: a demon arranges for all of one's introspective beliefs to be mistaken because each seems to be a belief about a fact directly before the subject's mind when in fact it isn't. Now how does the supporter of High Standard moderate nonexternalism know that she isn't a victim of such a demon? She can't point out that many of her introspective beliefs seem to be about facts directly before her mind because that is exactly how things would seem if she were in the skeptical scenario in question.

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<sup>41</sup> Conee and Feldman (1985: 15-16 and 2001: 232-34) think that a belief's noninferential justification supervenes on its fitting the evidence. Moser (1989: ch. 3) thinks it supervenes on the evidence's being best explained by the truth of the belief in question.

<sup>42</sup> See Fumerton (1995: 77) and BonJour (2003b: 192-4).

(But aren't there some introspective beliefs about which we couldn't be mistaken—beliefs which a demon couldn't get us to believe falsely? Consider, for example, the proposition that you're being appeared to redly. Could that be believed falsely by a person who is dead sure she's believing it truly? Yes. Being appeared to redly is one thing and believing with complete conviction that you are obviously being appeared to redly is another. Each could occur in a person while the other is absent—there could be the appearing without any belief in such an appearing and there could be the belief in such an appearing even when no such appearing occurs.<sup>43</sup> But if this could happen while it seems obvious that it isn't happening, how do you know it isn't happening to you with your beliefs about how you're being appeared to? Moreover, consider the confidence with which naysayers insist that this couldn't happen. How do they know that it *couldn't* happen—that its occurrence is *impossible*? By a priori intuition if at all. But it's possible to have an extremely strong a priori seeming in support of a falsehood. It has happened often in the history of philosophy. It would, therefore, be no problem for a demon to arrange for it to happen again. So how do the naysayers, who object to what I'm claiming here, know that that isn't happening in them right now? How do they know they aren't being deceived into thinking that such a scenario is impossible? If such a deception were happening effectively, it would certainly seem not to be.)

Perhaps the High Standard moderate nonexternalist would insist that it's a mistake to say that *fallible* introspective beliefs can be justified. She could point out that there are some

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<sup>43</sup> We can see that the latter is true as follows. Suppose Jack used to be a normal person who regularly formed the belief that he was being appeared to redly when he *was* being appeared to redly and that, in doing so, he picked up the concept of being appeared to redly. Now suppose that, due to brain damage or demon influence, he begins to believe that he is being appeared to redly when he isn't being so appeared to. He doesn't *hallucinate* his being appeared to redly—i.e., it doesn't *appear* visually to him that he is being appeared to redly when he isn't being so appeared to. Nor does he base his belief that he is being appeared to redly on his acquaintance with how he's being appeared to. What happens is that even when he isn't being appeared to redly, he sometimes succumbs to an overpowering *inclination*—caused by brain damage or demon influence—to believe that it's obvious that he is being so appeared to. Given that being appeared to redly is one thing and that believing that one is being appeared to redly is another, the example seems to be a possible one.

introspective beliefs which are such that it is impossible to even have them unless they're true. An example might be the indexical belief "I'm experiencing that" (accompanied by an inner act of "pointing" to a mental state): one might think that in order for S to have that belief, there must exist the experience to which 'that' refers.<sup>44</sup> Suppose that's right. And suppose the High Standard moderate nonexternalist insists that it is only introspective beliefs of that sort— infallible introspective beliefs—that are justified. We are still left with the following skeptical scenario. Due to the work of a clever demon, the subject is unable to differentiate infallible introspective beliefs from fallible ones. Many introspective beliefs which are admitted by High Standard moderate nonexternalists to be fallible seem to this subject to be obviously infallible. That is, just as it seems obvious to infallibilists that a belief such as "I'm experiencing that" couldn't possibly be false, so also it seems utterly obvious to the subject in this skeptical scenario that a belief like "there are 47 speckles on the visual image before my mind's eye" couldn't possibly be false. Now the skeptic asks the proponent of the infallibilist High Standard position how she knows that she isn't like the person in the skeptical scenario just described. How does she know that her favored introspective beliefs really are infallible—that they don't just wrongly seem to be? The fact that they seem to be infallible is just what she should expect if she were in the skeptical scenario in question.

