A Defense of Externalism Through Regress Avoidance

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Introduction

In epistemology, the debate between internalism and externalism centers on the nature of epistemic justification—what makes a belief rational or reasonable to hold. Internalism holds that justification-conferring factors must be internal to the believer's mental state or cognitive perspective. A more specific version, accessibility internalism, further requires that these factors be accessible through reflection alone, at least in principle, even if not always immediately available due to distraction or cognitive limits. This distinction is important: while general internalism emphasizes internal mental states, accessibility internalism stresses the believer's reflective access to justification. In contrast, externalism maintains that justification can depend on factors external to the believer's mental states, such as the reliability of the belief-forming process. This paper argues that externalism offers a more plausible account of epistemic justification by addressing the problem of infinite regress inherent in internalist theories.

Externalism challenges these internalist premises by asserting that justification can depend on factors external to the believer's perspective or beyond their capacity for introspection. To demonstrate externalism's superiority, this paper first examines Laurence BonJour's defense of internalism in *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (1985). BonJour argues that epistemic justification requires reflective access to the reasons supporting a belief. However, this requirement leads to an infinite regress of justifications—a significant challenge for internalist theories. By contrast, externalism resolves this issue by allowing justification to stem from reliable belief-forming processes without requiring reflective access. Through this analysis, we

will show that externalism provides a more coherent and practical framework for understanding epistemic justification.

The Internalist's Argument

BonJour, in his work, presents a robust defense of internalism in epistemology, specifically endorsing accessibility internalism. He argues that for a belief to be epistemically justified, the believer must have cognitive access to the reasons or evidence that support the belief (p. 8). BonJour's central thesis can be summarized as follows: a person's belief that *P* is justified only if the person is aware, whether through introspection or rational reflection, of the factors that make *P* likely to be true—or would be aware of them under appropriate counterfactual conditions, such as if the person were attentive and reflective (p. 22). This access requirement does not demand constant conscious awareness but rather the potential for awareness through reflection alone (pp. 21–24). 'External information' in this context refers to anything not directly accessible through introspection or rational reflection—for example, the reliability of one's perceptual processes, the testimony of others, or facts about the external world that lie beyond the believer's cognitive perspective (p. 8).

BonJour's argument rests on two main premises:

1. Epistemic justification is fundamentally about the pursuit of truth; a justified belief is one that is likely to be true.

2. For a belief to be justified, the believer must be acting in an epistemically responsible manner.

BonJour connects epistemic responsibility with the requirement of awareness. He argues that if a person holds a belief without being aware of what makes it likely to be true, they are not being epistemically responsible (pp. 20–21). On his view, epistemic responsibility requires that one be able to provide reasons for one's beliefs when challenged. However, it is not sufficient merely to be able to offer some reason—after all, someone who consistently responds to epistemic challenges by claiming, for instance, that the moon is made of green cheese is clearly failing to meet their epistemic duties. What matters is that the believer is positioned to provide good reasons—reasons that actually support the likelihood of the belief's truth and are accessible through reflection.

This requirement introduces a significant problem: the regress of reasons. For any justifying reason a believer might offer, we can ask what justifies that reason, and then what justifies that, and so on. This leads to a potentially infinite regress of justifications, which threatens to undermine the possibility of ultimate justification. BonJour acknowledges this challenge and responds with a coherentist model of justification (pp. 93–94). On this view, beliefs are justified not through a linear foundational chain, but through their mutual support within a coherent system. Justification, in this framework, is holistic rather than linear, aiming to halt the regress by appealing to the internal consistency and explanatory integration of the believer's entire belief system.

The Problem of Infinite Regress in Internalist Accounts

One of the most significant challenges faced by internalist theories of justification is the problem of infinite regress. This issue has its roots in ancient philosophy and was famously discussed by Aristotle in his *Posterior Analytics* (Aristotle, trans. 1901). The problem of infinite regress poses a fundamental logical flaw in internalist accounts, particularly accessibility internalism.

