THREE ARGUMENTS AGAINST FOUNDATIONALISM: ARBITRARINESS, EPISTEMIC REGRESS, AND EXISTENTIAL SUPPORT

Daniel Howard-Snyder and E.J. Coffman

Abstract. Foundationalism is false; after all, foundational beliefs are arbitrary, they do not solve the epistemic regress problem, and they cannot exist without other (justified) beliefs. Or so some people say. In this essay, we assess some arguments based on such claims, arguments suggested in recent work by Peter Klein and Ernest Sosa.

A particular belief of a person is *basic* just in case it is epistemically justified and it owes its justification to something other than her other beliefs or the interrelations of their contents; a person's belief is *nonbasic* just in case it is epistemically justified but not basic. *Traditional Foundationalism* says that, first, if a human being has a nonbasic belief, then, at bottom, it owes its justification to at least one basic belief, and second, there are basic beliefs. Call the second thesis *Minimal Foundationalism*. In this essay, we assess three arguments against Minimal Foundationalism which we find in recent work of Peter Klein and Ernest Sosa.[1]

1. Foundationalism and Arbitrariness

Peter Klein puts his case against Foundationalism succinctly as follows:

> [F]oundationalism is unacceptable because it advocates accepting an arbitrary reason at the base, that is, a reason for which there are no further reasons making it even slightly better to accept than any of its contraries. (Klein 1999, 297)

The argument suggested here is plain enough:

The Argument from Arbitrariness

1. If Foundationalism is true, then there are basic beliefs of the following kind: S's basic belief that p is justified although there are no further *reasons* that make it even slightly better that S believe p rather than any of p's contraries.
2. There can be no such beliefs.
3. So, Foundationalism is false. (1, 2)

---

[1] Four notes in one. (1) Hereafter, we will leave the modifier "Minimal" in "Minimal Foundationalism" implicit. (2) We add "…or the interrelations of their contents" to the definition of basic belief to rule out Pure Coherentism as a version of Foundationalism. We leave this clause implicit in the text. (3) Epistemic statuses other than justification are amenable to the basic/nonbasic distinction, but to make this explicit would needlessly complicate the text. (4) Our definition of basic belief needs to be qualified; see note 3 and the text to which it is referenced.

A question arises: what sort of thing is a "reason," according to Klein? As it turns out, Klein uses "reason" to refer both to *beliefs*, which are a certain sort of mental state, and to *propositions*, which are not.[2] Let's not worry about which Klein meant and consider both options.

Suppose reasons are propositions. Then premise 1 reads:

1a.   If Foundationalism is true, then there are basic beliefs of the following kind: S's basic belief that p is justified although there are no further *propositions* that make it even slightly better that S believes p rather than any of p's contraries.

Unfortunately, 1a is false. There are versions of Foundationalism according to which there are further propositions the truth of which make it (at least) slightly better that S believes p rather than one of its contraries, even if S's belief that p is basic and justified. To illustrate: suppose that Evan's (allegedly) basic belief that the ball is red owes its justification to the ball's looking red to him and not to any other beliefs of his. This supposition is compatible with a version of Foundationalism according to which Evan's belief owes its justification to his visual experience because, in part, these two propositions are true:

(A)   When one's belief that a ball is red is caused in normal circumstances by the ball's looking red to one, it is very likely that the ball is red, much more likely than that the ball is yellow or blue, for example.

(B)   Evan's belief that the ball is red was caused in normal circumstances by the ball's looking red to him.

So, on this version of Foundationalism, there are some further propositions, namely (A) and (B), the truth of which makes it (at least) slightly better that Evan believes the ball is red rather than, say, yellow or blue. Other versions of Foundationalism have the resources to make the same point, *mutatis mutandis*. Indeed, it's difficult to think of one that lacks them; after all, each version of Foundationalism has some story to tell about how basic beliefs are justified and that story will consist of some propositions the truth of which would make it the case that for each basic belief that p, it is (at least) slightly better that the person who holds it believes that p rather than any of p's contraries.

Perhaps Klein's line of thought will fare better if we take "reasons" to refer to beliefs. In that case, premise 1 of The Argument from Arbitrariness reads:

1b.   If Foundationalism is true, then there are basic beliefs of the following kind: S's basic belief that p is justified although there are no further *beliefs* that make it even slightly better that S believes p rather than any of p's contraries.

Is this an improvement? We think not. There are versions of Foundationalism according to which there are further beliefs the truth of which make it (at least) slightly better that S believes p rather than one of its contraries, even if S's belief that p is basic and justified. To illustrate: consider Evan again, and suppose someone else, say William, correctly believes both (A) and (B). This supposition is compatible with a version of Foundationalism according to which Evan's belief owes its justification to his visual experience because, in part, what William believes, namely

---

[2] The paragraph straddling (Klein 1999, 298-99), uses 'reason' to denote a belief (where belief is a kind of mental state), while the very next paragraph uses 'reason' to denote a proposition.

(A) and (B), are both true. So on this version of Foundationalism, Evan's belief can be basic even if there are some further *beliefs*—e.g., William's belief that (A) and (B)—the truth of which makes it at least slightly better that Evan believes that the ball is red, rather than yellow or blue. No doubt, the same point can be made by other versions of Foundationalism, *mutatis mutandis*.

Perhaps it matters whether Evan himself is the one who believes (A) and (B). If so, then Klein's purposes might be better served by

> 1c. If Foundationalism is true, then there are basic beliefs of the following kind: S's basic belief that p is justified although there are no further *beliefs of S* that make it even slightly better that S believe p rather than any of p's contraries.

Is this a change for the better? No; 1c is false. That's because there are versions of Foundationalism, like the one sketched above, according to which S's belief that p can be basic and justified even though there are further beliefs of S the truth of which makes it (at least) slightly better that S believes that p rather than one of its contraries. To illustrate: return to Evan, and suppose that he correctly believes both (A) and (B). That supposition does not imply that Evan's belief that the ball is red is not basic. For the mere fact that Evan believes (A) and (B) does not imply that his belief that the ball is red owes its justification to those two beliefs of his. To suppose otherwise is to fail to distinguish two states of affairs:

- Evan believes that the ball is red *and* Evan believes (A) and (B).
- Evan's belief that the ball is red *owes its justification to* his belief that (A) and (B).

While the second implies the first, the first does not imply the second. Thus, so long as Evan's belief that the ball is red does not owe its justification to his belief that (A) and (B), his belief that the ball is red might well be basic.

Perhaps one will object: "But surely, if Evan believes (A) and (B), then his belief that (A) and (B) must be, at least in part, his grounds for his belief that the ball is red. In that case, Evan's belief that the ball is red cannot be basic."

We deny both claims here. The first claim—that if Evan believes (A) and (B), then his belief that (A) and (B) must be, at least in part, his grounds for his belief that the ball is red—fails to distinguish two states of affairs:

- Evan believes that the ball is red *and* Evan believes (A) and (B).
- Evan's belief that (A) and (B) is, in part, Evan's *grounds for* believing that the ball is red.

While the second implies the first, the first does not imply the second. That's because, in general, one can believe the premises of an argument and yet not believe the conclusion on that basis but rather on the basis of something else. The second claim—that if Evan's belief that (A) and (B) is, at least in part, his grounds for his belief that the ball is red, then the latter belief cannot be basic—is false. That's because a basic belief can have multiple sources of justification; when it does, its epistemic status is overdetermined. For example, suppose that Evan believes that the ball is red on the basis of both its looking red and an inference from his belief that (A) and (B).

