

Is There Non-Inferential Justification?

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I Justification

I want to talk about a certain epistemic quality that I call “justification,” and inquire whether that quality can ever be had “immediately” or “non-inferentially.” Before we get into substantive issues, we need first to agree about what epistemic quality it is we’ll be talking about, and then we need to clarify what it is to have that quality immediately or non-inferentially.

When I say I call this epistemic quality “justification,” you’re liable to think, “Oh I know what that is.” You may. But experience has taught me that different philosophers use and understand the term “justification” differently, even *before* they start spinning substantive theories about what “justification” amounts to. So we should proceed cautiously. You *may* use the term “justification” to describe the same epistemic quality as I do; or you may use it to describe some different status or quality. You may use some *other* term, or no term at all, to describe the quality I call “justification.”

I say that **you have justification to believe P** iff you’re in a position where it would be epistemically appropriate for you to believe P, a position where P is epistemically likely for you to be true. I intend this to be a very inclusive epistemic status.¹ Some philosophers say you can know P without “having any justification” for your belief. We can assume that whenever a subject knows P, she’ll be in a position where it’d be epistemically appropriate to believe P. So on my usage, whoever knows P has justification to believe P. (Perhaps she has that justification *because* she knows.) The philosophers who say otherwise are using “having justification” to mean something different, or more specific, than the epistemic status I am using it to mean. The same goes for philosophers who say a belief can be epistemically appropriate, and so play a role in justifying other beliefs, though you do not “have any justification” for it. On my usage,

all it means to have justification to believe something is that it's appropriate for you to believe it, and to rely on that belief in forming other beliefs. Some philosophers call this epistemic status "entitlement" or "warrant," rather than "justification." For the sake of a shared discussion, though, we need to fix on a single terminology.

If there's some state or condition you're in *in virtue of which* you have justification to believe P, I'll call it a "justification-making condition," or a **justification-maker** for short. This is a condition that *makes it* epistemically appropriate (or more appropriate) for you to believe P, rather than disbelieve P or suspend judgment. It's a truth-maker for your having justification to believe P. (Firth 1964 called these conditions "warrant-increasing properties.") We can say that conditions of this sort **justify** you in believing P. They are **justifiers**. (We will encounter a different way to understand talk of "justifiers" in §VI, below.)

In what follows, it will be useful for us to distinguish between **having justification to believe P**, and actually **appropriately holding** a belief in P. To have justification *to* believe P, it is not important whether you *actually do* believe P (nor, if you do, why you do); there just have to be things that make believing P an appropriate attitude for you *to* have. To *appropriately believe* P more is required. You need to believe P; you need to have justification *to* believe P; and you also need to believe P *on the right grounds*. You need to believe it *for* reasons that make you have justification to believe it; you can't believe it for other, bad reasons, or on a whim.² There are further conditions as well: for instance, you need to be taking proper account of any evidence you have that tells against or undercuts your grounds for believing P. I describe another further condition in Pryor forthcoming. Only when all such conditions are met will your belief in P be appropriately held.

II Immediate Justification

Now that we have a grip on the notion of "justification," let's clarify what it means to talk about "immediate justification."

For some propositions, you have justification to believe them because *other* propositions you have justification to believe epistemically support them. For instance,

suppose you look at the gas gauge of your car, and it appears to read “E.” So you have justification to believe:

(Gauge) The gas gauge reads “E.”

That, together with other things you justifiedly believe about your car, gives you justification to believe:

(Gas) Your car is out of gas.

(It’s not important for our purposes whether you *actually do* believe (Gauge) or (Gas). Given your evidence, you *ought* to believe them.) In this example, your justification to believe (Gas) *comes* in part from the fact that you have justification to believe (Gauge). That is, having justification to believe the latter is part of *what makes you* have justification to believe the former. The justification you have in this example to believe (Gauge) does *not* in the same way come from your having justification to believe (Gas). (One mark of this is that evidence that undercut your justification to believe (Gauge) would *ipso facto* undercut your justification to believe (Gas); but not *vice versa*.) When your justification to believe P comes in part from your having justification to believe other, supporting propositions, I’ll say that those latter propositions **mediate** your justification to believe P. (This kind of justification is sometimes called “inferential” justification. We’ll encounter a second way in which justification can be “inferential” later.) When your justification to believe P does *not* come from your justification to believe other propositions, I’ll call it **immediate**.

Some clarifications.³ First, the question whether your justification to believe P is mediate or immediate is a question about *what kind of epistemic support* you have for P. It’s not a question about *how much* support you have: nothing in our definition requires immediately justified beliefs to be infallible or indefeasible. Nor is it a question about what psychological processes you’ve undergone. The support you have to believe P can be mediate (or “inferential”) even if you didn’t *arrive at* P by deriving or inferring it from other beliefs.

Second, in order for you to have immediate justification to believe P, it’s not required that your justification *comes from nowhere*, that there is nothing that *makes you* so justified. It’s only required that what makes you justified doesn’t include having

justification for other beliefs.⁴ There are various proposals about what can make one have immediate justification. E.g., perhaps you're immediately justified in believing you feel tired because *you do* feel tired. Perhaps you're immediately justified in believing that tiredness is a mental state because *you understand* what tiredness is. And so on. It may be that there is no single correct account. Different propositions may be justified by different kinds of things.

Third, the fact that you have immediate justification to believe P does not entail that no other beliefs are required for you to be able *to form or entertain* the belief that P. Having the concepts involved in the belief that P may require believing certain other propositions; it does not follow that any justification you have to believe P must be mediated by those other propositions.⁵

Fourth, justification is usually defeasible. What a justification-maker for P gives you is provisional or *prima facie* justification to believe P; and *that* is what I'm saying can be mediate or immediate. Whether it's *all things considered* appropriate for you to believe P will depend on what *other* evidence you possess, and whether it *defeats* the *prima facie* justification you have to believe P.

Fifth, beliefs can be epistemically overdetermined. You can have immediate justification and independent mediate justification to believe the same thing. In some cases, your belief will be grounded on the facts that make you have immediate justification; in other cases it might be grounded on the facts that make you have mediate justification, or on both sets of facts. This shows that we should try to explain the notion of "grounding" in a way that permits beliefs to be both grounded and immediately justified—if that's possible. (In section VII we will consider an argument that it is not possible.)

III Why Believe In Immediate Justification?

Now that we've achieved some clarity about what immediate justification *is*, let's ask why we should believe in it.