BonJour's requirement that justification must be accessible through reflection alone can lead to challenges. As discussed earlier in *The Internalist's Argument*, accessibility internalism posits that for a belief to be justified, the believer must have reflective access to the factors that justify that belief. Reflective access refers to the ability to become aware of these justifying factors through introspection or rational reflection alone, without relying on external sources of information. However, this requirement can potentially lead to difficulties in explaining the justification of certain beliefs.

Consider the following scenario:

1. To be justified in believing *P*, one must have reflective access to some justifying reason, say *Q*.
2. If *Q* justifies *P*, one has thereby met one's epistemic responsibility for *P*—at least for the moment.
3. But the question then arises: what justifies one's belief in *Q*?
4. If *Q* is justified by *R*, and so on, this can lead to a chain of justification with no clear endpoint.

Now, it may seem that once one cites *Q* as a reason for *P*, they've discharged their immediate epistemic responsibility. And in a sense, that's true—until the justificatory spotlight shifts to *Q*

itself. The regress problem emerges not because a believer cannot cite a reason, but because each reason can itself be scrutinized and held to the same internalist standard of reflective accessibility.

To address this, BonJour identifies three responses internalists might offer. These are not the only theoretical options available, but they are the ones BonJour takes seriously:

1. Accept an infinite regress of justifications, which is psychologically implausible and epistemologically problematic.
2. Allow for circular reasoning, where beliefs in the justificatory chain eventually justify themselves.
3. Posit some "basic" beliefs that do not require further justification, which seems to violate the core principles of internalism.

BonJour himself opts for a coherentist alternative, which attempts to avoid the regress by rejecting the linear model of justification altogether.

The Picnic Planner's Dilemma

In order to better understand these options, let us expand to a real-life scenario. Suppose a picnic planner wakes up, looks outside, and forms the belief:

Belief A: "*It is cloudy this morning.*"

Under accessibility internalism, for Belief A to be justified, it must satisfy two key principles:

1. Reflective Accessibility: All justifying factors must be accessible through either introspection or rational reflection (BonJour, 1985, pp. 8–9).

2. Epistemic Completeness: A belief must not rely on unexamined or hidden assumptions; all justificatory steps must be made reflectively explicit.

To assess whether Belief A is justified, the person reflects on the basis for it:

Belief B: "*I saw dark clouds when I looked outside.*"

To justify Belief B, the person must also reflectively endorse:

Belief C: "*My visual perception is accurate right now.*"

Here, we must distinguish between two epistemically distinct concerns. Belief B addresses the *content* of perception (seeing clouds), while Belief C addresses the *reliability* of perception. These are not interchangeable: the content of perception could be accurate even if the perceptual system is flawed, or vice versa. Still, from the internalist's perspective, for B to serve as a legitimate justifier for A, C must also be accessible and justified.

The person may then consider:

Belief D: "*Dark clouds generally indicate rain.*"

Belief D introduces an empirical generalization. But internalism demands more than statistical reports from meteorologists. If justification must come from one's own accessible mental states, then such a generalization must be grounded in:

Belief E: "*My memory confirms that, in past experiences, dark clouds have preceded rain."*

Belief E, too, stands in need of justification:

Belief F: "*My memory is accurate in this instance."*

At this point, the regress problem resurfaces: if each belief requires reflective justification through another belief, the person must then justify F as well—for example:

Belief G: "*My introspective check of memory and perception is itself reliable."*

But now we may ask: what justifies G? And so on. At no point, under strict accessibility internalism, can the chain stop arbitrarily without violating the requirement for reflectively accessible justification. This brings us to a broader diagnosis of the problem. The internalist, at this stage, faces three core commitments that together generate the regress:

1. No Arbitrary Stopping Points: Accessibility internalism rejects the idea of basic beliefs—beliefs that are justified without being supported by further reasons. A belief like B or E cannot be exempt from scrutiny simply because the believer finds it intuitive or foundational (BonJour, 1985, pp. 26–27). A basic belief, in contrast, is one whose justification does not depend on the justification of another belief—for instance, "I am in pain" or "I see red" might be candidates in some foundationalist theories.

