In *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues*, Laurence BonJour and Ernest Sosa address a variety of questions at the heart of recent epistemology. Among them are questions about the ability of internalist foundationalists to provide an adequate account of how basic beliefs are justified and questions about the merits of externalist theories of epistemic justification. I am in substantial agreement with the broad outlines of BonJour’s internalist foundationalism, though I differ with him over important details of both it and his critique of externalism. In what follows, I will first say something about what internalism is. I will then turn to BonJour’s well-known objections to externalism. I will conclude with a discussion of Sosa’s key objection to internalism. Obviously, I will be unable to discuss most of the interesting and provocative points in this valuable book.

1. INTERNALISM

BonJour first mentions internalism in the following passage:

Must epistemic justification depend on elements that are internal to the believer’s conscious states of mind in a way that makes them accessible to his conscious reflection (at least in principle), or might it derive instead from factors that are external to those states of mind, entirely outside the scope of his conscious experience? (7)

Internalism takes the first alternative, holding:

INT. Epistemic justification depends entirely on elements that are internal to the believer’s conscious states of mind, where these states are at least in principle accessible to conscious reflection.
Externalism denies this thesis.

I will accept this account of internalism and the view that
externalism is the denial of internalism. There are details
about what counts as being “in principle accessible” that I
will not discuss here. A question about the relevant “ele-
ments” that justification depends on will emerge in the next
few paragraphs.

In some key passages, BonJour suggests that internalism
requires more than what is stated in (INT), or, perhaps, that
he interprets (INT) in a remarkably demanding way. One
such passage comes early in the book, in a discussion of basic
beliefs. He says that there are three crucial elements in any
case of foundational belief: a “sensory experience,” a belief
about some “aspect of that experience,” and “an act of direct
apprehension of or immediate acquaintance with the sensory
experience and its relevant features.” (17) To illustrate this
idea, he gives an example:

Thus, for example, we might have, first, the actual presence in my visual
field of a red triangular shape; second, the allegedly basic belief that there
is a red triangular shape in my visual field; and third, the direct apprehen-
sion of or immediate acquaintance with the red triangular shape. It is this
third element that is apparently required for the view under consideration
to differ from what would otherwise seemingly be a purely externalist
view of the justification of basic beliefs. (17)

I have some question about what the third element is and
why it is needed, but that is not my current point. In this
example, the first item, which is supposed to be a sensory
experience, is having a red triangular shape in one’s visual
field. This is an internal state that is accessible in principle.
Thus, a theory holding that having such a shape in one’s
visual field is sufficient to justify the corresponding belief
would seem to qualify as internalist according to (INT). Yet
Bonjour says that a theory would count as externalist unless
it holds that justification depends upon the third thing, the
direct apprehension of this shape. Thus, he seems to adding
something to his account of what internalism is.