

SELLARS AND SOCRATES:  
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE SELLARS PROBLEM  
FOR A SOCRATIC EPISTEMOLOGY

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FOR A SOCRATIC EPISTEMOLOGY

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And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Sellars Problem for a Socratic Epistemology

The problem of perceptual justification concerns how perceptual experiences evidence perceptual beliefs. It is very intuitive that perception offers good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are likely to be true. Moreover, it is intuitive that by perception we have a source of information about the external world that is independent from our beliefs. When we enter into the philosophy classroom, however, these intuitive claims gives rise to many perplexing and difficult questions.

My dissertation is a study of one of these problems. This problem is the Sellars problem. In a nutshell, the Sellars problem concerns how a belief that provides the basis for inference to further beliefs can itself have positive epistemic status without receiving that status from some other belief that provides the basis for inference. This initial statement of the problem, however, will be largely unintelligible to those who are not acquainted with the history of epistemology. In order, therefore, to render intelligible the problem I turn to a brief history of epistemology.

#### **1 The History of the Sellars Dilemma**

In this section I begin with a brief history of foundationalism leading to the role of the given. I then turn to a brief exposition of Sellars' classic essay "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." I close with a section on Bonjour's recapitulation of the Sellars Problem.

## A. Epistemology to Sellars, or a brief history of foundationalism

Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics* responds to a challenge to the possibility of knowledge. He describes the challenge thus:

Now some think that because one must understand the primitives there is no understanding at all; others that there is, but that there are demonstrations of everything. Neither of these views is either true or necessary.

For the one party, supposing that one cannot understand it another way, claim that we are led back *ad infinitum* on the grounds that we would not understand what is posterior because of what is prior if there are no primitives; and they argue correctly, for it is impossible to go through infinitely many things. And if it comes to a stop and there are principles, they say that these are unknowable since there is no *demonstration* of them, which alone they say is understanding; but if one cannot know the primitives, neither can what depends on them be understood *simpliciter* or properly, but only on the supposition that they are the case.

The other party agrees about understanding; for it, they say, occurs only through demonstration. But they argue that nothing prevents there being demonstration of everything; for it is possible for demonstration to come about in a circle and reciprocally.

But we say that neither is all understanding demonstrative, but in the case of the immediates it is non-demonstrable—and that this is necessary is evident; for it is necessary to understand the things which are prior and on which the demonstration depends, and it comes to a stop at some time, it is necessary for immediates to be non-demonstrable.<sup>1</sup>

This is an instance of the famous regress argument. If the belief that q is justified on the basis of the beliefs that p implies q and p then we may inquire into the reasons for those beliefs. Either there are further reasons for them or there are not. If there are further reasons for those beliefs, then either there are additional reasons for those further reasons or there are not. It is implausible that the chain of reasons is infinite; so either

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<sup>1</sup> Posterior Analytics, 3:5-23.



there are no further reasons for the beliefs or those further reasons are themselves justified by the initial reasons. It is implausible that reasons cited in defense of some claim can be justified by the claim itself, so it seems the chain of reasons must end in some claim that is not supported by further reasons. The skeptic argues that this foundational claim is not justified since it is not supported by some further claim. Aristotle argues that some such claims are justified but not justified by further propositions.

The position that grounds inferential justification in some non-inferentially justified belief is known as *epistemic foundationalism*. The foundationalist conceives of the structure of justified belief as resting upon a foundation of immediate beliefs that are justified but need not receive justification from other beliefs. The main puzzle for the foundationalist is to explain how these beliefs are justified if not by receiving justification from other claims. This puzzle is heightened by the Socratic desire to avoid arbitrary beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Arbitrary beliefs are beliefs for which one has no reason at all to think that they are true. The foundationalist, thus, needs to show how these foundational propositions differ in justificatory status from purely arbitrary claims.

The move foundationalists have made is to appeal to role of *the given* (alternatively described as *the self-evident* or *the self-presenting*). The phrase “the given” is a way of describing the class of immediately justified (or known) propositions. Descartes, for example, in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, locates the given in the class of propositions that when one thinks that the proposition is true one cannot be

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<sup>2</sup> For a description of Socratic epistemology see Chisholm (1989).

mistaken. The *cogito* is the exemplar of such a proposition. The legacy of Cartesian foundationalism is skepticism. Thus, foundationalists have attempted to expand the given to include self-presenting states.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to characterize a self-presenting state. Let us say initially that a self-presenting state is a state that when one is in it and ponders whether one is in it one forms the true belief that one is in such a state. A classic example of the sort of thing that was claimed to be self-presenting is sense-data. A sense-datum is the immediate object of perceptual awareness. It was claimed that sense-data were mental objects that are directly before one's mind. When, e.g., one undergoes a visual experience of seeing a table the immediate objects of sensory awareness are not the physical things located in one's environment but private mental objects. The foundationalist thus claimed that if one was in a state of experiencing some private mental object—say a red sense-datum—and one pondered whether one was experiencing a red sense-datum then one would correctly believe that one was experiencing a red sense-datum.

The foundationalist project therefore was to start with these immediate truths and reconstruct empirical knowledge on the basis of these truths. Many challenged whether this could be done, even assuming that the immediate truths were justified. Thus one main project of foundationalist epistemology was to show that skepticism could be avoided. A primary foundationalist response to this challenge was to expand the class of the given to secure successful inference to the non-basic beliefs. The expansion was affected by including within the class of the given basic beliefs about the empirical

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Russell (1997) [original 1912], Lewis (1946) & Chisholm (1989).

world. Wilfrid Sellars argued, however, this that is not possible: there cannot be non-inferentially justified beliefs about the empirical world. I turn now to a brief exposition of the Sellars problem.

## B. Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind"

Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" is a rich essay. Sellars' main goal in this essay is to undermine the entire framework of givenness.<sup>4</sup> The given, as we have seen, is an epistemological category an item falls into when that item provides the basis for inference and it is also known or justifiedly believed without itself needing support from other items that enter into inferential relations. A good candidate for the type of thing that can be given is propositional content (other proposed candidates are facts, properties, or states of the external world); for propositions are the kind of things that can be known and further they are the kinds of things that can be used for inference.

If this is correct then the given are those foundational propositional contents which are justified without receiving justification from other propositional contents, and moreover these contents provide the basis upon which all other non-basic beliefs may be justified. The given, then, are the atoms of a foundationalist epistemology. They are logically independent of each other and need not evidentially support the other atoms.

As we saw above the given is intended to end the regress of reasons by providing a secure foundation for empirical knowledge. As a *foundation* for empirical knowledge the given is required to be able to stand in inferential relations to other beliefs. As a

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<sup>4</sup> Sellars (1963), p. 128.

*secure* foundation the given is required to be known or justified in such a way that it need not receive further support from other items to have sufficient epistemic warrant to evidence other inferential beliefs. Sellars describes this as one form of the Myth of the Given and explains that there are two claims associated with this Myth. He writes,

One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed, *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be non-inferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims—particular and general—about the world.<sup>5</sup>

The argument that Sellars is pointing towards can be taken as an impossibility argument. It is impossible that (i) an epistemic atom have epistemic merit that is logically independent from its receiving epistemic merit from other claims and (ii) the epistemic atoms provide the basis for inference to the non-epistemic atoms.

The argument that it is not possible that (i) and (ii) are true begins with the claim that an atom must not merely have epistemic merit but that the subject must recognize in some sense that the atom has positive epistemic merit. Sellars writes, “To be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only *have* authority, this authority must *in some sense* be recognized by the person whose report it is.”<sup>6</sup> We can reformulate this claim as follows: S knows p only if S recognizes that p has positive epistemic status.

An initial question about this principle is what kind of recognition does Sellars intend. Does this recognition require knowledge, justified belief, mere belief, or some

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<sup>5</sup> Sellars, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> Sellars, p. 168.

kind of sub-doxastic awareness? Sellars' exposition in this section reveals that the recognition requires knowledge (or at least justified belief). Sellars writes,

For a *Konstatierung* [judgment] 'This is green' to 'express observational knowledge', not only must it be a *symptom* or *sign* of the presence of a green object in standard conditions, but the perceiver must know that tokens of 'This is green' *are* symptoms of the presence of green objects in conditions which are standard for visual perception.<sup>7</sup>

Sellars continues to explain that knowledge that *this is green* logically presupposes general knowledge that these signs are reliably associated with the presence of green things.

Now it might be thought that there is something obviously absurd in the idea that before a token uttered by, say, Jones could be the expression of observational knowledge, Jones would have to know that overt verbal episodes of this kind are reliable indicators of the existence, suitably related to the speaker, of green objects. I do not think that it is. Indeed, I think that something very like it is true. The point I wish to make now, however, is that if it *is* true, then it follows, as a matter of simple logic, that one could not have observational knowledge of *any* fact unless one knew many *other* things as well.<sup>8</sup>

Sellars' argument can be represented as follows:

1. For any item of empirical knowledge,  $Fa$ , S knows  $Fa$  on basis  $e$  only if S knows that  $e$  is a reliable indicator of the fact that  $Fa$ .
- Thus,
2. The epistemic atoms are items of empirical knowledge only if S knows general facts of the kind mentioned in (1).
- So,
3. It is not possible that an epistemic atom have epistemic merit that is logically independent from its receiving epistemic merit from other claims.

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<sup>7</sup> Sellars, p. 168, underlining added.

<sup>8</sup> Sellars, p. 168, underlining added.

Although this argument doesn't invoke condition (ii), this condition seems to be used to support Sellars argument for the first premise. Although Sellars does not explicitly address this, the thought seems to be this. In order for an atom to provide the basis for inference it has to be the sort of thing that can stand in logical relations to the claims it is taken to justify. This blocks the move that the atoms can be pure experience, thus rendering unintelligible the demand that these atoms be justified. Since the atoms must bear logical relations to the claims they are taken to justify, Sellars seems to argue that they must have propositional content. This in turn supports the claim that the atoms must be known or justified.

An immediate objection to Sellars' position is that it generates an unacceptable regress. For if observational knowledge presupposes prior knowledge that X is a reliable sign of Y and that itself presupposes some prior observational knowledge which itself presupposes some prior general knowledge of the form X is a reliable sign of Y then we are quickly led down an unacceptable regress. Sellars responds to this worry by denying that observational knowledge requires *temporally prior* general knowledge. He claims, somewhat mysteriously, that knowledge is at home in a logical space that logically presupposes knowledge of general truths. He writes,

The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sellars, p. 169.

Sellars' suggestion seems to be that knowledge attributions are improper when we are not also willing to attribute to the subject some knowledge of general truths as well. This conflicts, Sellars claims, with the empiricist idea that empirical knowledge is atomic.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in EPM Sellars challenges the empiricist foundationalist claim there is a level of epistemic atoms that can provide the basis for inference to the non-epistemic atoms. I turn next to Laurence Bonjour's development of the Sellars' dilemma.

### C. Bonjour The Structure of Empirical Knowledge (SEK)

Laurence Bonjour wrote his doctoral dissertation at Princeton University on the Sellars Problem. His book SEK manifests several years of struggling with the Sellars Problem. Bonjour's solution to the problem is to adopt coherentism. For our purposes, however, we note that Bonjour's discussion of the Sellars problem recast the discussion in a way that engaged the attention of a significant number of epistemologists.

Bonjour's discussion of the Sellars problem comes in chapter four "The Doctrine of the Empirically Given." Bonjour argues that this problem constitutes a fundamental objection to empiricist foundationalism. Bonjour describes the basic idea of the doctrine of the given as follows:

The central thesis of the doctrine of the given is that basic empirical beliefs are justified, not by appeal to further beliefs or merely external facts but rather by appeal to states of "immediate experience" or "direct apprehension" or intuition—states which allegedly can confer justification without themselves requiring justification.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sellars, p. 168.

<sup>11</sup> Bonjour (1985), p. 59.

Bonjour argues that the proponent of the given is “caught in a fundamental and inescapable dilemma.”<sup>12</sup> Bonjour describes the dilemma,

If his [the subject’s] intuitions or direct awarenesses or immediate apprehensions are construed as cognitive, at least quasi-judgmental (as seems clearly the more natural interpretation), then they will be both capable of providing justification for other cognitive states and in need of it themselves; but if they are construed as noncognitive, nonjudgmental, then while they will not themselves need justification, they will also be incapable of giving it. In either case, such states will be incapable of serving as an adequate foundation for knowledge [or justification].<sup>13</sup>

The problem facing epistemology is that to the extent we aim to capture the Socratic require that justification requires awareness of good reasons we face the Sellars problem.

In an earlier chapter Bonjour put the basic problem by the following argument.<sup>14</sup>

- (1) Suppose that there are *basic empirical beliefs*, that is, empirical beliefs (a) which are epistemically justified, and (b) whose justification does not depend on that of any further empirical beliefs.
- (2) For a belief to be epistemically justified requires that there be a reason why it is likely to be true.
- (3) For a belief to be epistemically justified for a particular person requires that this person be himself in cognitive possession of such a reason.
- (4) The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe *with justification* the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.
- (5) The premises of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely *a priori*; at least one such premise must be empirical.

Therefore, the justification of a supposed basic empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1); it follows that there can be no basic empirical beliefs.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Bonjour’s restatement of the dilemma on p. 75 states the conclusion in terms of justification rather than knowledge.

<sup>14</sup> The following is a quote from Bonjour (1985), p. 32.



There is much that can be said about Bonjour's argument. The attention on this argument has focused on two different claims. First, whether awareness of a truth-indicative feature is necessary for justification (the externalist gambit). Second, whether the awareness of the truth-indicative feature does require justification from some other claims (the internalist foundationalist gambit).

#### D. The Canonical Form of the Sellars Problem

Bonjour's formulation of the Sellars Problem above represents the canonical form of the dilemma. It will be helpful to explicitly state the argument. I state the argument in terms of direct awareness. The crucial foundationalist claim is that a belief is noninferentially justified by direct awareness.

1. Either direct awareness involves conscious awareness of assertive content or not.
2. If direct awareness does involve conscious awareness of assertive content then that awareness justifies only if it is epistemically appropriate.
3. If direct awareness does not involve conscious awareness of assertive content then that awareness cannot justify belief.

So,

4. Either direct awareness justifies only if it is epistemically appropriate or the awareness cannot justify belief.

Thus,

5. Direct awareness does not provide foundational justification.

## **2 The Philosophical Significance of the Sellars Problem**

The significance of the Sellars Problem is tied to the significance of the given. As noted above an important epistemological search is for some secure basis upon which to justify less secure claims. In the *Meditations* Descartes begins by describing his task.

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.<sup>15</sup>

Descartes' task is to locate the axioms (the non-derived truths) and then show how the theorems (the derived truths) of commonsense and science follow from the secure axioms. The Sellars problem attempts to show that the distinction between axioms and theorems is not principled. That knowledge of the axioms logically presupposes knowledge of the theorems which themselves logically presuppose the axioms. The Sellars problem thus aims to expose a critical flaw in the foundationalist project.

In this connection, the Sellars problem has connections to Quine's argument for conformational holism, the view that our beliefs are not confirmed or disconfirmed by a direct confrontation with reality, but rather that our beliefs are confirmed or disconfirmed by a subtle interplay between experience and other theoretical beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Quine finds support for conformational holism in what has come to be known as the "Quine-Duhem" thesis. The Quine-Duhem thesis is that scientific experiments do not straightforwardly falsify or confirm a hypothesis, but only confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis relative to a body of assumed truths, e.g., that the experiment was performed in normal conditions,

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<sup>15</sup> Descartes, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> See Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism."

that there are no mysterious forces that influence the result of the experience, that the equipment operates properly, etc. This thesis, Quine appears to claim, supports the more general line that experience itself does not directly confirm or disconfirm individual beliefs, but only evidences belief within a broader theoretical framework. The Sellars Problem supports conformational holism in that knowledge logically presupposes a framework in which a person knows a number of other claims.

Another way to view the Sellars problem is in connection with the justification of scientific theories. The classic foundationalist project is to locate some basic level of claims about reality that can be used to justify scientific theories. Descartes, moved by the revolution of modern science, sought to discover the most basic axioms upon which he could then use to reason about the world (see, specifically, the last sentence of the above quote). The Sellars problem aims to show that, in principle, there is a problem with this search; for there cannot be a most basic set of axioms to justify scientific theories.

The Cartesian search for a secure basis for inference, the Quinean interest in conformational holism, and the concern for the justification of scientific theory grows out of our intrinsic interest to have good reasons for our beliefs. Human persons are believers and the kind of believers that can assess reasons for belief. The significance of the Sellars problem is ultimately grounded in this interest. Are there good reasons for our beliefs? If so, what structure do these reasons have? Is there a level of reasons the claims of which are justified without needing justification from other sources and also provide the basis for inference? This is the natural home for the Sellars problem.

### 3 A Sketch of the Responses to the Sellars Problem

There are three basic responses to the Sellars Problem: accept, deny the first horn, or deny the second horn. I will begin by discussing the second horn since it is the least controversial.

#### A. Reject the second horn

The basic idea encapsulated in the second horn is that non-contentful awareness does not justify perceptual belief. Externalist epistemologies reject this claim by arguing that justification requires a reliable connection to the truth of the belief and that connection need not go through propositional states. If, for example, experience is purely qualitative, i.e., contains no propositional content, experience can still justify if the experience prompts the belief that *p* in and only in most conditions in which *p* is true (this is to put it roughly). Other non-externalist epistemologies reject the first horn by opting for a form of epistemic conservatism. On this view our beliefs are *prima facie* justified merely by being believed. This view, however, is more properly taken as denying a presupposition of the Sellars dilemma. A presupposition of the Sellars dilemma is that experience is required to justify perceptual belief.

#### B. Reject the first horn

The crucial idea in the first horn is that any empirical propositional content that is *presented as true* (I will call this the *assertive* mode of hosting content and refer to

contents hosted in that way as *assertive contents*) cannot be self-justifying. This claim receives support from the line of reasoning that leads one to reject doxastic foundationalism. The doxastic foundationalist claims that some empirical beliefs are justified without receiving justification from other beliefs or experiential contents. The line of reasoning against this position stresses that empirical beliefs which lack reasons are arbitrary. If the doxastic foundationalist attempts to end the regress of reasons at certain empirical claims that he claims have an irreducible positive epistemic status then it is conceivable that different empirical claims have irreducible positive epistemic status. It then begins to look arbitrary as to which empirical claims have this status. Thus this line of reasoning suggests the move to a non-doxastic foundationalism on which the foundational beliefs are justified by experience.

This line of reasoning against doxastic foundationalism supports the claim that empirical assertive content itself cannot have irreducible positive epistemic merit. For, if beliefs for which there are no further reasons are arbitrary then assertive content for which there is no further reason is arbitrary as well, unless there are good reasons to think that assertive contents do not pose the same epistemic challenges as did belief. But, it is claimed, assertive contents do pose the same epistemic challenge as did belief; for such contents can be correct or incorrect and they are possibly incorrect. Hence, it is claimed, that assertive contents raise the same (or similar) concerns as did the justification of belief.

The primary response to this line of argument is to challenge the similarity between belief and the content of experience. The positions that opt for this challenge

agree that experience is required for justification and that moreover some kind of awareness of the content of experience is required for justification as well. There are two broad kinds of positions here. The first is the classical foundationalist position that appeals to some state of awareness that confers justification on a belief in virtue of being in that state and yet does not itself require justification from something else. Richard Fumerton's acquaintance theory is a prime example of this kind of theory. The other kind of theory is historically less well-known. It is articulated by John McDowell in his book Mind and World. The kind of theory McDowell outlines is described as an Aristotelian Second-Nature Theory. McDowell argues that we acquire a second nature of forming perceptual beliefs on the basis of our awareness of contentful perceptual experiences, but that this awareness of contentful perceptual experience does not require justification on account of the kind of thing a second nature is. I explore this view in much more detail in chapter five.

### C. Accept the dilemma

The final move available when assessing the Sellars problem is to accept it. This move has been historically associated with doxastic coherentism, a form of coherentism on which only beliefs can justify beliefs. Laurence Bonjour has been associated with this form of coherentism. Coherentists accept that awareness of the content of experience is required for justification and, moreover, that that assertive contents themselves require justification. Coherentists argue that these are both plausible assumptions for justification. One strategy the coherentist can employ to show that these are plausible

assumptions is to illustrate that both opponents of the Sellars problem—those who reject the first horn and those who reject the second horn—offer good reasons for rejecting the particular horn they deny. Then the coherentist claims that there is a position that satisfies both their rejections while avoiding each of their grievances with coherentism (this is, in fact, the strategy I employ (see chapter six)). For instance, those who reject the second horn support the line of reasoning that assertive content requires justification, which leads them to reject internalism *tout court*. But those who reject the first horn argue that awareness of propositional content is required for justification which leads them to reject externalism *tout court*. The coherentist argues that both positions articulate requirements for justification the acceptance of which implies coherentism.

The major difficulty with coherentism lies in its association with doxasticism, the claim that only beliefs justify beliefs. If doxasticism is overcome then the coherentist position is made more plausible. If, for example, the coherentist appeals to experiential contents in addition to belief content then this position escapes some of the most damning objections to it, objections which motivate denying one of the horns of the Sellarsian dilemma.

#### **4 An outline of chapters and brief statement of thesis**

The basic thesis I argue for is that non-doxastic coherentism yields the most satisfying solution to the Sellars problem. I argue for this by arguing that foundationalist solutions to the Sellars problem are not plausible. In this context I defend the following argument.

1. Justification requires having good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are true. (The Socratic Assumption)
  2. Having good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are true requires conscious awareness of assertive, propositional content. (From Chapters 3 & 4)
  3. Conscious awareness of assertive, propositional content cannot end the regress of reasons. (From Chapters 4 & 5)
  4. If some empirical beliefs are non-inferentially justified then one has good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are likely to be true and the reasons themselves do not require further justification. (From 1 & The Foundationalist Claim)
- But,
5. It is not possible that one has good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are likely to be true and the reasons themselves do not require further justification. (From 1, 2, & 3)
- So,
6. No empirical belief is non-inferentially justified. (From 4 & 5)

In chapters two through five I defend the first three premises. Having defended this argument in the last chapter I argue that nondoxastic coherentism is a plausible solution to this problem. It allows one to maintain the Socratic claim that justification requires good reasons while maintaining the intuitive notion that experience is an important source of justification.

In the following I mention briefly the content and contribution of each of the chapters.

### *Chapter Two: Perceptual Experience, Accuracy Conditions, and Content*

In this chapter I consider the question of whether experience has content and how, if at all, that content relates to the content of belief. A theory of perceptual justification should tell us what features of experience justify belief, and how and under what conditions those features justify belief. I argue in this chapter that perceptual experience has propositional content. This chapter lays the groundwork a claim I make in chapters 3



and 4 that perceptual justification requires conscious taking into account the content of perceptual.

### *Chapter Three: Justification and Recognitional Awareness, Part I*

I consider externalist responses to the Sellarsian Dilemma in this chapter. I consider William Alston's and Ernest Sosa's versions of externalism and argue that the solutions they offer are either inadequate because they leave out recognitional awareness of the content of experience or adequate but consistent with internalism. In the last section of the chapter I strengthen the argument that externalism is not a suitable response to the dilemma by examining a recent argument by Jack Lyons that the Sellars Problem supports externalism. Reflection on Lyons' argument manifests that the externalist response surrenders a plausible requirement on perceptual justification.

### *Chapter Four: Justification and Recognitional Awareness, Part II*

In this chapter I consider the nonconceptualist foundationalist response to end the regress of reasons in a nonconceptual state that is often characterized as direct awareness. I introduce the problem by illustrating how it arises for Bertrand Russell's epistemology. Russell's epistemological account provides a clear presentation of the Sellars problem for the nonconceptualist. I then turn to developments of nonconceptualism in the works of Roderick Chisholm, Paul Moser, Richard Fumerton, and Michael Huemer. I argue that each of these developments faces the same problem that afflicts Russell's nonconceptualism. The argument of this chapter supports the claim that the justification

of perceptual belief requires conscious awareness of the assertive content of perception, a form of awareness that is incompatible with nonconceptualism.

#### *Chapter 5: Conceptualism and the Regress Argument*

In this chapter I consider the conceptualist, foundationalist positions of John McDowell and Bill Brewer. They argue that justification requires intelligibility, i.e., that one's belief is justified only if there is something that the subject can take into account that makes the belief's truth discernible for the particular subject. This requires, on their views, that the kind of perceptual state that justifies belief be conceptual. I argue that this foundationalist position does not successfully answer the regress problem. The conclusion of this chapter supports my premise 3 that conscious awareness of assertive, propositional content cannot end the regress of reasons. It appears therefore that the natural direction for a conceptualist model to take is to forgo foundationalism. If a commitment to the reason-giving requirement necessitates adopting conceptualism then this provides motivation for examining anew coherentist accounts of perceptual justification. I do this in the next chapter.

#### *Chapter Six: How to satisfy Sellars and Socrates: An exploration of nondoxastic Coherentism.*

In this chapter I sketch a non-doxastic coherentist theory and argue that it is a plausible solution to the Sellars problem. It avoids the problems associated with externalism and foundationalist varieties of internalism. It upholds the thesis that

perception offers good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs without succumbing to the fate that perception no longer plays a crucial role in responding to the regress argument. In this way I suggest we have the resources for responding to Sellars and Socrates. Perception gives us good reason to think that our empirical beliefs are mostly accurate. Moreover, the contents of perception together with the coherence of one's informational system provide a plausible response to the regress problem.

## **5 Conclusion**

The main goal of the dissertation is an investigation of the best way to satisfy our intrinsic interest in having good reasons for our beliefs. I hope to have articulated a plausible theory that satisfies our desire for true, non-arbitrary beliefs. In the progress of reasoning through these issues we will discover a host of issues relating to a more general theory of rationality. In the end the account I defend satisfies the Socratic assumption that we have good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are true while acknowledge that perceptual experience is an important source of nondoxastic information about the external world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Content of Perception

Our problem concerns how perception can provide good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are true and yet also provide a successful end to the regress of reasons. My goal is to offer an account of perceptual justification that answers this problem. I will argue that perception does offer good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are true and that it can also provide a successful end to the regress problem. This account will show how perception can make intelligible our beliefs about the empirical world and also provide good reasons for regarding the skeptical hypothesis as rather improbable.

Our journey begins with the question of whether perception has content. I will argue that perception does have content. On my account of perceptual justification conscious awareness of perceptual content is necessary for the justification of belief based on perception. For when a belief is based on experience one's belief is justified only if one understands what the experience is about. The argument for this will have to wait until the next chapter. In this chapter we are concerned with the issue of whether perception has content.

#### **1 Experience & Content**

In this section I answer two initial questions. First, what is experience? Second, what is content? I am not concerned with giving a detailed catalogue of different kinds of

experience or different types of content. The goal in this section is to give a correct characterization of the key terms that will figure in the main argument of this chapter.

