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LEHRER'S CASE AGAINST FOUNDATIONALISM

ABSTRACT. In this essay, I assess Keith Lehrer's case against Foundationalism, which consists of variations on three objections: The Independent Information or Belief Objection, The Risk of Error Objection, and the Hidden Argument Objection. I conclude that each objection fails for reasons that can be endorsed – indeed, I would say for reasons that *should* be endorsed – by antifoundationalists and foundationalists alike.

A particular belief of a person is *basic* just in case it is epistemically justified and it owes its justification to something other than her other justified beliefs or their interrelations; a person's belief is *nonbasic* just in case it is epistemically justified but not basic. Foundationalists agree that if one has a nonbasic belief, then – at rock bottom – it owes its justification to at least one basic belief. There are justified beliefs because and only because there are basic beliefs. Such is generic *Foundationalism*.[1] One species is *Strong Foundationalism*, the view that a basic belief must enjoy certain epistemic immunities, e.g., immunity from error, refutation, or doubt. *Moderate Foundationalism* denies that a basic belief must enjoy these immunities, or any others for that matter.[2]

Keith Lehrer rejects Foundationalism. In this essay, I aim to assess his reasons for rejecting both generic Foundationalism and Moderate Foundationalism; I will not assess his reasons for rejecting Strong Foundationalism.

Two stage-setting remarks are in order. First, most critics of Foundationalism – including Lehrer – are not epistemic nihilists. Indeed, one frequently hears that *because* Foundationalism implies epistemic nihilism, the view that virtually nobody has any justified beliefs about even the most mundane matters, it should be rejected. As we shall see, Lehrer uses some epistemic principles that arguably imply epistemic nihilism. I will assume without argument that this implication suffices to reject those principles. Second, Lehrer's words are not always clear, and so we must reconstruct and evaluate whatever argument a single passage suggests realizing that, on occasion, it might suggest more than one argument. Relatedly, even where the intended argument is clear, Lehrer sometimes relies on premises that are, at best, in need of argument; occasionally, I will state and evaluate a supporting argument that draws on, *inter alia*, things Lehrer says else-

where. We must not let hermeneutic indecision and argumentative gaps keep us from engaging and improving upon the lines of thought we find.

1. THE INDEPENDENT INFORMATION OR BELIEF OBJECTION

The first argument in Lehrer's case against Foundationalism can be found in the following extended passage:

[A] . . . When I see a red object, I believe I see something red without consciously inferring that from anything else. When, however, we ask why that belief is justified, the answer reveals [1] a dependence on independent information . . . and shows that the belief, though justified without conscious inference, is not self-justified in the sense required by the foundation theory. The justification of the belief [2] depends on other information, to wit, information rendering me competent to discern truth in such matters, in this case, competence to tell something red when I see it.

[B] These considerations might lead us to doubt the tenability of even a modest fallible foundationalism, affirming that, as a matter of contingent fact, some beliefs are justified in themselves independently of other information and belief. It appears that the justification for accepting anything we believe [3] depends on other information, general information, that enables us to obtain truth and avoid error . . . .

[C] The question for the foundation theorist, however, is whether the justification of our basic beliefs [4] depends, at the time at which they originally arise, on our beliefs about our competence to tell what is true and what is not in such matters, or upon the information on which such competence is based. I believe that I see something red. Someone alleges the belief to be basic. It may well be that I have not consciously inferred this belief from any other, but the justification for accepting the belief seems to [5] depend on the assumption, and on my assumption, that I can tell a red thing when I see one. If I have no idea whether I can tell a red thing when I see one, then, even if I can, my belief that I see something red lacks the sort of justification required for knowledge.

[D] . . . [W]hen I believe that I see something red, the justification I have for accepting the belief in the interests of obtaining truth and avoiding error [6] depends on my justified background belief that I have the competence to tell a red thing when I see one, though I do not infer that I see a red thing from that background belief. I may, at first, infer that I see . . . a red thing from a premise about my competence in . . . red-thing identification, but, subsequently, a habit of belief replaces inference. Nevertheless, my justification for accepting [this belief] [7] depends on background information about my competence to obtain truth and avoid error in my doxastic commitments.

[E] The moral of the story about basic beliefs [is this]. If alleged basic beliefs do not guarantee their truth, then the justification for accepting those beliefs in the quest for truth must [8] depend on other information or beliefs. The alleged basic beliefs will fail to be self-justified. All justified acceptance of beliefs, with the possible exception of a small number of infallible beliefs, will [9] depend on some background information about our competence to determine whether the contents of the beliefs are true or false, and our knowledge depends on this as well.[3]

What should we make of the argument here? Before we tackle that question, let's clarify several matters.

First, Lehrer's explicit target is Moderate Foundationalism, or as he calls it, 'fallible foundationalism'. On inspection, it turns out that if the argument succeeds at all, it succeeds against generic Foundationalism, not just Moderate Foundationalism.[4] I will evaluate it under the broader guise.

Second, Lehrer's illustrative basic belief is his belief that *he sees something red*; elsewhere, it's his belief that *he is being appeared-to-redly* or that *he is sensing-redly*. Since my assessment will not hang on such cautious examples of basic beliefs, I will use illustrative basic beliefs like my belief that *the ball is red*.