In each of the skeptical scenarios just described, we have the serious moderate nonexternalist in a situation like that faced by the externalist. The externalist and the serious moderate nonexternalist agree that:

Inferentialism is false: There are some conditions which, if satisfied by her noninferential beliefs, would be sufficient for their justification.

Strong Awareness Internalism is false: One's noninferential beliefs can be justified in virtue of satisfying certain conditions even if one neither (a) believes that those conditions are satisfied nor (b) conceives of the

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<sup>44</sup> See McGrew (1999: 228).

fact that those conditions are satisfied as being in any way relevant to the truth or justification of one's beliefs (perhaps because she never applies any concepts to them at all).

The Low Standard view is false: It's possible for all to seem well (for nothing to seem amiss) epistemically speaking even when the conditions necessary for noninferential justification aren't satisfied.

Because she accepts these three points, the serious moderate nonexternalist will have to grant the possibility of a skeptical scenario in which a person's noninferential beliefs don't seem to the subject to fail to satisfy the conditions necessary for noninferential justification, even though they do fail to satisfy them. This is so whether the conditions in question involve the belief's fitting the evidence or its being the best explanation of the evidence; it is so whether the conditions involve having the fact the belief is about directly before one's mind or the belief's being infallible. But once she grants this possibility, she can be asked how she knows that she isn't in such a scenario herself. And she should feel forced to confess that the fact that she seems not to be is exactly what you'd expect for someone who is in fact in such a scenario. Moreover, her position forces her to admit that her noninferential beliefs can be justified simply in virtue of satisfying the required conditions; there is no need to believe that she satisfies them—no need to conceive of her beliefs as satisfying conditions relevant to their being justified. All of this places her in a position very much like the externalist.<sup>45</sup> Both agree that their noninferential beliefs can be justified in virtue of satisfying conditions they don't conceive of as being relevant to justification—both agree that this justification can be present despite the fact that these conditions could fail to be satisfied without it seeming to them that they aren't satisfied. The result is that each of the four objections from the previous subsection can be pressed against serious moderate nonexternalists.

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<sup>45</sup> The only difference is that the mentalist will insist that the conditions for noninferential justification are determined solely by the subject's mental states and the internalist will insist that the subject is aware of something that contributes to the belief's justification (even if she needn't conceive of that thing as relevant in any way to the belief's justification).

1. *Conditional Answer*: The serious moderate nonexternalist's view is that *if* their noninferential beliefs satisfy the relevant conditions, then they are justified. But this is merely a conditional response. The real question is whether that antecedent is satisfied or if, instead, they are in a skeptical scenario. And given that things would seem epistemically just fine if they were in a skeptical scenario, the skeptic will think they can't tell whether the antecedent is true. Moreover, because serious moderate nonexternalists reject Strong Awareness Internalism, they will insist that they don't *need* to know or believe that the antecedent is true.

2. *Epistemic Circularity (or Bootstrapping)*: Serious moderate nonexternalists seem forced to allow for epistemically circular track record arguments. They have no principled way to prevent noninferentially justified "direct acquaintance" beliefs, for example, from being used as premises in an epistemically circular track record argument for the reliability of direct acquaintance itself.<sup>46</sup> Both of these first two complaints are as successful at showing that serious moderate nonexternalism is philosophically unsatisfying as they are at showing externalism is philosophically unsatisfying.