The most famous argument for immediate justification is called the **Regress Argument**. Really this is not one argument but several; because philosophers do not

always have the same regress in mind. Sometimes they have in mind a *dialectical* regress: to defend your belief that P in argument, you need to appeal to other beliefs, but then how do you defend those other beliefs? Sometimes they have in mind a *grounding* regress: your belief in P is grounded in such-and-such other beliefs, but then what grounds those other beliefs? Sometimes they have in mind a *justification-making* regress: what makes you have justification to believe P is, in part, your having justification to believe such-and-such other propositions, but then what makes you justified in believing those other propositions?

Let's focus on this third, justification-making regress. There are four possible ways for the regress to play out:

- (i) The regress never ends. The justificatory chain goes on forever.
- (ii) What makes you justified in believing P is your having justification to believe other things, and...what makes you justified in believing some of them is your having justification to believe P. That is, the justificatory chain includes some closed loops.
- (iii) Eventually we get to a proposition you believe inappropriately, *without* having any justification for it. Though this belief is not itself justified, it is somehow able to justify you in believing further propositions.
- (iv) Eventually we get to a proposition you have justification to believe, but that justification does not come from your believing, or having justification to believe, any further propositions.⁶

The Foundationalist argues that options (i) and (ii) are untenable; so we have to accept (iii) or (iv). On either of those options, a subject can have justification to believe some propositions, that does not come from her having justification to believe any other propositions.⁷

Though this Regress Argument is the *most famous* argument for immediate justification, I do not think it is the *best* argument. It has the same weakness as any argument by elimination: everything turns on whether the rejected options really are untenable. That's not a matter that can be quickly decided. In addition, the Regress Argument assumes that justificatory relations always have a linear, asymmetric nature; and some epistemologists deny that that's so.

So I do not think the best argument for immediate justification is this Regress Argument. I think the best argument comes from **considering examples**.

Suppose I feel tired, or have a headache. I am justified in believing I feel those ways. And there do not *seem* to be any other propositions that mediate my justification for believing it. What would the other propositions be?

Suppose I raise my arm. I am justified in believing that I'm doing this in order to scare a fly. That is *my reason for* trying to raise my arm. Sometimes my reasons for acting are opaque to me and have to be carefully reconstructed. But not always. In cases like this one, my reasons can be immediately evident to me. There doesn't seem to be *anything else* I'm justified in believing, that *makes me* justified in believing my reason for trying to raise my arm is to scare a fly. What would the other beliefs be?

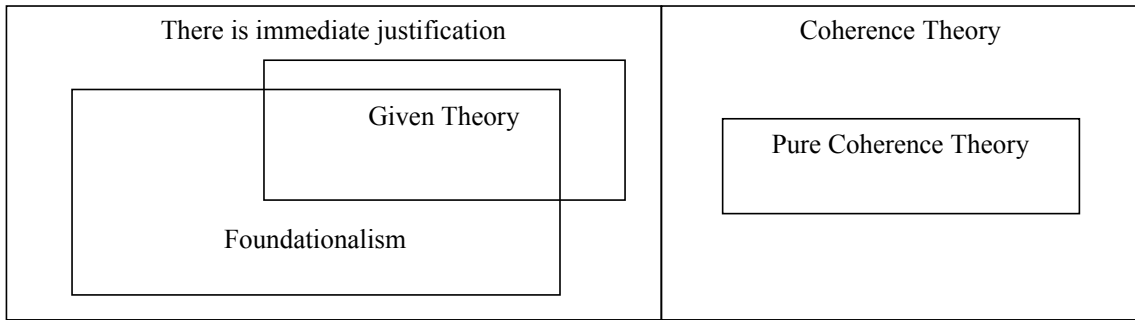
I'm imagining my grandmother. The way I'm imagining her is sitting in her kitchen. Or at least, I believe it is. And it seems I could be *justified* in that belief. Again, it's hard to see what other propositions might mediate this justification.

I think about a domino and a chessboard. It's obvious to me that the only way to wholly cover two spaces on the board is to place the domino horizontally or vertically. That's something I *could* have derived from geometric premises. But in this case I didn't. I just immediately saw that it was true. In this case, too, my justification does not seem to be mediated by any further propositions.⁸

These and many other examples provide us with good candidates to be immediate justification. What we need to do is see whether such examples stand up to critical reflection.

IV The Master Argument for Coherentism

The main argument against immediate justification was historically directed at the Given Theory. That was a theory that offered a specific account of what some immediate justification-makers looked like. The precise details of the Given Theory aren't important for our inquiry.⁹ What is important is that the Given Theory is just one possible account among many of what gives us immediate justification. Fans of immediate justification are also free to give different accounts. The following map may be helpful:



I make Foundationalism a proper subclass of the view that there is immediate justification, because Foundationalists also hold additional theses about the structure of your justification. One does not need to accept those additional theses, merely to believe that *some* beliefs are immediately justified. Coherentists deny that it's possible for any beliefs to be immediately justified. They say that justification always comes, *at least in part*, from your justification for other beliefs. I distinguish between Pure and Impure versions of Coherentism. Pure Coherentists claim that a belief can only be justified by its relations to other beliefs. Impure Coherentists are willing to give some non-beliefs, such as perceptual experiences, a justifying role. They'll just deny that those states are able to justify a belief *all by themselves*. They can only do so in cooperation with other justified beliefs. For instance, an Impure Coherentist might say that when it looks to you as if you have hands, *and* you have justification to believe that your visual experiences are reliable, *those facts together* can make you justified in believing that you have hands.¹⁰

Now, as I said, the main argument against immediate justification was historically directed at the Given Theory. This argument alleged that in order to be a justifier, you need to have certain characteristics, and that having those characteristics makes you be the sort of thing that itself needs justification. Here is a sample presentation, from BonJour:

The basic idea of givenness...is to distinguish two aspects of ordinary cognitive states, their capacity to justify other cognitive states and their own need for justification, and then to try to find a kind of state which possesses only the former aspect and not the latter—a state of immediate apprehension or intuition. But we can now see plainly that any such

attempt is fundamentally misguided and intrinsically hopeless. For it is clear on reflection that it is one and the same feature of a cognitive state, namely, its assertive or at least representational content, which both enables it to confer justification on other states and also creates the need for it to be itself justified—thus making it impossible in principle to separate these two aspects. (BonJour 1985, p. 78)

The characteristics BonJour cites are having “assertive” or representational content. (Sometimes it’s claimed, in addition, that a justifier has to have *conceptual* content. We’ll return to that idea later.) In order to have these characteristics, the Coherentist argues, a state would itself have to be a belief—or at least be sufficiently like a belief that it in turn needs justifying. So we aren’t going to find any immediate justifiers: conditions that are able to justify though they don’t themselves need justifying. That is the core of the familiar argument against the Given Theory.

