

# A Myth resurgent: classical foundationalism and the new Sellarsian critique

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**Abstract** One important strand of Sellars’s attack on classical foundationalism from *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* is his thesis about the priority of is-talk over looks-talk. This thesis has been criticized extensively in recent years, and classical foundationalism has found several contemporary defenders. I revisit Sellars’s thesis and argue that is-talk is epistemically prior to looks-talk in a way that undermines classical foundationalism. The classical foundationalist claims that epistemic foundations are constituted by the agent’s set of looks-judgments. However, I argue that only a subset of these looks-judgments are even candidates to serve as foundations for the agent’s empirical knowledge, and membership in this subset is determined by the agent’s theory of how the world is. Thus, the epistemic force of the looks-judgments in this subset is dependent on the agent’s theory of how the world is. This means that these looks-judgments aren’t foundational at all, as the agent’s theory of how the world *is* is epistemically prior to the epistemic status of these looks-judgments. This is the sense in which judgments about how the world *is* are epistemically prior to judgments about how things *look*. This conclusion allows concrete elaboration of another of Sellars’s well-know (although not well-understood) claims: “I do wish to insist that the metaphor of ‘foundation’ is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former”.

**Keywords** Classical foundationalism · Sellars Wilfrid · Epistemology · Knowledge · Justification

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## 1 Classical foundationalism

Foundationalists can be divided into two camps. One camp advocates what we might call direct realist foundationalism (DRF). Richard Fumerton characterizes DRF as follows:

Let's define epistemological direct realism as the view that we have noninferentially justified beliefs in at least some contingent propositions describing the external physical world...A belief is noninferentially justified when its justification is not constituted, even in part, by the having of other justified beliefs. (Fumerton 2006, pp. 680–681)

As Fumerton notes, DRF has had a remarkable resurgence in the last decade or two. It has been defended, in various formulations, by William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, Michael Huemer, James Pryor, and others.<sup>1</sup>

The other camp advocates what I shall call classical foundationalism. As Ram Neta describes the view, “Classical internalist foundationalism seeks to ground all our knowledge of the world around us on our knowledge of the data given in our consciousness and of various a priori truths known by reflection alone” (Neta 2011, p. 7). Thus, according to the classical foundationalist, our foundational beliefs are not about external objects, but are instead about sensations, sense data, or other mental objects or phenomena; we then *infer* empirical beliefs from these non-inferential foundational judgments. Classical foundationalism, commonly associated with Descartes, has been historically the most common, having been defended by Russell, Price, and others; and is today defended by philosophers such as Richard Fumerton, Richard Feldman, Laurence Bonjour, Timothy McGrew, Evan Fales, and others.<sup>2</sup>

I have criticized DRF at length elsewhere<sup>3</sup>; the target of the present essay is classical foundationalism. Famously, foundationalism generally is the target of much of the first half of Wilfrid Sellars's “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.” In Part III (§§10–20), Sellars offers an account on which looks-talk does not constitute an autonomous ‘language game’, but is parasitic on is-talk. That is, one must be able to talk about how things are before one can talk about how things look; is-talk is conceptually prior to looks-talk.

Sellars's account has had many critics. In particular, these critics argue that while Sellars might have established the logical or conceptual priority of is-talks over looks-talk, it does not follow that is-talk is *epistemically* prior to looks-talk. Versions of this criticism can be found in Alston (1983, 2002), Bonevac (2002), and Pryor (2005).

In their commentary on *EPM*, deVries and Triplett write, “[W]e do not think that Sellars really intends to have presented a conclusion that any reasonable reader who had followed the course of his argument must now accept...Rather, we think that Sellars means to pull the reader out of old habits of thought. He is best read here

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Alston (1983, 1999), Huemer (2001), Plantinga (1993), and Pryor (2000).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Fumerton (2001a, b), Feldman (2004), Bonjour (2001), McGrew (2003) and Fales (1996). For recent criticisms of classical foundationalism, see Poston (2010, with a reply by Fumerton 2010), Ballantyne (2012), Markie (2009), Freeman (1996), and Sosa (2009, Chapt. 2).

<sup>3</sup> See Koons (2012, 2015).

as *suggesting* an alternative rather than *establishing* it to be the case” (2000, p. 23). Brandom makes a similar comment in his latest book: “In *EPM* Sellars does not try to support the strong modal claim that the various practices *must* be related in this way. He thinks that his alternative account of the relation between these idioms is so persuasive that we will no longer be tempted by the Cartesian picture. It is an interesting question, which I will not pursue here, whether his story can be turned into an even more compelling argument for the stronger claim he wants to make” (Brandom 2015, pp. 106–107).

