

The Structure of Justification

Ali Hasan

Penultimate version

For the Blackwell Companion to Epistemology, 3rd edition, Sylvan et al. (eds.)

Virtually everyone agrees that any knowledge we have tends to come in bundles; no one knows just one thing and nothing else. The same seems true of justification, which is widely accepted as required for knowledge: no one has justification to believe just one thing and nothing else. But this leaves open exactly how our beliefs hang together, what relations must hold between them, what sort of structure must obtain, for any of them to count as known or even justified. It leaves open whether there are foundational or basic beliefs—roughly, beliefs that don't depend for their epistemic status on any other beliefs—and it leaves open what sorts of relations beliefs that are not basic must stand in to other beliefs in order for any of them to have positive epistemic status.

This chapter focuses on some relatively global or big-picture questions about structure, and specifically the structure of justification.¹ There are other important questions we might ask about justification, of course. For example, there are questions about the nature and strength of the *connection between justification and truth*. Epistemic justification seems to be intimately connected to truth or probability in a way that moral or practical justification need not be.² There are also questions about the *extent or contours of justification*—roughly, questions about the justificatory status of various actual and possible beliefs. Questions about structure are distinct from these other questions. Indeed, philosophers who agree about the structure of justification could disagree about these other questions, and those who agree about the truth-connection and/or the contours of justification could disagree about structure.

Still, it is difficult to get very far in debates about structure without running into these other sorts of questions. As we shall see, some of the most serious problems raised for each of the main views regarding the structure of justification (e.g., foundationalism, infinitism, coherentism), and many of the problems that figure in debates within each broad camp, have to do with the prospects of giving a plausible, defensible answer to questions about the contours of justification and the truth connection. This shouldn't be surprising. We want a theory that gets right which beliefs are or aren't epistemically justified—we don't want a view that makes

¹ For general overviews of different accounts of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and justification, see Steup and Neta (2020) and Ichikawa and Steup (2017). There is a related but different sense of "structure" in the debate over structural and substantive requirements of rationality; in that debate, structural rationality is (roughly) coherence, and substantive rationality is (roughly) responsiveness to reasons. For more on this debate, see Kiesewetter and Worsnip (2023).

² If having a belief would make me much happier or help me satisfy some of my moral obligations, that may give me a reason (a practical or moral one) to acquire such a belief. But that would not be an epistemic reason or provide epistemic justification to believe. What seems to be missing is some appropriate connection to the truth or probability of the belief.

justification implausibly hard or implausibly easy to achieve—and provides a good, illuminating explanation of these verdicts.

Our investigation of these debates will be presented at a relatively general level, to help give a sense of the lay of the land and some of the main advantages and disadvantages of various views regarding the structure of justification. Inevitably, this will mean that problems raised for particular views will be far from decisive, and only a few possible responses and developments can be considered.

In what follows, we'll examine different views of the structure of justification, investigating how well or poorly they seem to do on these fronts. We'll see that the need for a truth-connection raises problems for infinitism and coherentism; and that foundationalist attempts to incorporate a truth-connection make it difficult to get the contours of justification right. We'll end by briefly noting some challenges to finding a single sense of "foundational belief" defining the debate.

1. Foundationalism and the Regress Argument

You probably agree with me that at least some of our beliefs are justified, and so, that global skepticism is false. You probably also agree that many of these beliefs depend for their justification on other beliefs. For example, I am justified in believing that the local bank is closed today because I am justified in believing that today is Sunday and that banks are always closed on Sundays. The dependence seems to be inferential: my justification to believe that the bank is closed today depends on some inferential relation between this belief and the others.

But do all beliefs depend on other beliefs for their justification? Let a "foundational" or "basic" belief be any belief that is justified but does not depend essentially on any other beliefs for its justification; a non-basic justified belief does depend essentially for its justification on other beliefs.³ Note that the distinction just given says nothing explicit about *inference*. We can distinguish "non-inferentially justified beliefs", which are justified but do not depend essentially for their justification on any (actual or available) *inference* from other beliefs, and "inferentially justified beliefs", justified beliefs that do depend essentially for their justification on (actual or available) *inference* from other beliefs. Epistemologists often seem to assume that any justified belief that is not inferentially justified is basic, or equivalently, that any non-basic justified belief is inferentially justified. I will assume, for now, that this is right, though we'll later see that matters are more complicated.

According to foundationalism, any justified belief must either be a basic, non-inferentially justified belief or, if it is non-basic, it must depend for its justification on other beliefs which must themselves be justified, with this regress of justification terminating, sooner or later, with basic beliefs. The foundationalist is also committed to the existence or availability of at least

³ We can leave open whether one and the same belief can be basic or foundational in this sense while also having justification from other beliefs; it's justification would be overdetermined.

some basic beliefs. These basic beliefs serve as a kind of “foundation” for the edifice of knowledge or justified belief.