Notice that this argument really doesn’t have anything specifically to do with the Given Theory. If it works, it should work against *any* account of immediate justification. In fact, if it works, then the only things which can play *any* justifying role will be other beliefs (or belief-like states). So the argument threatens Impure Coherence Theories no less than it does views that countenance immediate justification. It’s not really an argument *against the Given Theory*, then. It’s more an argument *for Pure Coherentism*. I think of this argument as the **Master Argument for Coherentism**.¹¹

One step in this Master Argument insists that only states with propositional content can be justifiers. Let’s call this:

The Content Requirement In order to be a justifier, you need to have propositional content.

Why should we accept that requirement? Well, if a state doesn’t have propositional content, then it can’t stand in logical relations to beliefs. Davidson once complained:

The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in *this* sense are the basis or ground of those

beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified. (Davidson 1986, p. 311)

Of course Davidson is right that merely learning that some sensation S caused belief B does not *show* that B is justified, or that S is what makes it justified. However, it would be compatible with that that S *does* make B justified. Davidson wants to rule that possibility out. He thinks that sensation S *cannot* be what justifies B. So he must think that it's *only* by standing in logical relations to a belief that a state can justify the belief. He may be thinking: if a state doesn't stand in logical relations to a belief, then why should it justify that belief *as opposed to others*? For example, let's assume that headaches don't have propositional content. (Some philosophers argue that all mental states have propositional content. For the sake of discussion, we'll assume with Davidson that they're wrong.) Why then should a headache justify me in believing *I have a headache*, as opposed to *I don't have a headache* or *I am a headache* or *There are no such things as headaches*? *My headache* itself wouldn't logically support *any* of those propositions; so it's not clear why it should justify some of them but not the others.

There is then some initial plausibility to the idea that in order to play the role of a justifier, a state has to be able to stand in logical relations; which it can only do if it has propositional content. (Objection: What about *a lack of defeating evidence*? That's not naturally thought of as a state with propositional content; but it does seem relevant to your justification. Reply: The Content Requirement should be understood as stating a necessary condition to be a *prima facie* justifier. The role defeating evidence plays is in settling a further question: When does *prima facie* justification get to become all things considered justification?)

The other step in the Master Argument insists that if a state has propositional content, then it will be a belief or epistemically like a belief:

Only Beliefs Only beliefs (or other states that are epistemically like beliefs, and also require epistemic justification) have propositional content.

But wait a minute! *Desires* have propositional content, and they're not the sort of thing which *could* be, nor do they *need to be* justified—at least, not *epistemically* justified.¹²

The Coherentist will respond: “That’s true, desires have propositional content and don’t need any epistemic justification. So the Only Beliefs premise as it stands is false. But desires aren’t *capable* of justifying beliefs, either! So they’re not a counter-example to *the conclusion* we want: that only beliefs can be justifiers. They just force us to be more specific about what features it is that enable a state to be a justifier. It takes more than just having propositional content. There are some ways of representing the proposition that P that *purport to be saying how the world is*, and other ways that don’t. When a state represents that P in the first way, we can say that the state *assertively* represents that P. Desires may represent that P in some sense, but they do not represent it assertively. Neither do states like imagining and entertaining. When you desire that P, or imagine that P, or entertain the thought that P, your mental state does not purport to be saying that P is (already) true. What our Master Argument *should* say is that, to be a justifier, a state needs to have propositional content, *and* it needs to represent that proposition *assertively*. States that don’t do that aren’t even *purporting* to say how the world is, so how could they play the role of justifiers? And in order to represent a proposition assertively, a state will have to be a belief, or else sufficiently like a belief that it needs justifying too.”

Let’s revise the Master Argument as the Coherentist proposes:

The Content Requirement (Revised) In order to be a justifier, you need to have propositional content, and you need to represent that proposition assertively.

Only Beliefs (Revised) Only beliefs (or other states that are epistemically like beliefs) represent propositions assertively.

□ Only beliefs (or other states that are epistemically like beliefs) can be justifiers.

I want to mention two quick worries about this argument, and then dwell at length upon a third.

First, even if this argument were sound, it’s not clear that it would establish Coherentism. The argument says that the only things that could justify are states like belief, that “require” justification. A Foundationalist might agree that beliefs in some

sense always “require” justification, but argue that they’re still sometimes *able to justify* other beliefs even when *they’re not* themselves justified. (This was option (iii) in the Regress Argument.) The other beliefs that got justified in this way would count as “immediately justified,” as I’ve defined it.

Second, we might worry whether the Coherentist is himself in a position to accept the Master Argument. After all, doesn’t the Coherentist want facts about *coherence* to play a justifying role? Yet coherence is not itself a belief or a belief-like state. Here I think the Coherentist can reply, “Notice that coherence is a property of *the contents* of your beliefs. Any set of beliefs having the same contents would be just as coherent. So it’s OK to say that it’s always your beliefs that are doing the justifying. It’s just that certain sets of beliefs (those whose contents cohere well) justify more than others. Talk about the justifying role of *coherence* is shorthand for talk about which sets of beliefs justify and which don’t.” This seems to me a plausible line for the Coherentist to take.

There is a third worry that the Coherentist cannot so easily finesse, however. This worry once again concerns the Only Beliefs premise. The problem is that many philosophers of mind these days think of *experiences* as having propositional content. To say that experiences have propositional content is not to say that experiences are beliefs. It can look to you as if P without your believing that P. Experiences and beliefs just have it in common that they both represent propositions.¹³ And both seem to represent propositions *assertively*; when they represent that P, they do so in a way that purports to say how the world is. So the Master Argument as we have it gives us no reason to exclude experiences from the ranks of justifiers.¹⁴

Yet, unlike beliefs, experiences aren’t the sort of thing which *could be*, nor do they *need to be* justified. Sure, *beliefs about* what experiences you have may need to be justified. But *the experiences themselves* do not. (If someone comes up to you and demands, “*How dare you* have that experience? What gives you the right?” what should you say?) So we see that, contrary to the Only Beliefs premise, states that assertively represent a proposition *won’t* always themselves require justification.