#### A. Mental Content

What is content? Content is information. Information may be given in sentential form or non-sentential form (e.g., a picture). Information, on my account, is identical to propositional content. On my view propositions are abstract objects that determine possible-world truth conditions where these abstract objects are sets of possible worlds. This conception of propositions yields the desirable result that propositional content is fine-grained. One objection to identifying content with propositional content is that (e.g.,) a picture has content but the content is more fine-grained than sentential content. The tacit assumption on this objection is that propositional content is identified with sentential content. On the view of content I assume here, propositional content is not to be identified with sentential content. Propositional content is a set of possible worlds, where worlds are maximal states of affairs. (I will adopt the standard device of allowing lower case letters—*p*, *q*, *r*, etc.—be variables over the range of propositional content.)

The kind of content that is of interest in perception is mental content. Mental content is the kind of content had by mental states. The content of mental states is information that can play a role in explaining intentional behavior. This is significant because some states may encode information that does not play any role in explaining intentional behavior. For example, a mental state may encode information about a certain

brain state, where the latter information cannot be used to guide intentional behavior.<sup>1</sup>

This information is not mental content. I propose the following definition of a state with content:

D1: A mental state has content =<sub>df</sub> it carries information that can figure in a true explanation of intentional behavior.

It is important that a definition of mental content permits states to have content when that content does not, in fact, figure in intentional explanation. For instance, there is a sense of ‘see’ in which S can see D without S noticing or recognizing D. For example, Tom may see his car keys but not recognize that there are his keys. Tom, however, is in a mental state that carries information about his keys that *can* figure in a true explanation of intentional behavior. For once Tom recognizes that there are his keys, he reaches out and grabs them. The content of Tom’s experience does not change. Rather Tom comes to recognize what was already there.

## B. Perceptual Experience

Second, what is experience? I will focus on perceptual experience. Perceptual experience is sensory awareness of sensibilia—e.g., properties, objects, or facts. Sensibilia may be physical or non-physical—i.e., sense data. I will leave open the issue of the ontology of percipients. Sensory awareness is awareness that occurs via the senses. For normal human beings there are five modes of sensory awareness. These

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<sup>1</sup> This may not be possible, if the only information encoded in mental states is that which can figure in a true explanation of intentional behavior.

modes of awareness provide access to sensibilia: e.g., visual awareness provides access to images; auditory awareness provides access to sounds; etc.

Given this account of experience, what would it be for a perceptual state to have content? In brief, it would be for the perceptual state to carry information that can figure in a true explanation of intentional behavior. For example, if S is visually aware of the blinking icon on the computer screen and S's action is guided by that awareness, then the perceptual state has content. For a true explanation of S's action needs to advert to the information encoded in S's perceptual experience.

There is a classic debate among empiricists about the nature of perceptual experience. Let us focus on visual experience. Can one's visual experience include the experience of (e.g.) computers or is one's experience limited to shapes and colors? Given the distinction between mental content and sensibilia, we can make some headway on this debate. If one focuses on the sensibilia themselves then it seems experience is limited to shapes and colors. If, however, one focuses on the content of the perceptual state then perceptual content is not limited to shapes and colors. For given that I see a glass of water and that I desire a glass of water, there is a true intentional explanation of my behavior in terms of the perceptual content *there is a glass of water*. In fact it is considerations of this sort that provide a strong argument that perceptual experience does have mental content. I turn to a development of this argument now.

## **2 Does perceptual experience have content?**

I argued in the previous section that there are two ways of understanding perceptual experience as figures in the empiricist debate over the nature of experience. On the one hand, perceptual experience is the mere occurrence of sensibilia in one's sensory field. This is to construe experience as a *sensation state*. On the other hand, perceptual experience is identified with a perceptual state, where a perceptual state may have content if it carries information that can figure in the true explanation of intentional behavior. This is to construe experience as an *appearance state*.

The main question *does experience have content* addresses the issue of whether experience can carry information that can figure in the true explanation of intentional behavior. I will argue that experience does have content. The argument is more lucidly presented by focusing on perceptual states. Can perceptual states carry information and if they carry information can that information figure in true intentional explanations of behavior? I argue that the answer to these questions is yes.

An initial assumption. I will assume for the sake of argument that a state that carries information if and only if it capable of being accurate or inaccurate. For example, tree rings carry information about the age of tree because the tree rings themselves can accurately (or inaccurately) represent the age of the tree. For the purposes of our argument I will show that perceptual states can be accurate or inaccurate and thus they carry information.

Here is the argument:

1. Perceptual experiences can be misleading.
2. If (1) then it is possible that things are not as they appear in perception.
3. But if it is possible that things are not as they appear in perception then perception can be inaccurate.



So,

4. Perception can be inaccurate.
5. If (4) then perception carries information.

Thus,

6. Perception carries information.

Premise (2) uses the notion of how things appear in perception. There are several different senses to ‘appears’: the phenomenological sense, the epistemic sense, and the comparative sense.<sup>2</sup> To distinguish between these senses take, for example, the statement ‘This coin appears to be circular’. If ‘appears’ functions in the epistemic sense then this sentence indicates that the subject has a tendency to believe that the coin is circular given the experience. ‘Appears’ as it functions in the comparative sense in the statement indicates the way coins usually looks. The phenomenological use of ‘appears’ refers to the “look” of the coin. For instance, if one views a flat circular object at an angle it will look elliptical. The sense of ‘appears’ in premise (2) is the phenomenological sense. Thus, if perceptual experiences can be misleading then it is possible that things are not as they look to be in perception.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that things appear to persons in perception provides an argument that perceptual states have content. This follows given that there are true explanations of intentional behavior that advert to the content of perceptual states. For instance, suppose Bill reaches for a piece of cake. We can explain Bill’s action by averting to his desire to eat cake and his visual experience representing to him that there is cake. We need not

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<sup>2</sup> See Chisholm (1957).

<sup>3</sup> This specification the phenomenological sense of ‘appears’ relies heavily on visual experience. It does apply, though, to all varieties of perceptual experience.

always explain action by way of belief/desire pairs; for we can explain action by way of perceptual states as well.

Also, a stress on the phenomenological sense of ‘appears’ blocks a similar argument that the rings on a tree has content or that the thermometer has content in virtue of the level of the mercury carrying information. If ‘appears’ were understood in either the epistemic or comparative sense then we would reach the conclusion that these states have content. But the information encoded in these states is not part of any true intentional explanation of the tree’s behavior. A tree is not an agent.

There is an objection that needs addressing before we proceed.<sup>4</sup> The argument I gave may prove too much. For it may prove that pains have propositional content. But—so the objection goes—surely pains lack content. The new argument proceeds as follows:

7. Pain experience can be misleading.
8. If (7) then it is possible that things are not as they appear in pain experience.
9. But if it is possible that things are not as they appear in pain experience then pain experience can be inaccurate.

So,

10. Pain experience can be inaccurate.
11. If (10) then pain experience carries information.

Thus,

12. Pain experience carries information.

It is true that pain experience can cause false beliefs. But this fact alone is consistent with the falsity of (8). For the appearance language in premise (8) is to be taken in the phenomenal sense and the mere fact that an experience causes a belief only requires an epistemic reading of ‘appears’. Nevertheless, things can phenomenally appear in pain

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<sup>4</sup> This objection comes from Peter Markie.

experience in ways that they actually are not. Persons who have lost limbs report phantom pains.<sup>5</sup> Some report feeling pain in their leg, when they have no leg. The case of phantom pain shows that (8) is true as well for pains. There is a way things appear in pain experience. Phantom pains represent that there is damage in a region that no longer exists.

The objection assumes that pains are not representational. But this assumption is controversial. It is consistent with the argument that perception has content that pain experience likewise has content.<sup>6</sup>

### **3 Arguments against the Content Thesis**

In the remainder of the chapter I consider arguments against the claim that perceptual states have content. The general line of argument against the content thesis is that perception should be assimilated to sensation states. On this view perception is like pains, itches, or tickles in that they are not about anything.

I will argue that views of this type are mistaken. The central problem such views face are the phenomenon of misleading experiences. In what follows I examine different accounts that deny that perceptual experiences have accuracy conditions. I argue that none of these accounts succeed in showing that experiential states lack accuracy conditions. The arguments show that either these accounts fail on their own merits or that they are compatible with perceptual experiences possessing accuracy conditions.

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<sup>5</sup> See Michael Tye (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Tye argues that pains (etc.) are representational states. See Tye “A Representational Theory of Pains and Their Phenomenal Character” in Gunther (2003).

## A. Raw feels

The first view I consider that denies experience has accuracy conditions holds that experience lacks any sort of representational content. Steven Reynolds defends a view of perceptual justification on which perceptual experiences are non-propositional and non-intentional. He describes this view: “Experiences are like itches and tickles, and unlike beliefs, in not “saying” anything or even being *about* anything. They are complex ordered masses of sensations produced in perception.”<sup>7</sup> Reynolds’ position assimilates perceptual experience to sensation states. But why think this is correct? In Reynolds’ (1991) paper he does not argue for this view but assumes it and attempts to show that experience so conceived provides a suitable basis for perceptual justification.

One reason for thinking experiences are just raw feels is that perceptual belief is independent of perceptual experience. For instance a subject may undergo a perceptual experience and not realize at all what the experience indicates. For example, a child may undergo the experience of looking at a carburetor but have no idea how to identify carburetors; thus the child does not recognize the experience is of a carburetor. The child is in a certain sensation state in this case. Later, after the child acquires the concept of a carburetor, we can imagine the child to be in the same-type sensation state. In this case, however, the child realizes that the experience indicates and consequently believes that *there’s a carburetor*. This shows that perceptual belief is independent of perceptual experience, but it does not show that perceptual experience lacks content. Perceptual

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<sup>7</sup> See Reynolds (1991), p. 273.

experience can have content and yet the subject lacks a recognitional-awareness content of the experience. Such a phenomenon is attested to in the above case: at a later time the child learns how to discriminate carburetors and then recalls that his earlier experience was of a carburetor.<sup>8</sup>

A significant problem for the “raw-feels” conception of experience is the connection between experience and truth. If our beliefs based on perception are sometimes true then it seems that experience must convey information to us about the world. For these perceptual beliefs seem to endorse the content of perception. But if experience is merely a sensory state with no content then it is difficult to see how it could convey any information about the world. For example, random noise does not justify the belief that *there are some flowers*. The random noise has no feature that indicates the truth of the later. But if experiences are merely qualitative sensory states then experiences are like random noise. It’s a mystery then how experiences convey information about the world.

Reynolds is aware of this objection and attempts to respond to it by noting that experience conveys information in analog form rather than digital form. Given the assumption that content is digital information, it follows that perception lacks content. The distinction between types of information-carriers comes from Fred Dretske.<sup>9</sup> Dretske has distinguished analog representations from digital representations. A representation of a state of affairs *s* in which an object *o* has a property *p* is digital iff the representation

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Martin “Perception, Concepts, and Memory” argues that such a phenomenon yields an argument for the nonconceptual content of perception. See Gunter ed. (2003).

<sup>9</sup> See Dretske (1983), Chapter 6.

carries the information that *o* has *p* in *s* and carries no more information. A representation is analog of the same state of affairs when it carries more information about *o* and *s*.

Reynolds' claim that experience carries information in analog form is correct. But this does not show that experience lacks content. For perceptual states have content just in case the state carries information that figures in true explanations of intentional behavior. Reynolds' himself admits that perceptual states carry information. Therefore, if it he to resist the content thesis he must resist the claim that the information contained in perceptual states plays a role in true explanations of intentional behavior.

Reynolds does not explicitly address this issue, but given what he does say it is not difficult to construct a rejoinder to my argument. The rejoinder will stress the difference between a sensory state and an appearance state. A sensory state is not about anything. Perceptual experiences are to be identified with sensory states and thus they are not about anything. Consequently, perceptual experiences lack content.

The premise I reject is the claim that perceptual experiences—perceptual states—are to be identified with sensory states. Why? For this reason: perceptual experiences play an ineliminable role in true explanations of intentional behavior. If perceptual experiences are identified with masses of complex sensations then it is a mystery how those masses of complex sensation guide behavior. They would guide intentional behavior only given certain beliefs about what those sensations were correlated with. But persons—and other animals—need not have these higher order beliefs about their experiences in order to act on the basis of experience. Thus it is wrong to identify

perceptual experience with sensory states; such identification loses the ability to explain how basic action can be guided by experience.

## B. Sense-data

Another view that denies that perceptual states have accuracy conditions is a sense data view. Frank Jackson (1977) defends a representative theory of perception on which the immediate objects of perception are private mental objects.<sup>10</sup> Jackson does not directly address the question of whether experience has content. His primary concern is to address the question, what are the objects of perception. Given Jackson's theory, though, we can distinguish two questions; first, do sense-data have content; second, do perceptual experiences have content? The answer to the first question is no. Sense data, like ordinary empirical objects, lack content; they just are.<sup>11</sup> The second question, though, does not have a straightforward answer; for sense-data are not experiences on Jackson's view; rather they are the immediate objects of perceptual experiences. In fact, there seems to be no argument from a sense-data view to the claim that experience lacks content.<sup>12</sup> Thus, a commitment to sense-data does not threaten the claim that experience has content.

It may be objected to this that if the content of experience just is the objects one is immediately aware of then the sense-data view implies that experience lacks content.

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<sup>10</sup> Jackson has now renounced this view.

<sup>11</sup> Russell makes this point in *The Problems of Philosophy* (see Russell 1997):

<sup>12</sup> Susanna Siegel makes a similar point in her recent article: "The Contents of Perception," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005).

However, the content of experience is not equated with the objects of experience. Rather the content of experience is how things are presented in experience.

### C. Direct Realism

Direct Realism is the view that in perceptual experience (primarily visual experience) we are directly aware of physical objects. Charles Travis has recently defended a version of direct realism on which experiences are not representational.<sup>13</sup> Rather experiences are inputs for representation. Representation occurs when one “takes” one’s experience a certain way. This “taking” is claimed to be primitive.

The main challenge for direct realism—and for the other views we have considered as well—is the phenomenon of misleading experiences. How does Travis’s position explain how experiences can be misleading without being committed to experience possessing accuracy conditions? Concerning misleading experiences Travis writes,

By perceiving I can... be misled, at least because what I see (hear, feel, smell) may be misleading. A touch need not mean what it seems to. An odour may be artificially produced. For *what* I perceive to be misleading, nothing need be *represented* as so. Perhaps *none* of the ways perception may mislead involves anything being represented to us as so. Perhaps in perception things are *not* represented to us as being thus and so.<sup>14</sup>

Travis notes that J.L. Austin held a similar view on which perceptual experiences are not semantically evaluable.<sup>15</sup> Travis summarizes Austin’s position: “Austin’s idea is that,

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<sup>13</sup> Travis (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Travis, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> See Austin Sense and Sensibilia (1962).



rather than *representing* anything as so, our senses merely bring our surrounding into view; afford us some sort of awareness of them. It is then for us to make of what is in our view what we can, or do.”<sup>16</sup>

I shall evaluate this position by considering how it handles the following cases of misleading experiences.

Case 1: Jim Morrison seems to see pink rats on the wall.

Case 2: Sextus Empiricus seems to see a bent stick in the water.

Case 3: Mr. Müller seems to see two lines of unequal length.

Case 4: Donny Q. seems to see a gallant knight.

Case 5: Ms. Gossip seems to see Suzy and Billy flirting.

The problem with these cases is that each case involves a different way experience can be misleading. A theory of perception needs to explain in what way these kinds of experiences are misleading. As we shall see this poses a problem for Travis’s position, since he is locked into one account of the ways experience can mislead. The first three cases, for example, suggest that the experience itself is misleading. Travis’s position, however, seems ill-suited to handle these kinds of cases.

The cases Travis’s position handles well are cases like 5. In this case Ms. Gossip seems to see Suzy and Billy flirting. She observes a scene in which she takes it that Suzy and Billy are flirting. Ms. Gossip takes her experience in such a way that she thinks Suzy

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

and Billy are flirting.<sup>17</sup> So Ms. Gossip takes her experience in a misleading manner. But how does Travis's position handle the other cases? Travis explicitly considers the Müller-Lyer illusion (Case 3). Travis responds to this with the following:

In the Müller-Lyer [case], two lines are contrived to have a certain look. They do not just *seem* to have that look; that is actually the way they look. Two lines may well have that look because one *is* longer than the other. That is a familiar way for things to be. Depending on circumstances, that look may thus *indicate* that it is two lines of unequal length that one confronts. Or one might take it to. Unequal length *might* be what is to be expected; or at least what *is* expected. *Thus* may someone be misled by a Müller-Lyer [case]. False expectations arise here in the wrong view of what something (a look) means, though perhaps a right view of what it *ought* to. What one gets wrong is the arrangement of the world: how the misleading seen things in fact relate to other things. *That mistake neither requires, nor suggests, that in this illusion one line is represented to us as being longer than the other, or that anything else is represented as so.*<sup>18</sup>

I highlight two implications of Travis's discussion of this case. First, the experience of a Müller-Lyer case does not represent two lines as being unequal. Second, the experience is misleading because the subject takes her experience in a misleading way. This second claim, however, is mistaken. This "taking" is either an unconscious act or a conscious act. If "taking" is an unconscious act of the subject then we need some plausible explanation as to why the subject unconsciously "takes" her experience as indicating two unequal lines. In my view the most plausible explanation is that the experience represents the lines as being unequal. But Travis cannot adopt this explanation. He must insist that this unconscious "taking" is not explained by the

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<sup>17</sup> It would be wrong to say that Ms. Gossip takes her experience to represent some state of affairs that doesn't obtain; for in this case Ms. Gossip—on Travis's—view would be very confused: her experience doesn't represent anything, ergo it doesn't represent Suzy and Billy as flirting.

<sup>18</sup> Travis, p. 68. Final emphasis added.

representational content of the subject's experience nor by the beliefs the subject has.

But I do not understand how this could be. For it seems to require an unconscious "taking" that floats free of any mental explanatory items (i.e., not experiential content and not belief).

Maybe there's more to be said about this unconscious "taking". Maybe Travis can say that the unconscious taking is just to be disposed to believe that the lines are unequal on the basis of such experience. Here, however, Travis faces a dilemma: either there is something about the look of the experience that grounds the disposition or there is. If there is something about the look that grounds the disposition then the only plausible candidate I can think of is the content of the experience. But that's inconsistent with Travis' position. If, however, there's nothing about the look of the experience that grounds the disposition to believe then it could have been the case that the look in the Müller-Lyer case grounded the disposition to believe that there was something blue before one. But that is absurd. The experience in the Müller-Lyer case has no quality that indicates the presence of a blue item.

Back to the main dilemma: If, however, "taking" is a conscious act then the subject does not "take" her experience as being an experience of two unequal lines. This is seen from the fact that after the subject learns that it is an illusion and she believes that she is seeing two equal lines, it still remains the case that it appears to the subject that the lines are unequal.<sup>19</sup> This assumes, of course, that believing the lines are equal on the basis of that experience involves taking the lines to be unequal. Since I am considering

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<sup>19</sup> I suppose Travis could hold that there are two takings here. This move seems desperate, though.

conscious taking and belief is a kind of conscious taking I think this assumption is innocuous. I conclude then that case 3 (and also cases 1, 2, and 4) show that Travis's proposal will not work.

The general argument against the content thesis does not succeed. Views that deny that perceptual states have content cannot explain the misleading character of experiences.

#### **4 Conceptual & Nonconceptual Content**

The claim that perceptual states have propositional content is often associated with debates over whether the content of perception is conceptual or nonconceptual. For the purposes of clarifying the thesis of this chapter and illuminating later discussion, I briefly discuss this issue. Alex Byrne (2005) helpfully distinguishes two theses that are often run together in these discussions. Byrne distinguishes the thesis of state nonconceptualism from the thesis of content nonconceptualism. The thesis of state nonconceptualism is the claim that a mental state *M* with content *p* is a *nonconceptual state* iff it is possible to be in *M* without possessing all the concepts that characterize *p*.<sup>20</sup> The thesis of content nonconceptualism is that some mental states have a different kind of content than belief content.<sup>21</sup> Given this distinction we can separate five theses in the debate over the nature of perceptual content.

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<sup>20</sup> Byrne (2005), p. 233.

<sup>21</sup> Byrne, p. 234.

T1: Some perceptual states are such that it is possible for a subject to be in that state without possessing all the concepts that characterize the content of that state.

T2: No perceptual states are such that it is possible for a subject to be in that state without possessing all the concepts that characterize the content of that state.

T3: Some perceptual states have content that is different in kind from belief content.

T4: Perceptual states have content but the content is not different in kind from belief content.

T5: Perceptual states lack content.

The argument of this chapter supports T4. I have not taken a position on either T1 or T2.

## **5 Conclusion**

I've presented an argument for the content thesis: perceptual states have propositional content. Furthermore, I've argued that views that deny the content thesis are untenable. In the next chapter I turn to the question of what kind of awareness of perceptual content one must have in order for belief based on that experience to be justified.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Justification and Recognition Awareness of Content:

#### Part One – An argument against Externalism

We learned in the last chapter that perceptual states have propositional content. This creates a problem for an account of perceptual justification that aims to uphold the twin theses that (i) perception offers good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are true and that (ii) perception can end the regress of reasons. The problem was noted by Wilfrid Sellars, and it can be formulated as a dilemma.<sup>1</sup> I will often refer to the problem as the Sellarsian dilemma.

The problem is best understood by way of illustration.<sup>2</sup> Consider an account of perceptual justification that holds that perception is sensory awareness of particulars, where the particulars may be mental particulars (e.g., sense data) or physical particulars (e.g., physical objects). Such a theory is well-positioned to handle the regress argument. Perception ends the regress of reasons because sensory awareness of particulars does not require justification. Further it is claimed that sensory awareness of particulars provides good reasons for our beliefs. The problem, though, is that sensory awareness of particulars does not provide good reasons for our beliefs. There are many particulars contained within our visual field such that we lack justifying awareness of them. This is the lesson of the problem of the speckled hen.<sup>3</sup> The speckled hen problem shows that

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<sup>1</sup> Sellars (1963).

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell (1912) advocates similar to the one I am about to describe.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Chisholm (1948).

merely having an item figure in one's visual field and believing that that item is there does not justify the belief. Something more is required. This something more is that one needs the right sort of awareness of the item. Thus, in order to capture the first thesis that perception offers good reasons for thinking our empirical beliefs are true one need to require a stronger sense of awareness than mere sensory awareness.

The stronger kind of awareness is awareness of the content of perception. For the mere occurrence of particulars in one's visual field does not offer a good reason for thinking that some claim is true.<sup>4</sup> This additional requirement, though, is at odds with a successful solution to the regress problem. The problem is that awareness of content is a propositional attitude, and such attitudes do not involve real relations to the truth-maker of one's empirical belief (the empirical fact that makes one's belief true). Traditional foundationalist attempts to solve the regress problem attempt to end the regress of reasons in a state that provides a reason for belief and involves a real relation to the truth-maker of one's belief. So the problem is that if one accepts this additional requirement of awareness of content then one seems unable to accept the twin theses about perceptual justification. (This problem constitutes one-half of the Sellarsian dilemma.)

A natural response to this argument is to reject the additional requirement: the justification of belief based on perception need not involve an awareness of experiential content. This sort of move is a standard externalist response. Externalists typically think that accepting a requirement like awareness of content over-intellectualizes what is needed for justified empirical belief. The justification of belief based on perception just

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<sup>4</sup> This point was observed by Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (1963) §3.

requires that one's perception be a good indication of the truth of one's belief. I will argue in this chapter this externalist response fails. If perception does not afford awareness of the content of experience then belief based on experience is not justified. If this is right, then, an adequate account of perceptual justification must require awareness of perceptual content. (This constitutes the other half of the Sellarsian dilemma.)

Another major goal of this chapter is to develop a more nuanced catalogue of kinds of awarenesses. I will begin with a short discussion on kinds of awarenesses, and then in the context of the remaining sections I will expand on these initial remarks. I will argue that recognitional awareness of the objects of perception is required. Given the account of recognitional awareness this yields the result that one is aware of the content of one's experience.

I end the chapter with a discussion of a recent argument by Jack Lyons that reflection on this problem for perceptual justification provides a good argument for externalism. Reflection on Lyons' argument will reinforce the conclusions of this chapter by showing why the externalist response fails. Lyons' argument is additionally helpful in that it introduces key terminology and concepts that help for a more nuanced discussion of the dilemma. The remaining chapters will draw on this discussion.

The outline of the chapter is as follows. I begin with a brief discussion of types of awarenesses. Next I turn argue that externalism does not solve the main problem, since rejecting the requirement of awareness of the content of experience does not secure the claim that perception offers good reasons for belief. I will argue for this claim by considering the views of William Alston and Ernest Sosa. In the last section, I expand



the argument against externalism by examining Jack Lyons' argument that this issue for perceptual justification provides a general argument for externalism.

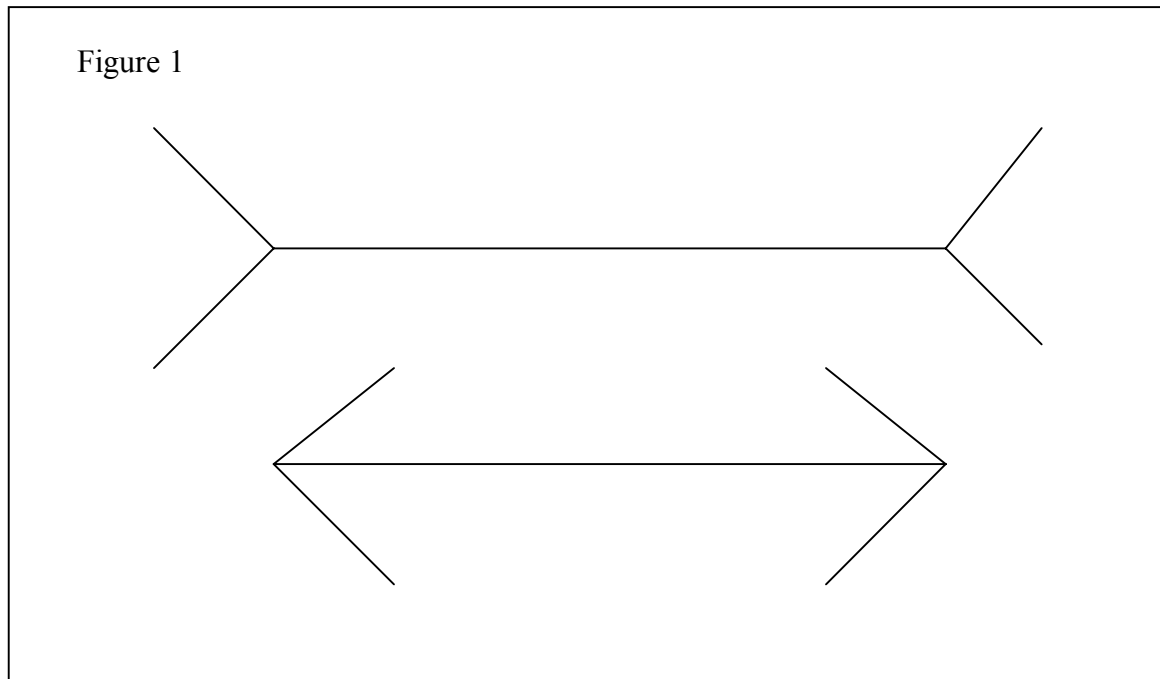
## **1 Kinds of Awarenesses**

There are two fundamental types of awarenesses: de re awareness and de dicto awareness. De re awareness is awareness of some object, property, or fact. De dicto awareness is propositional awareness, an awareness that p. De dicto awareness of a proposition is an intentional state of mind by which one is related to some proposition that may fail to correspond to the way things are. De re awareness comes in two kinds: experiential awareness and recognitional awareness. Experiential awareness of some object, property, or fact is the occurrence of that item within one's sensory field. One is experientially aware of everything that one experiences. A young child that does not know how to identify an oriental vase is experientially aware of the vase in virtue of the vase (or some representation of it) figuring in the child's visual field.