Foundationalists have traditionally utilized some version of the regress argument in defense of their view:

1. Any justified belief must either be basic or non-basic.
2. If a justified belief is non-basic, it must be justified by inference or by inferential relations, and either:
 - a. the inference terminates with beliefs that are not themselves justified;
 - b. each belief relied upon in the inference requires some further inference from other beliefs for its justification, *ad infinitum*;
 - c. the inference is circular, so that the justified belief appears ultimately as a premise in its own justification; or
 - d. the inference terminates with beliefs that are basic.
3. Unjustified beliefs (a) cannot provide justification.
4. A circular inference (b) cannot provide justification.
5. An infinite regress (c) cannot provide justification.
6. Therefore, any justified belief must either be basic, or depend for its justification on an inference that terminates with beliefs that are basic.

So far, the argument supports the foundationalist’s thesis that *if* any belief is justified, then it must be either basic or depend ultimately on basic beliefs. To get the conclusion that there are some basic beliefs, the argument might continue:

7. Some beliefs are justified.
8. So, there are some basic beliefs.

The argument is an argument by elimination, ruling out each of the options mentioned under premise 2 except for the last.

2. Garbage in, Garbage out

Consider option (a). This position is so unpopular that it doesn't have a common name, but I will call it "garbage foundationalism".⁴ Of course, if a belief is unjustified then it doesn't make sense to ask what justifies it. But why should we think that unjustified beliefs can provide justification? This seems to make justification rather arbitrary, resting on a foundation of epistemic garbage. It seems possible to justify any belief that *P* of mine if all I need is some other belief that lacks justification and that obviously entails (or makes probable) that *P*. I might believe that aliens have abducted me on the basis of my belief that aliens have abducted all humans over six feet tall and my belief that I am a human over six feet tall. But if I am not justified in my belief that aliens have abducted all humans over six feet tall, then it surely cannot provide any justification that I've been abducted. This would make justification too easy, allowing beliefs that are quite arbitrary, dogmatic, products of wishful thinking, and so on to be justified. Garbage foundationalism thus seems to have implausible implications, implications that get the contours of justification horribly wrong.

A deeper, underlying concern seems to be the lack of an appropriate truth-connection. There is no reason to think that an inferred proposition is true or likely when there is no reason to think that what it is inferred from is true or likely.⁵ To treat an unjustified belief as a good stopping point, providing reasons or grounds justifying other beliefs, is analogous to the mistake of taking the logical validity of an argument to be sufficient for the truth of its conclusion.

3. Infitism

The second response (b) is to accept infinitism. It might be motivated by the desire to avoid the apparent arbitrariness of garbage foundationalism. Justification requires having reasons, and having reasons—for the infinitist—requires other supporting beliefs. A belief can be justified only by an infinite inferential regress of (non-repeating) supporting beliefs.

A common initial objection to infinitism is that it requires something beyond the capacities of finite beings like us: an infinite number of supporting beliefs, each of which is a belief with a different propositional content. Some infinitists reply that it is not required that we actually have infinitely many supporting beliefs, only that they be available to one—roughly, that one would be disposed on reflection to believe or endorse each of the infinitely many supporting propositions. Consider the proposition that $1,027,903 - 13 = 1,027,890$, or that *bananas are not carburetors*. You now believe it, but before actually considering it you didn't—though you did already believe, for example, that you are human. You were, however, already *disposed to believe* that $1,027,903 - 13 = 1,027,890$ and that *bananas are not carburetors*, and you didn't have to acquire any new information to believe it. It is plausible that there are infinitely many

⁴ Some accounts allow a propositional attitude like belief or acceptance to provide justification without being justified, provided it enjoys some other positive status, like "entitlement." For example, see Crispin Wright's entitlement theory (2004).

⁵ There are very special cases that are exceptions, such as the belief that one believes something.

propositions that we are at least disposed to believe, in a sense that implies that we would believe them if we considered them.

Another objection is sometimes referred to as the *reductio argument* against infinitism (Klein 1999, Oakley 2019). For any proposition—and so also for the negation of any proposition—there are many other, non-repeating propositions (or sets of propositions) that entail it. If justification required only that there be an infinite regress of other propositions supporting (entailing or making probable) what one believes, then any given proposition would be justified for one, and so would its negation. But this is absurd.

Infinitists themselves recognize this and respond that additional conditions are needed to restrict what can be justified, e.g., conditions to the effect that the reasons have to be “available” to the subject, or that they have to be “properly hooked up with [the subject’s] own beliefs” (Klein 1999: 300). Note that the availability requirement has to be weak or minimal enough that it applies to infinitely many supporting propositions for any justified belief, while being strong or demanding enough to rule out that just about any proposition is going to be justified. A natural account, already suggested by the reply to the finite-mind objection, is to understand the availability to subject S of a proposition R as a reason for P in terms of S’s being disposed to believe or endorse the proposition and appeal to it in defense of P, at least under some appropriately restricted or idealized circumstances. Roughly, only propositions that S would endorse and appeal to in support of P, at least if given enough time to reflect, can be reasons available to S for believing P.

