

Luminous Enough for a Cognitive Home (Draft)

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Philosophy without phenomenology is blind. And on my view, use of the phenomenological method is nothing other than reliance on that with which we are directly acquainted to secure foundationally justified belief. In a way, the above claims represent only an endorsement of a certain classical form of foundationalism. That foundationalism formally leaves open both the precise analysis of direct awareness, and the nature of that which is given to us through direct awareness. Somewhat more controversially, then, I want to argue that there is no alternative to construing our knowledge and justified belief as relying on a foundation provided by a robust first-person perspective recognizing that each of us has a privileged access to the contents of our minds. Foundational *empirical* knowledge is restricted to noninferentially justified beliefs about our internal mental states.

Preliminaries:

It is difficult to address an epistemological issue these days without engaging closely the ongoing internalism/externalism debate. I don't want this to be a detailed discussion of that debate, so I'll begin by making a number of conditional concessions. If certain familiar forms of externalism about justification were correct, then we could, in principle, have foundationally justified belief in just about anything. Suppose, for example, that a crude form of reliabilism is correct. On this sort of view, foundationally justified beliefs will be most naturally construed as beliefs that result from a reliable belief-forming process where the input is something other than a belief.¹ It is an empirical question as to which beliefs will satisfy the reliabilist's criterion for being noninferentially justified. We may have been evolutionarily programmed or designed by a God to have indefinitely many spontaneous and perfectly reliable beliefs prompted by non-doxastic input. The appearance of a snake might prompt me to believe that I'm in danger and if the process is reliable the resulting belief will be noninferentially justified.² There might be a God who has created me so that when I see a beautiful sunset I find myself believing in the existence of a creator, and if that belief-forming process is reliable then I'll have a noninferentially justified belief that God exists. To be sure, most reliabilists don't want to be too ambitious in what they include in their foundations. Most will recognize introspection as one source of noninferential empirical justification, but will also expand foundations to include beliefs about past experience, and, probably, certain beliefs about one's immediate physical environment. I've argued elsewhere, however, that our very concepts

¹ As Jennifer Wilson has pointed out, one should be a bit more careful here. Since a reliabilist might want to allow noninferentially justified belief that one has a belief, where the input of the "introspective process" is the belief itself, we should allow that a noninferentially justified belief can have as its input a belief state. What distinguishes this process from those that yield inferentially justified belief, however, is that the epistemic status of the input belief is irrelevant to the justification of the output belief.

² In fact, most snakes probably aren't dangerous. The evolutionary value of having the spontaneous belief is probably just that the expected utility of believing that they are is high (given the very unpleasant results of cozying up to one that is deadly).

of physical objects and their properties may well make unlikely the tenability of an epistemological direct realism even on a reliabilist view. As a matter of commonsense empirical fact, our beliefs about the external world causally rely on a host of background beliefs about internal and external conditions of perception, beliefs which had better be justified if the “output” beliefs of perception are themselves to be justified. But these are empirical questions that leave untouched the *a priori* possibility of noninferentially justified belief in propositions describing the physical world.

On a crude causal theory of knowledge, direct, foundational knowledge will be something like a belief caused by its truth-maker, where the causal chain has no intermediate justified doxastic states as links. Again, on such a view, there would be no *a priori* reason to deny foundational status to any candidate for knowledge. Hume was essentially right when he claimed that the occurrence of any state of affairs can in principle be the cause of any subsequent state of affairs. Given a world in which there exist the right sort of causal chains we could have foundational knowledge of dangerous snakes and God’s existence.

There are a host of arguments leveled against externalist analyses of justification and knowledge. Some focus on technical obstacles the externalist must overcome to even state a clear, coherent version of the view. So, for example, the generality problem for reliabilism is formidable. The reliabilist must figure out a non-arbitrary way to specify both the relevant process kind, reliability of which is at issue, and the relevant environment relative to which reliability is defined. Causal theories of anything always face the problem of “deviant” causal chains—hypothetical situations in which there is a convoluted causal route from what is supposed to be the relevant cause, to the relevant effect, but where the nature of the route intuitively precludes the causally-defined concept from applying.