In this paper, I want to attempt to provide this “more compelling argument.” Sellars has moved us most of the way down the road toward such an argument; if we begin at the point where he left us, I think a compelling argument can be constructed that is-talk is, in fact, epistemically prior to looks-talk in a way that undermines the classical foundationalist conception of empirical knowledge. In doing so, we will also be able to shed light on another well-known (though not well-understood) statement of Sellars’s: “I do wish to insist that the metaphor of ‘foundation’ is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former” (Sellars 1997, p. 78/§38).

The strategy of this paper is to be maximally concessive. I will not challenge the classical foundationalist’s claim that we form beliefs about the contents of our sensory experience; nor will I challenge her belief that our empirical beliefs<sup>4</sup> are inferred from these foundational looks-judgments. I do not take a stance on the alleged infallibility of these foundational looks-judgments, as the soundness of the following argument does not depend on their being claimed as infallible or incorrigible. However, I will argue that even having made all of these concessions, it can be shown that the structure of knowledge is more complicated than the classical foundationalist picture can admit.

## 2 Classical foundationalism and epistemic priority

The general structure of Sellars’s anti-foundationalist argument is to try to show that various sorts of background knowledge are epistemically prior to our observation judgments. That is to say, our observation judgments are only justified if, and to the extent, we can (and do) make other sorts of justified judgments. Call this the *argument from epistemic priority*. Here is a version of the argument from epistemic priority I have offered against direct realist foundationalism.<sup>5</sup> We will take this as our starting point, and from it, develop an argument against classical foundationalism.

It is a familiar point that observation is theory-laden. Often, what this means is not spelled out clearly, and there are several different notions of theory-ladenness. Let me focus here on one specific variety: observation is theory-laden in the sense

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, I use the term ‘empirical’ to delineate beliefs and concepts that apply, or are about, external objects; this use excludes beliefs about the phenomenological character of experience and phenomenological concepts. As an anonymous referee for *Synthese* has pointed out to me, the term ‘empirical’ hasn’t always been used in this way, and so it is perhaps necessary to clarify at the outset this terminological point.

<sup>5</sup> See Koons (2015).

that what observation belief one forms given a particular set of sensory stimuli is causally determined by the theories one holds.<sup>6</sup> For example, two of my students told me of a recent visit to the emergency room in which they observed a woman trying to cast demons out of someone who was experiencing a seizure in the waiting area. Clearly, this woman (upon reception of a certain set of stimuli) formed the belief that she was observing the outward signs of demonic possession. Presumably, a person better-versed in modern medicine would form the belief that the person was suffering from a specific type of (perhaps epileptic) seizure. So again, one's theory of the world can causally affect the content of one's perceptual beliefs.

But this version of theory-ladenness has significant epistemic consequences for direct realist foundationalism. Consider, as an example, the phenomenon of St. Elmo's fire, which is a glowing region of atmospheric electricity that appears on pointed objects (church steeples, airplane wings or propellers, etc.) during thunderstorms. Now consider two people, Smith and Jones, each observing the same phenomenon during a thunderstorm. Let us further suppose that Smith is well-read in science, is familiar with this type of atmospheric disturbance, and without hesitation judges the observed phenomenon to be St. Elmo's fire. Thus, we see the above-described form of theory-ladenness at work here: because of Smith's background theories, the stimulus he is presented with causes him to form a belief that is consonant with those theories. Jones's worldview, on the other hand, is a poorly-supported pastiche of superstition and the paranormal, which he has acquired from poorly-sourced websites and unreliable supermarket tabloids (tabloids of the sort that specialize in absurd stories about Elvis sightings, people giving birth to alien babies, and bizarre tales of the supernatural). With this background, Jones without hesitation judges the observed phenomenon to be a ghost. Again, the causal role of the background theories in determining what belief issues from a particular sensory stimulus is clear. But this is not the end of the story: this harmless-seeming form of theory-ladenness has serious consequences for direct realist foundationalism. It is clear, in this case, that Smith's observation is justified, and I think it is equally clear that it is justified because Smith's theory of the world that generates this particular belief in response to this visual stimulus is itself justified. Jones's perceptual belief, on the other hand, is clearly not justified, and it is not justified because it is generated by a theory that is itself not justified. Thus, the observational predicates ('ghost,' 'St. Elmo's fire,' etc.) we employ stand and fall with the theories that stand behind them. Thus, we are justified in employing these

<sup>6</sup> An anonymous referee has questioned whether this is universally true: "I look to the sky and see blue. Is this causally dependent on a theory I hold, on a set of beliefs? Perhaps, but another alternative is that it is the manifestation of a disposition I have to form certain beliefs based on certain experiences—a disposition that isn't itself a belief and isn't based on any belief." While we can certainly talk in terms of dispositions, the deeper point here is that these dispositions are tied to a particular conceptual repertoire—say, that of color—and that is why the disposition results in judgments of color, rather than judgments of temperature, distance, or salinity. And the main thrust of this paper will be that a disposition to form certain beliefs cannot result in *prima facie* justification unless the concepts embedded in the resulting beliefs are part of an *epistemically validated* theory. The mere disposition cannot in itself be justification conferring, if the resulting belief deploys concepts that are, at bottom, ones the agent is in generally not justified in deploying in perceptual judgments.