A more serious problem is that the infinitist’s conditions for justification are not appropriately connected to the truth. Indeed, infinitism seems vulnerable to the sorts of worries that came up for what we called garbage foundationalism. We are supposed to think that somehow by moving from the finite case to the infinite case we can avoid the arbitrariness of stopping with some belief that is not itself justified. But when the infinite series just consists of more beliefs or dispositions to believe, there is no reason to think that arbitrariness is avoided. There is, after all, nothing about the mere addition of more beliefs, even beliefs whose contents entail the beliefs we already have, that makes it more likely that they are true.⁶ At the end of the day, the account’s conditions bring us no closer to truth than does garbage foundationalism. We’ve merely replaced a belief that is arbitrary from the epistemic point of view with an infinite series of beliefs that are no less arbitrary as a whole.

This problem is related to the *conditional justification problem* (Dancy 1985, Fumerton 1995, and Ginet 2005). According to some critics of infinitism, justification by inference is conditional justification only, which is really no justification at all. When I infer P from Q, justification for P depends on my having prior justification for Q. But with infinitism, there is no end to this epistemic dependence. Just as nothing can be instrumentally or conditionally valuable unless

⁶ It may make it more likely that the proposition *I have such-and-such beliefs* is true, but the same doesn’t hold for most other beliefs.

something is intrinsically valuable, nothing can be conditionally justified unless there is something that is unconditionally justified.

Klein (2005) responds to the conditional justification problem by rejecting the analogy to instrumental value: *justification* is not strictly *transferred or inherited* at all; it is not *conditional* in the sense of depending on the prior justification of other beliefs. Rather, justification supervenes on the whole infinite series, “emerging” from or depending on the structure of the whole rather than being transferred. Even if this makes sense, and so avoids the conditional justification problem, it doesn’t help with the worry that there is no epistemically relevant connection to the truth. For whether we conceive of the structure of justification as a matter of transference or emergence, there is nothing about the psychological availability of an infinite inferential regress of supporting propositions that makes the supported proposition more likely to be true.

Some readers might begin to worry that the conception of the appropriate connection to truth at work here is too strong. One way to push this is to complain that it runs up against the “New Evil Demon Problem” (Cohen 1984). A brain in a vat, or the victim of an evil demon, might be internally just like you in all respects, having all the same beliefs and other mental states. Intuitively, their beliefs are just as justified as yours, even though none of their beliefs—at least beliefs in contingent propositions about the external world—are true or even probable in any objective sense. At least for those who accept the “internalist” intuition that justification depends essentially and only on what is internal to the mind, the truth-connection must be of a subjective sort. The most that can be required, one might think, is that the belief be true or probable *from the subject’s perspective*.

But how, on the infinitist view, is this requirement satisfied? It won’t do to simply add that if any belief that *P* is justified then the belief that *P is true* is justified as well—that’s too trivial (Cohen 1984). Perhaps one must believe (or be disposed to believe) that one has such and such beliefs, and that these beliefs are probable or that they tend to be formed in a reliable, truth-conducive way. The general idea is to introduce meta-beliefs about the truth, probability, or reliability of one’s beliefs. And the infinitist would presumably require that these meta-beliefs be justified, and so require the availability of an infinite, non-repeating regress of beliefs supporting *them*. This might invite charges of *over-intellectualization*: it seems to require a relatively high level of cognitive sophistication, and so make justification implausibly hard to get for young children, and arguably even adults. Indeed, since the requirement that one believe that one’s beliefs are reliable applies to the meta-belief itself, we must have available to us meta-meta-beliefs, and meta-meta-meta beliefs, with increasingly more complex beliefs at every level. It’s not clear that, even a few steps up, we are capable of even holding such beliefs.

A second worry with the attempt to capture the truth-connection through a meta-belief requirement is that any addition to the set of supporting propositions one is disposed to endorse will just be exactly that—*more beliefs or dispositions to believe*. If we were already convinced that having a belief or disposition to believe directed at a single proposition gives one no reason to take other propositions entailed by it to be true, and convinced that adding an

infinity of supporting beliefs does no better, why should the mere availability of a higher-order proposition to the effect that one's first-order beliefs are reliable or likely to be true provide any such reason? Compare: piling on more and more valid arguments brings one not an inch closer to the truth; and adding more and more valid arguments to the effect that the first-order arguments are sound brings one no closer to the truth.

The infinitist might stipulate that the propositions have to be true in order to count as reasons—or, more plausibly, require that the propositions tend to be true, that they would not be believed or endorsed on reflection if they were false, or some condition of the sort.⁷ But that seems *ad hoc*, unconnected in any clear way with the infinitist account. In any case, now we seem to have a mixed, impure sort of infinitism that takes justification to depend *in part* on relations to things other than beliefs available to the subject, and those relations are relevant to the truth-connection.

