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*(The following is a slightly revised version of a paper I wrote for a class in epistemology at Cal State San Bernardino taught by Dr. Matthew Davidson.)*

### Observations on BonJour's Foundationalism

The “central question of epistemology,” according to BonJour, is:

Do we have any good reasons for thinking that our beliefs about the world, at least the main ones that we hold most firmly, are *true* or at least approximately true — any rational basis for thinking that they succeed in describing the world more or less correctly? And if so, what form do these reasons take?<sup>1</sup>

Skepticism asserts that the answer to the first question is no. All other epistemological theories, including BonJour's foundationalism, assume an affirmative answer. To the second question, foundationalism says every belief must be justified by inference from some other belief, except for a few beliefs designated as basic. These beliefs are justified, but not by inference from other beliefs.<sup>2</sup> The foundationalist challenge has been to explain just how that can happen. This essay will briefly review BonJour's attempt to meet that challenge, consider some objections to his proposal, and then offer the author's evaluation of BonJour's position. For brevity's sake, the discussion will be limited to the subset of basic beliefs that pertain to sensory experience.

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1. Laurence BonJour and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemic Justification: Internalism Vs. Externalism, Foundations Vs. Virtues* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 5.

2. BonJour and Sosa, 12.

If it appears to me visually that there is a tree in front of me, then I will usually believe that there is a tree in front of me. If asked why I believe there is a tree in that place, I will probably say that I believe it because I see it. The skeptic will ask how I can logically infer “the tree exists” from “I see the tree,” and they will claim that I cannot actually do that and therefore have no justification for believing that the tree exists. The foundationalist responds that the skeptic’s argument is not cogent. BonJour’s particular response appeals to a three-way division of cognitive labor. Given my belief that I see a tree, the particulars of what I think I see — the “sensory content” (SC) — are somewhere in my mind; and a description of what I think I see — “descriptive content” (DC) — is somewhere in my mind; and then somewhere in my mind is an awareness of sensory content (ASC), which confirms that there is a good match between DC and SC, and that confirmation justifies my belief that there really is a tree in the place where I believe I see a tree.<sup>3</sup>

This argument is not obviously effective. It seems to presuppose an ability on my part to “read reality” off of whatever in my mind is purporting to represent reality.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there seems to be some sense in which BonJour could be multiplying entities beyond necessity. Still furthermore, BonJour’s scheme does not seem to deal effectively with counterexamples such as the specked hen, as noted by Sosa, since mere awareness of sensation cannot necessarily imply a fit between sensation and reality.<sup>5</sup>

The problem can be stated more generally. Let  $D$  be the set of all beliefs,  $\{p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots, p_n\}$ , held by  $S$ . Then for every  $p_k$  in  $D$  there must be some  $p_{k-1}$  such that  $p_{k-1} \rightarrow p_k$ , except as follows:

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3. BonJour and Sosa, 63-64.

4. Matthew Davidson, classroom lecture (California State University, San Bernardino, May 26, 2009).

5. BonJour and Sosa, 121, 127.

There exists a proper subset  $D_b$  of  $D$  such that for every belief  $p_j$  in  $D_b$ , there exists no such antecedent belief that entails  $p_j$ .  $D_b$  is then the set of  $S$ 's basic beliefs, and the challenge for foundationalism is to explain how they can be justified. For every  $p_j$  in  $D_b$ , there must be some proposition  $p_{j-1}$ , cognitively accessible to  $S$ , such that  $p_{j-1} \rightarrow p_j$ , but  $p_{j-1}$  cannot be an element of  $D$ . To be basic, a belief cannot, by definition, get its justification from another belief. But it is not apparent what other sort of proposition can  $p_{j-1}$  be. If  $S$  can use it to justify believing  $p_j$  — if  $p_{j-1}$  is cognitively accessible to  $S$  — then intuition suggests that  $S$  must believe  $p_{j-1}$ .

BonJour's tripartite scheme attempts to show how the perceptual experience itself might justify a perceptual belief for  $S$  without  $S$ 's using his or her belief in any doxastic proposition. Besides the objections already noted, however, any such attempt to justify perceptual belief in terms of perceptual experience almost necessarily presupposes that our senses are reliable as a matter of fact. I cannot infer the existence of an object from my seeing that object unless I assume that my visual experiences are reliable indicators of empirical reality. But, if I cannot justify that assumption, then I have gotten nowhere, epistemologically speaking.

