

I

A Version of Internalist Foundationalism

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The Regress Problem and Foundationalism

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this essay is to investigate one main aspect of what I take to be the central question of epistemology. That question concerns the rational status of our beliefs about the world in relation to the independent world that they purport to describe: Do we have any good reasons for thinking that our beliefs about the world, at least the main ones that we hold most firmly, are *true* or at least approximately true – any rational basis for thinking that they succeed in describing the world more or less correctly? And if so, what form do these reasons take? It is fairly standard to describe a belief for which such truth-conducive reasons exist as being *epistemically justified*; and I will adopt this usage here (often omitting the qualifier “epistemic” for the sake of brevity), though with the warning that the term “epistemic justification” has also been employed in somewhat different ways that we will eventually have to take note of.

Here and throughout, I will assume the correctness of the realist conception of truth as correspondence or agreement with the appropriate region or chunk of mind-independent reality.¹ Thus the issue to be discussed is what reasons we have for thinking that our beliefs stand in such a relation to the world.

For present purposes, I will confine my attention almost entirely to the epistemic justification of putatively *empirical* beliefs: those contingent beliefs seemingly held on the basis of reasons that derive, in ways that we must try to better understand, from sensory or

¹ Where the relevant sort of mind independence is only in relation to the specific cognitive act in question, thus allowing for the possibility that beliefs about mental matters may also be true in this sense.

perceptual *experience*.² In brief, then, our question is: How, if at all, are empirical beliefs about the world epistemically justified? (It is common to associate this issue with that of whether, and under what conditions, such beliefs constitute *knowledge*; but, for reasons briefly indicated at the end of this chapter, I will mostly focus on reasons or justification alone, setting the issue of knowledge aside.)

It is obvious that we ordinarily take ourselves to have good reasons or justification of this sort for a wide variety of seemingly empirical beliefs: beliefs about our immediate physical environment, about our personal past, about things and events elsewhere in the world, about history, about various results of science, and of course about our conscious experience itself. At the level of common sense, there is no trace of a general doubt about the accuracy of our empirical beliefs, nor any suggestion that our confidence in this area might be unfounded or fundamentally irrational. With relatively rare and localized exceptions, we also act with great confidence on the basis of these beliefs, and here too there is in general no hint of any serious uncertainty or doubt. But the effort to explain what our reasons for beliefs of these kinds actually involve or even how such reasons are possible turns out to be fraught with familiar and extremely recalcitrant difficulties.

It is largely in response to these difficulties that epistemology has lately found itself in a state of almost unparalleled ferment. The decades since the early 1980s have witnessed what may be fairly described as an explosion of epistemological discussion, with ever more new positions being suggested, elaborated, discussed, criticized – and then dismissed as untenable by at least large portions of the philosophical community. This situation might be taken to show that the subject is healthy and flourishing, despite the admitted failure of epistemologists to agree on very much, but many have instead drawn the pessimistic conclusion that epistemology is in its death-throes and should be abandoned as hopeless by all philosophers of good sense.³

2 There is also, of course, the traditional category of beliefs justified a priori, those for which the apparent reasons for thinking them to be true derive, not from sensory experience, but rather from pure reason or rational reflection alone. Reasons of this sort raise a largely different set of issues, which I have discussed elsewhere but have no space to consider here. (For a defense of a largely traditional conception of a priori justification, see my book *In Defense of Pure Reason* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Hereafter cited as *IDPR*.)

3 Perhaps the best-known and most radical advocate of this sort of view is Richard Rorty in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), but there are many others who have advanced views in the same general direction.

This latter conclusion strikes me as wildly premature at best, but it is hard to deny that it is one possible interpretation of the widespread and seemingly intractable disagreements that are presently to be found in this area.

Much of this recent discussion has been organized around two main dichotomies. On the one hand, there is the dichotomy between *foundationalist* and *coherentist* accounts of epistemic justification, and especially of empirical epistemic justification. Does such justification derive ultimately from “foundational” beliefs whose justification somehow does not depend at all on that of other beliefs, or does it derive instead from relations of coherence or agreement or mutual support among beliefs, with no appeal to anything outside the system of beliefs? On the other hand, there is the dichotomy between *internalist* and *externalist* accounts of such justification. Must epistemic justification depend on elements that are internal to the believer’s conscious states of mind in a way that makes them accessible to his conscious reflection (at least in principle), or might it derive instead from factors that are external to those states of mind, entirely outside the scope of his conscious awareness? These two dichotomies cut across each other, so as to generate four *prima facie* possible overall positions: internalist foundationalism, externalist foundationalism, internalist coherentism, and externalist coherentism. It is these positions, or rather the first three of them, around which the present discussion will be organized.⁴

The historically standard and seemingly obvious view of empirical justification, reflected in a great tradition stretching from Descartes through Locke, Hume, Kant, and many others, up to recent figures like

4 Externalist coherentism, as will be explained later, combines what turn out to be the less attractive sides of each of the two dichotomies. What results is a view that has very little in the way of intuitive or dialectical appeal, and that, not surprisingly, has rarely if ever been explicitly advocated. (Though it can be viewed as a dialectical pitfall into which would-be internalist coherentist positions have a rather alarming tendency to fall.)