concepts in perception only to the extent that the theories in which these concepts are embedded are justified.<sup>7</sup>

It might be thought that the above argument trades on a conflation of propositional and doxastic justification<sup>8</sup>: that is, even though “That is a ghost” is not propositionally justified for Jones, it is nevertheless doxastically justified for him.<sup>9</sup> This objection is wrong, though. “That is a ghost” is neither propositionally nor doxastically justified for Jones. For if doxastic justification is to amount to *justification*—that is, to amount to a normative notion—then a person must be able to fall short of it. And given Jones remarkable failure to live up to reasonable epistemic standards, Jones lacks even doxastic justification for the belief, “That is a ghost.” (This is not to say that one couldn’t be doxastically justified in believing that one saw a ghost—if, for example, one was raised in a society, or a community, in which such beliefs were widely-held. But let us assume that this is not the case with Jones, and in the following instances of judgments deploying concepts like *ghost*, *unicorn*, etc.)

Now it may not be immediately obvious how the above argument against direct realist foundationalism has any bearing on classical foundationalism. After all, the classical foundationalist is not committed to our foundational beliefs being about objects in the world. Rather, for our classical foundationalist, foundational beliefs are about seemings or sensations. But if you bear with me for a moment, the relevance of the above argument will become apparent.

I think most classical foundationalists think of the relation between foundational beliefs and empirical beliefs working in this relatively unproblematic fashion: I seem to see (a lawn, a hamburger, a deer...); the best explanation of my experience is that there is (a lawn, a hamburger, a deer...); therefore, (probably) there is (a lawn, a hamburger, a deer...). But of course, having a ghostly or unicornly or leprechaunly appearance doesn’t make it probable at all that there is in fact a ghost or a unicorn or a leprechaun in front of one. The difference, of course, lies in whether one’s looks-judgment embeds concepts that are *epistemically validated*—that is, that one has some kind of epistemic license to deploy in empirical judgments, that one has some kind of reason to believe are part of a decent theory of the world.

<sup>7</sup> The issue is more complicated than a mere reliance on false or unjustified background beliefs. A child who believes that there will be gifts in her stocking, and believes they will be there because Santa put them there, may well be justified in believing the gifts are there, even though her theory of how they got there is based on false premises. But there is a difference between, for example, having a faulty etiology, and deploying concepts (like *ghost* or *unicorn*) which are themselves part of a bad theory. The girl may well be justified in believing there will be presents; she is probably not justified in believing that among these presents, there might be a unicorn. (Assuming, of course, that the girl is not *doxastically* justified in believing in the existence of unicorns, an issue I address in the next paragraph.)

<sup>8</sup> An experience propositionally justifies a proposition if it provides justification for that proposition, even if it does not lead the agent to believe that proposition. Doxastic justification is more contentious: for some authors, belief B is doxastically justified for S *iff* B is propositionally justified, and the agent believes B on the basis of whatever propositionally justifies B. However, the present objection relies on a more relativized version of doxastic justification: experience E doxastically justifies belief B for S *iff* E makes B rational for S in light of S’s ancillary theoretical commitments (regardless of whether E *propositionally* justifies B), and S believes B on the basis of E.

<sup>9</sup> Anjana Jacob raised this objection in conversation.

It may seem to Jones as though he has a ghostly, or unicorny, or leprechaunly experience. But if Jones's theory of the world is such that Jones could not be doxastically justified in applying any of these concepts in an empirical judgment, then 'foundational' beliefs employing these concepts now become fundamentally unsuited to play the foundational role allotted to them in the classical foundationalist theory. If Jones is totally lacking in doxastic justification for believing in ghosts, unicorns, or leprechauns, then any looks-judgments employing such concepts will be devoid of epistemic force, will not be able to justify a corresponding empirical judgment. Such looks-judgments simply don't provide evidence for the corresponding empirical judgments, because they employ concepts which themselves are part of epistemically bankrupt theories.

This isn't the point (which any advocate of classical foundationalism will gladly acknowledge) that inference from appearance to reality is defeasible. The point is more fundamental: a concept that is fundamentally divorced from empirical support will, as argued above, rob a looks-judgment in which it is deployed of epistemic force. Thus, if an agent judges, "I am having an appearance of a ghost," where the agent's theory of ghosts is very poorly supported, then *ghost* is not (as it were) a justifiable content, and this looks-judgment cannot serve as a premise to the empirical belief, "There is a ghost."