Where does this leave things between Foundationalists (or fans of immediate justification more generally) and proponents of the Master Argument? A Foundationalist *can* just stop here. He can say, “Well, we’ve seen that experiences are a counter-example

to the Only Beliefs premise; so even if we accept the Content Requirement, that poses no obstacle to letting experiences play the role of justifiers. They might play that role in cooperation with other beliefs, as the Impure Coherentist allows, or they might do it all by themselves. We've seen no good reason yet to think they can't." (See e.g. Martin 1993 and Steup 2001.)

Some Foundationalists do stop there. They're happy to accept the Content Requirement. But that is a pretty demanding constraint to put on what can be a justifier. And in fact, if you think about it, the Content Requirement will be well-motivated only if an *even more demanding* constraint is. Let me explain.

The Coherentist denies that the mere presence of a headache or a desire can justify you in believing anything, because these states don't assertively represent anything. They can't even justify you in believing that you have those states. But then neither should the mere presence of a belief or an experience justify you in believing you have *them*, either. For although beliefs and experiences do have propositional contents that they assertively represent, those contents are playing no role in the justificatory relation here envisaged. It seems just an unfair prejudice to allow states that assertively represent propositions to justify the belief that *you're in* those states, but deny the same ability to other states. We should either allow this justifying relation in every case, or prohibit it in every case.

The Coherentist will try to prohibit it. They'll say, "Look it's not just that the justifying state needs *to have* a content. The content needs to be in some sense *what does the justifying*." What that means, I guess, is that the content of the justifying state needs to *imply*, or *inductively* or *abductively support*, or stand in some other suitable evidential relation to the content it justifies. Let's give this idea a name:

Premise Principle The only things that can justify a belief that P are other states that assertively represent propositions, and those propositions have to be ones that *could be used as premises* in an argument for P. They have to stand in some kind of inferential relation to P: they have to imply it or inductively support it or something like that.

The contents of your beliefs and experiences will ordinarily not imply that *you're in* those states; so this Principle will prevent your beliefs and experiences from directly justifying the belief that you're in them.¹⁵

I think this Premise Principle is the real intuitive force behind the Coherentist's Content Requirement. Recall the Davidson quote from earlier. He was saying that to be a justifier, you have to stand in logical relations to the beliefs you justify. I think this is what he really had in mind. Here are some other authors also giving voice to the Premise Principle.

We cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgment is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as implication or probabilification, which hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities. (McDowell 1994, p. 7)

[A reason for S's believing that P is] a fact about that person which makes her believing that thing intelligible from the point of view of rationality. If this is to happen then the selected fact about S must be somehow related to (her) believing that P. And since this relation is to make her believing that P intelligible *from the point of view of rationality*, it is necessarily a relation which obtains in virtue of the correctness of some kind of reasoning. That is to say, successfully giving such a reason makes essential reference to the premise of an inference of some kind, whose conclusion is appropriately related, most likely by identity, to the content of the belief for which the reason is being given. (Brewer 1999, p. 154; see also pp. 150-51)

The Premise Principle says that all justifying relations between states hold in virtue of "inferential relations" between their contents. We have to be sure we understand this properly.

First, the Premise Principle states a constraint on what can give you justification *to believe* things; it does not concern your actual beliefs or reasoning processes. It can allow that we often form beliefs that are *supported by* "inferential relations" without *engaging in* any inference.

It can also respect the difference that Harman 1986 emphasized between logic and reasoning. Harman said that just because you believe some premises that together imply P, it doesn't follow that it'd be reasonable for you to infer P. It might, e.g., be more reasonable to give up your belief in some of the premises. The Premise Principle can allow this. It's only trying to explicate the nature of *prima facie* justificatory relations. According to the Premise Principle, those always consist in "inferential relations" between contents. If your beliefs in some premises together imply P, and you have *prima facie* justification for those beliefs, then you have *prima facie* justification to believe P. But it might be unreasonable for you to *infer* P on those grounds, e.g. if you also have *other* evidence that tells against P, or that undercuts some of your *prima facie* justification for the premises.

Although there's a sense in which the Premise Principle claims all *prima facie* justificatory relations are "inferential," this is not the same as saying that all justification is "inferential" in the sense of being *mediated*. The Coherentists would like to *argue from* the Premise Principle to that conclusion. But the Premise Principle by itself doesn't say it. Without supplementation, the Premise Principle would allow experiences to justify beliefs. For instance, an experience as of your having hands could justify the belief that you have hands. And justification of this sort would count as immediate. It's just that, according to the Premise Principle, the experience is able to justify that belief because of the "inferential relations" its content stands in to the content of the belief. (In this case, the "inferential relation" is straightforward: the experience's content is the same as the content of the belief.) So the Premise Principle doesn't imply what people usually have in mind when they say that our perceptual justification is "inferential" or mediated. That is a view according to which we're in the first place justified in believing we have certain experiences, and then that justification for beliefs about our experiences is an essential part of what justifies our beliefs about the external world. The Premise Principle doesn't imply that; it would allow *our merely having* experiences with the right sorts of contents to justify beliefs about the external world.

Nor is the Premise Principle *implied* by the view that perceptual justification is mediated. For the latter view says nothing about what justifies our beliefs about our

experiences. Perhaps, contra the Premise Principle, we're justified in those beliefs merely *by virtue of having* the experiences.

So there's no straightforward relation between the Premise Principle and the question whether perceptual justification is mediated or immediate. The relation between the Premise Principle and Foundationalism more generally is also complicated. As I said before, some Foundationalists are happy to accept the Coherentist's Content Requirement, and the Premise Principle that motivates it. They just argue that there can be justifiers that satisfy the Premise Principle but aren't beliefs.

Those arguments interact in interesting ways with the question whether experiences have "conceptual content." Some philosophers combine the Premise Principle with the view that you can only have the required type of "inferential relation" when both *relata* have conceptual content. That seems to be the view of Sellars (1956), McDowell (1994 Lectures 1 and 3; 1998),¹⁶ and Brewer (1999 Ch. 5). The Coherentists will go on to argue that experiences don't have conceptual content and so cannot be justifiers. McDowell and Brewer, on the other hand, think that experiences *are* justifiers; so they argue that experiences do have conceptual content after all. Others have argued that experiences can stand in the "inferential relations" the Premise Principle requires even if their content is not conceptual (see e.g. Heck 2000 and Peacocke 2001).¹⁷ Personally, I'm not really sure what "conceptual content" is; so I won't enter into this debate. I just wanted to call attention to the role the Premise Principle plays in it.