The current epistemological literature also contains defenses of a variety of further alternatives, most of them falling into two main groups. First, there are views that are hybrids of various kinds between the main alternatives listed in the text. Such hybrids seem to me to inherit all of the difficulties pertaining to the main views that they attempt to combine, thus being in general less attractive than any of them. Second, there are also views, such as contextualism and the various forms of “naturalized epistemology,” whose *modus operandi* is in effect to evade the central epistemological issue formulated in the text. All such further alternatives will be set aside in the present discussion, though what is said here will be strongly relevant to the assessment of the first of these two groups.

Ayer, Lewis, and Chisholm, is, of course, internalist foundationalism. But a central theme of recent epistemological discussion has been a widespread retreat from, and repudiation of, this historically dominant view. Indeed, almost the only point on which large numbers of otherwise widely disparate epistemologists agree is the conviction that internalist foundationalism is an untenable, indeed hopeless, position and must be abandoned if epistemological progress is to be made. There are serious reasons for this view, the most important of which will be considered shortly. But it is worth pointing out that it is far from clear that there is any general agreement among such epistemologists about the specific deficiencies of foundationalism. Indeed many of those who reject it seem to have no very definite argument in mind. As happens with alarming frequency in philosophy, the recent movement away from internalist foundationalism often looks less like a reasoned dialectical retreat than a fashionable stampede. And it is of course the rejection of internalist foundationalism that provides the primary motivation for both internalist coherentism and externalist foundationalism, neither of which could plausibly be claimed to be intuitively very plausible if they were not viewed by their proponents as the only viable dialectical alternative, once internalist foundationalism has been rejected.

I myself have played a role in this development, offering some of the arguments against foundationalism of both the internalist and externalist varieties and attempting to develop and defend the internalist coherentist alternative. But I am now convinced that the rejection of internalist foundationalism is a serious mistake, one that is taking epistemology very much in the wrong direction and giving undeserved credibility to those who would reject the central epistemological project altogether. My initial reasons for this judgment are dialectical. Both coherentism and externalism seem to me to be quite unsatisfactory as responses to the deepest epistemological issues, albeit in quite different ways, and there seems to me to be no further alternative to internalist foundationalism that does any better. But I also think that I can now see the way around the most serious objections to internalist foundationalism, and that this also brings with it some idea of what a viable internalist foundationalist position might look like.

Thus my eventual, albeit still tentative, thesis will be that internalist foundationalism, in something approximating its classical Cartesian form, is defensible and essentially correct as an account of empirical epistemic justification – though some of the ideas reflected in

coherentist views will also play a subsidiary role in the position that I will ultimately defend. As already noted, this view represents a very substantial departure from my previous epistemological views.⁵ Since part of my goal in this essay is to correct what I now regard as my own previous and very serious mistakes – to confess my epistemological sins, as it were – I will be compelled to make somewhat more reference to those previous views than might otherwise be appropriate.

In the rest of the present chapter, I will offer a fuller account of the main issue and consider in a preliminary way some of the reasons why the initially appealing internalist foundationalist solution has been so widely rejected in recent epistemology.

1.2 The Regress Problem

As we have seen, our initial question can be formulated with what may turn out to be a deceptive simplicity: What reasons, if any, are there for thinking that our various empirical beliefs⁶ are true, or at least likely to be at least approximately true – qualifications that I will normally omit? How, if at all, are our beliefs *epistemically justified*?

Perhaps the least complicated answer to this question is the one offered by the most obvious form of skepticism, which claims that there are in fact no such reasons, no epistemic justification, for any empirical belief. Such an extreme version of skepticism is obviously extremely implausible from an intuitive or commonsense standpoint – and also something that the extreme skeptic himself cannot, on pain of contradiction, claim to have any reason for believing to be true. Clearly this skeptical answer to our question is quite unappealing; it would be foolish to even consider accepting it until all other alternatives have been thoroughly explored. But at the same time, even extreme skepticism cannot be simply *assumed* to be false if the original epistemological issue is to be taken seriously.

5 Mainly as presented in my book, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985). (Hereafter referred to as *SEK*.)