To be sure, in most cases, we can happily concede that an appearance-of-P can support an inference to the probable-reality-of-P. Thus, if I have an appearance-of-a-deer, then probably, there really is a deer (*ceteris paribus*). But notice why such looks-judgments are, in fact, suitable to play this role in these cases: because in the great majority of cases, looks-judgments employ concepts that are well-established empirical concepts. That is to say, these concepts are part of theories that are themselves well-grounded or well-justified. But a looks-judgment that does not employ such concepts, or that employs concepts that are not part of a well-grounded empirical theory, is simply not *relevant* to any further empirical judgments one might want to justify. Thus, the epistemological relevance of looks-judgments depends on their deployment of concepts which are part of justified empirical theories. Thus, the epistemological relevance of looks-judgments depends, ultimately, on the prior justification of these empirical theories in which these perceptual concepts are embedded.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This is why I think even Fumerton's more sophisticated classical foundationalism is susceptible to this criticism. On his view, "one has a noninferential justification for believing P when one has the thought that P and one is acquainted with the fact that P, the thought that P, *and* the fact which is the thought that P's corresponding to the fact that P" (Fumerton 2001a, pp. 13–14). While he notes that this formulation implies that foundational beliefs are infallible, he later walks this back in response to criticism from Plantinga, conceding that "one can have noninferential justification for believing that one is in a certain sensory state, where that justification consists in the fact that one is directly acquainted with a different, but *very similar* sensory state" (Fumerton 2001b, p. 74). The criticism of this paper is that Fumerton overlooks another possibility: one could be acquainted with a sensory state (say, of redness) and instead of having the thought 'red,' one could have the thought, 'presence of demonic spirits.' Now Fumerton is cast on the horns of a dilemma. On the one horn, Fumerton can say this foundational belief is not justified. It can't be unjustified *merely* because the resulting belief is false; Fumerton has conceded the possibility of justified-but-false beliefs. The belief must fail to be justified because it deploys concepts that are not epistemically validated. But this just means, again, that the justification of the theory embedding the concepts deployed in a supposedly foundational belief is epistemically prior to the justification of that belief, rendering it non-foundational. On the other horn of the dilemma, Fumerton can say the belief is justified. But then, as I have

So there is really a sleight of hand here, in classical foundationalism. Supposedly, the class of foundational beliefs is the class of all looks-judgments. The justification of these (we may grant) does not depend on the prior justification of any proposition or theory. But the class of *actual* foundational beliefs—beliefs that are *actual* candidates for premises to justify empirical judgments—is restricted to the class of looks-judgments deploying concepts that are part of an epistemically validated theory of the world.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the epistemic force of these looks-judgments is dependent on the justification of a body of theory—meaning that this restricted class of epistemically-efficacious looks-judgments is not foundational at all. We have our conclusion of epistemic priority, and we have also fleshed out, in a plausible sense, a Sellarsian argument to the effect that talk of how things *are* is epistemically prior to talk of how things *look*.<sup>12</sup>

### 3 Simple classical foundationalism

Gregory Dawes has objected to my anti-direct realist foundationalist argument on the grounds that while perceptual beliefs involving what he calls ‘low-level observation reports’ are theory-laden, they can nevertheless be foundational, since they employ concepts which are virtually universally accepted and are not at all controversial. Dawes writes,

Koons fails to distinguish between different kinds of perceptual belief. It may be true that all perceptual beliefs are, in some sense, theory-laden, but the theories involved differ. While some are contested, others are uncontroversial: they represent the kind of ‘common-sense’ theory that guides our everyday behaviour. Anthropologist Robin Horton refers to this as ‘primary theory’ and suggests that it remains relatively constant throughout history and across cultures. Beliefs based on this kind of theory are not incorrigible, but they can play a foundational role. They are beliefs we generally share and that can be referred to in order to settle higher-level theoretical disputes. The clash between Smith and

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Footnote 10 continued

been arguing, the belief is not suited to serve a foundational role, since it will be unable to justify further empirical claims (since the belief deploys concepts that are part of a theory—the theory of demons—that is so ill-supported).

<sup>11</sup> An anonymous referee for *Synthese* has suggested the advocate of classical foundationalism might make the following move: “We start with the class of all looks-judgments. This won’t be a consistent set, so we have to do some pruning. You recommend pruning by keeping only those looks-judgments that utilize concepts of an epistemically validated empirical theory of the world, which is inconsistent with foundationalism. What if someone says the right pruning strategy is to accept the maximally consistent set of looks judgments, so that we need not look outside the larger set itself?” I suggest two responses: first, it is not clear that looks judgments can be inconsistent, in any real sense, without important empirical considerations of compatibility and incompatibility. Second, by importing coherentist considerations, this move makes the coherence of the set prior to the epistemic force of any particular looks-judgment, making said judgments non-foundational.

