**Epistemic Reasons II: Basing**

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**1. Introduction**

Often we have reasons for our doxastic attitudes. Bobby's reason for thinking that he will be reunited with an old friend is that a fortune cookie said so, while Edna's reason for suspending judgment on string theory is that it makes too few falsifiable predictions. Bobby and Edna should be distinguished from Jessie, whose brain lesion just caused some groundless beliefs to pop into her head. While the brain lesion is a reason why she has these beliefs, she lacks reasons of her own for them. Meta-ethicists refer to a similar distinction among reasons for action as the distinction between *explanatory* and *motivating reasons*. But because it is controversial to speak literally of motivation for doxastic attitudes, we need different terminology. Following Scanlon (1998: 19), I'll use the term “operative reasons”.

This article is an opinionated guide to the literature on operative epistemic reasons. This literature includes what epistemologists typically put under the heading of “the basing relation”. But the relevant literature is broader. Many philosophers working on general questions about reasons and reasoning outside of epistemology narrowly construed have shed tremendous illumination on the topic. Moreover, there has been lots of work on theoretical inference that hasn't taken place under the “basing relation” rubric, though the issues should be discussed together. This article places these pockets of literature under a unified heading.

The discussion is organized around the following questions:

1. *Ontology*. What sorts of things are operative epistemic reasons? Mental states, facts, propositions, or what?

1. *General Conditions*. What relation must a reason bear to someone's belief to be her operative epistemic reason for it? Is this relation causal, dispositional, or what?

If reasons are propositions or facts, what epistemic relation must one bear to them to have them as operative epistemic reasons? Is it knowledge, belief, or what?

1. *Inferential Reasons*. What is it for a belief to be inferentially based on a reason?

1. *Non-Inferential Reasons*. Are there non-inferential reasons for belief? If so, how do they resemble inferential reasons and how do they differ?

§2-5 pursue these questions in order.

**2. The Ontology of Operative Epistemic Reasons**

To what ontological category do operative epistemic reasons (henceforth “OERs”) belong? Following Turri (2009), we can distinguish three views:

**Mentalism**: OERs are mental states.

**Abstractionism**: OERs are (perhaps false) propositions or (perhaps non-obtaining) states of affairs.

**Factualism**: OERs are facts.

Mentalism is the traditional view. Explicit proponents include Davidson (1986), Pryor (2007), Swain (1981), and Turri (2009), and many other epistemologists presuppose the view. The analogue of this view in the philosophy of practical reason was popular until Dancy (2000); even figures who embraced factualism about normative practical reasons were mentalists about operative practical reasons.[[1]](#footnote-1) While mentalism was historically dominant in epistemology, many now defend non-mentalist views. Factualists include Hyman (1999), Littlejohn (2012) and Unger (1975). Abstractionists include Fantl and McGrath (2009) and Millar (2004).

*Arguments for Mentalism*

One argument for mentalism is that it provides the simplest explanation of the necessary correlation between OERs and mental states.[[2]](#footnote-2) Whenever someone has an OER for a doxastic attitude, that person is in a further mental state. It is natural to call that mental state the reason. Which mental states are correlated with OERs is controversial, but the correlation is undeniable. What explains it? Mentalism gives a simple answer: the OERs *are* the mental states.

Non-mentalists have a clear alternative picture. They say that although one cannot possess p as one's OER unless one bears some attitude to p, the reason itself is p. This picture may sound more complex because it seems to posit OERs over and above mental states. But is the ontological baggage weightier? Both camps acknowledge attitudes, contents, and the operative-reason-for relation. They just have different views about the relata of the relation. Properly calculated, then, the weight of the ontological baggage seems the same. If so, mentalists lack a clear parsimony advantage.

A second argument for mentalism is inspired by Davidson (1980):

1. Rationalizing explanations of doxastic attitudes are causal explanations.

2. The relevant causal factors are mental states.

3. So, OERs are mental states.

Factualists will respond by rejecting (2) and saying that the facts that are objects of certain mental states are the relevant causal factors. This picture is attractive in some cases. “John believes it rained because the streets are wet” sounds like it could be literally true. Life is harder, however, due to the possibility of reasoning in the light (or darkness?) of false beliefs. Here we cannot straightforwardly replace causally relevant mental states with worldly facts. And surely *false propositions* are not causes. So how can non-mentalists view rationalizing explanations as causal?