3. *Uncomfortable Moving up a Level*: Serious moderate nonexternalists should be as uncomfortable as externalists about moving up a level to talk of higher-level beliefs satisfying the conditions they think are required for justification. They must admit that it can merely seem as if their first-order beliefs are justified even when they don't in fact satisfy the conditions necessary for justification. Likewise, they must admit that their higher-level beliefs about the justification of their first-order beliefs can also seem to be justified even when they don't in fact satisfy the conditions necessary for justification. Once one realizes that, wouldn't the nonexternalist's philosophical curiosity demand to be assured that both one's higher-level beliefs and one's first-order beliefs really did satisfy the relevant conditions—that it didn't just

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<sup>46</sup> See Fumerton (2006: 175-7).



mistakenly seem that they did? I should think it would, in which case even the High Standard moderate nonexternalist (both fallibilist and infallibilist) should agree that there is some philosophical assurance that they are missing (and wanting) and cannot provide any better than externalists can. This leaves the serious moderate nonexternalist in a position that is just as philosophically unsatisfying as the externalist.

4. *Anything Goes*: If the serious moderate nonexternalist is right, then her beliefs can be justified noninferentially even though (a) she doesn't conceive of them as satisfying any conditions relevant to their justification and (b) she must admit that all could seem well to her epistemically speaking even though her beliefs fail to satisfy the conditions necessary for justification. Given (a) and (b), she can comfortably assert that she knows via direct acquaintance that her first-order direct acquaintance beliefs satisfy the conditions of justification and that they'd be justified even if she didn't know this at all (despite the fact that they could seem justified to her even if they weren't). But then it seems that anything goes. Why can't the crystal ball gazer claim to know via crystal ball gazing that her first-order crystal ball beliefs satisfy the conditions necessary for justification, all the while asserting that her first-order crystal ball beliefs would be justified even if she didn't know this (and despite the fact that they could seem justified to her even if they weren't)? This sort of move by the crystal ball gazer is exactly parallel to what the externalist and the serious moderate nonexternalist say to skeptics about perception and direct acquaintance respectively. And it's just as philosophically unsatisfying when made by the serious moderate nonexternalist as it is when made by the externalist.

What we've seen in this subsection is that nonexternalist views can be divided into three groups: radical nonexternalist views, Low Standard moderate nonexternalist views, and serious moderate nonexternalist views. Radical nonexternalist views are implausible because they

quickly lead to radical skepticism. Low Standard views are implausible because they make justification too easy to come by. And I've argued that serious moderate nonexternalist views are as vulnerable as externalism is to the four objections from the previous subsection.

### ***C. Responding to the Four Objections***

The fact that the four objections presented in section III.A apply just as well to serious moderate nonexternalism as they do to externalism, doesn't by itself help externalism escape the trouble alluded to in those objections. It merely places others in their allegedly bad company. However, once we realize that the alternatives to serious moderate nonexternalism (and externalism) are radical nonexternalism and the Low Standard view, we may begin to suspect that facing those four objections is not as problematic as initially supposed. In this subsection, I'll briefly explain how externalists can and have responded to these four objections.

1. *Conditional Answer*: An initial response to this objection is to note that anyone who rejects radical nonexternalism—i.e., anyone who rejects both Inferentialism and Strong Awareness Internalism—will think that there can be noninferentially justified belief. And when pressed about what makes such beliefs justified, those who reject radical nonexternalism will say that they're justified in virtue of satisfying certain conditions—in other words, they'll assert the conditional claim that *if* those beliefs satisfy those conditions, they're justified. If pressed further about whether they know that the antecedent of that conditional is true, the natural thing for the opponent of radical nonexternalism to say is that she doesn't need to know or even believe that the antecedent is true in order for those noninferential beliefs of hers to be justified. What matters for their justification is that those conditions *are* satisfied, not that she knows or believes

that they're satisfied. Given that this sort of response makes sense for *all* who reject radical nonexternalism, we can see why both externalists and moderate nonexternalists will find it attractive. The "Conditional Answer" objection seems, therefore, to depend for at least some of its force on a failure to recognize what rejecting radical nonexternalism requires. And given how common and plausible it is to reject Inferentialism, failing to recognize what such a rejection requires is a serious weakness of this objection.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, as Alston, Sosa, and especially Kornblith have emphasized, there's no reason to think that externalists (or other opponents of radical nonexternalism) will have to *deny* knowledge of the antecedent of conditionals such as *if belief B satisfies condition C, B is justified*.<sup>48</sup> It's true that these antecedents *needn't* be known in order for a belief like B to be justified. But there's no reason for an externalist to say the antecedents *can't* be known. They will be known if they're believed in a way that satisfies whatever conditions are required for knowledge. And, as externalists and moderate nonexternalists will agree, those conditions can be satisfied by a belief—including a higher-level belief in the antecedent of the conditional in question—even if the subject doesn't know or believe that those conditions are satisfied. This is a simple consequence of rejecting Inferentialism and Strong Awareness Internalism.