We've been looking at the Master Argument for Coherentism, and considering whether it succeeds in ruling out the possibility of immediate justification. I said that even if the Master Argument were sound, it might still be possible for unjustified beliefs to do some justifying; and that would be a kind of immediate justification. We've also seen that one can accept the Premise Principle and still say that experiences justify; that will be another kind of immediate justification. So one does not need to reject the Premise Principle, to believe in immediate justification.

Nonetheless, many Foundationalists will want to reject the Premise Principle. It doesn't exclude *the very possibility* of immediate justification; but it does impose *quite a demanding constraint* on what can be an immediate justifier. Many Foundationalists

believe in justification-making facts that violate that constraint. For instance, many Foundationalists want to allow *facts about what sensations you're having*, or *facts about what mental activities you're engaging in*, to count as justifiers. Some want to allow *facts about what's required to possess certain concepts* to play a justifying role. Some say *facts about how reliable you are*, or *facts about whether your cognitive faculties are functioning properly*, or *facts about what beliefs are irresistible*, can play a justifying role. And so on. Each of these facts concerns matters that go beyond what assertive states you're in; so the Premise Principle would exclude them all from being justifiers.

I think, then, that it'd be valuable to consider whether the Premise Principle is really well-motivated. The rest of this paper will consider some arguments on its behalf.

There is one type of argument that I won't consider. Those are "arguments from the trenches": arguments of the form "Theory So-and-So gives the correct substantive account of justification; and that theory only postulates justifiers of the sort the Premise Principle permits." Assessing any argument of that type would require examining the pros and cons of different theories of justification, and determining whether Theory So-and-So really is an adequate theory. That's well beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will look at arguments that try to establish the Premise Principle "from on high," *before* we've decided upon a substantive theory of justification. I'm going to argue that *no argument of that sort* succeeds. Hence, I think we have no reason to give the Premise Principle any authority when we're choosing among competing theories of justification. If I'm right, that will clear the way for the many Foundationalist theories that postulate immediate justifiers that violate the Premise Principle.¹⁸

V Avoiding Arbitrariness

Our first argument for the Premise Principle is one that I've already mentioned. Consider a state without propositional content, like your headache. Since it has no propositional content, this state can't stand in logical relations to any beliefs. So why should it justify *any one* belief as opposed to others? Why should it justify the belief *I have a headache*, as opposed to *I don't have a headache*, or any other belief? What can the Foundationalist say to make the justifying relations he postulates non-arbitrary?

Chisholm provides a nice example of what's being objected to here. His view was that having an experience would give one *prima facie* justification for (or "tend to make evident") certain beliefs (see, e.g., Chisholm 1989). The justifying relations Chisholm postulated struck many philosophers as *ad hoc*. That impression was particularly forceful because of the model of experience Chisholm worked with. When we describe an experience as one of sensing or being-appeared-to *squarely*, that's supposed to be a description of the experience's intrinsic phenomenal quality. We might naturally *take* such an experience to be one in which we're perceiving an external square; but "being-appeared-to squarely" isn't a description of what external objects we seem to be perceiving. It doesn't mean "having an experience *that represents that there is a square.*" Chisholm didn't think experiences had representational content. Hence, the justifying relations he postulated seemed to lack any principled motivation. Why should sensing squarely justify beliefs about squares, rather than beliefs about squirrels? Many think Chisholm had no adequate answer to this question; so his position seems arbitrary and unsatisfying.

I certainly agree that epistemologists should give principled, non-arbitrary rationales for the justifying relations they postulate. However, I see no reason to think that they'll *have to* appeal to propositional contents to do it. A Foundationalist might attribute other kinds of structure to some of his justifiers. On certain theories of events, for example, events have something like a logical structure. The event of my having a headache has a logical structure akin to the structure of the proposition that I have a headache. Wouldn't these structures be enough to enable the Foundationalist to avoid the charge of arbitrariness?¹⁹ This is just one option for a Foundationalist to pursue. It's hard to draw any general assessment, until we see how the details work out. But the idea that only the Premise Principle can save us from arbitrariness seems unwarranted to me.

VI Evidence and Reasons

Where I've been talking about "justification-makers" or "justifiers," some other philosophers will talk about "evidence" or "reasons"; and there are several arguments that

the latter notions have to conform to the Premise Principle. This might be thought to show that justification-makers *also* have to conform to the Premise Principle.

Recall that a “justification-maker” is defined to be whatever makes it epistemic appropriate for you to believe some propositions rather than others. We should be open to the possibility that terms like “evidence” and “reasons” do not express exactly that notion. They may express different, or more specific notions.

For instance, some philosophers argue that “reasons” and “evidence” have to be the sort of thing that can *probabilify* a hypothesis, and hence, that the hypothesis can have a *probability conditional on*. Hypotheses also have to be able to *explain* our evidence, be *inconsistent with* our evidence, and so on. All of these roles require evidence to have propositional content. So how could states without propositional content justify or be evidence? (See Williamson 2000, pp. 194-7, and Plantinga 2001, p. 62.)

In response, I say: Let’s not assume too quickly that “evidence” and “justifier” are perfect synonyms. Consider that we sometimes use the terms “belief” and “desire” to refer to *propositions that* one believes and desires, rather than to *one’s states* of believing or desiring them. Similarly, I think, sometimes we use “evidence” to refer to *propositions that are* evident to one, rather than to the states that make them evident. In other words, we use “evidence” to refer, not to our justification-makers, but rather to the propositions that they (most directly) justify. We call those propositions “our evidence” because they can serve as evidence for further reasoning. This diagnosis would permit things like headaches, that do not *themselves* have propositional content, to be justification-makers—so long as *what* they give one justification *to believe is* a proposition.

A second argument says that we ordinarily understand “justifications” for a belief to be *arguments* that support the belief. If you have *reasons* for your belief, they should be considerations you could in principle *cite*, or *give*, to someone who doubted or challenged the belief. You can’t give someone else a non-propositional state like a headache (at least, not in the relevant sense); you can only give them *premises* and *arguments* that inferentially support your belief. This seems to show that justifications and reasons *are* limited to things permitted by the Premise Principle. (See for example McDowell 1994, pp. 165-6.)

