

## Precis of perception and basic beliefs

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This book is concerned with a cluster of issues: the distinction between perception and inference; the role of nondoxastic experiential states in perceptual belief and perceptual justification; the nature of epistemologically basic beliefs<sup>1</sup>; and a famous class of counterexamples to reliabilism involving agents with clairvoyance or other strange cognitive powers. What these issues have in common, I think, is that the central philosophical problems they generate are all solved by singling out a certain class of cognitive systems, or modules. The outputs of these special modules are epistemologically basic beliefs. Perceptual modules constitute a subset of this special class, and what it is to be a perceptual belief is to be the output of one of these perceptual modules. Thus, all perceptual beliefs are basic, though not all basic beliefs are perceptual. The features that distinguish these modules have nothing to do with conscious experience, so the theory defended here makes room for a kind of “zombie epistemology”: even zombies (who are lacking in conscious experiences altogether) can have perceptual beliefs—and justified perceptual beliefs—provided that they have (reliable) perceptual modules.

My theory of basicity is an externalist one, and although it could be incorporated into a nonreliabilist epistemology, one selling feature is that it solves a long-standing problem for reliabilism. My “Inferentialist Reliabilism” holds that reliability is sufficient for the prima facie justification of basic beliefs, while nonbasic beliefs must be the result of a reliable inferential process that takes justified beliefs as inputs. Clairvoyance-type objections to reliabilism (BonJour 1985; Lehrer 1990) show that process reliability is not sufficient for justification, but because the kinds of modules that appear in clairvoyance-type cases are not the

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<sup>1</sup> A basic belief is one that does not depend for its prima facie justification on evidential connections to other beliefs.

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kinds that produce basic beliefs, the cases are not counterexamples to my Inferentialist Reliabilism.

My view is a foundationalist form of reliabilism. Most reliabilist theories are foundationalist in structure, but only degenerately so, in that they allow for basic beliefs without drawing a clear distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs and without insisting on the nonbasicity of any beliefs. Mine does insist that some beliefs are nonbasic and therefore in need of evidential support from other beliefs. Although this is a significant concession to internalism, my theory remains staunchly externalist and nonevidentialist. Basic beliefs, on my view, are always ungrounded, even when justified. This is at odds with some forms of reliabilism and most forms of foundationalism. “Experientialism” holds that basic beliefs derive evidential support from nondoxastic experiences. Although popular with reliabilists and internalists alike, experientialism is deeply flawed.

The “Grounds Principle” holds that justification requires some ground, or reason, that serves as the agent’s evidence for a belief. The “Belief Principle” holds that only beliefs can serve as grounds. Doxasticism is the conjunction of both of these principles, and whereas the experientialist embraces the Grounds Principle and denies the Belief Principle, I endorse the Belief Principle, but also the denial of doxasticism; together these entail that the Grounds Principle is false. Experientialism and evidentialism are therefore false as well.

The book contains several arguments against experientialism. One is a modified version of the Sellarsian dilemma, though now pressed into the service of an externalist rather than a coherentist epistemology. Another argument starts with the intuitively plausible claim that zombies and other creatures lacking conscious experiences can nevertheless have justified empirical beliefs. Even normal, real-life agents might have perceptual knowledge (justified belief) of *x* without having an experience of *x*. Another argument relies on perceptual learning cases where two agents have identical sensory experiences, but they are justified in different beliefs as the result of their different learning histories. Another argument contends that the lower level representational states that make up perceptual experience cannot serve as evidence for perceptual beliefs, because of a “sensation-perception gap”: the information encoded in these experiential states is not something that the agent herself could appreciate as uniquely picking out the perceptual belief the agent actually arrives at. The agent does usually arrive at a unique perceptual belief, but only because she has special purpose cognitive mechanisms for doing so, and not because the experiential states have any special evidential status for the agent.