Other objections to externalism strike at the very heart of the views. One of the most powerful arguments against reliabilism, for example, is probably the so-called new Evil Demon Problem. It seems that we can imagine a world in which we are the victims of an evil demon (or a Matrix-world computer, or a mad neurologist) who induces in us precisely the same sensations we have in this world despite the absence of the physical objects we take to be their cause. Most feel the force of the internalist’s claim that whatever we say about the epistemic status of our own beliefs, we should also say about the epistemic status of the demon-victims’ beliefs. A kind of reverse problem affects causal theories. We can imagine a person with an epistemically “perverse” belief that is nevertheless caused by the fact that makes it true (BonJour’s clairvoyant, for example--explain). These sorts of objections are symptomatic, however, of the internalists’ more fundamental dissatisfaction with externalism--their conviction that the externalist has divorced justification and knowledge from anything that would carry with it the kind of *assurance* we seek in wanting knowledge and justified belief in the first place. A reliably produced belief gives us no assurance of truth unless we have reason to believe that it is reliably produced. A belief caused by its truthmaker gives us no assurance of truth unless we have reason to believe that the truthmaker is its cause.

These brief and far too superficial remarks are hardly going to convince externalists to abandon their views. But in what follows I want to explore the more traditional foundationalism that seeks to discover in foundations a kind of justification that does carry with it assurance of truth.

Acquaintance:

Descartes sought secure foundations in infallible belief. If infallible belief is understood as belief whose existence entails the truth of what is believed, it is not clear that we should follow Descartes's lead. Notoriously, if I believe any necessary truth then, trivially, my believing that proposition entails the truth of what I believe. But it is easy to imagine a person who irrationally believes a proposition that nevertheless turns out to be necessarily true. And even when one finds a few empirical propositions that are entailed by my believing them (my belief that I exist, or that I have beliefs), those propositions entail other much more complex contingent propositions that a person may have no reason at all to believe given inability to grasp the relevant complexity.

It is much more plausible, I would argue, to search for a kind of *justification* that precludes the possibility of error, and does so by including in the justification the very truthmaker for the belief. Interestingly enough, as we saw above, that is precisely what a crude causal theory of basic justification does. If my belief's noninferential justification consists in the fact that it is caused by its truthmaker, then trivially, I can't possess that justification while believing falsely. But as I suggested above, the traditional foundationalist wants to involve the truthmaker for a belief in its justification in such a way that we gain assurance of truth.

On the acquaintance theory of noninferential justification (at least the one I'm interested in defending), one has noninferential justification for believing P when one is directly acquainted with the fact that P, the thought that P, and the correspondence between the thought and its truthmaker. I'm often asked for a further explication of this critical concept of direct acquaintance, and the questioner is usually, and perhaps understandably, disappointed with my answer: the concept is indefinable. In general, however, a philosopher must get used to the idea that there are fundamental conceptual building blocks which defy further analysis. Just as knowledge and justified belief must have *epistemic* starting points, so also, conceptual analysis must begin somewhere—there must be conceptual “atoms” so to speak. But to say that acquaintance is indefinable is not to refuse to say philosophically interesting things about it. Furthermore, I would argue that there is a sense in which one can “ostend” acquaintance—one can explain the concept through an act of intellectual pointing. And ostension is one perfectly familiar way of introducing a concept. I think pain, for example, is indefinable, but if someone purports not to understand what a sensation of pain is, I can solve his problem quickly. All I need to do is hit him as hard as I can asking him to focus on the most dramatic change he notices in the character of his experience. That change, I then tell him, is in the kind of thing I call pain.