6 I will conform to the fairly standard practice of recent epistemologists by using the term “belief” to stand for any state, whether dispositional or occurrent, whose content is the acceptance of a proposition. Thus “beliefs” will include conscious acts of acceptance or assent as well as the formed disposition to engage in such acts when the appropriate issue is raised. But see Paul Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 13–23, for a plausible critique of this standard usage.

But what other alternatives are there? A skepticism that is confined to empirical beliefs and their justification will be likely to grant that many of my putatively empirical beliefs are logically and probabilistically interrelated in such a way that if a particular belief or conjunction of beliefs were somehow either justified already or perhaps merely assumed to be true, this would provide a proximate reason for thinking that some further belief was true. An explicit statement of such a reason would take the form of an argument or inference from the former belief or conjunction of beliefs as premise to the latter belief as conclusion. The inferential connections involved in such *conditional* or *inferential reasons*, as I shall call them, obviously raise justificatory questions of their own, and more would have to be said about them in a complete epistemological account.⁷ But they can reasonably be taken for granted where, as on the present occasion, it is empirical justification that is our concern. Thus it will be useful to imagine a skeptic who is willing to accept conditional reasons of this sort and see how far we can get on this basis.

Conditional reasons by themselves do not, however, speak very directly to our original problem, since the vast majority of the things that we ordinarily think we have reason to believe to be true are obviously not in this way conditional in form. And it seems obvious at once that the existence of a conditional reason can provide a reason or justification for its non-conditional consequent only if there is some further reason or justification, which must seemingly be epistemically prior, for accepting the truth of its antecedent.

In this way the issue of epistemic justification for one belief may be in effect transformed, via an appropriate conditional reason, into the issue of justification for one or more other beliefs. Clearly this process can be repeated, in principle at least through many stages, yielding an epistemological tree-structure in which a belief at one level is conditionally justified in relation to those at a successive level, those at that level in relation to others at a still further level, and so on.⁸ Equally clearly, however, the delineation of an epistemological structure of this sort does nothing by itself to show that *any* of the non-conditional beliefs that appear in it are true. It remains open to a would-be skeptic,

7 The traditional view, which seems to me essentially correct, is that the justification of these inferential connections is ultimately a priori in character. See *IDPR*, cited in note 2.

8 For an elaboration of this picture, see Ernest Sosa, "How do you know?," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 11 (1974), pp. 113–22.

even if he⁹ concedes all of the conditional reasons involved, to reject any non-conditional belief in the structure simply by rejecting some or all of the premises upon which that belief's justification conditionally depends.

The foregoing picture leads directly to a version of the classical *epistemic regress problem*. At each node of the tree the issue of justification for the previous non-conditional beliefs is conditionally answered by appeal to a new set of premises; at the next level, the issue of justification for those new premises is conditionally answered by appeal to yet further premises; and so on. The obvious problem is to say how this regress of levels or stages of justification, each dependent on the next, finally ends, assuming (as I shall here) that the finding of new sets of premise-beliefs (beliefs that have not previously appeared in the overall structure), each adequate to conditionally justify the premise-beliefs of the previous stage, cannot and does not go on infinitely. At first glance, at least, there seem to be only three general alternatives:

- 1 The final stage of a particular branch of the regress may invoke premise-beliefs for which no further reason or justification of any sort is available. In this case, it seems to follow that the inferential connections reflected in the epistemological tree-structure, no matter how complicated and ramified they may be, offer no reason or justification for thinking that *any* of the component

9 The skeptic in question might, of course, be either a man or a woman. It is a fact about the English language, or was at least until very recent times, that the pronouns "he" and "him" can be correctly used in a generic or neutral sense to refer to persons of either gender. Many, many recent writers have found this usage to be politically incorrect and so have attempted in various ways to undermine it, such as by using "she" and "her" as generic pronouns, either exclusively or in alternation with the more standard ones. My sense of this is that we may well be getting close to the point where "he" and "him" are no longer naturally understood in a generic way, but are still very far from having "she" and "her" assume the generic role (and still further from having both sets of pronouns function naturally at the same time in this way), with the attempts to use the feminine pronouns in this way serving only as flags displaying the political correctness of the author and serving to distract the reader, at least momentarily, from the main issues under discussion. This seems to me to simply be bad writing (as does the use of the plural "they" and "them," where only a single person is involved), but the question is what to do instead, given that generic pronouns are frequently needed in philosophical writing to refer back to the person holding a certain belief or view (such as skepticism). Though in writing the present work I at first used the disjunctive "he or she" and "him or her," the clumsiness of this seemed eventually too great to be tolerated. Thus I have chosen to adhere to the perhaps still viable generic use of "he" and "him," adding this footnote to remove any uncertainty about what is going on.