Thus, there seems to be no way that the foundationalist can evade the charge of arbitrariness. BonJour tries to do so by offering a meta-justification. As Klein observes, the general foundationalist claim is that properly basic beliefs have some non-doxastic property  $P$  such that any belief having  $P$  is justified. We can then ask whether that claim is itself justified. As Klein says, if it has a justification, then the regress continues, and if it does not, then the claim itself is arbitrary.<sup>6</sup> In a response to Klein, Bergmann attempts to counter the charge by distinguishing between a reason

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6. Peter D. Klein, "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons," *Nous* 33, no. 13 (1999), 303. JSTOR, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0029-4624%281999%2933%3C297%3AHKATIR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S> (accessed Feb. 5, 2008).

for believing some proposition P and a justification for believing P. “In drawing attention to the meta-justificatory argument, the foundationalist is not offering a reason for his basic beliefs,” says Bergmann. “Instead, the foundationalist is using the ideas in that meta-justificatory argument to explain why it is that lacking a reason for a belief isn’t sufficient for that belief’s being arbitrary.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Bergmann does not, at least in that article, reveal what meaning he attaches to “arbitrary” that would differ significantly from “without reason” or some equivalent formulation.

The problem here seems to lie in the foundationalist dogma that any proposition, in order to count as a reason for some belief, must involve inference from some other belief. I suggest that this dogma be replaced with another dogma, that it is rational, reasonable, epistemically acceptable, or whatever we want it to be, to believe some propositions simply because we are aware of no compelling reason either to believe their contraries or to withhold judgment about their truth. They are not indefeasible and should not be regarded as such, but if we know of no defeaters, then until we know of some, we are justified by default in believing them.

BonJour himself suggests something like this in a 1999 article. There he identifies eight characteristics peculiar to our sensory experiences that, he argues, justify our supposing them to closely correlate with empirical reality.<sup>8</sup> If we suppose that the objects we perceive are real but our perceptions of them are grossly distorted, then there is no parsimonious explanation for the distortion. If we suppose that the objects are not even real, then any explanation for our perceiving them the way we perceive them will be even less parsimonious.<sup>9</sup> Thus Occam’s razor,

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7. Michael Bergmann, “What’s *Not* Wrong with Foundationalism,” <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~bergmann/klein.htm> (accessed June 13, 2009).

8. Laurence BonJour, “Foundationalism and the External World,” *Nous* 33, no. 13 (1999), 241-44, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2676104> (accessed June 14, 2009).

9. BonJour, 244-45.

if nothing else, compels us to believe that the world around us really is more or less the way it appears to be.

The skeptic can then ask why we should trust Occam's razor, but there must be a point at which we may ask the skeptic: Why not? For all the virtue there may be in the questioning of our assumptions, it is not a given that doubt is the universal default. If there is any property at all that is common and unique to the beliefs we regard as foundational, and if we have a compelling argument that that property entails some likelihood that those beliefs are true, then two things follow. One is that we have refuted the charge of arbitrariness: We do have a reason for believing them. The other is that we may now put the burden of proof on the skeptic. If we have a reason to believe, then we are justified in believing until someone gives us a reason not to believe.

There remains the issue of cognitive accessibility. Bonjour observes that the average person does not have much if any access to the argument he presents for our belief in sensory data.<sup>10</sup> That is true, but the average person is not a philosopher. It seems reasonable to set the epistemic bar higher for people capable of critical thought. People who cannot solve the problem of induction can nevertheless be justified in believing that biological evolution is a fact of the earth's history. We may appeal at this point to Boghossian's notion of blind entitlement: Anyone, at any particular moment, is entitled by default to accept the pronouncements of whatever epistemic system they find themselves with at the moment.<sup>11</sup> Everett argues similarly that no one should be deemed irrational if they simply agree with whatever they are told by their epistemic

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10. Bonjour, 246.

11. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 99.

community.<sup>12</sup>

A motif common to all accounts of justification is that, whatever it is, justification somehow licenses a belief — makes the belief epistemically acceptable. It seems to be taken for granted that to be acceptable, a belief must at least be rational in some sense, if not necessarily in the narrow sense of being the conclusion of a logically rigorous argument. It is thus necessary for justification that a belief be rational in a broad sense. I hope to have presented some reason to think it is sufficient as well.

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12. Theodore J. Everett, “The Rationality of Science and the Rationality of Faith,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 98, no. 13 (2001), 19, JSTOR <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-362X%28200101%2998%3A1%3C19%3ATROSAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7> (accessed March 22, 2008).

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