Some non-mentalists reply by independently arguing against (1). Such is Dancy (2000, 2004)'s tack. He holds that the way that reasons explain attitudes and actions is by *making sense of them*, where that is a normative notion. Dancy doesn't deny that they do this in part by being represented by other attitudes that are causally active. Rationalizing explanations are *accompanied* *by* causal explanations. But Dancy denies that the relata of the causal explanations are the reasons themselves.

Another argument proceeds from facts about reasons talk, particularly in cases of error. We often say things of the form “S has doxastic attitude D(p) because she believes q”. When q is false, many feel they cannot felicitously omit the “she believes” bit. So we get some evidence for mentalism in error cases. If we accept Williams (1981: 102)'s dictum that “[t]he distinction between true and false beliefs on the agent's part cannot alter the *form* of the explanation which will be appropriate”, it seems we must conclude that in both good and bad cases, the agent's reason is *really* her belief that p.

This argument isn't conclusive. Dancy (2004) reports having an opposing intuition about sentences like: “His reason for doing it was that it would increase his pension, but he was sadly mistaken about that.” Moreover, in Dancy (2000), he notes that a non-mentalist can render what is expressed by sentences with “because s/he believed...” clauses by using appositional sentences like “S's reason for having D towards p is, as she believes, that q”, whose truth is consistent with non-mentalism. Another move would be to question Williams's dictum. Hornsby (2008) proposes a disjunctive picture on which operative reasons are (known) facts in the good case and (believed) propositions in the bad case, allowing us to resist the final move in the argument.

*For Factualism and Abstractionism*

Dancy (2000)'s central argument for non-mentalism begins with a desideratum on any account of φ-ing for reasons: it must be compatible with the fact that we can φ for normative reasons. Dancy argues that mentalists cannot accommodate this desideratum, because normative reasons are, he maintains, typically facts about the world, not beliefs or other mental states.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This argument alone is unlikely to convert epistemologists. As noted in the companion piece, mentalism about normative reasons is no less popular than mentalism about operative reasons in epistemology. Granting, however, that we ought to reject mentalism about operative practical reasons, one might supplement Dancy's argument with an argument from the *unity of reason*.

One version of this argument rests on the idea that OERs and operative practical reasons must belong to the same ontological category to both be operative reasons.[[4]](#footnote-4) Another version rests on the assumption that whatever rationalizes beliefs also must be capable of rationalizing acting on these beliefs,[[5]](#footnote-5) and that only (apparent) facts rationalize actions. One might be puzzled by this argument because it presupposes that we act “on beliefs”. But as Alvarez (2010) stresses, “belief” has a content sense and a state sense, and here the sense is the former.

These arguments combined yield a formidable case against mentalism. Some epistemologists might be tempted to conclude that we should reconsider the arguments in meta-ethics against mentalism, and argue that we could achieve better unity by adopting mentalism across the board. They haven't done so yet, however.

Other arguments against mentalism parallel arguments in the normative case. Since I discussed the latter arguments in the companion piece, I will only briefly mention two. One is that non-mentalism gets the phenomenology of believing for reasons right. Reasoning is “transparent”: when we reason about whether p, our attention is directed outward at (apparent) facts that bear on p.[[6]](#footnote-6) Presumably in reasoning we are attending to reasons for belief, some of which become our OERs. If so, transparency supports non-mentalism.

Another argument proceeds from reasons talk. We often say things of the form “S's reason for D(p)-ing is that q”; as Pryor (2007) notes, we rarely hear ordinary people saying things of the form “S's reason for D(p)-ing is her belief that q”. We do often hear things of the form “S D(p)s because she believes q”. But non-mentalists needn't disagree that beliefs causally explain other beliefs, and the crucial sentence form uses “because” rather than “for the reason that”. In any case, however, the linguistic support is indecisive, partly because of the felt need to mention beliefs in bad cases.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Problems for Factualism and Abstractionism*

Non-mentalism is not without its problems. Factualists have trouble with ignorance. Even if one denies that non-factive mental duplicates necessarily have the same *normative* epistemic reasons, it is hard to deny that they have the same *operative* epistemic reasons.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet if OERs can be externalia, the latter claim cannot be true. Some factualists may go ahead and reject even that claim,[[9]](#footnote-9) but doing so is costly.