non-conditional beliefs that are essentially dependent on those unjustified beliefs are true.¹⁰ Those connections tell us, in effect, only that some things would be true *if* other things were true, and that those other things would be true *if* still further things were true, and so on, ending with things that there is no reason to believe to be true. Thus, if all relevant justificatory relations are captured by a structure whose branches terminate in that way, the view of the skeptic is apparently vindicated with respect to all non-conditional beliefs.¹¹

- 2 The final stage of a particular branch of the regress may invoke premise-beliefs that have occurred somewhere earlier in that branch, so that the justificational structure in effect loops back upon itself. In this case, the result seems once more to be skeptical (assuming again that all justificatory relations are captured by the structure), since the justification for all of the non-conditional beliefs in that branch is either directly circular or else dependent on premise-beliefs that are justified only in this circular and apparently question-begging manner. A justificational structure whose branches all terminate in this way again seems to provide no reason for thinking that any of the component non-conditional beliefs are true.
- 3 The only alternative apparently remaining is that the premise-beliefs at the final stage of a particular branch are indeed justified, but in some fashion that does not involve any further appeal to conditional or inferential reasons and thus does not require new premise-beliefs that would themselves be in need of justification. According to this third alternative, while there is still indeed a reason or at least a rational basis of some sort for thinking that each of these ultimate beliefs is true (so that this alternative differs from the first one), this reason or basis does not appeal to any sort of argument or inference from further premise-beliefs about which further issues of justification could be raised. For obvious reasons, these ultimate premises are standardly referred to as *basic* or *foundational* beliefs, and the epistemological position that advocates them as *foundationalism*.

10 I ignore here, for the sake of simplicity, the possibility of a situation of epistemic overdetermination, in which there are multiple independent justifications for a particular belief.

11 Obviously a particular epistemological structure might realize at different places two or even all three of the alternative outcomes of the regress discussed in the text. Explicit consideration of these further possibilities will be left to the reader.

1.3 Foundationalism, Coherentism, and Externalism

Historically, the foregoing dialectic, together with the assumption that global skepticism about non-conditional beliefs is false – that is, that we do have reasons for thinking that at least many of the non-conditional things that we believe are true – has usually been taken to show that some version of foundationalism and indeed of internalist foundationalism must be correct. According to the most historically standard version of internalist foundationalism, foundational beliefs are justified by appeal to sensory and introspective *experience*, and it is a version of this position that I will eventually attempt to defend.

Internalist coherentism (though sometimes without much stress on the internalist aspect) has been widely discussed (though not really very widely advocated) in recent epistemology. Such a theory may be viewed, albeit perhaps somewhat misleadingly, as growing out of the second of the three alternatives considered above about the eventual outcome of the regress of justification. It rejects empirical foundationalism and holds instead that *coherence*, roughly the agreement and mutual inferential support of empirical beliefs (a relation that is reflected in conditional reasons of the sort discussed above), is the primary or even exclusive basis for empirical justification. (It is obvious at once that making clear how such coherence-based justification can even count as *empirical* will be a major problem that such a view must address.)

As indicated above, there is also a third main alternative to be considered. The empirical foundationalism briefly adumbrated above as well as the most common versions of empirical coherentism are *internalist* in character: they appeal for justification to something of which the believer in question is allegedly aware, to which he has direct cognitive access. But many recent epistemologists have been attracted by views that are *externalist* in character: views that appeal for justification to factors, most commonly the reliability of the belief formation process, that may be and normally are largely or entirely outside the cognitive grasp of the believer. Most such views can in fact be viewed as alternative versions of foundationalism, with the external factors supplying the justification of the basic beliefs – though this structural feature becomes relatively unimportant from an externalist standpoint.

Thus we have three main views on the table: internalist foundationalism, internalist coherentism, and externalist foundationalism.

(For the sake of brevity, I will henceforward refer to the first two views as “foundationalism” and “coherentism,” and to the third as simply “externalism.”) I will devote the balance of the present chapter to a consideration of some of the reasons that have led to the widespread rejection of foundationalism in recent epistemology. Chapters 2 and 3 will then be devoted to externalism and coherentism, respectively. It will emerge that these two views are also afflicted with very serious – indeed, in my judgment, fatal – problems, when advanced as solutions to the central epistemological issue formulated above.¹² This will motivate a reconsideration of foundationalism in chapter 4, in which a version of traditional foundationalism will be argued to be defensible after all. Unfortunately, however, the specific foundationalist position in question will turn out to greatly aggravate the further issue of how an inference from the foundation to various beliefs about the physical world can be justified. Thus the final chapter will be devoted to a reconsideration of this venerable problem.