But how might one ostend acquaintance? Well think again about pain. Most of us remember occasions on which we clearly felt pain—pain of which we were aware—but where we ceased to notice the pain when we became distracted by something else. We had a bad backache, perhaps, and became engrossed in a conversation so interesting that we went for a period of time without even noticing the pain. There are, of course, two possibilities. One is that while we were distracted the pain actually ceased. The other, however, is that the pain continued, but that we simply were unaware of it for a period of time. It seems to me that the latter is every bit as plausible as the former, and

on the *assumption* that it is the correct way to think of what happened, we can now “point” to awareness with a definite description—it is the relation we had to our pain prior to the distraction, a relation which ceased during the distraction, and which began again after the conversation ended.

Allowing that one can be in a psychological state without being aware of that state also allows one to make sense of all sorts of interesting possibilities. When I was younger, I used to think that Freudian talk of the unconscious was either gibberish or just a way of talking about complex dispositions to behave. It now seems to me, however, that there is no reason at all to deny the intelligibility of there being *occurrent* intentional states, states which might have all sorts of behavioral effects, but which have the further feature of being unconscious. Just as an interesting conversation can divert one’s attention from the pain one feels, so also, beliefs, fears, desires, embarrassment—all sorts of factors-- might divert one’s attention from other desires, fears, and beliefs.

On my view, acquaintance is a real relation that obtains only between existing relata. While one can believe that which is false, desire that which will never happen, and fear that which is not the case, one cannot be acquainted with that which doesn’t exist. For this reason, it is highly misleading to describe acquaintance as an *intentional* state. The genuinely intentional can be characterized by the semantic fact that the sentences describing them can be true even if their grammatical object terms fail to refer. Because acquaintance is a real relation that requires real relata, justification constituted in part by acquaintance guarantees the truth of the belief it justifies.

But does acquaintance really bring with it an assurance of truth. Might one start legitimately worrying about whether one really is acquainted with a fact that is the truthmaker for one’s belief. Although he doesn’t couch his discussion in terms of acquaintance, Tim Williamson has an argument against the so-called “luminosity” of states commonly thought to be plausible candidates for foundational knowledge. A state of one is luminous, in his sense, if one is always in a *position* to know through introspection (I would say through acquaintance) that one is in that state whenever it occurs. The modality implicitly referred to is presumably something like causal possibility relative to circumstance—the kind of possibility invoked in my claim that I can raise my right hand any time I want within the next five minutes, but I can’t dunk a basketball any time within the remainder of my life.

Williamson points out that virtually all paradigmatically mental states can change incrementally where one is unable to notice any given incremental change. Pains can ever so slowly diminish. Feelings of warmth can ever so slightly change until one feels cold. Red appearances can slowly change until they become orange appearances. It seems relatively plausible to suppose that as a matter of empirical fact most people can’t detect extremely slight changes that take place in the character of their experience. If one grants that and one grants that there must come a point at which gradual change does result in one’s no longer feeling pain, or one’s no longer being appeared to redly, then, Williamson argues, certain plausible claims about knowledge will commit us to the view that we can’t always know that we are in pain or being appeared to redly when we are. We need only reflect on the fact that the last stage of the pain or red appearance before it ends is, by hypothesis, indistinguishable to us from the next stage at which we no longer feel pain or are no longer experiencing redly. But knowledge, the argument goes, requires safety. You can’t know P when there is an extremely close possible situation in

which not-P and you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between P and not-P. (Though these days most seem to think that you can know P if there is a remote situation in which not-P which you wouldn't be able to distinguish from P).

It should be obvious from what I said earlier that I have no interest in defending the claim that whenever one is in a paradigmatically mental state one can unproblematically access through introspection the fact that one is such a state. Again, a great deal depends on the interpretation of the modal operator. It is probably always logically possible for us to introspect one of our mental states. But one shouldn't rule out *a priori* the possibility that one can try and fail to introspectively discover a mental state that one nevertheless has. In my view it is not really a philosophical question, but there may be empirical reasons to suppose that there really is a Freudian unconscious teeming with introspectively hidden desires, resentments, fears, and beliefs. But Williamson's argument against luminosity might be interesting for a different reason.