Third, for Lehrer, 'acceptance' and its cognates are technical terms. As he sees things, to accept a proposition p is to believe p in the interest of attaining truth and avoiding falsehood with respect to p, as opposed (say) to believing p for the sake of peace of mind. Moreover, he notes, while some cases of believing a proposition are not cases of accepting it, every case of accepting a proposition is a case of believing it. Acceptance is "a special kind of belief".[5] In what follows, I will use 'belief' to refer to this "special kind of belief" of which Lehrer speaks, unless I indicate otherwise.

Fourth, Lehrer uses the word 'belief' equivocally. Sometimes he uses it to denote a certain sort of *mental state or act*, as when he speaks of "believing" and "habits of belief". Sometimes, he uses it to denote *what* is believed or accepted, as when he speaks of the "acceptance of beliefs". To avoid equivocation, I will use 'belief' to denote the mental state or act and 'proposition' to denote what is believed or accepted.

Finally, and most importantly, Lehrer conflates several worries about basic beliefs in the passage quoted above. Sometimes – e.g., at [6] – the worry is that they depend for their justification on "justified background beliefs", or "*beliefs* about our competence to tell what is true and what is not". Most often – e.g. [1], [2], [3], [7], and [9] – the worry is that they depend for their justification on "the *information* on which such competence is based". Of course, the information that I can discriminate red from non-red things is not the same thing as anyone's belief that I can discriminate red from non- red things. So we have here two very different formulations of Lehrer's worry. At yet other times – e.g. [5] – Lehrer expresses his worry *conjunctively*: they depend for their justification on "the assumption, *and* my assumption that I can tell a red thing when I see one". Finally, his worry even finds *disjunctive* expression – e.g., at [4] and [8]: they depend for their justification on "other information *or* beliefs". I will focus on belief- and information-versions of the worry. Let's examine the belief-version first.

1.1. *The Belief-Version*

At the most general level, the belief-version of the Objection is this:

(1) If S's belief that the ball is red is basic, then it is justified.

(2) If it is justified, then its justification depends on S's other beliefs (specifically, his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one).

(3) If its justification depends on S's other beliefs, then it is not basic.

(4) So, if S's belief that the ball is red is basic, it is not basic (1)–(3).

What should we make of this argument?

Note, first of all, that the locution "depends on" in the consequent of premise (2) is ambiguous in such a way that the premise might mean either

(2′) If S's belief is justified, then its justification is derived from S's other beliefs (specifically, his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one),

or

(2″) If S's belief is justified, then it is justified only if S has some other beliefs (specifically, the belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one).

Understood as (2′), premise (2) is just another way of saying "Foundationalism is false". Understood as (2″), premise (2) seems true, but, to avoid equivocation, premise (3) must be read as

(3″) If S's belief is justified only if S has some other beliefs, then it is not basic.

Unfortunately, (3″) is false. Even if S's belief cannot be justified unless he has other beliefs, it does not follow that the justification of S's belief is derived from those other beliefs. That's because a logically necessary condition for the truth of *S's belief that the ball is red is justified* is that S have the belief that the ball is red, and a logically necessary condition for the truth of *S has the belief that the ball is red* is that S have other beliefs, from which it follows that S's belief is justified only if S has some other

beliefs. But nothing in that accounting of why S's belief is justified only if S has some other beliefs implies that S's belief derived its justification from those other beliefs of his. Thus, it is left wide open whether S's belief is basic. So, depending on how we read Lehrer's premise (2), the belief-version either begs the question or has a false premise.

Now, in all fairness, I should point out that Lehrer *argues* for premise (2). It is only fitting, then, that we assess his argument. Lehrer's argument for premise (2) – which I am now reading as (2′) – is in paragraph [C] of the passage above; it comes to this:

(2a)   If S's basic belief that the ball is red is justified, then S believes that he can tell a red thing when he sees one.

(2b)   If S believes that he can tell a red thing when he sees one, then the justification of his belief that the ball is red is derived from S's other beliefs (specifically, his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one).

(2′)   So, if S's belief basic belief that the ball is red is justified, then its justification is derived from S's other beliefs (specifically, his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one).

Unfortunately, Lehrer does not explain why we should accept (2a) and (2b). Let's see if we can do better.

1.1.1. *In Defense of Premise (2a)*
We might begin to argue for (2a) with a platitude: if S's belief that the ball is red is *justified*, then S *has* the belief that the ball is red. But, if S has the belief, then S possesses the concept of a ball and the concept of the color red. Possessing those concepts, however, requires possessing certain non-occurrent beliefs (say, expectations) about how things that fall under those concepts tend to behave under various conditions, as well as non-occurrent beliefs about their interrelations with other concepts. Call such non-occurrent beliefs 'concept-possession beliefs'. It follows that S has the belief that the ball is red only if S has the relevant concept-possession beliefs. *Therefore*, S has the belief that the ball is red only if S believes he can tell a red thing when he sees one – which is premise (2a).

Unfortunately, this last inference is invalid. At any rate, it isn't clear why S can't have those beliefs that *allow* him to tell a red thing when he sees one without believing *that* he can tell a red thing when he sees one. Think of normal children in this connection.

Perhaps we can bridge the gap. Here's a suggestion: even if S can have the relevant concept-possession beliefs without believing that he can tell a red thing when he see one, that fact is irrelevant to premise (2a). For (2a) does not lay down a necessary condition on S's having the belief that the ball is red; it lays down a necessary condition on that belief's *being justified*. And here is the important point: S's belief cannot *be justified* unless S *justifiably believes* that he can tell a red thing when he sees one; and it goes without saying that S cannot justifiably believe that proposition unless he believes it.

