Why Pragmatism Cannot Save Us:

An Expansion of the Epistemic Regress Problem

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Abstract

The epistemic regress problem targets our ability to provide reasons for our beliefs. If we need reasons for our beliefs, then we may also need to provide reasons for those reasons, and so on into regress. Because the epistemic regress problem is often cast as an attack on our ability to achieve justification, it is often thought that epistemic positions which do not rely on notions like justification escape without difficulty. The first goal of this dissertation is to establish the generality of the epistemic regress problem, beyond all technicalities regarding the nature of justification. To do this, I propose a new minimal epistemic standard, that we should hold no bald assertions to be epistemically acceptable. I then use this epistemic standard to construct two new forms of the epistemic regress problem. The first version of the problem is reminiscent of the classical problem in that it attacks our ability to locate any such reason. The second version of the problem attacks our ability to unite any such reason to a particular claim that it is supposed to support. The second goal of this dissertation is to argue that pragmatism fails as a solution to the epistemic regress problem. The pragmatist seeks to avoid the regress by provisionally accepting their beliefs to be evaluated later. In so doing, the pragmatist seeks to have reasonable beliefs, but only after having accepted them provisionally. After eliminating other theoretical alternatives that the pragmatist may use to bolster their position, I argue that the pragmatic solution is not successful because (1) it is committed to some foundational beliefs that are necessary to facilitate the evaluation of their provisional beliefs which fall prey to the regress, and (2) the employment of these criteria of evaluation encounters the regress in its second form. I conclude by advocating for an understanding of Pyrrhonian skepticism under which we are not required to eschew our everyday beliefs that is nevertheless commensurate with the epistemic regress.

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Introduction

> "The Skeptic, being a lover of humankind, desires to cure by speech,
> as best he can, the self-conceit and rashness of the dogmatist."
>
> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 3.280
>
> [But] "Que sçay-je?"
>
> Michel de Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*

Skeptical responses to problems in epistemology are often dismissed. They are commonly thought to violate commonsense[1], to be impractical or unlivable[2], and they often seem to require us to give up on our everyday beliefs[3]. Indeed, Bett (1987) writes as though this were the *defining feature* of skepticism:

What distinguishes a certain philosophical position as a form of *scepticism* is that it attacks, or undermines, some kind of deep-seated shared attitude towards the world or towards ourselves. For example, we normally take for granted that we *do* know at least some things about the world around us, that some moral positions *are*, in some objective sense, correct and others incorrect, or that we *do* in general choose our actions freely. None of these are propositions which we would normally *articulate*, they are much too basic to our ordinary attitudes even to occur to us most of the time. But it seems undeniable that we *proceed as if* these propositions

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[1] Hawthorne (2004), for instance, argues that skepticism fails to recognize "the Moorean constraint" which says, as a matter of fact, "there is considerable knowledge." (p. 111)

[2] As Rinard (2022) notes, these charges often have to do with the seemingly ridiculous nature of Pyrrhonian suspension of belief. Should the skeptic give up *all* beliefs? What about the beliefs that keep us from walking out of windows or the beliefs that allow us to find food and shelter?

[3] Cohen (1999) writes, "what is troubling and unacceptable about skepticism is the claim that all along in our everyday discourse, when we have been claiming to know, we have been speaking falsely." (p. 80)

are true. What is characteristic of scepticism, it would seem, is precisely that it denies propositions of this deep-seated kind. (p. 53)

Professionally, skepticism occupies a minor role in epistemology and philosophy at large[4]. Frances (2005) writes:

The notion of skepticism elicits strange behavior in philosophers, especially epistemologists… Philosophers are pretty much professionally *forbidden* from being radical skeptics even though we aren't forbidden from believing any of many other comparably outlandish claims. (p. vii)

and Rinard (2022) has suggested that contemporary epistemologists argue in accord with a pattern she calls "*reductio ad skepticism*", wherein a view is dismissed as false *because* it seems to lead towards a skeptical conclusion. (p. 438) There is also something to be said for the fact that skeptical responses are inherently *negative* – they do not propose alternative solutions for the theories they dismantle, nor do they reframe the issue they are meant to address for the sake of later development; they simply propose that the issue is unresolvable. This feature does not mesh well with a picture of professional philosophy as an inherently collaborative process.

Nevertheless, I begin this project with a plea on skepticism's behalf. General skepticism is not without its theoretical virtues, and the acceptance of such a position is not as dire as many philosophers believe. While some varieties of skepticism *do* seek to make sweeping assertions like "there is no knowledge", this is not universally true for even general skepticism. As more recent developments of Pyrrhonian skepticism (e.g. Eichorn 2020 and Rinard 2022) have shown,

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[4] According to the latest PhilPapers Survey (Bourget and Chalmers 2020), fewer than 4% of respondents endorse the view that there is no philosophical knowledge – the same is true of those respondents who endorse the view that there is no philosophical progress.

the acceptance of a skeptical conclusion need not require that we give up on ordinary beliefs, even, perhaps, our ordinary philosophical beliefs.

Pyrrhonian skeptics, following Sextus Empiricus, seek to remain in *epochê*, or a state of suspended belief , when they are confronted with *isostheneia*, wherein no choice can be made between competing beliefs given a lack of sufficiently motivating reason; and the Pyrrhonian generally accepts that *isostheneia* is inevitable. But, while the Pyrrhonian will forever remain in *epochê* regarding our ability to complete the epistemic project of establishing the grounds of reason, this does not mean the skeptic must give up *all* of their beliefs. Indeed, it is the Pyrrhonian skeptic's suspension of belief *about* this metaepistemic project that allows them to maintain their ordinary beliefs in good faith. In this way, following Eichorn (2020), Pyrrhonian skepticism is a kind of "philosophical therapy" which allows us to transcend from a *challenge* against the dogmatic acceptance of ordinary beliefs to an *acceptance* of those very beliefs.

As to skepticism's virtues, Kyriacou (2020), citing a number of other epistemologists, argues that skepticism is explanatorily promising in regard to certain epistemic problems that other epistemic theories have had difficulty resolving – problems like "the Gettier, lottery and value problems, the dogmatism paradox, concessive knowledge attributions, the preface paradox, DeRose's bank cases, etc." (p. 547) Thus, he argues, skepticism may possess greater explanatory power than some of its non-skeptical rivals. More importantly, I think that we stand to miss a great opportunity by ignoring the skeptic's problems. It is conceivable, for instance, that by exploring these problems we might learn something about the limits of our capacities (Stroud, 1984), or uncover some truth about our epistemic potentials (Fumerton 1995, Unger 1975). Or, perhaps, the value of a skeptic's viewpoint might lie in its ability to help keep us honest and to remain vigilant against epistemic irresponsibility (Aikin 2008, Pritchard 2015).

In this project, I examine one of the oldest of the skeptic's problems towards this end – specifically, the epistemic regress problem. Most epistemologists see "reason", "warrant", or "justification" as a kind of success condition for our beliefs – some of our beliefs attain this epistemically desirable status, and some do not. The epistemic regress problem is an attack on our ability to find beliefs that meet this condition. Usually, the problem presents itself as an attack against our ability to supply reasons for our claims. It requires that, in order for our beliefs to be reasonable (to be supported by some reason), they must be *made* reasonable by some other belief. But if that other belief is not reasonable, itself, then it cannot stand in support of any other. If accepted, this generates a regress of reasons – I will always need some further reason to support a belief that is to count as a reason for some *other* belief. This, the classical Pyrrhonian argues, is why we should adopt the state of *epochê*. There is simply no way to present any belief as more or less reasonable than any other – hence *isostheneia*.

While I will provide critical assessments of many of the known strategies for defeating or avoiding this problem, my aim is not to demonstrate that we cannot know anything, that we are mistaken to hold our everyday beliefs in esteem, or even that this problem is forever irresolvable. My aim is to clarify the true extent of the epistemic regress problem and, in so doing, to argue that many of the proposed solutions to the problem prove insufficient. While I will offer arguments opposed to the traditional solutions to the epistemic regress problem, my main focus in this project will be pragmatism. Pragmatism, I will argue, is an insufficient solution to the epistemic regress problem in that its strategy of avoiding the problem altogether is critically flawed. Insufficient solutions are either distractions leading us further from an acceptable resolution of the epistemic regress problem, in which case we should be glad to be rid of them, or they are potential areas for development, in which case we should be glad to know where the

opportunity lies. In either case, I will argue that epistemologists would be remiss to continue their acceptance of pragmatism, construed as a strategy to avoid general skepticism, without further consideration.

