While it is difficult to say how exactly we are to understand the internalism-externalism debate about epistemic justification, we can understand the debate as one in which internalists assert a particular thesis about requirements on justification and rational belief, and externalists deny that thesis. What is the requisite thesis? Unfortunately, there’s no standardly agreed upon thesis to which all internalists assent. As such, let us make sense of this by focusing on that widely accepted version of internalism called access internalism. What is access internalism? Let us say that a theory of epistemic justification is a form of access internalism if that theory tells us that the property being epistemically justified is subject to “the internalist constraint.” So, unless a doxastic attitude satisfies that constraint, her believings cannot be justified. What is the internalist constraint? Let us understand it according to the following claim:

**INTERNALISM:** For any person S and doxastic attitude d, S’s having d at a time t is epistemically justified only if the grounds that justify S’s having d are cognitively accessible to S at t.

As we can see, the internalist constraint is a necessary condition on epistemic justification. **INTERNALISM** tells us that epistemic justification requires cognitive awareness to the grounds that make reasonable or rationally appropriate the holding of a certain doxastic attitude. This is why such theories are called access internalism. It is internalism since the states that do the justifying must be internal to the doxizer. Of course, you will notice that there are many states that are internal to a person, but are neither something to which we have any access nor are seemingly relevant to justification. For instance, although Jones’ lipid levels are internal to her, those states are not something to which she has access—not without specialized training and equipment, at any rate—or are relevant to epistemic rationality of believing propositions, e.g., that snow is white. So, it is access internalism since we must be able to know—being acquainted with and able to think about—those states.

There are a number of things to notice about **INTERNALISM**. First, the envisaged person who espouses this view takes it that cognitive access is an individually necessary, but insufficient condition for justification. There are other necessary conditions on justification.
What those additional conditions are differ from one version of internalism to another version. Second, INTERNALISM does not specify what is constitutive of the requisite grounds that justify a doxastic attitude. The what-are-the-constitutive-grounds-for-epistemic-justification issue is what (at least in part) distinguishes internalists from one another. The key is that, whatever grounds are constitutive of epistemic justification, according to INTERNALISM, those grounds must be something to which a cognizer has access. As such, where there are some grounds that are the justification makers of a set of beliefs, those grounds must enter into the appropriate relation, namely, *being cognitively accessible to*. And that relation exists “inside” cognizers. Third, we can distinguish two types of access internalism: strong and weak forms. The difference can be understood as follows. According to strong versions, we are to understand INTERNALISM as the view that

\[
\text{S-INTERNALISM: For any person } S \text{ and doxastic attitude } d, \text{ } S' \text{ 's having } d \text{ at a time } t \text{ is epistemically justified only if the grounds that justify } S' \text{ 's having } d \text{ are such that } S \text{ actually has cognitive access to those grounds at } t.
\]

Given S-INTERNALISM, unless a person is actually aware of the grounds that justify their believings, suspensions of judgement and disbelievings, their doxastic attitudes cannot be epistemically “up to par.” Smith’s being able to, but having not accessed the grounds of his believings is sufficient to render his beliefs unjustified. According to weak versions of access internalism, that is too demanding of a requirement. No, we are to understand INTERNALISM as the view that

\[
\text{W-INTERNALISM: For any person } S \text{ and doxastic attitude } d, \text{ } S' \text{ 's having } d \text{ at a time } t \text{ is epistemically justified only if the grounds that justify } S' \text{ 's having } d \text{ are such that } S \text{ is able to cognitively access those grounds at } t.
\]

As should be obvious, W-INTERNALISM tells us that the internalist constraint is one about the mere possibility of such access. Whether or not we are actually aware of the grounds that justify our doxastic attitudes is not required. No, such access must simply be possible (in the broadly logical sense). In other words, unless such cognitive access is in principle possible for Smith (even if most of the time he is not actually aware of those grounds), then his believings cannot be
epistemically justified. Which version of INTERNALISM should one adopt? That is a dispute that internalists are currently fighting and one that I do not want to enter here.

Having now stated the basic thesis to which access internalists are committed, we can see that externalism is any theory that denies INTERNALISM, i.e., that epistemic justification requires the satisfaction of the internalist constraint. Externalists accept neither the claim that a person’s having cognitive access—even the mere possibility—to the requisite justification making grounds is a necessary condition on epistemic justification nor that such access even along with the other necessary conditions is always—even often—sufficient. Instead, externalists take it that we must understand epistemic justification differently. They agree with internalists that doxastic attitudes must be grounded in the right way and that those grounds must enter into the relevant relation(s), but deny that those relations include the relation being cognitively accessible to.¹

¹ Copyright 2010, Richard G. Graziano. All rights reserved. This material may not be used, or duplicated in part or whole without express written permission by the author.