<sup>12</sup> And, in an ironic turn, the foundational beliefs or looks-judgments turn out to be those that are in principle *fallible* (because the concepts they employ turn out to be part of a theory that could be overturned). I will not make much of this point, though, because not all contemporary foundationalists insist on the infallibility or incorrigibility of foundational beliefs.

Jones occurs, not at the level of these foundational beliefs, but at a higher level of theory-driven belief formation. (Dawes 2015, pp. 62–63)

This objection suggests that we should focus our attention on a particular variety of classical foundationalism, arguably the most plausible version. On this version, which I shall call simple classical foundationalism (SCF), our basic perceptual judgments do not involve complex concepts (*policeman*, *Chevy Nova*, *television*, etc.), but instead involve only basic properties of objects, such as color, shape, and so forth. Thus, one's basic perceptual judgments are not of the form, "I am having the appearance of a tomato," but instead, "I am having a red, round, bulgy appearance." SCF has probably been historically the most common version of classical foundationalism.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding Dawes's objection, I think SCF is vulnerable to the same objection we have been discussing. However, developing our argument against SCF will require us, once again, to take a detour through direct realist forms of foundationalism. Let us begin by noting that even Dawes admits that our low-level observation reports are theory laden.<sup>14</sup> Paul Churchland, a student of Sellars's, is particularly eloquent on this point.<sup>15</sup> He argues, convincingly, that the meaning of observation predicates—even the simplest ones like 'red'—is not given in sensation, but is instead determined by the network of conceptual connections with which they are involved. Churchland asks us to imagine an alien race that sees in the infrared spectrum, and therefore is able to visually detect temperature, but has sensations whose intrinsic character ranges from white (for hot) to black (for cold). (This is supposing it even made sense to compare the intrinsic quality of their perceptions to ours.) Churchland points out that it would be absurd to translate their observation sentences as reporting objects' colors (black, white, and gray) rather than their temperatures. (And it would be grievously uncharitable, too, since most of the aliens' observation reports would then turn out to be false, by our lights.) This seems like a solid demonstration that the meaning of observation predicates is determined by their place in a network of theory; even simple observation predicates like 'red' are thoroughly theory-laden. Churchland goes

<sup>13</sup> However, not all contemporary advocates of classical foundationalism advocate SCF. McGrew does, but Fumerton does not, while others take no clear stance on the issue.

<sup>14</sup> Although I am taking most of my cues in this paper from Sellars, Sellars would not describe our low-level observation reports as theory-laden, since he reserves the term 'theoretical' to describe objects that are unobservable. [As Brandom writes, "So observational concepts, ones that have (at least some) noninferential circumstances of appropriate application, can be thought of as *inference laden*. It does not follow, by the way, that they are for Sellars for that reason also *theory laden* (2015, p. 104).] For Sellars, of course, this is a methodological distinction rather than an ontological one; an object (like Neptune) can start out as theoretical, and then become observable. But I think the difference between Sellars and myself is terminological rather than substantive. The point I am trying to capture when I call observation predicates like 'red' theory-laden is that even the simplest observation predicates are inferentially-articulated in a way such that use of them commits us to certain claims about the way the world is. Thus, if we predicate 'red' of something, we are committed to its being colored; we are not thereby committed to its being hot, or cold, or far away. Thus, even use of our low-level observation predicates involves certain empirical commitments (which are always, in principle, contestable), and it is in this sense that I describe these predicates as theory-laden. It would be more accurate, I suppose, to describe them as 'in-principle-contestable-empirical-commitment laden', but for obvious reasons I will use 'theory laden' as a shorthand for the preceding. I am grateful to Carl Sachs and Ken Westphal for pressing me on this issue.

<sup>15</sup> See Churchland (1979, Chapt. 1).

so far as to argue that various of our ordinary perceptual concepts, like *warm*, embody contradictions and stand in need of replacement by successor theories and concepts. (And, of course, Sellars seems to hold that many elements of the manifest image could be replaced with a better scientific articulation of the world.)

The admission that even our low-level observation reports are theory-laden undercuts the claim that they can be foundational. Since they are theory-laden, we must conclude that we are justified in deploying these concepts in perceptual judgments only to the extent that the theories in which these concepts are embedded are justified. The case of (e.g.) color concepts and the case of the ghost/St. Elmo's fire are not different in kind. The fact that a theory (such as a common-sense theory of colors) is justified all the way up to its eyeballs should not conceal the fact that it is a *theory*, and it is *justified*; and hence that all our deployments of color concepts in perceptual judgments have the weight of this justification standing behind them (however much we may take this justification for granted). Which is to say, this mass of justification is epistemically prior to the justification of perceptual judgments employing color concepts, and is part of what makes these judgments so secure.