While I recognize that pragmatism is a rich tradition that involves much more than a response to the epistemic regress problem, my usage of the term should be understood to refer only to the epistemic components of pragmatism that *could* serve as some response to the epistemic regress problem. Pragmatism, as an epistemic project, offers a potential solution to the epistemic regress problem by embracing a *degree* of skepticism itself. Indeed, pragmatism readily adopts the tenets of fallibilism, under which we are never entitled to certainty about the status of our beliefs, though this, on their view, should not stop us from our investigations[5]. The epistemic regress problem, given its demand for further and further reasons, reveals a strong desire to secure reasoning on *certain* foundations. But, if we abandon the allure of certainty, then perhaps we may avoid the problem in the first place – so suggests the pragmatist. Pragmatism does this, I argue, by *provisionally* accepting their beliefs in order to evaluate them at some later point – that is, they do not seek to establish the reasonability of some belief *before* accepting it, contrary to what the epistemic regress problem demands. If the reasonability of a belief can be secured in this *post hoc* fashion, then the skeptic's challenge against the supply of reasons may never come to fruition.

I will now provide my strategy for this project in broad strokes. In Chapter 1, I will identify a crucial weakness of the traditional epistemic regress problem that allows certain tailored solutions to slip through the skeptic's grasp. Specifically, I will argue that the traditional epistemic regress problem, in targeting a success condition like "proof" or "justification", allows

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[5] See Peirce 1992.

for those epistemic theories that do *not* utilize such notions to avoid the problem altogether. I will attempt to address this problem by proposing a minimal epistemic standard to which *all* normative theories of reason must comply. In so doing, I set the stage for Chapter 2 in which I will present a new form of the epistemic regress problem that is not so easily avoided. The minimal epistemic standard that I propose is that we should not hold any merely bald assertions. I further elucidate this standard with a disjunctive account of reasons, according to which a belief is reasonable (and thus not bald) just in case it would be found reasonable by any epistemic theory of justification, warrant, reason, etc. After consideration of some nuance regarding the epistemic acceptability of bald assertions, I will clarify that while some bald assertions may be epistemically admissible in some contexts, merely bald assertions (which explicitly have no epistemic upshot) can never be epistemically acceptable.

In Chapter 2, I will provide a new account of the epistemic regress problem in two modes – both targeting our ability to meet the new minimal epistemic standard established in Chapter 1. In the first mode of the regress, the epistemic regress problem functions much the same as its traditional counterpart. It attacks our ability to show that our beliefs can meet the minimal epistemic standard. In the second mode, however, the epistemic regress problem attacks our ability to associate reasons with beliefs in such a way that those reasons could be used to help us achieve the minimal epistemic standard in the first place. This second mode of the epistemic regress problem allows for a new kind of vertical regress across orders of discourse, up into the order of the metaepistemic. This feature of my version of the epistemic regress problem will prove critical to my responses to pragmatism and other proposed solutions. I conclude Chapter 2 with a concession towards a certain type of externalism which refuses to ground its metaepistemic commitment *to externalism* by any other means but externalist sources of

justification. This type of solution, I argue, *does* succeed in escaping from my version of the epistemic regress problem.

In Chapter 3, I will introduce the three classical solutions to the epistemic regress problem and explain how they are thought to avoid it. After some discussion as to how these strategies might cope with my restructured regress problem, I will borrow criticisms from Russell (1912), Fumerton (1995), and Aikin (2010) to argue that these solutions, when properly considered, collapse into one – foundationalism. This involves a similar strategy to Aikin's (2010) own treatment of the epistemic regress problem, though he concludes, I think mistakenly, that the three solutions collapse into infinitism rather than foundationalism. The success of the traditional solutions to the epistemic regress problem, then, falls squarely upon the shoulders of foundationalism.

In Chapter 4, I will further motivate the apparent strength of pragmatism by attacking foundationalism as a sufficient solution to the problem. I will begin by examining the "special-making" feature of foundational beliefs (that which *makes them* foundational) which will prompt my first argument against the use of foundationalism as a solution. Here, I will argue that it will be functionally impossible to discriminate between beliefs that have genuinely achieved this "special-making" feature and beliefs that are merely ungiveupable. If such underdetermination is possible, I argue, then it will never be possible to secure our beliefs firmly in the way that the foundationalist requires. My final attack on foundationalism will also serve as something of a cautionary tale for other proposed solutions to the epistemic regress problem. I will argue that, even if we *could* identify foundations for our beliefs successfully, there is still reason to think that foundationalism could fail to terminate the second mode of the regress conclusively. This is because the epistemic regress problem constitutes an attack on our ability to use reasons to

support *further* claims; thus, securing some foundational belief(s) will not, by itself, resolve the problem. We not only need foundations, but the means by which we can infer conclusions from them in a way that does not run afoul of the second mode of the epistemic regress.

Given the failings of foundationalism, I will finally turn to pragmatism in Chapter 5. After an accounting of why such a view may seem intuitive as a solution to the problems I have discussed up to this point, I will undertake my attempt to demonstrate that it will not, in fact, serve as a successful solution to the epistemic regress problem. This will primarily involve a criticism of the means by which such a practice evaluates the results of inquiry – given the understanding that such a practice nominates some provisional belief, then evaluates its worthiness based on its performance after the fact. While this evaluation of beliefs after provisional acceptance seems to allow one to ignore the demands of the skeptic to supply reasons for adopting a belief in the first place, the same cannot be said for the criteria used to conduct this evaluation. It is the desiderata employed by the pragmatist to conduct their evaluations that bring them fully back within the scope of the epistemic regress problem, for these, too, must not violate our minimal epistemic standard – no criteria for evaluating beliefs should be a merely bald assertion. I will argue that there are only two paths for the pragmatist to take in response to this problem: (1) accept some amount of foundationalism, though this will come with its own problems as Chapter 4 will demonstrate; or (2) accept the criteria for evaluating beliefs dogmatically (violating the no merely bald assertions rule).

I conclude in Chapter 6 with further discussion of my skeptical conclusion. I begin with a discussion about the consequences of my preceding arguments. Specifically, I will argue that the skeptic employing my version of the epistemic regress problem is under no obligation to surrender their beliefs, or even their attitude regarding their beliefs' reasonability, in light of the

problem. I will propose some considerations for future attempts at resolving the epistemic

regress, and I will close by encouraging other epistemologists to consider more lenient standards

of epistemic responsibility such that, even if *none* of our beliefs can be proven reasonable, we

nevertheless commit no special sin in maintaining them.

Chapter One: Towards a Minimal Epistemic Standard

1.   Introduction: Unpacking the Traditional Problem

The traditional epistemic regress problem preys upon the thought – found as early as Plato's *Theaetetus* – that knowledge requires something more than correct judgment. In other words, it is the notion that we must meet some standard over and above true belief in order to avoid mere epistemic luck and actually obtain knowledge that triggers the traditional epistemic regress problem. The requirement that we meet some standard ("justification" on most views) entails that we must earn or succeed at something in order to lay claim to knowledge, and the skeptic employing the traditional epistemic regress problem is attacking our ability to meet those very success conditions.

The earliest surviving version of the regress problem comes from Sextus Empiricus:

> In the mode deriving from infinite regress, we say that what is brought forward as a source of conviction for the matter proposed itself needs another such source, which itself needs another, and so *ad inifinitum*, so that we have no point from which to begin to establish anything, and suspension of judgement follows … We have the mode from hypothesis when the Dogmatists, being thrown back *ad inifinitum*, begin from something which they do not establish but claim to assume simply and without proof in virtue of a concession. The reciprocal mode occurs when what ought to be confirmatory of the object under investigation needs to be made convincing by the object under investigation; then, being unable to take either in order to establish the other, we suspend judgment about both. (PH 1.166-169)

Here, Sextus Empiricus is describing three modes of reasoning all of which require us to suspend judgment completely or to accept our conclusions dogmatically. In contemporary literature, these three modes are usually identified (in order of presentation) as infinitism, foundationalism, and coherentism (or, more traditionally, circular reasoning). In each case, the problem for these modes stems from their need to succeed in bolstering their claims from the position of merely potentially true belief to something more. Here, Sextus Empiricus calls the key to the success we seek a "source of conviction", a "proof", and something "confirmatory", and it is the failure to secure such a thing that requires us to adopt the Pyrrhonian stance of suspended judgment, or *epochê*, that he endorses.

The core of the traditional epistemic regress problem is that whatever is presented as the source of proof or confirmation for a belief or claim will also be subject to the same requirements – it too must be bolstered by some source of proof or confirmation. More recent attempts at capturing the problem jettison talk of proof or confirmation in favor of other notions like reason (as in, reason *for*) or justification. Klein's Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness, for instance, is one such modern day reformulation of Sextus Empiricus' regress.

> Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness: "For all x, if a person, S, has a justification
> for x, then there is some reason, r1, available to S for x; and there is some reason,
> r2, available to S for r1; etc." (1999, p. 299)

Once again, we find ourselves in the situation where, in order to justifiably lay claim to some belief, we must first have some reason that supports the belief, but in that case, we will also have to have some reason for our reason lest we lose the ability to justifiably lay claim to *it*. This generates the usual epistemic regress without reliance on confirmation or proof.