What should we make of this line of thought? Note that it affirms the premise that

- S's basic belief that the ball is red is justified only if S *justifiably* believes that he can tell a red thing when he sees one.

Moreover, it would be arbitrary to impose such a condition on beliefs about balls and their colors and not other beliefs; moreover, it would be arbitrary to impose such a condition on basic beliefs but not nonbasic beliefs. Furthermore, as Lehrer makes clear, what is important to him here is that believers be justified in believing that they are "competent to discern truth" in matters with respect to which they form beliefs. Thus, I take it, the bulleted premise above is true only if it is true, in general, that

- For *any* belief that p of S, S's belief that p is justified only if S justifiably believes that he can tell whether p is the case.

That is, only if S justifiably believes that he is competent to tell whether p is the case.

But this general claim entails epistemic nihilism. For it is perfectly general and reiterative, and thus leads to an infinite regress of meta-beliefs with successively more complicated propositional contents, very few of which any human being can grasp much less believe, and believe justifiably.

Here's a second suggestion for bridging the gap, one that takes its cue from Lehrer's work on self-trust.[6] I have those concept-possession beliefs that allow me to tell a red thing when I see one. Thus, I am worthy of my trust when I form beliefs about the color of red things. Now, in general, I am worthy of my trust on some matter because of some ability, capacity, or disposition that makes me worthy of my trust; my *being trustworthy* about it is what makes me worthy of my trust. There is, however, an ambiguity that must be resolved concerning the claim that I am trustworthy on some matter. When a speaker affirms that someone is trustworthy about something, one understands *the speaker* as affirming that the person in question is trustworthy on the matter *for the listener* to whom the remark is made. This is important because trustworthiness is a relative notion in

the sense that, in general, a person *x* is trustworthy about something *for a person y* only when *y* is aware of the capacity, ability, or disposition of *x* which makes *x* worth trusting on that score. Consequently, *I* am trustworthy *for myself* on some matter only if I am *aware* of the capacity, ability, or disposition in which my trustworthiness about the matter consists. So, since I am trustworthy for myself concerning the color of red things, it follows that I am aware of the capacity, ability, or disposition in which my trustworthiness about it consists. It's a very short step (i.e., awareness requires belief) to the conclusion that I have the self-reflective meta-belief in question, the belief that I can tell a red thing when I see one.

What should we make of this argument? It's most distinctive feature is that it has the false premise that "in general, a person *x* is trustworthy about something for a person *y* only when *y* is aware of the capacity, ability, or disposition of *x* which makes *x* worth trusting on that score". Counterexamples are a dime a dozen. A mother can be trustworthy about child-rearing for her son even if he is unaware of the capacity, ability, or disposition of hers in virtue of which she is worth trusting on that score. A teacher can be trustworthy about a subject for her students even if they don't believe that she has the relevant abilities. And so on.

Lehrer clearly asserts (2a), but it's unclear why we should believe it. Suppose we do, however. Let's turn now to (2b).

1.1.2. *In Defense of Premise (2b)*

Why suppose that, if S believes that the ball is red, then, if he believes that he can tell a red thing when he sees one, the justification of the first belief is derived from the second one? The mere fact that S has both beliefs can't account for why one owes its justification to the other, so what is it about them that makes it the case that the one derives its justification from the other? Lehrer doesn't say.

Here's a suggestion:

(1)   The justification of S's belief that the ball is red is derived from his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one *because S could not even believe that the ball is red unless he also believed that he can tell a red thing when he sees one*.

Unfortunately, this suggestion confuses what it is that a belief owes its *justification* to with what it is that a belief owes its *existence* to. All manner of things are such that without them S's belief that the ball is red could not exist. It does not follow that his belief owes its justification to them, even in part. Thus, the mere having of some further belief without which one

could not have the target belief does not suffice for the latter's *owing* its justification to the former, even in part.[7]

  Here are two more suggestions:

(2)   The justification of S's belief that the ball is red is derived from his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one *because S could not even believe that the ball is red unless he also believed with justification that he can tell a red thing when he sees one.*

(3)   The justification of S's belief that the ball is red is derived from his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one *because S's belief that the ball is red could not be justified unless he also believed with justification that he can tell a red thing when he sees one.*

Unfortunately, neither suggestion avoids the objection. Consider (3). Even if it is absolutely impossible that S's belief that the ball is red is justified unless he *has* the justified belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one, it simply does not follow that the *justification* of the first belief, as opposed to its *existence*, derives from the justification of the second one. So far as I can see, this gap cannot be bridged without asserting something like the unenlightening and question-begging proposition that

(4)   The justification of S's belief that the ball is red is derived from his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one *because S's belief that the ball is red owes its justification to his belief that he can tell a red thing when he sees one.*

If I'm right, then (2b) cannot serve in a good argument against Foundationalism.

  It appears that Lehrer's defense of premise (2) of the belief-version fails. I now turn to the information-version.

1.2. *The Information-Version*

The information-version goes like this:

(1)   If S's belief that the ball is red is basic, then it is justified.

(2)   If it is justified, then its justification depends on *independent information* (specifically, information rendering S competent to tell something red when he sees it).

(3)   If its justification depends on *independent information*, then it is not basic.

(4)   So, if S's belief that the ball is red is basic, then it is not basic (1)–(3).

What should we make of this argument? Premise (1) is true, but what about (2) and (3)?