Those proposing the "Conditional Answer" objection seem sometimes to think that the conditions required for higher-level knowledge of the antecedents of such conditionals aren't the same ones proposed by externalists or moderate nonexternalists for knowledge generally. They seem to think that for such higher-level knowledge, conditions proposed by proponents of Inferentialism or Strong Awareness Internalism must be satisfied.<sup>49</sup> But externalists and

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<sup>47</sup> See Bergmann (2006b: 227-9) for further elaboration of this response.

<sup>48</sup> See Alston (1986a), Sosa (1997), Kornblith (2004).

<sup>49</sup> BonJour, for example, says:

moderate nonexternalists will think their favored conditions are sufficient for the justification or warrant of *all* beliefs, including higher-level beliefs that some lower-level belief satisfies the conditions for justification or warrant.

2. *Epistemic Circularity (or Bootstrapping)*: The intuition grounding this objection seems to be that a belief source can't reasonably be relied on to vouch for its own trustworthiness—i.e., a belief in a source's trustworthiness can't come to be justified by dependence on beliefs produced by that very belief source. The alleged problem for externalism is that it seems to contradict this intuition by allowing for epistemically circular belief justification (or bootstrapping) in responding to skepticism. There have been two main sorts of response to this charge.<sup>50</sup>

The first response is to argue that in order to avoid the problem of allowing for epistemically circular justification one is forced to hold that knowledge of the reliability of our belief sources—or even knowledge itself—is impossible. But since those consequences are so implausible, we should acknowledge that it's not so bad to admit epistemically circular justification after all. Alston has defended this sort of response by arguing at length that we can't know without epistemic circularity that our faculties are reliable.<sup>51</sup> Sosa argues that looking for someone who knows without epistemic circularity that her faculties are reliable is like looking

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... the proper conclusion [for the externalist] 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 process 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*. (2002: 236-7, italics added)

Notice that he seems to be stipulating that the higher-level beliefs (the contents of which are the antecedents that, according to BonJour, must be known to prevent the externalist response from being merely conditional) count as knowledge only if they arrived at by something like direct acquaintance.

<sup>50</sup> In addition to the articles cited in the next eight footnotes by Alston, Bergmann, Pryor, Schmitt, Sosa and Van Cleve, defenses of epistemic circularity can also be found in Alston (1986a), Boghossian (2000), Braithwaite (1953), Lemos (2004), Sosa (1997), and Van Cleve (1984).

<sup>51</sup> See Alston (1993). Alston focuses mostly on sense perception but makes the argument more generally too in the final chapter.

for the patron saint of modesty who blesses all and only those who don't bless themselves. It's silly to bemoan the fact that no one has the feature in question once we realize the feature can't be possessed.<sup>52</sup> The fact that not even God, a perfect and omniscient knower, could know his ways of knowing are reliable without relying on his ways of knowing to do so strongly suggests that epistemic circularity needn't always be problematic.<sup>53</sup>

Others have noted that it isn't just externalists who face the problem of permitting epistemically circular justification. Consider those who allow for *basic* knowledge—i.e., knowledge produced by a belief source S where that knowledge isn't preceded by the subject's knowledge that S is reliable.<sup>54</sup> Cohen, Van Cleve, and Schmitt have argued convincingly that all who say there is basic knowledge must permit epistemic circularity.<sup>55</sup> Thus, to avoid permitting epistemically circular justification, one must reject basic knowledge. But to reject basic knowledge is to say that all beliefs produced by a source must be preceded by (and, presumably, be at least partially based on) the belief that the source in question is reliable. Unfortunately, this

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<sup>52</sup> Sosa (1994: 284)

<sup>53</sup> Either that or we've got ourselves an argument for atheism that hasn't received much attention.