The importance of reformulations like Klein's (and Aikin 2008, 2009, 2010; Cling 2008; Deutscher 1973; Post 1980; and Valaris 2014) is that many philosophers have long rejected the notion that something akin to proof is required to advance a belief from the position of something merely potentially true to something reasonable to hold. It might be, for instance, that it is perfectly reasonable to believe in something without such a proof because the belief in question could afford us some epistemically valuable end. In his "The Will to Believe", William James rails against the staunch evidentialism of Clifford (1877), noting that there are many valuable beliefs for which we can offer no conclusive proof:

> Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found? I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them—I absolutely do not care which—as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude, and I think that the whole history of philosophy will bear me out. (James 1896, p. 15)

It may also be the case that some of our reasons or justifications for a belief simply make the belief in question *more likely* to be true, falling short of guaranteeing its truth. Inductive and adductive reasoning seem critically dependent on the notion that we can have evidence, reasons, or justification for our views even if those reasons can never amount to conclusive proof.

Without these modern reformulations, all but the most radical evidentialist will have an easy answer to the epistemic regress problem – the problem relies on a notion of reason that does not fully capture the scope of acceptable reasons as such. By shifting the conversation from

"proof" and "confirmation" to "justification" and "reasons", Klein (1999) effectively reintroduces the epistemic regress problem to those theorists who could otherwise ignore the problem. In doing so, modern-day reformulators of the epistemic regress problem remind us that the problem is not merely a problem to do with proof or confirmation.

But there is still work to be done. In invoking justification in his unpacking of "reason", Klein (1999) broadens the scope of the problem, but his version of the problem is still insufficient to capture the concern of many to whom the problem, I will argue, still applies. For just as the notion of conclusive proof is disregarded by many epistemologists as the hallmark of a minimally acceptable belief, so too is the notion of justification sometimes dismissed as the threshold standing between merely possibly true belief and something more.

While those epistemologists who decry justification would be correct to think that they avoid Klein's regress, it would be a mistake to think that this means that they avoid the epistemic regress problem altogether. What these modern-day objectors of the epistemic regress problem have missed up till now is that the spirit of the epistemic regress problem reaches beyond all technicalities regarding a normative notion of reason. So long as we think that *some* condition must be satisfied which does the job of separating a belief that might merely be true and a belief that we actually have reason to hold, the epistemic regress problem looms. This is best argued through demonstration, and towards that end, I will now construct a theory of reason that is sufficiently general so as to be acceptable to all who maintain some separation between belief that might merely be true and reasonable belief. In the following chapter, this minimal epistemic standard for reasonable belief will then be used to generate a new form of the epistemic regress

problem, much broader in scope and, accordingly, much more in keeping with the spirit of the traditional epistemic regress problem.[6]

2.   A Minimal Epistemic Standard

The issue with Klein's (1999) reformulation of the epistemic regress problem comes down to his choice to make justification the barrier for epistemic acceptability of some belief. An epistemologist who cares nothing for justification will not be disturbed by our inability to ever achieve such a status and, indeed, may count this potential failure of a competing view to do so as a theoretical virtue of their own view. But Klein is right to note that the epistemic regress problem boils down to the supply of reasons. In his Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness, Klein not only gives us a new formulation of the epistemic regress problem, but a functional definition of justification – to be justified in believing x is to have some reason for x. My proposal is to cut out the reference to justification altogether and to jump straight to the heart of the problem.

What Sextus Empiricus, Klein (1999), and others seem to be getting at is that we ought to have reasons for our beliefs, and it is *this* stipulation that generates the regress, not some requirement of proof, confirmation, or even justification. The minimal epistemic standard that I offer now just is a reflection of this stipulation and nothing more besides it. I propose that we ought to have some sort of reason for our beliefs if we are to consider them anything more than merely potentially true. This standard can also be used to generate a negative criterion – epistemically acceptable beliefs cannot be *bald assertions*.

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[6] In so doing, my account will circumstantially also provide a challenge to Cling's (2014a and 2014b) assertion that there is no singular epistemic regress problem. Cling holds, conversely, that there is a *family* of problems that we recognize as the epistemic regress problem and that these problems vary in accord with the kind of epistemic reason they prey upon. My treatment of the epistemic regress problem will be sufficiently general to capture all of the members of this family in one fell swoop.

At first glance, my standard may not seem altogether distinct from Klein (1999); he is, after all, claiming that we need to have reasons for our beliefs if we are to avoid arbitrariness (which may loosely be interpreted as bald assertions). That Klein names justification, however, as the barrier between arbitrary belief and otherwise, is where the problem, and thus the distinction between our views, lies. Many epistemologists hold that a belief can be non-arbitrarily held *even if* it lacks justification. This is especially true if an epistemologist's view on justification is incredibly strict, such that the window through which justification can be achieved is quite narrow. A strict evidentialist like Clifford (1877), for instance, might claim that you are not justified in holding a belief unless you can offer conclusive evidence for that belief – nevertheless, many of these epistemologists are still willing to accept that we can have *some* reason for a belief even if those reasons are insufficient to achieve the loftier goal of justification. My claim then is that the epistemic regress problem does not target our ability to earn justification or, more loosely, our ability to hold sufficiently reasoned beliefs (whatever those sufficiency criteria might be), but that it, instead, targets our ability to obtain *any* sort of reason for our beliefs – sufficient or otherwise. That said, I do think that Klein (1999) is correct in separating the successful achievement of reason and the failure of achieving reason in terms of arbitrariness, even if his view of reason is too limiting. It is important to note that an arbitrary belief might still be a true belief, however, thus I elect for a shift in language towards the avoidance of merely potentially true beliefs over the avoidance of arbitrary beliefs.

But why avoid bald assertions? What allows for the linkage between our need for reasons in order to avoid mere potential truths and our need to avoid bald assertions, I suggest, is that there is some epistemic norm to form and maintain only beliefs that are more than merely potentially true. So, there is no requirement that we avoid bald assertions if there is no epistemic

onus to pursue beliefs that are more than merely potentially true. Is there such an epistemic

onus? First, to say that a belief is more than merely potentially true is to say that the subject

holding said belief fulfills some condition that grants *any* degree (perceived or not) of likelihood

to their belief being true. Thus, a potentially true belief may fail to fulfill this condition because

it might be a *merely* potentially true belief. With this understanding of the distinction, I will

begin by saying that such a norm (to avoid merely potentially true beliefs) is not at all

uncommon – indeed, many who investigate epistemic norms hold that the ultimate aim of any

epistemic enterprise is knowledge[7], and many more hold that a belief this is merely potentially

true would *not* suffice towards that aim[8]. Nevertheless, the popularity of a norm need not be its

only virtue[9]. I argue that the norm I propose follows if one is convinced that beliefs are *for*

something – i.e., if believing serves the function of leading us towards knowledge, helping us

understand the world, and/or simply assisting us in discerning between appropriate and

inappropriate actions given the circumstances. Thus, the reason why we should maintain the

epistemic norm I propose is because it drives us to opt for beliefs that might actually fulfill

whatever role beliefs are meant to play. To contrast, without the norm I propose, it follows that

it is just as epistemically acceptable to form only beliefs that are merely potentially true. It

would then be epistemically acceptable to hold beliefs known to be contradictory (so long as

each is potentially true in its own right); it would be epistemically acceptable to hold beliefs

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[7] See Adler 2002, Hawthorne 2004, Huemer 2007, McHugh 2011, Littlejohn 2013, Peacocke 1999, Stanley 2005, Sutton 2007, Unger 1975, and Williamson 2000. These views, it should be said, are not without contenders. Côté-Bouchard (2016), for instance, argues *against* theories about epistemic norms that suggest that they derive their force from the constitutive aim of belief altogether. And Friedman (2023) argues that we ought to adopt a form of quietism about the aim of inquiry.

[8] Even epistemologists who conceive of some sense of "weak" knowledge or "lightweight" knowledge, which does not require satisfaction of any condition over true belief, still hold that a belief's *possibly* being true is insufficient for knowledge (see Goldman and Olsson 2009 for an example of this position).

[9] And indeed, it is important to note that consensus does not always mean that we have stumbled upon truth.

contrary to lucid, vivid experience even when there are no defeating circumstances; and it would

be epistemically acceptable to spread these beliefs to others.

