

# REASONING AND PERCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONALISM: COMMENTS ON ROBERT AUDI'S *SEEING, KNOWING, AND DOING: A PERCEPTUALIST ACCOUNT*

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**ABSTRACT:** This commentary considers Audi's treatment of four fundamental topics in the epistemology of perception: inference, the basing relation, the metaphysics of reasons and grounds, and the relationship between knowledge and justification.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ROBERT Audi's book *Seeing, Knowing, and Doing: A Perceptualist Account* (2020) offers a comprehensive picture of our perception, knowledge, and agency. At the center of the book is the idea that perception is a starting point for knowledge, as well as for many of our other epistemic and practical achievements. The resulting picture foregrounds perception in both philosophy of mind and epistemology. *Seeing, Knowing, and Doing* is wide-ranging yet careful, balancing respect for our intuitions with theoretical consistency and completeness.

Here, I will focus on Audi's treatment of four fundamental topics in the epistemology of perception: inference (§II), the basing relation (§III), the metaphysics of reasons and grounds (§IV) and the relationship between knowledge and justification (§V). In each section, I raise challenges and questions for Audi. There is far more of interest in the book than I have the space to cover here, so I have selected four topics that comprise a fundamental and interconnected set of issues.

## II. INFERENCE

In Part 1 of *Seeing, Knowing, and Doing*, Audi presents a view of perception that allows it to justify our actions and serve as the foundation for our knowledge. An important aspect of this view is the idea that perception is non-inferential. On Audi's view, while perception involves psychological processing, none of this processing constitutes inference. This view poses a contrast between perception, perceptual

belief, and intuition on the one hand (which Audi classifies as non-inferential) and non-perceptual beliefs on the other hand (some of which Audi classifies as inferential). The non-inferential nature of perception has important epistemic consequences. It allows perception to serve as an epistemic foundation. Because perception is not inferentially dependent on premises, it is what Audi calls “premise-independent” and so can foundationally ground our beliefs, knowledge, and actions.

A view of inference and its scope is central to this picture. Audi defines inference as “roughly a passage of thought from one or more propositions (the ‘premise set’) to another proposition on the basis of (or at least causally assisted by) a sense of some support relation between the former and the latter” (Audi 2020: 52). This definition aptly captures the central idea of inference. Audi also specifies that on his view, 1) inference can be intentional or non-intentional, and 2) an agent need not know that she is inferring. These are helpful specifications because they allow Audi’s definition to capture a wide range of what we would intuitively label inference, as well as a wide range of the mental processes studied under the label of inference in psychology.

Audi holds that from his definition of inference follows an important restriction on the scope of inference—that is, on the set of mental processes that can be classified as inferences. Audi writes that his view of inference implies “that a person’s inferring something entails some conscious event, even if momentary” (Audi 2020: 52). In the rest of this section, I will pose a challenge to this idea that inference requires a conscious event.

First, why might Audi’s definition of inference (as a passage of thought from one set of propositions to another proposition on the basis of a sense of some support relation between them) entail the presence of a conscious event? This entailment cannot be due to the idea that all thoughts must be conscious events because Audi allows for the existence of unconscious thought. So, there could be a passage from unconscious premise thoughts to unconscious conclusion propositions. Perhaps instead the necessary conscious event is the “sense of some support relation” between the premise and conclusion propositions. Whether a sense of a support relation must be conscious turns on what exactly “sense of some support relation” means. If it means any kind of indication that the premises support the conclusion, it could also be unconscious—e.g., another unconscious thought with the content—these premises support this conclusion—or an unconscious transition rule. If by “sense of some support relation” Audi means something that is necessarily consciously experienced, then there is a conscious element in every inference by definition. Audi leaves open the phenomenology of this sense of support, so it is worth considering what kind of sense of support is present in various kinds of inferences.

While some inferences are accompanied by a vivid conscious experience of the premises’ support for the conclusion, many ordinary inferences also lack such a conscious experience of support. To illustrate this point, consider an experienced couples therapist conducting a session with two clients. During the session, the therapist listens and gives advice based on what her clients say. She also unconsciously observes her clients’ body language through the lens of her training, and on that basis draws unconscious inferences about their relationship dynamic. She calibrates her advice accordingly. She of course has conscious visual experience

of her clients sitting before her, but her categorization of their positions as leaning inward or outward, holding their shoulders tensely or loosely, etc. is all unconscious. There is at some point an entirely unconscious passage of thought from unconscious premise propositions (e.g., the couple leaned away from each other when they were discussing finances) to a conclusion proposition (e.g., there are strains in the relationship around finances). Her entire conscious attention is dedicated to listening to the couple speak, so her thoughts about their body language unfold unconsciously, without even a conscious sense of support between the propositions. Her conclusion that there are strains in the relationship around finances is conscious, but none of her inferential process is.