<sup>54</sup> In this context, the term 'basic' in 'basic knowledge' has a different meaning than it does when foundationalists say there are properly basic beliefs. In that foundationalist claim, 'basic' means noninferential. But given the way 'basic' is used in this context, even an inferential belief can constitute basic knowledge (e.g., knowledge that is produced by deductive inference prior to the subject's knowledge that deductive inference is a reliable belief source).

<sup>55</sup> See Cohen (2002), Van Cleve (2003), and Schmitt (2004). There's a slight complication that arises in defining basic knowledge. Some say, as I did above, that basic knowledge occurs if and only if knowledge produced by a source isn't *preceded* by the subject's knowledge of that source's reliability. Others (e.g., Cohen) say basic knowledge occurs if and only if knowledge produced by a source isn't *preceded by or produced at the same time as* the subject's knowledge of that source's reliability. I prefer the former definition given that people (such as Cohen himself) seek to avoid epistemic circularity by denying basic knowledge. On the former definition, denying basic knowledge (i.e., insisting that knowledge produced by a source must be preceded by knowledge of that source's reliability) is enough to avoid epistemically circular knowledge. But on the latter definition, that isn't enough. According to the latter definition, it's possible to deny basic knowledge (where this is understood as insisting that knowledge produced by a source must be either preceded by or produced at the same time as knowledge of that source's reliability) while allowing for knowledge of source S's reliability that is produced directly by S itself as its first knowledge output. Since this S-produced knowledge of S's reliability is a case of knowledge via a source whose reliability wasn't verified before it was employed to produce knowledge of its own reliability—and which continues to be unverified by an independent source—we have a case of epistemically circular knowledge. Thus, although Cohen employs the latter definition of basic knowledge, he needs the former definition in order for his rejection of basic knowledge to enable him to avoid epistemic circularity.

commits one to Inferentialism, which is highly implausible because it so obviously implies that knowledge is impossible. In addition, I've argued elsewhere, without reference to the basic knowledge issue, that all those who reject Inferentialism are committed to permitting epistemically circular justification.<sup>56</sup> Again, given the extreme plausibility of rejecting Inferentialism, this lends support to the conclusion that epistemically circular justification needn't be a bad thing.

The second type of response to the "Epistemic Circularity" objection is to argue that we can make sense of the tendency to deny epistemically circular justification by distinguishing acceptable cases from unacceptable cases of it and noting that philosophers often focus solely on the unacceptable cases, which they quite naturally and properly find problematic. This is the strategy employed by Pryor, Schmitt, and me. All three of us agree that when someone believes a source is unreliable, an epistemically circular argument for its reliability cannot be of any help.<sup>57</sup> That person's belief in the unreliability of the source functions as an undercutting defeater for all beliefs produced by it, including those relied on in epistemically circular arguments for its reliability. In addition, Pryor and I argue that even doubts about that source's reliability (where those doubts are genuine and strong enough to make one withhold judgment about its reliability—though they may not make one positively suspect unreliability) can serve as undercutting defeaters for all beliefs produced by that source. So, according to us (but contrary to Schmitt), epistemically circular arguments are not useful for helping those who have such doubts come to justifiedly believe in the reliability of the source in question.<sup>58</sup> But Pryor suggests (rightly, I think) that if the doubts in question are merely hypothetical—i.e., if the

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<sup>56</sup> See Bergmann (2004a and 2006b ch. 7).

<sup>57</sup> See Bergmann (2004a: 717-19 and 2006b: 198), Pryor (2004: 365-6), and Schmitt (2004: 392).

