

CHAPTER NINE



Foundationalism and Coherentism

As has been noticed in a few places, though without very much discussion or elaboration,¹ Descartes's basic epistemological approach is *foundationalist* in character: it views justification and knowledge as ultimately derivative from a set of basic or foundational elements whose justification does not depend in turn on that of anything else. For Descartes, as for many foundationalists, the foundation for knowledge and justification consists of (i) a person's immediate awarenesses of his or her own conscious states of mind, together with (ii) his or her a priori grasp of self-evidently true propositions. Beliefs deriving from these two sources require no further justification, whereas beliefs about most or all other matters, and especially beliefs concerning objects and occurrences in the material world, require justification or reasons that ultimately appeal, whether directly or indirectly, to immediate experience and a priori insight.² As the term "foundation" itself suggests, the underlying metaphor is an architectural one: think of a building or structure, perhaps a very tall one with many different levels, but all of them resting on a bottom level that does not rest in the same way on anything else.

Most historical epistemological views have been broadly foundationalist in character (though they have not always agreed with Descartes about the specific composition of the foundation). But in recent times a fairly widespread apparent consensus has developed to the effect that the whole foundationalist approach is deeply flawed and ultimately untenable.

In the present chapter, I will explore this issue. We begin by considering a basic problem pertaining to the *structure* of justified belief or knowledge,

one that is usually taken to provide the most telling argument in favor of foundationalism and that will also help to clarify the foundationalist view. Next we will consider some of the main objections that have been advanced against foundationalism. This will lead to a consideration and assessment of the main contemporary alternative to foundationalism, namely *coherentism*. Doubts about the tenability of this alternative will then motivate a reconsideration of foundationalism in the final part of the chapter.

The Epistemic Regress Problem and the Foundationalist Argument

I will formulate the general problem abstractly, since it is the structure and not the particular beliefs that matters. Suppose that there is some belief, which we may refer to as B_1 , that is allegedly justified for a particular person at a particular time, and consider what specific form the justification of this belief might take. One obvious possibility is the following: B_1 might be justified because the person in question holds some other justified belief B_2 (which might of course be a conjunction of simpler beliefs) from which B_1 follows by some rationally acceptable kind of *inference*, whether deductive, inductive, abductive (inference to the best explanation), or whatever. I am *not* suggesting that the mere existence of this other belief and of the inferential relation is by itself sufficient for B_1 to be justified. Clearly if the person in question is not at all inclined to appeal to B_2 as a reason for B_1 or has no idea that any inferential relation holds between the two or has a mistaken conception of this inferential relation, B_1 will not be justified in this way for him. For the moment, however, I will simply assume that whatever further conditions are required for B_1 to be justified for this person by virtue of its inferential relation to B_2 are in fact satisfied.³

But whatever these further conditions may turn out to be, it is clear at least that (as already stipulated) B_2 must itself be somehow justified if it is to confer justification, via a suitable inferential relation, upon B_1 . If the person in question has no good reason to think that B_2 is true, then the fact that B_1 follows from B_2 cannot constitute for him a good reason to think that B_1 is true. Thus we need to ask how B_2 might in turn be justified. Here again one possibility, the only one that we have identified so far, is that the justification of B_2 derives, via a suitable inferential or argumentative relation, from some further justified belief B_3 . And now if the question regarding the justification of B_3 is answered in the same way by appeal to another justified belief B_4 , and so on, we seem to be faced with a potential *infinite regress* in which each answer to an issue of justification simply raises a new issue of the same

kind, thus seemingly never reaching any settled result and leaving it uncertain whether any of the beliefs in question are genuinely justified. All of the justifications up to any point depend on whether or not beliefs further along (or back) in the sequence are justified, and this issue is never fully resolved.

To think more carefully about this issue, we need to ask what the alternatives are as to the eventual outcome of this regress. What, that is, might eventually happen if we continue to ask for the justification of each new belief that is cited as a reason for an earlier belief in the sequence? (You should think about this issue carefully for yourself before reading further. For the moment try to consider all apparent possibilities, no matter how bizarre or implausible they may seem and no matter whether or not they seem initially to be compatible with the alleged justification of the original belief B_1 .)

In fact, there seem to be only four possible outcomes of the regress.⁴ First, we might eventually arrive at a belief, say B_6 , upon which the justification of the previous belief in the series rests, but which is itself simply *unjustified*. This, however, would surely mean that the belief whose justification rests directly on B_6 is also not really justified, and so on up the line, so that the original belief B_1 turns out not to be justified either—contrary to our original supposition. There can be no doubt that some alleged justificatory chains do in fact end in this way, but if this were true in general, and if there were no other sort of justification available that did not rely in this way on inference from other beliefs, then we would have the skeptical result that no belief is ever justified, that we never have a good reason to think that anything is true. This would obviously be a very implausible result, at least from a common-sense standpoint. (Is this a good reason to think that it could not be correct? And if so, how strong a reason is it?—think carefully about this.)

Second, it *seems* to be at least logically possible that the regress might continue *infinitely*, with new beliefs being appealed to at each stage that are sufficient to justify the preceding belief but are themselves in need of justification from one or more other new beliefs. This is perhaps the alternative that it is most difficult to get a clear focus on. Is it really even a logical possibility? And if it is logically possible, is there any serious chance that it might turn out to actually be realized, either in a particular case or in general? (Think about this before reading further. Can you think of any arguments against the actual occurrence of this sort of justificatory structure?)

It is tempting to argue that no finite person could have an infinite number of independent beliefs, but this does not seem to be strictly correct. As I gaze at my bare desk, can't I believe, all at once, that there is not an armadillo sitting on it, that there are not two armadillos sitting on it, that there are not three armadillos sitting on it, and so on for all of the infinitely many

natural numbers (positive whole numbers), thus resulting in an infinite set of beliefs? Moreover, the members of such an infinite set of beliefs might even stand in the right inferential relations to yield a justificatory chain, as is indeed true with the present example: that there is not even one armadillo is a good, indeed conclusive reason for thinking that there are not two; that there are not even two is a conclusive reason for thinking that there are not three; and so on.