1.4 The Case against Traditional Foundationalism

In the most standard sort of empirical foundationalist position, as we have seen, justification is claimed to rest on a foundation of “basic beliefs,” beliefs that are alleged to be justified or at least epistemically acceptable without that justification or acceptability being itself dependent on inference from other beliefs (or on anything else that would itself require justification). It is upon these basic beliefs that the justification of all other empirical beliefs is supposed to depend, in the way already indicated: if the empirical beliefs that constitute the justifying reasons for any particular, non-basic empirical belief were specified, and then the further beliefs supporting any non-basic belief cited as such a reason also specified, and so on, all of the branches of the resulting justificatory structure would terminate sooner or later with basic beliefs.

There are two main kinds of objections that have been raised against such foundationalist views. The first focuses on the justificatory relation between the foundation and the superstructure of non-basic beliefs, as those two components are specified by any particular version of foundationalism. It questions whether it is in fact possible on the

¹² Externalism, as we will see, may still be a defensible and indeed valuable view for other purposes, some of which still fall within the general aegis of epistemology.

basis of the foundation thus specified to arrive at an adequate justification for the various sorts of beliefs that we ordinarily regard as justified, or at least for a reasonably high proportion of such beliefs. Here the most important beliefs whose justification is alleged to be problematic are beliefs about the physical world (assuming that, as is the case for many foundationalist views, these are not already part of the foundation). Clearly a foundationalist view that falls seriously short in this area will itself amount to a fairly severe and hence intuitively implausible version of skepticism.

It is obvious that the seriousness of this first general sort of problem will vary widely with respect to different foundationalist views, depending in large part on just how much is included in the set of basic or foundational beliefs. In particular, a less traditional foundationalist view according to which at least some beliefs about physical objects count as foundational will clearly have much less difficulty arriving at a reasonably plausible account of the overall scope of justified belief than will a more traditional view that restricts the foundations to beliefs about subjective states of experience. Since, as already noted, the general sort of foundationalist view that now seems to be otherwise defensible is of the more traditional sort, this problem will eventually become quite urgent.

For the moment, however, I want to focus on a second and to my mind much more fundamental kind of objection to foundationalism, one that asks how the supposedly basic or foundational beliefs are themselves justified or rendered epistemically acceptable. The basic beliefs in a foundationalist account of empirical justification are, after all, themselves contingent beliefs, beliefs that are true in some possible worlds and false in others. It thus seems obvious that if they are to serve as the justificatory premises for all the rest of empirical justification, then some sort of reason or rational basis for thinking that they themselves are true or at least likely to be true in the actual world is required. And the problem is that it seems initially impossible for there to be such a reason or rational basis for these allegedly basic beliefs (of an internalist character) that does not at the same time impugn their status as genuinely basic.

In fact, the characterization so far offered here of basic beliefs is almost entirely negative: though they are justified *somehow*, which I have taken to mean that there is a suitable reason or basis of some sort for thinking them to be true, this reason does *not* appeal to conditional reasons that would invoke further premises that would themselves be in need of justification. But how is this possible? How can there be a

reason or basis for thinking that a given claim is true that involves no inference or argument and no further premise of any sort? What might such a reason or basis consist in?

Foundationalists have responded to this challenge, sometimes only by implication, in a variety of ways. Some have claimed in effect that the issue of justification for the basic or foundational beliefs somehow does not arise or at least for some reason cannot be correctly or meaningfully raised. This sort of view seems, however, to be difficult or impossible to understand, especially given the already noted contingent character of the beliefs in question. The only intelligible way that a belief that is to serve as a foundation for the whole structure of other beliefs can itself be “not in need of justification” is if it already possesses something tantamount to justification (whether or not that term is employed), in which case this status needs to be further explained.

Other foundationalists have appealed instead to the idea that such beliefs are “self-justified” or “self-evident” (or “intrinsically justified” or “justified in themselves”), but it is difficult to attach a content to these characterizations that is both clear and defensible. A basic belief cannot be literally *self*-justifying unless the foundationalist accepts circular reasoning as a source of justification, a view that seems obviously wrong (and that would also undercut one of the main objections to coherentism). Nor can it be plausibly claimed that the foundational beliefs are self-evident in the sense that is sometimes claimed to apply to beliefs justified a priori. Whether or not that conception is finally defensible, there is obvious and substantial intuitive plausibility to the idea that when I understand a simple necessary truth, e.g., the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$, I am able to directly and immediately apprehend on the basis of that understanding and without appeal to any further premise or argument that the claim in question must be, and so is, true. Such a proposition is naturally described as justified or evident in virtue of nothing more than its own intrinsic content, and in this way as *self*-evident. But whatever the ultimate merits of this essentially rationalist conception of self-evidence,¹³ nothing at all like it can be invoked for the sort of belief that is our immediate concern here, namely a belief having as its content a contingent proposition requiring empirical justification. Being contingent, true in some possible worlds and not in others, such a proposition cannot be seen or appre-

13 For a defense of a moderate version of rationalism, one that allows for the possibility that justification of this sort is fallible, see *IDPR*, cited in note 2.

hended to be true simply on the basis of its content.¹⁴ Moreover, to say that such a belief requires empirical or experiential justification is to say that it is precisely not *self-evident*, not justified merely by virtue of its intrinsic character or content, but rather, if at all, by something, *experience*, that is obviously external to that content.