We can switch to abstractionism to avoid this cost, but abstractionists also have problems to solve. Operative reasons ascriptions strike many as factive. “John's reason for going to the party is that Mary is there” just seems to entail that Mary is there. There are, however, alternative explanations of the intuitions: Comesaña and McGrath (2014) argue that they are best explained by regarding the apparent entailment as an *uninherited, non-entailed presupposition*.

Another problem is that abstractionism does not obviously fare better in explaining how we can act for normative reasons than mentalism. Dancy (2000: 115) denies that operative reasons are propositions partly because he thinks they cannot be normative reasons. He regards normative reasons as states of affairs, but as Lord (2008) notes, he himself thinks these are poor candidates for objects of attitudes. One might worry that they are thus equally poor candidates for OERs.

Dancy's other reason for denying that OERs are propositions—viz., that sentences of the form “S's reason for φ-ing is the proposition that p” seem false—generalizes to any abstractionist proposal. Most sentences of the form “S's reason for φ-ing is the abstract object, X” will also seem false, after all. The upshot might be that such linguistic evidence calls for some other explanation on pain of refuting every alternative to factualism and mentalism, Dancy's included.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Pluralism*

One response to the disagreement between factualists and abstractionists is to say that it is shallow. Consider the variety of constructions that give rationalizing explanations. Some are clearly factive, like “S believed that p because q.” If we are interested in such explanations, factualism is surely right. Others are not factive, like “S reasoned to the conclusion that p from the premises q and r”. Yet others are not clearly factive, like “S's rationale for believing that p included these considerations: q, r, s....”

Some draw irenic conclusions from this variety of constructions. While Hyman (1999) seemed to argue that OERs are always known facts, he later clarified that although we can use “reasons” to refer to premises that may be false, we “sometimes use the term ‘reason’ to express a different idea: the idea of a person’s being guided by a fact.”[[11]](#footnote-11) And while Lord (2013) treats all operative reasons attributions as factive, he admits that there is another kind of explanation—via “rationales”—that is not.

**3. General Conditions on Having Operative Epistemic Reasons**

For convenience, I'll henceforth talk as if OERs are propositions. Our next question is:

* What does it take for p to be S's OER for doxastic attitude D(q)?

Three conditions have been suggested:

* *Representational Condition*: S is in a to-be-determined type of mental state with the content that p.

* *Treating Condition*: S treats p as a normative epistemic reason for D(q)-ing.
* *Explanatory Condition*: S's D(q)-ing is non-deviantly explained by some p-related mental conditions (e.g., a belief in p or treating of p as a normative epistemic reason for D(q)-ing).

People disagree about how each condition should be understood.

3.1. *The Representational Condition*

One debate hearkens back to the factualism vs. non-factualism squabble. Factualists tend to favor the view that S must know that p in order to act for the reason that p. Such was Unger (1975)'s view and, it seemed, Hyman (1999)'s. Abstractionists and mentalists tend to favor the view that belief is all that is required. If pluralists are right that there is no deep disagreement between facualists and non-factualists, some of the disagreement here is superficial.

Still, even if we should acknowledge both factive and non-factive rationalizing explanations, important questions remain about representation. One question is whether the representational states must be doxastic. Can p be one's reason for believing q if it merely non-doxastically seems to one that p? Because those who give non-doxastic seemings a big role in epistemology tend to be mentalists, this question has received no attention.

A second question that arises if we focus on factive rationalizing explanations is whether one must know a fact to be guided by it (see Hyman (1999)), or whether less is required (see Locke (2015)). The answer may turn on how we understand fake barn cases. It does seem that one can acceptably reason from the perceived fact that the structure is a barn despite the environmental luck. So it may seem that one needn't know a fact to be guided by it. But Sosa (2007) maintains that we have a kind of knowledge in fake barn cases; if one likes his distinction between animal and reflective knowledge, does it follow that being guided by reasons only requires animal knowledge? This is an unresolved question.

A third question is whether the representation condition must be conceptual. Some, like McDowell (1994), say the space of reasons is contained within the space of concepts. Others, like Heck (2000), disagree. This disagreement raises a new question: can the content of an experiential state be one's OER if one lack the concepts required for a correct specification of that content, as some non-conceptualists (e.g., Peacocke (2001)) maintain? We'll revisit this question in §5.

3.2. *The Explanatory Condition*

OERs are a special case of explanatory reasons. How should we understand the explanatory relation between OERs and doxastic attitudes? This is one of the most widely discussed questions about OERs, often addressed under the heading of “the basing relation”.