So long as Evan's belief that the ball is red would be justified on the basis of the ball looking red to him absent his inference from (A) and (B), it is basic.[3]

Some critics of Foundationalism have failed to recognize that basic beliefs can be epistemically overdetermined. Their failure has led them to specious objections. A recent case in point is Susan Haack's objection to what she calls "weak foundationalism," according to which a basic belief is defeasibly justified by something other than a belief (Haack 1993, 16), say, an experience. At first blush, says Haack, weak foundationalism is a sensible account of the common view that, for example, if Peter believes that there is a dog before him on the basis of it's phenomenally appearing to him as if a dog is before him, then Peter's belief is justified, but only defeasibly justified since the appearances might be misleading, etc.. "At second blush, however," Haack continues,

> an awkward question arises: would not [Peter] be *more* justified, or more securely justified, in believing that there is a dog before him if he also justifiedly believed that his eyes are working normally, that he is not under the influence of post-hypnotic suggestion, that there are no very lifelike toy dogs around, etc., etc.? Surely, he would. But the weak foundationalist cannot allow for this, for his story is that basic beliefs get their justification *exclusively* from something other than the support of further beliefs;... (Haack 1993, 31, our emphasis)

Exclusively?! The problem with the argument is evident: weak foundationalism states that a basic belief is defeasibly justified by something other than a belief, which does not imply that there cannot be anything else that contributes to its justification. In particular, it does not imply that "basic beliefs get their justification *exclusively* from something other than the support of further beliefs".

How could Haack make such a mistake? It is instructive to see how. The passage just quoted above continues as follows:

> …to allow that they [basic beliefs] get some justification from experience and some from the support of other beliefs would violate the one-directional character of justification, on which, *qua* foundationalist, [the weak foundationalist] insists. (Haack 1993, 31-32)

But why suppose that the weak foundationalist, *qua* foundationalist, insists that the character of justification is "one-directional" in such a way that a basic belief cannot derive justification from both experience and other beliefs? Here's Haack's answer:

> [H]ere and throughout the book [(Haack 1993)], 'foundationalism' will refer to theories of justification which require a distinction, among justified beliefs, between those which are basic and those which are derived [nonbasic], and a conception of justification as one-

---

[3] This is the qualification referred to at note 1, part (4). Here is a more accurate statement of what a basic belief is:
> A particular belief of a person is basic just in case it is epistemically justified and it owes its justification, *at least in large part*, to something other than her other justified beliefs or the interrelations of their contents,

where the italicized qualification signals that if a basic belief owes its justification to some other belief of the person or the interrelations of their contents, then, it would remain justified even if it did not owe its justification to those other beliefs or interrelations. While it is crucial to recognize that basic beliefs can be epistemically overdetermined, we will not import that point into the definition of basic beliefs that we will use in the text.

directional, i.e. as requiring basic to support derived beliefs, *never vice versa*. (Haack 1993, 14, our emphasis)

So, according to Haack, the weak foundationalist, like all foundationalists, is committed to the claim that basic beliefs cannot receive *any* justification from nonbasic beliefs—and so cannot be epistemically overdetermined. Why? Because, well, that's the way she's going to use the word 'foundationalism'. We leave it to the reader to discern the merits of an argument against Foundationalism that, at bottom, relies on a critic's stipulative definition of 'foundationalism'.[4]

Returning to the main thread of discussion, one might suggest that we have missed Klein's point. Klein should be understood as asserting

> 1d.　　If Foundationalism is true, then there *could be* basic beliefs of the following kind: S's basic belief that p is justified although there are no further beliefs of S that make it even slightly better that S believe p rather than any of p's contraries.

Since Foundationalism implies that there *could* be basic beliefs of this kind, and there *couldn't* be, Foundationalism is false.[5]

What should we make of this variation on Klein's theme? It seems to us that what's at issue here is not Foundationalism but epistemic externalism and internalism, both of which are compatible with Foundationalism. We do not have the space to go into the matter in depth here, and so we will content ourselves with a general observation. Externalists tend to allow for cases in which one's belief that p is justified even if one has no further beliefs that support p over its contraries, whereas (some) internalists do not. So if you are an externalist, you will probably not be much impressed by the premise above that there could not be a case of the sort in question.[6] However, if you are an internalist, and, more importantly, if your particular brand of internalism implies that one's belief that p is justified only if one has some further beliefs that support p over its contraries, you can still be a foundationalist (and hence deny 1d) provided that you allow that in some cases, namely the case of basic beliefs, one's belief does not owe its justification to those further beliefs. (See our discussion of 1c above.) Of course, you will need to explain why one must have those further beliefs in the first place, but that explanatory demand does not arise from Foundationalism; it arises from your brand of internalism.

So far as we can see, there is but one way to modify premise 1 of Klein's Argument from Arbitrariness so that it is *clearly* true:

---

[4] Twenty years before the publication of (Haack 1993), Frederick Will, another critic of Foundationalism, argued against the epistemic overdetermination of basic beliefs (Will 1973, 200-201). (Unlike Haack, he didn't just *stipulate* away the possibility.) Three years after Will published his book, and *seventeen years* before the publication of (Haack 1993), William Alston published these words:

> To say that a belief is immediately justified is just to say that there are conditions *sufficient* for its justification that do not involve any other justified beliefs of that believer. This condition could be satisfied even if the believer has other justified beliefs that could serve as grounds. Overdetermination is an epistemic as well as a causal phenomenon. What fits a belief to serve as a foundation is simply that it doesn't *need* other justified beliefs in order to be justified itself. (Alston 1989b, 45)

And later, *ten years* before the publication of (Haack 1993), Alston reiterated the point (Alston 1989c, 64). Neither of these works is cited in the Bibliography of (Haack 1993).

[5] Ryan Wasserman brought this way of casting Klein's argument to our attention.

[6] In this connection, compare how externalists reply to BonJour's case of Norman the clairvoyant (BonJour 1985, 41-45) and (BonJour 2002, 230-31).

       1e.   If Foundationalism is true, then there are basic beliefs of the following kind: S's basic belief that p is justified although there are no further *beliefs of S that both justify it (in large part)* and make it even slightly better that S believe p rather than any of p's contraries

But in that case, premise 2—the claim that there can be no such beliefs—is nothing more than a stylistic variant on the sentence "Foundationalism is false". No good argument has a premise which is a mere stylistic variant of its conclusion.

      We see no way to rescue Klein's Argument from Arbitrariness. Let's turn to his contention that basic beliefs do not solve the epistemic regress problem.

2. Foundationalism and Epistemic Regress

Basic beliefs have a theoretical role to play. Their entrée onto the epistemological stage is arguably exhausted by that role. If they cannot perform it, they do not exist.[7] What is that role? Well, basic beliefs are supposed to solve the epistemic regress problem. But what is that problem, exactly?

      Before we answer that question, it is essential to understand that any discussion in this area must be conducted in terms of individual persons and their beliefs; for Foundationalism is a thesis about the beliefs of individuals and the conditions under which their beliefs are justified. That is, it is a thesis about *doxastic justification*, a thesis about the conditions under which a person's *beliefs*, as opposed to *propositions* or *persons* are justified.[8] With this in mind, we can describe the regress problem that Foundationalism aims to solve.