The locution "depends on" in the consequent of premise (2) is ambiguous in such a way that (2) might mean either

(2′)   If S's belief is justified, then its justification is derived from independent information (specifically, information rendering S competent to tell something red when he sees it).

or

(2″)   If S's belief is justified, then it is justified only if certain independent information is the case (specifically, information rendering S competent to tell something red when he sees it).

If we read (2) as (2″), then, in order for the argument to avoid equivocation, premise (3) must be read as

(3″)   If S's belief is justified only if certain independent information is the case (specifically, information rendering S competent to tell something red when he sees it), then it is not basic,

which is false. (3″) is false because S's belief is not basic only if it derives its justification from some other *beliefs* of S, or their interrelations; and, the antecedent of (3″) neither states nor implies that the information which must be the case in order for S's belief to be justified must also be *believed* by S. Thus, even if S's belief is justified only if certain independent information is the case, it does not follow that S's belief is not basic.

Now suppose we read (2) as (2′). Then, in order to avoid equivocation, we must read premise (3) as

(3′)   If the justification of S's belief is derived from independent information, then it is not basic.

Now why should we suppose that (3′) is true? According to Lehrer, we should believe (3′) because, if the justification of a basic belief is derived

from independent information, then it "is not self-justified in the sense required by the foundation theory". But what sense of 'self-justified' is that? Many foundationalists don't even employ that term. So how can there be some sense of it "required by the foundation theory"?

Thankfully, Lehrer means something by 'self-justified' that *is* required by generic Foundationalism, although different foundationalists express the requirement differently. Lehrer writes:

> According to foundationalists, knowledge and justification are based on some sort of foundation, the first premises of justification. These premises provide us with basic beliefs that are justified in themselves, or self-justified beliefs, upon which the justification for all other beliefs rests.[8]

These self-justified or basic beliefs, Lehrer continues,

> do not depend for their justification on anything else that we accept. Everything else that we are completely justified in accepting must ultimately be based on these basic beliefs, which provide us with the foundation for the edifice of justification and knowledge.[9]

Later, Lehrer tells us "a basic belief must be self-justified rather than being justified entirely by relation to other beliefs", and that "the justification of all justified beliefs depends on the self-justification of basic beliefs".[10] It appears, then, that Lehrer uses 'self-justified belief' and 'basic belief' synonymously. A self-justified or basic belief is a belief that is justified 'in itself', that is, *it does not derive its justification from anything else that we accept* (at any rate, not entirely).

So Lehrer's defense of premise (3′), unpacked in accordance with what he means by 'self-justified,' consists in this argument:

(3a)   If the justification of S's belief is derived from independent information, then S's belief owes its justification to his *accepting* that information.

(3b)   If S's belief owes its justification to his accepting independent information, then S's belief is not basic.

Premise (3′) follows, and (3b) is true; but what about (3a)?

I submit that it is false. After all, why couldn't the justification of S's basic belief be derived from independent *information* without deriving its justification from his *accepting* that information? There are two options here. First, the justification of S's basic belief might be derived from independent information even though he is unaware of it and hence fails to accept it; second, the justification of a basic belief might be derived from independent information that S in fact accepts even though his basic belief

does not owe its justification to his acceptance of it. Even if we write off the first option because it implies some sort of objectionable epistemic externalism (and I'm *not* recommending we do), we cannot write off the second option unless we can explain in a non-question-begging fashion why it is the case that, if S's basic belief owes its justification to some independent information and he accepts that information, then the justification of S's basic belief is derived from his acceptance of that information. So far as I can see, this simply cannot be done.

I conclude that the information-version of the Objection under consideration fails. Let us now turn to another objection.

2. THE RISK OF ERROR OBJECTION

The second argument in Lehrer's case against Foundationalism – specifically, Moderate Foundationalism – is found in this passage:

... Some foundation theorists, who have denied that the justification of basic beliefs need provide any guarantee of truth, have gone so far as to deny that such justification is connected with truth in any way at all. Such theories, though philosophically important, leave us with a dilemma. Either such justification is irrelevant to the truth of basic beliefs or it is relevant. If the justification is irrelevant to the truth of basic beliefs, then it is not the sort of justification needed to justify acceptance or to yield knowledge. The acceptance required for knowledge is acceptance that aims at truth. Therefore, no justification that is irrelevant to truth is adequate to justify acceptance.

Suppose, then, that the foundation theorist maintains that the justification of basic beliefs is relevant to the truth of those beliefs, though it does not guarantee their truth. If there is some risk of error, then the justification such basic beliefs possess must offset the risk, that is, they must make the risk worthwhile. The risk or probability of error infecting our basic beliefs must not be too high, or else we would not be justified in accepting those beliefs as our foundation. If, however, there is some risk of error in accepting a basic belief, how can we be justified in accepting the belief without confirmation that the risk of error is acceptable?

The foundation theorist may simply postulate that we are justified in accepting certain basic beliefs and give no justification for this claim. We may agree on intuitive grounds that we are justified in accepting the beliefs in question, but why do we think that the beliefs in question are justified? It is because we believe that they are sufficiently likely to be true. We agree that we are justified in accepting the beliefs because of the probability of their truth, but why do we think that the beliefs in question are so likely to be true? When one considers the candidates for such beliefs – introspective beliefs concerning one's present thoughts and sensations, or cautious perceptual beliefs about simple qualities we see directly before us – the answer is apparent. We think that our powers of introspection and perception are very unlikely to lead us into error on such simple matters.