We saw earlier that Dancy rejected the view that rationalizing explanations are causal. Nonetheless, it is consistent to hold that rationalizing explanations are underwritten by causal explanations, in the sense that whatever mental states represent reasons causally explain beliefs. Hence, even epistemologists who allow that OERs are propositions have liked causal accounts.[[12]](#footnote-12) Indeed, the dominant theories of basing are mostly causal, in a broad sense.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The most popular causal theory is the sustaining cause theory.[[14]](#footnote-14) On this view, OERs explain doxastic attitudes by being (contents of) mental states that are among their sustaining causes. One version of this view is:

**Simple Sustaining View (SSV)**: p is S's OER for D(q)-ing iff p is the content of a belief or experience which is a sustaining cause of S's D(q)-ing.

SSV faces several problems. One problem is that not just any kind of causal sustaining suffices for basing. To borrow an example from Turri (2011: 389), we can imagine that “through some random quirk—the result of a neural assembly malfunctioning—Wilt's belief that the lettuce wilted [causally sustains] his belief that the Patriots will win twelve games this season.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Since the former belief is not Wilt's reason for the latter, SSV fails provide sufficient conditions. Defenders of SSV hence must explain what makes a sustaining cause *non-deviant*.

Another objection questions the necessity of causal sustaining. In Lehrer (1971)'s gypsy lawyer case, we imagine that a lawyer, Sal, is reviewing the evidence bearing on whether his client, Bob, is guilty of eight murders. There is good evidence that Bob did all eight. Sal is, however, a gypsy who always follows the cards, which tell him that Bob is innocent of the eighth. Sal becomes certain of this and decides to reconsider the evidence. In reconsidering it, he stumbles upon decisive evidence that Sam is innocent of the eighth murder. But, Lehrer adds,

if it were not for his unshakable faith in the cards, the lawyer himself would be swayed by...emotional factors and would doubt that his client was innocent of that eighth murder. It is only because of his faith in the cards that the reasoning gives him knowledge. Therefore, the reasoning that gives him knowledge does not even potentially explain his belief that his client is innocent of the eighth crime.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The case persuaded Swain (1981) to pursue a more complicated analysis, deeming reasons like Sal's “pseudo-overdeterminants” and allowing them as well as sustainers to be bases. It moved others, like Tolliver (1982) and Lehrer, to accept *pure doxastic views* on which D(q)-ing for reason r consists in having a meta-belief to the effect that r is a good epistemic reason for D(q)-ing.

Many have, however, been unconvinced by Lehrer's case.[[17]](#footnote-17) To see why, let's get crystal-clear on what must happen for it to be a counterexample. Lehrer needs the case not only to be one where the evidence is not *sufficient* to sustain his belief, but where the evidence is not even a partial sustainer of his belief—which isn't clear in Lehrer's description until the last sentence. The evidence must make no difference whatsoever to whether Sal has this belief. If so, it is hardly clear that Sal has knowledge.

If we dismiss Lehrer's case, we can avoid some epicycles in old analyses of the basing relation. But we still need a solution to the deviance problem. One recent solution is proposed by Turri (2011). According to Turri (2011), OERs are sustaining causes of beliefs, where the sustaining relation *manifests a cognitive trait*. A cognitive trait, Turri writes, is a “disposition or habit to form (or sustain) a doxastic attitude in certain circumstances”, citing as examples how we “habitually take experience at face value [and] reason in patterns.” In the deviance counterexample above, Wilt's belief manifested no cognitive trait: the sustaining relation owed to a quirky neurological malfunction. Hence, Turri's proposal blocks that counterexample.

It is unclear, however, that the requirement that the sustaining manifest a cognitive trait is enough to block all deviance. Imagine a subject who believes that there is no connection whatsoever between the consideration that triggers the sustaining disposition and her first-order belief. It is hard to believe that the consideration is her OER. But the sustaining disposition could still be part of her (flawed) cognitive character. Perhaps one might say we can't be alienated in this way from our character, but I don't see why: one can realize that one has a flawed character and labor to transcend it.

3.3. *The Treating Condition (and a Revised Explanatory Condition)*

One way to avoid this problem was foreshadowed by *causal-doxastic theories*, which require that the subject also believe that the consideration that causally sustains her belief is a normative epistemic reason.[[18]](#footnote-18) But these views overintellectualize basing by requiring believers to have the concept of a normative reason. There are, however, spinoff views that avoid overintellectualization by appealing to the weaker idea of *treating something as a normative reason*.