4. Coherentism

The third option (c) seems no better, for a circular inference is obviously vicious: I cannot rely, even in part, on a belief in a proposition in order to justify a belief in the same proposition! A few might bite the bullet here and claim that circles are not necessarily bad, at least if the circle is big enough. More plausibly, coherentists tend to object that the regress argument illegitimately assumes that justification must be linear and one-directional. The justification of our beliefs might have to do with how they hang together, how well they cohere with other beliefs, where beliefs do not need to depend on any privileged foundation of beliefs for their justification. Having many beliefs that cohere are justified not because they allow for larger circles but because of the greater mutual support or coherence that they enjoy.

A coherentist account needs to clarify the notion of coherence at work here. Mere consistency seems much too weak; beliefs might after all be consistent merely because they have nothing to do with each other (e.g., my belief that $5+7=12$ and that apples grow on trees), and that is not sufficient for justification. Moreover, we want to be able to make sense of coherence as coming in degrees, and mere consistency doesn't allow us to do that.⁸ Requiring that every belief entail and be entailed by others is too strong. My belief that the streets are wet, that the forecast called for rain, and that I heard a thundering sound earlier are coherent (in a sense that goes beyond consistency) even though there are no entailments between them. The coherentists might emphasize non-deductive (explanatory or inductive) relations between one's beliefs, and not require entailment. Some might also take some inter-level relations to be relevant (e.g., there's a kind of coherence between a first order belief and a second order belief that this belief is rational or justified). The general idea is that the greater the density of (non-

⁷ See for example Klein (1999), who rejects any requirement of meta-beliefs but does require the "objective availability" of reasons.

⁸ Consistency is arguably also too strong. See Foley (1979).

trivial?) deductive and non-deductive connections between beliefs, the greater the coherence, and so the greater their justification.⁹

Like infinitism, however, a major worry with coherentism is its difficulty with the truth-connection. One way the worry is expressed is by noting that there is no epistemic role assigned to experience or observation, nothing to anchor one's beliefs to the way things actually are. A web of beliefs could be entirely coherent and yet be completely isolated from the world, and even from any sensory experience. Why, then, should we think that it provides any justification for the way the world, or even merely our experience of it, actually is? Some coherentists have attempted to accommodate a role for experiences or observations by emphasizing that experiential or perceptual *beliefs* can enter into relations of coherence with other beliefs; these perceptual beliefs may depend *causally* (at least in part) on our sensory or perceptual experiences, but they do not depend on non-belief states for *justification*. (See, for example, Bonjour 1985, Ch. 6.) The underlying worry about a truth-connection remains, however. Nothing about a coherent web of beliefs is essentially connected to their truth or accuracy about the external world or even to our own non-doxastic experiences.

As already discussed in connection with infinitism, coherentists might complain that the objection demands too much, requiring a connection with the external world that violates internalist intuitions. At most, we should require a subjective connection to the truth or probability of one's beliefs. The coherentist might require, for example, that the subject have meta-beliefs to the effect that one has beliefs that satisfy certain properties (cohering with other beliefs, having certain kinds of contents, etc.), and that such beliefs are reliably produced or likely to be true.

The two problems raised for the infinitist seem to apply here as well. First, this seems to overintellectualize justification and make it implausibly hard. The subject will need these meta-beliefs, meta-beliefs that will presumably need to cohere with other beliefs. These meta-beliefs will themselves need to satisfy the requirement of a truth-connection, and so we will need to have meta-meta-beliefs about them, and so on, leading to a hierarchical regress of increasingly complex beliefs. Second, and more fundamentally, any such meta-belief added to the coherent set of beliefs will be just that—another belief. If we were already convinced that having a belief directed at a single proposition doesn't improve one's perspective on its truth or the truth of anything it entails, why should the addition of more beliefs, including higher-order beliefs about the reliability or coherence of one's beliefs, provide any such reason? Recall the analogy with arguments: it doesn't matter how (deductively) valid or (inductively) strong the connections between various claims; drawing more and more implications does nothing to improve one's connection to the truth. Analogously, the addition of more beliefs standing in deductive, inductive, explanatory, inter-level, or other coherence-constituting connections to other beliefs does not improve one's connection to the truth.

⁹ See Olsson (2021) for more on how to understand "coherence".

5. Foundationalism and the Argument from Examples

While the regress argument is probably the most commonly repeated argument for the view, foundationalism is sometimes also defended by appeal to examples (Pryor 2005, BonJour 1995, Ch. 4, and Howard-Snyder 2020). The argument from examples is a defense of the claim that basic beliefs exist by providing, or directing one's attention to, plausible candidates. Pryor thinks it is a better "argument for immediate justification" than the regress argument for foundationalism, in part because the latter has "the same weakness as any argument by elimination: everything turns on whether the rejected options are really untenable" (Pryor 2005: 184).