So the justification for accepting these beliefs, if they fail to guarantee their own truth, implicitly depends on a theory we have concerning the reliability of our cognitive powers. This means, however, that the allegedly basic beliefs in question are justified by relation to other beliefs and are not genuinely basic. Such a theory is not a pure foundation theory. The

allegedly basic beliefs must stand in the appropriate probability relation to other beliefs for their justification.[11]

How shall we understand the line of thought here?

The main argument is a dilemma, as Lehrer tells us, which appears to be this:

(1)   If Moderate Foundationalism is true, then either S's fallible basic belief's being justified is relevant to its truth or it is not.

(2)   If not, then S's belief lacks the sort of justification needed for knowledge.

(3)   If so, then S's belief is nonbasic.

(4)   So, if Moderate Foundationalism is true, then either the justification of S's fallible basic belief lacks the sort of justification needed for knowledge or S's belief is nonbasic (1)–(3).

(5)   A belief cannot be at once basic and nonbasic; moreover, the justification of a fallible basic belief is the sort of justification needed for knowledge.

(6)   So, Moderate Foundationalism is false (4), (5).

I want to focus on premises (2) and (3). Why suppose they are true?

2.1. *Lehrer's Defense of Premise (2) and the Deontological Conception of Justification*

Lehrer's argument for premise (2) is this:

(2a)   If S's fallible basic belief's being justified is not relevant to its truth, then it lacks the sort of justification that is had by a belief that aims at truth.

(2b)   If S's belief lacks the sort of justification that is had by a belief that aims at truth, then it lacks the sort of justification needed for knowledge.

Premise (2) follows, but are all of the premises true?

Premise (2a) is arguably false. Suppose we distinguish two concepts, or families of concepts, that go under the term 'epistemic justification'. On

the one hand, there is the *truth-conducivity* concept, according to which (roughly) justification is a matter of believing in such a way that makes it highly likely that one's belief is true. On the other hand, there is the *deontological* concept, according to which (roughly) justification is a matter of believing in such a way that one does not violate any of one's epistemic duties, duties illustrated by the likes of *Don't believe something that you have just as good reason to believe is false as true*, or *Believe those things that seem to be likely given other things you justifiably believe*, or *Critically reflect on your beliefs*.[12] While many epistemologists insist that a belief is justified only if both concepts apply to it, many others insist that only one must, and, of these, many insist that only the deontological concept must.

Now, suppose this last group has it right. In that case, a belief's being justified is not a matter of one's believing in a way that makes it likely that one's belief is true; the justification of a belief is not relevant to its truth. That's because one can believe in accordance with one's duties even if one (unwittingly) believes in a way that systematically leads to falsehood. After all, suppose I'm doing the best I can to believe only on the basis of grounds that make my beliefs very likely to be true. In that case, my beliefs are *aimed* at truth, to use Lehrer's terminology. Nevertheless, unbeknownst to me, I might be the victim of a Cartesian demon or I might be a brain-in-a-vat. In that case, I cannot be properly blamed for believing as I do; thus, I have not failed in my epistemic duties; thus, my beliefs are justified. Therefore, even if a (fallible basic) belief's being justified is irrelevant to its truth, it may nevertheless have the sort of justification that a belief *aimed* at truth can have. That is to say, premise (2a) is false.[13]

While many epistemologists will reject Lehrer's argument along these lines, suppose we don't. In that case, let's examine premise (3).

2.2. *Lehrer's Defense of Premise (3): The First Edition Version*

The first edition of Lehrer's *Theory of Knowledge* contains a defense of premise (3) that differs from the defense found in the second edition. In the present subsection, I will assess the first edition argument.

Lehrer's argument for premise (3), in the first edition, comes to this:

(3a)   If S's fallible basic belief's being justified is relevant to its truth, then there is some risk of error.

(3b)   If there is some risk of error, then S's belief is justified only if she is able to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable.[14]

(3c)   If S's belief is justified only if she is able to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable, then S's belief derives its justification from other beliefs of hers, to wit, those whose contents constitute her theory concerning her cognitive reliability.

(3d)   If S's belief derives its justification from other beliefs of hers, then S's belief is nonbasic.

Premise (3) follows. What should we make of this argument for (3)?

Suppose that it is possible for S to be *able* to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable while *lacking* both (i) beliefs the contents of which would constitute her theory concerning her cognitive reliability and (ii) the capacities and skills necessary to construct a theory from those contents. In that case, (3c) is obviously false. So in the remainder of this section, let us suppose that

(P1)   S is able to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable only if she possesses both (i) and (ii), i.e. the relevant beliefs, capacities, and skills.

Still, I suspect that both (3b) and (3c) are false. I will direct my attention to (3b) first.

I take it that

(P2)   (3b) is true only if the analogue for *non*basic beliefs is true.

To suppose otherwise is to impose an arbitrary standard on basic beliefs. It follows from (3b), (P1), and (P2) that, in general,

(GP)   For *any* of one's justified beliefs B, if there is some risk of error, then B is justified only if one possesses both (i) beliefs the contents of which would constitute her theory concerning her cognitive reliability and (ii) the capacities and skills necessary to construct a theory from those contents.

Consequently, only those who are sophisticated enough to possess the relevant beliefs, capacities, and skills have any justified beliefs at all. So vast stretches of humanity throughout history, including every young child, fails to have any justified beliefs at all, even justified beliefs about the most mundane matters. This consequence, I take it, is implausible in the extreme. Lehrer's (3b) sets the epistemic bar too high.

