

On the General Argument Against Internalism

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Abstract: I respond to John Greco's argument that all forms of internalism in epistemology are either false or uninteresting. The paper divides into two sections. First, I explain precisely what internalists and externalists in epistemology disagree over. This puts us in a position to assess whether Greco's argument succeeds. Second, I present Greco's argument and offer two objections.

1. Internalism and Externalism

More than one debate goes by the label 'internalism/externalism' in contemporary epistemology. All share one thing in common, namely, they concern the nature and grounds of evaluative epistemic properties, especially justification. The controversy ultimately turns on the correct answer to two questions.¹ Where 'E' designates an

¹ Among the sources that have informed my thinking on this are: Pollock (1986), Steup (1996), Conee and Feldman (2001: section I), Pryor

evaluative epistemic property, ‘S’ any cognitive being, and ‘i’ an item of S’s suitable for epistemic evaluation (where we include S as one of S’s eligible items):

- A. Is it possible for *i*’s E-status (i.e., whether it is E, or the extent to which it is E) to partly depend on contingent facts that are not strictly about S’s mental life?²
- B. Does *i*’s being E *entail* that S is aware of, or has unproblematic access to, all those factors which make it the case that *i* is E?³

A and B generate the following taxonomy.

Answering ‘no’ to A makes you a **supervenience internalist**.

Supervenience internalists claim that E “strongly supervenes” on mentality, where this is taken to exclude even partial dependence upon

(2001: section 3.1), and Feldman (2003: 613). See also Greco (2005: section 1). Fumerton (1995: 96, 159, et. passim) has a different take on the matter, one not captured by either A or B. He thinks that the internalism/externalism dispute is ultimately over “the *reducibility* of epistemic concepts to nomological concepts,” and that internalism is essentially characterized by a “refusal to ‘naturalize’ epistemology.” Neta and Pritchard (2007) claim to identify “literally hundreds” of potential internalist/externalist disputes.

- ² The ‘strictly’ is intended to rule out, among other things, conjunctive facts like these: the fact that S has a mental life **and** induction is actually truth-conducive; the fact that S is having a sense perception **and** sense perception is a reliable faculty bestowed by God; the fact that S is having a visual experience as of a zebra **and** S’s experience is being caused by a mule that the zookeepers have cleverly disguised to look just like a zebra; etc.
- ³ Note that this is different from asking whether S’s having unproblematic access to those factors *helps make it the case* that *i* is E.

contingent non-mental factors. They accept the following thesis:⁴

Strong Supervenience on the Mental (SSM): For any possible cognitive beings, if they are exactly similar in all relevant mental respects (in their respective worlds), then their respective *i*'s have exactly the same E-status (in their respective worlds).

Supervenience internalists could disagree over which mental states are relevant. Some might include *all* of S's mental states and relations, past and present, while others might include only those S is presently aware of or has unproblematic access to. This leads to an important distinction among supervenience internalists, discussed below.

Answering 'yes' to B makes you an **access internalist**. There are two importantly different types of access internalist, discussed below. S has "unproblematic access" to a factor just in case S could easily become aware of it. What counts as "easily" is left vague. Access internalists distinguish between direct and indirect access,⁵ and some might contend that only direct access is unproblematic. Introspection

⁴ Here I'm indebted to Jaegwon Kim's (1996: 224; 1987: 316) discussion of strong supervenience. We should note that, strictly speaking, SSM does *not* entail that epistemic status *depends* upon, or only upon, the mental. Epistemological nihilism, the view that it is *impossible* to have evaluative epistemic properties, entails SSM, but nihilism is consistent with the claim that it is not true that epistemic properties depend on the mental. I take it that in most cases talk of supervenience implicates a further commitment on the part of the author to an "in virtue of" dependence relation, as well as a denial of nihilism. For more on this, see Turri (forthcoming a).

⁵ See BonJour (2002: 223 – 224). It is possible to have both direct and indirect access to one and the same fact; my discussion does not rule this out.

and *a priori* intuition provide us with **direct access** to facts.⁶ If direct realism is the correct theory of perception, then perception also provides us with direct access to contingent non-mental facts about our current surroundings; if direct realism is the correct theory of memory, then memory provides us with direct access to *past* contingent facts, both mental and non-mental.⁷ We have **indirect access** to things we become aware of by (properly) reasoning from the directly accessible things.⁸

Answering ‘yes’ to *both* A and B makes you a **traditional access internalist**. Traditional access internalists need not mind that contingent non-mental facts play a role in determining whether *i* is E.⁹ For instance, they could agree that the right sort of contingent causal or counterfactual relationship with the external environment is required for E. But they will insist that S must have unproblematic ac-

⁶ Chisholm (1989: 77) contends that you can discover whether your belief is justified “merely by reflecting on [your] own conscious state.... In a word, [you] need only consider [your] own state of mind.” According to Chisholm, introspection alone suffices to reveal justification.

⁷ Thomas Reid (1764: chapter 2, section 3) suggests such a theory. Says Reid, “Suppose that once, and only once, I smelled a tuberose in a certain room where it grew in a pot, and gave a very grateful perfume. Next day I relate what I saw and smelled. When I attend as carefully as I can to what passes in my mind in this case, it appears evident, that the very thing I saw yesterday, and the fragrance I smelled, are now the immediate objects of my mind when I remember.”