I defend a “Perceptual Systems Theory” of perceptual belief, according to which what it is to be a perceptual belief is simply to be the output of a perceptual system. I mean for the concept of a perceptual system here to be the one employed by contemporary cognitive science. That concept, I think, is of a cognitive system such that

- (a) its lowest level inputs are transductions across sense organs,
- (b) none of the inputs to any of its subsystems is under the direct voluntary control of the larger organism,

- (c) it is “inferentially opaque”, i.e., none of its interlevel representations are conscious beliefs, (i.e., its outputs are what BonJour calls “cognitively spontaneous beliefs”)
- (d) it has a “normal” etiology; i.e., it results from the interplay of learning and innate constraints.

A cognitive system more generally is an isolable virtual machine that performs some functionally cohesive task and is self-sufficient with respect to that task (for more details, see Lyons 2001).

The Perceptual Systems Theory of perceptual belief gets the grain size right (we have perceptual beliefs about tables, not about furniture), it allows for perceptual learning (unlike Fodor’s theory of modules, mine doesn’t require innateness), and it—appropriately, in my view—decouples perceptual belief content from sensory phenomenology.

The Perceptual Systems Theory can and should be conjoined with the claim that all perceptual beliefs are epistemologically basic. This gives us the claim that beliefs about ordinary physical objects, at an intermediate level of specificity, are basic (beliefs like ‘there’s a table’, not ‘there’s a piece of furniture’ or ‘there’s an 1851 Chippendale table’—though the exact levels of specificity will vary among individuals, due to innate differences, perceptual learning, etc.). This seems to me to get the epistemology right.

The theory of perceptual belief generalizes to a theory of basic beliefs. I call a system that satisfies (c) and (d) above a “primal system”, as the term is suggestive of both the ontogeny and the opacity of the system. Conditions (a) and (b) are distinctive of perceptual systems and are not required of all basic-belief-producing systems. It is tempting to claim simply that every output of a primal system is a basic belief, but this isn’t quite right. Primal systems admit of inferential and noninferential operation, depending on whether or not they are taking beliefs as inputs (and basing their outputs on these beliefs)<sup>2</sup>; alternatively they may fire spontaneously or take queries, conceptions, and the like as inputs. A belief is basic iff it results from the noninferential operation of a primal system. This, hopefully, will account for the basic status of the beliefs that result from introspection, memory, a priori intuition, etc., in addition to perception. Clairvoyance-type counterexamples do not involve cognitive systems that satisfy this theory of basicity. In fact, when we reconceive clairvoyance-type cases using agents for whom (a)–(d) are satisfied, our intuitions of unjustifiedness go away, and the cases cease to look like counterexamples to reliabilism.

Primal systems also offer a theory of “basic inference,” which is where the agent can be justified in drawing an inference without having to be justified in believing the corresponding conditional or in believing that the premise is good evidence for the conclusion. I hold that an inference is basic iff it is the result of the inferential operation of a primal system. This avoids Lewis Carroll-style regress problems

<sup>2</sup> This issue is somewhat more delicate than one might think. The mere fact that a belief is an input to a process does not mean that the process is operating inferentially on that belief. On one possible theory of introspection, my introspective belief, that I believe that it’s raining, takes as input, but is not based on, the belief that it’s raining.

without implying that all inferences are basic, as do most reliabilist theories. Some inferences require reflective belief in the legitimacy of the inference; some do not.

Let me close this introduction with a methodological point. I have been trying, as I think is typical in epistemology, to give an account that captures and does justice to our central epistemological intuitions. We think that perception is a source of basic beliefs, because in some vague sense, we think that perceptual beliefs result from perceptual systems. Obviously the theory of perceptual systems is a precisification (hopefully!) of the folk notion, but this is good and standard methodology in analytic epistemology. Besides precisification, there are other ways we might improve on our intuitive ideas. We might, for instance, decide that certain of our intuitive requirements (e.g., the etiological constraint of (d)) are unprincipled and should be dropped from our finished epistemology. In addition, we can “correct” our intuitive epistemological judgments by finding out which processes are indeed reliable and which systems are indeed primal, and so on. Our intuitions about justifiedness comport pretty well, I claim, with our current best guess about which beliefs are the outputs of primal systems. But science can help us out here. If it turns out that we have primal systems for third-person mental state attribution, or belief in God, or even clairvoyance, then the relevant beliefs ought to be counted as basic, the silence or contraindication of our intuitions notwithstanding.

## References

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