Treating something as a normative reason does not require having the concept of a normative reason. This is an instance of the more general thought that treating Xs as Fs doesn't require having the concept of an F. Cats can treat entities as prey while lacking the concept prey. Inferring from p from q entails treating q as a normative reason to believe p, but does not require having or using the concept normative reason.

Current accounts of basing invoke treating, though there is disagreement about how to understand it. Ram Neta takes treating p as a reason to believe q to involve inner ostension to an explanatory relation under a demonstrative concept for a justifying relation.[[19]](#footnote-19) Errol Lord and I understand treating dispositionally, though unlike Turri (2011), we don’t see the relevant dispositions as character traits but rather as competences, where, following Sosa (2015), we take the notion of competence as primitive.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Treating enables Neta, Lord and I to converge on a better account of the explanatory condition. To see the shape of the account, consider a subject S who believes q for the reason that p. We say this is true because:

S treats p-like considerations as normative reasons to believe q-like propositions and, in virtue of that fact, S's belief that p explains why S believes that q.

More generally:

**Explanation in Virtue of Treating**: p is S's OER for doxastic attitude D(q) iff S treats p-like considerations as normative reasons for D(q)-like attitudes and, in virtue of that fact, S's representing that p explains why S is D(q)-ing.

Causal-doxastic accounts of basing can be understood as special cases of this view *modulo* the false assumption that treating p as a reason to φ is believing that p is a reason to φ. If treating is understood dispositionally, the account resembles the views of Turri (2011) and Evans (2012). But by appealing to the competences constitutive of treating, the account avoids deviance worries for these views.

**4. Inferential Reasons and Reasoning**

There are different ways in which a consideration can become one's OER. Many OERs are *inferential*: they become our OERs because we make inferences from them. Inference is thus an important subtopic within the topic of this article. Following Harman (1986), we should distinguish the activity of inference from the proofs or arguments inferences sometimes track. Focusing on the activity, let’s ask:

* What is it to infer one proposition from another?

Uncontroversially, inferring p from q involves transitioning from a mental state whose content is q to a mental state whose content is p. Two sub-questions are (i) what kinds of mental states are suitable beginnings and ends of such transitions, and (ii) what the transitioning itself involves. Of these sub-questions, (ii) has received more attention.

A simple answer to (i) would see the relevant mental states as outright doxastic attitudes and perhaps graded ones like credence .63.[[21]](#footnote-21) But this answer ignores suppositional reasoning: when we assume p for *reductio* and infer q, our attitudes towards p and q aren't outright or graded beliefs.[[22]](#footnote-22) Even bracketing suppositional reasoning, there is a possible asymmetry between premise-states and conclusion-states. While the conclusion-state must be one over which we have rational control (which we exercise by inferring the conclusion), it is unobvious that we must have rational control over premise-states. One cannot infer *to* non-doxastic seeming, but it is not obvious why one cannot infer *from* a non-doxastic seeming. We’ll return to this question in §5.

Sub-question (ii) is harder. The answer is not just that the premise-states are original causes of the conclusion-state. Even setting worries about deviant causation aside, this answer conflicts with the agential nature of inference. Inferring is something we do, not something that happens to us, as several writers stress.[[23]](#footnote-23) Perhaps we can extend ``inference'' to refer to passive subpersonal processes, but paradigmatic inferences are, as Boghossian (2014: 3) says, “person-level, conscious, and voluntary”.

Accordingly, a central approach to question (ii) involves seeing inference as a species of rule-following. Broome (2014b) says this approach captures the active nature of inference, because in following a rule, “[t]he rule does not merely cause you to behave in a particular way, as a program does to a computer. The rule *guides* you.”