Given this (and returning now to SCF), the argument from the previous section can be extended to this section. Looks-judgments, on the classical foundationalist scheme, can only have evidential import vis-à-vis empirical claims if the concepts deployed in these judgments are epistemically validated. Of course, most such concepts are epistemically validated, as they are backed up by overwhelmingly-justified folk theories. But again, looks-judgments are only capable of serving as epistemological foundations if, and to the extent that, the concepts employed in such judgments are part of a justified theory of the world. A person who judges, "I am having the appearance of a red, bulgy object" can only then use this judgment to infer that there is probably a red bulgy object because *red* is a thoroughly-established empirical concept. Thus, the justification of this theory is prior to the epistemic force of the perceptual judgment employing these perceptual concepts—meaning that these perceptual judgments aren't foundational after all.

Thus, SCF is also involved in a sleight of hand. The claim is that the class of foundational beliefs is the class of all looks-judgments. However, only a subset of looks-judgments are candidates for foundational status, and the members of this subset are picked out by identifying those judgments that deploy epistemically validated concepts. Again, though, this means that these 'foundational' looks-judgments aren't foundational at all, since the epistemic status of the empirical theories in which these concepts are embedded is prior to the epistemic status of the looks-judgments in which these concepts are deployed.

#### 4 The conceptual content of foundational beliefs

A natural objection arises at this point: the advocate of SCF can argue that the concepts employed in looks-judgments are not empirical concepts at all, but rather phenomenal concepts. That is to say, when I judge "I am having an appearance of red," the word 'red' here appeals to the quality of my sensation, and is not an empirical<sup>16</sup> concept referring

<sup>16</sup> See note 4 above on my use of the term 'empirical' in this context.

to a property of objects at all. Thus, the use of this term need not commit me to redness signifying any specific empirical property (say, color, as opposed to temperature, or distance, or something else). ‘Red’, as used in a looks-judgment, does not carry any contestable (empirical) theoretical content, but refers directly to the contents of my experience. Chisholm (1957, Chapt. 4) calls this the ‘non-comparative’ sense of the looks-locution; Alston (2002) calls this the ‘phenomenal’ looks-concept.

Sellars, of course, dissents, making the very strong claim “that the sense of ‘red’ in which things *look* red is, on the face of it, the same as that in which things *are* red” (Sellars 1997, p. 35/§12). By contrast, Alston argues,

It does look as if any concept of appearing for which the phenomenal concept is fundamental...does not use ‘red’ in ‘X looks red’ in the same sense it bears in ‘X is red.’ But that is not to say that it is used in a different sense either (as detachable predicate). On the contrary, the most plausible interpretation would be that ‘looks red’ is treated as a single semantic unit, rather than being constructed out of combining ‘looks’ with a predicate ‘red’ that could occur in other phrases...If we are looking for an appearance concept in which when something appears red, it is in just the sense in which a physical object would be red, we have to leave phenomenally looking red altogether and move to something like ‘That looks to be red,’ which is outside the group of look concepts for which the phenomenal concept is fundamental, but means something like ‘So far as I can tell, that is red.’ (Alston 2002, p. 81)

Thus, for Alston, “the phenomenal concept is one that gives the intrinsic character of looking red” (Alston 2002, p. 81), and does not have content by reference to empirical objects.

In line with my policy of being maximally concessive to the classical foundationalist, I am willing to concede that our empirical knowledge may rest on a foundation of beliefs involving an *unstructured* sense of ‘looks x’—that is, a sense of (e.g.) ‘looks red’ where ‘red’ does not make the same contribution to ‘looks red’ as it does to a judgment that something *is* red. There is, however, a fundamental problem with appealing to phenomenal or non-comparative looks-talk to shore up SCF. This problem takes the form of a dilemma concerning the content of ‘red’ or ‘looks red’ as it appears in foundational beliefs. Either

(a) ‘looks red’, though unstructured, is derived from or constructed on analogy from ‘is red’, and so has a conceptual connection to ‘is red’;

or

(b) ‘looks red’ is fundamentally conceptually autonomous from ‘is red’, and our concept of ‘is red’ is wholly derived from our concept of ‘looks red’.

Either horn of the dilemma presents, I will argue, insuperable difficulties for SCF.