Two contradictory beliefs may nevertheless be equally possible – for instance, it is

possible that some ravens are black and it is also possible that no ravens are black, when

considered separately – thus, if there is no epistemic requirement beyond the belief in the

potentially true, we violate no epistemic standard by believing in both simultaneously.[10] If we

have no epistemic requirement over and above the possibility of our beliefs being true, it thus

seems epistemically acceptable to believe in at least some contradictions. Further, in the absence

of *strictly* disconfirming evidence[11], no amount of adverse evidence (however vast) could cause

a potentially true belief to lose its status, thus it follows that it is epistemically permissible to

maintain a belief that runs contrary to all of our available evidence if our only epistemic norm is

that beliefs must fulfill the possibility of being true. Lastly, if we assume that epistemic norms

should be consistent across agents[12], then it also follows that it would not be epistemically bad

conduct for me to attempt to persuade you of my beliefs that are merely potentially true or for

you to accept them readily without question. The issue present in each of these cases is that,

without something like a norm enshrining the epistemic requirement to pursue beliefs that are

more than merely potentially true, our epistemic norms would not provide the grounds from

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[10] We might even be able to reasonably entertain beliefs like those of Moore's paradox (P but I believe that not-P) if the only criterion for reasonableness is meaningfulness.

[11] Assuming such a thing is possible given the Duhem-Quine problem.

[12] I am not here suggesting that it is universally accepted that epistemic norms hold consistently across agents come what may. It may be, for example, that we should subject some agents to more epistemic scrutiny than others, or that some might have greater epistemic obligations than others depending on their status. For instance, it may be that an epistemic authority has *additional* epistemic norms to abide by than someone with very little influence. Nonetheless, I do take it that epistemic norms ought to be applied consistently across agents when we have controlled for such context. It might even be possible for us to incorporate this context within our epistemic norms such that they *do* hold consistent across agents. In this way, the person with relatively little influence is still bound by the epistemic norms governing epistemic authorities even though their capacities for realizing success or failure in relation to these norms remains latent.

which our beliefs *can be* useful – indeed, without the addition of the norm I suggest, belief of this sort may be counterproductive in that there is no mechanism to control against intentional endorsement and spread of disinformation.

One might object that, while I am correct in thinking that our epistemic norms should do more than require that our beliefs *could* be true, my proposal to enshrine the idea that we should have reasons for our beliefs (and that we should therefore avoid bald assertions) is not the right sort of norm to do the job. To this objector, I offer assurances. In formalizing the epistemic norm as I have, I have attempted to lay the groundwork for something like a *disjunctive view of epistemic acceptability*. On my view, some belief x counts as "reasonable" so long as the believer holding it does so for any "reason". What that reason amounts to could be a great number of things depending on the theory of the epistemologist in question – so long as the believer satisfies *even one* of these theories of constraint against merely possible true beliefs, the belief is reasonable on my view.[13]

Now the traditional foundationalist following in the footsteps of Descartes (1996) will likely not agree that the coherentist following BonJour (1985) has satisfied the appropriate condition of constraint against mere possible true belief, and both will likely argue that the externalist about justification is far from the mark. Nevertheless, all will accept that so long as their theory is appropriately represented amongst the disjunctions, believers acting in accord with my epistemic norm could at least *in principle* form a belief that is not merely possibly true on

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[13] Because I am aiming for a maximally permissive view of reasons, this will be true even if a believer's reasons end up being false – contrary to the view that Comesaña and McGrath (2014) call "factualism", which they also oppose. Audi's (1986) distinction between "reasons to believe p" and "a reason S has for believing" may also help in the elucidation of this idea. "Reasons to believe p" need not be held by anyone; they are merely propositions that would carry some warrant *if* believed. "A reason S has for believing", on the other hand, is entirely personal and may, in the end, carry no warrant at all. On my disjunctive account of reason, I count "a reason S has for believing" as sufficient for the avoidance of bald assertion so long as some epistemic theory would claim S's reason as epistemically acceptable. That is to say, I am not requiring that a reason need *actually* advance a belief in respect to its likelihood – as in a "reason to believe p".

occasion. And this is sufficient for my purposes given that the epistemic regress problem is an attempt to deny our ability to *ever* satisfy this particular condition. This ambivalence to the nature of reason extends to all domains across which epistemologists disagree on this matter. On my view, a belief counts as having a reason even if we don't have access to that reason (as an externalist might accept) and it counts as reasonable if we can provide a series of dialectical justifications for the belief (as a strong access internalist might demand).

Further, I am not here proposing that my minimal epistemic standard is the *only* norm governing belief acquisition and/or maintenance. I leave open the possibility that there may be further epistemic norms and that some of those further epistemic norms may bear on issues outside of the scope of the reason-giving process that I am here concerned with. Indeed, some other epistemic norms may bear on morality or practical reasoning – which are issues that I will not fully address here. Friedman (2018), for instance, argues that we should not hold beliefs (or collect knowledge) that are not circumstantially valuable to us due to our limited cognitive capacities. In effect, she argues that the accumulation of these "junk beliefs" limits our epistemic opportunities to learn something potentially useful to us. Whether such a norm can be defended is another question, but it is clear that norms like Friedman's do not conflict with my proposed minimal epistemic standard just because they introduce *additional* requirements for acceptable beliefs. If a belief will fail my standard, then it will surely fail standards set by other epistemic norms – though the reverse will not be true.

It would also be prudent to note that I am only proposing an *epistemic* norm when I suggest that we should only form and maintain beliefs that are more than merely potentially true or when I say that it is epistemically impermissible to maintain bald assertions.[14] There may be

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[14] I take the time to make this point because this is not always the case within the realm of epistemic norms. Hawthorne (2004), for instance, argues that there is a knowledge norm for assertion such that any assertion that p

all sorts of non-epistemic reasons for maintaining some bald assertion, and I do not seek to deny

that here.[15] It may be, for instance, that I am heavily incentivized to carry on with some belief or

other despite having no reason for it – indeed, even if I have reasons contrary to my belief. We

see this in Clifford's (1877) case of the irresponsible shipowner. In Clifford's parable of the

shipowner, we are to imagine a man who owns a passenger vessel who discovers, much to his

dismay, that his ship is no longer seaworthy. Because he stands to suffer great financial loss if

he has to address this fact, he instead persuades himself that the vessel is safe enough for at least

one more voyage. Clifford's parable inevitably ends with the death of all those on board because

Clifford wants to make the point that unreasonable believing can lead to tangible harm, but it is

nonetheless clear to me that the shipowner *did* have a reason – just not an epistemic one.[16] The

shipowner's "reason" had nothing at all to do with the truth but with his own desire to alleviate

his mental burden. This, I think, is a non-epistemic reason[17] and I am not, here, interested in

suggesting that it is somehow wrong in the universal sense that Clifford seeks. Now, were we to

make an epistemic evaluation of the shipowner, it seems clear that he *has* violated my proposed

norm if there is no additional information in the case to be provided. To sum, bald assertions *are*

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is permissible only under the condition that one *knows* p. While I think that this is a fine epistemic norm,
Hawthorne seems to think of it as a norm for conduct or reasoning simpliciter.

[15] Though I do think there is a case to be made for the view that Jessica Brown (2012) refers to as "the inheritance
argument", in which norms for practical reasoning and norms for assertion are inherited from some more
fundamental epistemic norm like the norms governing knowledge.

[16] Comesaña (2015) resists my distinction here in that he argues that a practical or prudential "reason" for a belief
must be thought, by the agent, to provide evidence for that belief in cases where that is the only reason they have
for said belief. This, he argues, follows because it is impossible for an agent to be motivated by a reason they do
not take to provide any kind of evidential support. If Comesaña is correct, then Clifford's shipowner *does* have
purely epistemic reasons – just not very good ones. This possibility is also noticed by Audi (1986, p. 31) as he notes
that "a reason for which S believes p" can potentially collapse into "a reason why S believes" p if reason is
permitted a non-epistemic use. While I am not yet convinced by Comesaña's (2015) impossibility arguments, they
nevertheless pose no threat to my account. If reasons like Clifford's shipowner's *do* count as epistemic ones, then
they simply get evaluated according to the same standard as all other epistemic reasons.

[17] Rinard (2018) complicates the picture for evidentialists, who insist that we are always motivated by evidence
when we subscribe to some believe p, by arguing that, while evidence for a belief may be necessary to consider it a
live alternative, it is not always sufficient to motivate a belief. Further, she argues, sometimes *practical* reasons
can do the job of motivating a belief, once it has been made a live option by some degree of evidence.

epistemically inadmissible; that does not mean they are necessarily inadmissible in all contexts and domains.

Finally, there are some special cases in which it might be argued that bald assertions do serve some worthy epistemic end. If this is the case, then my standard requiring reasons for all epistemically acceptable beliefs, for all its generality, may still be too restrictive. My strategy for answering these objections will be to show that these instances have some reason located elsewhere in their epistemic narrative, that it is nonetheless present; thus, any purported bald assertion within this narrative is likely not to be bald at all. To unpack and to meet this objection will require more groundwork. I begin this endeavor with an account of reason, both historical and my own.