(3b) has an even more implausible consequence. To confirm that the risk of error is acceptable, one must confirm that the target proposition

is highly likely to be true, which minimally requires one to give a good probabilistic argument for the claim that it is highly likely to be true, an argument whose premises are derived from the contents of one's other justified beliefs. In short,

> (P3)   One confirms that the risk of error is acceptable only if one gives a good argument for that claim from the contents of one's other justified beliefs.

Furthermore, as Lehrer points out in the passage quoted above, any such argument will eventually appeal to the reliability of one's cognitive powers, as is plain when we consider the most plausible candidates for basic beliefs, namely mundane perceptual and introspective beliefs. That is,

> (P4)   One cannot give a good argument for the claim that the risk is acceptable without giving a good argument for one's cognitive reliability.

It follows from (P2)–(P4) that (3b) is true only if, in general,

> (GP*)   For any of one's justified beliefs B, if there is some risk of error, then B is justified only if one is able to give a good argument for one's cognitive reliability from one's other justified beliefs.

Note that (GP*) goes beyond (GP). (GP) merely requires that one *possess* the relevant beliefs, capacities, and skills; (GP*) makes additional *epistemic* requirements. (GP*) requires that one be able to give a *good* argument for, in effect, the conclusion that one's theory is correct or the best available one, which would involve, *inter alia*, knowing of and eliminating competitors; moreover, (GP*) requires that one be *justified* in believing those propositions that would serve as the premises of the argument one must be able to give.

  Two worries arise. First, virtually all of the beliefs that any human being has are mundane beliefs and each of them is such that it has at least some risk of error; but very few of us possess the propositional resources for a *good* argument for our cognitive reliability, even if, in principle, there is such an argument available to us. Second, no human being has the ability to give the sort of argument required by (GP*) because *there is no such argument* available to human beings. Any plausible candidate for a good argument will have at least one premise with respect to which there is the risk of error. Thus, if (GP*) is true, one must justifiably believe that premise, in which case, given the generality and reiterativeness of (GP*), a

pernicious infinite regress of beliefs results. Lehrer's premise (3b) entails epistemic nihilism. Let's turn now to (3c) and let's suppose that (3b) is true.

The thought behind (3c) is this. Suppose that S's belief is justified only if she is able to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable; and suppose (as we did above) both that she has that ability only if she has the relevant beliefs, capacities, and skills, and that the relevant beliefs are those whose contents constitute her theory concerning her cognitive reliability; then, it follows that S's belief derives its justification from those beliefs. But *why*? Why does it follow from those suppositions that S's belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability? Lehrer doesn't say.

Perhaps the idea is this: if she didn't have those beliefs, then she wouldn't have an ability which is required for her belief to be justified. That is,

- If S's belief is justified only if she is able to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable, then, *if she would not have that ability unless she had the relevant beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability*, her belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability.

Unfortunately, this conditional is false. Suppose the belief in question is S's belief that the ball in front of her is red. S would not have the ability to confirm that the risk of error in holding this belief is acceptable unless she had all manner of other beliefs (that 2 + 2 = 4, that she exists, etc.); but, obviously, it doesn't *follow* that her belief that the ball is red derives its justification from them.

We might try to isolate S's beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability as the *salient* ones without which she would not have the ability in question. Of course, we couldn't do that by identifying them as the ones from which her belief derives its justification – that would presuppose the denial of foundationalism. But even if we could isolate them appropriately, why should we suppose that since *those* beliefs are partly constitutive of an ability such that her belief could not be justified if she lacked it, S's belief *derives* its justification from them?

Perhaps the idea is this: if S's belief derives its justification from her ability to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable, then it derives it justification from those beliefs that partly constitute that ability. That is,

- If S's belief is justified only if she is able to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable, then, *if her belief derives its justification from that ability and, hence, any beliefs that partly constitute it, to wit,*

her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability, her belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability.

Unfortunately, this conditional is likewise false. Just because an ability has a certain feature does not imply that the items that constitute the ability have that feature; moreover, there is no good reason to suppose that the property of *being an x such that a belief derives its justification from x* is a property that the parts of a whole have if the whole has it.

The only candidates that I know of which really bridge the gap between the antecedent and consequent of (3c) bear a certain affinity to this candidate:

- If S's belief is justified only if she is able to confirm that the risk of error is acceptable, then, *if her belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability*, her belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability.

Those candidates, like this one, have two features: first, they are trivially true, and second, they can be used in an argument for 3c only if some other premise in that argument is a stylistic variant on "Foundationalism is false". The candidate before us is a case in point. It is trivially true but can be used in an argument for 3c only if that argument contains the premise that S's belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability, which is nothing but another way of saying that Foundationalism is false.

2.3. *Lehrer's Defense of Premise (3): The Second Edition Version*

In the second edition of his *Theory of Knowledge*, Lehrer retains the main argument that I identified at the outset of Section 2; however, he alters his defense of premise (3) slightly.[14] Whereas in the first edition, a fallible basic belief is justified only if the believer is able to *confirm* that the risk is acceptable, in the second edition a fallible basic belief is justified only if the believer is able to *explain why* the risk is acceptable. Does this move avoid my objections? Let's look into the matter briefly.

The second edition defense comes to this:

(3a′)   If S's fallible basic belief's being justified is relevant to its truth, then there is some risk of error.

(3b′)   If there is some risk of error, then S's belief is justified only if she is able to explain why the risk of error is acceptable.[16]

(3c′)   If S's belief is justified only if she is able to explain why the
         risk of error is acceptable, then S's belief derives its justific-
         ation from other beliefs of hers, to wit, those whose contents
         constitute her theory concerning her cognitive reliability.