Let us begin with the first horn. As we saw above, Alston denies that the word ‘red’—used in a phenomenal looks-judgment—has the same sense as ‘red’ when used in an empirical judgment. (Indeed, he denies that a judgment of ‘looks red’ is decomposable into separate elements of ‘looks’ and ‘red’.) However, he clearly seems

to think that the phenomenal concept is derived from, or constructed on analogy from, the empirical concept. Thus, Alston writes,

If someone doesn't know what it is like for something to look red, what qualitative distinctiveness attaches to that way of looking, we must use one of the other concepts to initiate him into the language game. We must present some red objects to him under standard conditions (having ascertained that his optical system is functioning normally, if necessary) and tell him that looking red is looking like that. (Alston 2002, p. 76)

Sellars, of course, would argue that this passage from Alston demonstrates the conceptual (and hence epistemic) priority of empirical over phenomenal concepts, but we have already seen that this move is widely contested, and so will not follow him here. However, this move—the attempt to build our knowledge on a foundation of phenomenal looks-judgments—is subject to the same criticism offered against other versions of classical foundationalism in Sects. 2 and 3.

Let us begin by observing, as we have before, that “to be epistemically basic (i.e., justified in a way that relies on no other justified beliefs)” is only part of the job description of a basic belief in classical foundationalism. If that were the only role a basic belief played in the theory, foundationalism wouldn't be a very interesting theory of knowledge. Rather, these basic beliefs are *also* supposed to serve as epistemic foundations for our empirical knowledge, which is to be inferred (defeasibly, to be sure) from these foundations.

Furthermore, although looks-judgments do not employ empirical concepts, many of them wear on their sleeves their connections to the various empirical judgments for which they are available as premises; this is in virtue of the conceptual connections we noted above between empirical concepts (like *is-red*) and phenomenal concepts (like *looks-red*). Thus, red appearances will, *ceteris paribus*, be evidence for the presence of—what kinds of objects?—red objects, of course. The connection between red appearances and red objects isn't some kind of lucky happenstance; nor is it merely a kind of empirically-discovered correlation of independent properties (like ‘tasting sour’ and ‘having a pH of less than 7’). The phenomenal concept *looks-red* is derived from the empirical concept *is-red*, and so if a judgment of ‘looks red’ is going to stand as evidence for *any* empirical claim, it is going to stand as evidence for the claim that something *is* red. This is true even if we construe *looks-red* as a non-comparative concept (albeit one that, as Alston notes, we must learn by ostension, and which—while having no empirical content of its own—has the content it does *by analogy to* related empirical concepts).

But now it should be clear that it matters what empirical concept our phenomenal concept is derived from. If the phenomenal concept *looks-red* is derived from an empirical concept *is-red* that is not itself empirically validated, then an experience of *looking red* will not be able to support inferences to the instantiation of the empirical concept. Thus, even if we focus our attention on phenomenal concepts, the empirical validation of the empirical concepts from which these phenomenal concepts are derived has a fundamental bearing on the ability of these phenomenal concepts to play their central role in a foundationalist epistemology.

Thus, one cannot infer “A is red” from “I have an appearance of red...”, if by “is red” one means “is imbued with the power of demons,” or “is far away.” This fact can be obscured by the fact that virtually nobody conceptualizes simple seemings in such a weird way. But as I noted in Sect. 3, the fact that a theory (like our theory of basic perceptual concepts) is justified to the eyeballs, and few (if any) people seriously entertain rival theories, should not blind us to the fact that it is still a theory, and justified, and this justification is *epistemically prior* to justificatory power of phenomenal concepts as deployed in ‘foundational’ looks-judgments. Thus, even conceding an unstructured use of ‘looks red’, if this use has the conceptual connection to ‘is red’ envisioned by Alston, SCF is undermined. And this is true even given the concession that ‘red’ doesn’t have the same meaning in both phrases.

This takes us to the second horn of the dilemma. On this horn, the advocate of classical foundationalism can deny that phenomenal looks-concepts have their content derivatively from or by analogy with related empirical concepts. Thus, ‘looks-red’ is not defined in terms of its relation to ‘is-red,’ but purely in terms of its relation to a subjective, private sensation. Such an account presumably holds that an account of ‘is red’ is ultimately constructed out of ‘looks red’. So there is a relation of conceptual dependence, but it only goes in one direction: is-talk is conceptually parasitic on looks-talk, but not vice-versa.

Even if we concede that all of this is true, does this represent a winning strategy for SCF? In answering this question, we must be careful to demarcate metaphysical and epistemological questions. As Peacocke (1984) argues, “One should not assume that definitional priority and cognitive priority must coincide” (377). As a metaphysical matter, ‘is-red’ may be defined in terms of ‘looks-red’.<sup>17</sup> However, it also seems clear that if someone doesn’t understand what it is for something to look red, the only way to introduce her to this concept is to acquaint her with objects that are red and to say, “Looking red is looking *like that*.” All of this is perfectly compatible with conceding that “is red” is defined in terms of “looking red”, and also that “looks red” is unstructured. As a metaphysical matter, ‘is-red’ may be defined in terms of ‘looks-red’. But even if this is true as a claim about what colors are, it is equally true that “‘red’ has to be learned before certain concepts of experience” (Peacocke 1984, p. 377).<sup>18</sup> Thus, the concept *looks-red* one employs in foundational judgments, while unstructured, and while *definitionally* prior to *is-red*, is learned in terms of *is-red* and has its cognitive content for the user in terms of *is-red*. Thus, it seems like the second horn of the dilemma leads back to the first horn. When an agent forms a belief involving the concept *looks-red*, this belief has its content derivatively from the notion of *is-red*, due to the cognitive priority of the latter over the former.