But though the actual infinite regress alternative is interesting to think about, it still seems clear that it could not play a role in an account of how beliefs are actually justified. One reason is that it is difficult or impossible to see how this picture could be applied to most actual cases of apparently justified belief, where no plausible infinite chain of this sort seems to be forthcoming. A deeper reason is that it seems clear on reflection that merely having an infinite chain of beliefs related in the right way is not in fact sufficient for justification. Suppose that instead of believing that there are no armadillos on my desk, I am crazy enough to have the infinite set of beliefs to the effect that for each natural number n , there are at least n armadillos on my desk. You may doubt that I could really be this crazy (I hope you do!). If I were, however, then I could construct an infinite justificatory chain: that there are at least two armadillos is a conclusive reason for believing that there is at least one, that there are at least three is a conclusive reason for believing that there are at least two, and so on. But it still seems clear that none of these beliefs would really be justified. The reason is that in such a justificatory chain, the justification conferred at each step is only *provisional*, dependent on whether the beliefs further along in the chain are justified. But then if the regress continues infinitely, *all* of the alleged justification remains merely provisional: we never can say more than that the beliefs up to a particular stage *would* be justified *if* all of the others that come further on (back) in the sequence are justified. And if this is all that we can ever say in such a case, and if all chains of inferential justification were infinite in this way, and if there were no other account of how beliefs are justified that did not rely on inference from other beliefs, then we again would have the unpalatable skeptical result that no belief is ever genuinely justified.

The third apparent possibility is that the chain of inferential justification, if pursued far enough, would eventually circle back upon itself: that is, that some belief that has already appeared in the sequence (or perhaps a conjunction of several such beliefs) would be appealed to again. The belief that has this status might be the original belief B_1 , or it might be some later belief in the sequence; suppose again that it is B_6 and that the belief for which it is supposed to provide the justification on this second occurrence is B_{10} . The

obvious problem with a justificatory chain having this structure is that the overall reasoning that it reflects appears to be circular or question-begging in a way that deprives it of any justificatory force: Omitting explicit mention of some of the intermediate steps (and assuming that the inferences are all correct), B_1 is justified if B_6 is, and B_6 is justified if B_{10} is, and B_{10} is justified if B_6 is. But then B_6 is justified just in case B_6 is justified, which is obviously true, but provides no reason at all to think that B_6 is in fact justified; and since the justification of B_1 depends on that of B_6 , such a chain of justification also provides again no real justification for B_1 . Once again we have an apparently skeptical result: if all inferential justification were ultimately circular in this way, and if there were no noninferential way in which beliefs are justified, then no belief would ever be genuinely justified.⁵

The fourth and final alternative is the one advocated by the foundationalist. It holds, first, that there is at least one way (or perhaps more than one) in which beliefs can be justified that does not rely on inferential relations to other beliefs and so does not generate a regress of the sort we have been considering; and, second, that any chain of alleged inferential justifications that genuinely yields justification must terminate with beliefs that are justified in this other, noninferential way. These noninferentially justified or *basic* beliefs are thus the *foundation* upon which the justification of all other beliefs ultimately rests.

The main argument for foundationalism is that this last alternative must be the correct one, since all of the other alternatives lead, in the ways we have seen, to the implausible skeptical result that no belief is ever justified. This may not be a conclusive argument for foundationalism, since it is hard to see any very clear basis for asserting that total skepticism could not possibly be correct (think about whether you agree with this), but it is surely a very powerful one, both intuitively and dialectically. Moreover, the most standard version of foundationalism, which is at least approximately the one reflected in Part I of this book, has also a good deal of independent plausibility from a common-sense or intuitive standpoint: it certainly seems as though we have many beliefs that are justified, not via inference from other beliefs, but rather by sensory or introspective *experience* (and also by a priori insight). Thus the case for foundationalism appears initially to be quite strong.

Objections to Foundationalism

Nonetheless, as already remarked, there are many recent philosophers who have argued that foundationalism is in fact seriously and irredeemably mistaken,⁶ and we must try to understand the objections to foundationalism that

they advance in support of this claim. These objections fall into two main categories, the first pertaining to the alleged relation of justification between the supposed foundational beliefs and the other, nonbasic beliefs that are supposed to be justified by appeal to them and the second pertaining to the nature and justification of the foundational beliefs themselves.

The first kind of objection has to do with whether it is in fact possible on the basis of the foundation specified by a particular foundationalist position to provide an adequate justification for the other beliefs that we ordinarily regard as justified (which might be referred to as “superstructure” beliefs), or at least for a reasonably high proportion of such beliefs. For the Cartesian version of foundationalism we have been considering, the core of this issue is essentially the problem discussed in chapter 7: is it possible to justify beliefs concerning the external world of material objects on the basis of beliefs about immediately experienced states of mind⁷ (together with a priori justified beliefs in self-evident propositions)?

A foundationalist view that cannot justify giving an affirmative answer to this question, one for which a significant proportion of the beliefs that common sense regards as justified cannot be satisfactorily shown to be justifiable by appeal to its chosen foundation, will itself amount to a fairly severe version of skepticism, with the severity depending on just how thoroughgoing this failure turns out to be. Such a skeptical result obviously tends to seriously undercut the foundationalist argument from the regress problem, discussed above, which advocates foundationalism as the only way to avoid an implausible skepticism (though the skeptical consequences of any foundationalist view will never be as total as those that apparently result from the other possible outcomes of the regress, since at least the foundational beliefs themselves will still be justified).

In fact, the shape and seriousness of this first general sort of problem varies widely among foundationalist views, depending mainly on just how much is included in the specified set of basic or foundational beliefs.⁸ There are versions of foundationalism according to which at least some perceptual beliefs about physical objects count as basic or foundational, and views of this sort have substantially less difficulty in giving a reasonably plausible account of the overall scope of nonfoundational knowledge than does the Cartesian view that restricts the empirical foundation to beliefs about subjective states of mind. In fact, however, as we will see toward the end of the present chapter, it is the Cartesian view that turns out to provide the most defensible response, indeed in my judgment the *only* defensible response, to the second main sort of objection to foundationalism, that concerning the justification of the foundational beliefs themselves. If this is right, then a defensible ver-

sion of foundationalism will have to meet this first problem, not by expanding the foundation, but rather by arguing that the more restricted Cartesian foundation is indeed adequate to avoid unacceptably skeptical results. (Much of Part I is relevant to this issue, especially chapters 4, 7, and 8, though much more discussion would be needed to resolve it.)

Here, however, we will focus mainly on the second and seemingly more fundamental kind of objection to foundationalism, that which challenges the foundationalist to explain how the supposedly foundational or basic beliefs are themselves justified. In considering this issue, we will focus primarily on the empirical part of the foundation: the part that is not justified *a priori* and that thus consists of contingent beliefs, beliefs that are true in some possible worlds and false in others.⁹ Most foundationalists follow the general line taken by the Cartesian view and hold that foundational beliefs of this kind are justified by appeal to sensory and introspective *experience*. But despite the apparent obviousness of this answer, it turns out to be more difficult than might be thought to give a clear account of how it is supposed to work.