Consider again the pain that slowly subsides. Let's suppose that I can't notice incremental changes, and let's consider again the pain state immediately preceding the state that is no longer pain. This time let's add to the story that I still believe at that point that I'm in pain. On a view like mine, I seem to be committed to the view that I'm directly acquainted with a pain state. That acquaintance guarantees the existence of the pain and *if* it partially constitutes a kind of justification it looks as if it is a pretty good candidate for infallible justification. But when I am that close to error—that close to a situation in which I would have had a false belief—it seems very odd to suggest that I have infallible justification. If I wanted assurance of truth, that justification seems barely better than the externalist's concept of justification constituted by the fact that my belief that I'm in pain is caused by the fact that I'm in pain.

Note, however, that the foundationalism I defend does *not* identify noninferential justification with the *mere* fact that one is acquainted with the fact that is a truth maker for one's belief. I have argued that one has noninferential justification only when one is also directly acquainted with the *correspondence* between one's belief (one's thought) that one is in pain and the fact that makes it true. Correspondence has always seemed to me to be the sort of thing that comes in degrees. While the correspondence theory of truth is often viewed as the most natural companion to a classical two-valued logic, it seems to me that it might actually be the easiest theory of truth to combine with a many-valued logic—a logic that takes there to be a continuum from paradigmatic falsehood to paradigmatic truth. Williamson exploits the idea that mental states can slowly and imperceptibly change. Through such changes paradigmatic pain can eventually disappear completely. Assuming that there is a point at which one moves from being in pain to not being in pain, that will also often be a point at which one moves from being acquainted with a pain state to being acquainted with a state other than pain. The acquaintance with the state that is so very close to being a state other than pain hardly seems like a very *strong* source of justification for believing that one is in pain. All this seems plausible. But, of course, nothing follows from this concerning the nature of one's justification for believing that one is in pain when one is directly acquainted with sharp, searing pain.³ The difference, I would suggest, lies in the nature of the correspondence between the thought and the pain when one has the strong justification provided by acquaintance with searing pain. The justification provided by *acquaintance* with such correspondence not

³ On this see Baron Reed's "Shelter for the Cognitively Homeless," *Synthese*, 148, 2006, 303-08.

only precludes the possibility of error, but does so in a way that gives one complete assurance of truth. There is no better justification one could gain. One has all one needs—all one could possibly want by way of justification for one's belief.

A similar response is one (but only one) of the ways in which one might try to respond to the problem of the speckled hen,⁴ an objection raised by Ernie Sosa and Peter Markie to my version of foundationalism. It seems plausible to claim that the surface of a hen with forty-eight speckles can present to me a forty-eight speckled appearance. When it does, I can be directly acquainted with the relevant experience but have no justification for believing that I am appeared to forty-eight-speckled-ly. More generally, it seems plausible to claim that when I am acquainted with an experience, that experience might have any number of properties of which I am ignorant. And if this is true, the argument goes, we need more to explain noninferential justification than is offered by the radical foundationalist trying to identify the source of noninferential justification with direct awareness of experience. Now one might well deny that when confronted by the speckled hen one is appeared to forty-eight-speckled-ly. One might claim only that one is appeared to many-speckled-ly. But even if one admits that the experience has a perfectly determinate character with respect to the spots presented, the acquaintance theorist can retreat to the claim that one is simply not acquainted with a thought corresponding to the perfectly determinate appearance—either because one really doesn't have such occurrent thoughts or because in some circumstances one is only acquainted with a correspondence relation between an indeterminate thought and the determinate fact.

Our inner mental life constitutes a cognitive home not because we always have unproblematic access to our mental states. Our inner mental life constitutes a cognitive home because we sometimes have a kind of justification for believing truths about such states that is *better* than the justification we have for believing other empirical truths, and that is, in fact, as good as justification gets.