<sup>58</sup> See Bergmann (2004a: 717-19 and 2006b: 198) and Pryor (2004: 366). Schmitt (2004: 392) explicitly rejects this point, insisting to the contrary that merely having doubts resulting in withholding judgment about a faculty's reliability isn't enough to make epistemically circular arguments for its reliability ineffective.

proposition that the source is unreliable is merely being entertained but there is no doubt leading to withholding judgment with respect to that proposition—then an epistemically circular argument for a source’s reliability can still be a source of justification.<sup>59</sup>

The upshot of this second response is this. Epistemically circular arguments are useless at convincing skeptics of a source’s reliability. But this doesn’t make them intrinsically flawed. For they can be used effectively by nonskeptics to come to know that their own faculties are reliable, even when entertaining (though remaining unmoved by) skeptical hypotheses. It’s true that this won’t be philosophically satisfying for the skeptic. But the fault is not with externalism. It’s with the skeptic and her tendency to have doubts when she needn’t—doubts that give rise to a context in which a certain sort of philosophical curiosity can’t be satisfied.

3. *Uncomfortable Moving up a Level*: Externalists, such as Alston, have expressed misgivings about moving up a level and claiming, in addition to first-order knowledge, higher-level knowledge that their faculties are reliable.<sup>60</sup> Fumerton pounced on this as evidence that externalists generally have a reason to feel such discomfort.<sup>61</sup> I’ve pointed out that Alston’s discomfort is due to his discomfort with epistemic circularity, and yet Fumerton also endorses epistemic circularity when he says we can know by direct acquaintance that direct acquaintance is a legitimate source of justification.<sup>62</sup> In response, Fumerton has offered the additional point (mentioned above in laying out this objection) that when the internalist employs direct acquaintance at the first level—to know, for example, that she’s being appeared to redly—her philosophical curiosity is fully satisfied in a way it isn’t when she uses perception to know there’s a red object in her environment. The unfulfilled curiosity in the case of perception gives

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<sup>59</sup> He hints at this point in Pryor (2004: 366-8) and has confirmed it in correspondence.

<sup>60</sup> Alston (1993: 16-17).

<sup>61</sup> Fumerton (1995: 178-80).

<sup>62</sup> Bergmann (2000: 171-2).

rise to the need for a higher-level belief about the reliability or legitimacy of perception. We have no such need, says Fumerton, in the case of direct acquaintance, though we can easily form a higher-level belief in the legitimacy of direct acquaintance using direct acquaintance itself—and this higher-level belief also satisfies our philosophical curiosity. But if we form a higher-level belief in the reliability of perception and rely on perception in doing so, we are left with the same unfulfilled philosophical curiosity that we had about the first-level perceptual belief: how do we know that perception (used this time to legitimate perception) is reliable? According to Fumerton, it is this difference that makes externalism problematic in a way that internalism relying on direct acquaintance is not.<sup>63</sup>

I've already given a partial response to this objection above when I argued in section III.B that internalists face the same problem, even with regard to direct acquaintance. It seems possible for a person to believe that *p* while assuming that she is directly acquainted with the fact that *p* when, in actuality, she isn't so acquainted and there is no such fact. Moreover it's possible for this to go entirely unnoticed by the person who may be utterly convinced that all is well with her beliefs epistemically speaking. But then the skeptic can ask how the direct acquaintance theorist knows this isn't what is happening with all of her current direct acquaintance beliefs. The fact that it seems not to be happening would seem to be useless comfort for someone who fully understood the problem. In the face of these considerations, such a person's philosophical curiosity should be no more satisfied by claims of direct acquaintance than by claims of perception.