There are in fact at least two ways of developing the problem that arises here, though they are perhaps in the end just different ways of getting at the same underlying point. The first way questions whether the whole idea of sensory *experience* justifying *beliefs* really makes intelligible sense,¹⁰ and the starting point of the argument is the view that the distinctive content of a sensory experience is itself *nonpropositional* and *nonconceptual* in character.

Think here of an actual sensory experience, such as the one that I am presently having as I look out my window. (You should supply your own firsthand example.) There are many trees of different kinds at least partially in my field of view, and what I experience might be described as a variegated field of mostly green with small patches of brown and gray and other colors, and with many, many different shades and shapes, all changing in complicated and subtle ways as the wind blows or clouds move by. Given some time and close attention, I could arrive at many, many propositional and conceptual judgments about what I am experiencing: that one patch is larger than another, that one shape is similar to or different from another, that a particular patch is brighter than the one that was there a moment earlier, that various specific colors for which I have learned names are present, and on and on.¹¹ But my most fundamental experience of the sensory content itself does not seem to be propositional or conceptual in this way. It is not primarily a consciousness *that* the experiential content falls under certain general categories or universals. The experienced sensory content is what these general or classificatory judgments are about, what makes them true or false, but this sensory content itself is different from and vastly more specific than the various conceptual

characterizations, in a way that makes it extremely doubtful that it could ever be *fully* described in such conceptual terms. (Think *very* carefully about this difficult point, considering lots of examples—which are fortunately very easy to come by. Imagine trying to describe such an experienced sensory content to someone else, perhaps over the phone. One problem is that our vocabulary in this area seems obviously very inadequate: we have words for general ranges or colors and shapes, but not for fully specific instances. But even if you did have an adequate vocabulary, isn't it clear that it would be very, very difficult to actually give anything close to a complete description, and—the real point—that the sensory content of which you are conscious and which you are attempting to describe does not itself already involve or consist of such a conceptual or classificatory description?)

Remember that the issue we are presently concerned with is whether sensory experience can justify *beliefs*. But if sensory experience is in this way nonconceptual, and given that beliefs are formulated in propositional and conceptual terms, it becomes hard to see how there can be an intelligible justificatory relation between the two. How can something that is not even formulated in conceptual terms be a reason for thinking that something that is thus formulated is true? The present line of argument concludes that there can be no such justificatory relation—and hence, as the only apparent alternative, that the relation between sensory experience and beliefs must be merely *causal*. As the recent American philosopher Donald Davidson puts it:

The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes [that is, are not formulated in conceptual terms]. 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.¹²

And if this is correct, then we have the rather surprising result that the nonconceptual content of sensory experience, even though it undeniably exists, is apparently incapable of playing any justificatory role, and thus cannot provide the justification for foundational beliefs. Sensory experience in itself would thus turn out to have no very important epistemological significance. (Can this possibly be right? And if you think it couldn't, then what exactly is wrong with the argument just given?)

The second, closely related anti-foundationalist argument focuses on the person's *awareness* or *apprehension* of the experiential content.¹³ Clearly

(setting the previous objection aside for a moment), the experience that supposedly justifies a particular basic belief must have a correlative specific character that *somehow* makes it likely that that specific belief is true. Moreover, the person must somehow apprehend or be aware of the specific character of this experience if it is to provide him or her with justification (of an internalist sort—see chapter 10) for his or her belief. But what is the nature of this apprehension or awareness of the character of the experience? There seem to be only two possibilities here, and the objection is that neither of them is compatible with the foundationalist view. (Thus the argument takes the form standardly referred to by logicians as a *dilemma*.)

One possibility is that the specific character of the sensory experience is apprehended via a reflective *conceptual* awareness, that is, another *belief* (or at least a state that strongly resembles a belief): the belief that I have such-and-such a specific sort of experience. Here it is important to keep the whole picture in mind. We started with one supposedly foundational belief, which was presumably about some feature of the experience. In order to explain how that first belief is justified by the experience we needed to invoke an independent apprehension or awareness of the experience, and the suggestion is now that this apprehension or awareness takes the form of another belief. But now there are two problems. First, the original, supposedly basic belief that the experience was supposed to justify appears to have lost that status, since its justification now depends on this further belief, presumably via an inferential relation. Second and more importantly, there is now also a new issue as to how this further reflective belief is *itself* justified. Since this reflective belief is supposed to constitute the person's most basic apprehension or awareness of the experiential content (that was the whole point of introducing it), there is no apparent way for it to be justified by appeal to that content, since there is no further awareness of the content to appeal to.¹⁴ And to invoke a further conceptual awareness of that same content, that is, yet another belief (or belief-like state), only pushes this issue one step further back. In the process of trying to avoid the original regress, we seem to have generated a new one.

But the only apparent alternative is that the most fundamental apprehension or awareness of the specific character of the sensory content does not take the form of a conceptual belief *that* the experience is of a certain specific sort, but instead is not formulated in conceptual or classificatory terms at all. If so, then any further issue of justification is apparently avoided, since there is simply no further claim or assertion to be justified. But the problem now is that it becomes difficult to see how such an apprehension or awareness can provide a basis for the justification of the original, supposedly basic belief: If

the apprehension of the experiential content is not in any way belief-like or propositional in character, then there is apparently no way to *infer* from that awareness to the truth (or likely truth) of the supposedly basic belief, no way in which the truth of the basic belief can *follow* from the experiential apprehension. And in the absence of such an inference, it is obscure how either the experience or the apprehension thereof constitutes any sort of reason for thinking that the supposedly basic belief is true.

The two foregoing objections are in effect two ways of getting at the fundamental issue of what the alleged justificatory relation between sensory experience and propositional, conceptual beliefs is supposed to amount to, how it is supposed to work. The relation cannot be logical or inferential, both because logical or inferential relations exist only between propositional or conceptual items, and sensory experience itself is seemingly not propositional or conceptual in character; and because an appeal to an awareness that was propositional or conceptual and so could stand in logical or inferential relations could not provide a genuine solution to the epistemic regress problem, since that sort of awareness would itself require justification. But what then is the nature of this relation between sensory experience and basic beliefs?

You may well think that these arguments must be somehow mistaken, that there must be some way in which the right sort of sensory experience can justify a belief. But then how exactly does this work? We will return to this issue at the end of the chapter, after we have had a look at the coherentist alternative.