(3d′)   If S's belief derives its justification from other beliefs of hers,
         then S's belief is nonbasic.

Premise (3) follows.

As it turns out, the second edition defense of premise (3) *does* fare
better than the first edition defense. In particular, my objection based on
(GP*) fails since the analogues of (P3) and (P4) for explanation are false.
While the activity of confirming a proposition requires that one be justified
in believing that the evidence one cites is in fact the case, the activity of
explaining why a proposition is true does not require that one be justified
in believing the items that constitute the explanans. That is because, while
being the best available explanation of the truth of a proposition renders
the items that constitute the explanans fit for belief, it is not the case that
confirming a proposition renders the evidence one cites fit for belief. Un-
fortunately, my other objections to the first edition defense are not so easily
avoided.

Suppose that it is possible for S to be able to explain why the risk of
error is acceptable while lacking both (i) beliefs the contents of which
would constitute her theory concerning her cognitive reliability and (ii) the
capacities and skills necessary to construct a theory from those contents.
In that case, (3c′) is obviously false. So let us suppose that

(P5)   S is able to explain why the risk of error is acceptable only if she
         possesses both (i) and (ii), i.e., the relevant beliefs, capacities,
         and skills.

Now consider (3b′). I take it that

(P6)   (3b′) is true only if the analogue for *non*basic beliefs is true.

To suppose otherwise is to impose an arbitrary standard on basic beliefs. It
follows from (3b′), (P5), and (P6) that, in general,

(GP)   For *any* of one's justified beliefs B, if there is some risk of error,
         then B is justified only if one possesses both (i) beliefs the
         contents of which would constitute her theory concerning her
         cognitive reliability and (ii) the capacities and skills necessary
         to construct a theory from those contents.

Consequently, only those who are sophisticated enough to possess the relevant beliefs, capacities, and skills have any justified beliefs at all. So vast stretches of humanity throughout history, including every young child, fails to have any justified beliefs at all, even justified beliefs about the most mundane matters. This consequence, I take it, is implausible in the extreme. Lehrer's (3b′) sets the epistemic bar too high.

As for (3c′), even if S's belief is justified only if she is able to explain why the risk of error is acceptable, and even she has that ability only if she has the relevant capacities, skills, and beliefs (and the relevant beliefs are those whose contents constitute her theory concerning her cognitive reliability), why should we suppose that it follows that S's belief *derives its justification* from those beliefs? *Why?* As in the first edition, Lehrer remains silent in the second. We might recommend moves similar to those recommended earlier:

- If S's belief is justified only if she is able to explain why the risk of error is acceptable, then, *if she would not have that ability unless she had the relevant beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability*, her belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability.
- If S's belief is justified only if she is able to explain why the risk of error is acceptable, then, *if her belief derives its justification from that ability and, hence, any beliefs that partly constitute it, to wit, her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability*, her belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability.
- If S's belief is justified only if she is able to explain why the risk of error is acceptable, then, *if her belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability*, her belief derives its justification from her beliefs concerning her cognitive reliability.

But, so far as I can see, the analogous objections are decisive.

I conclude that, although the second edition defense of premise (3) is an improvement, it is not a success; indeed, it is failure. The Risk of Error Objection, therefore, fails.

3. THE HIDDEN ARGUMENT OBJECTION

Lehrer's third argument in his case against Foundationalism can be found in this passage:

[The] advantage of the coherence theory is that the coherence theorist can explain why our most fundamental beliefs are justified, namely, because they cohere with some system of beliefs, while the foundation theory is limited to saying that our basic beliefs are justified

without giving any explanation why. Any explanation of why our basic beliefs are justified would become the basis of an argument to the conclusion that they are justified, and such an argument would render the justification of the beliefs in question non-basic. The coherence theorist claims that the foundation theorist is left with a kind of explanatory surd which the coherence theorist can avoid by explaining justification in terms of coherence.[16]

A fair reconstruction of the main argument here is this:

(1)   Either there is an explanation of why basic beliefs are justified or there is not.

(2)   If there is, then there are no basic beliefs (i.e., Foundationalism is false).

(3)   If there is not, then coherentism has an explanatory advantage over Foundationalism.

(4)   So, either there are no basic beliefs (i.e., Foundationalism is false) or coherentism has an explanatory advantage over Foundationalism.

We might worry about premise (3), as well as the significance of the conclusion, but my concern lies with premise (2).[17] Why should we believe it?

Lehrer provides a crystal clear argument for it in the passage quoted above:

(2a)   If there is an explanation of why basic beliefs are justified, then there is an argument for the conclusion that they are justified.

(2b)   If there is an argument for the conclusion that basic beliefs are justified, then there are no basic beliefs.

Premise (2) follows, but what should we make of the premises?

As for (2a), suppose that there is some foundationalist explanation E of why basic beliefs are justified such that if E were true of one's believing something, then one's belief would be justified (in a basic way). Furthermore, suppose that E is true of S's belief that the ball is red. Then the following two statements would be true:

(A)   For any person x and for any belief that p that x has, if E is true of x's belief that p, then x's belief that p is justified (in a basic way).

(B)   E is true of S's belief that the ball is red.

Of course, if A and B are both true, then so is

(C)   S's belief that the ball is red is justified (in a basic way).

Thus, A, B, and C comprise an argument – in the abstract, at any rate. So (2a) seems true.