      Suppose that S's belief that q is justified; furthermore, suppose that S believes that q on the basis of an inference from two other beliefs of hers, her belief that *if p, then q*, and her belief that *p*. Finally, suppose that S's belief that q owes its justification to these other beliefs of hers via this inference. Then, S's belief that q is inferentially (or mediately, or indirectly) justified. Now, a simple question arises: How can S's belief that q be justified on the basis of an inference from the contents of other beliefs of hers? How, that is, can S's belief that q be inferentially justified? Could it be that S's belief that q is inferentially justified on the basis of her belief that *if p, then q*, and her belief that *p*, while neither of those beliefs is justified—the unjustified justifier option? Or, could it be that S's belief that q is inferentially justified on the basis of her justified belief that *if p, then q*, and her justified belief that *p*, and that these latter beliefs of hers are inferentially justified in their turn on the basis of some further beliefs of hers, and so on, so that, ultimately, her belief that q owes its justification to itself—the circular justification option? Alternatively, could it be that S's belief that q is inferentially justified on the basis of her justified belief that *if p, then q*, and her justified belief that *p*, and that these latter beliefs of hers are

---

[7] This is not to say that the only reason to think that there are basic beliefs is that they solve the epistemic regress problem. Perhaps, as James Pryor has reminded us recently, the best reason comes from considering examples. See (Pryor 2005, 184-85).

[8] We can distinguish doxastic, propositional, and personal justification as follows. Doxastic justification is a property of *beliefs* that is expressed by locutions like 'B is a justified belief of S's' and 'S's belief that p is justified'. Propositional justification is a property of *propositions* that is expressed by locutions like 'p is justified for S' and 'S has a justification for p'. Personal justification is a property of *persons* (or, more broadly, *cognitive subjects*) that is expressed by both belief-entailing and non-belief-entailing readings of 'S is justified in believing p'. For interesting work on the logical properties of and relations among these different kinds of justification, see (Bach 1985), (Engel 1992), (Kvanvig and Menzel 1990), and (D. Sosa unpublished).

inferentially justified on the basis of some further beliefs of hers, and so on, *ad infinitum*, for infinitely many non-repeating beliefs of hers—the infinite regress option? Finally, could it be that S's belief that q is inferentially justified on the basis of her justified belief that *if p, then q*, and her justified belief that *p*, and that these latter beliefs of hers are *non*-inferentially justified, that is, justified but not on the basis of any other beliefs of hers—the basic belief option? The regress problem consists in explaining which of these options is correct and why.[9] The traditional foundationalist contends that the basic belief option is the only feasible option.

Now, according to Klein, what's wrong with Foundationalism is that it cannot solve the regress problem. So we have the following argument:

The Argument from Failure to Solve the Regress Problem

1.   If Foundationalism is true, then basic beliefs can solve the regress problem.
2.   Basic beliefs cannot solve the regress problem.
3.   So, Foundationalism is false. (1, 2)

We concur with premise 1, but what about 2? What does Klein have to say on its behalf? We discern three lines of thought in his writing.

2.1 Worries about meta-justifications

We can get at the first line of thought by returning briefly to an earlier matter in section 1. One version of the Argument from Arbitrariness affirmed premise 1a, which states that if Foundationalism is true, then there are basic beliefs of the following kind: S's basic belief that p is justified although there are no further *propositions* that make it even slightly better that S believe p rather than any of p's contraries. We argued that Foundationalism's basic beliefs are compatible with there being some further propositions of the sort in question, and we illustrated the point with a case involving (A) and (B). Many foundationalists want to go a step further. They insist that something like those two propositions *must* be true for each basic belief. Indeed, according to them, any viable version of Foundationalism requires that, for any human person S and proposition p, S's belief that p is basic only if there is some property F such that S's belief that p has F and B's having F makes p likely to be true. Such pairs of propositions are standardly called "meta-justifications". Suppose, if not because you believe it then just for the sake of argument, that these foundationalists are correct.

With this supposition in place, we are in a position to hear directly from Klein why basic beliefs cannot solve the regress problem.

> [C] Can [the foundationalist] avoid advocating the acceptance of arbitrary reasons by moving to meta-justifications?…. Pick your favorite accounts of the property, [F]. I think…that the old Pyrrhonian question is reasonable: *Why is having [F] truth-conducive? Now, either there is an answer available to that question or there isn't….* If there is an answer, then the regress continues—at least one more step, and that is all that

---

[9] There are permutations on these options, of course, as well as other options to consider. Other options include Epistemic Nihilism, which can be seen as denying the initial supposition that S's belief that q is justified, and Pure Coherentism , which can be seen as denying the linear conception of justification which is embodied by the initial supposition that S's belief that q owes its justification to the inference in question.

is needed here, because that shows that the offered reason that some belief has [F] or some set of beliefs has [F] does not stop the regress. If there isn't an answer, the assertion is arbitrary. (Klein 1999, 303, emphasis added)

[D] To generalize: Foundationalism…cannot avoid the regress by appealing to *a meta-claim that a belief having some property, [F], is likely to be true. That claim itself requires an argument that appeals to reasons…*. For surely a reason is required to justify the belief that propositions with property, [F], are likely to be true; and whatever justifies that claim will require a reason; and—well, you get the point. (Klein 1999, 304, emphasis added)

[E] My point is merely that moving to the meta-level, that is, arguing that such beliefs [i.e. basic beliefs] are likely to be true because they possess a certain property, [F], will not avoid the problem faced by foundationalism. *Either the meta-justification provides a reason for thinking the base proposition is true* (and hence the regress does not end) or it does not (hence, accepting the base proposition is arbitrary). (Klein 1999, 304, emphasis added)

What is the argument here?

Klein means to pose a dilemma: either arbitrariness or failure to stop the regress. But how do these unpalatable options arise? We discern two answers in the texts above. One focuses on whether the meta-justification provides a reason for the proposition believed—see quotation [E], the italicized bit. The other focuses on whether there is a further reason for the meta-justification—see quotations [C] and [D], the italicized bits. Klein does not distinguish these answers but we shall; for whether there is a reason for something is not the same issue as whether it provides a reason for something else. So we have two arguments to assess.

For ease of exposition, let 'there is an MJ', which stands for 'there is a meta-justification', abbreviate the following sentence: 'There is some property F such that S's belief B that p has F and B's having F makes p likely to be true'. Here is the argument in [E]:

The Does-MJ-provide-a-reason-for-p? Argument

2a.   S's basic belief B that p can solve the regress problem *only if* B can stop the regress and B owes its justification to something other than S's other beliefs.
2b.   B owes its justification to something other than S's other beliefs *only if* there is an MJ.
2c.   If there is an MJ, then either it provides a reason for p or it does not.
2d.   It is false that MJ does not provide a reason for p. (Otherwise, arbitrariness.)
2e.   If MJ does provide a reason for p, B cannot stop the regress.
2f.   So, if there is an MJ, B cannot stop the regress. (2c-2e)

Premise 2 follows.[10] What should we make of this argument?

---

[10] Like this:
2g.   So, B owes its justification to something other than S's other beliefs *only if* B cannot stop the regress. (2b, 2f)
2h.   So, S's basic belief B that p can solve the regress problem *only if* B both can and cannot stop the regress. (2a, 2g)
2i.   It is false that B both can and cannot stop the regress.
2.   So, S's basic belief that p cannot solve the regress problem. (2h, 2i)

Given our assumption that 2b is true, the argument is above reproach, with one exception—2e is false. To see why, note that if 2e is true, then, if MJ provides a reason for p, B owes its justification to some other beliefs of S. But B owes its justification to some other beliefs of S only if her grounds for B are other beliefs of hers. So if 2e is true, then, *if MJ provides a reason for p, B's grounds are other beliefs of S*. This implication (the sentence in italics) is false, however. An MJ is just a pair of propositions, existing in the abstract. Obviously, they can exist and "provide a reason" even if S is completely unaware of them.