3.   Prior Attempts at Capturing Reasons

To answer those who might suggest that bald assertions can be epistemically fruitful and to assure those who disagree but nevertheless think that my formulation of the minimal epistemic standard is insufficient to capture that which elevates a belief beyond mere potential truth, I will first need to provide an account of reasons. Some of the historical attempts at determining the nature of reasons have already been discussed. Sextus Empiricus seems to think that a reason for a belief amounts to something like a proof for a belief, or some strong degree of confirmation of that belief. Klein (1999) seems to think that a sufficient reason for a belief ought to render a belief justified, and so sufficient reason and justification are seemingly synonymous under his view. But the nature of justification has long been an issue of much debate and things have not improved since Gettier (1963).

There are some, like Descartes, who think that justification ought to function in such a way that each inference from some certain, undoubtable foundation should preserve that initial degree of certainty. There are others who hold that justification has nothing to do with the status of some foundational belief and the inheritance of our second-order beliefs from it, but rather with the way in which the network of our beliefs cohere (Bonjour 1985). And there are still other epistemologists who rely on the notion of justification to understand the role of reasons who think that it is a property of the believer-belief-world system in such a way that a belief approaches or achieves justification so long as it is formed by the believer under the right circumstances in relation to the world (see Goldman 1979). If this is the case, and reasons may be external to us, it may even be the case that reasons do not need to be accessible to us in order to count *as* reasons – i.e., I may have a belief that satisfies the minimal epistemic standard and not *know* that I have a belief that satisfies this condition.[18]

Some epistemologists reject the notion of justification after Gettier (1963) and opt for other ways of understanding the constraint on epistemically acceptable belief. Zagzebski (1996) and Sosa (2007), for example, adopt some form of virtue epistemology, in which our beliefs are made epistemically acceptable not by some justificatory status but because they were formed through some epistemically virtuous process. So long as these epistemologists adopt some form of success condition which, when met, transforms a merely potentially true belief into something more, then I take their view to count amongst my disjunctive understanding of reason. Battaly (2008) argues that the virtue epistemologist is theoretically opposed to what she calls "belief-based epistemology", a form of epistemology involving the analysis of beliefs and their relationship with concepts like truth and justification. Virtue epistemology, on her presentation,

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[18] Other views about the nature of justification not explored here but nonetheless worthy of mention include Alston (1989), Chisholm (1989), and Conee and Feldman (2004).

places the agent at the forefront of epistemic evaluation. Thus, it may initially seem like this sort of virtue epistemologist has no truck with an epistemic norm like mine given that it concerns the formation and maintenance of beliefs of some quality or other. That said, even on Battaly's presentation, the virtue epistemologist is still concerned with knowledge, and belief still has an important role to play in this process. Even if we seek to locate our evaluations at the level of agents rather than beliefs, those evaluations will be made in accord with some behavior or practice of the agent having to do with belief-formation, and thus it will still be the case that we could say an agent ought to avoid the formation of some beliefs or other.

In sum, a belief is reasoned if it is developed through certain inference from some certain foundation(s), but it is also reasoned if it is a well-mannered member of a wider system of belief. A belief is reasoned on my view if there is some fact about the world that makes it so, even if we are unaware of that fact, or it is reasoned if the believer holding it came to said belief under some epistemically virtuous process.

As earlier stated, none of these epistemological theories in isolation will endorse my account of reasons but given that I am employing addition in order to create a disjunctive view of reason, each must admit that the view I provide of reasons is a *minimal* condition. That is, if some belief does not satisfy my account of reasons, then it will not satisfy any of the accounts alone. But I want to include more than just the traditional epistemological approaches to reasons within my disjunctive theory because I am interested in determining the possibility of escaping the epistemic regress problem when presented in its most basic form. In order to make my theory of reasons maximally permissive, then, I now turn to developing a view inclusive of more recent, seemingly extra-epistemological concerns.

4.   A Maximally Permissive View of Reasons

Miracchi (2021) paints a helpful picture of a division between theorists she calls "objectivist" epistemologists and "ameliorativists". While the objectivists insist that normative epistemology is an independent form of inquiry from broader concerns like social and political issues, ameliorativists argue that the norms of epistemology ought to be used to serve the interests of these broader concerns (to *ameliorate* non-epistemic concerns). That is, ameliorativists argue that our epistemic norms ought to be put to work towards the practical purpose of advancing our interests in light of the realities of our socio-political world. Miracchi takes this further in arguing that we should not only employ epistemology towards our social ends but that we should understand epistemological norms *through* these socio-political lenses.

This "integrative epistemology", as Miracchi labels it, demands that we take notice of the fact that our objective epistemological notions are intrinsically tied to the social reality we find ourselves in. Any account of reason on the integrative view, therefore, *must* contend with these issues. It might be argued by the integrativist, for instance, that a person *does not* hold a belief reasonably if that belief is formed and maintained under the blinding influence of privilege (Toole 2022). It may be that a belief is not reasonably held if the very holding of that belief is likely to continue the perpetuation of some injustice (Fricker 2007). And it may be that a belief is not reasonably held if the formation of the belief occurred under conditions in which some seemingly non-epistemic control was left unmitigated – such as Dotson's (2011) "testimonial smothering"[19].

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[19] In cases of Dotson's (2011) "testimonial smothering", members of marginalized or underrepresented groups engage in self-censorship because they have reason to think that their testimony will not be heard, will not be understood, and/or will not be met with an appropriate degree of respect. If the non-marginalized form certain beliefs (say beliefs about the plight of the disenfranchised, for instance) within this context, these beliefs may be construed as non-reasonable.

Given my aim to generate a *minimal* epistemic norm, not to mention my general sympathies towards such views, it behooves me to clarify that my view of reasons is inclusive of this form of thinking as well. If what it takes to have reasons is to fulfill certain social, political, or even moral obligations, under some views, then those fulfillment conditions satisfy my constraint against bald assertions just as well as more typical justification constraints. Again, the "objectivist" epistemologists will disagree given Miracchi's (2021) presentation of them, but my disjunctive notion of reason includes their more restrictive view as well, and so it still suffices as a standard by which a belief might *sometimes* be elevated beyond the status of merely potentially true.

Friedman (2020) and Fleisher (2022) also argue for an updated account of reasons in light of their view that zetetic norms ought to be construed as epistemic norms. Fleisher (2022) is especially helpful because he offers an inventory of reasons that he believes ought to be accepted as epistemic reasons that are nevertheless dismissed by orthodox epistemology. Following Laudan (1978), Fleisher (2022) argues that some beliefs (or theories) possess features that make them "pursuitworthy" even if we currently lack evidential support for these beliefs – Fleisher believes that the features that make these beliefs pursuitworthy function as "promise reasons" which, he holds, just *are* epistemic reasons.

Fleisher begins his account of promise reasons by noting that the mere fact that a belief or theory is testable can be reason enough to pursue it. If a theory is easily tested, then it is easily disconfirmed. And, if in testing the theory, we find that the theory is disconfirmed, then we have gained some knowledge. Thus, the testability of a theory, divorced in consideration from our evidence for a theory, can serve as a reason for pursuing it.

Given that my current formulation of the minimal epistemic standard implies our reasons for a belief ought to include factors that make a belief likely to be true to some degree, and Fleisher's testability reason seems independent of the likelihood of the belief-to-be-tested's truth, it may initially seem that my view cannot accommodate these sorts of reasons. But this misses the point that Fleisher thinks that testability is a feature that makes a theory pursuitworthy *for some reason*. That reason is that a theory ranking high in testability is likely to get us closer to some kind of truth (even if that truth is the disconfirmation of the theory considered). As Fleisher notes, "the fact that a theory is testable makes it more likely that inquiry will be successful, in large part because it increases the agent's (epistemic) probability of being in a world where the theory is false but testing the theory leads to successful inquiry anyway." (p. 19) On my view, then, Fleisher's endorsement of testability *qua* epistemic reason *does* pass the test of avoiding bald assertion, because the pursuit of a theory while motivated by the testability of that theory is done so in pursuit of some likelihood of truth.

Fleisher also follows Whitt (1992) in considering a theory's potential to generate "high-quality analogies" as a promise reason because such analogies can be used to generate potentially useful predictions. As with testability, Fleisher (2022) notes, "what makes possession of a heuristic analogy a reason is how it concerns promoting successful inquiry in general, given how it promises new evidence that might disconfirm the theory in question." (p. 20). Fleisher also follows Lichtenstein (2021) in thinking that the presence of anomalies could be a good promise reason for pursuing a theory despite the fact that anomalies offer apparent evidential support *against* said theory. This is because the investigation of these anomalies, once again, generates the possibility that we might *disconfirm* the theory in question. Both of the promise reasons listed here can be addressed in the same manner as testability. These promise reasons *can* count

as epistemic reasons on my view because we only accept these promise reasons as reasons given our understanding that following them grants the potential for some degree of truth, whatever that truth happens to be.[20]

The discussion thus far reveals my purpose in transforming my norm enshrining the need for reasons into the negative requirement "hold no bald assertions". In my endeavor to construct a minimal epistemic standard, I have seen the need to generate a disjunctive theory of reason – otherwise, the standard I propose can never be sufficiently minimal by the lights of those who might have otherwise been captured by the epistemic regress problem. But given the sheer variety of proposals for constraint criteria governing the separation of merely true beliefs from potentially reasonable beliefs, such a disjunctive theory is in practice too difficult to formulate. For this reason, let "bald assertion" then function as a stand-in for a belief that *fails* to pass the constraint criteria for *any* view that sorts the merely potentially true beliefs from those that are deemed reasonable. Thus, the minimal epistemic standard I now propose is that *we should hold no bald assertions*. After some brief comments on the nature of bald assertions and their distinction from what I will call *merely* bald assertions, I will proceed to consider some lingering theoretical resistance to this standard.