Recognitional awareness of some object, property, or fact is logically stronger than experiential awareness. Recognitional awareness of x requires that S's experiential awareness of x guides S's intentional action. For instance, when I drive safely around town, stopping for the appropriate signs and signals, I am recognitionally aware of those signs and signals. Recognitional awareness can be of misleading items. Illusions, for example, can be used to guide intentional action. Since intentional inexistence is a defining feature of intentional states, recognitional awareness is an intentional state of mind. Moreover, recognitional awareness is not equivalent to merely behavioral responses to certain objects. Such responses are not cases of intentional action.

De dicto awareness comes in two varieties: belief and appearance. Belief is a kind of awareness-that because belief is a kind of awareness and one believes that a

proposition is true. Even though I will not offer an account of the nature of belief, I think we can see that there is another kind of de dicto awareness. This kind of awareness-that does not involve belief but involves how things are presented to one. For instance, in the Müller-Lyer illusion (Figure 1)



the content *the two lines are unequal* is presented to one. It appears that the lines are unequal. After one learns this is an illusion one doesn't believe that the lines are unequal. However, it remains the case that it appears that the lines are unequal. This shows that there are at least two kinds of de dicto awarenesses.

I will argue that perceptual justification requires being in an (appropriate) appearance-state (I will often refer to this as “awareness of content” to make clear that the appearance state involves the awareness that a claim is being made by the experience). This requires that one is recognitionally aware of the appropriate items. Recognitional awareness of x helps to constitute being in a certain appearance state.

In the following I turn now to externalist responses to the original problem.

## 2 Externalism

The problem as we saw in the introduction was that if one requires awareness of content for perceptual justification then this seems incompatible with accepting the twin theses that perception offers good reasons and that it can end the regress of reasons. The standard externalist response is that awareness of content need not be present for the justification of belief. A perceptual belief may be justified (or, more broadly have positive epistemic merit<sup>5</sup>) without having awareness of the content of experience.

Two of the most significant epistemologists with externalist commitments are William Alston and Ernest Sosa. Both develop accounts of justification that include an externalist element and both explicitly discuss the Sellarsian dilemma. I begin with a discussion of William Alston's response to the problem. Alston suggests that the fact that a perceptual belief is caused by a normal perceptual process in normal conditions is sufficient for that belief to be immediately justified.<sup>6</sup> I argue against Alston's position by arguing that facts about the origin of perceptual belief are either insufficient for justification or consistent with internalism.

Next, I consider Ernest Sosa's response to one form of the problem. Sosa helpfully formulates a version of the dilemma and argues that several of its crucial premises are false. I argue that Sosa's response to one horn of the dilemma suffers the same setbacks that Alston's response faces. Further I argue that Sosa is right to reject a

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<sup>5</sup> See chapter 4 for a discussion on varieties of epistemic merit.

<sup>6</sup> See discussion below.

key premise on the other horn of the dilemma, but in the end this doesn't amount to a successful response since that horn can be reformulated without reliance on the troublesome premise. The arguments against Alston's and Sosa's externalist responses show that plausible externalist replies to the main problem are unsuccessful.

#### A. William Alston

I will argue that Alston's response to the Sellarsian dilemma is either inadequate because it gives up too much (i.e., awareness of the content of experience) or adequate but consistent with internalism. The first horn shows that a purely externalist response to the dilemma is inadequate; the second horn shows that an adequate response does not require externalism. Thus, on either horn, externalism is not the proper solution to the dilemma.

##### i. The General Issue

In his paper "What's Wrong with Immediate Knowledge?"<sup>7</sup> Alston responds to what he takes as the Sellarsian critique of immediate knowledge. (I will focus on immediate justification.) Alston defines immediate justification as follows:

S is *immediately* justified in believing that  $p$  – S is justified in believing that  $p$  by virtue of something other than some relation this belief has to some other justified belief(s) of S.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alston (1989), 57-78.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

Examples of immediate justifiers include: “(a) immediate experience of what a belief is about; (b) for certain special cases, simply the truth of the belief, or the fact that it is believed or understood, (c) facts about the origin of the belief, for instance, the fact that a certain perceptual belief arose from normal perceptual processes.”<sup>9</sup>

The challenge to the possibility of immediate justification, he takes it, requires the level-ascent premise that S justifiedly believe p only if S justifiedly believe that p is justified.<sup>10</sup> This premise conflicts with the possibility of immediate justification because it requires of every justified belief some further justified belief. Alston’s response to the level-ascent premise comes in two stages. In the first stage, he observes the distinction between justifying and being justified. A belief is justified iff it is epistemically appropriate. One justifies a belief iff one does something to show that the belief is justified.

The second stage of the argument applies this distinction. Alston observes that unreflective subjects do not typically engage in the activity of justifying their beliefs. But their beliefs are nevertheless justified. E.g., a young child that sees a red apple in normal conditions is justified in believing that there is an apple even though the child has no relevant higher level beliefs he could use to justify that belief. Thus, the level-ascent premise is false; one can justifiedly believe p without justifiedly believing that p is justified.

## ii. The Problem of Immediate Perceptual Justification

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> See Ibid., pp. 64-72.

Does this show that perceptual beliefs can be immediately justified? And if so, is Alston's explanation of how belief can be immediately justified adequate? Alston's response to the level-ascent premise does not imply that perceptual beliefs can be immediately justified. For his response does not imply that beliefs produced by wishful thinking are immediately justified, and thus if perceptual beliefs can be candidates for immediate justification then we need some reason for thinking that perceptual beliefs are significantly different than beliefs produced by wishful thinking.

Alston is sensitive to the fact that simple perceptual beliefs are not clear cut cases of beliefs that are immediately justified. He writes,

A simple perceptual belief, for example, that there is a tree in front of me, or if you prefer, that I see a tree in front of me, is a more controversial case. A normal adult could provide a reason if pressed: "It looks like a tree" or "I am having the kind of experience I would have if I were seeing a tree". But it seems that a being too unsophisticated to come up with any such reasons could still have perceptual knowledge that there is a tree in front of him just by virtue of forming that belief by normal perceptual processes in normal circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

Alston here suggests that a perceptual belief may be immediately justified by the fact that one forms the belief by normal perceptual processes in normal circumstances. Earlier he gave an example of a possible immediate justifier as "facts about the origin of the belief, for instance, the fact that a certain perceptual belief arose from normal perceptual processes."<sup>12</sup> Alston's suggestion is then that the fact that a perceptual belief arose by normal processes in normal circumstances can immediately justify belief. No further belief about the epistemic status of that process is required.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

Let us grant for the sake of the present argument that Alston is right that the level-ascent premise is false. Can facts about the origin of a perceptual belief immediately justify such beliefs? There is an initial problem with evaluating this claim. We do not know what counts as a “normal” perceptual process nor do we know what counts as a “normal” circumstance. Alston does not indicate how we should take this. I think, though, that we needn’t determine what counts as a normal process or circumstance in order to assess whether the mere fact that a belief is formed on the basis of this kind of process justifies belief. We can instead focus on whether this kind of perceptual process yields awareness of the experiential content. Either this process does yield such awareness or it does not. I will argue that if the process does not yield awareness of content then the perceptual process doesn’t yield justification. If, however, it does yield this awareness then Alston’s solution is consistent with internalism. Thus, I shall argue that Alston’s account is either inadequate because it leaves out the right kind of awareness or it is adequate but not distinctly externalist.

a. The first horn

Let us investigate the consequences of the first horn on which this kind of perceptual process does not yield awareness of experiential content. One of the main themes in Alston’s epistemology is to uphold the intuition that unreflective subjects have good reasons for their beliefs.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear, however, whether this implies unreflective

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, “Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?”, “What’s Wrong with Immediate Knowledge?”, and “An Internalist Externalism.” These papers are contained in Alston (1989).



subjects are not recognitionally aware of the relevant contents of their experiences.<sup>14</sup>

Alston discusses the epistemological significance of unreflective subjects in the context of theories that require subjects to have higher-order beliefs for justification. This, however, is compatible with those same subjects being recognitionally aware of the relevant contents of their experiences. For recognitional awareness of experiential content does not require higher-order beliefs about the content of one's experience.

Let us suppose, however, that the perceptual process Alston has in mind does not yield awareness of the content of experience. There is a good argument that if persons lack awareness of the relevant content of experience then the appropriate belief cannot be immediately justified by the experience. For in this case the subject's belief is a complete mystery to him.

Recognitional awareness (R-awareness), recall, is that most basic kind of awareness of the content of one's experience that guides belief and intentional action. Higher-order awareness may guide action and belief, but it requires r-awareness. As an example of r-awareness, think of the kind of awareness one has of the stoplights when driving safely (!) around town. There is little reflection on one's experience. But the awareness of the stoplight guides action; you see it, stop, and proceed only when it turns green. Contrast this with a case in which one lacks r-awareness of the stoplight, even though one is looking right at it. When you drive through the red light, there's a sense in which you were aware that it was red—you were looking right at it. But the content of the experience wasn't registered in a way that guides your action.

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<sup>14</sup> See the previous discussion of this in chapter 3, pp. 10-12.

Suppose a subject lacks r-awareness of, say, an oriental vase in the living room. Given this, the object of the experience is not something the subject uses to guide his action. If asked, for example, to specify what is to the right of the vase, the subject would be at a loss because the relevant content of his experience does not register with other cognitive capacities that allow him to appropriately respond to such questions. This illustrates the sense in which the belief that there's an oriental vase is a complete mystery to this subject. There is nothing within S's experience that indicates to S the presence of a vase. The content of experience is, as a matter of fact, a good reason for the belief, but the subject is not guided by that content in any significant way (though perhaps at some subliminal level the content causes the appropriate belief).

This case also illustrates that experiential content which a subject is not aware of cannot be taken into account by the subject. It cannot be used for reasons whether for reasons for further beliefs or reasons for actions. These two claims strongly suggest that a perceptual process that does not yield recognitional awareness does not justify.

Alston himself can be charitably construed as agreeing that recognitional awareness of the objects of experience is required for justification. Alston maintains that subjects must have some awareness of the putative justifier. In his paper "An Internalist Externalism"<sup>15</sup> he requires that the subject be aware of the justifying ground of her belief. The awareness that Alston requires is such that the subject "takes into account" the objects of experience. Alston writes,

To say that my belief that the streets are wet is based on the way they look is to say that in forming a belief about the conditions of the streets I (or the

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<sup>15</sup> Alston (1989), 227-245.

belief-forming “mechanism”) am differentially sensitive to the way the streets look; the mechanism is so constituted that the belief formed about the streets will be some, possibly very complex, function of the visual experience input. Even where an explicit belief in a support relation is absent, the belief formation is the result of *taking account* of features of the experience and forming the belief *in light of* them, rather than just some involving some subcognitive transaction.<sup>16</sup>

This is an intriguing remark; for Alston appears to require some conscious process for basing a belief on experience (and thus for the belief to be justified). At the end of this remark Alston writes in a note,

It may be contended that where such “taking account” is involved, this amounts to the subject’s having and using a belief in a support relation. And perhaps this is right, for a minimal, low-level grade of belief possession and use. One could “have” and “use” the belief in this way, however, without the belief’s being available for conscious entertainment, assertion, or use in inference.<sup>17</sup>

The position Alston sketches here is similar to what I have attempted to capture by talk of recognitional awareness of the objects of experience. The main difference between my proposal and Alston’s is that I do not think it accurate to describe de dicto awareness of content a kind of a belief. The reason here arises from Kripke’s rationality argument to the effect that you shouldn’t attribute to a person contradictory beliefs if there’s another interpretation of their cognitive states available (see Kripke’s case of Pierre in “A Puzzle about Belief”<sup>18</sup>). In any case, we can see from this that Alston concurs that a perceptual process which does not yield recognitional awareness of the

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<sup>16</sup> Alston (1989) “An Internalist Externalism,” p. 229.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 229 fn. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Kripke (1979).

objects of experience does not justify. Thus, if Alston's solution to the Sellarsian dilemma requires that one lacks awareness of content then it is inadequate.

b. The second horn

On the second horn the kind of perceptual process relevant for justification yields recognitional awareness of the objects of one's experience. I will argue here that this solution is adequate but not distinctly externalist; for what justifies is the recognitional awareness of the objects of experience. The perceptual process may be normal or abnormal; so long as the process results in awareness of the assertive content of experience it justifies. This shows that, given this horn, Alston's solution does not require externalism.

I will assume here that awareness of content provides some justification for belief. I want to show that the additional requirement that the perceptual process be normal is not additionally required for a belief's justification. That this is so may be illustrated by the new evil demon problem.<sup>19</sup> This problem concerns subjects whose experiences are phenomenologically identical to our own, but whose experiences are the products of manipulation, whether by evil scientists or nefarious ghostly spirits. The processes that produce these experiences are not normal under any epistemologically helpful sense of "normality". Yet the subjects have good reasons for their belief because they have conscious awareness of the relevant experiential contents.

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<sup>19</sup> See Cohen (1984).

That the processes are not normal under any epistemologically useful sense of “normality” can be shown by holding fixed the specified sense of normality and varying recognitional awareness. Suppose the processes are statistically normal in such worlds. This is not helpful because one can have rationally appropriate perceptual belief without the belief being an instance of a process that is statistically normal within a class of worlds. Let the demon-world scenario be described the same except that each person is controlled by a different demon which is given the following instructions: deceive your person into thinking there’s an oriental vase before him on the basis of the intrinsic features of his experience but don’t produce those features in his experience in a way any other demon in this world does. This implies that the perceptual processes in this demon world are not statistically normal. Yet such unfortunate souls have good reasons for their beliefs. As long the experience contains the assertive content that an oriental vase is present and one is r-aware of that, the belief is rationally appropriate.

It may be objected that there will be some level of description such that the processes are statistically normal in such demon worlds.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps this is right. The challenge, though, is to ensure that such a level of description will explain why the demon-worlders’ beliefs are justified. It seems doubtful, however, that this can be met. For a purely general description of the processes as “processes produced by nefarious ghostly spirits” will be statistically normal, but it is surely not helpful for explaining why the beliefs are justified. What would be helpful is a level of description that specifies the content of the experience and how the beliefs are formed on the basis of that content. But

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<sup>20</sup> This objection was put to me by Jonathan Kvanvig.

here it seems that what is driving such an analysis is the fact that recognitional awareness of assertive content justifies belief.

Other senses of “normality” that have been proposed fail for similar reasons. Ernest Sosa, for example, suggests that the perceptual processes of the demon worlders are instances of processes that are reliable in the actual world. He considers a demon worlder’s belief that there is a white, round item before one on the basis of the experience of a white, round item. He writes,

[A] visual experience as if there is something white and round before one is a reason for believing that there is such a thing there before one, but only because in the actual world such a visual experience is reliably related to there being such a thing there.<sup>21</sup>

This is inadequate because the content of a demon worlder’s experience may indicate the presence of an object that is not such that such experiences are reliable in the actual world. Suppose the content of the demon worlder’s experience is the same as the content of our experiences of mirages. Such visual experiences give the demon worlder a reason for believing that there is water ahead even though such a visual experience is not reliably related to there being water ahead in the actual world.

It may be objected that such experiences *are* reliably related to the presence of water in the actual world because mirage-experiences are identical qua experiences to experiences of there being water ahead. Since the latter is predominant and reliably related to water, then mirage experiences are reliably related to there being water ahead. This objection is unsuccessful because mirage-experiences are not identical qua

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<sup>21</sup> In Bonjour & Sosa (2003), p. 164.

experiences to the experience of there being water ahead. Mirage experiences have their own phenomenology even though they also have the assertive content that there is water ahead.

This counterexample to Sosa's claim shows that the requirement that the perceptual process be normal is not a necessary condition for justification. Furthermore the counterexample suggests that what is doing the explanatory work with respect to the justification question is not the fact—if it is a fact—that one's belief is produced by normal perceptual processes in normal conditions. (Recall Alston's earlier remark that "facts about the origin of the belief, for instance, the fact that a certain perceptual belief arose from normal perceptual processes" are plausible candidates for immediate justifiers.<sup>22</sup>) Rather what explains why the belief is justified is that one has the right kind of awareness of the content of one's experience. Alston's solution, taken on this horn, does not show that externalism is required to solve the Sellarsian dilemma.

### iii. Alston on "looks" (or, Alston on "Awarenesses")

I have argued to this point that recognitional awareness of the content of experience is required for justification. This shows that externalism of the variety Alston's remarks suggest is not required to solve the dilemma. Alston himself may be fine with this conclusion. As I noted above Alston has some intriguing remarks on the kind of awareness required for justification. Furthermore, in a recent paper he argues that nonconceptual direct awareness can justify. To complete our discussion of Alston I

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<sup>22</sup> See pp. 4&5 above for discussion on this and see Alston (1989) "What's Wrong with Immediate Knowledge?" p. 60.

briefly consider this position.<sup>23</sup> I argue that nonconceptual direct awareness is insufficient for justification. The argument thus shows that externalism + nonconceptual direct awareness does not adequately handle the dilemma.

In a recent paper “Sellars and the ‘Myth of the Given’”<sup>24</sup> Alston considers whether awareness of contents requires justification. Alston argues that there is a *nonconceptual* direct awareness of the content of perception and that this awareness can immediately justify belief without itself needing justification.<sup>25</sup> Alston does not explicitly address the issue of whether conceptual awareness requires further justification. But given the emphasis he places here and elsewhere<sup>26</sup> on nonconceptual direct awareness and the mere fact that a belief is produced by a certain kind of perceptual process, we may wonder whether conceptual awareness raises more problems for immediate justification than nonconceptual awareness. A full examination of this latter issue will be put off until Chapter 5. In this brief section I consider whether a broadly externalist response coupled with nonconceptual direct awareness provides a suitable response to the dilemma.

Alston claims that nonconceptual direct awareness is of particulars.<sup>27</sup> It is identified with the phenomenal look of particulars that is presented in experience. For, Alston argues “this nonconceptual direct awareness of objects is fundamental to conscious perception, and that ... is what is distinctive of it vis-à-vis other modes of

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<sup>23</sup> I will consider similar responses in chapter 7 on the notion of de re evidential support.

<sup>24</sup> Alston (2002).

<sup>25</sup> See Ibid., p. 73 & p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> See the discussion above and also Alston’s paper “What’s Wrong with Immediate Knowledge.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 73 “This nonconceptual direct awareness [is] of objects.”



cognition.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, he argues, that only the concept of a phenomenal look can specify the intrinsic character of how things look in perception.<sup>29</sup> This is what makes perception distinctive vis-à-vis other modes of cognition.<sup>30</sup>

Nonconceptual direct awareness of particulars is phenomenal awareness of particulars. What is this phenomenal “look” or phenomenal awareness? The phenomenal look of a (e.g.) red experience is the intrinsic quality of the experience. This phenomenal look is difficult to specify. Alston writes, “[The looks concept in the statement] ‘X looks red to S’ in this sense reports what we might call the *qualitative distinctiveness* of this appearance, the intrinsic character of this presentation of X to S.”<sup>31</sup>

Alston is surely right that there is a nonconceptual direct awareness of particulars in perception. But there is a further question of whether this awareness can yield justification. Alston writes, “[E]ven if I have shown that Sellars’ arguments have not damaged the account of perceptual experience given the Theory of Appearing, he might take that to be a hollow victory if it could not also be shown that nonconceptual appearances can provide justification for beliefs about the objects that appear.”<sup>32</sup>

I consider the appeal to nonconceptual states of awareness in the following chapter. For present purposes I will argue that there is an initial case against Alston’s claim. Nonconceptual direct awareness of particulars does not itself imply that one conceives of the justifier as relevant to belief. But on some minimal conception of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 82.

“conceiving” justification requires that one conceive of the justifier as relevant to belief. I have argued that this minimal conception of “conceiving” can be unpacked in terms of recognitional awareness. This comports with Alston’s earlier remarks (quoted on p. 9) that the subject may “take into account” the content of experience. Further Alston claims, “It may be contended that where such “taking account” is involved, this amounts to the subject’s having and using a belief in a support relation. And perhaps this is right, for a minimal, low-level grade of belief possession and use.”<sup>33</sup> If this is right, then nonconceptual direct awareness is not the kind of awareness required for justification.

As further evidence for this, consider that there is a puzzle at the heart of Alston’s remarks on nonconceptual direct awareness. For when he attributes justification to the subject on the basis of nonconceptual direct awareness of the item he talks as if the subject understands what the experience is of. For example Alston writes, “If something looks like a computer, that provides *prima facie* credibility to supposing that it is a computer.”<sup>34</sup> Alston intends this to be taken as the phenomenal sense of “looks”. But the phenomenal sense of looks is consistent with the subject having no clue that there is a computer before one. Since the phenomenal sense of looks just captures the intrinsic quality of the experience, a subject who has no conception of a computer can be presented with the same intrinsic quality. As I argued in the section above on the first horn, this kind of awareness is not sufficient for justification.

This argument indicates that recognitional awareness of the justifier is conceptual. Alston’s discussion of the level-ascent premise does not address the crucial issue of

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<sup>33</sup> “An Internalist Externalism” p. 229 fn. 4, Alston (1989).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

whether this conceptual capacity requires further justification; for he attempts to end the justificatory chain with nonconceptual direct awareness. This, however, is not sufficient for justification.

## B. Ernest Sosa

In this section I briefly consider Ernest Sosa's response to a form of the Sellarsian dilemma. Sosa formulates a version of the dilemma that is interestingly different from Alston's construal of the dilemma. This formulation contributes to our understanding of the Sellarsian dilemma and related issues. I will here focus only on Sosa's particular formulation and his response to it. I will argue that Sosa's response to one horn of the dilemma is mistaken for similar reasons that the Alstonian response that doesn't require recognitional awareness is mistaken. Sosa rightfully rejects the other horn of the dilemma, but the dilemma can be reformulated to escape his criticisms. I conclude from this that Sosa's response to the Sellarsian dilemma is inadequate.

In Sosa's classic essay "The Raft and the Pyramid" Sosa lays out a response to a broadly Sellarsian argument.<sup>35</sup> Sosa begins by characterizing foundationalism. The foundationalist holds that there is a non-symmetric relation of evidential support among our beliefs. Some of these beliefs are basic in the sense that they support but are not supported by any other beliefs. Sosa explores broadly Sellarsian arguments that lead one to reject this idea.

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<sup>35</sup> Sosa (1991); original (1980).



Here is one such argument:<sup>36</sup>

1. If a mental state incorporates a propositional attitude, then it does not give us direct contact with reality, e.g., with pure experience, unfiltered by concepts or beliefs.
2. If a mental state does not give us direct contact with reality, then it provides no guarantee against error.
3. If a mental state provides no guarantee against error, then it cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge.
4. Therefore, if a mental state incorporates a propositional attitude, then it cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge.
5. If a mental state does not incorporate a propositional attitude, then it is an enigma how such a state can provide support for any hypothesis, raising its credibility selectively by contrast with its alternatives. (If the mental state has no conceptual or propositional content, then what logical relation can it possibly bear to any hypothesis? Belief in a hypothesis would be a propositional attitude with the hypothesis itself as object. How can one depend logically for such a belief on an experience with no propositional content?)
6. If a mental state has no propositional content and cannot provide logical support for any hypothesis, then it cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge.
7. Therefore, if a mental state does not incorporate a propositional attitude, then it cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge.
8. Every mental state either does or does not incorporate a propositional attitude.
9. Therefore, no mental state can serve as a foundation for knowledge.

I begin by considering the second horn of the dilemma, premises 5 and following. I will argue that Sosa's response to this horn is inadequate for similar reasons that the Alstonian response was found inadequate. Sosa claims that nonpropositional mental states can provide the basis for immediate justification.<sup>37</sup> He reasons that the belief that there is a red item before one may be justified in part because "it [the belief] has its origin in one's visual experience of red when one looks at an apple in daylight."<sup>38</sup> This claim, however, is mistaken as we saw when discussing the Alstonian position that the fact that

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<sup>36</sup> Sosa (1991), p. 169-170. I renumber this argument.

<sup>37</sup> Sosa, p. 170.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 170.

a belief is produced by a normal perceptual process in normal circumstances can justify apart from recognitional awareness of the content of the experience. Moreover, given that the kind of awareness required for justification is conceptual it follows that a nonpropositional (i.e., nonconceptual) mental state cannot justify belief. Therefore, the rejection of premises 5 & 6 is unsuccessful.

Sosa responds to the first horn of the dilemma by denying (3). This premise contraposed states that immunity from error is a necessary condition for providing a foundation for knowledge. Sosa argues that this premise is false by an analogy between epistemically justified beliefs and ethically appropriate actions.<sup>39</sup> He suggests that just as the optimal action and the ethically justified action may come apart; likewise true belief and justified belief come apart. This he suggests shows that infallible justification is too strong.

The argument Sosa gives here is very quick and, at best, suggestive. It provides some reason to think that not every justified belief is infallible. The advocate of premise (3), however, does not deny that. Rather the advocate of premise (3) claims that the *foundational* beliefs must have infallible justification. Sosa's brief dismissal then of the first horn of the dilemma is not adequate.

Additionally, assuming that some form of modest foundationalism—a foundationalism with fallible foundations, we can restate the first horn so that Sosa's rejection of the premise is immaterial. The first half of the dilemma can be reformulated.

10. If a mental state incorporates a propositional attitude, then the propositional attitude provides a reason for belief only if it is justified.

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<sup>39</sup> See Ibid., p. 170-1.

11. If *the propositional attitude provides a reason for belief only if it is justified* then it cannot serve as the foundation for knowledge.

Sosa does not address this form of the dilemma. It may be initially thought that (10) lacks motivation. Why think it is true? Why think that a propositional attitude provides a reason for belief only if the attitude is justified? Answer: the kind of propositional attitude is one that makes a claim that something is the case. In the experiential case, the attitude is hosting the content in the assertive mode (see chapter 2). This attitude is similar to belief in that in the belief mode one entertains the content as true. Since belief requires justification, recognitional awareness of the assertive content of experience requires justification as well.