The therapist's mental process here is naturally described as a kind of unconscious inference. It also fits Audi's definition of inference as a movement of thought from premise propositions to conclusion propositions on the basis of a sense of some support relation between them. Here the sense of support is itself unconscious, but it no less reflects the therapist's understanding of the relationship between body language and relationship dynamics. Labeling this mental process an inference properly captures the way in which the conclusion belief is epistemically dependent on the premise beliefs: if the premises were unjustified (e.g., if the therapist had poor training about the meaning of body language), the conclusion would inherit this unjustified status. This is because justification is transmitted from premises to conclusion, just like in a good inference. It seems right to think of this as a process that transmits justification because the conclusion belief (that there is a strain in the relationship) inherits its justification in part from the therapist's psychological training, which is itself a source of a robust, intellectual kind of justification. Labeling this mental process as an inference also gives the therapist proper epistemic credit for the use of her expertise.

Such entirely unconscious inferences seem ruled out by Audi's view of inference, yet there seems to be good reason to include them, namely their shared epistemic structures. It would be interesting to hear how Audi would fit such examples into his picture. Such examples also highlight the question of which aspects of an inference must be conscious, on Audi's view—the premise thoughts, the conclusion thoughts, or the sense of support between them?

### III. BASING

In this section, I discuss the role that epistemic basing plays in perception. On Audi's view, perception is non-inferential and plays a special foundational role. Audi's definition of inference specifies that inference is a kind of movement of thought, so unless one holds that perception involves thought, perception is non-inferential by definition. Here, I explore the idea that even without appeal to inference, perception can be epistemically dependent on other mental states (or on their propositional contents). This epistemic dependence alters perception's epistemic role, undermining its ability to provide an epistemic foundation.

Audi allows for the possibility that perception is sometimes epistemically dependent, but he denies that this epistemic dependence undermines perception's ability to provide an epistemic foundation. To understand how this works, first

consider Audi's distinction between basic and non-basic perceptions. In basic perceptions, objects or properties are directly represented. In non-basic perceptions, "the object of perception is represented in virtue of the crucially indicative properties" (Audi 2020: 22). For example, in a non-basic perception of anger, anger might be represented in virtue of certain facial features such as a wrinkled brow, piercing eyes, and a downturned mouth. Seeing-as, or what Audi calls "aspectual perception," is a kind of compound perception that includes forms of non-basic perception. For example, one might see a couch as comfortable in virtue of the curve of its cushions, or a dog as a German Shepard in virtue of the shape of its snout.<sup>1</sup>

Audi holds that some (but not necessarily all) aspectual perceptions are epistemically dependent, even though they are not inferred from premises. How might this work? When an aspectual perception is formed in response to indicative properties, it is sometimes non-inferentially based on those properties. Audi describes this kind of perceptual basing as both cognitive, in that it involves mental operations, and epistemic, in that it reflects a kind of evidential relation. Audi describes perceptual basing as "closely analogous to the sense in which one belief may be based on another when the latter expresses one's evidence for the former" (Audi 2020: 54). For example, a perception of a painting as a Mondrian might be based on one's seeing the shapes and colors of the painting, as well as on one's background knowledge of Mondrian's signature style.

However, Audi holds that there is also an important sense in which perceptual basing is disanalogous from what Audi calls "inferential basing" (the kind of basing that occurs in belief). Inferential basing is justificational basing. This means that it renders the conclusion state justified or unjustified, depending on the nature of the basing relation. For Audi, perceptual basing is not justificational basing. It is a kind of epistemic dependence relation that does not render the conclusion state justified or unjustified. Thus, on Audi's view even if an aspectual perception is based on prior states, it can still function as an epistemic foundation.