There are obstacles to analyzing inference in terms of rule-following. Suppose we understand guidance by a rule as intentional guidance. How does one then follow a rule of the form, “In conditions C, φ”? By doing another inference, it seems. As Boghossian writes: “On this Intentional construal of rule-following, then, my actively applying a rule can only be understood as a matter of my grasping what the rule requires, forming a view to the effect that its trigger conditions are satisfied, and *drawing the conclusion* that I must now perform the act required by its consequent.”[[24]](#footnote-24) If rule-following consists in intentional guidance, inference cannot consist in rule-following on pain of regress or circularity.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The alternative is *dispositionalism*, on which following R consists in a disposition to conform to R in appropriate circumstances. Doubts about dispositionalism became prominent after Kripke (1982). While not everyone has been convinced by Kripke's doubts, themes from his discussion have resurfaced in discussions. Boghossian raises the following Kripke-inspired objections to dispositionalism:

* A person's dispositions are finite in the sense that (e.g.) “it is not true that I have a disposition to answer q when asked what follows from any two propositions of the form p and `if p, then q', no matter now large.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

* A person's dispositions will be infected with performance errors.

* Dispositions to conform in particular cases are explained by rule-following, not vice versa.

* If the rule-following involved in inference is merely dispositional, it will “just look like the regular causation of some thoughts by others, without the element of taking [premises to be reasons for conclusions] that Frege rightly saw to be essential to inference.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

A theme from Sosa helps to block these objections. Suppose we switch from generic dispositionalism to a specifically *competence-based* approach. Sosa (2015) argues that competences in general are not just dispositions to succeed but at best a “very special case” of dispositions to succeed. He argues, indeed, that the notion of competence should be taken as primitive. While this is not the place to defend Sosa's view, it is clear how it would help in this context.

Performance errors are no strike against this view: they are not manifestations of competence, so (2) is irrelevant or false. Moreover, because competences aren't just dispositions to succeed, a person's competence can explain more specific dispositions of hers to succeed. She has these more specific dispositions *in virtue of* her competence. So (3) doesn't undermine a competence-based proposal. Furthermore, a psychological state that manifests competence is not just “regularly caused” by it. Indeed, manifesting a competence to conform to a rule that permits conclusion C given certain premises P1...Pn plausibly *constitutes* a way of taking P1...Pn to be reasons for concluding C, yielding the “Taking Condition” Boghossian takes to be missing from mere cases of regular causation. So (4) is no objection to a competence-based proposal.

What about (1)? Compare linguistic competence. It exhibits what Chomsky calls “discrete infinity”, enabling me to grasp indefinitely many sentences. So competence can be unbounded. Boghossian recognizes that dispositions can be unbounded even if realized in finite material. But what, then, is the objection? He says it comes down to the following: “[A] capacity to grasp infinitely long propositions...does not follow from our nature as thinking beings [whereas] in the case of [a fragile] glass, the existence of the infinite number of inputs...just follows from the nature of the glass qua physical object.''[[28]](#footnote-28) If this is an objection to viewing inferential rule-following as grounded in logical competence, it is also an objection to viewing syntactic rule-following as grounded in linguistic competence. That seems wrong.

This view shares a cost of Boghossian's ultimate view. He says we should take rule-following as primitive; I say we should take competence as primitive. But competence can do more work than rule-following, as the plausibility of competence-based approaches to knowledge, perception, action, and other topics shows. The twin notions of competence and manifestation resolve problems of deviant causation in all these areas. So these notions seem better candidates for inclusion in primitive ideology.

Hence, I tentatively suggest that we can understand inferring p from q as manifesting a competence to conform to a rule that recommends believing p given the truth of q. It should be stressed that the notion of competence here is not robustly normative, but normative only in the thin sense in which any standard of correctness is normative. Compare how a person who acts intentionally manifests an intention-fulfilling competence, though the action and intention might be irrational. We want a thin notion of competence here to allow for reasoning with bad rules.

**5. Non-Inferential Reasons?**

Let's turn to a final question: can there be non-inferential operative reasons? Some foundationalists must say “yes”. Foundationalism is typically defined as the view that there are non-inferentially justified beliefs on which all other justified beliefs are inferentially based. If all justified beliefs are justified by reasons—a controversial claim, but one endorsed by many foundationalists—doesn't it follow that some reasons justify non-inferentially? And for our beliefs to be justified by them, mustn't we have corresponding non-inferential OERs?

Well, this is a little fast. All foundationalists really need are beliefs that are justified but not by mental states that themselves require justification—properly basic beliefs, as some say. It is not trivial to assume that properly basic beliefs are not inferentially justified. We would need to assume a parity principle according to which all inputs to inferences call for justification just as much as outputs do. If mental states that are “beyond justification”—say, non-doxastic seemings—could be inputs to inferences, we could reject the parity principle.