Sosa's argument against the original dilemma does not carry over to this new form of the dilemma. I conclude then that Sosa's response to the dilemma does not provide a suitable response.

### **3 Does the dilemma support externalism?**

In this section I consider a novel use of the Sellarsian dilemma to argue for externalism. The main goal of this section is to strengthen the conclusion that externalism is not required to solve the dilemma. I accomplish this by focusing on Jack Lyons' use of the Sellarsian dilemma to argue for externalism. Lyons' argument is helpful for our purposes because it aims to show the virtues of an externalist solution to

the dilemma. By arguing that Lyons' solution does not succeed we can a deeper appreciation of the failure of externalism.

Jack Lyons, in "Externalism and the Sellarsian Dilemma", presents a novel argument for externalism using Sellars' dilemma.<sup>40</sup> In a nutshell the argument is that the Sellarsian dilemma forces a choice between doxastic theories and externalist theories. Since, according to Lyons, doxastic theories are implausible, the Sellarsian dilemma provides a compelling reason for externalism.

#### A. The Setup

Lyons presents the Sellarsian dilemma on the claim that nondoxastic experiential states can evidentially justify beliefs. The dilemma then proceeds:

[Either] an experiential state is propositional or it is not. If the state is propositional, then it would have to be itself justified before it could confer justification on the beliefs in question, but then those beliefs would not be basic after all, and the experiential state has not terminated the regress. If the state is not propositional, then it would not be the sort of thing that is in need of justification, but then it could not confer justification either, because it could not stand in the appropriate logical relations to the basic beliefs. So in neither case can experiential states serve as a terminal source of justification. They can be terminators or justifiers, but not both.<sup>41</sup>

Before I present Lyons' revised argument for externalism, I introduce some terminology. A key component to Lyons' argument throughout involves the distinction between *evidential justifiers* and *metaphysical justifiers*. Lyons introduces this distinction by observing that the question "what sorts of things can serve as justifiers?" is

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<sup>40</sup> Lyons (ms). Page references are to the manuscript.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 1-2.



ambiguous.<sup>42</sup> Lyons explains, “The ambiguity is between the questions ‘what sorts of things can serve as justifying grounds for beliefs?’ and ‘on what sorts of things can justification supervene?’”<sup>43</sup> Lyons indicates that the *ground* of a belief, in his terminology, is the subject’s reason for the belief. Lyons writes, “For something to be the ground of a belief, it must be the sort of thing that the believer can take into account.”<sup>44</sup> An evidential justifier, thus, is a ground for a belief that confers justification on the belief.<sup>45</sup> An evidential justifier is the sort of thing that can bear logical and probabilistic relations to belief.<sup>46</sup>

A metaphysical justifier, by contrast, is that in virtue of which the belief is justified.<sup>47</sup> Reliabilism, Lyons claims, is a prime example of a theory of metaphysical justifiers, not evidential justifiers. Simple reliabilism claims that a belief is justified iff it is the product of a process that produces mostly true beliefs. The fact that a belief is produced by a reliable process is not something a cognizer takes into account in forming a belief (at least, not usually).

Given this distinction between evidential and metaphysical justifiers, Lyons offers a more precise characterization of doxasticism. Doxasticism, Lyons claims, involves two principles: *the belief principle* (BP) and *the grounds principle* (GP). The belief principle is that only beliefs can evidentially justify beliefs.<sup>48</sup> The grounds principle is that all

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Lyons appears to endorse this. See pp. 1-2 & pp. 17 & ff.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

justified beliefs have grounds, i.e., evidential justifiers.<sup>49</sup> Lyons observes that GP is required to adequately characterize doxasticism because a reliabilist may accept BP but deny GP in virtue of claim that some beliefs are justified without evidential justifiers; such beliefs have only metaphysical justifiers.<sup>50</sup>

Given this characterization of doxasticism, Lyons separates two non-doxastic theories. The first theory is called “experientialist nondoxasticism”. The experientialist accepts the grounds principle, but rejects the belief principle. The second theory Lyons terms “externalist nondoxasticism.” This view holds the belief principle but rejects the grounds principle. This taxonomy generates an interesting result: William Alston is an experientialist but Alvin Goldman (it is claimed) is an externalist.<sup>51</sup>

## B. The Argument

We are now in position to state the main argument for externalist nondoxasticism. Lyons does not explicitly state how the argument proceeds. He does, however, write the following:

Assuming the falsehood of doxasticism, any argument for the Belief Principle is an argument for externalism.... We can use the Sellarsian dilemma to force a new dilemma: either doxasticism is true or the Grounds Principle is false. And since doxasticism is false, the Grounds Principle must be as well.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> See Lyons, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

Doxasticism, we now know, is the conjunction of BP and GP. Thus, the falsity of doxasticism requires the falsity of either BP or GP. The Sellarsian dilemma, as Lyons construes it, provides an argument for BP. For it emphasizes “that there is no apparent way to understand nondoxastic experiences as grounds for belief.”<sup>53</sup> Lyons main argument for externalism can be represented thusly:

1. Either  $\sim$ GP or  $\sim$ BP.
  2. BP
- Thus,
3.  $\sim$ GP.
  4. If  $\sim$ GP then externalism is true
- So,
5. Externalism is true.

There is something odd about this argument, however. Premise (1) is assumed for the sake of argument. But it is quickly observed that the Sellarsian dilemma provides an argument for the belief principle and thus we get a short argument for the falsity of the grounds principle. But, given the truth of (4)—which I won’t dispute, premise (1) is tantamount to assuming the truth of externalism to provide an argument for externalism.

The crucial question for this argument is, *why think that (1) is true?* It is clear for reasons just noted that it cannot be assumed. Furthermore, given the significance of the Sellarsian dilemma to argue for the belief principle, it seems we need a strong independent argument against the grounds principle. But, initially at least, we do not get such an argument. Instead we get an argument against the belief principle. For instance Lyons describes his strategy writing:

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 15.

The externalist can forge an unholy alliance with Sellars in an attempt to limit the playing field to doxastic theories and externalist theories. Given the notorious difficulties with doxastic theories, this may leave externalism as the only genuinely viable option. I lack the space here to argue against doxastic theories, but the widespread exodus from doxastic theories in recent years suggests that the famous isolation argument, coupled with the fact that any belief can be held for bad reasons, have convinced most that doxasticism cannot be maintained.<sup>54</sup>

This will not do, however. This suggests that what is wrong with doxasticism is the belief principle, not the grounds principle. But what we need is an argument that the grounds principle is mistaken. But in this case we have a direct argument for externalism via (4).

Fortunately, Lyons provides a discussion at the end of his paper on the grounds principle. He argues that internalist non-doxastic foundationalism requires that experiential states serve as both evidential justifiers and justification generators at the same time. (A justification generator is a state that generates justification for a belief without itself needing justification.) But Lyons argues that this is implausible. Hence, he claims, the grounds principle lacks defense. I turn now to this discussion.

### C. On the Grounds Principle

Lyons proceeds by examining two different non-doxastic foundationalist defenses of the grounds principle. One by Matthias Steup<sup>55</sup> which holds that experiential states have propositional content; the other by William Alston<sup>56</sup> that holds that experiential states

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 2-3.

<sup>55</sup> See Steup (2000).

<sup>56</sup> See Alston (2002).

lack propositional content. Lyons argues that neither option is satisfying on account that both conflate evidential and metaphysical justifiers.<sup>57</sup>

a. Grounds & Non-propositional experiential states

I will consider the argument against Alston's position first since it is the more straightforward of the two. Alston holds that experiential states are nonpropositional and thus, in virtue of being nonpropositional, need not be justified in order to justify. Furthermore, Alston admits that these states do not bear logical or probabilistic relations to beliefs. But Alston argues that they need not do so in order to justify.<sup>58</sup>

Lyons' argument against Alston's position is straightforward. Alston's claim that nonpropositional states can justify without needing justification is plausible given that it is metaphysical justifiers at issue. But it is implausible if evidential justifiers are intended. Lyons writes, "Though it is clearly true that metaphysical justifiers need not bear logical or probabilistic relations to their justificanda, this does not begin to show that the same is true of evidential justifiers."<sup>59</sup> Lyons suggests that Alston owes us an account of how nonpropositional experiential states can evidentially justify belief. Lyons writes,

An experiential state without propositional content would not be able to stand in logical, probabilistic, or any other evidential relations to beliefs, and thus stands outside 'the logical space of reasons'. It cannot serve as justifying grounds for beliefs, any more than a rock or my dog can. At the very least, if such a state can evidentially justify belief, it is mysterious how, and the theorist who insists on the possibility owes us an explanation.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Lyons, p. 17.

<sup>58</sup> This represents Lyons' construal of Alston's position (Lyons, p. 16).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

This criticism of Alston's position raises the same issues that my brief discussion of Alston's position on "looks" (see 2.A.iii). It is difficult to envision how a nonpropositional mental state can serve as something a subject can take into account. Given the argument against Alston's position, we may conclude that Lyons argument is on target.

b. Grounds & Propositional experiential states

The other non-doxastic foundationalist defense of the grounds principle holds that experiential states are propositional but that they need not be justified in order to justify (see Steup (2000)). The general thrust of Lyons' argument is clear: this position conflates evidential with metaphysical justifiers. And to the extent that it's plausible that these states do not need justification we have to conceive of them as metaphysical justifiers; if, however, the states are conceived as evidential justifiers then—like other kinds of evidence—they themselves need to have positive epistemic status in order to justify.<sup>61</sup>

Let us examine the details of this argument. Lyons explains that on Steup's position experiential states have propositional content but such states do not require justification because they generate justification.<sup>62</sup> Lyons, then, claims that "Steup never explains how evidential generation could be possible."<sup>63</sup> The key problem Lyons seems to have with

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<sup>61</sup> This characterization comes in part from personal conversation with Jack Lyons.

<sup>62</sup> See Lyons, p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Steup's account is that it is not clear that it is possible for  $x$  (in this case an experiential state to with propositional content) to evidentially justify a belief, unless  $x$  is itself justified.

What evidence does Lyons marshal for this claim? Lyons claims that a state's having propositional content is not sufficient to justify a belief. He writes,

Experiences with propositional content could perhaps stand in (broadly) logical relations to beliefs, but it is entirely mysterious how they can actually serve as evidence for beliefs. My desire that  $p$ , my fear that  $q$ , and my wondering whether  $r$  can stand in logical relations to my belief that  $p$  or  $q$  or  $r$ . But it is quite clear that none of these states can serve as evidence for this belief. Neither can the proposition that  $p$  by itself or your belief that  $q$ . Standing in logical relations to beliefs may be necessary, but it is not nearly sufficient, for evidentially justifying those beliefs.<sup>64</sup>

This illustrates that “something more” than a state's having propositional content is required for justification. Lyons proposes that the “something more” is that the state itself is justified. Thus, this would explain it is not possible for a state to evidentially justify a belief without that first state being justified.

But why think that the “something more” is that the state itself is justified? Lyons argues for this by analogy with the justification of belief. What justifies my belief that  $p$  when it is based on the belief that  $q$  and  $q$  implies  $p$  is not merely the content of the other beliefs but that the other beliefs are justified. He writes,

It is not that one belief literally transmits justification to another belief as if justification were some kind of caloric-like fluid—that would be taking the transmission metaphor too seriously. On the present view, the inferred belief derives its justification not from the premise beliefs themselves, but from whatever justifies them. If we suppose that this is the only way for

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

something to evidentially justify beliefs, we can explain why unjustified beliefs cannot evidentially justify other beliefs. It is because what justifies a conclusion belief is whatever justified the premise belief, in this case, nothing. Analogous reasoning explains why desires, fears, bare conceptions, and the like cannot evidentially justify beliefs. It is not because they are not beliefs but because they are not justified. Unfortunately for the experientialist, the same reasoning also implies that experiences cannot evidentially justify beliefs—regardless of whether these experiences are propositional or not.<sup>65</sup>

The argument, then, is this. Assume the belief that q is justified, not just conditionally justified. The grounds for q are your beliefs that p and that p implies q. But those beliefs don't justify your belief that q, unless those beliefs are themselves justified. Similarly, in the case of basic perceptual justification the experience that p itself does not justify the belief that p unless the experience that p is itself justified.

Lyons' argument here is basically sound. Another way to state the main premise is that evidential justification is governed by the principle of noninferential justification, advocated by Richard Fumerton. This is the principle that "to have justification for believing P on the basis of E one must have not only (1) justification for believing E, but also (2) justification for believing that E makes probable P."<sup>66</sup> If, in order to justify belief, experience must involve a conscious awareness of propositional content then that cognitive judgment must itself have positive epistemic status in order to justify. I will return to this type of argument in the next chapter.

Does Lyons' argument, however, show that the grounds principle is false? It does not. His argument shows that the grounds principle is inconsistent with foundationalism.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>66</sup> Fumerton (2006), p. 39.



A coherentist theory, however, may adopt the grounds principle. Lyons' objections to the coherentist theory are based on its acceptance of the belief principle. The theory of justification I advocate in the final chapter accepts the grounds principle but denies the belief principle. A non-doxastic coherentist theory can do this, claiming that experience is an INUS condition for the justification of belief.<sup>67</sup>

#### **4 Concluding Remarks**

I have argued that the externalist response to the dilemma does not succeed. Externalism is either insufficient since it leaves out recognitional awareness of the content of experience or it is unnecessary and consistent with internalism. Moreover, the Lyons argument that the Sellarsian dilemma supports externalism was shown to be inadequate; for it is consistent with a non-doxastic coherentist theory. In the next chapter we will begin to examine internalist responses to the dilemma.

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<sup>67</sup> See the final chapter for a development of the idea of INUS conditions.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Justification and Recognitional Awareness:

#### Part Two – An argument against Non-conceptual Internalism

We learned in the previous chapter that the externalist solution to our main problem is unsuccessful. Externalists face a dilemma: either the antecedent of an externalist principle of non-inferential justification does not include any mental concepts (e.g., awareness) or it does include such concepts. If it does not include such concepts then externalism fails to uphold the first thesis that perception offers good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are true. If, however, the antecedent of an externalist epistemic principle does include some mental concepts then the externalist component (e.g., reliability, truth-tracking, proper function, and other such nomological concepts) is unnecessary. Thus, on either horn, externalism is not the proper solution to the original problem of trying to resolve the apparent incompatibility between the two theses that (a) perception offers good reasons for thinking our empirical beliefs are true and (b) perception can end the regress of reasons.

In previous chapters I have argued for two constraints on any successful solution to the main problem. The first constraint, articulated in chapter two, was that perception has propositional content. The second constraint, articulated in chapter three, was that the justification of belief based on perception requires consciously taking into account the content of perception. In this chapter I examine one kind of internalist foundationalist response to the main problem.

Internalism can be grouped into two types: conceptualism and non-conceptualism.<sup>1</sup> The most prominent form of internalism is non-conceptualism. The non-conceptualist aims to end the regress of reasons by a non-conceptual mental state that provides a good reason for thinking that our beliefs are true. Moreover, in virtue of being a non-conceptual state one can stop the regress of reasons that would otherwise continue if the state were conceptual. A non-conceptual mental state with content *p* is one that a subject can be in without possessing all the concepts that characterize *p*.<sup>2</sup> Note, also, that the property of *being non-conceptual* is a property of the state not the content.<sup>3</sup> All the nonconceptual internalists I consider are state non-conceptualists.

As we shall see many non-conceptualists take a successful solution to the regress problem to require that the mental state be non-conceptual. This requirement itself grows out of the demand that the mental state is factive, i.e., involve a real relation to the truth-maker of the belief.<sup>4</sup> The requirement of nonconceptuality, I shall argue, generates a problem with accepting the thesis that perception offers good reasons for belief; for, in short, having a good reason for a belief requires being consciously aware of the reason. This, however, is a conceptual state. Non-conceptualists are uncomfortable with this because conceptual states are intentional states of minds, mental states that have objects which may fail to correctly indicate how things are. Thus, non-conceptualists find intentional states ill-suited to end the regress of reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bergmann (2006) for a similar classification.

<sup>2</sup> This definition is taken from Alex Byrne (2005), p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> See Byrne (2005) for further discussion of this point.

<sup>4</sup> A different way to ground this requirement is along the following lines: The requirement itself grows out of the need for the state to be something that it doesn't make sense to seek justification for.

I will begin the chapter with a discussion of the basic problem facing the non-conceptualist. I will take as the basis for this discussion the account of empirical justification sketched by Bertrand Russell in his splendid book *The Problems of Philosophy*.<sup>5</sup> Our discussion will be informed by a recent concern that Ernest Sosa has voiced for views of the kind Russell articulates. This section gives us a clear statement of the central difficulty facing non-conceptualism. In the remaining sections I argue that recent versions of non-conceptualism do not escape the basic problem.

A brief comment on the structure of the argument: A significant goal of non-conceptual internalist foundationalism is to articulate a correct principle of non-inferential justification. This principle has the form: if S is in non-conceptual mental state M with content p then S is foundationally justified in believing that p. I will argue that no principle of this form yields foundational justification for the belief that p. The argument is an inference to the best explanation from the data of past and current failed attempts to formulate a successful principle. If this argument is successful it shows that a non-conceptualist position cannot maintain the first thesis that perception offers good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are true.

## **1 Russell & the Early Acquaintance Theory**

In Russell's wonderful short book *The Problems of Philosophy* he sketches a general account of perceptual knowledge.<sup>6</sup> The account rests upon the notion of

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<sup>5</sup> Russell (1997) (first published in 1912).

<sup>6</sup> I assume this is an account of perceptual justification as well.

acquaintance. Russell introduces this notion in order to explain two senses of 'know'.

Russell describes:

The word 'know' is... used in two different senses. (1) In its first use it is applicable to the sort of knowledge which is opposed to error, the sense in which what we know is *true*, the sense which applies to our beliefs and convictions, i.e., to what we call *judgements*. In this sense of the word we know *that* something is the case. This sort of knowledge may be described as knowledge of *truths*. (2) In the second use of the word 'know' above, the word applies to our knowledge of *things*, which we may call *acquaintance*. This is the sense in which we know sense-data.<sup>7</sup>

A question arises from this brief explication. How does knowledge by acquaintance give rise to knowledge that a thing exists or has some property? If knowledge by acquaintance is a relation like *being to the right of* then there will be many items we bear this relation to such that we do not know that they exist. The puzzle is to connect knowledge by acquaintance with knowledge that something is the case. If knowledge by acquaintance does not yield knowledge of truths then it is not a very interesting epistemological category; for we want to understand the nature of a valuable kind of cognitive success, a kind of cognitive success that involves understanding that something is the case.<sup>8</sup> If knowledge by acquaintance does not imply knowledge of truths then the former is of no help to the central epistemological task. Russell thinks that knowledge by acquaintance is a valuable and essential part of a successful epistemological theory. What Russell needs is a bridge principle that connects

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>8</sup> I assume that knowledge implies understanding. For discussion on this see Kvanvig (2003).

knowledge by acquaintance with knowledge of truths (or, as Russell later calls it, “knowledge by description”).<sup>9</sup>

A successful bridge principle constitutes a principle of non-inferential justification. A correct principle of non-inferential justification is a major goal for a foundationalist epistemology, an epistemological theory that aims to end the regress of reasons in a state justifies belief apart from receiving justification from some other belief. As we shall see in this section there is an underlying difficulty facing Russell’s attempt to articulate a principle of non-inferential justification in terms of acquaintance.

Russell initially proposes the following bridge principle:

(BP) “If I am acquainted with a thing which exists, my acquaintance gives me the knowledge that it exists.”<sup>10</sup>

Russell connects acquaintance with direct awareness. He writes, “We shall say that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths.”<sup>11</sup> I will assume that a principle for non-inferential knowledge can also be used as a principle of non-inferential justification. This yields the following:

(BP’) If S is directly aware of  $x$  then S’s belief that  $x$  exists is non-inferentially justified.

There is an important distinction between having good evidence for a proposition and believing a proposition on account of the good evidence. The difference can be

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 46ff.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 46.

expressed in this way: a person may have justification for a proposition but not justifiably believe the proposition. Merely having good evidence for a proposition is to have *propositional justification*. To believe the proposition on account of the evidence is to have *doxastic justification*. (BP') is ambiguous between propositional justification and doxastic justification.

Richard Feldman in a recent paper suggests principles of propositional justification and doxastic justification based on Russell's acquaintance principle.<sup>12</sup> Feldman offers the principle of propositional justification:

PJ1: If a person is aware of experiential property F (i.e., has an experience of F-ness), then the person is foundationally justified in believing that he is having an experience with quality F.<sup>13</sup>

The principle of doxastic justification Feldman suggests is,

DJ1: If a person is aware of experiential property F (i.e., has an experience of F-ness), and believes that he is having an experience with property F, then that belief is foundationally justified.<sup>14</sup>

Principle (DJ1), if true, explains how certain beliefs can be justified apart from any other beliefs. Moreover, if true, (DJ1) provides an answer to the regress problem. The regress ends with the state of being aware of experiential property F. Such a state need not require justification.

However there is a crucial ambiguity with respect to the notion of direct awareness or acquaintance.<sup>15</sup> Ernest Sosa explains this in the following, writing:

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<sup>12</sup> Feldman (2004), p. 201.

<sup>13</sup> Feldman, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

One's consciousness contains experiences that go unnoticed; unnoticed altogether, or at least unnoticed as experiences with an intrinsic experiential character that they nevertheless do have. Just as one automatically jumps one's jumps, smiles one's smiles, and dances one's dances, however, so one experiences one's experiences. And since experiencing is a form of awareness, one is thus in one sense automatically aware of one's experiences, precisely in experiencing them. One is so aware even of experiences that escape one's notice and of which one is hence *unaware*, in another sense.<sup>16</sup>

Sosa, as we observed in chapter three, takes this to illustrate the need to distinguish *experiential* awareness from *noticing* awareness. One is experientially aware of everything that one experiences. One is noticingly aware of those things one correctly believes are there. Sosa explains the distinction:

(a) noticing, intellectual, awareness, [is the kind of awareness] whereby one occurrently believes or judges the thing noticed to be present, as characterized a certain way; ... (b) experiential awareness, [is the kind of awareness] whereby one is "aware" directly of an experience of a certain specific sort simply in virtue of undergoing it.<sup>17</sup>

Sosa adds:

To notice a fact about one's experience at a given time is to believe correctly that it is so, but just a guess will not suffice: it is required that the correct belief be also at a minimum justified, or reasonable, or epistemically appropriate, or some such.<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of Sosa's distinction Feldman formulates the revised principles:

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<sup>15</sup> The following discussion relies heavily on Feldman (2004). I learned about this problem from Sosa (2003). See also Poston (forthcoming) and Fumerton (2006) for a discussion of how an acquaintance theorist may handle this sort of problem.

<sup>16</sup> Sosa (2003), p. 276.

<sup>17</sup> Sosa (2003), 276.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 277.



PJ1e: If a person is experientially-aware of experiential property F, then the person is foundationally justified in believing that he is having an experience with property F.

PJ1n: If a person is noticing-aware of experiential property F, then the person is foundationally justified in believing that he is having an experience with property F.<sup>19</sup>

Sosa's claim is that (PJ1e) is false, but that (PJ1n) is uninformative. Sosa relies on "the problem of the speckled hen" to show that (PJ1e) is false. The idea is that there are some experiential properties go completely unnoticed and hence don't provide any justification for our beliefs. This is surely correct. When I look at a 23-sided figure, even though I am experientially-aware of the experiential property 23-sidedness, I do not have foundational justification in believing the proposition *there's a 23-sided figure*.

Yet the appeal to noticing-awareness, Sosa argues, will not help. Noticing-awareness requires more than the conjunction of the presence of the experiential property and the belief that the property is present because lucky guesses will make the conjunction true. Sosa concludes that the belief needs to be justified or reasonable. But once this is formulated into a principle of non-inferential justification it is obviously unhelpful to the foundationalist project. Feldman offers the following to illustrate this point:

PJ3n: If a person is having an experience with experiential property F, and the person believes that he is having an experience with property F, and he is justified in that belief, then the person is foundationally justified in believing that he is having an experience with property F.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Feldman (2004), p. 202-3.

<sup>20</sup> Feldman, p. 203.

(PJ3n) is obviously not useful to the foundationalist.

Sosa's complaint uncovers a deep problem with internalist foundationalism. The problem was first noticed by Wilfrid Sellars,<sup>21</sup> though this has not been recognized in the literature.<sup>22</sup> Take the foundationalist feature F. The presence of F confers justification on a proposition. F must have two features. It must have content and that content must be something the subject is aware of. The problem is that non-conceptual foundationalists are pulled in two opposite directions. On the one hand, they want to end the regress of reasons. This requires ending the regress in a state doesn't require justification. Since this state needs to have some mental content, perceptual states are ideally suited to end the regress. On the other hand, this state needs to involve awareness that some content is presented as true. But such a state cannot be a mere belief for the reasons Sosa mentions.

In general this problem can be represented in terms of a dilemma, where F is the proposed foundational justifier:

1. Either F involves awareness that some content is reasonable or not.
  2. If not, then F cannot justify a belief.<sup>23</sup>
  3. If so, then F cannot end the regress of reasons.
- So,
4. F cannot both justify belief and end the regress of reasons.

Russell's account of empirical justification is helpful to illustrate this problem.

The basic problem with Russell's account (and later non-conceptualist accounts) is that

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<sup>21</sup> Sellars (1963) § 16.

<sup>22</sup> Though see Poston (forthcoming) for a statement of the relation between the Sellars problem and the problem of the speckled hen.

<sup>23</sup> I argued for this premise in chapter two.

the non-conceptual mental state, M, is required to play two incompatible roles. First, it must provide infallible justification for the belief, in the sense that being in state M implies that the content of M is true. Thus, a belief based on M is guaranteed to be true. Second, the non-conceptual mental state, M, must imply an awareness that the content is presented as true, in the sense that being in state M implies that one is aware that p. Let us call this sense of awareness, “propositional awareness”. These two roles are incompatible because propositional awareness is not factive. In a demon-world I am aware that I have hands, even though I am induced to falsely believe that I have hands.

There is some pressure against the idea that propositional awareness is not factive. For instance, there is an intuition that I cannot be aware that *the Steelers won the AFC Championship Game* without it being true that they did. Suppose it was false and suppose I read a misleading report that they won. The sentence ‘I am aware that the Steelers won the AFC Championship Game’ seems strained. As further support for this consider the case in which prior to the Galileo’s invention of the telescope people thought the moon was a perfect sphere. They looked at the moon and believed that it was a perfect sphere on the basis of the appearances. Were they aware *that* the moon was a perfect sphere? It seems strained to say that they were so aware.