Suppose I feel tired, or have a headache. I am justified in believing I feel those ways. And there do not *seem* to be any other propositions that mediate my justification for believing it. What would the other propositions be? [Pryor 2005: 184]

This and other examples Pryor gives are examples of basic beliefs of a broadly *a posteriori* (specifically, introspective) sort. We can also add some *a priori* examples (e.g., see BonJour 1995, Ch. 4). Two marbles are twice as many as one. Triangles are trilateral. Anything that is actual is possible. There do not seem to be any other propositions that mediate my justification for believing these propositions. Indeed, for many of these examples, it's hard to see *what* the other propositions would be. One could, of course, come up with other propositions which entail or make probable some of these propositions, propositions that we also believe or would believe on reflection. But it is highly doubtful that we ever rely on them.

The appeal to examples is limited in a way: the foundationalist is not just committed to the existence of some examples of basic beliefs, but also to the claim that any non-basic belief must depend for its justification, ultimately, on basic beliefs. The foundationalist might rely on both arguments together—the appeal to examples, and the regress argument—to defend this pair of claims.

6. Taking It Easy

We defined basic belief negatively, in terms of what it doesn't depend on (other beliefs), and this doesn't tell us what it does depend on, or in virtue of what it is justified. What more is there to say?

Begin with the view, sometimes called doxastic conservatism, according to which the mere fact that S believes P gives S some (at least defeasible) justification for the belief. The main worry with this view is that it makes justification much too easy; it seems that any belief whatsoever could be foundationally justified.¹⁰ Moreover, and more fundamentally, there is no clear, non-trivial connection between the satisfaction of the conditions for justification—having a belief in

¹⁰ Though see McCain (2008) for a defense of doxastic conservatism against this and similar concerns.

the absence of conflicting or defeating beliefs—and the truth of the belief. There is no objective truth-connection: for virtually all the propositions we believe, the mere fact that we believe them doesn't make them true or even probable.¹¹ And there is no non-trivial subjective truth-connection: of course, in believing that *p*, I take *p* to be true or am committed to its truth in some sense, but why should that improve my perspective on whether *p* is indeed true?

Most foundationalists are not doxastic conservatives. They hold that something further, beyond the belief, is needed. In the vicinity of doxastic conservatism is a view that might take the fact that one has some *non-doxastic* states to make a difference to justification, but where these states are still propositional or representational, having the same or relevantly similar content as the belief, as the ultimate source of justification. According to phenomenal conservatism, for example, my belief that I have a hand might be justified by its seeming or appearing to me that I have a hand.

Is this an improvement over doxastic conservatism? Such states might provide justification *if the subject has some reason to think they are true or accurate*, but absent this, why should they make a difference? Why would having a mere appearance that *P* provide justification, though having a mere belief that *P* does not? Note that it's not enough to say that beliefs admit of justification but non-doxastic experiences do not, and so there's no worry about a regress involving experiences. This does not help explain why states that could easily be false or inaccurate would provide the subject with a reason for thinking that the beliefs with corresponding or similar contents are true.

One way to secure a robust truth-connection is to adopt an "externalist" version of foundationalism, for example, one that requires that one's belief be formed by a reliable or truth-conducive process or faculty, or that one's belief be safe from error, and drops any requirement to the effect that the subject must have access to some reason or evidence in favor of the belief.¹² One cost, however, is that this view conflicts with the new evil demon intuition that there can be no difference in justification where there is no difference in the subject's perspective on the truth. If justification requires that one's beliefs be formed in a reliable or truth-conducive way, a person's beliefs about the external world can go from being justified to unjustified and back again without any change in any of their actual or accessible conscious states or experiences, or indeed any change in internal states at all.

Many externalists accept this consequence. They might argue that the intuition that a change in justification requires a change to the first-person perspective is a confusion, or that it makes justification implausibly difficult to achieve (e.g., Goldman 1999, Bergmann 2006). Externalist foundationalists will point out that they can reject skepticism easily, like the appearance views just discussed, but do so without sacrificing an objective truth-connection.

¹¹ There are some exceptions, such as the belief that I have some beliefs.

¹² See Goldman (1979) for a classic defense of reliabilism, and Sosa (1999) for a defense of the safety condition.

Some worry, however, that all these forms of foundationalism make gaining justification way too easy. For example, one might form the belief that the table is red on the basis of an appearance of a red table, and infer that it is not a white table that is illuminated by red lights. Phenomenal conservatism would have to accept that the belief that it is not a white table illuminated by red lights is justified (assuming the subject has no reason to think something funny is going on). A reliabilist would have to say the same if the belief that there is a red table present is the result of a reliable perceptual processes. Cohen (2002), among others, have found this to be an intuitively implausible result.