⁸ BonJour (2002: 223 – 224) remarks, “For example, if the reliability of certain sorts of testimony can be cogently established by reasoning that begins from what is initially available there ... then the supposed facts reflected in such testimony becomes *indirectly* available as a basis for internal justification.”

⁹ BonJour (2002; 2003: 177 – 178), Fumerton (1995).

cess to any such fact. Access to such facts could be either direct or indirect.

Answering ‘no’ to *both* A and B makes you a **supervenience mentalist internalist**, or **mentalist** for short. Mentalism is committed to the view that it is at least possible for some aspects of S’s mentality, which are *not* unproblematically accessible to S, to help determine *i*’s E-status.

Answering ‘no’ to A and ‘yes’ to B makes you a **supervenience access internalist**. This is the category of supervenience internalists who deem relevant only those mental features that S either is aware of or has unproblematic access to.

Answering ‘yes’ to A and ‘no’ to B makes you an **externalist**. Answering ‘yes’ to A does not commit externalists to denying that any or all aspects of S’s mentality help determine *i*’s E-status. Strictly speaking, it does not even commit externalists to denying that on some, or even most, occasions, facts about S’s mental life *entirely* determine *i*’s E-status. Answering ‘no’ to B does not commit externalists to denying that S sometimes, or even most times, has unproblematic access to all the factors that determine *i*’s E-status.

The following chart represents the four possible views.

	Yes to B	No to B
Yes to A	Traditional Access Internalism	Externalism
No to A	Supervenience Access Internalism	Supervenience Mentalist Internalism

Some epistemologists believe that answering ‘no’ to B makes you an

externalist, that answering ‘yes’ to B makes you an internalist, and that question A is irrelevant or misguided.¹⁰ I shall set that issue aside. As indicated above, further distinctions are possible within the squares, depending on how we characterize ‘unproblematic access’ and how we understand ‘mental’.

2. The General Argument Against Internalism

John Greco argues that no internalist theory about any epistemic status is both true and interesting.¹¹ He calls his argument “The General Argument Against Internalism.” In what follows, I will first introduce the necessary terminology to state Greco’s argument. Then I will present his argument. Finally, I will offer two objections.

An **objective epistemic evaluation** concerns how successful a person’s cognitive powers and performance are. We objectively evaluate someone when we ask questions like, Does she have good eyesight? Does she reason well? Does she have a good memory? Scoring well on these dimensions requires reliability, in terms of visually identifying features of the immediate environment, drawing inferences that are at least likely to preserve truth, and dependably and accurately retaining information previously gathered. Call the epistemic statuses at stake in objective evaluations **objective epistemic properties**. Reliability, accuracy, and objective probability are objective

¹⁰ See, e.g., BonJour (2002: 223 – 224; 2003: 175, 177 – 178, et. passim) and Plantinga (1993: 180 – 181).

¹¹ Greco (2005). Parenthetical citations in the text refer to this work.

epistemic properties (258 – 9).¹²

A **subjective epistemic evaluation** is different. Scoring well on this dimension does not require reliability (or accuracy or objective probability). Someone could be the unsuspecting victim of systematic undetectable deception, but nevertheless be proceeding appropriately. He might trust teachers who, inexplicably, seek to do cognitive harm, or he might be the victim of an evil genius, as in Descartes' famous thought experiment. Call the epistemic statuses at stake in subjective evaluations **subjective epistemic properties**. Responsibility, praiseworthiness, and, some would say, justification are subjective epistemic properties.

Greco's argument can be summarized as follows, where 'evaluation' is short for 'epistemic evaluation'.

1. All evaluations are either subjective or objective.¹³
2. All objective evaluations are externalist.
3. All interesting subjective evaluations are externalist.
4. Therefore, all interesting evaluations are externalist. (From 1 – 3)

The argument is valid. To resist the conclusion, we must isolate at least one false premise. Premise 1 is true by definition. Either an

¹² A reliable process produces mostly true beliefs. An accurate process produces mostly accurate beliefs, where an accurate belief is one that is either true or closely enough approximates the truth for practical purposes. All reliable processes are accurate, but not vice versa. I here draw on some remarks of Alston's (1991: 105).

¹³ An anonymous referee questions whether this disjunction is exhaustive. For the sake of argument, I grant that it is.

evaluation concerns an epistemic property that requires reliability (or accuracy or objective probability), or it does not. If it does, then it is objective; if it does not, then it is subjective. But 2 is false and 3 is questionable, as I will now show.

Greco defends 2 by noting that objective evaluation concerns “accuracy, reliability, and appropriate causal relations to one’s environment,” which are “paradigmatically external factors” (259). However, reliability and accuracy are not always external *in the sense relevant to the internalist/externalist debate*. That is my basic criticism of 2. Let me elaborate.