There may be a notion of “a reason” that these remarks properly articulate. We can call it the **dialectical** notion of a reason. I want to emphasize, though, that that notion is *different* from the notion of a justification-maker that I’ve been employing in this paper, and that the Premise Principle is meant to be formulated in terms of.

It’s useful here to distinguish two construals of the verb “justify.” On the first construal, “justifying” a belief in P is a matter of proving or showing the belief to be just (or reasonable or credible). This is something that *a person* does, by giving some argument in support of that belief. (Here we can include both arguments whose conclusion is P, and arguments whose conclusion is that your belief in P is epistemically appropriate, or is likely to be true.) By extension, we can also talk about *things* justifying beliefs; in this extended sense, a thing counts as justifying a belief if it’s something *you’re in a position to use* to prove or show your belief to be just. Such things would be “reasons” in the dialectical sense articulated above. To be explicit, let’s call these things **justification-showers**.

There’s also a second way to construe the verb “justify,” which sees it as akin to the verbs “beautify” and “electrify.” When a combination of light and color beautifies a room, it’s not *proving* that the room is beautiful; rather, it’s *making* the room beautiful. Similarly, on this understanding, justifying a belief is a matter of *making* a belief just or reasonable, rather than a matter of *showing* the belief to be just. That’s how I understand the notion of a justification-maker.²⁰

No doubt there are some interesting connections between justification-making and justification-showing. But they are two different notions; so we should not assume that their extensions will coincide. It *needs argument* to show that nothing is eligible to be a justification-maker unless it can also be a justification-shower. Until we have such an argument, the fact that justification-showers always conform to the Premise Principle should not persuade us that justification-makers must do so as well.

Even if we manage to separate the notion of a justification-maker from the dialectical notion of “a reason,” I expect proponents of the Premise Principle will still insist there’s enough of a connection between justification and “reasons” for constraints on the latter to support some restrictions on the former.

For instance, they can observe that there's a difference between *reasons there are* to believe P—where these include reasons not now available to you—and *reasons you have* to believe P. For example, one reason *there is* to believe you'll soon be sick is the fact that you just drank poison. But if you're unaware of that fact, then it's not a reason you have. For something to be a reason you have, for it to justify *you* in believing P, it has to be in some sense *epistemically available* to you. It has to be the sort of thing you could *take as* a reason. When it's not available to you—e.g., when you're not in a state that assertively represents it, and so not in a position to appeal to it in arguing for P—then it may be *a* reason to believe P, but it won't be a reason you have. For anyone with “internalist” sympathies, these reflections should apply to justifiers just as much as they do to reasons.²¹

I think it's right to distinguish between things such that *you would* be justified in believing P, if you were aware of them, and things that *do* justify you in believing P. I think it's also right that if something justifies you, then it has to be in some sense “available” to you. But I think it'd be wrong to assume that this kind of “availability” requires you to be in representational states. As I understand the notion of “availability,” it's correlative to the notion of a ground. A justifier is available to you at a given time—it will be something you can “take as” a reason—if it's something that could then *ground* a belief of yours. If the Foundationalist can make sense of beliefs being *grounded on* non-representational justifiers like headaches, then he can make sense of those justifiers being sufficiently available to you.

Our next argument for the Premise Principle will question whether the Foundationalist *can* make sense of the grounding relation, without appeal to beliefs or other representational states.

VII Grounding and Being Guided By Norms

We introduced the notion of a **ground** to distinguish between cases where you believe P *for* good reasons, or on grounds that justify you in believing P, and cases where you believe P on bad grounds, ones that do not justify that belief. What does it take for

your belief to be *grounded on* some fact or condition C that you're in? A natural thought is that your belief counts as so grounded iff it's formed (or sustained) in a way that's guided by the epistemic norm "When in C, believe P." If that's right, then the best way to understand the grounding relation is by inquiring into what it takes to be guided by such a norm.

I understand an **epistemic norm** to be a claim about how we should be, in epistemic matters. Some norms merely evaluate the quality of a static epistemic situation: e.g., *You should not (it's inappropriate to) have inconsistent beliefs*. Others instruct us how to *change or improve* our situation: e.g., *If you believe that A is F, then you should believe that B is F too*; or *You should gather as much evidence as possible*. Only some epistemic norms tell us what to believe or to refrain from believing. Those are the norms that we need to consider here. We can take them to be of the form: *When you're in conditions C, you should believe (or refrain from believing) P*. Putting it in the imperative: *When you're in C, believe P*. Norms like these will be correct just in case being in C does make it the case that you should believe P. In other words, just in case being in C is a justification-maker for the proposition that P.

For any norm, there will be a difference between acting in a way that merely *happens to accord* with the norm, on the one hand, and *being guided by* the norm, or *complying* with it, on the other. You act in accordance with a norm "When in C, do \square " just in case you always \square when in C. You need not be *trying* to follow that norm. You may have \square ed for reasons that have nothing to do with C. You may even regard being in C as decisive reason *to refrain from* \square ing—but just never have noticed that you were in C. In order to comply with the norm, on the other hand, the fact that you're in C *does* in some sense need to guide or be your reason for \square ing. We need to know what this relation amounts to, when \square ing consists in forming (or sustaining) a belief.

One account of this will portray you as **deliberately following** the norm, in the way that one can deliberately follow a cooking recipe. I mean three things by this. First, on this account your belief will be voluntarily chosen. Forming it will be a genuine action of yours. Second, your belief will be chosen for a reason (a practical reason). In forming the belief that P, you'll have been guided by a norm "When in C, believe P" only if the fact (or apparent fact) that you're in C is among your reasons for actively forming that

belief. Third, this account says that to be acting for the reason that you're in C, you have to *represent* that reason to yourself. You have to be in a position to employ the proposition that you're in C as a premise in your practical reasoning. The upshot of these three assumptions is that your belief can be guided by the norm "When in C, believe P" only when you represent to yourself that you're in C, and can employ that proposition as a premise in reasoning. This may be thought to lend some support to the Premise Principle.²²

Some replies. First, even if this account of belief-formation were right, it's not clear that it would really support *the Premise Principle*. It seems only to support the claim that, for C to be a justifier that grounds your belief, you need to be in some state that assertively represents you as being in C. This doesn't imply that *C itself* is a representational state. Still, this account will imply that representational states are present whenever your belief is properly grounded. And that may be of some use to a defender of the Premise Principle. He may urge that it's really the state that *represents you* as being in C, and not the condition C itself, that's doing the justifying.²³