The distinction between transmitting and conferring justification is useful in clarifying Audi's picture. A state transmits justification if it transfers its own justificatory status to another state (perhaps in combination with justification transferred from other states). A state confers justification if it creates justification without itself having a justificatory status. For Audi, even though some aspectual perceptions are epistemically based, they nonetheless confer, rather than transmit, justification.<sup>2</sup>

I agree with Audi's diagnosis of aspectual perception as involving a kind of cognitive and epistemic basing. However, contra Audi, I believe that this perceptual basing is a kind of justificational basing, meaning it renders perception justified or unjustified. On my view, perceptions that are based on reasons transmit rather than confer justification, undermining perception's foundational epistemic role. I argue for this view in detail in Jenkin (2023), using the example of chess players whose perceptions of available moves on a chessboard are based on stored perceptual premises about the mappings of individual pieces at locations to moves. Here, I will offer some reasons to think that even granting Audi's set up of the issues, perceptual basing is justificational.

First consider inferential basing, which is the paradigmatic kind of justificational basing. Recall, according to Audi, that inference is "roughly a passage of

thought from one or more propositions (the ‘premise set’) to another proposition on the basis of (or at least causally assisted by) a sense of some support relation between the former and the latter” (Audi 2020: 52). So, we can understand inferential basing to be a basing relation that involves (1) a passage of thought, (2) a movement from a premise set of propositions to a conclusion proposition, and (3) a sense of some support relation between premises and conclusion.

Which of these elements of inferential basing are essential for transmission of justification? Elements (2) and (3) do the hard work of ensuring that justification is transmitted. Element (2), a movement from premise propositions to conclusion propositions, ensures that there is a transfer-like process that would allow justification to move from one state to another. Element (3), a sense of support between premises and conclusion, ensures that the mental transition is not a random one but is guided by epistemic relations. I argued in §II that this sense of support need not be conscious (it might take the form of an unconscious mental representation or psychological rule), but it must nonetheless drive the transition. These are the essential aspects of basing that transmit justification from the premises to conclusion.

Element (1), that there is a passage of thought, rather than a passage of perception (or another kind of mental state), does not itself seem essential to the transmission of justification. After all, we are considering whether perception involves justificational basing as an open question, so we should not restrict justificational basing to thought by definition. One might argue that some particular feature of thought is essential to basing, e.g., having propositional contents or having rich contents. But such features tend to be shared by more sophisticated forms of perception, such as aspectual perception.

So now we are equipped to ask, does the kind of basing that occurs in aspectual perceptual have the key elements two and three that seem to capture the transmission of justification? That is, does aspectual perception involve a mental movement from premise propositions to conclusion propositions on the basis of a support relation? I think it does. Consider one of Audi’s focal examples of aspectual perception: seeing an infant as being a victim of the Zika virus on the basis of seeing the infant as microcephalic (Audi 2020: 54). Here there is a mental movement from a set of premise propositions to a conclusion proposition. The set of premise propositions includes (1) that the infant is microcephalic, which is a content of perception, and (2) that microcephalia is indicative of Zika (or some similar proposition), which is a content of belief. The conclusion proposition is that the infant is a victim of Zika, which is a content of perception. There is an epistemic support relation between these premises, which guides the passage of perception. Setting aside my earlier arguments that consciousness is not required for transmission of justification, this may even be a partially conscious process, involving a fleeting sense of support between these premises as the aspectual perception emerges.

So, it seems that aspectual perception has all the requisite elements for justificational basing. Justificational basing renders the conclusion state justified or unjustified. If aspectual perceptions are themselves justified or unjustified, then they transmit, rather than confer, justification. This destabilizes aspectual perception’s role as part of an epistemic foundation. Zooming out from the issue of justificational basing, any kind of epistemic dependence of perception—even the

non-justificational kind of epistemic dependence that Audi grants—poses a threat to foundationalism. After all, what we want from an epistemic foundation is something epistemically independent from our prior beliefs such that it can be used as a check on our beliefs and be used to build unadulterated knowledge. Any kind of epistemic dependence, whether justificational or otherwise, threatens foundationalism. This includes both cases in which perception depends on prior knowledge but also cases in which perception depends on prior forms of perceptual justification.

How much does this epistemic dependence destabilize the perceptual foundationalism? Audi only allows that a limited class of perceptual elements can be based on prior perceptions: aspectual perceptions of emotions, natural kinds, categories, and normative properties, to name a few examples. Given what I have argued here, non-aspectual perception, or forms of aspectual perception that are not based on prior states, might still confer justification and play a foundational role. Basic perceptions of properties such as colors, shape, and motion may not involve basing and so may not be epistemically dependent. Rather than precluding the possibility of an epistemic foundation entirely, we might think of perceptual basing as pushing the epistemic foundation back to only basic, epistemically independent perceptions.