2. Anti-Enthymatic Demand: Internalism insists that no premise in a justificatory chain can remain implicit or unexamined. It's not merely circular reasoning that's ruled out, but also any chain where some steps are assumed without reflection.
3. Psychological Plausibility: As Schacter (1999) and others note, ordinary cognitive agents lack real-time access to the reliability of their memory or perceptual systems. The demand for continuous reflective access to such meta-justifications is not just demanding—it borders on the psychologically impossible.

One internalist response is coherentism, as proposed by BonJour, which seeks to halt the regress by rejecting linear chains of justification altogether. On this view, a belief is justified not by tracing its lineage to foundational premises, but by its integration within a web of mutually supporting beliefs (BonJour, 1985, pp. 92–101). While this approach avoids linear regress, it faces its own challenges. Critics argue that coherence alone cannot ensure truth—an internally coherent belief system could still be entirely disconnected from reality. Moreover, coherentism risks circularity, since the justification for each belief depends on the system's overall coherence, which in turn presupposes the justified status of its components (Pappas, 2023).

In this case, our picnic planner finds themselves paralyzed, unable to justify even a mundane belief like "It is cloudy this morning" without initiating a cascade of further justificatory demands. This "doxastic crisis" (BonJour, 1985, p. 31) illustrates the core difficulty: under accessibility internalism, even everyday beliefs become epistemically unstable.

Examining the Internalist Argument

The infinite regress of justifications is both psychologically implausible and epistemologically problematic. Psychologically, it is implausible because human cognitive capacities are finite; we cannot sustain an endless chain of reasoning for every belief we hold. As the *Picnic Planner's Dilemma* illustrates, attempting to do so would lead to decision paralysis in ordinary contexts. Epistemologically, an infinite regress implies that no belief is ever fully justified, since each justificatory step would itself require further justification, ad infinitum.

To avoid this outcome, some epistemologists appeal to the notion of *basic beliefs*—beliefs whose justification does not depend on the justification of other beliefs. Such beliefs are often considered self-evident or non-inferentially justified. Examples might include simple perceptual beliefs (e.g., I see a red apple), introspective beliefs (e.g., I am in pain), or logical truths (e.g., A is A).

However, basic beliefs pose a challenge for internalism, particularly accessibility internalism. Recall that accessibility internalism holds that a belief is justified only if the believer is aware—either introspectively or reflectively—of the factors that make the belief likely to be true. This does not mean that all justificatory factors must be explicitly inferential, but it does require that whatever *does* justify the belief must be cognitively accessible to the believer.

This raises a dilemma. If a basic belief is justified merely by the believer's grasp of its content—say, that I see a red apple justifies itself in virtue of being self-evident—then one might argue that no further justificatory awareness is required. But in that case, what *is* the believer aware of, aside from the belief itself? If the answer is "nothing," then it seems the justificatory factor is not distinct from the belief it justifies. This risks violating the internalist requirement that justification be based on accessible support—even if that support is non-inferential.

On the other hand, if internalists *deny* the legitimacy of basic beliefs in order to preserve the demand for accessible justification, they fall back into the regress problem. Every belief must be supported by another, and no belief can serve as a justified starting point.

Thus, accessibility internalism faces a significant tension: either allow for basic beliefs and risk collapsing the requirement of reflective access into mere belief possession, or reject basic beliefs and confront the infinite regress. This dilemma cuts to the heart of internalism's viability. It raises the question: can any theory preserve both a strong accessibility condition and a workable foundation for epistemic justification?

The Externalist Solution

Externalism, however, elegantly solves this problem. Allowing justification to stem from reliable belief-forming processes without requiring reflective access cuts off the regress. Goldman's (1979) reliabilism, for instance, posits that justification arises from reliable belief-forming processes, not introspective certainty. The picnic planner's belief is justified by the reliability of their perception, memory, and possibly external tools like weather apps, without needing infinite introspection.

If we look at the picnic planner's dilemma from an externalist perspective, we can resolve this problem without infinite regress.