The phenomenon is correct—the sentences are strained. But how does this support the desired conclusion that the sentences are false? One way is to use the premise that if a sentence is strained then it is false. This premise is itself false. Often we accept claims that initially seem strained. For instance, we accept that it is false that

the shortest path between two points is a straight line. We should therefore reject the desired conclusion that awareness that a content is presented as true is factive.

There is additional evidence in support of my claim that propositional awareness is not factive. Two cases are especially significant. First, in the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion I am aware that line 1 is longer than line 2. This propositional awareness is not factive and it remains once I learn that line 1 is not longer than line 2.<sup>24</sup> Second, in a demon world, persons have good reasons for their empirical beliefs. They have good reasons for their beliefs because their experiences have contents that indicate the beliefs are true. When they form their beliefs on the basis of the content of their experiences they are aware that the content is presented as true. This being aware that the content is presented as true is propositional awareness. The subject is consciously aware of the likely truth of a certain claim. In the case of the demon world it is (e.g.,) the claim *I have hands*. To attempt to redescribe this as a case of non-propositional awareness does not uphold the intuitive claim that the denizens of a demon-world have mental states very similar to our own.

There is a further line of argument to support the claim that propositional awareness is not factive. The argument goes as follows. I can know on the basis of reflection that I am aware that there's a red disk on the table. But if propositional awareness is factive then I can know that there's a red disk on the table. Hence I can rule out skeptical scenarios on the basis of knowing that I am aware that p and knowing that propositional awareness is factive. For instance, I can know that there's not a white disk

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<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 2 for a more in-depth discussion of this case.

illuminated by red lights on the basis of being aware that there's a red disk. But such a result is untenable. (One might think that this shows I cannot know what I'm aware of. This implies that no one ever believes anything reasonably. That's wrong. But even if it's right it's not reasonable to believe.)

Let us briefly consider an objection to the claim that I can know by reflection that I am aware that there's a red disk on the table. The objector denies this, claiming instead that I can know by reflection that I am aware of a red disk on the table. The difficulty with this objection is that propositional awareness supervenes on awareness of objects & properties. When I am recognitionally aware of various objects and properties I thereby become aware that a certain content is presented as true. So the objector's claim implies that in certain cases I can know by reflection that I am aware that p.

So, if Russell's account (and later non-conceptualists accounts) is committed to the claims that the foundational justifier must provide infallible justification and imply propositional awareness then the account is inconsistent. In the following I briefly show that Russell's accounts implies these two claims.

There is a strong dialectical motivation for non-conceptualist to fall into this problem, and Russell is no exception. The motivation comes from the attempt to uphold the claims that the foundational justifier offers good reasons for belief and that the foundational justifier ends the regress of reasons. Upholding the first claim is secured by insisting that the foundational justifier have content that indicates the truth of the belief and requiring that the foundational justifier includes a conscious realization of the

content. The second thesis, however, moves one to end the regress in a state involving a real relation to its object. Such a state is then individuated by the presence of its truth-maker and hence guarantees that whenever one is in the state the object of the state is veridical.

We can see that Russell is pulled in these opposite directions. Russell claims that there are two ways of knowing a fact: by way of judgment (= knowledge of truths) or by way of acquaintance (=knowledge by acquaintance).<sup>25</sup> Judgment always involves the possibility of error and hence cannot end the regress of reasons.<sup>26</sup> But the second way of knowing a fact, the way of acquaintance, does not involve the possibility of error. Russell writes, “The second way of knowing a complex fact, the way of acquaintance, is only possible when there really is such a fact, while the first way, like all judgement, is liable to error.”<sup>27</sup> The way of acquaintance, according to Russell, makes a truth evident: “We may say that a truth is self-evident, in the first and most absolute sense, when we have acquaintance with the fact which corresponds to the truth.”<sup>28</sup> Now presumably this way of acquaintance gives one knowledge of truths. But Russell says “all our knowledge of truths is infected with *some* degree of doubt.”<sup>29</sup> What Russell is running up against here is the basic problem: no propositional awareness without possibility of error, yet no solution to the regress argument without a guarantee of truth.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

In the following I turn to other developments of the non-conceptual internalist position. I argue that they face the same problem as Russell's account faces. I conclude thus that non-conceptual internalism is inconsistent with the claim that perception offers good reasons for belief.

## **2 A Survey of Developments in Non-conceptualism**

In this section I survey developments in non-conceptual internalist foundationalism that grow out of Russell's epistemology. As we saw the basic problem facing Russell's acquaintance theory is that acquaintance needs to be reason-giving (i.e., involve a conscious realization of a content as actualized) but anything that is reason-giving is not a successful stopping point to the regress of reasons. I will survey developments of classical foundationalism and argue in the context of each view that they do not solve the basic problem. I will consider Roderick Chisholm's notion of *self-presenting* states, Paul Moser's concept of *direct attention attraction*, Richard Fumerton's development of the acquaintance theory, and Michael Huemer's emphasis on *seeming* states. I hope that after discussing each of these significant internalist foundationalist accounts the reader will see how to carry forward the attack against newer versions of the classical foundationalist idea.

### **A. Roderick Chisholm & Self-Presenting States**

Roderick Chisholm develops an internalist foundationalist theory of justification upon which the basis of empirical justification rests on self-presenting states. Chisholm

is not explicit as to whether self-presenting states are nonconceptual. Chisholm distinguishes between two kinds of self-presenting *properties* which map on to the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction. One kind of self-presenting properties are self-presenting *intentional* properties “properties [that] pertain to our *thoughts* – thinking, judging, hoping, fearing, wishing, wondering, desiring, loving, hating, and intending.”<sup>30</sup> The other kind of self-presenting properties are *sensible* properties. These properties pertain to “the ways in which we *sense*, or are *appeared* to.”<sup>31</sup> I will interpret Chisholm as a nonconceptualist and focus on whether sensible properties are self-presenting. This interpretation best fits with Chisholm’s remarks about the speckled hen problem apropos sensible properties. Chisholm there identifies putative self-presenting properties with visual sensations.<sup>32</sup> Visual sensations are nonconceptual items.

In order to access Chisholm’s developed and nuanced epistemology let us begin with his response to an argument against the possibility of non-inferentially justified beliefs.

In *Theory of Knowledge* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed) Chisholm lays out the challenge as follows:<sup>33</sup>

1. Suppose that there are *basic empirical beliefs*, that is, empirical beliefs (a) which are epistemically justified and (b) whose justification does not depend on that of any further empirical beliefs.
2. For a belief to be epistemically justified requires that there be a reason why it is likely to be true.
3. For a belief to be epistemically justified for a particular person requires that this person be himself in cognitive possession of such a reason.
4. The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe *with justification* the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.

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<sup>30</sup> Chisholm (1989), p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Chisholm (1989), p. 86.



5. The premises of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely *a priori*; at least one such premise must be empirical.  
Therefore,
6. The justification of a supposed basic empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1).  
Therefore,
7. There can be no basic empirical beliefs.

Chisholm's response to this argument constitutes a page and a half.<sup>34</sup> His response involves distinguishing two senses of 'likely' as it occurs in the second premise: an external sense according to which it tells us about statistical frequencies and an internal sense that tells us about epistemic justification.<sup>35</sup> Chisholm argues that if the external frequency sense of 'likely' is at issue then premise 3 is false. He claims that a person need not be in cognitive possession about the relevant frequencies in order to be justified in believing *p*. If, on the other hand, the intended sense of 'likely' is internal then, Chisholm says, premise (2) is false. He writes, "A belief in what is self-presenting may be justified even though no *other* belief constitutes a reason for thinking it to be true."<sup>36</sup>

Chisholm's brief response to this argument is unsatisfying. His reply makes sense only given the false assumption that the only reasons a claim is likely to be true are beliefs. If we allow that experiences can provide reasons for beliefs then, by Chisholm's own lights, premise (2) is true. Self-presenting states can provide reasons for empirical beliefs. I think, however, we can uncover a more substantive Chisholmian response to this argument. It requires some interpretation.

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<sup>34</sup> See *Ibid.*, 86-7.

<sup>35</sup> See Chisholm, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

I begin with a discussion of why Chisholm should not deny premise (3), the claim that “for a belief to be epistemically justified for a particular person requires that this person be himself in cognitive possession of such a reason.” Once we reject the false claim that only reasons for a claim’s truth are beliefs Chisholm’s internalist commitments should lead him to accept this claim. Justification requires the cognitive possession of reasons. There is a question here about just what “cognitive possession” amounts to, but let us shelve that question for the moment.

The claim that Chisholm should reject is (4), the premise that “the only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe *with justification* the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.” This claim, if true, would show that there is no non-inferential justification. If we allow that experiences can provide reasons for beliefs then this claim requires that experiences themselves be justified. And that, on the face of it, doesn’t sound right. This response seems consonant with Chisholm’s epistemology. In place of experiences Chisholm appeals to the notion of self-presenting states.

In the following I introduce and explain some of the key notions to Chisholm’s epistemology in order to evaluate the claim that self-presenting states can confer justification on belief without themselves needing justification. I will argue that nonconceptual self-presenting states do not confer justification on belief.

I begin with the notion of the self-presenting. Self-presenting properties will provide the basis for basic empirical beliefs. Chisholm defines the notion of a self-presenting property as follows:

P is self-presenting =df Every property that P entails includes the property of thinking.<sup>37</sup>

This definition includes two technical concepts *entailment* and *inclusion*.

Chisholm explains property inclusion as follows: “One property ... *include[s]* another if the first is necessarily such that anything that has it also has the second.”<sup>38</sup> Allowing second-order quantification we can represent this as follows:

Property Inclusion:  $(\forall F)(\forall G)(\Box(\forall x)(Fx \rightarrow Gx) \text{ iff } (F \text{ includes } G))$ .

The second concept Chisholm appeals to is *entailment*. This is an intentional sense of entailment defined as follows: “The property of being F ... entail[s] the property of being G provided that believing something to be F includes believing something to be G.”<sup>39</sup> This yields the following,

Entailment: Believing Fx includes believing Gx iff Fx entails Gx.<sup>40</sup>

Chisholm uses this definition of self-presenting to formulate the following principle about certainty.

MP1 If the property of being F is self-presenting, if S is F, and if S believes himself to be F, then it is certain for S that he is F.<sup>41</sup>

We can apply MP1 in an argument against (4). Recall (4) states “The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe *with justification* the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.” Where S believes herself to be

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> I think Chisholm must intend this as a biconditional.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 19. I think here too Chisholm intends this as a biconditional.

<sup>40</sup> There is another way to read this principle given the quote above. It is for any x and y where x and y are possibly distinct if believing Fx includes believing Gy then Fx entails Gy.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

appeared to greenly, S is in cognitive possession of such a reason that makes this belief certain. Her being in such a state—the state of being *appeared to greenly*—makes certain her belief that she is in this state.

As we saw above with Russell's acquaintance theory a problem for non-conceptualism is that S can be in a state—on Russell's account, the state of being acquainted with x—and not realize that one is in that state. However, once one realizes that one is in the state—on Russell's account, one judges that one is in the state—the possibility of error is present, and hence this realization cannot end the regress of reasons. Does Chisholm's MP1 face a similar problem? Yes. Let me explain.

The problem with (MP1) is that sensible properties may occur unnoticed in one's visual field. The earlier problem Sosa observed with Russell's principle applies with the same force to Chisholm's (MP1). Suppose one has a visual sensation and yet does not consciously realize that one has such a visual sensation. The mere occurrence of the visual sensation does not confer justification on the related claim.

Chisholm explicitly addresses this problem in a short section on the problem of the speckled hen. Chisholm introduces the problem:

Consider the visual sensation that is yielded by a single glance at a speckled hen. The sensation may be said to contain many speckles. One may ask therefore, "*How many* speckles are there?" If we judge, say, that the sensation contains 48 speckles, we may very well be mistaken: perhaps there are a few more speckles or a few less. Yet our judgment is a judgment about the nature of the sense-datum—or about the nature of the way we sense. The fact that such a judgment may be mistaken would seem to be in conflict with our view according to which the nature of what we sense is self-presenting and therefore a source of certainty.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Chisholm, p. 25.

Chisholm recognizes that not every visual sensation—or appearance state—confers foundational justification on the correct belief. His solution to the problem is to restrict the class of self-presenting *sensible* properties to those that are “relatively simple and easy to grasp.”<sup>43</sup>

Does such a restriction strategy work? Let us be clear on what the strategy is. The problem is that many sensible properties are not self-presenting. Hence, belief about those sensible properties will not be non-inferentially justified. Why? Because one can be in visual states with such and such sensible properties and yet completely fail to recognize that those properties are present. The strategy, therefore, is to restrict the class of self-presenting *sensible* properties to those that involve consciously realizing that they are present.

But which *sensible* properties are those? Chisholm offers the uninformative response: those that are relatively simple and easy to grasp. This does not answer the basic problem. Chisholm’s considered response seems to be that self-presenting sensible properties are those that satisfy his analysis of the self-presenting. The problem is that this doesn’t seem to work as the problem of the speckled hen illustrates. Consider Chisholm’s explanation for why the property of containing 48 speckles is not self-presenting. There’s a crucial mistake in this. He writes,

Now the property of containing 48 speckles *entails* the property of being a speckle (for whoever believes something to have the property of containing 48 speckles also believes something to have the property of being a speckle). But the property of having 48 speckles does not *include* the property of being a speckle (one can *have* 48 speckles without thereby

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

*being* a speckle). Hence the property of having 48 speckles is not a self-presenting property.<sup>44</sup>

There's a problem here with Chisholm's response. First, there's a slight exegetical issue. Chisholm begins by talking about the property of *containing 48 speckles* and then shifts to talking about the property of *having 48 speckles*. Depending on how one understands "containment" and "having" these may be importantly difference. I will take to the language of *having* to be primary.

Chisholm claims, then, that the property of *having 48 speckles* entails a property it does not include and hence isn't self-presenting. The property at issue is the property of *being a speckle*. Is it true, though, that everyone who believes *x* to have the property of *having 48 speckles* believes that *x* has the property *being a speckle*? I believe that that hen has the property of *having 48 speckles* but I don't believe that that hen has the property of *being a speckle*. Hens aren't speckles.<sup>45</sup>

If this is correct then some properties that satisfy Chisholm's account of the self-presenting do not confer justification on belief. Hence, MP1 is false.

## B. Moser & Direct Attention Attraction

We've seen thus far how two non-conceptualist accounts fail to solve the basic puzzle. Both Chisholm's and Russell's accounts fail because the basic nonconceptual states are not reason-giving. Paul Moser's (1989) *Knowledge and Evidence* provides a different nonconceptualist account of noninferential justification. Moser's introduces the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>45</sup> The argument here trades on how one reads Chisholm's entailment principle (see fn 40 above).

notion of *direct attention attraction*<sup>46</sup> and argues that it can be used to formulate a correct principle of noninferential justification. The problem Moser's account faces is similar to the problem Russell's account faces: direct attention attraction is not reason-giving.

I begin by listing several features of direct attention attraction.

- This is a form of awareness that “does not ... essentially involve one's predicating something of the presented contents” (p. 81).
- This “attention attraction is different from mere sensory stimulation, since it essentially involves direct awareness, albeit nonconceptual awareness, of what is presented in experience” (p. 81).
- “One's attention is directly engaged, if only momentarily, by the more or less determinate features of certain presented contents” (p. 81)
- This attention attraction is different from *focusing* attention because the latter involves a form of conceptualization (p. 81-2).
- “In essence, direct attention attraction is one's being directly psychologically ‘affected’ by certain contents in such a way that one is psychologically *presented* with those contents” (p. 82).
- “Presentation ... essentially involves direct nonconceptual noticing, but does not essentially involve conceptual noticing *as* or noticing *that*” (p. 82).
- “Direct visual attention attraction occurs when an object directly *appears* to one” (p. 82).
- “For most of us, I suspect, the relevant notion of psychological presentation or direct attention attraction is adequately defined ostensively, by an appeal to common experiences” (p. 83).
- Direct attention attraction is of contents of one's experience that one does not “take” (or conceptualize) in anyway. These contents of the *given* in experience (p. 182).

There are a few initial puzzles apropos Moser's remarks on direct attention attraction.

For instance, direct attention attraction is supposed to end the regress of reasons by being reason-giving but yet not standing in need of any further justifying reasons. Suppose you are in such a state. You then focus on the reason or conceive of the reason as relevant to

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<sup>46</sup> See Moser (1989), pp. 81 and following.

belief. When that occurs, though, you do not increase the foundational justification for your belief. That seems odd because by being more careful and focusing on the reasons you should be able to increase the degree of justification for belief. Moreover, by focusing you thereby acquire a defeater for belief, the defeater that you have incorrectly characterized the sensory item. One shouldn't acquire defeaters in virtue of being more careful.

This problem illustrates that Moser intends direct attention attraction to be a different kind of reason-giving relation than conceptual reason-giving relations. Moser claims that direct attention attraction constitutes a second kind of reason-giving relation, i.e., non-conceptual direct awareness. The problem is to understand how a non-conceptual state can be reason-giving. Recall Sosa's earlier distinction between e-awareness and n-awareness. Moser would deny, I think, that direct attention attraction is to be identified with e-awareness. He would also deny that it is to be identified with n-awareness. What other kind of awareness is there such that it is (i) non-conceptual and (ii) reason-giving?

One thought is that recognitional awareness might do the trick. This, however, will not work because recognitional awareness is a form of conceptual awareness. Recognitional awareness involves tracking an object through a variety of changes. But if one can do that one thereby has a concept of the object.<sup>47</sup> This state, however, cannot end the regress of reasons for non-conceptualism since it is possible to be in such a state and for the object not to exist.

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<sup>47</sup> See Millikan (2000).



Moreover given the argument in the previous chapter it seems that any awareness logically weaker than recognitional awareness will not justify belief. Justification, as we saw in the section on Alston, requires consciously taking into account the items represented in one's experience. Consciously taking into account, though, just is to be recognitionally aware of those items. I conclude then that Moser's notion of direct attention attraction is either not nonconceptual or not reason-giving.

### C. Fumerton & A Developed Acquaintance Theory

The situation is beginning to look dire for the nonconceptual internalist. The basic problem is to find a state that is reason-giving and ends the regress of reasons. Recall, as we saw with Russell's epistemology, is that a primary motivation for nonconceptualism is that it avoids the problem of intentional inexistence. Conceptual states, in general, have the feature that it is possible to be in them and yet their objects are not veridical. The problem with finding a reason-giving factive state is heightened by the observation that a mere conjunctive state will not suffice. The state must be reason-giving in virtue of its guarantee to the truth. We've seen thus far that prominent attempts at this project have failed. Attempts to satisfy the first desiderata fail the second and attempts to satisfy the second desiderata fail the first.

Let us consider a recent attempt to revive Russell's acquaintance theory. Richard Fumerton, in his superb (1995) *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*, presents an updated acquaintance theory of noninferential justification. Fumerton explains that the acquaintance relation is a fundamental, nonepistemic relation that can be used to

construct an account of nonconceptual awareness of reasons. Given our previous discussion on Russell, Chisholm, and Moser we know that the basic problem is to explain how such an account can be reason-giving and imply a guarantee of truth. I will argue that Fumerton's account does not solve the basic problem.

Fumerton places his account of acquaintance within a larger account of truth and intentionality. For Fumerton the primary bearers of truth-values are thoughts. He holds that thoughts are nonrelational properties of a self (or mind) that are logically distinct from brain states. A thought is true if and only if it corresponds to reality. The correspondence relation is taken as a primitive relation. A fact, in contrast to a truth, is a "nonlinguistic complex that consists of an entity or entities exemplifying properties."<sup>48</sup>

The acquaintance relation is then introduced as a *sui generis* relation that can hold between a self (or mind) and a property, thing, or fact.<sup>49</sup> Noninferential justification requires three things: it requires that S is acquainted with the truth-maker of S's belief (the fact); that S is acquainted with the truth-bearer of S's belief (the thought); and that S is acquainted with the correspondence between these two. This gives us the following account: S is noninferentially justified in believing p iff S is acquainted with (i) the fact that p, (ii) the thought that p, and (iii) the relation of correspondence holding between the thought that p and the fact that p.<sup>50</sup>

How can this be used as a response to the Sellarsian dilemma (which itself is an instance of our main problem)? Fumerton claims that the Sellarsian dilemma requires

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 75.

that the *given* have incompatible properties. On the one hand the given ought not be tainted by the application of concepts; for if it were the data identified as the given would be conceptualized as one way rather than other, and that feature of it would require justification. On the other hand, the *given* is required to stop the regress of justification, and thus provide the basis upon which we infer our beliefs. But in order to play this role the given must at least be propositional and have a truth-value. This, however, involves the application of concepts.

Fumerton's response to the dilemma seems to be thus.<sup>51</sup> When one is acquainted with a property or fact, one bears the right sort of relation to the truth-maker of a possible truth-bearer (a thought). This relation itself does not imply that one justifiably believes anything. We can add other facts that together constitute a noninferentially justified belief. Given that one is acquainted with the truth-maker, we need to add that one is acquainted with the truth-bearer (the thought). These two facts, however, are not sufficient to bestow justification on the subject's belief. The problem of the speckled hen illustrates this. In addition, we need to ensure that the subject makes the right connection between the truth-maker and the truth-bearer. This is accomplished by requiring that the subject be acquainted with the correspondence between the truth-maker and the truth-bearer.<sup>52</sup>

There is a problem with this account, though. To see this consider the left to right direction of Fumerton's acquaintance principle of noninferential justification. The left to

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<sup>51</sup> See pp. 74-5.

<sup>52</sup> Ernest Sosa has claimed that this final version still suffers from the problem of the speckled hen. See Poston (forthcoming) for a response.

right direction reads: if S is acquainted with the fact that p, the thought that p and the correspondence between the thought that p and the fact that p then S's belief that p has foundational justification. The problem arises because the acquaintance relation is a non-intentional, real relation. As such this relation does not imply any understanding of the object on the subject's part. As Fumerton himself notes one can be acquainted with a fact "without even possessing the conceptual resources to *represent* that fact in thought."<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Fumerton claims that animals—who lack any understanding of the relevant fact—may be acquainted with a fact.<sup>54</sup>

This problem illustrates that acquaintance itself is not a reason-giving relation, in the sense that whenever that relation obtains a conscious subject is given a reason for believing that the second item in the relation is present. The problem is that a person can be acquainted with a fact and not realize that the fact has obtained. Since this is so, it's difficult to see how cobbling together more and more relations of acquaintance can solve the basic problem.

An interesting passage from Fumerton's review of Bill Brewer's book illustrates that acquaintance does not involve awareness. Fumerton writes,

Brewer is an access externalist. He doesn't think that one needs access to the fact that one is directly acquainted with external reality in order for that acquaintance to yield noninferential justification. And, interestingly enough, I think that this is precisely the position a direct acquaintance theorist *should* take when trying to end a regress of justification. Russell himself, who most internalists will usually claim as one of their own, probably had precisely the same view as Brewer about the irrelevance of access to acquaintance. To be noninferentially justified in believing that one is in pain, according to Russell, one needs only direct acquaintance

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<sup>53</sup> Fumerton, p. 74.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

with the pain (and the correspondence between the belief and the pain). One does not need awareness of that direct acquaintance, justified belief that one is in such a state, or knowledge that one is in such a state, in order for the acquaintance to constitute foundational justification.<sup>55</sup>

This is a fundamental problem for the acquaintance theorist; for it is the problem that acquaintance is not reason-giving. Consider for instance acquaintance with thoughts. If this relation is the same as acquaintance with facts then since S can be acquainted with a fact and not realize the fact is present it seems that S can be acquainted with one of S's thoughts and not realize that S is thinking that thought. Such a case is difficult to imagine, but the difficulty arises from a less than firm grasp on the nature of the acquaintance relation. Suppose, for example, that one denies the possibility of being acquainted with a thought while not consciously realizing that one is thinking that thought. What accounts for this? Why, in particular, is it that one cannot be acquainted with thoughts and fail to realize that one is thinking the thought but that one can be acquainted with a property or fact and fail to realize that the property or fact is present? The explanation cannot appeal to a different kind of relation we have to our thoughts than to properties and facts. But it seems that such an explanation must appeal to that kind of difference. So this denial doesn't seem promising.

The problem that one can be acquainted with x and fail to consciously realize x is present can be bypassed by making the acquaintance relation a kind of intentional relation of mind, as for example, one thinking that p. But this move entirely abandons the second claim that relations of acquaintance can be used to end the regress of reasons.

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<sup>55</sup> Fumerton (2002), p. 517.

For if acquaintance is an intentional relation of minds then being acquainted to a fact doesn't guarantee that that fact is true. Acquaintance is supposed to be a real relation and intentional relations aren't real relations.

I conclude therefore that Fumerton's revised acquaintance theory does not provide a successful response to the basic problem. It secures a response to the regress problem by foregoing the first thesis that perception offers good reasons for belief.

#### D. Phenomenal Conservatism

I have argued that significant theories of nonconceptual internalism fail to account for the truth of two intuitive theses: perception is reason-giving and perception ends the regress of reasons. I close by considering a recent account of internalism by Michael Huemer. Huemer's (2000) *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* constitutes a sustained defense of phenomenal conservatism, the claim that *if it seems to S as if P then S thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that p.*<sup>56</sup> This principle, Huemer claims, constitutes the correct account of noninferential justification. I will argue that Huemer's account fails to answer the basic problem as well.

The problem for phenomenal conservatism can be put in terms of a dilemma: either it seeming to S as if P is reason-giving or not. If it is not reason-giving then it does not provide prima facie justification for S's belief that p. If, however, it is reason-giving then it cannot end the regress of reasons. On either horn of the dilemma phenomenal conservatism does not constitute a correct account of noninferential justification.

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<sup>56</sup> See Huemer, p. 99.

Let us begin with a discussion on *seemings*. What are *seemings*? It is surprising that Huemer devotes only a small section of his book to a discussion on the nature of seemings (three pages in fact, pp 99-101). We learn in that section that seemings are non-doxastic states<sup>57</sup> and that there are different kinds of seemings.<sup>58</sup> There are perceptual seemings as when it seems to one that line 1 of the Müller-Lyer illusion is longer than line 2. There are intellectual seemings as when it seems to Frege as if the axiom of comprehension is true (the axiom that for every property there is the set of things that have that property). Moreover we learn that seemings are defeasible—they can be rationally undermined by more evidence. For instance, it may seem to me as if you are truthful but when a trustworthy friend tells me you are a snake oil salesman, I lose that initial seeming. Furthermore, seemings are not factive. It may seem to me as if there's an oasis ahead even though it's false.