   Premise (2b), on the other hand, is clearly false. The mere *existence* of the argument "A, B, so C", in the abstract, does not suffice for S's *believing* that the ball is red *on the basis* of that argument.

4. CONCLUSION

I conclude that Lehrer's case against Foundationalism fails. Of course, even if I'm right, we cannot conclude that Foundationalism is in the clear. The most we can conclude is that if we are to reject it sensibly, we cannot look to one of its most widely respected opponents for wisdom on the matter.[18]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

[1] Two clarifications are in order. First, although I have characterized Foundationalism in terms of *epistemic justification*, it is not wedded to that family of concepts. Substitute whatever general terms of epistemic appraisal you like and the foundationalist will offer you a basic/nonbasic distinction. Second, a foundationalist need not deny that a belief's justification can have multiple sources. For example, suppose you believe with justification that your babies are crying, and your belief owes its justification to (i) your present auditory experience as well as (ii) an inference from the present testimony of your spouse. Is your belief basic or nonbasic? The foundationalist should say that it all depends. If, all else being equal, your belief would still be justified even if it did not owe its justification to your inference from your spouse's testimony, then it is basic; if it would not, then it is nonbasic. My assessment of Lehrer's case against Foundationalism does not hang on this modification of the characterization of basic belief in the text.

[2] For more on these immunities, see William Alston, "Varieties of Privileged Access", in *Epistemic Justification* – hereafter, EJ – (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1986), 249–286.

[3] *Theory of Knowledge* – hereafter, TK1 – (1st edn, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1990), 73–75. The case against Foundationalism in TK1 improves upon the one in Lehrer's earlier book, *Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, London, 1974), where they differ. So I'll focus on TK1. TK1 has recently been revised: *Theory of Knowledge* 2nd edn, Westview Press, (Boulder, CO, 2000). I will refer to the second edition as TK2. The quotation in the text is in TK2 83-85.

[4] As Lehrer observes in passing, TK1 67 and TK2 75.

[5] TK1 11. Elsewhere, e.g., *Self-Trust* – hereafter ST – (Oxford University Press, New York, 1997), 3–4, and TK2 14, he denies that acceptance is a species of belief. I'll stick with the thesis in TK.

[6] ST 53-57. Although Lehrer is not there arguing for premise (2a), if what he says there is sound, it will in fact constitute a defense of (2a).

[7] The distinction is Alston's; see "What's Wrong With Immediate Knowledge?", EJ 63-4.

[8] TK1 13 TK2 15.

[9] TK1 39 and TK2 45.

[10] TK1 41 and TK2 48.

[11] TK1 43-44.

[12] These examples are merely illustrative. For more on the deontological/truth-conducivity divide, see Alston, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification", EJ 81-114.

[13] Richard Foley, among many others, would be sympathetic with this objection to (2a). See "What's Wrong with Reliabilism?", *The Monist* 68 (1985), 188–202.

[13] Lehrer writes in the quoted passage: "If, however, there is some risk of error in accepting a basic belief, how can we be justified in accepting the belief without confirmation that the risk of error is acceptable?" I read this rhetorical question as premise (3b), but I might have done otherwise. I might have uncharitably read it as the false claim that one must *actually confirm* that the risk is acceptable, rather than simply be *able* to confirm it. Alternatively, I might have uncharitably read it as the foundationalist-friendly claim that there *be* confirmation that the risk is acceptable, i.e., that there by a high conditional probability that the content of one's belief is true given the reliability of one's cognitive powers. I take it, however, that we must read this sentence as requiring the ability to engage in the *activity* of confirming that the risk of error is acceptable; otherwise, we don't have an anti-foundationalist argument worthy of our time.

[14] TK2 47.

[15] Lehrer writes: "If, however, there is some risk of error in accepting a basic belief, how can we be justified in accepting the belief without any explanation of why the risk of error is acceptable?" I read this rhetorical question as premise (3b)', but I might have done otherwise. I might have uncharitably read it as the false claim that one must *actually explain* that the risk is acceptable, rather than simply *be able* to explain it. Alternatively, I might have uncharitably read it as the foundationalist-friendly claim that there *be* an explanation why the risk is acceptable, rather than that one must be able to explain it. I take it, however, that we must read this sentence as requiring the ability to engage in the *activity* of explaining why the risk of error is acceptable if we are to have on our hands an anti- foundationalist argument worthy of our time.

[16] ST 60-61. I see no significant difference between this argument and the argument of "The Coherence Theory of Knowledge", in *Metamind*(Oxford University Press, New York, 1990), 245–246. What I have to say here applies there, *mutatis mutandis*.

[17] Even if coherentism has the particular explanatory advantage that Lehrer points out – and it arguably does not (see, e.g., William Alston, "Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?",

EJ 39-56, esp. 49–50) – it might not be preferable to Foundationalism. Foundationalism may have other more impressive advantages and Coherentism may have more miserable disadvantages.

[18] I assess other critiques of Foundationalism and Moderate Foundationalism in "On Bon-Jour's 'Basic Antifoundationalist Argument' and the Doctrine of the Given", *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (1998), 163–177, "On an 'Unintelligible' Idea: Donald David-son's Case Against Experiential Foundationalism", *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (2002), 523–555 and "Foundationalism and Arbitrariness", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (forth-coming), "On a 'Fatal Dilemma' for Moderate Foundationalism, *Journal of Philosophical Research* (forthcoming), with Christian Lee.

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