Thus the obvious and, I now believe, correct thing to say is that basic or foundational beliefs are, after all, justified by appeal to experience. But the difficulty, which turns out to be very formidable, is to give a clear and dialectically perspicuous picture of how this is supposed to work.

Foundationalists such as C. I. Lewis and Richard Fumerton,¹⁵ among many others, have spoken at this point of basic beliefs being justified by the “direct apprehension” or “direct acquaintance” with the relevant experiential content. On the surface, however, this answer is seriously problematic in the following way. The picture it suggests is that in a situation of foundational belief, there are the following three distinguishable elements. First, there is the relevant sensory experience itself. Second, there is the allegedly basic or foundational belief, whose content, I will assume, pertains to some feature or aspect of that experience. And third, there is what appears to be a further mental act of some kind that is distinct from the belief, an act of direct apprehension of or immediate acquaintance with the sensory experience and its relevant features. And it is this further mental act that is supposed to provide the person’s reason for thinking that the belief is true.

Thus, for example, we might have, first, the actual presence in my visual field of a red triangular shape; second, the allegedly basic belief that there is a red triangular shape in my visual field; and, third, the direct apprehension of or immediate acquaintance with the red triangular shape. It is this third element that is apparently required for the view under consideration to differ from what would otherwise seemingly be a purely externalist view of the justification of basic beliefs. The suggestion is that the basic belief is justified, not merely because it in fact describes the experience correctly in a non-accidental way (which would be an externalist account), but rather because the character of the experience in virtue of which the description is correct is

14 Indexically formulated claims such as “I am here now” may be an exception here, but a basis for justification that goes beyond its mere content is needed for any claim with non-indexical descriptive content.

15 See C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1946) and Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

cognitively *given* or *presented* to the person in question via the act of direct apprehension or immediate acquaintance, and is thereby cognitively accessible. At the same time, however, this direct apprehension or acquaintance is claimed to require no further justification itself, thus allegedly bringing the regress of justification to a close.

The immediate and obvious problem is to understand the nature of this apparently essential third element, the other two being at least reasonably unproblematic. Even if it is somehow not strictly a *belief*, is it still an assertive or judgmental cognitive act that involves something like a *conceptualization* or *classification* of the experiential element in question? Is what is directly apprehended or “given” something like the truth of the conceptually formulated *proposition* that there is a red and triangular experiential element present (rather than no such element at all or only one that is green and square or blue and oval or some other combination of color and shape)?

If the answer to this question is “yes,” then it is easy to see how this second cognitive act can, *if it is itself justified*, provide a reason for thinking that the belief in question is true. On most conceptions of direct apprehension, the content of the direct apprehension and that of the basic belief would not indeed be strictly identical, as the discussion so far might suggest, since the former would be more specific or determinate than the latter. But the truth or correctness of the direct apprehension that there is a red triangular shape in my visual field would nonetheless be sufficient for the truth of the basic belief that there is a red triangular shape in my visual field and hence would apparently provide an impeccable reason for accepting it – on the assumption, once again, that the direct apprehension is itself somehow justified or acceptable.

Just here, however, lies the apparent difficulty. Since on this construal a direct apprehension has as its content a contingent propositional thesis or assertion concerning the classification of my experience, some reason seems to be required for thinking that such a direct apprehension is *itself* true or correct. Such a reason obviously cannot be provided by the basic belief and to appeal merely to the first of the elements enumerated above, the sensory experience itself as distinct from any reflective awareness or apprehension thereof, would seemingly amount to a collapse into externalism. But having as its content a contingent claim, the direct apprehension cannot, as we have already seen, be strictly self-evident. And to say simply that acts of direct apprehension, unlike ordinary beliefs, somehow do not by their very nature require any further justification is merely to stipulate that

the foregoing problem is not genuine without offering any clear account of how and why this is so. Thus it is very hard to see why a direct apprehension or immediate acquaintance does not itself require some further sort of justification, presumably by appeal to some further sort of cognitive state, in which case the regress either apparently continues, even if it is perhaps no longer strictly a regress of belief, or else terminates in the first of the seemingly unsatisfactory ways considered above – with the result in either case being that the supposedly basic belief turns out not to be genuinely basic after all.