It is evident from the above remarks that seemings have propositional content. Are seemings conceptual? Huemer does not explicitly address this issue. Huemer does claim that the content of experiences is propositional but also nonconceptual.<sup>59</sup> He clarifies, “What I mean by this is that experiences have (at least some) content independent of the concepts that the subject of the experiences has. Nonconceptual content is content that does not depend upon one's having concepts adequate for grasping that content.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>58</sup> The following is a summary of points made on pages 99-101.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

Huemer's view here is more accurately stated as state non-conceptualism. Alex Byrne (2005) helpfully distinguishes two theses that are often run together in discussions over the possibility of non-conceptual content.<sup>61</sup> Byrne formulates state non-conceptualism as the claim that "state M with content p is a *non-conceptual state* iff it is possible to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p."<sup>62</sup> Byrne contrasts state non-conceptualism with content non-conceptualism according to which there is a different kind of content than belief-content.<sup>63</sup> On Huemer's view one can be in an experiential state with content p without possessing all the concepts required to characterize p. This is compatible with there only being one kind of content. Huemer's other remarks—(e.g.) "conceptuality is not an intrinsic property of a content"<sup>64</sup>—reveal that he intends to argue for state non-conceptualism.

It seems, therefore, we should understand *seemings* as a way of entertaining content in either a conceptual or nonconceptual manner.<sup>65</sup> Earlier Huemer introduces the concept of apprehensions.<sup>66</sup> An apprehension is a specific kind of mental representation, one that represents their contents as *actualized*. Huemer refers to this feature as their assertiveness.<sup>67</sup> Apprehensions differ from wants, hopes, fears, and other mental states, in that their function is to represent the world as it actually is.<sup>68</sup> Huemer does not explain how the notion of function operates here. It is unclear whether most apprehensions must

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<sup>61</sup> See also section 4 in Chapter 2 above.

<sup>62</sup> Byrne (2005), p. 233.

<sup>63</sup> Byrne, p. 234.

<sup>64</sup> Huemer, p. 74.

<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., Huemer, p. 74.

<sup>66</sup> See p. 53 and following.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.



be successful to have this function. I imagine Huemer would deny that. In any case, he claims that an apprehension is an assertive mental representation. An experience is one kind of an apprehension (belief is another kind). Furthermore, Huemer holds that the “object of awareness (that of which one is aware), in general, is the object that satisfies the content of the apprehension.”<sup>69</sup> *Seemings* are a kind of apprehension, either conceptual or nonconceptual. They are nondoxastic apprehensions.

Can this awareness of content be reason-giving? The question comes to this: can we have access to content (or, assuming content conceptualism, belief-content) apart from accessing it in a conceptual manner? I have argued that recognitional awareness of the items represented in experience is required for justification. Given a tracking or recognitional theory of concepts on which you possess the concept of x iff you can track (or recognize) x's, nonconceptual awareness of x cannot be reason-giving. This line of attack has constituted the main argument against non-conceptual internalism. Non-conceptual awareness of x implies that one cannot reidentify x or track x through a variety of changes. Such awareness does not justify. So non-conceptual awareness of x (e-awareness in Sosa's terms) doesn't justify.

There is another way to run Huemer's response. Huemer could argue that seemings are conceptual and then try to resist the regress argument. This constitutes a significant departure from the nonconceptualist project. The nonconceptual internalist searches for a factive, non-defeasible, reason-giving state. But on Huemer's account seeming states are non-factive and defeasible. The attempt to end the regress by such

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 80.

states is not successful. To see this observe that a reason-giving non-factive defeasible state presents content *p* as actualized. It is possible, though, given the non-factive nature of the state to be in that state when *p* is false. Moreover, given the defeasible nature of the state this state is open to rational undermining (as in the case in which one learns that *p* is false). To avoid the regress then one has to appeal to the nature of this state in such a way that it gives one reason to justifiedly believe that “skeptical” scenarios do not obtain.<sup>70</sup> But given the nature of the state there is no information encoded in that state that is incompatible with the skeptical scenarios. This presents a significant problem for the appeal to non-factive defeasible states to response to the regress.

In any case this sort of response is a significant departure from nonconceptual internalism. The response we considered from Huemer surrenders the nonconceptualist element. I consider this kind of response more fully in the next chapter in the context of John McDowell’s and Bill Brewer’s views. I conclude therefore that on the non-conceptualist reading of Huemer’s phenomenal conservatism we do not have a successful solution to the basic problem.

### **3 Conclusion**

I have argued that nonconceptual internalism does not solve the basic dilemma. The problem arises because nonconceptual internalists search for a factive, non-

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<sup>70</sup> The argument here assumes the premise that a reason for *p* has to be a reason for thinking that any potential defeaters of the support relation are false. I consider this claim in the following chapter (see the section on the plausibility of skepticism). The basic idea is that at the foundational level it is arbitrary to think that the putative foundational justifier provides a reason for the justificandum, if the justificans is compatible with the falsity of the justificandum. To think that the justificans provides a good reason for the justificandum we need a reason for thinking that potential defeaters are misleading.

defeasible, reason-giving state. Initially it looks as if perceptual states are prime examples of certain states. But when we look closer we see that there is a basic conflict between a state being reason-giving and it ending the regress of reasons. To the extent that the regress should end in a factive, non-defeasible state it cannot be reason-giving. But to the extent that a state should be reason-giving it cannot be factive and non-defeasible. In the next chapter I consider accounts that deny this assumption. They affirm that one can end the regress of reasons in a non-factive, defeasible state.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conceptualism and the Regress Argument

In the previous chapter we investigated whether nonconceptualist theories of empirical justification solve the basic dilemma. We saw that nonconceptualist theories are unable to solve the basic problem. To the extent that such theories offer a successful solution to the regress problem they relinquish the claim that foundational states provide good reasons for our beliefs. But to the extent that such theories imply that foundational states provide good reasons for our beliefs they fail to secure a successful solution to the regress problem. Hence, our basic dilemma is unsolved. How can perception provide good reasons for our empirical beliefs and provide a successful stopping point to the regress of reasons?

In this chapter I shall examine conceptualist foundationalist attempts to solve this problem. This kind of solution aims to end the regress of reasons in a conceptual state that provides good reasons for thinking our empirical beliefs are true. As we saw in the last chapter the principle difficulty facing this kind of a solution is that such states are defeasible and non-factive. Thus the main goal of this approach is to argue the regress of reasons can be rightly stopped by defeasible, non-factive mental states.

We shall examine two prominent developments of conceptualism, one by John McDowell and the other by Bill Brewer. John McDowell attempts to solve the regress problem by appealing to an analogy with Aristotle's notion of a second nature. McDowell claims that there is something about the second nature incorporates conceptual

judgments in an unproblematic manner. A significant portion of our task in this chapter is to attempt to understand McDowell's second nature account. Bill Brewer's account is aimed to extend and clarify McDowell's approach. Hence, the treatment of Brewer's position will focus primarily and whether and how Brewer manages to clarify and extend McDowell's approach.

Given the difficulty in understanding McDowell's and Brewer's position one of my primary aims in this chapter is to explain their positions and to make evident how their response to the regress problem is supposed to go. Apart from this exegetical task, I will argue that they do not offer a successful foundational principle of epistemic justification. A successful principle will have the form: if *S* is in mental state, *m*, then *S* has foundational justification for the belief that *p*. Both McDowell and Brewer argue that *m* is a conceptual state. I will argue that since *m* is defeasible and non-factive it cannot end the regress of reasons.

## **1 McDowell**

It is an understatement that McDowell's views are difficult to understand. The difficulty derives, in part, from McDowell's attempt to sketch a novel philosophical system, a system that aims to resolve fundamental puzzles involving the relation between nature and the mental. McDowell claims that the Sellarsian dilemma gives voice to a modern anxiety premised on a certain conception of nature and the mental. We shall, therefore, attempt to understand McDowell's general aim and place his discussion of the Sellarsian dilemma within this context. Given the inherent difficulty attaching to

discussions of McDowell's view, my goal will be to err on the side of lucidity in order to present an understandable view that responds to the Sellarsian dilemma.

## A. An Overview of McDowell's Project

### a. The Main Puzzle

The puzzle McDowell sketches is the Sellarsian dilemma in a slightly different guise. The puzzle arises from two elements each with intuitive status. The first element of the puzzle is what McDowell calls "minimal empiricism."<sup>1</sup> This is the idea that experience is a judge on whether our ways of thinking about the world are correct. McDowell puts this point as follows: "the idea [is] that experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are, as it must be if we are to make sense of it as thinking at all."<sup>2</sup> The main idea of this is that empirical thought—our beliefs about the world—is answerable to the verdicts of sense experience. If, for example, I believe that there is a bowl of oranges on the kitchen table then sense experience can deliver a correct or incorrect verdict on this empirical judgment. In our terminology, minimal empiricism is the claim that experience provides good reasons for thinking that our beliefs about the empirical world are likely to be true.

The second element of the puzzle generates the worry that experience cannot function as a judge over our thinking, that the requirement of minimal empiricism cannot be met. This second element involves three individual claims that constitute a certain picture of the place of the mental in nature. The first of these individual claims is that "a

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<sup>1</sup> See McDowell (1994): xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., xii.

normative context is necessary for the idea of being in touch with the world at all.”<sup>3</sup>

Correct or incorrect empirical thought requires a normative context.

It is somewhat of a puzzle why McDowell thinks this. McDowell claims that empirical thought involves the introduction of the logical space of reasons. This is to say that empirical thought—thought about the world—cannot be given a purely empirical description, a description that averts to concepts in the domain of the natural sciences. McDowell quotes Wilfrid Sellars on the introduction of the logical space of reasons. Sellars writes, “In characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.”<sup>4</sup> McDowell claims more for his own position: knowledgeable or not, empirical thought requires a normative context. To the extent that I can make sense of this, the thought seems to be that to attribute beliefs to a person we have to be willing to attribute justification to the person as well. This does not require thinking that the person’s beliefs are justified, but only that using the language of justification makes sense in characterizing the person’s doxastic states.

The second part of this picture is that the relations that constitute the logical space of nature are different in kind from the relations that constitute the logical space of reasons. This results in a dualism between nature and reason. The concept of logical space is important for McDowell’s work. A logical space is a space that is individuated by certain relations and objects that bear those relations to other objects. For instance, as

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Sellars (1963): 298-9. See McDowell, xiv.

a trivial example, the logical space of chess is the space of possible moves on a chessboard and the pieces related by those moves. Castling is a relation in this space, and it can hold only between a Rook and a King.

More importantly, for McDowell's purposes, are the logical space of nature and the logical space of reasons. The logical space of nature is constituted by the relations of fundamental physics (and other relations explicable in terms of the fundamental relations, such as the relations that occur in biology) and objects that can bear those relations to each other. Causation, for example, is a relation in the logical space of nature. The logical space of reasons is constituted by rational relations such as implication and probabilification. On this present picture these relations are *sui generis*.<sup>5</sup> These relations hold among conceptual items, items that are in principle intelligible to rational subjects. The second individual claim, then, is that the logical space of reasons cannot be explicated in terms of the logical space of nature; the space of reasons is *sui generis*.

To this point, then, the puzzle looks like this. The first element of the puzzle requires that experience exercise control over empirical thought. But the second element of the puzzle requires that empirical thought be placed within the logical space of reasons, a space that is not explicable by the logical space of nature. A final claim completes the second element: persons are natural beings and as such the ability to experience the world is natural. It is undeniable that we share—to a certain extent—perceptual experience with animals. We may here speak of “impressions” as those

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 6.



natural phenomenon of experience that we share with animals. Impressions are impingements on our senses by the world.

The puzzle, therefore, is that impressions—a purely natural phenomenon that occurs in the logical space of nature—must exercise control over empirical thought—a phenomenon occurring in the logical space of reasons. Given this picture, it does not seem possible for experience—if conceived as a purely natural phenomenon—to exercise control over our empirical thought. Impressions, as natural phenomenon, cannot enter into reason-giving relations. But in order to function in the way minimal empiricism requires they must enter into reason-giving relations.

We can state this puzzle in more familiar terms: if experience is nonconceptual and thought conceptual, then experience cannot exercise rational control over thought; for the nonconceptual cannot be conceived as relevant to a belief. Therefore, experience cannot play the role it is widely thought to play. This is the Sellars' problem in a nutshell. Moreover, this problem is identical to our main problem if one adds the premise that a successful solution to the regress problem must assimilate reasons to natural phenomena like impressions. Impressions have the virtue of being such that either they are present or not. But, as we saw in the previous chapter, they cannot justify belief because they aren't reason-giving.

#### b. The Main Positions

The positions McDowell considers require relinquishing one of the claims used to derive the main puzzle. The three positions McDowell considers are rampant Platonism,

bald Naturalism, and Davidsonian coherentism. McDowell's main argument for his position—a moderate Platonism or an Aristotelian second-nature theory—is that it does not require abandoning any of the theses that figure in the main puzzle. Thus, the claims of the main puzzle provide an argument for McDowell's position.

(i) Rampant Platonism

This first position is not discussed in depth. This position denies that persons are natural beings. It holds instead that our empirical thought is an exercise of non-natural capacities. This position is obviously unsatisfying. It must deny that empirical thought is actual. In thought we are not in touch with a natural world, but rather we discover a super-natural reality.

(ii) Bald Naturalism

This position denies the *sui generis* character of the logical space of reasons. It approaches empirical thought as a purely natural phenomenon, locating it in a merely descriptive realm. Thus, this position denies the normative nature of empirical thought. This position is adopted as a response to the main puzzle of explicating the way experience can give reasons for empirical thought. If we can resolve the difficulty in conceiving how experience can give reasons for empirical judgment without relinquishing the *sui generis* character of rationality then bald naturalism loses its initial appeal.

### (iii) Davidsonian Coherentism

This third position denies minimal empiricism, the claim that experience must function as a judge on empirical thought. McDowell locates this position in Donald Davidson.<sup>6</sup> Davidson argues that the puzzle forces us to abandon the idea that experience as impingements on our senses by natural phenomena can exert rational influence on empirical thought. Such impingements are blind from a rational perspective; data cannot be incorporated into a rational system apart from that data being of the right kind for the system (i.e., being conceptual).

McDowell argues that Davidson's position requires the abandonment of the intuitive thesis that perception offers good reasons for our empirical beliefs. The difficulty is that one is forced to abandon this thesis, if there is no alternative position. Davidson finds the Quinean naturalizing move unsatisfactory, as well as the move of the rampant Platonist. Thus, assuming the basic puzzle is insurmountable one can feel driven into abandoning minimal empiricism. A positive argument against Davidson's position requires expanding logical space so as to escape the basic puzzle.

### c. McDowell's Solution

McDowell argues that a new position will not require abandoning any of the intuitive theses that lead to the main puzzle; one can avoid the unsatisfactory moves of rampant Platonism, bald naturalism, and Davidsonian coherentism. The position McDowell sketches is described as a form of moderate Platonism. "Platonism" because

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<sup>6</sup> Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1984).

it does not deny the normative nature of empirical thought nor the *sui generis* character the logical space of reasons. “Moderate” because it does not deny that persons are natural beings and as such experience is a part of the natural realm (i.e., it is not an exercise of a non-natural ability).

McDowell describes his view by analogy to an Aristotelian second-nature theory. He takes Aristotelian moral psychology as an important guide to how we should conceive of the relation between our conceptual capacities and the natural world. On Aristotle’s account to be an ethical person is to have the virtue of character. Virtue of character includes practical wisdom which involves openness to ethical reasons. On Aristotle’s account, McDowell claims, the reception of ethical reasons is passive in a similar way that perceptual experience is passive. Furthermore, these ethical reasons gained by the exercise of practical wisdom are irreducible to a non-ethical perspective. One cannot possess these ethical reasons apart from possessing practical wisdom. Importantly, the only perspective by which one can assess whether ethical reasons are genuine is the distinctly ethical perspective, the perspective constituted by the possession of practical wisdom. This is significant because it undermines a skepticism about ethical reasons. The skeptical anxiety is not felt by Aristotle because in order to assess ethical reasons one has to adopt the very perspective in which those reasons are given in the exercise of practical wisdom.

McDowell summarizes his enriched Aristotelian position:

The ethical is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are

opened to the very existence of this tract of the space of reasons. Thereafter our appreciation of its detailed layout is indefinitely subject to refinement, in reflective scrutiny of our ethical thinking. We can so much as understand, let alone seek to justify, the thought that reason makes these demands on us only as a standpoint within a system of concepts and conceptions that enables us to think about such demands, that is, only at a standpoint from which demands of this kind seem to be in view.<sup>7</sup>

McDowell's aim for these remarks is to generalize this picture to show how one can maintain each of the claims that lead to the original puzzle. One of the main ideas is that perceptual experience—like practical wisdom—involves openness to reasons, reasons that are objectively present whether or not one is aware of them. The main puzzle holds that experience must exercise control over our empirical thought and yet given the dualism of reason and nature, and the claim that impressions are a part of nature, it seems impossible that experience can exercise control over thought.

McDowell's Aristotelian position maintains each of those claims without generating the same puzzle. On this view the logical space of reasons is not reducible to the logical space of nature. This maintains the normativity of rationality. Moreover, persons are fully natural beings; perceptual experience is not some occult non-natural ability we uniquely possess. Given all this, however, on this Aristotelian conception we can recognize that perceptual experience—so conceived—exercises control over empirical thought. Thus, McDowell claims, we can maintain each of the intuitive theses without generating puzzlement.

The key to this position is to understand how perceptual experience can exercise this control while at the same time recognizing significant overlap with nonconceptual

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<sup>7</sup> McDowell, p. 82.

animals. The crucial part of McDowell's account is the concept of a second nature. A second nature is an acquired ability that actualizes a potentiality. On Aristotle's picture acquiring practical wisdom is to acquire a second nature. McDowell's claim is that openness to reasons in perceptual experience is to acquire a second nature. This second nature involves the passive exercise of conceptual capacities.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to see the work accomplished by the notion of a second nature. Conceptual capacities in one sense are non-natural in that they cannot be explicable in terms of the logical space of nature. McDowell writes, "We cannot capture what it is to possess and employ the understanding... in terms of concepts that place things in a realm of law."<sup>9</sup> But in another sense conceptual capacities are natural in that they are inextricably linked to our being a part of nature.<sup>10</sup> The solution to this is second nature: an actualization of a natural potentiality that is constituted by the exercise of conceptual capacities.

The picture McDowell is offering is innovative. On his view perceptual experience—the kind that does exercise rational control over belief—is part of our second nature. This nature involves the conceptual capacities that are drawn on in our most fundamental perceptual experiences. There is no dualism between impressions—non-rational products of nature—and *appearings*. Impressions, so conceived, can exercise no control over empirical thought. *Appearings* involve concepts and as such are intelligible to the subjects. McDowell writes, "The conceptual contents that are most

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<sup>8</sup> See pp. 84-86.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 87.

basic in this sense are already possessed by impressions themselves, impingements by the world on our sensibility.”<sup>11</sup>

This secures the claim that there is no dualism between empirical thought and the basic data of experience. The basic data of experience is conceptual. McDowell writes, “The impressions on our senses that keep the dynamic system in motion are already equipped with conceptual content.”<sup>12</sup> McDowell hopes that we can understand this by focusing on the Aristotelian ethical character. Acquiring the ethical second nature allows us to be passively responsive to ethical reasons. On this Aristotelian view there is no dualism of nature and ethical reasons: the ethical reasons themselves are part of the natural realm. In a similar vein, McDowell hopes to induce in us the thought that in perceptual experience we are open to reasons that are part of the natural realm.

## B. Objections

I turn now to objections to McDowell’s view. These objections serve both to clarify and criticize McDowell’s view.

### a. The Threat of Idealism

It is instructive that McDowell takes care to show that his position does not imply idealism.<sup>13</sup> McDowell argues that independent reality is not located outside the conceptual realm. To understand McDowell’s position better let us suppose for the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9-10. See also “Experiences are impressions made by the world on our senses, products of receptivity; but those impressions themselves already have conceptual content” (p. 46).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> The majority of Lecture II “The Unboundedness of the Conceptual” addresses this issue.

moment that independent reality *is* (in part) located outside the conceptual realm. This forces on us a dualism of reason and nature. An idea strongly associated with this conception is that the basic impingements on our sensory organs are part of the nonconceptual realm. The problem then is to understand how experience so conceived—our access to the independent world—can exercise control over empirical thought. The problem is that nonconceptual data are blind in that they cannot exert rational influence over a subject's beliefs; for these data are nonconceptual and as such cannot be conceived as relevant to a subject's beliefs. McDowell avoids this problem by presenting a new conception of nature. On this view, nature—reality itself—is not located outside the conceptual realm. Therefore, McDowell avoids a dualism that leads to the main puzzle.

But this position threatens to resolve to idealism. One way to understand idealism is the claim that there is no world independent of thought; no thought, no matter. McDowell aims to uphold the independency thesis: without thought, matter still exists (or, the world is independent of thought). Showing consistency may seem difficult because on most realist views the world is nonconceptual. McDowell therefore has to show (a) the world is independent of thought and yet (b) the world lies within the conceptual realm.

The strategy McDowell employs is to assume (a) and show how (b) can be true. The argument here is difficult. McDowell argues by appeal to the objectivity of thought. He quotes Wittgenstein's remark that "When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the



case, we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact; be we mean: *this—is—so.*”<sup>14</sup> McDowell reformulates this:

There is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. So since the world is everything that is the case, there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought.<sup>15</sup>

On the strategy we are pursuing we assume the independency thesis (a) and then show how it is the case that (b) the world lays within the conceptual realm. McDowell’s thought in this passage seems to be this. Empirical thought which is conceptual reaches out to the world, a world that exists independently of thought. In order for this to occur, the world must lie within the conceptual realm, where this means that the world must be thinkable. This is to say that there is no other content than the kind of content that is capable of being believed. Belief content is all there is to content. McDowell’s claim (b) is thus the claim that there is no non-conceptual content.

It is important not to confuse thesis (b) with the thesis that the world is a conceptual entity. McDowell does not claim that this latter thesis is true. Rather the claim is that independent reality can exert rational control over belief by itself lying within the conceptual realm.

McDowell’s response here to the threat of idealism is novel and interesting. The core thesis to this response is that there is no nonconceptual content, no content that is not possibility endorsed by belief. This thesis doesn’t imply that the world itself is a

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<sup>14</sup> McDowell, (p. 27). Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* sec. 95.

<sup>15</sup> McDowell, p. 27.

conceptual entity. It seems therefore that McDowell's position doesn't resolve into Idealism.

#### b. Naturalism and Conceptual Beings

A second objection to McDowell's account is that nonconceptual animals share perception with us and therefore experience is not fundamentally conceptual. The objection is pressing given that it is undeniable that we share perceptual sensitivity to the world with animals. Animals negotiate their terrain via a perceptual system that is sensitive to their environment.

Let us begin by asking what it means to say that experience is conceptual on McDowell's view. McDowell explains that this means that the very same content of experience can be deployed in the content of judgments, where the content of judgments is intelligible to the subject. McDowell writes, "It is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials."<sup>16</sup>

Suppose that we accept—contrary to McDowell's wishes—that the content of our experience is fundamentally the same as the content of the experience of nonconceptual animals. If we accepted the claim that animals do not form judgments about their experience then the sameness of experience thesis implies that the basic data of experience as nonconceptual. But nonconceptual data is not able to rationally influence a subject's beliefs; for nonconceptual data is not intelligible to the subject. In order for

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

information to be intelligible to the subject it must be conceived of and this is a distinctly conceptual capacity.

It may be, however, that this view is forced upon us by reflection on nonconceptual animals' perceptual sensitivity to their environment. McDowell argues that reflection on the Aristotelian model of a second nature illustrates how there may be two different ways to be perceptually sensitive to one's environment: one conceptual at its core and another nonconceptual. For instance McDowell writes, "What we share with dumb animals is perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment. We can say that there are two species of that, one permeated by spontaneity and another independent of it."<sup>17</sup>

However this is not clear. For in the ethical case we do not feel the tension to attribute to nonconceptual animals the virtue of character. Hence in the case of an ethical second nature it seems more plausible to conceive of this second nature as a conceptual and natural ability not shared with animals. But, in the case of a perceptual second nature it seems much less plausible to conceive of this as both a completely conceptual and natural ability not shared with animals. In this case it is plausible to locate some sameness between us and animals in the content of experience: we both receive perceptual impressions.

McDowell's final story seems to admit this much, but holds that by a proper upbringing we are initiated into a practice that somehow or other changes the nature of our perceptual sensitivity to the world. It is clear that McDowell wants to resist the move

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 69

that the basic experiential data are interpreted in order to make them items for possible judgments. What is not clear is the intelligibility of the picture he is offering.

There are two other objections to McDowell's claims about the conceptual nature of experience that deserve brief mention. The first objection is the content of experience is fine-grained and conceptual capacities are course-grained.<sup>18</sup> For instance, we have the ability to experience many more shades of color than we have color concepts. McDowell argues that conceptual capacities can be as fine-grained as experience. He argues that the use of demonstratives shows that conceptual capacities are fine-grained. It is important that the move is not that the use of the demonstrative allows nonconceptual content to be used in the content of a judgment (and as such become conceptual). Instead McDowell thinks that the use of the demonstrative shows that the fine-grained content is already conceptual since we can rationally take it into account by using the demonstrative.

The second objection is that experiential content is independent of belief (or empirical judgment). This threatens the claim that experiential content is conceptual.<sup>19</sup> The tacit premise that McDowell rejects in this argument is that conceptual activities are not passively drawn on in experience. McDowell writes,

According to the position I am recommending, conceptual capacities are already operative in experience itself. It is not that actual operations of conceptual capacities first figure only in actualizations of dispositions to judge, with which experiences are identified—so that experience is connected with concepts only by way of a potentiality.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See pp. 56-60.

<sup>19</sup> See pp. 60-63.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

### c. The Plausibility of Skepticism

McDowell argues that in perceptual experience we are open to the world. This openness involves two anti-skeptical claims; first, that we are open to the external world, thereby implying that the existence of the external world; second, that we are open to the nature of the external world, thereby implying that the world is the way we perceive it. But there are familiar skeptical arguments to the effect that both these conclusions are unwarranted. How, therefore, does McDowell address these skeptical arguments?

The main skeptical argument is that we may have non-veridical experience that is phenomenologically indistinguishable from veridical experience. We, therefore, have the same justification in non-veridical experience for our beliefs that we have in veridical experience. And, thus, we lack sufficiently robust justification for our belief in the existence and nature of reality based on perceptual experience.

Given this argument it can seem unintelligible that in perceptual experience we are open to the existence and nature of the world. But McDowell denies that openness is unintelligible, and this he claims gives him justification for ignoring the skeptical arguments. McDowell repeats several times that he is not attempting to answer skepticism. Rather he insists that as long as it is intelligible that in perceptual experience we are open to the existence and nature of the external world, then skeptical anxieties lack urgency. McDowell explains

If the idea [of openness to facts] is intelligible, the skeptical questions lack a kind of urgency that is essential to their troubling us, an urgency that derives from their seeming to point up an unnerving fact: that however good a subject's cognitive position is, it *cannot* constitute her having a states of affairs directly manifest to her. There is no such fact. The aim here is not to answer skeptical questions, but to begin to see how it might

be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal, in the way that common sense has always wanted to.<sup>21</sup>

But is this a satisfying response? The main skeptical argument exploits the tempting claim that the data we receive in perceptual experience does not guarantee either the existence of physical objects or the nature of physical objects. In fact, the main skeptical argument presses upon us the conclusion that in experience we are directly aware of private mental objects.<sup>22</sup> Once one accepts this conclusion it is difficult to fail to take seriously skepticism.