7. From Too Easy to Too Hard?

Is there a form of foundationalism that can accommodate a truth connection that is both objective and subjective, that has both a strong connection to the truth while also tying justification to the first-person perspective? Consider a foundationalism of a traditional sort according to which a belief can be justified by the subject's being in a special kind of non-doxastic state, a state of direct awareness of or "acquaintance" with some fact that makes the belief true.¹³ This state of awareness is partly constituted by the fact itself, and so one cannot be in the very same state without the fact existing. This view accommodates an objective connection to the facts at the foundational level, while also accommodating a difference in the subject's perspective. Indeed, the difference in the subject's perspective afforded by direct awareness secures the connection to the truth of one's beliefs.

It may be useful to contrast this direct awareness with a belief in a proposition that is necessarily true. I might happen to believe something that is necessarily true, like the Pythagorean theorem, but this doesn't seem to make the belief justified. Externalists might explain that the problem is that the belief was not formed in a reliable way, a way that is sensitive to the truth or safe from error. Other foundationalists would explain the problem in terms of the subject's lack of the relevant intuitive, but possibly false, appearances. The awareness foundationalist can say that the problem is that a subject's unwittingly believing something that happens to be necessarily true, is formed in a reliable way, etc., makes no difference to the subject's perspective on its truth. And the connection to the truth that awareness secures is clearer and much stronger than that provided by a mere appearance. A belief in a propositional content that happens to be true is not constituted by its being true or by any facts that make it true; a state of awareness of some fact *is* constituted by that very fact.

We can get very different versions of the view depending on how one answers such questions as: Is the *relation* of awareness or acquaintance that one stands in to something else representational or not?¹⁴ What sorts of things can be the object or target of this awareness? Can we be aware of particulars, properties, states of affairs, or facts? Some or all of the above?

¹³ See Hasan and Fumerton (2020) for more on acquaintance theories.

¹⁴ Traditional acquaintance theories take these states of awareness to be non-representational. Others might take them to be non-doxastic *representational* states, but "factive" ones (guaranteed to be true). See, for example, Silva (2023) and Silva's chapter in this volume.

Do we have awareness only of the internal domain (mental states, their properties, and/or purely internal facts about them)? Can we have awareness of external objects or events and facts about them? Can we be aware of logical relations like entailment? Probabilistic relations?

All such views give a similar response to the truth-connection question, one that invokes the idea that the relevant states of awareness are constituted in part by a real relation to something else. Questions of scope or extent—how easy or hard it is to get justification, whether the account has strongly skeptical implications, and so on—will depend in part on what sorts of things one can or cannot be directly aware of. Other things being equal, the more limited the richness and variety of objects of awareness, the more difficult it will be to avoid strongly skeptical consequences. For example, the common worry with a Humean or classical foundationalist view that says we can only be aware of our own “ideas” or impressions and analytic or trivially necessary “relations of ideas” is that these resources are too poor or weak to justify belief in mind-independent objects.

On the other hand, the view that we can be directly aware of external physical objects or facts, that some of our states of awareness are literally constituted by things outside the mind, faces significant challenges of its own. *Phenomenologically*, it seems I could hold fixed what I am perceptually aware of and easily imagine, without difficulty, that there is no external object corresponding to *it*. Moreover, reflection on the possibility of illusions and hallucinations can highlight how difficult it is to make sense of the idea that you can be directly *aware* of (for example) *a round tomato* in the good, veridical case but not the bad hallucinatory case, even though your experiences are indistinguishable to you from the first-person perspective, and even if everything going on in your organs and nervous system is exactly the same.¹⁵ Views that are committed to awareness of universals, logical relations, and probabilistic relations, might help us make sense of the difference between justified and unjustified inference (see the next section) and strengthen our ability to avoid skepticism without requiring direct awareness of the external physical world. But they may face similar phenomenological and theoretical worries of their own.¹⁶

Thus, while awareness-foundationalist views seem able to secure a truth-connection that is both objective, connected to reality, and subjective, making a difference to one’s perspective on the truth, it is challenging to defend a version of the view that avoids radical skepticism (doesn’t make justification implausibly hard) while also providing a phenomenologically and theoretically plausible view of the nature of the mind and its relation to the world.

8. Justified Inference and More Regresses

Suppose that I am justified in believing that P, from which I infer and come to believe Q. My justification for believing in Q depends on my justification for believing P, but doesn’t it also depend on my justification *for the inference*? Surely it is not enough that P just happens to

¹⁵ See Hasan (2017, Ch. 3) for a discussion of these problems.

¹⁶ See Hasan and Fumerton (2020) for some elaboration on the advantages and disadvantages of these views.

entail Q—it must in some sense be a good, reasonable, or competent inference. But what does this involve?