If, on the other hand, the answer to the question raised three paragraphs back is “no,” if the act of direct apprehension or immediate acquaintance is in no way assertive or judgmental in character, if it has no content that amounts to or approximates the proposition or thesis that the person’s experience has one set of features rather than another, then any clear reason for demanding epistemic justification for such a state vanishes. If such an awareness has as its content no claim or assertion that is even capable of being true or false, then the notion of epistemic justification, as understood so far, simply does not apply to it. At the same time, however, it becomes difficult to see how the occurrence of such a state can in itself provide any reason or other basis for thinking that the original allegedly foundational belief is true. If the direct apprehension of the experience involves no claim or assertion regarding its character, so that who thus has such an apprehension is apparently not thereby aware *that* it has such-and-such features, then in what way is his belief *that* he has an experience with those features justified by that apprehension? The basic belief, after all, *is* judgmental: it has the assertive content that something, in this case a sensory experience, has one set of features rather than one of the various others that it might have had. How can a state whose content does not in any way say or indicate that things are one way rather than another nonetheless provide a reason or any sort of basis for thinking that the propositional content of a belief that they are one specific way is true?

It is this dilemma,¹⁶ together with a related argument that will be discussed later, that seems to me to constitute the most basic difficulty for those traditional versions of empirical foundationalism that do not

16 The original source of the dilemma is Wilfrid Sellars’s “Empiricism and the philosophy of mind,” reprinted in Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 127–96, esp. pp. 131–2. See also Sellars, “The structure of knowledge,” in Hector-Neri Castañeda (ed.), *Action, Knowledge, and Reality: Critical Studies in Honor of Wilfrid Sellars* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 295–347. For my own previous account and further elaboration of the dilemma, see *SEK*, ch. 4.

resort to externalism – a difficulty that once seemed to me to be clearly fatal. I will conclude this initial discussion of it by considering a possible rejoinder on behalf of the traditional foundationalist, one that now seems to me to point in the right direction but that nonetheless faces problems of its own.

One natural response for a foundationalist who takes the apparent dilemma seriously is to attempt to “go between the horns” by claiming that a state of direct apprehension or acquaintance is somehow *neither* fully assertive or judgmental nor entirely and unproblematically nonassertive and nonjudgmental. Rather such a state is, as it were, *semi*-assertive or *semi*-judgmental in character: it has a kind of content or cognitive significance, but not in a way that would raise a further issue of justification. Such states would thus allegedly resemble judgments or beliefs in having the capacity to confer justification on judgmental states proper, while differing from them in not requiring justification themselves.

But if this is to be more than a bare stipulation that the problem is somehow solved but without giving any hint of what the solution might be or how it is even possible, some further account is needed of how a state can have both of these properties. Some philosophers, perhaps most notably Husserl, have appealed at this point to the idea of a rudimentary cognitive state, prior not only to language but even to anything that is properly called conceptualization. Such a “pre-predicative awareness” would still *represent* or *depict* something, presumably experience, as being one way rather than another, but that representative content would be nothing like a propositional thesis or assertion, nothing that could be strictly true or false. In this way, it might be suggested, it could intelligibly provide a reason for a basic belief, while still being itself immune to the demand for epistemic justification.

The problem with this move is not that the idea of such a pre-conceptual cognitive state is untenable or even especially implausible (though many philosophers who are prone to identify intelligible thought-content with what can be linguistically expressed would surely be unhappy with it). The main difficulty is rather that any representative state that is capable of justifying a belief must somehow have as at least part of its content the *information* that the relevant state of affairs is one way rather than another, the way that the belief says it is rather than some way that would make the belief false. But for any representation that has an informational content of this sort, whether it is strictly conceptual or propositional or not, it will seemingly be possible to ask whether the information it presents is *correct* or *incor-*

rect in what it depicts, even if perhaps not strictly true or false. And once the issue of correctness has found a foothold, the issue of justification, of whether there is any good *reason* to think that the representation is correct rather than incorrect, will apparently follow immediately behind, and the regress will break out all over again.

As will emerge in chapter 4, I now think that a view in very roughly this general direction is defensible and indeed correct, if formulated and explained in the right way. But the present version, which attempts to avoid the need for justification simply by reducing or attenuating the conceptual or representative content of the direct awareness, plainly cannot succeed in itself. For no matter how far the representative character of the direct apprehension is thus diluted or attenuated, so long as it retains the capacity to justify a basic belief, there will be the same apparent reason for thinking that it itself requires justification. This is so because the very same aspect of such a state that allows it to justify a belief, namely its involving as its content the information that things are one way rather than another, also creates the apparent need for justification.