McDowell inadequately addresses this point, writing

Insisting on the image of openness is a way to give vivid expression to this point: there is no good argument from fallibility to what I call “the highest common factor conception” of our subjective position—the idea that even when things go well, cognitively speaking, our subjective position can only be something common between such cases and cases in which things do not go well.<sup>23</sup>

The argument from fallibility is supposed to be the main skeptical argument, and the conclusion McDowell wants us to accept is that phenomenological indistinguishability does not imply same justification. That is, a non-veridical perceptual experience that is phenomenologically indistinguishable from a veridical perceptual does not carry the same justification for believing that objects exist with such and such properties. This conclusion is difficult to reconcile with McDowell’s insistence of the intelligibility of perceptual experience—that the contents of perceptual experience that make a rational difference to a subject’s belief must be understood or recognized by the subject. For

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<sup>21</sup> See p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Bertrand Russell (1997).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 113.

given that a veridical and non-veridical experience may be indistinguishable, either both or neither of the contents of the experiences are intelligible to the subject. If neither then perceptual experience does not give reasons for empirical beliefs. If both then it is difficult to maintain that one provides reasons for empirical beliefs whilst the other does not.

### C. Assessment

Does McDowell's position solve the Sellarsian dilemma? It is evident that McDowell aims to uncover the deep philosophical roots that give rise to the dilemma. But is his solution effective? Recall the horn of the dilemma McDowell denies is that if experience is conceptual (or, alternatively, if perceptual awareness is conceptual), then experience itself (or the awareness itself) requires justification. McDowell's second-nature approach is supposed to show how one may have conceptual awareness that itself does not require justification. This idea is attractive, but it rests upon the intelligibility of extending an account of second nature from the virtue of character to rationality in general. It is difficult to understand how this can be accomplished.

Moreover, we have seen that each of the objections considered above pose unanswered difficulties for McDowell's account. McDowell's account does not handle the plausibility of skepticism well nor does it handle well our similarity with non-conceptual animals. A natural way to develop McDowell's account is to opt for idealism, but McDowell wants to resist this as well.

The section on skepticism illustrates the problem McDowell faces with the regress of reasons. McDowell aims to end a conceptual state that provides good reasons for empirical beliefs. We saw above that McDowell will resist the claim that this kind of state is non-factive, that is that it is possible to be in that kind of state when its content is false. McDowell resists this by denying that phenomenal sameness implies evidential sameness. But this denial is not reasonable. Phenomenal sameness implies an inability to distinguish among possible contents of experience. McDowell insists that in perceptual experience perceptual contents are open to view. This seems to involve the thesis that one knows that the content of one's experience is such and such. To the extent that one knows this one is able to distinguish between possible contents of experience and thus one is able to know what evidence one has in perceptual experience.

Accepting the thesis that phenomenal sameness implies evidential sameness forces one to abandon the claim that the regress can stop with a conceptual state. Why? Because by accepting this thesis one accepts the non-factivity thesis about conceptual states. Since non-factive states do not guarantee the truth of their contents one needs additional reason to think that when one is in a non-factive mental state  $m$  one's belief that  $p$  is likely to be true. I conclude thus that McDowell's solution to the main problem, while very interesting, is not successful.

## **2 Brewer**



Bill Brewer, in his book *Perception and Reason*,<sup>24</sup> argues that perceptual experiences provide reasons for empirical beliefs. Brewer calls this thesis (R).<sup>25</sup> Brewer explicitly connects his development of (R) with McDowell's project in *Mind and World*. He writes in a note, "This claim [(R)] is a crucial component of McDowell's position in this area. Indeed, the argument which I offer in support of it is my own extended development of his very suggestive comments on the matter."<sup>26</sup> Since we are familiar with McDowell's project and its problems, we shall cut to the chase and seek a justification for the main problem with denying the first horn of the Sellarsian dilemma, the horn that conceptual reason-giving states require justification.

Brewer argues that (R) requires that perceptual experiences are conceptual. His argument is simple: (R); if (R) then experiences are conceptual; therefore experiences are conceptual. Brewer assumes the truth of (R). The justification for the main premise relies on the claim that only reason-giving relations, relations that are intelligible to a subject, can determine the content of our most basic beliefs about the mind-independent world. Brewer's argument for this is difficult, and fortunately we need not enter into discussion of it. Our main question, therefore, is how Brewer's position answers Sellarsian concerns.

The primary Sellarsian difficulty Brewer's approach faces is to explain why the conceptual capacities drawn on in experience do not need justification. This is especially difficult given the fact that conceptual capacities drawn on in belief do stand in need of

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<sup>24</sup> Brewer (1999).

<sup>25</sup> See p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 18 fn 1.

justification. McDowell's explanation involved the difficult concept of a second nature. McDowell introduced this concept, recall, by Aristotle's notion of an ethical second nature. Skeptical anxieties, McDowell claimed, do not arise for Aristotle because the only way to assess the correctness of the judgments produced by the second nature is by using judgments provided by that very nature. Brewer doesn't offer us such heady metaphysics. Instead he attempts to explain how conceptual capacities drawn on in experience do not need justification by appeal to the conceptual content that passively figures in experience.

It is important to see that on Brewer's view belief states and perceptual states are ontologically different. A belief state on Brewer's view is an intentional state that may have a "non-existent" object (it may not correspond to an external object). A perceptual state, however, is not an intentional state. Rather a perceptual state is a species of a state of acquaintance that itself requires existing objects. One cannot be acquainted with an object if that object does not exist.<sup>27</sup>

This difference between belief states and perceptual states forces the prior question of just how a perceptual state can be conceptual. Let us explore this issue for a moment. It constitutes a serious challenge to the intelligibility of the account Brewer is offer. The problem here is that on Brewer's conception of perceptual states it's not clear how they can meet Brewer's reason-giving requirement, a requirement that is met by only conceptual states.

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<sup>27</sup> These points are skillfully made by Fumerton's review of Brewer's book. See Fumerton (2002).

Richard Fumerton presses this issue in his review of Brewer's book.<sup>28</sup> Fumerton explains (I quote at length since Fumerton puts the point so well):

But how exactly can one embrace Russell's conception of acquaintance as the relation upon which we are going to model perception and at the same time argue that acquaintance has conceptual content? One can be directly acquainted with particulars, particular properties, perhaps universals, and perhaps facts (particulars exemplifying particular properties or universals). But what makes any of these relations of acquaintance *conceptual*? It was Russell's view that direct acquaintance with a fact constitutes a kind of justification for believing a proposition made true by that fact only when one is simultaneously acquainted with the *correspondence* between one's belief (an intentional state capable of corresponding) and the fact that the belief makes true. On one rather natural view beliefs are conceptual just because they have the capacity to correspond or fail to correspond to reality. While perceptual states for Brewer are distinct from beliefs, it also seems that he wants perceptual states to have the same kind of conceptual content as beliefs, a kind of conceptual content that presumably should allow them to be the bearers of truth and falsehood so that they can constitute reasons for beliefs that also have the capacity to be true or false.... [But] if perceptual states and belief can share conceptual content, why can't they both be bearers of truth value or at least have the capacity to correspond or *fail* to correspond to reality. But perceptual states, understood as relations of acquaintance holding between a subject and an object, aren't the kinds of things that can be true or false. It would involve a kind of category mistake to characterize them this way. To paraphrase Hume (when arguing that passions lack true value), acts of acquaintance are complete realities in and of themselves without the capacity to agree or fail to agree to some matter of fact.<sup>29</sup>

This is a fundamental problem for Brewer's view. It is essential for Brewer's approach that perceptual states are not highly detailed vivid intentional states; for were they intentional states they would be subject to Brewer's reduplication argument.<sup>30</sup> The reduplication argument, to put it briefly, claims that perception cannot secure reference to

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<sup>28</sup> Fumerton (2002).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 515.

<sup>30</sup> See Brewer, p. 27. The description of this argument as the reduplication argument comes from Fumerton.

an external state of affairs where it is construed on analogy with a description whose reference is satisfied when there is some unique object satisfying that description.

Brewer goes on to argue that where perception is like a description it is always possible that the scene described is reduplicated by some different external state of affairs.

If Brewer's commitments prevent him from adopting an intentional account of perception then he is caught in the difficulty Fumerton presses. This difficulty illustrates a common theme with the Sellars' problem. If perception has content then it does not involve a real relation to some external state of affairs. But if perception is reason-giving it must have content. Hence if perception is reason-giving then it does not involve a real relation to some external state of affairs. Brewer is apprised of the Sellars' problem and attempts to handle it by joining together Russell's acquaintance theory with the reason-giving requirement. But as we have seen this will not work.

### **3 Conclusion**

I have argued that the conceptualist rightly focuses on the need for perceptual experiences to make intelligible perceptual belief. A commitment to this claim within the foundationalist framework, however, is difficult to work out. McDowell's account is the most thoroughgoing attempt to work out such an account, but it is difficult to come to terms with and faces several daunting objections. Brewer's account attempts to secure McDowell's position without the controversial metaphysics. However, Brewer's account faces the problem of requiring perceptual states to be both conceptual and to involve a real relation to physical objects.

It appears therefore that the natural direction for a conceptualist model to take is to forgo foundationalism. If a commitment to the reason-giving requirement necessitates adopting conceptualism then this provides motivation for examining anew coherentist accounts of perceptual justification. I do this in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX

### How to satisfy Sellars and Socrates: An Exploration of Non-doxastic Coherentism

In the previous chapters I've argued that there is a fundamental difficulty with maintaining two very intuitive theses. The first thesis is that perception offers good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are likely to be true. The second thesis is that perception can end the regress of reasons. We have seen that insofar as one aims to uphold the first thesis one fails to uphold the second. Also if one aims to secure the claim that perception can end the regress of reasons then one loses the intuitive claim that perception offers good reasons for thinking that our empirical beliefs are true.

We can restate the problem in terms of two claims. The Socratic claim is that epistemic justification requires good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are likely to be true. The Sellarsian claim is that states with assertive content cannot, by themselves, end the regress of reasons. Together with the additional claim that good reasons requires states with assertive content we reach the conclusion that the Socratic claim implies good reasons, by themselves, cannot end the regress of reasons. Since the Socratic claim is central to the epistemological task this poses a serious challenge to the possibility of rational belief.

In this chapter I want to explore a theory of justification that shows promise for resolving this basic difficulty. The theory may be classified as non-doxastic coherentism. We shall consider the classification issue shortly. Let me briefly mention some virtues of this theory. The main virtue is that it upholds the central intuition of a Socratic

epistemology that reasons for beliefs requires awareness of the reasons. As we have seen with foundational theories, a problem with maintaining the Socratic claim is that it conflicts with requirements on a successful response to the regress argument. The non-doxastic coherentist has a distinct advantage here. The coherentist denies an assumption operative in foundationalism. This assumption is that a singular mental state can provide a reason for belief. Another way to state this is that the *reason-for* relation is a two place relation that can hold between a singular experience and a belief. The coherentist rejects this assumption, claiming that reasons occur only within a system of contents.

The main thesis I defend in this chapter is that non-doxastic coherentism is a plausible solution to the basic problem we have been investigating. I will argue for this by arguing, first, that non-doxastic coherentism is not plagued by the typical problems that afflict classical coherentism. This claim shows that non-doxastic coherentism is more plausible than classical instances of coherentism. Second, I argue for my main thesis by arguing that non-doxastic coherentism illustrates how the two intuitive theses that generate the main problem are compatible. Finally, I argue that non-doxastic coherentism is not plagued by a central difficulty with Laurence Bonjour's form of coherentism. These three claims jointly support my thesis that non-doxastic coherentism is a plausible solution to the basic problem.

The outline of the chapter is as follows. First, I isolate the primary issue between foundationalists and coherentists. Second, I formulate the non-doxastic coherentist position by focusing on the logical space available to coherentism. Third, I show that the typical problems thought to undermine doxastic coherentism do not undermine the non-

doxastic version. Fourth, I explain how non-doxastic coherentism escapes the incompatibility argument with respect to the two intuitive theses. Fifth, and finally, I consider a central difficulty that plagued Bonjour's coherentism, and in fact, lead to his eventual repudiation of it.<sup>1</sup> I argue that this problem doesn't afflict the version of non-doxastic coherentism I advocate.

## **1 The Foundationalist & Coherentist Debate**

What is the primary issue between the foundationalist and the coherentist? Put abstractly, the issue is whether epistemic justification has a foundational structure. A foundational structure is a metaphor for how one's beliefs are justified in relation to one's other beliefs. Foundationalists claim that some beliefs are justified on the basis of other justified beliefs, and other beliefs are justified apart from being supported by other beliefs. Stronger forms of foundationalism result if one claims that this is the only way beliefs can be justified. The former beliefs are called non-basic beliefs and the latter are called basic beliefs.

Richard Fumerton, for example, draws the distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs in terms of inference. He claims that foundationalists are committed to the claim that there is a distinction between inferentially and noninferentially justified beliefs. Moreover, he observes, foundationalism involves the additional claim that "all

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<sup>1</sup> See Bonjour (2003).



justified beliefs can trace their justificatory ancestry back to noninferentially justified beliefs.”<sup>2</sup>

Both Matthias Steup and Paul Moser characterize foundationalism in similar terms. Steup claims that foundationalism implies two theses about a person’s system of justified beliefs: first, that some beliefs are noninferentially and nondoxastically justified;<sup>3</sup> second, that each non-basic belief “owes it justification ultimately to one or several beliefs in the foundation.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul Moser (1989) characterizes foundationalism as this:

Epistemic foundationalism states that necessarily if any proposition is justifiable for one on the basis of another proposition, then there is some proposition justifiable for one independently of its evidential relations to other propositions.<sup>5</sup>

Bonjour introduces foundationalism as a response to the regress argument. He describes the foundationalist response as follows:

The only alternative apparently remaining is that the premise-beliefs at the final state of a particular branch are indeed justified, but in some fashion that does not involve any further appeal to conditional or inferential reason and thus does not require new premise-beliefs that would themselves be in need of justification. According to this third alternative, while there is still indeed a reason or at least a rational basis of some sort of thinking that each of these ultimate beliefs is true (so that this alternative differs from the first one), this reason or basis does not appeal to any sort of argument or inference from further premise-beliefs about which further issues of justification could be raised. For obvious reasons, these ultimate premises are standardly referred to as *basic* or *foundational* beliefs, and the epistemological position that advocates them as *foundationalism*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fumerton (1995), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Steup (1998), p. 89-90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> Moser (1989), p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Bonjour (2003), p. 12.

The above remarks suggest that foundationalism involves the thesis that some beliefs are justified without being evidentially supported by other justified beliefs. This general characterization of foundationalism may not locate an interesting dispute between foundationalists and coherentists. For example, James Cornman argues that Quine and Sellars—two of the most famous coherentists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—may count as foundationalist if it amounts to the claim that some beliefs are justified apart from evidential relations to other beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Cornman cites a remarkable passage from Sellars in which Sellars writes,

To reject the myth of the given is to not commit oneself to the idea that empirical knowledge as it is now constituted has no rock bottom level of observation predicates proper. It is to commit oneself rather to the idea where even if it does have a rock bottom level, it is *still* in principle replaceable by another conceptual framework in which these predicates do not, *strictly speaking*, occur. It is in this sense, and in this sense *only*, that I have rejected the dogma of given-ness with respect to observation predicates.<sup>8</sup>

Cornman cites similar passages in Quine's writings. For example, Quine writes in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*<sup>9</sup>

to our knowledge of what is true, is very much the traditional one: observation sentences are the repository of evidence for scientific hypotheses.... Sentences higher up in theories have no empirical consequences they can call their own; they confront the tribunal of sensory evidence only in more or less inclusive aggregates. The observation sentence, situated at the sensory periphery of the body scientific, is the

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<sup>7</sup> Cornman (1978), p. 249-251.

<sup>8</sup> See Cornman, pp. 250-1. The quote is originally from Sellars, see Sellars (1967), p. 353.

<sup>9</sup> Quine (1969).

minimal verifiable aggregate; it has an empirical content all its own and wears it on its sleeve.<sup>10</sup>

For a contemporary instance William Lycan classifies himself as a coherentist and yet he holds that some beliefs have initially some warrant independently of their coherence within a system of contents.<sup>11</sup>

To the extent that there is an interesting debate here, it lies in the class of beliefs that are taken to be non-inferentially justified and the strength of justification had by those beliefs. Coherentists deny that empirical beliefs, like the belief that there's a sedan parked outside, are candidates for basic beliefs. Moreover, they deny that the basic beliefs have anything more than provisional or minimal justification. Lycan, for example, claims that the extent to which some beliefs are warranted apart from their coherence in a system of contents is not significant: "for justification in the fuller sense that we normally ask of beliefs," he writes, "considerably more coherence is required [than simply being believed]."<sup>12</sup>

I think the way to state the disagreement between the foundationalist and coherentist is whether there is a significant asymmetry with regards to the justification of belief. Since our investigation has been the justification of empirical beliefs, beliefs about tables, chairs, bears, and hares, I formulate the debate as over the following thesis:

(F) Some empirical beliefs are not evidentially supported by other beliefs.

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<sup>10</sup> Quine, pp. 88-89. Passage quoted from Cornman, p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> See Lycan (1996).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

Coherentists, by contrast, deny the central foundationalist claim. Their central claim is that no belief is ever more than provisionally justified without being evidentially supported by other beliefs. It is significant that this thesis is often confused with the claim that the only thing that justifies belief is some other belief. For instance, Matthias Steup claims: “Coherentists... maintain that it is impossible for a belief to be basic on the ground that what justifies a belief must always be one or more other beliefs”<sup>13</sup> It is consistent with the coherentist general picture that experience plays a justificatory role; it is only claimed that experience cannot justify belief without another belief contributing some justification.

A final remark about (F): It is important not to confuse the practice of inferring one belief from another belief with the fact that a belief is inferentially related to another belief, i.e., evidentially supported by another belief. As Sellars observed there is an obvious difference between *inferring* and *seeing*.<sup>14</sup> The critic of (F) shouldn't be taken to deny that sometimes we do not infer a belief from another belief. This is consistent, however, with the belief being evidentially supported by other beliefs. The issue concerning (F) is not whether there are some justified beliefs that persons do not explicitly infer from other beliefs. Rather the issue is whether there are some beliefs whose justification is not constituted by their support relations to other beliefs.

I have argued to this point that (F) is false. It may be helpful to briefly recap the argument. I have argued that (F) is incompatible with the Socratic claim and the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>14</sup> Sellars (1963), p. 127.

Sellarsian claim. The master argument is as follows (I assume for ease of presentation that we are considered with empirical beliefs about ordinary objects and properties):

7. Justification requires having good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are true. (The Socratic Assumption)
8. Having good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are true requires conscious awareness of assertive, propositional content. (From Chapters 3 & 4)
9. Conscious awareness of assertive, propositional content cannot end the regress of reasons. (Conclusion of Chapters 4 & 5)
10. If some empirical beliefs are non-inferentially justified then one has good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are likely to be true and the reasons themselves do not require further justification. (From 1 & The Foundationalist Claim)

But,

11. It is not possible that one has good reasons for thinking that one's beliefs are likely to be true and the reasons themselves do not require further justification. (From 7, 8, & 9)

So,

12. No empirical belief is non-inferentially justified. (From 10 & 11)

This conclusion is disturbing. If the only non-skeptical options to (F) are doxastic coherentism and infinitism then skepticism about rational belief may be forced upon us. And, as Peter Unger has observed, skepticism about rational belief is deeply disturbing because of its self-referential character—if true, it's not rational to accept.<sup>15</sup>

I think, however, we can accept this argument without adopting skepticism, doxastic coherentism, or infinitism. There is a fourth alternative to foundationalism that is plausible and solves the basic problem. In the following I explore a form of non-doxastic coherentism.

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<sup>15</sup> See Unger (1975).

## 2 Introducing Non-Doxastic Coherentism<sup>16</sup>

In this section I introduce non-doxastic coherentism. I begin with a discussion on the logical space of coherentism. I then discuss the nature of the coherence relation. Finally I discuss the role of experiences in a non-doxastic coherentist account.

### *A. The logical space of Coherentism*

Coherentism, as it has traditionally been formulated, is only one instance of a coherentist position. In complete generality the coherentist claims that a belief is justified iff it is a member of a coherent system. This general description leaves open differing interpretations on how this system is comprised. There are two general questions whose answers determine a specific kind coherentism. The first question is what kinds of things should be included in this system. Traditionally, it is assumed that only beliefs are within this system. But other answers are possible. The system may be comprised of, e.g., facts. This may not be very plausible. Another more plausible idea is that the system may be comprised of both beliefs and experiences. This will give us a non-doxastic form of coherentism.

A second question whose answer determines a specific kind of coherentism is what kind of access an individual should have to the items within the system. On one end of the continuum is the answer that the individual need have no access to the items of the system. This kind of coherentism would then include within the system all the facts or the beliefs of some ideal community or agent. On the other end of the continuum is the

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<sup>16</sup> This section is heavily influenced by a series of papers by Jonathan Kvanvig. See Kvanvig (1992), (1995a), (1995b), (1997), and (2003).

answer that the individual needs access to all the items of the system. This kind of coherentism would include within the system only those items a subject is consciously aware of.

The position I want to explore claims that the system includes all and only states with assertive, propositional contents whose contents are accessible to a subject. The particular system is that individuated by a person's beliefs and experiences. Moreover, the system includes contents that are stored in memory. For instance, contents about the color of your childhood home or about facts you learned in a college chemistry class are within the system, if they are somewhat readily accessible. Contents that are not readily accessible are not within a person's system and thus those contents do not affect the justification of a person's beliefs at a specific time.

It should be observed that the notion of accessibility is vague. Vagueness is not avoidable and thus an account that incorporates vague notions is not thereby invalidated. Bertrand Russell, for instance, observes that we need to admit vague notions in giving a correct account of knowledge. He thinks, for instance, that an account of derivative knowledge (i.e., inferential knowledge) needs to appeal to the notion of what is "discoverable."<sup>17</sup> Writing about the vagueness pertaining to what is discoverable, Russell claims

This renders our definition of derivative knowledge less precise than we could wish, since the word 'discoverable' is vague: it does not tell us how much reflection may be needed in order to make the discovery. But in fact 'knowledge' is not a precise conception: it merges into 'probable

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<sup>17</sup> Russell (1997), p. 134. Original 1912.

opinion'.... A very precise definition, therefore, should not be sought, since any such definition must be more or less misleading.<sup>18</sup>

Russell's point is about the vagueness pertaining to knowledge, but it holds also for justification. For instance, Russell's emphasis of what is discoverable is properly cast in terms of the conditions for justification. The justification one has for a belief depends on what is readily accessible to the subject. That an account appeals to vague notions seems, therefore, not an objection to it but a condition of adequacy for the account. As David Lewis is reported to have said: "the vagueness of the analysans reflects the vagueness of the analysandum. The account of non-doxastic coherentism I explore entails that a belief is justified for S iff it coheres with the assertive, propositional contents accessible to S. This system includes all and only the items an individual "has to go on." I refer to this system as an *intellectual perspective* or as an *informational system*.

One brief aside: The informational system, so described, will often have contradictions among its contents. For instance, I believe that there's no water on the road but my experience represents that there's water ahead. The resolution to this is to observe that, often, information comes flagged as to the modality. In the example above the content *there's water ahead* comes from the perceptual system and it conflicts with a content from the doxastic system. Since there are stronger reasons for the belief that there's no water on the road—it's a hot, dry day and illusions like this one occur often on days like this—the content from the perceptual system is not to be believed.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



Sometimes, though, the information loses its association with the relevant modality. In that case we may have a conflict between either two beliefs or a belief and a supposition. I don't remember for example if I saw Bill at the bar or just heard that Bill was at the bar. I do, however, believe that he was at home. Obviously, if I saw him then I should not believe he was at home, but if I merely heard that he was at the bar then it may be rational to dismiss that suggestion. In these kinds of cases suspension of judgment may be called for. The particulars of each case will depend on what other states surround the focal states.

*B. The nature of the coherence relation*

Another significant project for any version of coherentism is to characterize the coherence relation. What exactly is the coherence relation? At the outset we should not think that a failure to completely characterize the coherence relation is too damning an objection to coherentism. Why? Any reasonable epistemological account will include coherence as a kind of epistemic justification. A.C. Ewing claimed, for example, that coherence is a concept immanent in all our thinking.<sup>19</sup>

Roderick Chisholm, a paradigm foundationalist, claims that coherence—what he calls *concurrence*—is a source of epistemic justification. He writes, “a belief may derive its epistemic status from the way in which it logically *concurs* with the other thing one

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<sup>19</sup> Ewing (1934).

believes.”<sup>20</sup> We can utilize Chisholm’s cursory remarks on *concurrence* to indicate the general nature of coherence. *Chisholm* defines concurrence as follows:

*A* is a set of propositions that are *concurrent* for *S* =df *A* is a set of three or more propositions each of which is made probable for *S* by the conjunction of the others.<sup>21</sup>

It is helpful to say more about the coherence relation than just Chisholm’s definition of concurrence. Laurence Bonjour lays out five conditions for coherence in his classic *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*.<sup>22</sup>

- (A) A system of beliefs is coherent only if it is logically consistent.
- (B) A system of beliefs is coherent in proportion to its degree of probabilistic consistency.
- (C) The coherence of a system of beliefs is increased by the presence of inferential connections between its component beliefs and increased in proportion to the number and strength of such connections.
- (D) The coherence of a system of beliefs is diminished to the extent to which it is divided into subsystems of beliefs which are relatively unconnected to each other by inferential connections.
- (E) The coherence of a system of beliefs is decreased in proportion to the presence of unexplained anomalies in the believed content of the system.

The inclusion of Bonjour’s (A) raises the issue of whether consistency should be required for coherence. It seems that the answer is yes. Just as entailment is the limit of making probable so inconsistency is the limit of incoherence. This poses a problem for coherentism since it seems sometimes rational to have inconsistent beliefs. This problem was forcibly argued by Richard Foley.<sup>23</sup> The problem is this. We hold many beliefs about things that will not occur on the grounds that their occurrence is incredibly

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<sup>20</sup> Chisholm (1989), p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Bonjour (1985), pp. 95-99.

<sup>23</sup> See Foley (1993), chapter 4.

improbable. But we also believe that some one of these events will occur on the grounds that some one of these individually improbable events is bound to occur. This is the problem of the lottery paradox. A related problem has come to be known as the preface paradox. We believe a host of claims on the ground that they are individually very likely. But we also believe that some of these claims are bound to be false.