Some epistemologists (e.g., Fumerton 1995) have been tempted to accept, as a general principle of inferential justification, that S can have justification for any given belief Q by inference from, or on the basis of, belief P only if (i) S has justification for P, and (ii) S has justification for believing that P entails or makes probable Q.

(i) is widely accepted – to deny that it is required is to accept what I called garbage foundationalism. But what about (ii)? One might think that the requirement is incoherent (e.g., Huemer 2002). If to be justified in believing Q by *inference from P*, you have to be justified in believing something else (*P makes probable Q*), then doesn't it seem that believing Q isn't really justified inferentially by P after all, but by the conjunction of P and *P makes probable Q*? It should be clear that this is incoherent, since it amounts to saying that inferring Q from one proposition requires inferring it from that proposition and something more. And you can easily see that this will lead to the sort of regress famously discussed by Lewis Carroll (1895): one would need not only the premise [P & [P makes probable Q]], but also [[P & [P makes probable Q]] makes probable Q], and [[[P & [P makes probable Q]] makes probable Q]] makes probable Q], and so on.

A defender of the principle might claim that (ii) should be understood as justifying the *inference* from P to Q itself, and not as an additional required premise for the inference to Q. This avoids the incoherence and the related Lewis-Carroll style regress. If this is all that is said, however, it is rather *ad hoc*. Why give this belief a special role in inferential justification, but not as a premise?

One might worry that the principle leads to another ugly regress that can't be avoided by the apparently *ad hoc* move just mentioned, a regress that is similar to the regress of meta-beliefs for infinitism and coherentism. In order to be justified in believing that *P makes probable Q*, it seems I would need to infer that from some other belief that R. But then, wouldn't I also need to have justification for thinking that *R makes probable that (P makes probable that Q)*? And to have justification for thinking that, wouldn't I need to infer it (or at least be able to infer it) from some further reason R*, which would require in turn that I have justification for thinking that *R* makes probable that (R makes probable that (P makes probable that Q))*? This seems to lead to an infinite regress of ever more complicated propositions.

But the regress is not forced. A foundationalist can allow that some connecting beliefs of the form *P makes probable Q* can be basic or foundationally justified, and so don't require further justification by inference from other beliefs. The belief might be justified by some nondoxastic state or process—for example (a) by some *non-doxastic* awareness or grasp, or an appearance or seeming perhaps, of the probability relation between P and Q; or (b) by some reliable belief-forming process.

Once we see this, however, we might consider rejecting condition (ii) of the principle. We might require that one infer Q from P *competently*, where this does not involve or depend on having

justification for belief in the connection. Justifiedly inferring *Q* from *P* might depend, for example, on grasping the connection between them. Or it might depend on a belief-forming process that is “conditionally reliable” or truth-preserving, in the sense that it tends to yield true beliefs when the inputs are true (Goldman 1979).

9. Defining “Foundational”

So far, I have been using “basic belief” and “non-inferentially justified belief” interchangeably. But I want to briefly discuss a problem with this picture. Perhaps there can be a kind of *epistemic dependence* between beliefs that is *non-inferential*. On some views, an introspective belief about one’s own occurrent belief—e.g., my belief that *I believe that I am seated*—depends *for its justification* on one’s *having* a first-order belief with the relevant content. Still, it doesn’t depend *inferentially* on the first-order belief. Indeed, at least some who are inclined to treat introspective beliefs about our own experiences (e.g., the belief that I feel thirsty) as “basic” might treat beliefs about our own occurrent or conscious beliefs as similarly “basic”, holding that neither depends on inference (e.g., BonJour 1999). Notice that the introspective belief does not depend for its justification on the *epistemic status* of the first-order belief; it doesn’t depend on whether or not the first-order belief is *justified*. Indeed, it is not even a necessary condition of one’s being justified in the meta-belief that the first-order belief be justified. There is thus no need to wonder, in examining a subject’s justification for the meta-belief, whether the first-order belief is justified. There thus seems to be conceptual space for a belief to be basic in the sense of not depending, for its justification, on one’s *justification* for other beliefs, while still depending, for its justification, on other beliefs.

A related complication is that some reliabilist views might be committed to allowing some beliefs to depend on the justificatory status of other beliefs, even when the relation between the beliefs doesn’t seem to be *inferential* at all. For example, perhaps a memorial belief depends on a prior perceptual belief for its justification. To capture both the sense in which such a belief is non-basic, while also treating the introspective meta-belief discussed above as basic, perhaps we should define a basic belief as one that does not depend for its justification on the *epistemic or justificatory status* of another belief.