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[20] Fleisher (2022) continues with a compelling argument that certain social reasons to pursue a theory ought to count as promise reasons, and thus epistemic reasons. For instance, he argues that it is in the best interest of inquiry that we avoid premature consensus, thus it may be a good reason to pursue an unpopular theory *in virtue of* its unpopularity. The unpopularity of a theory need not depend on any sort of evidential constraint, so it seems like this kind of promise reason is once again testing my norm in the same way. Nevertheless, each of Fleisher's proposed social promise reasons can be addressed using the same method already employed because he, in focusing on zetetic success, is always aiming at increasing the likelihood of uncovering some degree of truth about something. Further, some of these social-based promise reasons have already been given treatment in my discussion of Miracchi (2021).

4.1.   Unpacking "No Bald Assertions"

To be clear, my use of "assertion" within the context of bald assertions is not meant to pick out any meaningful difference between belief and assertion. For my purposes, making a bald assertion does not imply any action but the formation or maintenance of an unreasoned belief. One can maintain a bald assertion on my view even if the belief is never shared, expressed, or manifested in the way in which one lives.

There is, however, a meaningful difference, on my view, between a bald assertion and a *merely* bald assertion, and while this distinction may see little use later in the project, it is necessary to clarify the distinction to avoid certain objections. Let a bald assertion be any held belief that is only merely potentially true. That is, a bald assertion is a belief that is held, but there is no epistemic reason for doing so. A *merely* bald assertion, then, is a belief that is held without some epistemic reason *and* where the holding of this belief is not thought (by any accepted epistemic theory) to serve any larger epistemic purpose. This additional qualification is necessary for two reasons. First, it may be necessary to assuage lingering objections to my treatment of the reasons Fleisher (2022) provides – "sure", an objector may claim, "you've argued that Fleisher's promise reasons are in pursuit of *some* truth, but you haven't shown that they are in pursuit of truth as related to the belief originally accepted." If this objection seems pressing, I will grant it. In such a world, bald assertions may be epistemically permissible, but it remains the case that *merely* bald assertions are not. The prescriptive form of my minimal epistemic standard would then become "avoid *merely* bald assertions", since the fulfillment of the minimal epistemic standard just involves having some reason for a belief – and on Fleisher's view, those sorts of zetetic reasons are epistemic reasons *for that* belief.

More importantly, however, there is still some lingering theoretical resistance to my minimal epistemic standard that this distinction should help me deflate. Here I am referring to two views in particular: a certain form of social epistemology, and the target of this larger work, pragmatism. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain how these two views resist the minimal epistemic standard and how they can be brought back within the fold.

5.   Theoretical Resistance to the Minimal Epistemic Standard

Within social epistemology, it is sometimes held that groups, as well as individuals, are capable of forming and maintaining beliefs of varying qualities. If this is so, then my minimal epistemic standard ought to apply in these circumstances as well, or otherwise fail to be properly minimal. Some social epistemologists (Quinton 1976, for example) argue that the beliefs of a group are simply summations of the beliefs of their comprising individuals. Thus, what a group believes just are the beliefs of its constituent individuals, and whether a group holds a belief reasonably will depend on whether its constituent individuals hold *their* beliefs reasonably. This sort of theory is no particular challenge to my minimal epistemic standard, as the onus for reasonability seems entirely placed on the agents that comprise the group and they are still subject to individual epistemic norms. But there are others who opt for models of group belief that are not summative (like Bird 2014). Further, some social epistemologists argue that a group can be justified in believing something *even if* not all of the individuals within that group would be justified in believing so (see Goldman 2014 and Lackey 2016). These latter views make it clear that some social epistemologists think that a group can fulfill some epistemic norm *even if* its comprising individuals do not (see Kitcher 1990, Muldoon 2013, and Weisberg and Muldoon

2009 for examples). Indeed, it may be possible that a group could fulfill some epistemic norm *because* some of its individuals do not.

More specifically, the challenge I consider now is that it may be in the group's epistemic best interest for some (likely small) portion of its constituents to make bald assertions. That is, if some small group of individuals within a larger network fail to meet my minimal epistemic standard, they may bring about positive epistemic circumstances for the broader network, intentionally or not. When a subset of a group decides to commit to a bald assertion, given everything I've said thus far, it seems that this would be an overall negative prospect, or at best a neutral one, for these individuals' epistemic purposes. Indeed, we can imagine that this small subset of the group could meet catastrophic consequences as a result of their careless believing. Nevertheless, the group at large may stand to benefit epistemically from this experience – they now know which beliefs to avoid in the future. For example, if a group of people are in an unfamiliar environment and in need of food and water that is not obviously present in their immediate surroundings, subgroups may be forced to rely on "hunches"[21] as to which direction they should travel to find resources. Heading off into an unknown wilderness on a hunch is probably not in an individual's best interest (assuming there are any alternatives) epistemic or otherwise, but it may benefit the group greatly. Some of these hunches may pay off, and this success can be made evident to the group; conversely, other hunches may end disastrously, and this too, could plausibly inform the group. If this seems plausible, then it may be that bald assertions are *not* without epistemic merit after all.

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[21] Generally, "hunch" is not used to rule out the having of reason, evidence, etc. for a belief but instead to indicate some degree of uncertainty. Here, I am using the word to describe the adoption of a belief in which there is no reason to adopt the belief on its own merits. It may also be argued that spreading out to seek resources in an unknown environment does not require a belief that one will be successful, or that the direction chosen is in any way suitable. That is right, I think, but it can also be imagined that one *might* have some belief that they have chosen the most suitable direction, even if this is not a necessary feature of such a "hunch".

I have two replies to this challenge. First, my distinction between bald assertion and merely bald assertion may perform much of the heavy lifting here. Recall that a merely bald assertion is one in which a belief is held for no reason *and* the holding of this belief is not thought (by any accepted epistemic theory) to serve any further epistemic purpose. In the case in which group beliefs emerge from, but are not identical to, the beliefs of their constituents, and some of those constituents hold bald assertions, it is nevertheless possible that those bald assertions might not be *merely* bald assertions. Now it may be objected that the group is not, itself, aware that the holding of some bald assertions by its constituents might be in its epistemic interest, nor would the individuals in this case understand that their efforts were towards the greater epistemic good. Nevertheless, I have not fixed any sort of awareness criteria on the epistemic utility of a belief – it may be, per internalism, that such a criteria is in order, but in keeping with my minimal standard I will not make that argument here. Thus, a bald assertion may avoid being merely bald even if the person holding it does not understand the larger epistemic benefit they stand to grant in doing so.

Second, when dealing with group epistemology, it may be that the unit of analysis ought to rest firmly on the group – that is to say, it may be appropriate to think that our epistemic norms should *only* apply to the group at large, not individuals. If this is the case, then any individual's choice to commit to a bald assertion is never a matter of scrutiny under my epistemic norm properly construed; only when a group commits to a bald assertion does my norm suggest that something has potentially gone awry. Thus, these situations, in which an individual commits to a bald assertion in such a way that the group they belong to benefits, could never indicate that my minimal epistemic standard has misfired. Even on a more moderate view that groups and individuals ought to abide by separate epistemic norms, or at least be evaluated

according to the same norms separately, my minimal epistemic standard does not seem in jeopardy. In such a case, we could say that an individual's choice to commit to a bald assertion is epistemically impermissible, and yet nevertheless it is epistemically acceptable for the group to exploit this fact. Whatever the case may be, at worst, it seems that I have to concede that such instances involve bald assertions that are nevertheless not *merely* bald assertions, and thus update the prescriptive element of my minimal epistemic standard to "commit no *merely* bald assertions" for these thinkers.

Lastly, yet another possible point of theoretical resistance emerges from a certain conception of pragmatism. When pragmatists seek to make epistemic progress, they often do so procedurally, within a fallibilistic framework. That is to say that pragmatists may try out an idea in the world, measure its success, and adjust their beliefs accordingly. In this process, the pragmatist ordinarily begins the process with a belief that they already have some reason to hold – perhaps the belief possesses one of the several pursuitworthy features Fleisher (2022) mentions, or perhaps the belief simply enjoys some degree of consensus. But there is no reason, in principle, why the pragmatist could not start with a bald assertion. Indeed, so long as they are willing to revise their beliefs later in the event of disconfirming evidence or repelling lived experience, this may seem perfectly reasonable. The idea here is that the pragmatist often locates the reasons for their beliefs in the evaluation of their beliefs once held, *not* before. But if this is permissible, then it may seem as though bald assertions should be epistemically permissible as a result.