Given my arguments in this section, the important questions for Audi are: (1) what prevents aspectual basing from being justificational basing? and (2) why doesn't aspectual perception's epistemic dependence threaten its foundational role?

#### IV. REASONS AND GROUNDS

Audi distinguishes not only between types of basing, as discussed in §III, but also between types of epistemic bases. On Audi's view, there are two types of epistemic bases: reasons and grounds. Reasons are always propositions, whereas grounds can be mental states. For example, if you see smoke and form the belief that there is a fire, your seeing smoke is the grounds for your belief that there is fire. But, Audi holds, your seeing smoke is not your reason for believing there is fire. Your reason for believing there is fire is the proposition that you see smoke (Audi 2020: 75).

This is an appealing picture for several reasons. First, the view that reasons are propositions allows that false propositions can be reasons, which explains difficult cases of false reasons. Second, the view that reasons are propositions is compatible with our ordinary usage of the term "reason," which Audi is careful to respect. Third, the view that grounds can be mental states explains why we might sometimes cite our perceptions when asked why we believe something. Fourth, the view that grounds can be mental states explains the intuitive epistemic dependence of perceptual beliefs on perceptions themselves.

However, there is an alternative picture of the metaphysics of reasons that has many of the same benefits. The alternative picture is this: reasons are the sole kind of epistemic basis, and they are always propositions.<sup>3</sup> Mental states (such as perceptions or beliefs) epistemically relate agents to propositions (the propositions that are their contents), enabling those propositions to serve as agents' reasons. To put this another way, we might say that perception provides us with reasons, even though perception does not itself constitute reasons or grounds. For example, on this picture, the proposition "there is smoke" is a reason provided to me by my

visual perception, and it is the reason for my belief that there is fire. This picture eliminates the need to posit the separate category of grounds yet maintains a crucial epistemic role for perception and other mental states.

This alternative picture has the same four appealing features as Audi's picture. First, it allows for false reasons, because it shares with Audi's picture the idea that reasons can be false propositions. Second, it respects our linguistic usage of the term "reason." When asked why you believe there is fire, it is natural to say, "because there is smoke," reporting the proposition that is your reason. Third, this picture also explains why we sometimes cite our perceptions when asked why we believe something. When asked why you believe there is fire, it is also natural to say, "because I see smoke," because your visual experience is what provides you with your reason. Fourth, the idea that perception provides us with propositional reasons also explains the intuitive epistemic dependence of perceptual beliefs on perceptions themselves. This is because perceptions epistemically relate us to the reasons that support our perceptual beliefs.

So, this alternative picture seems to be on equally good footing as Audi's own. Audi does cite one additional motivation for positing grounds as a separate category from reasons: "Grounds do not invite the regress or circle encountered if one supposes that propositional attitudes are justified only by elements of the same truth-valued kind" (Audi 2020: 76). Grounds confer justification rather than transmit it, and so they prevent infinite epistemic dependence on further propositions. However, we could carry this same kind of regress-stopping idea over to the way perception relates us to propositional reasons. If some basic (i.e., non-aspectual) perceptions epistemically relate us to propositions without epistemic dependence on any other mental states, then those propositions might serve as regress-stopping reasons. The contrast between this picture and Audi's is that on this picture the regress-stoppers are propositions, just like other reasons, whereas on Audi's picture they are a fundamentally different kind of thing—mental states.

What advantage, then, does Audi's picture have over this alternative picture? Are grounds meant to simply be states that epistemically relate us to reasons, making the two pictures fundamentally the same? If not, why must we posit the independent category of grounds?

## V. KNOWLEDGED WITHOUT JUSTIFICATION

One of Audi's most interesting epistemological views is that we can have knowledge while lacking justification. He claims that knowledge without justification occurs in cases in which:

*S* has reliably grounded belief that . . . intuitively seems an instance of knowledge but (1) is not based on or even accompanied by any apparently evidential experience; (2) cannot be justified by *S* by appeal to any other accessible element, such as a track record; and (3) partly for this reason, *S* may be puzzled at having . . . This is not only a possible case of knowledge without justification, but one in which *S* (having no memory of the good track record we know of) would likely not even claim justification. (Audi 2020: 92)