Why can't we start inferences with these states? An answer emerges if we view OERs as propositions. Suppositional reasoning aside, it is natural to think that to make an inference from p, one must endorse p. Endorsements call for justification. If so, inputs to inferences couldn't be regress stoppers. The fact that suppositions don't require endorsement or justification is no help, since *they* are not satisfying regress-stoppers. So if theoretical inferences must begin with endorsements, we must identify properly basic and non-inferentially justified beliefs.

That conclusion still does not force us to embrace non-inferential reasons. We must only if we agree that all justified beliefs are justified by reasons. Some reliabilists reject this claim; internalists who appeal to entitlement do so too.[[29]](#footnote-29) But other foundationalists must embrace non-inferential reasons.

So what are non-inferential OERs? How does one have something as one's OER without making an inference from it? These questions demand a two-part answer. One must specify

(A) the kinds of mental states that accompany non-inferential OERs, and

(B) the relations that hold between non-inferential OERs and beliefs and how, if at all, they differ from parallel relations in inferential cases.

We could distinguish non-inferential from inferential OERs in both ways. Far more has been said about (A) than about (B), so my discussion of (B) will be speculative.

*Developments of (A)*

Foundationalists say a lot about the kinds of states that can provide non-inferential *normative* reasons. Two options already mentioned are seemings and direct acquaintance.[[30]](#footnote-30) Another option is to appeal to experiences, understood as distinct from seemings. Seemings have conceptual content, but some think experiences have non-conceptual content.[[31]](#footnote-31) One might convert these views about normative epistemic reasons and into views about OERs. Since the foundationalists who accept these views typically assume mentalism, they could say that non-inferential OERs are states of these kinds.

If we reject mentalism, we could instead say that non-inferential OERs are contents of states of these kinds. But the third option is now mysterious. How can a content of experience that I lack the concepts to grasp be *my* reason for believing something? This worry led some to conclude that non-inferential OERs must be associated with conceptual states.[[32]](#footnote-32) It is a serious worry when framed as one about OERs. Bare facts about the world can be *normative* reasons, and this fact calls into question unqualified conceptualist claims like the claim that the space of reasons is a subspace of the space of concepts. Still, for normative reasons to be *our* reasons, we must represent them at the person level.

We have tentative support, then, for thinking that non-inferential OERs go with conceptual states. It doesn't follow that these stand in need of *justification*. Non-doxastic seemings aren't the kinds of things that can be justified, though perhaps they can be evaluted in other ways.

*Developments of (B)*

What are the relations between non-inferential reasons and beliefs in virtue of which the former constitute OERs for the latter? How do they differ from parallel relations in inferential cases?

Take the second question first. Suppose we follow Broome and Boghossian in viewing inferences as person-level activities. Inferential basing relations obtain in virtue of our making them. One hypothesis about the difference between the inferential and the non-inferential cases is that non-inferential basing relations do not obtain in virtue of person-level activities. Rather, the process running from reason to belief that establishes a non-inferential basing relation is subpersonal.

This hypothesis gets the phenomenology of non-inferential justification right. Imagine looking at a square, seeing that it is square and thereby being non-inferentially justified in believing that it is square. The phenomenology has an *immediate* character: you *just see* that it is a square. Some conclude—too quickly—that this is not a case of basing on reasons at all. Instead, we can take it to be a case of non-inferential basing on reasons, which differs from inferential basing precisely in not being established in virtue of a person-level process of citing reasons and judging accordingly. *That* is why it feels immediate, not because there is no basis. The basis is clearly the *way the thing looks*.

Some might regard the price we pay for securing this advantage as too steep. They might say: “OERs are person-level phenomena. Reasons that operate subpersonally are not OERs but mere explanatory reasons.”[[33]](#footnote-33) My response is to agree that the *result* of the process running from looks to beliefs is the person-level phenomenon of believing for a reason, but that the process is subpersonal. This response is principled. We already needed to distinguish process and result in the inferential case. Believing for an inferential reason isn't itself the activity of making an inference: it is the result of that activity. Similarly, believing for a non-inferential reason isn't the subpersonal movement from appearance to belief: it is the result of that activity. And it would be both question-begging and wrong to insist that something person-level can't result from something subpersonal. The subpersonal level is more fundamental, so there must be some story about how the person level is grounded in it.