My response here also relies on the distinction between bald assertions and merely bald assertions. If a pragmatist accepts a bald assertion and simply lives with it, never evaluating it and holding it closed to revision, then they have committed to a merely bald assertion. But,

because a bald assertion is only ever merely bald when it is accepted for no further epistemic purpose, the pragmatist's bald assertions will hardly ever qualify as such. Yes, pragmatists may make bald assertions, but they are typically doing so in order to make epistemic progress. Thus, once again, we must be careful to note that while it may be epistemically impermissible to form merely bald assertions on any epistemic standard, the same is not always the case for bald assertions more generally. While all views are subject to the minimal epistemic standard – that we should have some reason for our belief that makes it more than merely potentially true according to *some* epistemic theory – this may manifest in subtly different prescriptions along the distinction between bald and merely bald assertions. Given that those views which reject the epistemic admissibility of bald assertions will also reject the epistemic admissibility of *merely* bald assertions, I will from here only use the more liberal "avoid merely bald assertions" as the prescription that follows from my minimal epistemic standard.

6.   Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified weaknesses in the traditional epistemic regress problem and its modern-day formulations. Following this, I have constructed a new minimal epistemic standard which shall serve as the success condition upon which I can now construct a new formulation of the epistemic regress problem. This new minimal epistemic standard is more in keeping with the spirit of the epistemic regress problem in that it aims at an expectation that we should seek to hold beliefs that are more than merely potentially true – that we should have reasons for our beliefs. As I have shown, what counts as a reason varies widely. Nevertheless, with my maximally permissive disjunctive account of reasons, the minimal epistemic standard can be broadened to include these variations. In its current formulation of "avoid merely bald

assertions", I have shown that this minimal epistemic standard is sufficiently broad so as to accommodate "reasons" typically rejected by orthodox epistemology and important theoretical resistance to the notion that bald assertions are epistemically impoverished.

In the following chapter, I will now use my minimal epistemic standard to construct two new modes of the epistemic regress problem. Following this, I will note important resistance to these formulations from certain kinds of epistemological externalism. Some externalists, I argue, may functionally escape my presentation of the regress problem (though with some cost), while others succumb entirely. This difference will be drawn along the lines of a meta-theoretic distinction between externalists – those who attempt to defend their externalism with non-externalist reasons, and those who opt for a more thoroughgoing externalism.

Chapter Two: A New Formulation of the Epistemic Regress Problem

1.   Introduction

Before developing my version of the epistemic regress problem, let me begin with a recap of the motivating principles that I established in Chapter 1. I began by arguing that normative epistemology is beholden to a minimal epistemic standard such that we ought to have some reasons for our beliefs if they are to be considered anything more than merely potentially true. I elucidated the distinction between a belief that is merely potentially true and one that is more than merely potentially true by introducing a requirement that that the subject holding the belief in question must fulfill some condition, set by some epistemic theory, that grants a degree of likelihood to the truth of their belief for their belief to count as more than merely potentially true.

I then developed this minimal epistemic standard into a guiding epistemic norm with two different presentations – one positive and one negative:

Guiding epistemic norm (positive): We ought to have reasons for our beliefs.

Guiding epistemic norm (negative): No merely bald assertions are epistemically

acceptable.

This norm was further clarified with a disjunctive account of reasons and a distinction between bald assertions and merely bald assertions. On the disjunctive account of reasons that I propose, an epistemic reason is anything that is thought to grant a belief some status that elevates it beyond the merely potentially true – this reason need not be conclusive, propositional, or even accessible, though reasons that fulfill those conditions are also acceptable. Thus, my disjunctive account of reasons seeks to be maximally permissive in regard to the various traditions within epistemology of accounting for reason, justification, evidence, warrant, etc. Lastly, I argued that

some bald assertions may be epistemically acceptable so long as they are formed or maintained for some further epistemic end. That is, those bald assertions that are held *because* they could contribute to the likelihood of some belief's truth were found epistemically acceptable, while those bald assertions that are held with no epistemic upshot (*merely* bald assertions) are not.

In Chapter 1, I explained that epistemic regress problems seek to exploit satisficing conditions that bridge the gap between unreasonable belief and something more. By attempting to show us that these conditions can never be satisfied, the skeptic attempts to demonstrate that no belief can be found reasonable. Different versions of the epistemic regress problem differ in accordance with the satisficing condition that they are tailored towards – Sextus Empiricus seems to aim at conclusive proof, while Klein aims at justification[22]. The trouble with these variations is that, just as they are tailored towards certain accounts of epistemic reason, so too are objections to the problems tailored towards them. In this chapter, I will present my version of the epistemic regress problem which, instead, targets our ability to fulfill the minimal epistemic standard I set forth in Chapter 1. The generality of my disjunctive account of reasons will thus ensure that any attempts to escape the epistemic regress problem properly focus on the heart of the problem rather than any technical notion of reason for which previous versions of the epistemic regress problem have been constructed to target.

2.   The Epistemic Regress Problem in Two Modes

My version of the epistemic regress problem occurs in two modes – one targeting the supply of reasons, as in keeping with the traditional presentation of the problem, and one targeting the facilitation of "reasonableness" from candidate reason to belief. While I will begin with separate treatments of these two modes, I will argue that they are one and same problem

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[22] Again, this is the point that leads Cling (2014b) to argue that there is a *family* of epistemic regress problems, not a singular problem.

applied to distinct levels of discourse – that is, I will argue that the epistemic regress in application to the facilitation of reasonability is an attack on our ability to supply metaepistemic grounding for our beliefs, while the more traditional attack on our ability to supply reasons remains consistent across levels of discourse. This distinction will become crucial when addressing certain strategies used to avoid the epistemic regress. For instance, the traditional externalist will typically find little difficulty in mustering a response to the epistemic regress problem in application to the supply of reasons but will find a much more formidable challenge in addressing the second mode of the regress problem. I will begin with my account of the epistemic regress problem's first mode, regarding the supply of reasons, as it is much closer in presentation to the traditional account.

2.1.   First Mode – The Supply of Reasons

My version of the epistemic regress problem in the mode of an attack on our ability to supply reasons will not appear all too dissimilar from former accounts, but this misleading fact is due to the use of "reason" by various authors (like Klein 1999) to pick out particular notions more stringent than my disjunctive account. Nevertheless, note that my use of "reason" refers to my maximally permissive account of epistemic reasons from here unless otherwise noted. The problem begins with an identification of certain satisficing criteria for epistemically acceptable beliefs born out from the minimal epistemic standard established previously – specifically, a belief p is epistemically acceptable for S according to the minimal epistemic standard *iff* it is supported by some reason r of S's.[23]

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[23] I do not intend to introduce much nuance regarding the possession of reasons by some subject. When I say that a belief is supported "by some reason r of S's", I only mean a reason S has for p, not that S has some special claim to their reason, that their reason is inherently personal or perspectival, or even that it is accessible to them at all.

By many accounts included in my disjunctive account of reason, it readily follows that a reason r for a belief p satisfies as a reason just in case r is also epistemically acceptable.[24] Yet if r must also be epistemically acceptable in accord with my minimal epistemic standard, then it too must have some reason r_1 that supports it. For example, S's belief in climate change (p) may be seemingly supported by their belief that qualified scientists seem to unanimously support such a conclusion. This latter belief, then, seems to be functioning as a reason r, for S's belief. Now, if S had formed this supporting belief r by carefully reading scientific journals, attending climate science lectures, or even watching the nightly news, many of us might be content to acknowledge the reasonability of r. But suppose that S formed their belief in r because they have had vague dreamed experiences of close encounters with fictional climate scientists. Our consensus about the reasonability of S's belief r, I suspect, would be lessened, and the reasonability of S's belief in p would soon follow. This is because, in many cases, our reasons for a belief constitute reasons so long as they, themselves, are reasoned. We may acknowledge, following Audi (1986), that S's dreamed experiences could be "reasons for" S's belief in climate change in that they explain the origin of the belief, but that does not necessarily make them epistemically acceptable reasons for believing p. This is no immediate challenge to most accounts of reason, as most epistemologists seem willing to prohibit at least some sources of belief from granting epistemic merit – so long as there are *some* sources of reasonable belief,

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[24] This will, of course, not be true for *all* accounts included in the disjunctive account of reason, as some views hold that some potential avenues for the supply of reasons are not, themselves, propositional or the sort of thing than *can* be made reasonable. For instance, if you hold that a bit of sensory data can make the holding of belief p reasonable, then you would likely reject that that sensory data, itself, needs to be "epistemically acceptable" in the sense that we should have reasons *for it* in order for it to function as a reason for p. While I do think it is possible to recapture these kinds of intuitions under the first mode of the regress, by challenging the immediacy or directness of the content delivered through such means, I will instead try to head off these apparent exceptions with my second mode of the regress.

there is no issue. The traditional mode of the epistemic regress problem begins to rear its head when we subject the kinds of reasons we would normally accept to a similar degree of scrutiny.