But even if one grants that one can gain intellectual justification for believing that one is in pain that is both satisfying and extremely strong, why should one think that such justification is always better than the justification one has for believing, say, certain propositions about the physical world—say the proposition that there is a table before me now? Well, the classic argument is still the best argument. A belief of ours is better justified than another when there are fewer ways in which we could go wrong. The traditional foundationalist sought the given by stripping away all that might be in error given the believer's epistemic perspective. Here epistemology meets metaphysics. The classical foundationalists argue that there is something experientially common to both veridical and non-veridical (hallucinatory, for example) experience. To be sure, they

⁴ Chisholm's classic article (1942) presents the problem as one raised by Gilbert Ryle in a discussion with A. J. Ayer. Paul Ushenko (1946, p. 103) claims that the example of the speckled hen was first given by H.H. Price, but that he (Ushenko) raised a variation of the same problem in *The Philosophy of Relativity* (p. 90) in 1937. Ushenko also claims that he discussed the problem with Ayer. I thank Steven Bayne for pointing out to me Ushenko's contribution to the debate (in his history of analytic philosophy electronic mailing). Sosa raises the problem in Sosa, Ernest. 2003a. "Privileged Access." In *Consciousness: New Philosophical Essays*, ed. Quentin Smith, 273-92. Oxford University Press and Sosa, Ernest, and Bonjour Laurence. 2003b. *Foundations vs Virtues*. Blackwell.

don't always agree on how to characterize that common element. The sense-datum theorist claimed that whether I veridically see something red and round or am hallucinating something red and round, I am directly aware of a red, round, sense datum. The adverbial theorist claims that in both experiences I am appeared to red-ly and round-ly (where these are construed as nonrelational properties of the mind). These days it has become more common to claim that sense experience is a species of intentional state—that visual experiences represent such properties as redness and roundness. And it would be natural on such a view to claim that veridical experience and hallucination share these sensory intentional states. Fortunately, we needn't decide between alternative accounts of the sensory common denominator to make the relevant *epistemological* point. Adopting as neutral a terminology as possible, let's follow a suggestion once made by Ayer and say that whether or not we are veridically seeing a red round object, we at least seem to see something red and round—or it appears to us as if there is something red and round.

Now isn't it obvious that we have stronger justification for believing the proposition that we seem to see something red and round—that we are appeared to a certain way—than we do for believing the proposition that we actually see something red and round? At least that seems true if a) there is a probability of less than 1 that our perception is veridical and greater than 0 that it is a nonveridical counterpart, *and* 2) there is a common experiential element to both the veridical experience and its nonveridical counterpart that can be described as seeming to see something red and round. The probability of the disjunction, either I'm having a veridical experience or I'm having a nonveridical counterpart, seems obviously greater than the probability of either disjunct. And the claim about what I seem to see is true on either disjunct.

Notice, by the way, that the existence of an experiential common denominator to both veridical experience and its hallucinatory counterpart is perfectly compatible with Williamson's much discussed claim that perception is prime. Perception is prime in his technical sense when it is not simply the conjunction of an internal state with the obtaining of an external condition. But, of course, almost no-one in the history of philosophy ever endorsed the view that one perceives X when one is in a certain internal mental state that occurs when X exists. The standard view required that for there to be veridical perception of X there must be a causal *connection* between the existence of X and the relevant internal mental state.

There are a number of philosophers these days who would reject the above argument for thinking that our justification for believing truths about appearance is stronger than our justification for believing truths about external reality. Some reject the supposition that the epistemic probability that a given experience is veridical is always less than 1. Williamson famously claims that epistemic probability just is probability relative to evidence. And a person's evidence, he thinks, should be identified with what that person knows. Thus if a person knows that a given experience is veridical, then trivially the epistemic probability for that person that it is veridical, i.e. the probability relative to what he knows, is 1. Unless we assume at the outset some form of knowledge skepticism concerning the external world, we should never concede that typically the justification for believing the disjunction (either the perception is veridical or it is not) is stronger than the justification for believing either disjunct.