Perhaps one will object: "But what if S *is* aware of an MJ? Indeed, what if she *believes* it, perhaps even *justifiedly*? In that case, surely, B does not stop the regress." Two replies. First, the objection is not responsive to the case offered; it leaves it open that basic beliefs can solve the regress problem in those cases in which S is not aware of or does not believe an MJ. Second, the conclusion does not follow. It follows that B does not stop the regress when S is aware of or believes an MJ only if S's being aware of or believing an MJ entails that B owes its justification to her awareness or belief; no such entailment holds, however.

Perhaps Klein's other argument, the one in [C] and [D], will fare better. Here it is:

The Is-there-a-reason-for-MJ? Argument

2a. S's basic belief B that p can solve the regress problem *only if* B can stop the regress and B owes its justification to something other than S's other beliefs.

2b. B owes its justification to something other than S's other beliefs *only if* there is an MJ.

2c*. If there is an MJ, then either there *is* a further reason why B's having F makes p likely to be true or there is *not*.

2d*. It is false that there is no further reason why B's having F makes p likely to be true. (Otherwise, arbitrariness.)

2e*. If there is a further reason why B's having F makes p likely to be true, B cannot stop the regress.

2f. So, if there is an MJ, B cannot stop the regress. (2c*-2e*)

Is each new premise true? We think not.

Consider premise 2d* first. Recall that the schema for a meta-justification is this: *there is some property F such that B has F and B's having F makes p likely to be true*. For any candidate for a basic belief that p, that schema can be satisfied by a substitution instance for F for which there is *no* further reason why B's having F makes p likely to be true; so, 2d* is false. Let us explain.

For any candidate for F that you might think, at first blush, satisfies the schema—e.g., one natural candidate for F in the case of Evan's belief that the ball is red is the property of *being a belief that is caused in normal circumstances by a ball's looking red* (of course, there are other candidates)—there will be some reason why B's having F makes p likely to be true that can be specified in terms of the relevant fundamental features of the world and the laws of nature that govern them. Call this sort of reason a *Fundamental Reason*, and call the sort of complex property specified by a Fundamental Reason a *Fundamental Property*. Now, premise 2d* is equivalent to the proposition that, for any F and for any belief B that p, there is a *further* reason why B's having F makes p likely to be true. But suppose the substitution instance for F is a Fundamental Property. 2d* implies that in that case there would *have to be* a *further* reason why

B's having the Fundamental Property makes p likely to be true. But that implication seems false. Perhaps it is a *brute contingent fact* that B's having the Fundamental Property makes p likely to be true. Or perhaps the Fundamental Property is specified in such a way that it is a *necessary truth* that if B has it, p is likely to be true. If either of these suggestions is correct (and surely one of them is), there is an MJ for S's belief B that p, but there is no *further* reason why B's having the Fundamental Property makes it likely that p. All one can say is "that's just the way it is". For this reason, 2d* is false.

As for 2e*, suppose that there are infinitely many non-repeating reasons why B's having F makes p likely to be true. Even so, it does not follow that B cannot stop the regress since it does not follow that what S goes on in believing p is any member of this infinite set of non-repeating reasons; indeed, it does not follow that B cannot stop the regress even if she justifiedly believes every member of it.

2.2 Klein's Infinitism and Foundationalism

Elsewhere in (Klein 1999), Klein suggests a different argument for premise 2 of the Argument from Failure. He introduces two principles for one's having a justification for p:

> Principle of Avoiding Circularity (PAC): S has a justification for p only if p is not in its own evidential ancestry for S,

and

> Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness (PAA): S has a justification for p only if there is some reason, p*, available to S for p; and there is some reason, p**, available to S for p*; etc.

He then tells us that

> the combination of PAC and PAA entails that the evidential ancestry of a justified belief must be infinite and non-repeating… *It is the straightforward intuitive appeal of these principles that is the best reason for thinking that if any beliefs are justified, the structure of reasons must be infinite and non-repeating*. (Klein 1999, 299, his emphasis)

One might see in these principles an argument for premise 2 of the Argument from Failure, along the following lines:

> *The Infinitism Argument*

> 2a.   S's basic belief B that p can solve the regress problem *only if* B is justified and B owes its justification to something other than S's other beliefs.
> 2b.   B is justified only if S has a justification for p.
> 2c.   S has a justification for p only if there is available to S an infinite, non-repeating series of propositions beginning with p such that each (non-initial) proposition in the series is a reason for believing its predecessor. (2c combines PAC and PAA.)

2d.   If there is available to S an infinite, non-repeating series of propositions beginning with p such that each (non-initial) proposition in the series is a reason for believing its predecessor, then B does not owe its justification to something other than S's other beliefs.

2e.   So, B is justified only if B does not owe its justification to something other than S's other beliefs. (2b-2d)

2f.   So, B can solve the regress problem only if B both does and does not owe its justification to something other than her other beliefs. (2a, 2e)

2g.   It is false that B both does and does not owe its justification to something other than her other beliefs.

2.   So, S's basic belief that p cannot solve the regress problem. (2f, 2g)

Is this a good argument? Three observations will prove helpful in answering that question.

First, notice that the antecedent of premise 2b uses the locution 'B is justified', and the consequent uses the locution 'S has a justification for p'. The former refers to doxastic justification, the latter to propositional justification. So 2b assumes that doxastic justification requires propositional justification. If this assumption is false, 2b is false. Our main concerns lie elsewhere, so we will grant Klein both 2b and its assumption.

Second, notice that premise 2c is ambiguous. Its ambiguity stems from the term 'available'. One way a proposition p can be *available* to S is for p to be the content of an "already formed" belief of S's. A different way p can be available to S is for p to be such that S is *merely* disposed to believe p. So 2c might mean

2c1.   S has a justification for p only if S has a belief with content p1 that constitutes a reason for believing p; and S has a distinct belief with content p2 that constitutes a reason for believing p1; etc., *ad infinitum*,

or

2c2.   S has a justification for p only if S is (at least) disposed to believe a proposition p1 that is a reason for believing p; and S is (at least) disposed to believe a proposition p2 that is a reason for believing p1; etc., *ad infinitum*.

Which of these does Klein endorse? Pretty clearly, he has 2c2 in mind. Here's what he says:

I have already said that the infinitist is not claiming that during our lifetime we consciously entertain an infinite number of beliefs [i.e. propositions]. But what might not be so obvious is that the infinitist is also not even claiming that we *have* an infinite number of…"unconscious beliefs" if such beliefs are taken to be *already formed* dispositions... Consider the following question: Do you believe that 366+71 is 437? I take it that for most of us answering that question brings into play some of our capacities in a way that answering the question "Do you believe that 2+2=4?" does not. For I simply remember that 2+2=4... By contrast,... [w]e do not simply remember that 366+71=437. Rather,... [w]e are *disposed to think* that 366+71=437 after a bit of adding... We have a second order disposition—a disposition to form the disposition to think something. Thus, there is clearly a sense in which we believe that 366+71=437. The proposition that

11

366+71=437 is subjectively available to me because it is correctly hooked up to already formed beliefs. (Klein 1999, 308)

Here Klein recognizes the difference between 2c1 and 2c2, and seems to endorse 2c2.

Third, notice that since premise 2 is disambiguated as 2c2, the validity of the argument is preserved only if premise 2d is disambiguated accordingly:

2d2.　If S is (at least) disposed to believe a proposition p1 that is a reason for believing p; and S is (at least) disposed to believe a proposition p2 that is a reason for believing p1; etc., *ad infinitum*, then B does not owe its justification to something other than S's other beliefs.

With these observations in hand, we turn to an assessment of the argument.