Coherentism

The fundamental idea of coherentism is simple enough, especially given the objections just considered to foundationalism. The basic thrust of those objections is that there is no way for conceptual, propositional beliefs to be justified by appeal to nonconceptual, nonpropositional sensory experience. Moreover, a fairly obvious generalization of those arguments would apparently show that there is no way for beliefs to be justified by appeal to *anything* that is nonconceptual and nonpropositional in character: for again there will be no basis for any sort of inference from something of this character to a belief. Indeed, since only beliefs (or states enough like beliefs to make no difference) can stand in inferential relations and since the very idea of having a *reason* for thinking that something is true seems to essentially involve an inference of some sort from the reason to the claim in question, the apparent result is that beliefs can only be justified by other beliefs. Thus the

central claim of coherentism is that the sole basis for epistemic justification is relations among beliefs, rather than between beliefs and something external. More specifically, it is alleged, what justifies beliefs is the way they fit together: the fact that they *cohere* with each other.

But while the general idea of coherentism is both a direct result of the anti-foundationalist arguments and perhaps has a certain initial plausibility of its own (since justification that appeals to other beliefs is at the very least the most clear and obvious sort), elaborating this initial idea into a developed position turns out to be quite difficult. There are in fact many specific positions, both historical and contemporary, that are fairly standardly identified as versions of coherentism,¹⁵ but it is more than a little unclear exactly what, if anything, they have in common beyond this central idea—or even that they all are entirely consistent in their adherence to it. Thus it is more than a little uncertain whether there is any clearly defined general view that can be identified as coherentism.

The best way to handle this problem is to consider some of the key issues that any coherentist view that is to be a genuine dialectical alternative to foundationalism must apparently face and then attempt to figure out what a genuinely coherentist response might look like.¹⁶ Having done this, we will then be in a position to attempt a further evaluation of coherentism.

(1) The Nature of Coherence

The first and perhaps most obvious issue is the nature of coherence itself. It is clear that coherence is supposed to be primarily a property of a *group* or *system* of beliefs (though presumably a sufficiently complicated individual belief could be incoherent within itself). Proponents of coherence¹⁷ speak of beliefs agreeing with each other or fitting together or “dovetailing” with each other. Part of what is required here is logical consistency: beliefs that are logically inconsistent with each other, that could not all be true at the same time in any possible world (for example, the belief that the earth is spherical and the belief that the earth is flat), plainly do not fit together or agree to any extent at all. But contrary to what opponents and even a few proponents of coherence sometimes seem to suggest, mere consistency is not by itself enough for any serious degree of coherence. Consider a set of entirely unrelated beliefs: the belief that grass is green, the belief that today is Tuesday, the belief that Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C., and the belief that Matisse was a great painter. The set of beliefs is obviously consistent, simply because its members make no contact with each other at all and so could not possibly conflict, but it would be odd and misleading to describe it as coherent and perhaps still odder to suggest that this mere lack of conflict provides any real justification

for these beliefs, any positive reason for thinking that they are true. And the same thing could obviously be true for a much larger set of beliefs.

In fact, it is clear that most coherentists have had a much stronger and more demanding relation among beliefs in mind, a relation in virtue of which a coherent set of beliefs will be tightly unified and structured, not merely an assemblage of unrelated items. Here it seems plausible to suppose that all of the aspects or ingredients of this relation can be viewed as inferential relations of one sort or another among the component beliefs—with any sort of relation between two beliefs (or sets of beliefs) in virtue of which one would, if accepted and justified, provide a good reason for thinking that the other is true counting as an inferential relation. The idea is then that the members of a coherent system of beliefs stand in fairly pervasive inferential relations of this sort to each other, with the degree of coherence depending on the degree to which this is so, that is, on the number and strength of these inferential connections.

Although it is impossible to give a very good example of a coherent system of beliefs in the space reasonably available here, the following may help you to get a little better hold on the idea. Suppose that you are watching four birds in your backyard and form a set of ten beliefs about them, consisting of the beliefs with regard to each of the four (a) that the bird in question is a crow and (b) that the bird in question is black, together with the general beliefs (1) all crows are black and (2) that all black birds are crows. This set of ten beliefs is too small to be highly coherent, but it is far more coherent than the set of unrelated beliefs described earlier. The eight specific beliefs provide inductive support (one sort of inferential relation) for each of the two general beliefs, each member of the four pairs of specific beliefs provides deductive support (another sort of inferential relation) for the other when taken together with one of the general beliefs, and there are also inferential relations of an inductive sort between any seven of the specific beliefs and the eighth.¹⁸ Thus this set of beliefs is about as closely unified as a set this small could be (though some mathematical examples might be even better in this respect) and provides an initial model of what a coherent set of beliefs might look like.¹⁹

One general class of relations among beliefs that has received a great deal of emphasis in recent discussions of coherence is relations having to do with *explanation*. We have already seen in our earlier consideration of theoretical or explanatory reasoning²⁰ how the fact that a hypothesis provides the best explanation for a set of justified claims might provide a reason for thinking that the hypothesis is true. But it is equally true that an explanatory hypothesis can, if accepted, help to provide inferential support for some of

the claims that it could explain, though other premises will also be required. (The example in the previous paragraph provides a rough example of this sort of situation, though it is debatable to what extent, if at all, an inductive generalization really explains its instances.) Thus explanatory relations provide a basis for inference and so can constitute one ingredient of the general idea of coherence.²¹ (It seems excessive, however, to hold, as some have, that explanatory relations are all there is to coherence.)

(2) A Response to the Epistemic Regress Problem:

Nonlinear Justification

A second issue is just what sort of response coherentism can or should give to the epistemic regress problem. Of the four alternatives with regard to the outcome of the epistemic regress that were outlined above, the coherentist must apparently opt for the third, the idea that chains of inferential justification circle or loop back upon themselves, rather than ending in unjustified beliefs, going on infinitely, or terminating with foundational beliefs. Advocates of coherentism have occasionally claimed that such a view is acceptable as long as the circles and loops are large and complicated enough. But this response seems simply irrelevant to the objection discussed above: that such a picture involves circular reasoning and hence that the supposed chains of justification have in fact no genuine justificatory force. A large and complicated circle is still after all a circle. Is there anything better that the coherentist can say here?

Perhaps the best hope for a viable coherentist response to the regress problem is an idea offered originally by the nineteenth-century British idealist Bernard Bosanquet.²² It amounts to the claim that the very formulation of this problem depends on a basic mistake concerning the structure of inferential justification: the mistaken idea that relations of inferential justification fundamentally involve a one-dimensional, asymmetrical, *linear* order of dependence among the beliefs in question. Once this linear picture is accepted, it is argued, the regress of justification is unavoidable and can be solved only in the (allegedly untenable) foundationalist way. Bosanquet's contrary suggestion is that inferential justification, when properly understood, is ultimately nonlinear or *holistic* in character, with all of the beliefs involved standing in relations of mutual support, but none being justificatorially prior to the others. In this way, it is alleged, any objectionable circularity is avoided. (Think carefully about the plausibility of this claim, looking back at the discussion of the circularity alternative.)