Secondly, this account of belief-formation seems to rely on too reflective and deliberate a picture of what it takes to act for a reason, or in compliance with a norm. Consider activities like playing a musical instrument, figuring out why your car or computer isn't working, or making judgments of grammaticality. These are practical skills whose exercise seems to be governed by rules. But we don't think subjects need to think about or deliberately apply any rules when they're performing those activities. They don't even need to be *aware of why* they're acting in the precise ways they do. Many philosophers would regard their actions as guided by rules, for all that. So *prima facie*, it seems possible to act in a way that's guided by rules without representing to yourself that you're in conditions C so now you should do so and so.²⁴

Finally, I think the present account of belief-formation misrepresents *how active* we are with respect to our beliefs. Many justified beliefs aren't formed in the deliberate way it describes, because forming those belief *isn't an action of ours*, in the first place. We do exercise voluntary control over some aspects of our epistemic lives: what evidence we gather, what sources we consult, and so on. But when it comes to our here-and-now doxastic choices, these are usually involuntary and unreflective. Our beliefs

usually just *result from* our other epistemic efforts. They just *happen*, in the way that sneezing or digesting happen. Ordinarily we make no intentional choices about what to believe. One *can* choose to believe something, and then seek ways *to get* oneself to believe it—just as we can seek ways *to get* ourselves to sneeze or digest. But that is not the way we usually form justified beliefs.²⁵

Some philosophers argue for the strong thesis that it's impossible for justified beliefs *ever* to be formed by deliberate choice. Perhaps that's right. But here I need only the following, much weaker thesis: some beliefs are appropriately held, and so properly grounded, even though they *aren't* formed by deliberate choice. So it can't in general be required for grounding a belief that one have formed the belief in the deliberate way that the account we're considering describes.

Here a proponent of the Premise Principle might say: "True, we don't always *ourselves* deliberately choose our beliefs. But that is how an ideal reasoner would form beliefs. And it's a constraint on any condition that purports to justify our beliefs that it could ground the belief of an ideal reasoner who did choose his beliefs deliberately."

I'm not sure that the fully reflective and deliberate reasoner envisaged here is a coherent ideal for us to aim at. Such a reasoner would never form or change beliefs, except by deliberately following an epistemic norm. But deliberately following a norm requires *already* having beliefs about (or at least, some representation of) whether its antecedent conditions are fulfilled. From where is the ideal reasoner supposed to get *those* beliefs? Since she's an ideal reasoner, she'd have to have formed *them* by deliberately following norms, too. But then she'd need further beliefs, about whether the antecedent conditions of *those* norms are fulfilled... There's a real threat that this reasoner would never be able to get started. She'd never *be able to* deliberately follow a norm for forming beliefs. So she'd be doxastically paralyzed. Or, if she were able to get started, it would only be by virtue of believing an infinite hierarchy of propositions. Neither option gives us a very promising model to aspire to.²⁶

If your belief's being grounded on condition C isn't a matter of your *deliberately following* a norm when you form that belief, then what is it a matter of? This is a difficult question. I can't guarantee that when we work out the details, they won't turn out to be

inhospitable to views that violate the Premise Principle. But I think we *can* be assured that there is no argument here for the Premise Principle “from on high,” no argument that will settle the question before we work out those details.²⁷

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Biographical

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Notes

¹ Though it doesn't include everything. I think it's possible for subjects to believe P inappropriately, and so without justification, though be nonculpable for doing so. (Perhaps the epistemic faults that led to the belief are too subtle and well-entrenched for those subjects to recognize.) So there's one kind of positive epistemic status, being *epistemically blameless* in believing P, that does not entail that one has justification to believe P. See Pryor 2001 §4 for discussion and references.

² The relation of believing something *for* such-and-such a reason is sometimes called "the basing relation." However, I think that terminology encourages too voluntaristic and reflective a picture of the phenomenon; I prefer to call it "the grounding relation" instead. We will talk more about this relation in section VII, below. For further discussion, see Korcz 1997 and Audi 1993 Ch. 3, 7, and 8.

³ For more about immediate justification and what it does and does not require, see Alston 1989 Ch. 3; Audi 1993 Ch. 3; and Pryor 2000.

⁴ We have to be careful here: I expect that what makes you justified in believing one proposition may often make you justified in believing several. Suppose being in state S makes you justified in believing P_1, \dots, P_n . As I understand talk of "making it true" that you have justification, being in S can make it true that you have justification to believe P_2, \dots, P_n (let S^* be the state of having this justification), and also make it true that you have justification to believe P_1 , without its following that being in S^* is part of what makes you justified in believing P_1 . Hence, your justification to believe P_1 can be immediate, even if what makes you justified in believing P_1 also makes you justified in believing other propositions, too.

⁵ Consider: in order to have the concept of a unicorn I may need to believe (i) that unicorns have hooves, and (ii) that unicorns have horns. Now suppose I acquire evidence that a virus has killed all hoofed creatures. Since I believe unicorns to be hoofed creatures, I form the belief (iii) that no unicorns currently exist. It's clear that (ii) plays no role in justifying this belief. This shows that there can be propositions *you need to believe*

in order to have certain concepts (you need to believe (ii) in order to have the concept of a unicorn), without those propositions *mediating your justification* for every belief involving the concepts. Now, (iii) is not an immediately justified belief. But it serves to make my point. We can see the same phenomenon with beliefs that *are* good candidates to be immediately justified, like (iv) *If any unicorn exists, it is identical with itself*. (ii) plays no more role in justifying that belief than it plays in justifying (iii).

⁶ On some presentations of the Regress Argument, the regress stops with your last justified belief (or, as I say, with the last proposition you have justification *to* believe). On others, the regress stops with what justifies your last justified belief: the states or conditions that *make you* justified in believing it. These are just different ways of talking; there is no real philosophical disagreement here.

⁷ Many Foundationalists shun option (iii), but structurally it also qualifies as a Foundationalist option. For example, a Foundationalist might claim that *merely having* a belief that P—even without justification—makes you justified in believing that *you do* have that belief.

⁸ I owe this example to Tim Maudlin.

⁹ Briefly, and I as I understand it, that theory invoked a mode of awareness that (i) had a success-grammar, (ii) was a cognitive relation to things or events, rather than to propositions, and (iii) wasn't mediated by your awareness of anything else. This mode of awareness went under various names: direct apprehension, acquaintance, etc. It was usually claimed that what we're so aware of are sense-data. However, as I understand the Given Theory, it neither entails, nor is it entailed by, belief in sense-data.