Consider 2c2. Given the assumption that doxastic justification requires propositional justification (without which 2b is false), 2c2 implies that

- S's *belief* that p is justified only if S is (at least) disposed to believe a proposition p1 that is a reason for believing p; and S is (at least) disposed to believe a proposition p2 that is a reason for believing p1; etc., *ad infinitum*.

One might worry that while some beliefs of ours are justified, none of us is disposed to believe infinitely many propositions. But the latter is not obviously true. For, if there were infinitely many medium-sized octagonal objects, there would be infinitely many objects of which we are disposed to believe that it is octagonal; and, if God were to create infinitely many angels, there would be infinitely many objects of which we are disposed to believe that it is a creature (Klein 1999, 307-309).

More troubling is the fact that human beings have justified beliefs but they are not disposed to believe each member of a *relevant* infinite, non-repeating series of propositions. Suppose Peter believes that *he's appeared-to-greenly* on the basis of an appropriate experience; and suppose that the *only* relevant infinite, non-repeating series of propositions such that he is disposed to believe even some of its non-initial members is the one whose second member is the proposition that *it seems to him that he's appeared-to-greenly*, whose third member is the proposition that *it seems to him that it seems to him that he's appeared-to-greenly*, and so on. Now, although Peter is disposed to believe each of the propositions just mentioned and their like for some relatively small number of reiterations, he is *not* disposed to believe that *it seems to him that it seems to him that…it seems to him that he is appeared-to-greenly*, where the number of reiterations of 'it seems to him that' filling the ellipsis is the number of nanoseconds since the Big Bang. Peter is not unusual. No human being is even disposed to *grasp* such 'long' propositions, as we might call them, much less believe them. Nevertheless, or so we say, despite Peter's failure—a failure each of us shares in—his belief that *he is appeared-to-greenly* may well be justified.

"But," Klein might object, "even if Peter *presently* lacks the disposition to believe such long propositions, his belief that *he is being appeared-to-greenly* is still justified—provided he

can develop his capacities so that he *becomes* disposed to grasp them. In that case, he has a *second order* disposition, a disposition to form the disposition to grasp long propositions."[11]

The main thing we want to say in reply is this: who do you think you're kidding? We defy anyone to exercise their alleged ability to develop their capacities in such a way that they are disposed to grasp long propositions. Just try it. (We'll wait while you give it a shot….) The truth is you cannot. You have no second order disposition to form the disposition to grasp long propositions and hence none to believe them.

Klein's second order disposition objection encourages us to think that our present dispositions to believe propositions supervene on what would be the case if we were, in effect, cognitively divine. But that's just plain wrong. Our present dispositions to believe supervene on our *present* cognitive capacities, not on what they would be like if they were enhanced to Olympian proportions, or embellished with a godlike vocabulary and conceptual repertoire.

Suppose that what we've just said about 2c2 is wrong. Suppose we have the relevant dispositions and/or second-order dispositions. Still, 2d2 is false. For consider its contrapositive:

> 2d2cp. If B owes its justification to something other than S's other beliefs, then the following conjunction is false: S is (at least) disposed to believe a proposition p1 that is a reason for believing p; and S is (at least) disposed to believe a proposition p2 that is a reason for believing p1; etc., *ad infinitum*.

A question arises: Why couldn't B owe its justification to something other than S's other beliefs—say, an experience and certain facts relating experiences to beliefs grounded on them—even if S is disposed to believe each (non-initial) member of the relevant infinite, non-repeating series of propositions? S's being so disposed would spell trouble for B's status as basic only if such dispositions were *beliefs* and *B owed its justification to them*. But a disposition to believe is not a belief;[12] and, even it were, the fact that *B is basic only if S has infinitely many beliefs of the relevant sort* does not entail that *B owes its justification to them*.

Now, we do not aim here to defend the claim that S has a basic belief only if S is disposed to believe each (non-initial) member of a relevant infinite, non-repeating series of propositions; nor do we aim to defend the claim that S has a basic belief only if S has infinitely many beliefs of the relevant sort. Rather, we aim to point out, first, that Foundationalism is compatible with each of these claims and, second, that at least one of those claims is constitutive of Klein's Infinitism. So Klein's Infinitism is compatible with Foundationalism, and so no reason to deny it.

2.3 The *reasons-giving* regress problem

In more recent work, Klein offers a different line of thought in defense of premise 2 of the Argument from Failure.[13] The following quotation is representative of this strand of his anti-foundationalist thinking:

---

[11] This reply is fashioned along the lines of the paragraph straddling (Klein 1999, 308-09). Note an important difference between the "finite vocabulary objection" that Klein considers there and the one that we have put forward. The concepts and vocabulary in our case are minimal. To grasp long propositions of the sort we have in mind, we do not need to develop or invent new concepts and ways of specifying them.
[12] See (Audi 1994).
[13] (Klein 2003), (Klein 2004, 168-69), and (Klein 2005, 132-35).

The so-called "regress problem" can be stated briefly in this way: There are only three possible patterns of reasoning. Either the process of producing reasons stops at a purported foundational proposition or it doesn't. If it does, then the reasoner is employing a foundationalist pattern. If it doesn't, then either the reasoning is circular, or it is infinite and non-repeating. There are no other significant possibilities. Thus, if none of these forms of reasoning can properly lead to assent, then no form can….

…Suppose that an inquirer, say Fred D'Foundationalist, has given some reasons for his beliefs. Fred offers q (where q could be a conjunction) for his belief that p, and he offers r (which could also be a conjunction) as his reason for q. Etc. Now, being a foundationalist, Fred finally offers some basic proposition, say b, as his reason for the immediately preceding belief. Sally D'Pyrrhonian asks Fred why he believes that b is true. Sally adds the "is true" to make clear to Fred that she is not asking what causes Fred to believe that b. She wants to know why Fred thinks that b is true…. Being true to his foundationalism, he must think that there is some warrant that each basic proposition has that does not depend upon the warrant possessed by any other proposition.

The crucial point to note here is that Sally can grant that the proposition has autonomous warrant but continue to press the issue because she can ask Fred whether the possession of autonomous warrant is at all truth conducive. That is, she can ask whether a proposition with autonomous warrant is, *ipso facto*, at all likely to be true. If Fred says "yes," then the regress will have continued. For he has this reason for thinking that b is true: "b has autonomous warrant and propositions with autonomous warrant are somewhat likely to be true." If he says "no" then Sally can point out that he is being arbitrary since she has asked why he thinks b is true and he has not been able to provide an answer….

The dilemma is that either Fred has a reason for thinking that proposition is true or he doesn't. If he does, then the regress has not stopped—*in practice*. If he doesn't, then he is being arbitrary—*in practice*.

Once again, it is crucial to recall that Pyrrhonians are *not* claiming that foundationalism is false. They could grant that some propositions do have autonomous warrant which is truth-conducive and that all other propositions depend for some of their warrant upon those basic propositions. What lies at the heart of their view is that there is a deep irrationality in being a practicing self-conscious foundationalist. The question to Fred can be put this way: On the assumption that you cannot appeal to any other proposition, do you have any reason for thinking that b is true? Fred not only won't have any such reason for thinking b is true, given that assumption, he *cannot* have one (if he remains true to his foundationalism). Arbitrariness seems inevitable. Of course, foundationalists typically realize this and, in order to avoid arbitrariness, tell some story (for example, about privileged access) that, if true, would provide a reason for thinking basic propositions are at least somewhat likely to be true. But then, the regress of reasons has continued. (Klein 2003, sections 7 and 8)

What should we make of this passage?[14]

While it bears a strong affinity to (Klein 1999), it indicates a significant change, signaled by Klein's astonishing confession that he does *not* mean to argue that Foundationalism is *false*,

---

[14] For a critical assessment of Klein's line of thought that differs from the one to follow, see (Bergmann 2002).

but rather that one cannot *practice* Foundationalism. It does not permit the "practicing, self-conscious foundationalist" to play the reasons-giving game; a "deep irrationality" attends those who attempt it. Given our aim to discover a good argument for the denial of Foundationalism, we're a bit nonplussed by Klein's (dis)claim(er). Is he being serious? Or is he just being coy? Perhaps we can make headway in achieving our aim if we approach his (dis)claim(er) like this: although *Klein* (perhaps) doesn't mean to argue that Foundationalism is false, what he *says* may nevertheless be a good argument for that conclusion. So in what follows we will try to find in what Klein says the premises of another argument against the *truth* of Foundationalism.

