Externalism has become a very popular theory of knowledge, and for good reasons. The theory – which says, roughly, that for a true belief to qualify as an instance of knowledge, it needs only to stand in an appropriate relation to the world – has many advantages. It fits well into the overall framework of a “naturalistic epistemology”, since the relations which it claims to be relevant for knowledge are all open to normal scientific investigation. It provides effective responses to many of the problems which have troubled epistemology, such as the classical “regress of justification” or the more recent Gettier problem. And it squares much better with our practice of ascribing knowledge to people who are not particularly enlightened or philosophically minded than the more demanding “internalist” views.

Nevertheless, some externalists are not quite content with their own basic view. They feel an urge to make some concessions to the internalist – an urge which makes them add clauses and caveats to their theory. This may at first seem like a clever move. It is natural to think that, after all, internalism cannot be completely wrong. It must harbour some sound intuitions. Thus one is well advised to incorporate these in one’s theory, even if it thereby becomes somewhat impure. Purity is not an end in itself. The aim of epistemology must be to develop a theory which is maximally plausible, and one should not be surprised – or embarrassed – if this turns out to involve some kind of compromise between the more radical views.

This sounds reasonable enough. But is it really such a good idea to let one’s externalist theory accommodate some internalist intuitions? I shall argue that it is not – that what looks like a well-motivated minor modification is in fact disastrous to the whole externalist project.

It is no wonder that internalists have derived comfort from the externalists’ concessions. They have seen them as signs of a fundamental uneasiness on the part of the externalist. And in this I think they have been right. Externalism and internalism rest on fundamentally different ideas of what constitutes knowledge and justification. So if one reckons a need for internalist el-
lements in one’s theory of knowledge, one has very likely lost faith in the whole externalist project. At any rate, the incorporation of such internalist element *forces* one to abandon the externalist position. As soon as one has stepped out onto the internalist slippery slope, there is no way to prevent a slide to full-blooded internalism. So if one is attracted to externalism and not particularly impressed with the standard internalist objections, one had better find a way of meeting those objections without making any concessions at all. One has to be a *staunch externalist*.

To be a staunch externalist is not the same as being a stubborn or dogmatic one. I am not saying that externalism should be maintained even in the face of forceful objections. My point is rather that the objections have much less force than is normally reckoned. There is no real pull towards internalism in the theory of knowledge, only an apparent one. Part of my enterprise is to explain what gives rise to this illusion: why do even convinced externalists feel a strong pull towards internalism?

One can also be a staunch externalist without exaggerating the powers of the theory. Externalism *is* a very attractive theory, but it certainly has its limitations; it is not an epistemological wonder cure. For instance, externalism cannot in itself provide an answer to the most radical forms of skepticism. And it is of limited importance – though not wholly irrelevant, as I shall try to show – when it comes to problems of metajustification. Externalism is nothing more, but also nothing less, than a theory of knowledge, i.e. a description of what knowledge *consists in* – where knowledge means “plain” or “basic” knowledge, knowledge considered as an ordinary, “mundane” phenomenon, as something I suspect even my rather unreflective, uneducated grandma to have plenty of. This theory can in turn function as an element in a larger epistemological enterprise, but there is no need to be overly optimistic about what it can yield outside its natural domain.

I. Externalism and internalism

I shall centre my defence of externalism on a theory of the *reliabilist* kind, and one that is primarily a theory of *justification*. Such a theory has been put forward by Alvin Goldman, for instance in his book *Epistemology and Cognition* (1986). Part of my reason for this choice is that such a theory squares better with our ordinary conception of knowledge, which I take to be captured (roughly) by the standard definition: knowledge is justified true belief.