The lottery and preface paradoxes are problems for the coherentist because the beliefs are inconsistent and claimed to be rational. For concreteness consider a lottery with a 100 tickets. For each ticket,  $t_n$ , we believe  $t_n$  will lose. But we also believe some ticket will win. The contradiction is made explicit by forming a large conjunction of the individual ticket beliefs to get the belief, no ticket will win. But even apart from this explicit contradiction coherentists should feel uneasy about the original set of beliefs.

What is the correct response? There are three options: abandon coherentism, deny the data that inconsistent beliefs are rational, or claim that coherence is compatible with inconsistency. The first option does not solve the problem, since it is equally a problem for any viable epistemological theory. The second option is most plausible when cast in terms of the third response. For instance, it's not at all plausible that explicit contradictions are rational to believe. What is plausible is that one may rationally have inconsistent beliefs but not notice the inconsistency. In such a case it is no threat to the coherentist that one's beliefs are inconsistent. For instance, prior to learning that they are in fact inconsistent, it is rational believe general relativity and quantum mechanics even though it is known that the theories are incompatible with one another.

William Lycan has explored this option for the coherentist.<sup>24</sup> Lycan argues that a belief system can be inconsistent while still retaining a high degree of coherence.<sup>25</sup> Rationality can be maintained where the belief system can be compartmentalized. A subject may have two bodies of information, each of which rarely interact with one another, but both of which display a large degree of coherence. Furthermore, the inconsistency between the two sub-systems is not readily accessible to the subject. If it is only by taking a course in mathematical logic, for example, that one will discover the inconsistency then one's intellectual perspective is not irrational.

The key to this solution is to locate where on the continuum of access the inconsistency falls. For example, the lottery and preface paradoxes seem to illustrate the rationality of inconsistent beliefs prior to the discovery of the inconsistency. Once the subject discovers that she has inconsistent beliefs rationality requires that she give up those beliefs. This, however, does not constitute a major revision to her beliefs since the subject can weaken her earlier categorical belief to a high degree of belief. For example, when faced with the lottery paradox I surrender the belief that ticket  $t$  will not win and replace it with the belief that the probability that  $t$  will not win is  $(n-1)/n$  for all  $n$  tickets in the lottery.

So the upshot is that lottery and preface style prefaces do not threaten coherentism.

### *C. The epistemic role of experiences*

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<sup>24</sup> Lycan (1996).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

On the account I advocate one's intellectual perspective is comprised of one's beliefs and experiences and a belief's justification (or degree of justification) is determined by its coherence (or degree of coherence) with the non-question begging elements of the perspective. The qualification "non-question begging elements" is required since, trivially, every one of S's belief will be entailed by S's beliefs and experiences. The master argument I have defended implies that experiences themselves cannot justify belief apart from some other belief playing a justificatory role; for were experiences able to justify apart from belief, (F) would be true. One may then wonder how experiences play any justificatory role.

The account of experiential justification I endorse has been suggested by Jonathan Kvanvig in a series of articles.<sup>26</sup> Kvanvig utilizes J.L. Mackie's notion of INUS conditions. Mackie introduced these conditions to explain causation.<sup>27</sup> Kvanvig's idea is that experiences are INUS conditions for justification. An INUS condition for a belief's epistemic status is a condition that is an Insufficient but Nonredundant condition for a belief's epistemic status but also a part of a larger condition which is itself Unnecessary but Sufficient condition for a belief's epistemic status. On this conception one's intellectual perspective is an Unnecessary but Sufficient condition for a belief's epistemic status. Experiences are part of this intellectual perspective but they are Insufficient, Nonredundant conditions for a belief's epistemic status. A belief's justification may depend on one's having a particular experience and yet that experience is not a sufficient condition for that belief's justification.

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<sup>26</sup> See footnote 10 above.

<sup>27</sup> See Mackie (1974).

Permit me at this point to engage in a brief aside. Is non-doxastic coherentism compatible with the central foundationalist idea? If one understands the key foundationalist claim as I have given above the answer is no. Foundationalism, as I have characterized it, claims that some beliefs can be justified without receiving any support from any other beliefs. Another—looser—way of stating the foundationalist claim is that experience is a source of justification. The form of coherentism I advocate accepts this looser claim, if understood in terms of Kvanvig's INUS conditions. For instance, Earl Conee writes,

It may be that the only basic epistemic support relation is a sort of coherence that can hold both among beliefs in a system and between a system of beliefs and constraining experiences. If so, then the best theory of justification would combine the core of coherentism with the core of foundationalism and have it that a belief is epistemically justified exactly when it is in a coherent system that coheres with the person's experiences.<sup>28</sup>

Conee advocates here non-doxastic coherentism. I think that once a non-doxastic coherentist account is clearly formulated the initial attraction to foundationalism as a solution to the regress argument is diminished. It is often that the expansion of logical space itself provides reason to believe a new theory. I claim that non-doxastic coherentism has this advantage. If the reader disagrees, I turn to discuss some of the advantages of this form of coherentism. I begin by observing how this instance of coherentism escapes challenges to its doxastic variety.

### **3 Three traditional problems for Coherentism**

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<sup>28</sup> Conee, pp. 42-3. In Conee & Feldman (2004).

Discussions of coherentism have tended to focus on its doxastic incarnation. For instance, Richard Feldman characterizes coherentism as endorsing the thesis that “only beliefs can justify other beliefs.”<sup>29</sup> Feldman then assesses commitment to the following thesis:

CT: S is justified in believing p iff p coheres with S’s system of beliefs.<sup>30</sup>

This treatment of coherentism as doxastic coherentism is prevalent in the literature. See, for example, Ernest Sosa’s characterization of coherentism in the classical essay “The Raft and the Pyramid.” There Sosa writes,

By coherentism we shall mean any view according to which the ultimate sources of justification for any belief lie in relations among that belief and other beliefs of the subject: explanatory relations, perhaps, or relations of probability or logic.<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting that Sosa contrasts coherentism with the following view he calls “substantive foundationalism” which he characterizes as follows: “According to substantive foundationalism... there are ultimate sources of justification other than relations among beliefs.”<sup>32</sup> Since non-doxastic coherentism allows as an ultimate source of justification relations among beliefs and experiences, then on one reading of this nondoxastic coherentism would count as a form of substantive foundationalism!

The objections then leveled at coherentism in the context of the regress argument are leveled at doxastic coherentism. These problems are: the alternative coherent systems objections, the isolation (or input) objection, and—more generally—the problem of the

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<sup>29</sup> Feldman (2003), p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> Feldman, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Sosa (2000), p. 145.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

truth connection.<sup>33</sup> Let us briefly review these problems. I will argue in the context of each problem that nondoxastic coherentism avoids these troubling results.

#### A. The Alternative Coherent Systems Objection

The alternative coherent systems objection is that there are multiple—possibly infinite in number—different coherent informational systems. Let us assume further that the degree of coherence of a sizable number of these systems is fairly high and roughly similar. It seems that most any belief can be a member of one of these systems; and, therefore, most any belief can be justified. But surely—the objector continues—it's false that most any belief can be justified. After all the belief that the moon is made of cheese is unjustified and not possibly justified.

A related problem is that since there are many different coherent systems of belief, we cannot use the epistemic status of a system of beliefs to rationally choose—or prefer—one system of beliefs over another system. But, it is claimed, epistemology should give direction about which system of beliefs we should have.

One response to this problem is, *so what?* Consider the first problem. It's just false that the belief that the moon is made of cheese is not *possibly* justified. There's a possible world in which the moon is made of cheese and that we have excellent reasons for believing that. In such a world, the belief is justified. In fact, the truth of the belief is not required to make the point. Suppose that one's beliefs and experiences overwhelmingly indicate the belief is true. In that case the belief is rational. More

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<sup>33</sup> Bonjour gives the same list of problems in Bonjour (1985), pp. 106-110.



generally, we should be open to the claim that most any belief is *possibly* justified. If we consider how beliefs and experiences may change it is reasonable to suppose that most any belief is *possibly* justified.

Second, consider the other alleged problem, the problem that we cannot use the epistemic status of a coherent set of beliefs to choose among rival coherent sets. This is true, but how problematic is it? For starters we don't choose a set of beliefs. Rather we find ourselves with certain beliefs and experiences and then try to determine if we have good reasons for those beliefs and how we might improve our epistemic situation. Additionally, for any sane epistemological account, it will be a sober truth that more than one collection of beliefs is justified. We shouldn't expect then that an epistemological account will give direction for how to choose among rival sets of justified beliefs.

There's another way to run the objection. Suppose one was considering which of two rival sets to believe and both were equally justified, then one shouldn't believe either. So, if there are rival informational systems to your current intellectual perspective then your beliefs are not justified. This objection does not succeed. The first premise is true, but the conclusion doesn't follow. I may consider two rival informational systems whose justificatory status is the same and yet I believe a rival system to those two that is more justified than the others. In such a case my acceptance of my informational system is justified.

But doesn't the objection get a deeper problem? Isn't the problem that we can imagine rival informational systems equally justified to our own and thus we aren't

justified in accepting our system? This objection fails to note the role of *conservatism*.<sup>34</sup>

The non-doxastic coherentist theory I advocate includes a conservative element: a belief is *minimally* justified by our holding it. The justification that results from the conservative element is extremely slight. This justification can easily be lost and in a sense it is provisional. A belief's justification is enhanced by coherence within a system of contents.

With the conservative doctrine in place, this objection is no longer threatening. The rival informational systems conflict our justified acceptances. It would not be reasonable to abandon ship and adopt the rival perspective. Furthermore, it would not be reasonable to suspend judgment on the correctness of our own perspective.

The alternative coherent systems objection is therefore not a good objection to coherentism in any of its varieties.

## B. The Isolation (or Input) Objection

The Isolation objection comes in many forms. Earl Conee locates three separate arguments here: the multiplicity objection, the contradictory objection, and the sensational objection.<sup>35</sup> The central idea behind all forms of this objection the coherence of a system of beliefs cannot provide justification because the mere coherence of a system of beliefs is too detached from reality to provide justification.<sup>36</sup> I shall focus on what I take to be the main form of this objection, the input or sensational objection.

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<sup>34</sup> See Lycan (1996), pp. 5-8.

<sup>35</sup> See Conee "Isolation and Beyond" (1995).

<sup>36</sup> See Conee, p. 131.

Alvin Plantinga has pressed this objection against doxastic coherentism. He offers the case of the Epistemically Inflexible Climber as a counterexample. I quote at length since Plantinga puts this so wonderfully:

Consider the Case of the Epistemically Inflexible Climber. Ric is climbing Guide's Wall, on Storm Point in the Grand Tetons; having just led the difficult next to last pitch, he is seated on a comfortable ledge, bringing his partner up. He believes that Cascade Canyon is down to his left, that the cliffs of Mount Owen are directly in front of him, that there is a hawk gliding in lazy circles 200 feet below him, that he is wearing his new *Fire* rock shoes, and so on. His beliefs, we may stipulate, are coherent. Now add that Ric is struck by a wayward burst of high-energy cosmic radiation. This induces a cognitive malfunction; his beliefs become fixed, no longer responsive to changes in experience. No matter what his experience, his beliefs remain the same. At the cost of considerable effort his partner gets him down and, in a desperate last-ditch attempt at therapy, takes him to the opera in nearby Jackson, where the New York metropolitan Opera on tour is performing *La Traviata*. Ric is appeared to in the same way as everyone else there; he is inundated by wave after wave of golden sound. Sadly enough, the effort at therapy fails; Ric's beliefs remain fixed and wholly unresponsive to his experience; he still believes that he is on the belay ledge at the top of the next to last pitch of Guide's Wall, that Cascade Canyon is down to his left, that there is a hawk sailing in lazy circles 200 feet below him, that he is wearing his new *Fire* rock shoes, and so on. Furthermore, since he believes the very same things he believed when seated on the ledge, his beliefs are coherent. But surely they have little or no warrant for him.... Clearly... coherence is not sufficient for positive epistemic status.<sup>37</sup>

Plantinga's counterexample to doxastic coherentism is great, if only because of its vividness.

A doxastic coherentist may resist the conclusion that Ric's beliefs have little or no warrant. For, they may argue, there is no indication to Ric that his beliefs are false. This response, however, seems inadequate. The right response is to allow the content of one's

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<sup>37</sup> Plantinga (1993a), p. 82.

experiences to affect the coherence of one's informational system. If this is so, then Ric's beliefs are no longer coherent.

Richard Feldman claims, though, that this move concedes too much to the foundationalist. He writes,

Some defenders of coherentism might reply that one's beliefs *must* conform to one's experiences. ... However, if that is the case, then it turns out that a core element of foundationalism is right after all.... So if you reject this argument [the Isolation argument] against coherentism on these grounds, you seem to be appealing to a foundationalist idea."<sup>38</sup>

Feldman's claim here though seems wrong. First, we are not concerned with party alliances. Rather we are concerned with a correct account of empirical justification. If the correct account of empirical justification blends both foundationalist and coherentist ideas then so be it. Second—and more significantly—a substantive debate remains between non-doxastic coherentist and foundationalist. That debate is over the truth of (F), of whether some beliefs are non-inferentially justified. The move I recommend in response to Plantinga's objection does not show that (F) is true.

The input objection is not a good objection against non-doxastic varieties of coherentism.

### C. The Problem of the Truth Connection

The problem of the truth connection is the most problematic feature of doxastic coherentism. Both of the previous objections can be seen as special cases of this more general problem. This problem concerns the connection to truth. A theory of epistemic

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<sup>38</sup> Feldman (2003), p. 70.

justification should show how having justified beliefs makes it more likely than not that one's beliefs are true. Epistemic justification, in contrast to pragmatic justification, aims for truth. Since the coherentist identifies justification with coherence, it is imperative to show how having a coherent set of beliefs makes it likely that one's beliefs are true.

The problem of the truth connection is serious for any epistemological account. It is not a problem that is more severe for the coherentist than it is for an internalist version of foundationalism. For instance, consider some variety of classical foundationalism. How would the foundationalist handle this problem? In general, there are three options for solving this problem. Show that justification entails truth. Show that justification makes it probable that one's beliefs are true. Show that justification is an intentional means to getting truth. The first option is untenable since the classical foundationalism allows for uncertain inference, inference from the basic beliefs to the non-basic beliefs. The third option does not answer the main question. The main question is how justification increases the likelihood of truth. The third option refuses to answer that question and instead claims that justification is an intentional means—perhaps completely non-effective—for getting the truth. It is doubtful, therefore, that the third option will satisfy the foundationalist.

So the classical foundationalist needs to show how having justified beliefs makes probable that one's beliefs are true. If they can show this then they will have shown how justification increases likelihood of truth. This option, though, faces a problem. The problem is that most of the justified beliefs will be uncertain and thus it's possible to describe various skeptical scenarios that imply most of the justified beliefs are false. If

justification increases likelihood of truth then the classical foundationalist needs some reason to think that skeptical scenarios do not obtain. Such an argument will have to be *a priori*, since any *a posteriori* argument will have to make use of uncertain premises.

Thus the goal for a classical foundationalist aiming to answer the truth-connection problem is to give an *a priori* argument that it is unlikely that skeptical hypotheses obtain. To be clear the argument must show that it is *a priori* unlikely that our various experiences and beliefs are systematically false.

How should the argument proceed? By Bayes' Theorem the probability of a hypothesis conditional on some evidence is equivalent to unconditional probability of the hypothesis multiplied by the probability of the evidence given the hypothesis all divided by the unconditional probability of the evidence. In symbolic form

$$P(H/E) = P(H)P(E/H)/P(E)$$

Since the argument we are considering is entirely *a priori* in character the evidence will be the same for the various hypotheses. Furthermore, since we are imagining skeptical hypotheses the likelihood of the evidence given the various hypotheses will be approximately the same. Therefore the only factor remaining to determine the probability of the hypotheses conditional on the evidence is the unconditional probability of the hypotheses themselves. And the unconditional probability of the hypotheses is determined by the simplicity of the hypotheses. Thus the argument that justification increases likelihood of truth will have to shown that various skeptical hypothesis are *a priori* more complex than non-skeptical hypotheses.

Now that we see how such an argument must proceed let us ask whether the non-doxastic coherentist is in any worse position vis-à-vis the problem of the truth connection than the classical foundationalist. I think the answer is, No. The non-doxastic coherentist has roughly the same resources available as the classical foundationalist. The main difference between the two is that the coherentist eschews a privileged class of basic beliefs. But given the paucity of beliefs in that class, it is not likely that that will make much—if any at all—difference in replying to this problem. Therefore, I conclude that this problem—albeit serious—does not provide reason to prefer a non-coherentist theory over a coherentist account.

Nevertheless, one may wonder whether this problem is surmountable. Bonjour has defended a coherentist response to this problem, though it could equally be applied—*mutatis mutandis*—to an internalist foundationalism.<sup>39</sup> Bonjour defends the following argument:

**P1:** If a system of beliefs remains coherent (and stable) over the long run while continuing to satisfy the Observation Requirement, then it is highly likely that there is some explanation (other than mere chance) for this fact, with the degree of likelihood being proportional to the degree of coherence (and stability) and the longness of the run

**P2:** The best explanation, the likeliest to be true, for a system of beliefs remaining coherent (and stable) over the long run while continuing to satisfy the Observation Requirement is that (a) the cognitively spontaneous beliefs which are claimed, within the system, to be reliable are systematically caused by the sorts of situations which are depicted by their content, and (b) the entire system of beliefs corresponds, within a reasonable degree of approximation, to the independent reality which it purports to describe; and the preferability of this explanation increases in proportion to the degree of coherence (and stability) and the longness of run.

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<sup>39</sup> See Bonjour (1985), Chapter 8 “Coherence and Truth”.

Therefore,

**MJ:**<sup>40</sup> A system of beliefs which (a) remains coherent (and stable) over the long run and (b) continues to satisfy the Observation Requirement is likely, to a degree which is proportional to the degree of coherence (and stability) and the longness of the run to correspond closely to independent reality.<sup>41</sup>

The key premise of this argument is **P2** and the crucial plank of its defense is the claim that skeptical hypotheses are more complex than non-skeptical hypotheses. The justification for this claim is not easy and I shall not attempt to argue for it. The interested reader is hereby referred to Bonjour's exposition and defense of that claim (see pp. 179-188). In any event the problem of the truth-connection is not any more troubling for the coherentist than other kinds of epistemic internalists.

#### **4 The Positives of Nondoxastic Coherentism**

We have just seen that non-doxastic coherentism escapes three influential arguments against doxastic coherentism. Furthermore, we have seen that the regress argument is the primary reason to prefer foundationalism, a preference that rests in part on the implausibility of doxastic coherentism. Given that another variety of coherentism is available, if non-doxastic coherentism scores better than foundationalism with respect to our original problem then we have a good reason to prefer a nondoxastic coherentist theory of empirical justification. In the following I argue that non-doxastic coherentism upholds the two intuitive theses driving the main problem. I show that the ND-

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<sup>40</sup> MJ, presumably, for "meta-justification".

<sup>41</sup> Bonjour, (1985) pp. 170-1.



coherentist can accept that perception offers good reasons for belief and that perception can end the regress of reasons.

The basic problem we've seen is that theories of perceptual justification have difficulty maintaining that perception offers good reasons and yet it stops a vicious regress. A non-doxastic coherentist theory shows promise for solving this basic problem. The key move is the denial that justification proceeds in a linear fashion. Once we deny this assumption, we deny that justification is a two place relation between an experience and belief. This assumption was the key problem with the earlier theories we considered. For instance, on Russell's account a particular kind of experience—acquaintance—was claimed to provide justification for a belief. But either this experience didn't justify because it didn't involve a conscious realization of the object of the experience or it couldn't end the regress of reasons.

How does ND-coherentism solve the basic problem? First, the coherentist claims that only awareness of assertive propositional contents justifies. Perception, insofar as it justifies belief, involves awareness of the assertive propositional content. My perception of an oriental vase justifies my belief that there's an oriental vase only if I am consciously aware of there being an oriental vase.

The other advantage of nondoxastic coherentism is that it can uphold the foundationalist intuition that experience is a primary source of justification, which, I take it, is the plausible foundationalist claim with respect to the regress argument. It is reasonable that one of the main attractions to foundationalism is their commitment to experience as a justifier. Nondoxastic foundationalism captures this requirement by

holding that the assertive content of experience can justify belief by being an INUS condition. The content of experience plays a crucial role in the response to the regress problem; for the content of experience together with other holistic connections with belief ends the regress of reasons.

### **5 Is there an access problem for Nondoxastic Coherentism?**

Laurence Bonjour in his classic defense of Coherentism<sup>42</sup> describes a difficulty facing coherentism. The difficulty arises out the coherentist commitment to internalism. In Bonjour's case he criticizes externalist theories on the grounds that on such theories cognitive access to the justifier is not necessary. Bonjour, thus, recognizes that his form of coherentism needs to yield the result that a person has cognitive access to the justifiers. He writes,

The dialectical motive for coherentism depends heavily on the unacceptability of the externalist position.... It is thus crucially important that a coherentist view itself avoid tacitly slipping into a nonfoundationalist version of externalism. If coherentism is to be even a dialectically interesting alternative, the coherentist justification must, in principle at least, be accessible to the believer himself.<sup>43</sup>

He takes this to imply that a person needs a grasp of their entire system of beliefs, since the coherence of that system is a justifier.<sup>44</sup>

Bonjour describes the issue as follows:

According to a coherence theory of empirical justification... the epistemic justification of an empirical belief derives entirely from its coherence with the believer's overall system of empirical beliefs and not at all from any

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<sup>42</sup> Bonjour (1985)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>44</sup> See Ibid., pp. 101-106 on the Doxastic Presumption.

sort of factor outside that system. What we must not ask is whether and how the fact that a belief coheres in this way is cognitively accessible to the believer himself, so that it can give *him* a reason for accepting the belief.<sup>45</sup>

Bonjour claims that externalist versions of coherentism are possible on which the person need not have cognitive access to the coherence of his system. But Bonjour claims that such a view is unacceptable for the same reasons that externalist versions of foundationalism are unacceptable.<sup>46</sup>

Bonjour's own solution to this problem is not adequate. His solution involves positing the *Doxastic Presumption*, according to which one's grasp of one's system of beliefs is approximately correct.<sup>47</sup> Bonjour claims that the *Doxastic Presumption* is not justified. Rather he claims, "It is a characterization of something which is, from the standpoint of a coherence theory, a basic and unavoidable feature of cognitive practice."<sup>48</sup>

This is not adequate because it opens Bonjour's coherentism to a *tu quoque* argument from the foundationalist. The externalist foundationalist could argue for the *Reliability Presumption* according to which, from the standpoint of an externalist foundationalist theory, the posit that our basic faculties are reliable is a basic and unavoidable feature of cognitive practice. Furthermore, the internalist foundationalist could argue from the *Good Reasons Presumption* according to which, from the standpoint of an internalist foundationalist theory, the posit that perception gives us good

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 105 (see also p. 103).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

reasons for our empirical beliefs is a basic and unavoidable feature of cognitive practice. It is not clear that Bonjour can give any good reason for preferring the *Doxastic Presumption* over either the *Reliability Presumption* or the *Good Reasons Presumption*. The argument, therefore, for Coherentism begins to look dialectically unstable.

Does the account I have offered face a similar problem? Does the account of non-doxastic coherentism on which S's belief that p is justified iff it coheres with S's informational system falter on the same problem? No. The reason this account doesn't have this implication arises from the role on INUS conditions. The significance on INUS conditions is not to be underestimated. It allows an account of epistemic justification that combines the insights of internalist and externalist theories while also joining together what is plausible with regard to foundationalism and coherentism. The resulting account is interesting, if only for its place in logical space.

The problem with Bonjour's account of coherentism was that he endorsed an unrestricted access condition. He thus needed the Doxastic Presumption to satisfy that condition. In general, we can distinguish four claims about access (or awareness) conditions. The first two claims arise from the well-known distinction between strong & weak access.<sup>49</sup> A strong access condition requires that S's belief p is justified only if S is actually aware of the conditions that justify her belief. This is implausible since it generates a vicious regress of awarenesses. The weak access condition requires only that S is *possibly* aware of the conditions that justify her belief. This is an improvement but it

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Fumerton (1995) p. 63.

is not clear what force it has. Fumerton notes, for instance, that if the possibility is merely logical possibility (or even if it is nomological possibility) it may be consistent with externalist theories.<sup>50</sup>

The second two claims regarding the access condition arise from a distinction between unrestricted and restricted access. The unrestricted access condition holds that S's justification requires that S be aware (or merely potentially aware) of every condition that justifies her belief. The restricted condition holds that S's justification requires S be aware (or merely potentially aware) of only some conditions that justify her belief. The unrestricted access condition is implausible since some conditions, like the no-defeater condition, are justifiers of S's belief but S needn't have access (or potential access) to that condition.

An initial problem with the restricted condition is that there seems no clear distinction between which conditions one should be aware of and the conditions one needn't have awareness of. The non-doxastic coherentist account I offer has an advantage here—it can appeal to INUS conditions. The conditions one needs awareness of are the INUS conditions but one needn't have awareness of the entire system.

Bonjour's need to posit the *Doxastic Presumption* arises from his acceptance of the unrestricted access condition. Since the non-doxastic theory I offer denies that condition it needed advert to the *Doxastic Presumption* and other such machinations. In place of the unrestricted condition, ND-coherentism adopts the restricted access condition

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

on which S's belief that p is justified only if S is *actually* aware of the INUS conditions to the justification of S's belief.

It will be helpful to run this account through an example. Take my belief that there's a cup of Joe on the desk. This belief is justified because it coheres with my informational system. Moreover, I am aware of the INUS conditions for the justification of this belief. I am consciously aware of the experiential content *there's a cup of Joe*. It also coheres with contents I am consciously aware of (or could easily become consciously aware of). For instance, I am aware that I normally drink a cup of Joe when working in the morning, that I brewed some Coffee this morning, that my wife chided me for having hot coffee close to the computer, etc. In short, this content coheres with the rest of my information system.

Note two additional features of this account. First, it maintains the dialectical stability to criticize externalist accounts, since such accounts—insofar as they are objectionable—deny the restricted access condition. Second, it maintains the plausible internalist claim, since justification requires consciously taking into account features that indicate the truth of one's belief.

## **6. Conclusion**

Non-doxastic coherentism is a viable epistemological account. It avoids the problems associated with externalism and forms of internalism that adopt the unrestricted access condition. More significantly, non-doxastic coherentism resolves the basic problem of our investigation. It upholds the thesis that perception offers good reasons for

thinking that our empirical beliefs without succumbing to the fate that perception no longer plays a crucial role in responding to the regress argument. In this way I suggest we have the resources for responding to Sellars and Socrates. Perception gives us good reason to think that our empirical beliefs are mostly accurate. Moreover the verdicts of perception together with the coherence of one's informational system ends the regress of reasons.

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