Such a view amounts to making the *group* or *system* of beliefs, rather than its individual members, the primary unit of justification, with the component

beliefs being justified only derivatively, by virtue of their membership in such an adequately interrelated system. And the general property of such a system, in virtue of which it is justified, is of course identified as coherence. (The contrast between the linear and nonlinear conceptions of inferential justification is drawn at a very high level of abstraction, and you will have to work to try to bring it down to earth by considering possible examples.)²³

A further claim often made by proponents of nonlinear justification and by coherentist views generally is that the relevant system of beliefs in relation to which issues of coherence and so of justification are to be decided is the entire set of beliefs held by the believer in question. Indeed, this is frequently taken completely for granted with little discussion. But such an extreme holism is in fact not required in any very clear way by the logic of the nonlinear view, and it moreover poses serious problems that the coherentist might be better advised to avoid. The already rather uncertain idea of coherence becomes even more so when applied to comprehensive systems of beliefs, which will inevitably contain many beliefs having no discernible connection with each other. Moreover, even the minimal requirement of consistency is in fact rather unlikely to be fully satisfied by actual systems of belief. For these reasons, it seems to be a mistake for the coherentist to take his holism this far; and there is in fact no very obvious reason why, assuming that the coherence of a system of beliefs can indeed serve as a basis for justification, it might not be the coherence of some smaller group of beliefs that functions in this way in particular cases. (Though this admittedly raises the far from easy issue of just what the relevant group or system is in relation to a particular belief.)

(3) Coherentism and Sense Perception

A third crucial issue facing the would-be coherentist is what to say about the epistemic role of sense perception.²⁴ Here the coherentist seems to be faced with a stark choice. One alternative would be to simply deny that sense perception plays *any* genuine justificatory role—deny, that is, that the fact that a belief is a result of perception or of perceptual experience is relevant in any way to a reason for thinking that it is true. A coherentist who adopts this line need not deny the seemingly obvious fact that many of our beliefs are in fact *caused* by sensory experience and in that way count as perceptual. But he must insist that merely being *produced* in this way gives them no special *justificatory* status, so that their justification has to be assessed on the same basis as that of any other belief, namely by how well they fit into a coherent system of beliefs. Thus, according to this sort of view, a belief that is a mere hunch or is a product of wishful thinking or even is just arbitrarily made up,

but that coheres with a set of other beliefs (perhaps arrived at in the same ways!), will be justified; while a perceptual belief that is not related in this way to other beliefs will not be.

But such an extreme repudiation of the justificatory relevance of sensory perception or observation is both quite implausible from a common-sense standpoint and also greatly aggravates the issue, to be considered next, of why the fact that a belief satisfies the test of coherence constitutes a reason for thinking that it is true. For these reasons, few coherentists have been willing to go this far.²⁵ But the alternative is to try to somehow accommodate an important justificatory role for sense perception within the coherentist framework, without thereby slipping back into foundationalism—something that it is not at all easy to see how to do.

Perhaps the best alternative on this issue for a coherentist is to continue to insist that sensory experience in itself merely causes beliefs but cannot justify them, while adding that the fact that a belief was caused in this way rather than some other can play a crucial role in a special kind of coherentist justification. The idea here is that the justification of these *observational* beliefs (as they will be referred to here), rather than appealing merely to the coherence of their propositional contents with the contents of other beliefs (so that the way that the belief was produced would be justificationally irrelevant), might appeal instead to a general background belief that beliefs caused in this specific way (and perhaps satisfying further conditions as well) are generally true, where this general belief is in turn supported from within the system of beliefs by inductive inference from many apparently true instances of beliefs of this kind (with the alleged truth of these instances being in turn established by various specific inferences falling under the general heading of coherence). Such observational beliefs would obviously not be *arrived at* via inference, but they would still be inferentially *justified* in a way that depends ultimately on coherence: the coherence of the general belief about the reliability of beliefs caused in this way with the rest of the relevant system of beliefs.

In this way, it might be claimed, observational beliefs that depend in a way on perception and perceptual experience can after all play a role in coherentist justification. Moreover, beliefs justified in this way, since their justification does not depend on their specific content but only on the way that they are caused, could either agree with or conflict with other beliefs that the person holds, thus providing the sort of independent check or test of one's beliefs that sense perception is often claimed to provide. And a coherentist view could seemingly *require* (not merely allow) that beliefs justified in this way play a substantial justificatory role, while still retaining its basic coherentist character.²⁶

(4) Coherence and Truth

We come now to the most fundamental and obvious issue of all: Why is the fact that a belief satisfies the standards of a coherentist account of the sort just sketched supposed to show that it is *justified* in the sense of there being a good reason for thinking that it is *true*? What bearing does coherence have on truth or likelihood of truth (assuming, as we will here, that a coherence theory of truth itself is unacceptable²⁷)?

We may approach this issue by considering first how a coherentist might respond to two related, but more specific issues. The first of these is what is usually referred to as the *input* or *isolation* problem. Given the obvious facts, first, that there is much more to reality than a person's system of beliefs and, second, that most of those beliefs purport to describe that larger reality, the obvious question is then why the fact that those beliefs are coherent with each other constitutes any reason to think that what they say about the reality external to them is true or correct. Why couldn't a system of beliefs be perfectly coherent while nonetheless entirely impervious to any sort of influence or input from external reality, thus being completely isolated from it? But if this were so, it could seemingly be only an unlikely accident or coincidence if the beliefs in question happened to be true. Thus, it is argued, coherence is irrelevant to truth and so provides no basis for justification.

It is at this point that the proposed coherentist account of sensory observation becomes critical. For if that account can be fleshed out and defended, then the coherentist may have a response to this objection. He can say that the observational beliefs justified in the way indicated earlier are after all *caused* by external reality and so represent a kind of external input to the system of beliefs that can solve the isolation problem. Note that this response depends on the fact that the way that observational beliefs are caused plays a role in their justification (and also on the requirement that beliefs justified in this way play a substantial justificatory role); if they were caused in this way but justified solely on the basis of the coherence of their contents with those of other beliefs, thus being on a par with hunches, products of wishful thinking, beliefs resulting from mere dogmatism, and so on (or if such observational beliefs were simply too rare to have much impact), then the influence of the world on the system of beliefs would be too minimal to make truth likely.