Fortunately, this is not difficult to do. For, unlike (Klein 1999), (Klein 2003) and its successors emphasize the *activity* of justifying a belief—of producing, providing, and giving reasons for a proposition one believes. And this is linked to his conception of the regress problem, according to which the regress problem is the problem of explaining how "the process of producing reasons" for a proposition can result in its being justified for one. The link suggests the following train of thought: S's allegedly basic belief that p can solve the regress problem only if S can justify it, and S can do that only if S can give good reasons to think that p is at least likely to be true; but in that case, S's basic belief that p cannot stop the regress.

We find the train of thought here quite puzzling. For the regress problem that, according to Klein, basic beliefs cannot solve is *not* the regress problem that, according to Foundationalism, basic beliefs are supposed to solve. The regress problem, according to Klein, is the problem of explaining how "the regress of providing reasons," "the regress of reasons-giving," or "the process of producing reasons" can result in a proposition being justified (for a person). The regress problem, according to Foundationalism, is the problem of explaining how there can be inferentially justified beliefs. These are not the same problem.[15] Furthermore, Foundationalism only aims to solve the latter, not the former. Just as the theory of elements cannot be faulted in virtue of its failure to help the practicing self-conscious chemist find water on Chikamin Ridge in the Central Cascades, so Foundationalism cannot be faulted in virtue of its failure to help Fred D'Foundationalist give reasons in accordance with the rules of the game that Sally D'Pyrrhonian invites him to play. Just as the theory of elements is not about finding water, so Foundationalism is not about giving reasons.

We can put our puzzlement more clearly if we recall The Argument from Failure, which went like this:

1.   If Foundationalism is true, then basic beliefs can solve the regress problem.
2.   Basic beliefs cannot solve the regress problem.
3.   So, Foundationalism is false. (1, 2)

If we read the argument without equivocation, insisting on Klein's focus on the reasons-giving regress problem, premise 1 is false—Foundationalism has no implications for solving that problem. On the other hand, if we insist on Foundationalism's focus on the inferential-justification regress problem, premise 2 is not even mentioned in Klein's writings. Indeed, the premises are both true only if "the regress problem" refers to the inferential-justification regress problem in premise 1 and the reasons-giving regress problem in premise 2.

The charge of equivocation can be avoided on the assumption that one's belief can *be* justified only if one can *show* that it is likely to be true. If this assumption is correct, then, since showing that one's belief is likely to be true is what the reasons-giving regress problem is all

---

[15] See (Alston 1989a, 26-32) and (Audi, 1993, 118-25).

about, it follows that *basic beliefs can solve the inferential-justification regress problem only if they can solve the reasons-giving regress problem*. If we add this last italicized claim as a premise to The Argument from Failure, the equivocation disappears.

Unfortunately, this additional premise is no better than the assumption that underlies it, namely this:

> *The Assumption*. S's belief B that p is justified only if S can show that p is at least likely to be true.

We think that The Assumption is false, for at least three reasons.

First, think of moral analogues. Obviously, one's actions can be morally justified even if one is unable to show that one's action is not wrong. Indeed, consider any sort of justification you please—legal, pragmatic, moral, what have you—and, clearly, an action's being justified in that way does not require that the one who performed the action be able to show that it passes muster with the relevant standards. Why should epistemic justification be any different? The onus is on those who opt for The Assumption to give a compelling reason to suppose that there is a salient difference here. No one in the literature has succeeded on this score.

Second, epistemic nihilism looms. S can *show* that p is at least likely to be true only if S holds *justified beliefs* whose contents make it at least likely that p is true. In that case, The Assumption applies to the beliefs to which S must be able to appeal in order to show that p is at least likely to be true—and we're off to the races. While Klein *qua* infinitist has no problem with this, as we argued above there is much to worry about here. In particular, no human being can so much as grasp the contents of the beliefs generated by this regress. The result is epistemic nihilism: no human justifiedly believes *anything*.

Third, counterexamples are a dime a dozen. Being able to show that a proposition is true involves being able to give a good argument for its truth. Philosophers are too prone to take for granted the conceptual sophistication and skills needed to give a good argument, sophistication and skills not shared by the class of those who have justified mundane beliefs, past and present. We need not think only of higher non-human animals in this connection. Consider young, normal humans, like our little kids. Surely their mundane beliefs are justified—but they do not have the conceptual sophistication and skills to argue that what they believe is true. Or consider cases in which those who can ordinarily argue in the required way temporarily lose that capacity. Normal, mature adults occasionally experience mental 'seizures'—episodes that render them cognitively 'tongue-tied' and which temporarily render them *unable* to give good arguments. The causes of such episodes are various but include shyness, insecurity, anger, shock, and the like. Even mature, philosophically adept adults who are not in the grip of a mental seizure are sometimes unable to produce a good argument for what they believe, even though their belief is justified.[16]

---

[16] William Alston writes:

> We frequently take ourselves to know things with respect to which we have no such capacity [i.e. the capacity to produce adequate reasons]. I often suppose myself to know that my wife is upset about something, where I would be hard pressed to specify how I can tell, that is, hard pressed to specify what makes it reasonable for me to believe this. The same goes for much of our supposed knowledge about history, geography, and physical regularities. In the face of all this, why should we accept the thesis that justification essentially involves the capacity to demonstrate reasonableness? (Alston 1989b, 70)

Compare (Alston 1989e, 335). For more on the "show-be" distinction, see, among other places, (Alston 1989b, 44-45), (Alston 1989c, 73-74), and (Alston 1989d, 197-98).

The upshot is this. On one reading of Klein's Argument from Failure, it equivocates. On the only other available reading, it relies on a false claim, The Assumption. Either way, the Argument from Failure fails.[17]

3. Foundationalism and Existential Support

According to Ernest Sosa,

> [A] Given that beliefs would not so much as exist without an extensive supporting cast of related beliefs, there is an air of unreality about the foundationalist claim that beliefs might nevertheless be justified independently of other beliefs. It is hard to conceive of the hypothetical cases that one would naturally invoke in support of such a claim, for these would be cases where one held the target beliefs along with the supporting conscious states but without the supporting cast of other beliefs. But you could not possibly so much as host the target belief without a lot of the relevant supportive beliefs. [B] Nor does it seem that you could enjoy justification for the target belief in the absence of justification for a good number of those supporting beliefs, absent which you could not hold the target belief at all. [C] If one nevertheless insists that, despite this [i.e., despite the fact that one has a justified belief, Y, only if one has other justified supporting beliefs], in some sense the other beliefs do not help justify the target belief, one will surely be asked to explain this special relation of justifying that can fail to relate a belief X and a belief Y even when belief Y would not be justified (not as fully, or as well) in the absence of support by belief X. (E. Sosa 2003, 208-09)

On the face of it, this passage argues against Foundationalism ("there is an air of unreality about the foundationalist claim that…"). We have learned through personal correspondence however, that Sosa did *not* mean to argue against Foundationalism here. Instead, he meant to request an explanation of the "special relation of justifying" countenanced by Foundationalists. Sections [A] and [B] were intended to contextualize Sosa's request, which is issued in [C]. In what follows, we try to honor that request. In order to better position ourselves to do so, we will first reconstruct and assess the argument against Foundationalism naturally suggested by Sosa's words, even if they were not thus intended. Doing so will highlight some matters to which we will later appeal.