The Given Theory is undergoing something of a revival these days: see Fales 1996 and DePaul 2001.

¹⁰ Davidson and Bonjour (when he was a coherentist) are Pure Coherentists; Cohen 2002 is a recent example of Impure Coherentism.

¹¹ The argument dates back to a debate between Schlick and Hempel. Schlick said we can sometimes “compare propositions to facts,” and thereby acquire justification for believing those propositions. Hempel argued that the only way to acquire justification for believing a proposition is to “compare” it to things that stand in logical relations to it,

namely *other propositions*. See Schlick 1932/3, Hempel 1934/5a, Schlick 1934/5, and Hempel 1934/5b. Wittgenstein voices a view akin to Hempel's in *Philosophical Investigations* §486.

The Master Argument has been given many times since: for example, in Sellars 1963 §§3-7; Davidson 1981; Williams 1977 Ch. 2; and BonJour 1978 §4, 1985 Ch. 4. (In more recent writings, BonJour rejects the Master Argument. See note 18, below.)

¹² Some might want to count *instrumental* desires as epistemically justified when the means-end beliefs that motivate them are justified. I wouldn't. But in any case, we can set instrumental desires aside and just consider cases where you desire that P for its own sake. Those desires have propositional content, and *they* don't need to be epistemically justified.

¹³ One finds this view in Sellars 1963, Hintikka 1969, Lewis 1986, Dretske 1981 Ch. 4 & 6, Evans 1982 Ch. 5-7, Peacocke 1983 Ch. 1, Searle 1983 Ch. 2, Burge 1986, and in many places since. It's disputed whether experiences also have *additional* introspectible properties, beyond their propositional content; but there is broad agreement these days among philosophers of mind that they *at least* have propositional content.

¹⁴ John Broome suggested that we might also count *intentions* as assertively representing propositions; propositions about how we will act in the future. If so, then the Master Argument would give us no reason to exclude intentions from the ranks of justifiers, either.

¹⁵ They may be able to justify those beliefs *indirectly*, if their content is such that you can infer from its truth that you're likely to have certain beliefs or experiences. But the Coherentist should have no objection to that.

¹⁶ What McDowell calls "The Myth of the Given" in his 1994 is the view that things without conceptual content can play a justification-making role.

Curiously, McDowell seems to allow (at the bottom of 1994, p. 144) that *the fact that you're having a certain sensation* or impression might, together with justified beliefs about how such sensations are reliably caused, justify you in beliefs about the external world. McDowell thinks this kind of epistemic role is too "indirect" to be fully

satisfactory; but he does seem prepared to count it as a justifying relation. This sits ill with his otherwise thoroughgoing commitment to the Premise Principle.

¹⁷ Two caveats about Peacocke. First, he'd put his point like this: experiences can stand in the kinds of *rational relations* cited in the Premise Principle even if their content is non-conceptual. He's reluctant to call those relations "inferential relations" except when both *relata* are conceptual. Second, Peacocke does not himself accept the Premise Principle. He thinks that non-representational states like pains can also justify beliefs (see pp. 254-5).

¹⁸ Although many Foundationalists' theories commit them to rejecting the Content Requirement and the Premise Principle, it's rare to find much explicit and sustained discussion of these principles. BonJour is one author who does discuss them. In his 1978 and 1985 Ch. 4, he endorsed the Master Argument; but he's changed his mind and now rejects the Premise Principle. He thinks there can be "descriptive relations" between a belief and a non-propositional state that make the belief justified when one is in the non-propositional state. See BonJour 2001, pp. 29ff.

Other authors who discuss the Premise Principle are: Reynolds 1991, Fales 1996 Ch. 5-6, and Millar 1991 Ch. 4.

Fales' terminology can mislead, but in essence his view is this: Experiences do not themselves have propositional contents, and so can't stand in the kind of "inferential relations" required by the Premise Principle. However, their phenomenal qualities do have a proposition-*like* structure, and we have a way to non-propositionally "apprehend" this structure. Fales thinks that's all that's needed to justify our perceptual beliefs.

Millar *does* allow that experiences have propositional contents, but he thinks experiences are individuated by their phenomenal types rather than by their contents. He also thinks it's these phenomenal types that are epistemologically important. He says there are "quasi-inferential" links between phenomenal types and beliefs that experiences of those types make appropriate. These links, not the experiences' content, explain why experiences justify the beliefs they do.

¹⁹ I am indebted to Mark Johnston for discussions of this possibility.

²⁰ The noun “justification” has both a count use and a mass use. The count use (“He has a justification for that belief”) is most naturally read as referring to arguments or justification-showers. The mass use (“He has some justification to believe that”; “She has more justification than he does”; etc.) is more naturally read as referring to the presence of justification-makers.

²¹ I’m indebted to Mark Schroeder for discussions of this objection. See also Unger 1975, Ch. 5.

BonJour (1985 Ch. 2-3) and Brewer (1999, pp. 19, 49, and esp. 163ff.) claim that nothing can be a reason for you unless you’re in a position to recognize it *as* a reason. McDowell insists that anything that is going to count as a reason-giving relation “must be able to come under the self-scrutiny of active thinking” (1994, pp. 52-3). I think this means that your reasons must be available for you to think about and critically assess.

²² See for example Brewer 1999, pp. 165-9. Pollock considers, and criticizes, a similar argument on behalf of what he calls “the doxastic assumption” that only beliefs can be justification-makers (2001, p. 41; see also Pollock and Cruz 1999).

²³ Brewer takes this line (see pp. 168-9).

²⁴ Other philosophers have also argued against overly deliberate and reflective accounts of being guided by an epistemic norm. See Pollock and Cruz 1999, pp. 124-30 and 136-7; Millar 1991, esp. p. 121; and Reynolds 1991.

²⁵ For some recent discussion of the question whether belief is voluntary, see Alston 1989 Ch. 5, Steup 2000, Ginet 2001, Feldman 2001, and Audi 2001.

²⁶ See also Van Cleve 1979; Pollock and Cruz 1999, p. 125; and Pollock 2001, pp. 44-5.

²⁷ I’d like to thank Tony Brueckner, Rich Feldman, Mark Greenberg, Ram Neta, Christian Piller, Mark Schroeder, Matthias Steup, and audiences at NYU, UNC-Chapel Hill, Princeton, Kansas, Oxford, and York, for conversations and feedback that helped me write this paper.

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