Here Audi offers us a formula for identifying examples of knowledge without justification. While I am open to the idea that there can be knowledge without justification, I am not convinced that Audi's formula provides a perfect guide to such cases. More specifically, there are cases that fit Audi's formula yet do involve justification. One such example is Amia Srinivasan's "Racist Dinner Table" (Srinivasan 2020). Srinivasan describes a scenario in which Nour, a woman of Arab descent, goes to dinner at a white friend's home. All the other guests, including her friend's father, are polite to her, but afterward she cannot shake the thought that her friend's father is racist. She cannot pinpoint any particular comments he made or any particular actions he performed to support her belief that he is racist, but she has a strong conviction that she is correct. Let us stipulate that Nour's belief is reliably grounded. There is an appropriately reliable causal connection between the fact that Nour's friend's father is racist and Nour's belief that he is racist. She is not merely making a lucky guess but has the ability to reliably detect racism.

Given this reliable causal connection, Audi and Srinivasan would agree that Nour's belief amounts to knowledge. The interesting aspect of Srinivasan's example, though, is that it also evokes the intuition that Nour is justified in believing that her friend's father is racist.<sup>4</sup> Her justification plausibly comes from unconsciously picking up on subtle cues that indicate racism, even though she has no conscious experience of such cues.<sup>5</sup> However, Nour's case also meets Audi's criteria for knowledge without justified belief. (1) Nour's belief is not based on or even accompanied by any apparently evidential experience. Her experience may be on some definitions evidential, but it is not *apparently* evidential because nothing that is apparent to Nour would justify her belief. All she observes is politeness. (2) Nour's belief cannot be justified by any other accessible element, such as a track record. Nour does not know how skilled she is at detecting racism. If she has a track record, it is not accessible to her. (3) Nour may be puzzled as to why she has such a strong conviction that her friend's father is racist. So, Srinivasan's example poses a challenge to Audi. Nour meets Audi's criteria for knowledge without justification, yet she is intuitively justified.

Another example that illustrates this same point is Miranda Fricker's discussion of Carmita Wood (Fricker 2007). Wood experienced workplace sexual harassment in the 1970s, but she did not possess the concept of sexual harassment needed to understand what exactly she was going through. This is because the concept of sexual harassment was not yet in our common conceptual repertoire. Wood quit her job due to the trauma she experienced. She filed a claim for unemployment benefits, which was ultimately denied.

Wood's belief that she deserved unemployment benefits is another example of a belief that fits Audi's formula for knowledge without justification yet is in fact justified. (1) Wood had no apparently evidential experience for her belief. Because she lacked the concept of sexual harassment, her experiences of sexual harassment did not appear evidential to her. She could not articulate why her situation was problematic and why it merited receiving unemployment benefits. (2) She had no access to a reliable track record of knowing when she deserved unemployment benefits. (3) She might well have been puzzled as to why she believed she deserved unemployment given that she could not articulate her reasons. Nonetheless, her

experience of sexual harassment—even if not consciously categorized as such—seems to justify her belief that she deserves unemployment. Like Nour, Wood seems to have both knowledge and justification, while meeting Audi’s criteria for knowledge without justification.

Would Audi accept that the agents in these examples have justification, and hence that justification can occur without apparent evidential experience or other accessible elements? If so, the formula that Audi offers for identifying knowledge without justification needs modification.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The topics I have discussed here—the nature of inference, the basing relation, the metaphysics of reasons and grounds, and the relationship between knowledge and justification—only touch the surface of what is covered in *Seeing, Knowing, and Doing*. The book tells a complete story of the role of perception in our cognitive and epistemic lives. It also sheds light on our human experience of navigating an epistemically complex world, tying the theoretical to the experiential.

## ENDNOTES

1. “Comfortable” and “German Shepard” are examples of rich or high-level contents of perception. Audi argues that perception has rich contents in the book, and I will assume he is correct here.
2. Aspectual perceptions confer justification in the good case, in which the perceptual basing is of an epistemically good kind. Audi does not rule out unjustified seeing-as, in which the perceptual basing is of an epistemically bad kind.
3. For arguments for the view that perceptual reasons in particular are propositions, see Comesaña and McGrath 2016.
4. Of course, intuitions may vary. Srinivasan claims that Nour’s case evokes the intuition that she is justified, and the students and colleagues with whom I have discussed the paper have agreed.
5. Srinivasan considers the justification involved in this case to be external (i.e., a matter of worldly relations), whereas I would consider it to be unconscious, yet still internal to the individual’s mind. For the purpose of my discussion here this disagreement can be set aside.

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