An additional response is this: we can easily explain the externalist's discomfort with epistemically circular track-record arguments without jumping to the conclusion that the externalist is uncomfortable with externalism itself. The discomfort is due to the fact that when

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<sup>63</sup> Fumerton (2006: 184-6).



someone uses an argument, one typically assumes it must have some force against a doubter (that is how we tend to think of arguments). But, as already noted, epistemically circular arguments are useless against doubters (since to doubt their conclusions provides an undercutting defeater for some of the premises).<sup>64</sup> Moreover, it seems implausible to suggest that our higher-level beliefs in the reliability of our faculties are in fact produced by such arguments. That doesn't seem to be what is in fact going on when we believe our faculties are reliable. These two considerations explain the discomfort someone like Alston feels about relying on epistemically circular track record arguments; and they do so without impugning externalism. Hence, the inference from "externalists feel discomfort when moving up a level (and relying on epistemically circular track record arguments)" to "externalists are uncomfortable with the implications of their externalist principles" is fallacious.<sup>65</sup>

4. *Anything Goes*. Sosa considers the charge that, if externalist responses to skepticism are appropriate, then crystal ball gazers can appropriately use the same type of response to skepticism about their crystal ball beliefs as externalists use in response to skeptics about perception.<sup>66</sup> By way of response, he says that the externalist isn't committed to agreeing. For the externalist can point out that perception is in fact a reliable faculty (known to be reliable in part by depending on perception) whereas crystal ball gazing is not reliable (though it too may be believed to be reliable in part by depending on crystal ball gazing).<sup>67</sup>

Of course, the crystal ball gazer won't be satisfied by this if she thinks about crystal ball gazing the way typical externalists think about perception. Is there anything that the externalist

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<sup>64</sup> I'm thinking here not of hypothetical doubt but of doubt that involves suspecting the falsehood of or disbelieving or withholding the conclusion in question.

<sup>65</sup> For further discussion of these points, see Bergmann (2004a: 720-1 and 2006b: 200-202).

<sup>66</sup> Keep in mind that, as I noted when introducing the "anything goes" worry, we're stipulating that the crystal ball beliefs in question are internally consistent and that there's no clear way to falsify or confirm them without appeal to crystal ball gazing itself.

<sup>67</sup> Sosa (1997: section 6). Plantinga (1983: 74-78 and 2000: 342-53) says something similar when defending his externalist account of noninferentially justified theistic belief against the Great Pumpkin objection.

can say—anything satisfying to the crystal ball gazer—which will differentiate her views on perceiving from the gazer’s views on crystal ball gazing? I think that the answer may in fact be ‘no’, depending on the details of how crystal ball gazing works. (Does it conflict with itself or with other ways of knowing? Does it confirm itself?) Let’s suppose that the crystal ball gazer’s beliefs are consistent, self-confirming, and not contradicted by things she knows from other sources. Then it seems that the gazer can mimic exactly the externalist’s responses to the skeptic about perception. And just as the typical externalist remains philosophically satisfied despite the skeptic’s worries about perception, the externalist gazer can remain philosophically satisfied despite our conviction that she’s deluded. Is there any way the externalist can help the gazer see that her views are silly whereas our trust in perception isn’t? I think there may be no way to do this—using only the tools of philosophy—that will guarantee that all parties are satisfied.

What does that imply about externalism? Does her admission that, given her externalist principles, she can’t show the externalist crystal ball gazer that her gazing beliefs aren’t justified suggest that externalism itself should be dropped? No. First, the same problem arises for serious moderate nonexternalists too—for example to direct acquaintance theorists when faced with skeptics about direct acquaintance. The direct acquaintance theorists can’t noncircularly show they aren’t in a skeptical scenario in which their direct acquaintance beliefs merely seem to be reliably formed when in fact they aren’t. So they, like externalists about perception, are equally compelled to admit that they can’t satisfyingly explain why the gazer’s crystal ball views are to be rejected while their own (direct acquaintance) beliefs aren’t. The only way to avoid this sort of problem is to adopt a radical nonexternalist view such as Strong Awareness Internalism, which is objectionable because it so obviously implies that justification is impossible.