3.1 The Argument from Existential Support

Here is the argument suggested to us by [A] and [B]:

The Argument from Existential Support by Other (Justified) Beliefs

1. If Foundationalism is true, there are basic beliefs.
2. If there are basic beliefs, there is a justified belief that is not supported by any other (justified) beliefs of the person who has it.
3. It cannot be that there is a justified belief that is not supported by any other (justified) beliefs of the person who has it.

---

[17] For a recent, interesting, and unsuccessful defense of The Assumption, see (Leite 2004).

4.   So, Foundationalism is false. (1-3)[18]

What should we make of this line of thought?

Two preliminary observations are in order. First, [A] states that a basic belief requires a "supporting cast of other beliefs". [B] goes beyond [A] by stating that "a good number of those supporting beliefs" must be justified.[19] We could treat these as distinct arguments, but for brevity's sake we will assess them simultaneously, as indicated by the parenthetical "justified" in premises 2 and 3. Second, and most importantly, notice that the term 'supported by' is ambiguous. It might express the relation of *justificatory support*, where X justificatorily supports Y if and only if Y owes its justification (at least in part) to X. Alternatively, it might express a different relation, the relation of *existential support*, where X existentially supports Y if and only if Y would not exist in the absence of X.[20]

Now to our assessment. Either premises 2 and 3 both express the relation of justificatory support or they both express the relation of existential support. (Otherwise, the argument commits the fallacy of equivocation.) Let's explore each option in turn. If premises 2 and 3 both express the relation of justificatory support, premise 3 is this:

3j.   It cannot be that there is a justified belief that does not owe its justification to any other (justified) beliefs of the person who has it.

3j is synonymous with the sentence 'Foundationalism is false' and thus it is unavailable as a premise in a good argument against Foundationalism. Exploring the second option will take considerably longer.

If premises 2 and 3 both express the relation of existential support, we have these premises:

2e.   If there are basic beliefs, there is a justified belief, Y, and the person who has Y has no other (justified) belief, X, such that Y would not exist in the absence of (justified) X.
3e.   It cannot be that: there is a justified belief Y and the person who has Y has no other (justified) belief, X, such that Y would not exist in the absence of (justified) X.

3e is fine, but why should we suppose that 2e is true? It isn't just obvious. Passages [A] and [B] jointly suggest this argument for 2e:

---

[18] Others who argue in this way use the word "depends" and its cognates. They say: if Foundationalism is true, then there are basic beliefs, beliefs that can be justified without *depending on* other (justified) beliefs; but that's impossible—a belief could not so much as exist without *depending on* other (justified) beliefs. See, e.g., (Davidson 1986, 311), "Emphasis on sensation…flashing green light?," and (Lehrer 1990, 73-75). The distinction we draw in the next paragraph with respect to "supported by" can be applied to "depends on". For critical discussion of Davidson and Lehrer on this score, see (Howard-Snyder 2002, 546-53) and (Howard-Snyder 2004, 52-61), respectively.

[19] Actually, [B] goes beyond [A] by stating that, according to Foundationalism, "*you* can enjoy justification" in holding a basic belief only if you have some other justified beliefs (emphasis added). But Foundationalism is first and foremost a thesis about *doxastic* justification, not *personal* justification. We cannot just assume that the first implies the second; indeed, there are powerful reasons to suppose otherwise. See (Bach 1985, 251-52), (Engel 1992), and (D. Sosa unpublished).

[20] We find this distinction in, among other places, (Alston 1989b, 63-4) and (Audi 1993, 151).

2e1.   If there are basic beliefs, then there is a justified belief Y that is not *supported by* any other (justified) beliefs of the person who has it.

2e2.   If there is a justified belief Y that is not *supported by* any other (justified) beliefs of the person who has it, then that person (the person who has Y) has no other (justified) belief X such that Y would not exist in the absence of (justified) X.

2e follows.

Or does it? Perhaps not; perhaps the argument equivocates on the term "supported by". After all, 2e1 is uncontentiously true only if "supported by" expresses justificatory support; and, 2e2 is uncontentiously true only if "supported by" expresses existential support. Equivocation can be avoided, however. There are two options to explore on that score: first, read "supported by" in both 2e1 and 2e2 as expressing justificatory support; second, read "supported by" in both of those premises as expressing existential support. On the first option, we disambiguate the argument for 2e as follows:

2e1j.   If there are basic beliefs, then there is a justified belief Y that lacks *justificatory* support from other beliefs.

2e2j.   If there is a justified belief Y that lacks *justificatory* support from other beliefs, then the person who has Y has no other (justified) belief X such that Y would not exist in the absence of (justified) X.

On the second option, we disambiguate the argument like this:

2e1e.   If there are basic beliefs, then there is a justified belief Y that lacks *existential* support from other beliefs.

2e2e.   If there is a justified belief Y that lacks *existential* support from other beliefs, then the person who has Y has no other (justified) belief X such that Y would not exist in the absence of (justified) X.

Notice two things about these two arguments. First, premise 2e1j of the first argument is true by definition of "basic belief" (epistemic overdetermination aside), and premise 2e2e of the second argument is a tautology. Second, premise 2e2j of the first argument is equivalent to premise 2e1e of the second argument; both say, in short, that a justified belief's lacking *justificatory* support from other beliefs entails that it also lacks *existential* support. Hence, if one premise is false, so is the other. With that in mind, we choose to focus on premise 2e2j. What should we make of it?

At [C], Sosa expresses puzzlement over how it could be false. He says, in effect: if one insists that justified Y lacks *justificatory* support from (justified) X yet enjoys *existential* support from (justified) X, one has some explaining to do. But why does this position so puzzle Sosa? On the face of it, 2e2j's antecedent entails the *denial* of its consequent, given Sosa's [A] and [B], the upshot of which is 3e. According to 3e, if there is a justified belief Y, the person who has it *must* have some other (justified) belief X without which Y would not exist. If, like Sosa, we endorse 3e, then shouldn't we be at least *somewhat* sympathetic to the denial of 2e2j? We think so. Hence, we are puzzled by Sosa's puzzlement.

Of course, a proponent of 2e2j who holds that its antecedent entails the *denial* of its consequent may also hold that its antecedent *also* entails its consequent. This would nicely echo the common refrain that Foundationalism entails a contradiction. By our lights, though, it is such

19

a proponent of 2e2j who bears the explanatory burden here, not one who withholds on or denies 2e2j. After all, why suppose that Y's lacking justificatory support from other (justified) beliefs entails that it also lacks existential support? Or, to put it slightly differently: why suppose that Y's owing its existence to other (justified) beliefs entails that it owes it justification to other (justified) beliefs? We think that's the *real* puzzle to dwell on.[21]

3.2 The Bigger Picture

Let's return to Sosa's question: How can it be that justified Y could not exist in the absence of the (justified) Xs while it does not owe its justification to them? And let's approach this question by stepping back and taking a look at the bigger picture.