Belief A: "*It will rain this afternoon, so I should cancel the picnic.*"

We can justify this because of three main reasons:

1. Perception: Assuming the picnic planner has normal vision, they have reliable visual processing of clouds.
2. Memory: The picnic planner has a generally accurate recall of weather correlations.
3. Testimony: Weather app data also says that it will rain (an *extended cognitive tool*; Clark and Chalmers, 1998).

No regress occurs because justification terminates at the reliability of these mechanisms, not reflective access.

This approach effectively cuts off the infinite regress by allowing for non-inferential justification. It acknowledges that many of our justified beliefs, especially those formed through basic cognitive processes like perception or memory, do not rely on a chain of accessible reasons but rather on the reliability of the processes that produce them.

This approach aligns with distributed cognition, where reliance on tools like weather apps reflects Hutchins' (1995) theory of cognition extending beyond the mind, heuristic reasoning, as humans use "fast and frugal" rules (e.g., "dark clouds imply rain") rather than infinite reflection (Gigerenzer, 2008), and memory research, where Shacter (1999) shows we cannot constantly verify memory accuracy introspectively.

For example, consider perceptual beliefs. Externalism argues these are justified by the reliability of our perceptual systems, even if we lack reflective access to how they work. This non-inferential justification cuts off the regress, acknowledging that many beliefs (e.g., a child's intuitive avoidance of fire) derive from reliable processes, not chains of reasons. By anchoring justification in empirical realities of cognition, externalism bridges philosophical theory and lived experience, offering a psychologically plausible and empirically grounded account.

Implications for Epistemology

The externalist solution to the infinite regress problem has significant implications for our understanding of knowledge and justification. Firstly, it provides a more psychologically plausible account of how we actually form and justify beliefs in everyday life. Externalism recognizes that individuals typically do not engage in endless reflective chains to justify beliefs, but instead rely on cognitive faculties and processes whose reliability is often outside their immediate reflective awareness.

Secondly, it avoids the skeptical conclusions that often follow from internalist accounts struggling with the regress problem. Internalism, by demanding that every belief be justified by accessible reasons, faces the challenge that most of our beliefs—especially perceptual, memory, and intuitive judgments—lack such readily accessible justifications. This gap threatens to undermine the justification for nearly all of our beliefs, leading to a broad and severe form of skepticism. By contrast, externalism allows that a belief can be justified even if the believer cannot explicitly cite or reflect upon the justifying factors, provided that the belief is formed through a reliable process.

Lastly, it allows for a broader range of justified beliefs formed through non-discursive processes. Externalism can explain the epistemic status of beliefs formed through intuitive expertise, such as a doctor's rapid diagnostic judgments, or the perceptual beliefs of young children, without demanding that these agents articulate or reflectively access their reasons. By resolving the infinite regress problem, externalism offers a more robust and practical framework for understanding epistemic justification, one that aligns more closely with our intuitive notions of knowledge and our actual cognitive processes.

By resolving the infinite regress problem, externalism offers a more robust and practical framework for understanding epistemic justification—one that aligns more closely with both our intuitive notions of knowledge and the realities of human cognitive processes. Rather than demanding impossible levels of introspection and reflection, externalism locates justification in the reliable functioning of our belief-forming mechanisms, allowing for a more naturalistic and less skeptical account of human knowledge.

Conclusion

Externalism provides a more plausible and coherent account of epistemic justification than internalism. BonJour's internalist argument, while influential, ultimately encounters serious difficulties, particularly the problem of infinite regress. As illustrated by the Picnic Planner's Dilemma, accessibility internalism places unsustainable demands on believers, requiring an endless chain of reflectively accessible justifications. Externalism avoids this regress by grounding justification in the reliability of belief-forming processes, rather than requiring infinite introspection or explicit awareness of justificatory factors. Moreover, externalism offers a psychologically realistic and epistemologically robust account of everyday belief practices. It explains how individuals can justifiably rely on perceptual faculties, expert testimony, and external tools like weather apps, even when they cannot always articulate the underlying justifications. By aligning more closely with intuitive and practical aspects of human cognition, externalism avoids the pitfalls of internalist skepticism and provides a more compelling framework for understanding justified belief.

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