A different objection is that some cases of non-inferential justification may seem to involve a person-level process. Suppose I look at a square, ask what it is, and judge that it is a square because it looks thus-and-so. Isn’t this a case of foundational justification? If so, doesn’t it follow that a non-inferential basing relation can come to obtain via a person-level process?

One might deny that this is a case of foundational justification. Perhaps I am making an inference from <x looks thus-and-so> to <x is a square>. The justification is *nearly* foundational, but not foundational. One might object that this response implies that the foundations for empirical belief will become too sparse, consisting just of demonstrative beliefs about looks. But the response is that which beliefs are foundationally justified can vary from subject to subject, depending on their psychologies. In the case of our unusually deliberative subject, the foundations are deeper. But a subject who didn't make the inference, but “just saw” that it is a square, wouldn't have a belief any less foundational *for her*. Indeed, the deliberative subject herself could stop deliberating and opt for shallower foundations.

Our simple take on (B) has survived: the only difference in the relations that ground inferential and non-inferential reasons is that the basing relations are established by person-level activity in the former case and subpersonally in the latter. But this is to say nothing about the nature of the subpersonal process and how it grounds person-level basing. Whether we should embrace non-inferential reasons rather than saying that foundational beliefs lack OERs turns on these matters.

**6. Conclusion**

Some of the most important work on OERs has barely gotten started. While the literature on ontology and basing is rich, the key epistemological issues aren't settled fully by views on these matters. The status of traditional foundationalism and the rational role of experience turn more on how we understand the processes by which basing relations are established and whether we can make sense of non-inferential OERs. Some of the best work on inference has emerged only in the last five years. More work must be done on non-inferential OERs. The results of the literature on ontology, basing and inference pave the way for this work, which should start now.

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1. See, e.g., Raz (1975) and Smith (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Turri (2009: 54-55)'s “Master Argument”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The inference here rests on another important assumption one might question—viz., that to φ for a normative reason, one's operative reason must be *identical* to the normative reason. An alternative view is that φ-ing for a normative reason consists in having an operative reason that *represents* the normative reason. Cf. Mantel (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Littlejohn (2012: 105-106). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Fantl and McGrath (2009: 73)'s “Unity Thesis”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Shah (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For further discussion of the linguistic case for non-mentalism, see Pryor (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Indeed, one radical externalist about epistemic justification (viz., Littlejohn (2012)) relies on the duplication intuition about OERs in defending his view. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Lord (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Compare how the strangeness of saying “S hopes the proposition that p” hasn't convinced us that hope isn't a propositional attitude, and has alternative explanations (see King (2002)). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hyman (2011: 360). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Armstrong (1973: Ch. 6), Audi (1993), and Moser (1989: 156-158). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Counterfactual theories like Swain (1981)'s may be distinguished from causal theories, but Swain held such a counterfactual theory partly because he held a counterfactual analysis of causation; without it, his view would be better seen as a disjunctive view with causal and counterfactual elements. Because counterfactual analyses of causation are now unpopular, I won't discuss pure counterfactual theories. For discussion, see Korcz (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Armstrong (1973) and Moser (1989) for pure versions, and Audi (1993) for a hybrid version. An alternative I won't discuss is the original cause theory, on which OERs for D(p) are (contents of) mental states that are original causes of D(p). This view fails because one can gain new bases for belief and lose the old ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Turri's case had an original causal chain, but it clearly can be restyled to undermine SSV, as I've done. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lehrer (1971: 848). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Turri (2011) calls Lehrer's claim that Sal's belief is based on the relevant evidence “clearly false” and Goldman (1979) calls it “unconvincing”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Audi (1993), Longino (1978), and Korcz (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Neta (Ms), which grew out of Neta (2013). Marcus (2012) has a kindred view, though he appeals directly to inner ostension and not to treating. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Lord (2013) and [reference suppressed]. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For a discussion of whether we can reason with credences, see Staffel (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Wright (2014), who complained that Boghossian (2014)'s discussion of inference ignores this case. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, for example, Boghossian (2014) and Broome (2013, 2014a). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Boghossian (2014: 13) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Broome (2014b: 632) says he avoids this objection, but only because his account reduces to a dispositional account. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Boghossian (2008: 496). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Boghossian (2014: 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Boghossian (2008: 496). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Lyons (2009) and Wright (2004) for these views. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Huemer (2007) and Fumerton (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Heck (2000) and Peacocke (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Brewer (1999) and Ginsborg (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cf. McDowell (1994: 163). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)