But to state Williamson's position clearly is to reduce it to absurdity. There are familiar reasons for thinking that there is a concept of knowledge floating around that really does require for knowledge that P that there is a probability of P relative to evidence that is 1. That's still the simplest way to deal with the lottery paradox for knowledge. No matter how high the probability is that we just bought a losing ticket, almost everyone is uncomfortable claiming to *know* that the ticket is a loser. But one must surely choose between understanding knowledge as requiring that what is known has an epistemic probability of 1, and regarding as true most commonplace knowledge claims. We claim to know what day we are leaving Germany, what time we left the airport in Chicago, what the weather was like when we left, and so on. But surely everyone will concede, at least should concede, that we have stronger justification for believing that we exist than that we will be in Iowa next week. Surely everyone will concede that we have stronger justification for believing that I'm wearing a dark shirt than that I'm wearing a black shirt. And one can't make these obvious concessions if we accept Williamson's view both that we know all these things, *and* that propositions known have an epistemic probability of 1.

There is an older worry about attempts to retreat to the epistemically more secure world—a cognitively safe home—of appearance. Sellars famously argued that in at least one common use of “appears” or “seems” talk, to claim that something appears red, for example, is just to make a certain comparative claim. Something appears red if it appears the way red things appear under certain conditions. Obviously, knowledge that something appears red in this sense can't be any better than knowledge of at least some truths about physical world. Knowledge of the truth of comparative appearance claims just *is* a certain kind of knowledge of the physical world. But while there is a comparative use of “appears” it has always seemed to me that Chisholm was absolutely right in stressing that there is a noncomparative use of “appears.” Contra Sellars we really are entitled to give ontological status to that way red things appear. And there is nothing to stop us from inventing a technical terminology to describe that distinctive way of appearing with which we are all familiar.

Now as I emphasized the preceding does presuppose that there is an experiential common denominator, so to speak, to both veridical experience and its phenomenologically indistinguishable nonveridical counterparts. Disjunctivism, however, is in danger of becoming the received view. Many contemporary epistemologists give up on the idea that we can simply add conditions to appearance in order to distinguish between veridical and nonveridical experience. They claim that we simply need to give a quite different account of what's going on in veridical experience and what is going on in nonveridical experience. The disjunctivist's position strikes more traditional foundationalists as almost preposterous. If there is nothing common to both veridical and hallucinatory experience why are they impossible to tell apart? In response the disjunctivist might remind us of Williamson's argument that most of us are unable to distinguish at least some pains from states that are not pains. There is presumably a marked difference between being in pain and not being in pain and if that difference can exist without our being able to recognize the difference, why should we get so bent out of shape about the disjunctivist's claim that something radically different is happening in both veridical and nonveridical experience just because we are unable to distinguish the two kinds of experience. But one doesn't have to think about this response long before

one hits upon the relevant difference. Williamson's example trades on the existence of a continuum where, by hypothesis, there is only a tiny difference between each change on the continuum. It's the fact that there is so little difference between the last pain state and the state that is not a pain that explains the difficulty we have distinguishing them. Contemporary disjunctivists are typically committed to giving a radically different account of veridical perception that they give of nonveridical perception. They offer us, in effect, no account of the phenomenological indistinguishability of the two kinds of experience. And until such an account is forthcoming, we have no alternative but to retreat to the radical empiricist idea that there is in fact a common internal state to both veridical and nonveridical experience, a state potential knowledge of which is common to both veridical and nonveridical experience.

Once we reject disjunctivism, we will be led inexorably to the conclusion that we have a kind of knowledge of our internal mental states that is better than our knowledge of any propositions describing the physical world. And that's because if we take the best possible justification we have for believing what we do about the world around us, there is always a safer proposition describing the subjective character of our experience to which we can retreat. It's there that we find a more secure cognitive home to which we can retire. It is from that home that we can wonder what else might be reasonable to believe.