Does it follow that the externalist and the serious moderate nonexternalist must both admit that the gazer's position is just fine? No. They can insist that their position (on perception or direct acquaintance) is correct while the gazer's position is mistaken. They can admit that they can't *show* the gazer, using standards both they and the gazer accept, that the gazer's beliefs are unjustified whereas their own (perceptual or direct acquaintance) beliefs are justified. But they can satisfy themselves by pointing out that the difference between themselves and the gazers is that their own beliefs really do satisfy justification requirements whereas the gazer's beliefs only seem to be satisfying them. And this is so even though the gazers won't admit it but will instead say that their crystal ball beliefs do satisfy justification requirements. Moreover, the externalist and serious moderate nonexternalists who think the gazers are deluded needn't show any respect for the gazer's crystal ball beliefs even though they can't prove to the gazer's satisfaction that crystal ball beliefs fail to satisfy justification requirements that are satisfied by perceptual or direct acquaintance beliefs. Instead, they'll just confess that all they can do is hope that the gazer will escape her delusion. Those who find this response unsatisfying need to be reminded that we're forced to choose between that sort of response, on the one hand, and radical nonexternalism or the Low Standard view, on the other, and that the former seems preferable by far.<sup>68</sup>

#### **IV. The Superiority of Externalism**

In section III, I argued that externalists can respond to the four objections mentioned in III.A by making two points. First, they can argue that those four objections (aimed at supporting the charge that externalism's handling of skepticism is philosophically unsatisfying) apply just as

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<sup>68</sup> See Bergmann (2006b: 229-33) for further discussion of this reply to the "Anything Goes" objection.

strongly to the only live option for nonexternalists—namely, serious moderate nonexternalism, which rejects both radical nonexternalism and the Low Standard view. Second, they can argue that the four objections are either based on some misunderstanding or focused on alleged problems that aren't nearly as bad as the consequences of the only alternatives to those alleged problems (i.e., the consequences of radical nonexternalism or the Low Standard view). But I also noted that serious moderate nonexternalists can make this second point in defense of their own views. And this may make one think that the discussion in section III offers nothing to show that externalism has an advantage over serious moderate nonexternalism. After all, supporters of both positions can offer the replies given in section III.C in response to the four objections mentioned in III.A.

But although I think that serious moderate nonexternalists *could* offer those replies to those objections, doing so will not be tempting to them. They will, I strongly suspect, find those replies philosophically unsatisfying. This is because, although they officially reject radical nonexternalism, they seem to be motivated by a tacit endorsement of the intuitions supporting it. It is the appeal of the intuitions behind radical nonexternalism (supporting either Inferentialism or Strong Awareness Internalism or both) that provides one of the main motivations for rejecting externalism, including externalism's reliance on the replies mentioned in III.C. But once serious moderate nonexternalists are clear about their own rejection of radical nonexternalism, they should feel perfectly comfortable offering the III.C replies to the four objections from III.A. Unfortunately, along with the opportunity to use the III.C replies comes the undermining of the main objection to externalism. This, I believe, explains why serious moderate nonexternalists aren't tempted by the opportunity to use those replies.

Nonexternalists seem, therefore, to be faced with an uncomfortable dilemma.<sup>69</sup> Either they endorse serious moderate nonexternalism or they don't. If they don't, they face the implausible consequences of either the Low Standard view, which makes justification too easy to come by, or radical nonexternalism, which very quickly leads to the radical skeptical results implied by Inferentialism or Strong Awareness Internalism. But if instead they *endorse* serious moderate nonexternalism, then they are faced with both the III.A objections and the discomfort they feel with the III.C replies their position permits. Thus, they are caught between facing the implausible consequences of rejecting serious moderate nonexternalism, on the one hand, and, on the other, ignoring the discomfort that provided their main motivation for rejecting externalism. The end result is that the arguments of section III leave externalists in a better position than serious moderate nonexternalists. For although the latter can use the III.C replies, doing so forces them to concede that the main reason for preferring their view to externalism fails.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> An objection to nonexternalist views that relies on a similar dilemma is developed at length in my 2006b.

<sup>70</sup> My thanks to John Greco, Joel Pust, Matthias Steup, Michael Rea, and the philosophy department at the University of Notre Dame (where I presented this paper at a colloquium in March of 2007) for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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