Reliabilists have argued that the important evaluative epistemic concept of being justified in holding a belief, at least to the extent that that concept is associated with knowledge, is best understood as concerned with the objective appropriateness of the processes by which a given belief is generated and sustained. They hold that a belief is justified only when it is fostered by processes that are reliable in the believer’s actual world. Of course, reliabilists typically recognize other concepts of justification – subjective notions – which are given a noncompeting sort of epistemic legitimacy. However, they focus on the epistemically central notion of “strong justification,” and have come to settle on this familiar reliabilist analysis, supposing that it pretty much exhausts what there is to say about “objective justification.”

The straightforward reliabilist analysis of objective justification has contributed to epistemological understanding. However, there is yet clarification and perspective to be gotten by recognizing further epistemically valuable features that are distinct from, but related to, reliability. These additional epistemically valued features are “objective” in much the sense that reliability is. We here develop a way of thinking about one such epistemic value and suggest that it may also have an important role in our thinking about an agent being objectively justified in holding a given belief. Like the reliability of generating processes, the feature we characterize is epistemically valuable in view of the epistemic interest in the production of true belief systems.

Our suggestion is that understanding these further epistemic values will allow one to better appreciate both the place for reliability in epistemic evaluations and its limits. The limits do not indicate that reliabilists have been mistaken in thinking that the
reliability in the agent’s world of fostering processes is importantly related to an agent’s being strongly justified. Yet, they do indicate that the reliabilist position is improved by recognizing how related but distinct evaluative concerns also feature in the objective appropriateness of processes. Seeing this much allows us to appreciate how a common set of misgivings regarding the traditional reliabilist analysis can be accommodated within a perspective that remains focused on objective (rather than subjective) features of processing, and on features closely related to reliability.

1. THE RECEIVED ACCOUNT OF STRONG JUSTIFICATION

It has become common to distinguish objective justification (sometimes called strong justification, warrant, or some brand of positive epistemic status) from subjective justification. The basic idea is that justification of the stripe that is associated with having knowledge must have to do with objectively appropriate processing, and not simply processing that conforms to whatever epistemic norms the agent happens to have internalized. Goldman (1992a), for example, reflects on evaluations we might make when looking at beliefs formed by agents in an epistemically benighted society. In such cases, he observes, we can feel pulled in two directions. On the one hand, reflective and conscientious agents might do their best and have subjectively powerful reasons for their beliefs; and we would want to say that such agents are justified in their beliefs. On the other hand, such agents might be doing their best and nevertheless be employing processes that are objectively inappropriate to the central epistemic goal of producing true belief-systems; and we would want to say that those agents are not justified in their beliefs. Both evaluations have deep roots in our epistemic tradition. In view of the deep difference in what anchors these evaluations, we then also should recognize that they reflect distinct uses of ‘justification’. So doing, we disambiguate of our talk of justification.

So, we have this notion of objective justification, or warrant, that centers on the notions of objectively appropriate processing. In the most general terms, objective appropriateness is a matter of what would be conducive to the central epistemic end of the production of true belief-systems. It is perhaps worth emphasizing at this point