A second problem is raised by the apparent possibility of *alternative coherent systems*. Since coherence is a purely internal property of a group or system of beliefs, it seems possible to invent indefinitely many alternative systems of belief in a purely arbitrary way and yet make each of them entirely coherent, with any possible belief that is internally consistent and coherent being

a member of some of these systems. But since the beliefs in one such system will conflict with those in others, they obviously cannot all be justified. Thus there must be some basis other than coherence for choosing among these systems and the beliefs they contain, so that coherence is not by itself an adequate basis for justification.

Here again the best coherentist response will depend on the suggested coherentist account of observation. For if that account can be made to work, then the coherentist can seemingly require that any system whose coherence is to be a basis for genuine justification (i) must include such an observational ingredient and (ii) must *remain* coherent as new observational beliefs are added. Since the justification of the observational beliefs depends primarily on how they are caused²⁸ and not on their specific content, they have the potential to conflict with other beliefs in the system. Thus there is no apparent reason to think that just any arbitrarily invented system of beliefs will satisfy both of these further requirements, that satisfying (i) will not lead to a failure to satisfy (ii). Indeed, though the issues are more complicated than this brief discussion can convey, there is no very clear reason for thinking that more than one system will succeed in doing this in the long run.

The responses to these two more specific problems also point toward a coherentist response to the general problem of truth. If (but this is still a very big if) the coherentist account of observational input can be successfully elaborated and defended, then the coherentist can perhaps argue that the *best explanation* for the long-run coherence of a system of beliefs in the face of continued observational input is that the beliefs in the system are being systematically caused by an external reality that they accurately depict, and hence that they are likely to be true.²⁹ Even apart from the worries about the account of observation itself, there is much more that would have to be done to spell out and elaborate this argument,³⁰ but for now, this initial outline of how an argument linking coherence with truth might go will have to do.

We thus have the basic outline and rationale of a coherentist account of epistemic justification, one that seems on the surface to avoid foundationalism. But can such a view really succeed? Or are there serious, perhaps even insuperable problems lurking here? (Stop at this point and see if you can think of what sorts of objections such a coherentist view might face.)

Some Objections to Coherentism

In fact, there are many serious objections to coherentism. Here I will consider only three of them, one having to do with the idea of coherence itself and the other two both having to do in different ways with the general issue of the *accessibility* of coherentist justification to the believer.

First, while the discussion above may suffice to give you some initial grasp of the concept of coherence, it is very far from an adequate account, especially far from being one that would provide the basis for *comparative* assessments of the relative degrees of coherence possessed by different and perhaps conflicting systems of beliefs. And it is comparative assessments of coherence that are needed if coherence is to be the sole basis that determines which beliefs are justified or even to play a significant role in such issues. There are somewhat fuller accounts of coherence available in the recent literature,³¹ but none that come at all close to achieving this goal. Thus practical assessments of coherence must be made on a rather ill-defined intuitive basis, making the whole idea of a coherentist epistemology more of a promissory note than a fully specified alternative.

Second, if coherence is to be the basis for empirical justification,³² then an *internalist* coherence theory must require that the believer have an adequate grasp or representation of the relevant system of beliefs, since it is in relation to this system that coherence and so justification are determined. Such a grasp would presumably take the form of a set of reflective beliefs (or perhaps one comprehensive reflective belief) specifying the contents of the relevant system. And the glaring difficulty is that the coherentist view also seemingly precludes there being any way in which such reflective beliefs are themselves justified. Such beliefs are obviously contingent and presumably empirical in character; and yet any appeal to coherence for *their* justification would seem to be plainly circular or question-begging, since what is at issue is in part the specification of the very system of beliefs in relation to which coherence is to be assessed. Until I have a *justified* grasp of the contents of the relevant system, I can't tell which reflective beliefs of this kind are justified; but a justified grasp of the contents of that system depends on a prior answer to just this question.

Here it is in fact hard to avoid suspecting that would-be coherentists have failed to adequately purge themselves of an intuitive outlook that is really compatible only with foundationalism. From a traditional foundationalist standpoint, there is of course no real problem about one's grasp of one's own beliefs, since this is a matter of immediate experience for occurrent beliefs and can be made so for dispositional beliefs. But coherentists reject any such appeal to immediate experience, and so cannot legitimately appeal to this sort of access. And there seems to be no alternative account within the confines of coherentism that would allow the believing subject to have justified access to the contents of his system of beliefs and so to whatever justification the coherence of that system can provide.

Third, a less obvious but equally serious objection pertains to the coherentist's attempted account of observational input and the accompanying answer to the alternative coherent systems objection and argument for the connection between coherence and truth. An essential component of all of this is the idea that the observational status of a belief can be recognized in a *justified way* from within the person's system of beliefs, for only then could this status be used as a partial basis for the justification of such a belief, which then in turn would allow such observational beliefs to be appealed to for these various further purposes. Here again, recognizing that a belief is a result of sensory observation rather than arbitrary invention is at least reasonably unproblematic from a foundationalist standpoint that can invoke immediate experience. But for a coherentist, the basis for such a recognition can only be the further belief, itself supposedly justified by coherence, that a given belief has this status. And then there is no apparent reason why the various alternative coherent systems cannot include within themselves *beliefs* about the occurrence of various allegedly observational beliefs that would not conflict with and indeed would support the other beliefs in such a system, with these supposed observational beliefs being justified within each system in the way indicated above. Of course, such beliefs will not in general *really* be observational in character, but the coherentist has no way to appeal to this fact that is compatible with his coherentist framework. As long as it is only beliefs and the relations among them that can be appealed to for justification, the belief that a specific observation has occurred is all that matters, and whether such a belief was really caused in the right way becomes entirely irrelevant.

Thus there is no way consistent with coherentism to distinguish genuine observational input from this counterfeit variety. And, in consequence, there is also no way on the basis of the only sort of "observation" that is internally recognizable to answer the isolation and alternative coherent systems objections or to argue from coherence to likelihood of truth. A system that receives genuine observational input may thereby receive input from reality and may be unlikely to remain coherent unless that input (and so also the system that coheres with it) reflects the way that reality is, rather than being arbitrarily invented. But a system that merely contains beliefs about such input may still be entirely isolated from reality, may be merely an invented, internally coherent fantasy, and may be arbitrarily far from the truth. For this reason, coherence, even when supplemented with the coherentist version of observation, does not seem to yield any basis for genuine epistemic justification. (This last point is very difficult, and you will have to think about it at some length to be sure that you see it clearly.)