One might worry that this second horn of the dilemma is merely the old epistemological problem of knowing other minds. However, as Hyslop (2016) writes, “the problem of other minds is concerned with the fundamental issue of what entitles us to our basic belief that other human beings do have inner lives rather than whether we are able in specific cases to be sure what is happening in those inner lives” (2). The

<sup>17</sup> Peacocke defines being red in terms of being red’, and holds that ‘looks red’ is an altogether different (and structured) notion.

<sup>18</sup> Peacocke attributes this view to Wittgenstein, but seems to endorse it himself.

issue is not how we know that Smith or Jones has a mind. The question is how Smith or Jones can have a belief with the content *looks-red* antecedent to his introduction to the social world of objects that are red.

One final point: I have argued that the justification of our empirical theory is epistemically prior to the justification of our observation reports (even if these reports are purely about sensations or other internal states). No doubt, this raises the specter of circularity for many readers: our empirical theory rests (epistemically) on our observation reports; but the former is also, in an important sense, epistemically prior to the latter. Some have thus read Sellars as embracing a coherence theory of justification.<sup>19</sup> Of course, coherentism has its own problems. In fairness to Sellars, he claims that he is neither a foundationalist nor a coherentist.<sup>20</sup> Whether his position avoids the pitfalls of both views is a topic for another paper. But whatever the status of Sellars's positive epistemological project, I have argued that he gives us the tools to see how classical foundationalism cannot succeed as an account of the structure of knowledge.

## 5 Conclusion

What I have tried to do here is to elaborate the sense in which the epistemic status of our theory of how things actually *are* is prior to the epistemic status of looks-judgments. Thus, even granting that empirical beliefs rest on looks-judgments, looks-judgments *simpliciter* are not themselves foundational. Rather, only a subset of looks-judgments are—namely, those that employ epistemically validated concepts. Now, it will turn out for most of us that this subset of looks-judgments comprises most of our actual looks-judgments. But this is a mere reflection of the fact that most of us are pretty good at only employing epistemically validated concepts in our perceptual judgments, and it should not obscure the fact that the epistemic validation of these concepts is a necessary condition on these perceptual judgments having epistemic force. Which, in turn, implies that the epistemic status of the empirical theories embedding these concepts is prior to the epistemic status of these looks-judgments, rendering them non-foundational.

This conclusion also allows us to illuminate another of Sellars's somewhat oracular pronouncements: “I do wish to insist that the metaphor of ‘foundation’ is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former” (Sellars 1997, p. 78/§38). Observation reports rest on “other empirical propositions” in the sense that the concepts we deploy in observation reports must be part of a well-justified theory for the observation report itself to be justified.<sup>21</sup> But again, there is a sense in which empirical propositions rest

<sup>19</sup> For example, Poston (2012).

<sup>20</sup> “One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on the tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do” (Sellars 1997, pp. 78–79/§38). Burstein (2006) develops the argument that Sellars is neither a foundationalist nor a coherentist.

<sup>21</sup> One might worry that on the present account, a rival theory could only with great difficulty overthrow a well-entrenched theory, since it is difficult to see how one could ever be justified in ‘seeing’ the elements

on observation reports: it is not as though we *infer* the existence of rabbits in a field; we must actually *see* them to know that they are there.

These two conclusions—our elaboration of the Sellars quote in the previous paragraph, and our conclusion of the epistemic priority of is-talk over looks-talk—are two sides of the same coin. The (partial) epistemic priority of background theory over the concepts deployed in observation judgments underlies and explains both of these conclusions. This epistemic priority, as we have seen, provides an account of empirical knowledge that is fundamentally inhospitable to foundationalism of all stripes, both classical and direct realist. Sellars’s work remains a rich vein to mine for philosophical insights.

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Footnote 21 Continued

of the new theory. I think that it is a strength of the present account that it helps explain why, precisely, theory change is so difficult and philosophically puzzling. Although theory change is far too large of a topic to undertake here, I take it to be a commonplace in the philosophy of science that novel theories often have trouble gaining epistemic traction against well-entrenched theories; and writers as far back as Kuhn have argued that a new theory cannot take epistemic grip until the old theory is weighted down by many anomalies and is ripe for being overtaken.

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