There is a further complication, however. Many coherentists would insist that the kind of epistemic dependence that a belief has on the coherent web to which it belongs is also non-inferential, at least in two related senses: it does not depend on inferential relations conceived as *linear, one-directional*, relations; and the belief does not inherit its justification from other beliefs that already have it, but rather, all beliefs inherit their justification from the structure of the whole set. The holistic infinitist (like Klein) would agree with the second point. If we understand foundationalism as the view that there are some beliefs that don’t depend for their justification on the *justificatory status* of other beliefs, the coherentist and infinitist would emerge as a kind of foundationalist; justification for them depends on relations to other beliefs,

but not on some *prior justification* that other beliefs have.¹⁷ Paradigm foundationalists would deny that any justification is acquired purely from the fact that one's belief set is coherent, and so deny that there are any non-inferentially justified beliefs of this kind.

Suppose we understand inferential relations in a broad way, so that we leave open whether they are one-directional or asymmetric, and allow the relevant relations that contribute to coherence between beliefs to count as broadly "inferential" in nature. The foundationalist-coherentist debate might then be understood as a debate about whether any belief could be justified without depending on any broadly inferential relations to other beliefs (or dispositions to believe). The coherentist and infinitist insists that all beliefs so depend; the foundationalist denies it. At the same time, we should remember that some paradigm foundationalists (e.g., reliabilists) allow that some beliefs might not depend on *inferential* relations at all, and yet depend on the justificatory status of other beliefs.

There is thus no single, simple way to characterize the foundationalist-coherentist-infinitist debate. We should distinguish conceptually between three importantly different senses of "foundational belief": (i) a belief that does not depend for its justification on any other beliefs, (ii) a belief that does not depend for its justification on one's *justification* for any other beliefs, and (iii) a belief that does not depend for its justification on its *inferential relation* to other beliefs. At the same time, it should not be surprising that much of the focus of the debate in the literature is with (broadly) inferential vs. non-inferential justification, for a great many of our beliefs seem to be justified by their inferential (deductive, inductive, or explanatory) relations to other beliefs.¹⁸

References

- Bergmann, M. (2006). *Justification without Awareness*. Oxford University Press.
- BonJour, L. (1985). *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. Harvard University Press.
- (1995). *In Defense of Pure Reason*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1999). "Foundationalism and the External World." *Noûs* 33 (s13):229-249.
- Carroll, Lewis (1895). What the tortoise said to Achilles. *Mind* 4 (14):278-280.
- Cohen, S. (1984). "Justification and truth." *Philosophical Studies* 46 (3):279--95.
- (2002). "Basic knowledge and the problem of easy knowledge." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2):309-329.

¹⁷ However, they will affirm that those other beliefs must nevertheless satisfy the coherentist or infinitist conditions on justification.

¹⁸ I'm grateful to Kurt Sylvan for very helpful comments to the draft.

- Dancy, J. (1985). *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*. Blackwell.
- Foley, R. (1979). "Justified Inconsistent Beliefs." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (4):247-257.
- Fumerton, R. (1995). *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Ginet, C. (2005). "Infinetism is Not the Solution to the Regress Problem." In M. Steup & E. Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Blackwell.
- Goldman, A. (1979). "What is Justified Belief?" In George Pappas (ed.), *Justification and Knowledge*. Boston: D. Reidel.
- (1999). "Internalism Exposed." *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (6): 271-293
- Hasan, A. (2017). *A Critical Introduction to the Epistemology of Perception*. Bloomsbury.
- Hasan, A. and R. Fumerton. (2020). "Knowledge by Acquaintance vs. Description." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/knowledge-acquaindescrip/>.
- Horowitz, S. (2022) "Higher-Order Evidence." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/higher-order-evidence/>.
- Howard-Snyder, D. (2020). "Beliefs Can Be Justified by Experience." In S. Cowan (ed.), *Problems in Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Contemporary Debates*. Bloomsbury.
- Huemer, M. (2002). "Fumerton's Principle of Inferential Justification." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28:329-340.
- Ichikawa, J. and M. Steup. (2017). "The Analysis of Knowledge." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/knowledge-analysis/>.
- Kiesewetter, B. and A. Worsnip. (2023). "Structural Rationality." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/rationality-structural/>.
- Klein, P. (1999). "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons." *Philosophical Perspectives* 13:297-325.

--- (2005). "Infinitism is the Solution to the Epistemic Regress Problem." In M. Steup & E. Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Blackwell.

McCain, K. (2008). "The Virtues of Epistemic Conservatism." *Synthese* 164 (2):185-200.

Oakley, T. (2019). "The Reductio Argument Against Epistemic Infinitism." *Synthese* 196 (9):3869-3887.

Olsson, E. (2021). "Coherentist Theories of Epistemic Justification." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/justep-coherence/>.

Pryor, J. (2005). "There Is Immediate Justification." In M. Steup & E. Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Blackwell.

Silva Jr., P. (2023). *Awareness and the Substructure of Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sosa, E. (1999). "How to Defeat Opposition to Moore." *Noûs* 33 (s13):141-153.

Steup, M. and R. Neta. (2020). "Epistemology." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/epistemology/>.

Wright, C. 2004. "On epistemic entitlement: Warrant for nothing (and foundations for free?)" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary 78: 167-212.