1.5 The Concept of Knowledge

There is one further topic that needs to be considered before turning to a fuller discussion of the alternatives to foundationalism. Though the present discussion falls within the general area usually referred to as “the theory of knowledge,” the concept of knowledge itself has itself barely been mentioned so far. This is not an accident and will indeed largely continue (with one important exception) to be the case, and I want to conclude this introductory chapter with a brief explanation of why this is so. In fact, for all of its prominence, both philosophically and commonsensically, the concept of knowledge is, in my judgment, a seriously problematic concept in more than one way. So much so that it is, I believe, best avoided as far as possible in sober epistemological discussion – as paradoxical as that may sound.

To begin with the most obvious difficulty, it is generally though not universally agreed that one necessary condition for knowledge is the possession by the belief in question of an adequate *degree* of epistemic justification or warrant in at least roughly the sense adumbrated above, that of there being a reason or basis for thinking that the belief is true (or likely to be true). But *what* degree of justification? How strong does such a reason have to be to satisfy this requirement? To require with

many historical philosophers that the reason be strong enough to *guarantee* the truth of the belief seems to restrict knowledge to a few simple necessary truths, such as simple propositions of mathematics and logic, together *perhaps* with simple claims about one's own private sensory and introspective experience.¹⁷ Faced with the obvious incompatibility between this result and the vastly more extensive knowledge ascriptions of enlightened common sense, epistemologists have generally adopted the view (sometimes referred to as the "weak conception" of knowledge) that there is some lesser degree or level of justification, lower than a guarantee of truth but presumably higher than mere 51 percent probability, that is required for a belief to count as "knowledge." The obvious question, however, is just what this crucial level of justification actually is or how it might be determined or specified. And the striking fact is that there is very likely no attempt actually to specify this favored level of justification that would be agreed by anyone beyond its author to have succeeded and very few that have even been very seriously attempted.¹⁸ Indeed, the sole reason for thinking that there actually is a specific level of this sort is that its existence is apparently the only way in which there can be a reasonably precise concept of knowledge that does not lead at once to the skepticism generated by the more traditional view (the "strong conception" of knowledge).

Moreover, a further problem is that if the levels of justification are thought of in the seemingly obvious way as something like degrees of probability in relation to the justifying premises or evidence, then the idea of a definite level of justification short of a guarantee of truth that is sufficient for knowledge seems to generate a serious conflict between the ordinary use of the concept of knowledge and the demands of the probability calculus: while someone who knows both proposition *A* and proposition *B* would ordinarily be thought to be able on that basis to come to know the conjunctive proposition *A and B*, the possession by both *A* and *B* of any proposed level of probability less than 1 in

17 For a persuasive recent defense of this traditional view as to the required degree of justification, see Panayot Butchvarov, *The Concept of Knowledge* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

18 The main sustained attempt here is Roderick Chisholm's, in the three editions of *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966, 1977, 1989) and in various other writings in the same period. Following the vicissitudes of Chisholm's attempts in this area is perhaps the best way to convince oneself that what might be referred to as the magic level of justification sufficient for "knowledge" as opposed to mere rational belief cannot be successfully specified and very probably does not exist.

relation to any specified body of evidence or justifying premises does not guarantee that their conjunction will possess at least that level of probability, making it hard to see how the envisaged “weak” conception of knowledge could work, even if a definite level of justification could somehow be specified.

These problems suggest strongly that to the seemingly elementary but obviously fundamental question of what degree of justification or warrant is required to satisfy the concept of knowledge, there is not only no satisfactory answer presently available but no real prospect of finding one. And that in turn suggests that our grip on the supposed concept of knowledge itself is anything but sure, if indeed there is even a clear and univocal concept there to be understood. For reasons like these, which will be augmented in chapter 2 and could easily be expanded yet further,¹⁹ I will largely concern myself here with justification rather than knowledge. My conviction, which cannot be further defended now (but for which the success of the following discussion would constitute good evidence), is that such an approach is adequate to the issues arising out of the foregoing dialectic and indeed to all of the central issues of traditional epistemology.

19 An important further source of such reasons is the notorious “Gettier problem,” which is, I believe, largely if not entirely an artifact of the idea of a weaker level of justification that is still adequate for “knowledge.” It is also worth asking what the significance of a “magic” level of justification short of a guarantee of truth could possibly be. Even if we had reached such a level in a particular case, there would still be no reason not to seek still higher levels of justification for any claim whose truth was a matter of serious interest, nor would increases in justification become in any clear way less valuable once the “magic” level had been obtained. This again seems to call into question whether the concept of knowledge as understood by the weak conception could possibly have any real importance.