These objections, and especially the last, appear to be completely devastating to coherentism. I note in passing that it might be possible to avoid or at least mitigate them by adopting an *externalist* version of coherentism. But externalism, as we will see in the next chapter, faces serious problems of its own; and in any case, an externalist version of coherentism would have no dialectical point, since if externalism were otherwise acceptable, a foundationalist version would be much more straightforward and easier to defend.

Back to Foundationalism?

The sort of view that is often regarded as the main contemporary alternative to foundationalism has been examined and found wanting, but that is not enough, of course, to answer the anti-foundationalist arguments, in particular the arguments purporting to show that sensory experience is incapable of justifying conceptual beliefs and thus incapable of providing a foundation of the sort that the foundationalist is seeking. We thus need to return to those arguments and see whether they are really as compelling as they have often been taken to be.

It will be useful to begin with the second of the two arguments that were presented earlier in this chapter. This argument, as we saw, takes the form of a dilemma concerning the apprehension of the character of the experience, mainly sensory experience, to which the foundationalist wants to appeal for the justification of foundational beliefs: if the character of such experience is apprehended in a conceptual or propositional state, a belief or belief-like state, then it seems capable of providing a reason for thinking that further beliefs are true, but is also itself in need of justification; whereas if the apprehension of the character of experience is not in conceptual or propositional terms, if it does not involve any apprehension *that* the experience in question has one sort of general or classificatory character rather than another, the need for justification is avoided, but at the cost of rendering the apprehension seemingly incapable of providing justification for any further belief.

The suggestion that I want to offer here will be at least a bit easier to see if we focus initially on a somewhat special case, the case where the (alleged) basic belief in question is the reflective belief that I have some other specific occurrent belief: the belief that I am presently and consciously believing some specific thing. The natural place to look for justification for such a reflective belief is to the *experience* of having the other belief in question. And here the crucial fact that, I will suggest, allows an escape between the horns of the dilemma just mentioned is that my most fundamental experience or awareness of one of my own occurrent beliefs is *neither* a separate

reflective belief or belief-like state that would itself require justification *nor* a purely noncognitive awareness that fails to reflect the specific character of the apprehended state (in this case, mainly the propositional content of the belief). Instead, I suggest, to have a conscious occurrent belief just is, in part, to have a conscious awareness of the content of that belief (and also of one's accepting attitude toward that content), an awareness that is not reflective (or "second order") in nature, but is instead partly *constitutive* of the first-level occurrent belief state itself. My further suggestion is then that it is by appeal to this nonreflective, constitutive awareness of the belief content that a reflective, second-order belief can be justified—though we now see that it is this constituent, nonreflective awareness rather than the reflective belief that ultimately deserves to be called "basic."

The ideas in the previous paragraph are perhaps more difficult and philosophically sophisticated than anything that you have encountered so far in this book, so I want to pause a bit to try to get them into clear focus. The main distinction is between (a) a belief that is about *another*, distinct belief (and thus reflective or "second-order") and (b) the conscious awareness of a belief's *own* content that is, I am claiming, a constitutive or intrinsic feature of any conscious, occurrent belief, without the need for a second, independent belief. To take a specific example, suppose that I have the first-order, conscious or occurrent belief that *the sun is shining* (using italics to indicate the content). Then the relevant second-order or reflective belief would have the content *I (presently) believe that the sun is shining*. (This second-order belief is one that I might or might not actually have; we do not reflect in this way on all of our beliefs, and indeed we could not do so—think about it.) Thus whereas the intrinsic or constitutive awareness of the content of the first-order belief, an awareness that *always* occurs when I have such a conscious belief, would just be the conscious thought *the sun is shining*, with no explicit reference to me as the thinker, the second-order, reflective belief is explicitly about me having that first-order belief and thus must of course refer explicitly to me. The crucial point is simply that an occurrent belief is, after all, a *conscious* state, and that what one is primarily conscious of in having such a belief is precisely its propositional content (together with the accepting—as opposed to doubting or wondering—attitude toward that content, but with no explicit reference to the person who has the belief).

If this is right, then this first-order, constitutive awareness of content can seemingly provide a justifying reason for the second-order, reflective belief that I have an occurrent belief with that very content. Indeed, in the normal case, it is precisely because I am aware in the constitutive way of the content of my belief that I am led, when and if I reflect, to form the reflective

belief that I have such-and-such a first-order belief. But, at the same time, there is no apparent way in which the nonreflective, constituent awareness of content itself requires any sort of justification: an issue of justification can, of course, be raised about the belief as a whole (do I have any reason to think that the sun is shining?), but not about my nonreflective awareness of the content of the belief. Because of its nonreflective, constituent character, this “built-in” awareness, as it might be described, thus neither requires any justification, nor for that matter even admits of any. Indeed, this constituent awareness of content might be said to be strictly *infallible* in something like the way that many foundationalist views historically have claimed for basic or foundational beliefs: because it is this constitutive or “built-in” awareness of content that *gives* the belief its specific content, that *makes* it the particular belief that it is with the content that it has (rather than some other belief or some nonbelief state), there is apparently no way in which *this* awareness could be mistaken, simply because there is no relevant fact independent of the awareness itself for it to be mistaken about.³³

This infallibility does not, however, extend to the reflective, second-order belief: though such a belief can, I am claiming, be justified by appeal to the awareness that is a constitutive feature of the first-order belief that is its object, it would still apparently be possible to reflectively misapprehend the content of one’s own belief, to have a reflective belief that does not accurately reflect the content contained in the constitutive or “built-in” awareness. Such a mistake might be due to mere inattention, or it might result from the complexity or obscurity of the belief content itself or from some further problem or disorder. But unless there is some reason in a particular case to think that the chance of such a misapprehension is large, this mere possibility of error does not seem enough to prevent the reflective belief from being justifiable by appeal to the constituent awareness. That I find myself apparently aware in the constitutive way of the very content that the second-order, reflective belief claims that I believe is surely still in general a good reason, even if not a conclusive one, for thinking that the reflective belief is correct.

The foregoing provides an outline of how one specific sort of belief, namely a reflective, second-order belief about the existence and content of one of my own conscious, occurrent beliefs, can be basic or foundational in the sense of there being an internally available reason why it is likely to be true without that reason depending on any further belief or other cognitive state that is itself in need of justification—though, as we have seen, it is really the constitutive awareness of content rather than the reflective belief that ultimately turns out to be foundational. But though my immediate awareness of my own

occurrent beliefs is a part of my overall immediate experience and plays some role in justification, the most important part of that experience for issues of justification is my immediate awareness of sensory content. My suggestion is that an essentially parallel account can be given of how this awareness too can justify foundational beliefs.