Like many of us, Sosa takes it that, in general, "beliefs would not so much as exist without an extensive supporting cast of related beliefs." Thus, for any allegedly basic belief, it could not exist without an extensive cast of related beliefs. Moreover, like many of us, Sosa assumes that, in general, given that a belief could not exist without an extensive cast of related beliefs, it cannot be justified "in the absence of justification for a good number of those supporting beliefs". Thus, for any allegedly basic belief, it could not be justified in the absence of justification for a good number of those beliefs that existentially support it. Suppose Sosa is right. *Why* is he right? *Why* suppose that, in general, a belief could not exist without an extensive cast of existentially supporting beliefs? And, assuming that's right, *why* suppose that a good number of those existentially supporting beliefs must themselves be justified? We hypothesize that any plausible explanation that is neutral between Foundationalism and its denial will *not* imply that a belief that is existentially supported by other justified beliefs must also be justified by them.

We have space for only one illustration of this point. Our explanation is contentious of course, as any other explanation would be.[22] But, be that as it may, it illustrates the point we wish to make while honoring Sosa's assumptions and his request for an explanation.

When one forms a belief, even the most mundane belief, one applies at least one concept. But one can apply a concept only if one has a grasp of it, at least somewhat. Grasping a concept, even somewhat, requires the ability to discriminate between things to which it applies and things to which it fails to apply. A disposition to perfect application is not necessary; but with respect to a wide variety of things to which it does and does not apply, one must be disposed to apply it correctly. Now, this capacity to discriminate consists in, among other things, the possession of certain beliefs: non-occurrent beliefs (say, expectations) about how things to which the concept applies would tend to behave under various conditions, as well as non-occurrent beliefs about its interrelations with other concepts. Call such beliefs "concept-possession beliefs". So, to return to our earlier example, if Evan has the belief, Y, that the ball is red, then Evan has the relevant concept-possession beliefs, the Xs, beliefs without which Y would not exist, beliefs associated with his grasp of the concepts of a ball, redness, and the relation expressed (here) by '…is…'. So it is that, in general, a belief could not exist without an extensive cast of existentially supporting beliefs.

---

[21] Compare (Pryor 2005, 183): "the fact that you have immediate justification to believe P does not entail that no other beliefs are required for you to be able *to form or entertain* the belief that P."

[22] Mark Moffett and Ryan Wasserman made this clear to us. We were happy to discover that at least one other epistemologist agrees with our illustration, and uses it to similar effect. See (Pryor 2005, 198, note 5). The point was also made in (Howard-Snyder 2002, 550-53).

But what if Evan's concept-possession beliefs are all unjustified? What if his beliefs about the correct application of the concepts of a ball, red, etc. are all unjustified? What if his beliefs about the relations between those concepts and other concepts are all unjustified? Then Evan is completely ignorant of how to use those concepts, in which case he has no grasp of them at all. So, if Evan has a grasp of the concepts required for his belief, Y, that the ball is red to exist, the relevant concept-possession beliefs of his, the Xs, must be justified. What holds for Evan's belief holds for all. So it is that the existentially supporting beliefs must themselves be justified, or at least a good number of them.

But if, in accordance with the story we just sketched, belief Y could not exist in the absence of the (justified) Xs, doesn't it seem possible for Y to be justified without owing its justification to any other beliefs of S, including the (justified) Xs? Is there a puzzle with this possibility? We fail to see one. At any rate, nothing in the story we sketched reveals why a belief that is existentially supported by other justified beliefs *must* also be justified by them.

The upshot, then, is this. The distinction between existential support and justificatory support provides the conceptual space for the possibility that, even though Y cannot exist in the absence of the (justified) Xs, Y does not *thereby* owe its justification to the (justified) Xs. Y owes its justification to them only if *they are a reason or ground for which S holds Y*. And that condition is not satisfied merely in virtue of S's *having* them. If, furthermore, the justificatory relation holds between Y and some non-doxastic state of S (i.e., if some non-doxastic state of S is the reason or ground for which S holds Y), then, given some facts relating those states and Y, Y can be justified without owing its justification to the (justified) Xs even though Y owes its existence to the (justified) Xs.

Naturally, we might well wonder what, *exactly*, those facts are that are supposed to relate those non-doxastic states and Y. As everybody already knows, different foundationalists offer different substantive answers to that question. It is no part of our aim here to defend any substantive version of Foundationalism. We have been concerned only to explain at a more abstract level how the possibility of basic belief is not vitiated by the mere fact that a basic belief cannot exist unless the person who has it has some further (justified) beliefs. We hope to have achieved this aim to the satisfaction of Sosa, thereby honoring his request for an explanation. No doubt there are other explanations as well.

4. Conclusion

Neither Klein's arguments nor the argument suggested by Sosa's words renders Foundationalism dubious. Of course, Foundationalism might be false all the same. All we can conclude here is that if we are to reject it for good reasons, we must look elsewhere for them.[23]

REFERENCES

Alston, W.P. 1989a. "Two Types of Foundationalism." *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 165-85. Reprinted in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, W.P. Alston. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 19-38.

…. 1989b. "Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?" *Philosophical Studies* 29 (1976): 287-305. Reprinted in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, W.P. Alston. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 39-56.

…. 1989c. "What's Wrong with Immediate Knowledge?" *Synthese* 55 (1983): 73-95. Reprinted in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, W.P. Alston. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 57-78.

…. 1989d. "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology." *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 179-221. Reprinted in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, W.P. Alston. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 185-226.

…. 1989e. "Epistemic Circularity." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1986): 1-30. Reprinted in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, W.P. Alston. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 319-49.

Audi, R. 1993. "The Foundationalism-Coherentism Controversy: Hardened Stereotypes and Overlapping Theories." In *The Structure of Justification*, ed. R. Audi. New York: Cambridge University Press: 117-64.

…. 1994. "Dispositional Beliefs and Dispositions to Believe." *Nous* 28 (1994): 419-34.

Bach, K. 1985. "A Rationale for Reliabilism." *Monist* 68 (1985): 246–63.

Bergmann, M. "What's *Not* Wrong With Foundationalism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68 (2004), 161-65.

BonJour, Laurence. 1985. *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

…. 2002. *Epistemology: Classical Problems and Contemporary Responses*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Davidson, D. 1986. "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge." In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 307-19.

Engel, M. 1992. "Personal and Doxastic Justification in Epistemology." *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992): 133–50.

Haack, S. 1993. *Evidence and Inquiry*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Howard-Snyder, D. 2002. "On an 'Unintelligible Idea': Donald Davidson's Case Against Experiential Foundationalism." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 40 (2002): 523-55.

…. 2004. "Lehrer's Case Against Foundationalism." *Erkenntnis* 60 (2004): 51-73.

Klein, P. 1999. "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons." *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 297-325.

…. 2003. "Skepticism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2003/entries/skepticism.

…. 2004. "What *IS* Wrong with Foundationalism is that it Cannot Solve the Epistemic Regress Problem." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2004): 166-71.

…. 2005. "Infinitism is the Solution to the Regress Problem." In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. M. Steup and E. Sosa. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 131-40.

Kvanvig, J., and C. Menzel. 1990. "The Basic Notion of Justification." *Philosophical Studies* 59 (1990): 235–61.

Lehrer, K. 1990. *Theory of Knowledge*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Leite, A. 2004. "On Justifying and Being Justified." *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004): 219-53.

Pryor, J. 2005. "There is Immediate Justification." In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. M. Steup and E. Sosa. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 181-202.

Sosa, D. Unpublished. "Epistemic Luck".

Sosa, E., and L. BonJour. 2003. *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Will, F. 1973. *Induction and Justification*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.