Let us say that a concrete belief state, *b*, has **cogito status** if and only if (i) *b* could not possibly be false, and (ii) the fact that *b* could not possibly be false is accessible to its owner upon reflection. (Note that (i) does not entail that the *propositional content* of a cogito belief could not be false.) My belief that *someone believes something* has cogito status. The same goes for René’s belief that he is thinking, and my son’s belief that something exists. Cogito status is an objective epistemic property: necessarily, a cogito belief is reliable and accurate.¹⁴ But cogito status is not externalist: it does not depend, even in

¹⁴ In calling cogito beliefs ‘reliable’, I favor concision over explicitness. As an anonymous referee pointed out, it is easy to find oneself thinking that, whereas token belief states can be *reliably produced*, strictly speaking they are not themselves reliable, because reliability is a property of doxastic processes, not token belief states. In the present case, then, we might restrict our attention to beliefs formed as a result of (i) consciously considering the question whether *Q*, and (ii) consciously and explicitly endorsing *Q* because it is immediately obvious that such an endorsement must result in a true belief. Augustine (1993: Bk. XI, Ch. 26) and Descartes (1993: Second Meditation) describe beliefs resulting from similar processes.

part, on the subject's relationship to contingent features of the external, non-mental environment; and it is a conceptual truth that the subject either does, or easily could, have reflective awareness of all the facts relevant to cogito status. Some objective epistemic properties are internalist.

Undoubtedly, cogito status is also an interesting epistemic property. Cogito beliefs repel even the most ingenious skeptical challenge. And cogito status has played an enormously important role in the history of modern epistemology. Granted, we do not normally aim for cogito status, and we are not disturbed if our beliefs fail to attain it.¹⁵ Our aspirations are almost universally much more modest. But it does not follow that cogito status is uninteresting. We don't ever aim for omniscience, and we are not disturbed by our failure to measure up to such a standard, but we would not conclude that omniscience is uninteresting.

Greco's defense of 3 can be represented as follows:

5. All interesting subjective evaluations attend to a belief's etiology.
6. All evaluations that attend to a belief's etiology are externalist.

In any event, we should bear in mind that objective epistemic evaluation concerns properties other than reliability proper, encompassing also "accuracy" and "objective probability," among others. Cogito status clearly falls within the intended class. What's more, if we classify cogito status as a subjective epistemic property, then we would instead have a clear counterexample to premise 3: an interesting *internalist* form of *subjective* evaluation.

¹⁵ Thanks to Casey Swank for making the criticism I here respond to.

3. Therefore, all interesting subjective evaluations are externalist. (From 5 – 6)

A belief's etiology concerns "the history of the belief" and the reasons for which it is held (266). The reason for which a belief is held is a central component of its etiology. Let's use the phrase 'the basing relation' to name the relation between a belief and the reason for which it is held. Greco assumes that the basing relation is an external matter because it will "[involve] factors that are neither part of S's mental life nor something to which S has privileged access in the typical case" (268). And if Greco is right about the basing relation, then a belief's etiology is an external matter, and any epistemic property that essentially depends on a belief's etiology will thereby be an externalist epistemic property. In short, if Greco is right about the basing relation, then 6 is true.

Mentalists, at least, have the resources to contest 3 by rejecting 6.¹⁶ There is a coherent and plausible alternative view of a belief's etiology, fully consistent with mentalism. The view says: (i) reasons are mental states, and (ii) a belief is based on a reason just in case the reason non-deviantly causes the belief.¹⁷ All factors relevant to the basing relation are internal to S's mentality, being limited to either the subject's mental states or relations among them.¹⁸ Granted, they may not

¹⁶ In a footnote (p. 269, n. 3), Greco says that the difference between mentalism and access internalism does not matter to his arguments. It might in this case, though.

¹⁷ For a defense of (i), see Turri (forthcoming b); for a defense of (ii), see Turri (forthcoming c).

¹⁸ To some extent, this is held hostage to developments in the metaphysics of causation. If, for instance, we count the applicable natu-

be unproblematically accessible to S in any given case, but mentalism does not require such access. In light of all this, I submit that Greco has not presented a convincing case for 3.

In closing, I would like to point out that while the example of cogito status may undermine Greco's claim that all true and interesting forms of epistemic evaluation are externalist, it does not likewise undermine the claim that all true and interesting forms of epistemic evaluations concern reliability or accuracy. Greco claims that we would never want to completely abstract away from all external factors when evaluating an intellectual performance. While I disagree about that, it still remains highly plausible that we would not generally be interested in abstracting away from all considerations of reliability or accuracy. However this does not rule out some important and interesting forms of internalist evaluation.¹⁹

ral laws, which govern the causal relations among mental states, as relevant factors, and those laws are only *contingent*, then this mentalist response ultimately fails. Likewise, if the regularity account of causation is correct, then a contingent pattern of events, outside of the subject's mentality, will help determine the basing relation, thereby undermining this mentalist response. Thanks to Richard Fumerton for cautioning me on this point.

¹⁹ For helpful comments and feedback, I thank Richard Fumerton, John Greco, Ernest Sosa, and an audience at the 2007 Central States Philosophical Association meeting in Des Moines, Iowa. Casey Swank was my commentator on that occasion, and I thank him for his thoughtful remarks.

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