Consider then a state of, for example, visual experience, such as the one that I am presently having as I look out of the window in my study (see the rough description offered earlier in this chapter). Like an occurrent belief, such an experience is of course a *conscious* state. This means, I suggest, that in a way that parallels the account of occurrent beliefs offered above, it automatically involves a constitutive or “built-in,” nonreflective awareness of its own distinctive sort of content, in this case sensory or “phenomenal” content: to have such a phenomenal experience just is to be consciously aware of all of its nonconceptual content, however complicated it may be (for not to be aware of some of that content would be to not be having that specific experience). And, again in parallel fashion, such an awareness is in no need of justification and is indeed in a sense infallible in that there is no sort of mistake that is even relevant to it—no possible discrepancy between the content that I am aware of and the actual content of the experience. Thus this awareness of sensory content is also apparently able to justify reflective beliefs that are about that content.

Suppose, for example, that I am having a visual experience that involves, among other things, a triangular patch of bright green in the middle of my visual field. To have such an experience is to be aware of such a patch. And now if I come to also have the reflective belief that I am experiencing a patch of bright green in the middle of my visual field, this belief can seemingly be justified by appeal to the very constitutive or built-in awareness of the green patch that is part of what makes that experience the specific experience that it is. Here, once again, mistakes are possible: in a moment of inattention, I might fail to notice that the second-order belief and the actually experienced sensory content do not quite agree. But the fact that this is possible has, I suggest, no tendency at all to show that finding or seeming to find the second-order belief to be in agreement with the actually experienced content is not still an excellent reason, indeed the best possible one, for thinking that the second-order belief is true.

But does this really answer the anti-foundationalist arguments offered above? Even if it is correct that the constitutive or built-in awareness raises no further issue of justification, is there really an intelligible justificatory relation between it and a basic belief about the character of the experience? Perhaps this relation of justification is plausible enough in the case considered earlier,

where the constitutive awareness is an awareness of the content of an occurrent belief, for there the awareness of content is still in conceptual terms that connect in an obvious way with the conceptual content of the reflective belief, even if the constitutive awareness involves no conceptual *judgment* about the occurrence of that content that could demand justification. (Think again about the example described earlier.) But does this really work in the present and ultimately more important case, in which the content of the constitutive awareness is, as we saw earlier, not at all in conceptual terms (so that some, indeed, would refuse even to describe it as “content”)? Aren’t the earlier arguments still correct that there can be no intelligible justificatory relationship between the constitutive awareness of content of *this* sort and a conceptual belief that purports to describe it? (Here is a good place to stop and think about the issue for yourself, before proceeding.)

In fact, we are now in a position to see that these arguments rest on too simple a view of the alternatives for the relation between a sensory experience and a conceptual belief. If we grant (and indeed insist) that the specific content of such an experience is itself nonpropositional and nonconceptual in character, then it is quite correct that there can be no strictly *logical* or *inferential* relation between (a) this content (or the constitutive awareness thereof) and (b) a reflective, conceptual belief about that content. Since the awareness of nonconceptual content (the awareness of the green, triangular patch) is neither true nor false (because it makes no conceptual claim at all), it cannot be the case (as an inference would require) that its truth guarantees the truth of the belief (that I am experiencing such a patch). But such an experience, like other kinds of nonconceptual phenomena, can of course still be conceptually *described* with various degrees of detail and precision. The relation between the nonconceptual content and such a conceptual description of it is not logical or inferential, but it is also obviously not merely causal. Rather it is a *descriptive* relation, one in which the thing described does or does not fit or conform to the description. And where such a relation of description exists, the actual character of the nonconceptual object can obviously constitute a kind of reason or basis for thinking that the description is true or correct (or equally, of course, untrue or incorrect).

Thus suppose once again that I have a specific conscious state of sensory experience (an experience that includes a green and triangular patch in the middle of my visual field), and am, as already argued, consciously but nonconceptually aware of the specific sensory content of that state simply by virtue of having that experience. Suppose that at the same time I entertain a reflective belief that purports to describe or conceptually characterize that perceptual content, albeit no doubt incompletely (the reflective belief that I

have a green and triangular patch in the middle of my visual field). Assuming that I *understand* the descriptive content of that belief—that is, understand what sort of experience it would take to fit or satisfy the conceptual description—then I seem to be in a good, indeed an ideal, position to judge whether the conceptual description is accurate, whether it fits or agrees with the nonconceptual experience I am actually having, and if it apparently does so, to be thereby justified in accepting the belief.

Once again there is no reason to think that mistake is impossible and thus no reason to think that such a reflective belief is infallible. But as long as there is no special reason for suspecting that a mistake has occurred, the fact that such a belief seems to me on the basis of direct comparison to accurately characterize the conscious experience that I am having and that it purports to describe seems to be an entirely adequate reason for thinking that the description is correct and hence an adequate basis for justification.

It is important to emphasize, however, that a reason that appeals in this way to a descriptive fit between a descriptive belief and what the belief is about is only available in a case where the believer has some sort of independent access to the character of the nonconceptual item, that is, an access that does not depend on the conceptual description itself. In most other cases, such as one where it is some physical object or situation that is being described, the believer could have an access that is independent of the description in question only by having a second conceptual state embodying a second description, and this second description would of course itself equally require justification, so that no genuinely foundational justification would result.³⁴

But in the very special case we are concerned with, where the nonconceptual item being described is *itself* a conscious state, one can, I am suggesting, be aware of its character, and thus of the very thing on which the truth of the belief depends, via the constitutive or “built-in” awareness that any conscious state involves, without the need for a further conceptual description—and thereby be in a position to recognize directly the truth (or, of course, the falsity) of a reflective belief about that state. Here we seem indeed to be in a position to make a direct comparison between a conceptual description and the nonconceptual chunk of reality that it purports to describe—something that seems intuitively to be essential if our conceptual descriptions are ever to make contact with reality in a verifiable way.³⁵ Such a comparison is only possible, to be sure, where the reality in question is itself a conscious state and where the description in question pertains to the conscious content of that very state, but in that specific case it seems to be entirely unproblematic.³⁶

Thus a fairly standard version of foundationalism seems to have an adequate response to the second general sort of objection to foundationalism distinguished earlier: the one that pertains to the nature and justification of the foundational beliefs themselves. As already suggested, however, this response seriously aggravates the first kind of objection, the one that challenges whether the rest of what common sense regards as knowledge can be justified on the basis of the foundation thus arrived at. Whether the foundationalist can meet this sort of objection depends mostly on the eventual resolution of the issues discussed in chapter 7 (and, to a lesser extent, in chapters 4 and 8), issues which we will not pursue further here.³⁷