Let us now suppose that S's belief *p* (that climate change is occurring) is held not because of dreamed experience leading to *r* (that qualified scientists unanimously support such a conclusion) but because they have been carefully reading relevant scientific journals. The skeptic employing the epistemic regress problem will be quick to note that, in this case, S's belief in *r* is supported by other beliefs, some of which S might not even readily associate with their belief in *p*. For instance, S's belief in *r* seems to be supported by their belief that scientific journals are an adequate means of determining scientific consensus; that the alleged scientists contributing to these journals are genuine and not merely bad actors; and, much more generally, that S's perceptual faculties which allow for the consumption of these journals are at least sometimes reliable. Imagine, the skeptic demands, that S does *not* believe that scientific journals are an adequate means of determining scientific consensus. If that were the case, then S's support for *r* surely falters – you cannot reasonably claim that your belief about climate change is reasonable solely because you have consumed scientific journals which demonstrate that qualified scientists unanimously support the conclusion while simultaneously believing that those same scientific journals do not provide you any access to the views of said scientists.[25]

What the skeptic is attempting to demonstrate in making such appeals is that the reasonability of belief *p* is not just contingent upon *r*, but upon the reasonability of *r* itself, which

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[25] There are, admittedly, some forms of externalism that may find such a situation epistemically acceptable in that you could be justified in believing some *p* for reason *r* even if you, yourself, don't have reasons for *r* that are accessible to you in any way – you might even believe you have reasons for *r* that are contrary to your actual reasons in such a view. I will admit that my version of the epistemic regress problem does not fully capture such a view and that my presentation of these issues, consequently, may prove disappointing to such theorists. I will make reference to this alternative and how I understand its relation to the minimal epistemic standard throughout this chapter, especially the later sections.

can only be assessed by reviewing the (potentially) many other beliefs that support it. The

obvious problem is that those reasons for r, call them r_n, may or may not be reasonable – perhaps

S *does* believe that the scientific journals they have been consuming provide some means of

assessing scientific consensus, but if *this* belief is held by S only because it was reported to them

by someone they know to be fully unreliable, then S's belief in r (and ultimately p) still does not

seem reasonable. And this is what generates the epistemic regress in the mode of the supply of

reasons. It appears that in order for S to hold a reasonable belief p, p must be supported by some

reason r, which in turn must be supported by some reason(s) r_n, and so on until, as Sextus

Empiricus originally claims, we must decide to put a stop to the supply of reasons dogmatically,

to concede ourselves to circular reasoning, or to continue providing reasons forever – potentially

never establishing the reasonability of our initial belief.

These illustrations now complete, my presentation of the epistemic regress problem in its

first mode is as follows:

> **Epistemic Regress Problem, Mode 1 (M1)**: S satisfies the minimal epistemic standard
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> for belief p, so long as p is not merely a bald assertion, where p is not a merely bald
>
> assertion just in case there is some reason r that supports p which is also not a merely
>
> bald assertion. And r is not a merely bald assertion just in case there is some reason r_1
>
> which is also not a merely bald assertion that supports r. And so on, *ad infinitum* . . .

Again, this is not all that dissimilar from more traditional accounts of the epistemic regress

problem, the primary difference being that my presentation of the problem is not limited in scope

to particular accounts of reason. That said, there are some views of reason which *do* offer some

potentially easy resistance to my **M1**. For instance, externalist accounts of reason would not

consent to require that S needs any further reason r_1 for r on many, if not most, cases. This is because the externalist account of reason holds that what makes a belief p reasonable is that it in some way reflects an appropriate attunement of the subject to the world – and we may call that attunement r if we wish, given my disjunctive account of reason. Now this should not be taken to imply that an externalist holds that an agent only reasonably believes when their beliefs *are true*; rather, proper attunement usually implies that the agent has come to the belief in question through some process that ordinarily has a great degree of credence or reliability. Thus, an agent's reason r has much more to do with the facts of the matter than it does some further reason *of the agent's*. For this reason, the externalist is generally unwilling to consent to the regress from the beginning – the agent is properly attuned, or they are not, regardless of the agent's further beliefs about that status.

Further resistance can be found from views inspired by the like of Boghossian's (2003) theory of blind yet blameless reasoning, though Boghossian's work on the matter focuses nearly exclusively on the justification of using deductive rules of inference as warrant-yielding reasons. Briefly, Boghossian's view is that we may, in some instances, use some forms of reasoning in such a way that we cannot provide suasive reasons for that kind of reasoning[26] – which is to say that we use these forms of reasoning "blindly". While Boghossian is unwilling to commit to externalism, he nevertheless seeks to avoid the internalist standard of reason which he finds unproductive. Instead, Boghossian claims that our use of these blind forms of reasoning is "blameless" because performing these acts of reasoning is, on his view, *required* by our understanding of the related ingredient concepts. For any particular instance of modus ponens, for instance, our reasoning in accord with modus ponens is to be expected given our

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[26] See Boghossian (2000) for more on this point about suasive vs. non-suasive reasons.

understanding of the ingredient concept "if". If Boghossian's view is successful, then there will be at least some occasions in which the regress problem can be terminated without incident – or occasions where our beliefs are blind, yet blameless.

Finally, the primary target of this project, the pragmatist, has a response of their own. If it is reasonable to subject our beliefs to some tests *after* forming them in order to satisfy our epistemic standards, then it may be that **M1** gets reasonability the wrong way round. That is, the pragmatist will insist that we do not need to have reasons for our beliefs prior to accepting them, and that **M1** seems to arbitrarily demand the completion of this impossible task. Instead, we should adopt whatever beliefs (whether they come naturally or are adopted for some non-epistemic purpose) and subject them to our epistemic criteria *later*. If this method of reasoning is epistemically acceptable, then it seems clear that the skeptic cannot demand that the pragmatist should have a ready supply of reasons for their antecedent beliefs.

Given this plausible resistance to **M1**, the second mode of my version of the epistemic regress problem is crucially important. While I take it for granted that those epistemologists who are generally thought to be captured by the traditional epistemic regress problem (like strong access internalists and self-professed infinitists) continue to be so under my **M1**, it will not be until the second mode is made clear that these newer objectors can be brought within the fold.

2.2.   Second Mode – The Facilitation of Reasonability

The second mode of the epistemic regress problem targets the connections between our beliefs and their supporting reasons. In effect, it is a challenge to the notion that any candidate *r* offers genuine support for any candidate *p*. While **M1** establishes that *p* must be supported by

some *r* that is not merely a bald assertion, it leaves the ingredient notion of "support" unanalyzed. The second mode of the epistemic regress problem that I propose targets this relation of support between reason and belief as another form of satisficing condition for epistemic admissibility.

Let us revisit our earlier example. S holds a belief *p* that climate change is a genuine phenomenon, and they hold this belief because they believe *r*, that there is near unanimous consensus from qualified scientists that *p*. While **M1** targets the status of *r* itself, the second mode of the epistemic regress challenges the connection between *r* and *p*. Suppose that S *does* have some reason for thinking that *r* – that is to say, *r* is not a merely bald assertion for S. Does this fact actually tell us anything about the status of *p*? We know that S *takes r* to bear some epistemic relation towards *p*, but that does not necessarily mean that it, in fact, does. Earlier, we considered that S might have believed *r* because of vague dreamed experience, and we would be hard pressed to say that S's dreamed experiences made *p* any more epistemically admissible. So, while it is clear that the status of *r* is important to the reasonability of *p*, this is not the full of it. We must further know that S's epistemically acceptable belief in *r*, the fact that there is some consensus amongst qualified scientists that suggests climate change is a genuine phenomenon, would reasonably allow the acceptance of *p* – that climate change is a genuine phenomenon – and there are many potential ways of doubting that this is the case. It may be, for example, that S lives in a world in which it is a widely known fact that qualified scientists always report the opposite of their findings. If this is the case, then even if S's belief in *r* is more than a merely bald assertion – climate scientists *do* seem to be expressing some consensus about the genuine nature of climate change – it still doesn't lend much support to *p* – in fact, it seems to do the opposite, given information that S, it is assumed, should have known.

What I am driving at is that there seems to be some condition required for the facilitation of epistemic admissibility from reason to belief. This notion is not altogether new and has marked similarities to what Audi (1986) calls "connecting beliefs" or what Rosa (2019) calls "bridge-beliefs". Both presentations consider the possibility of a need for beliefs that do the job of "connecting" our reasons to the beliefs that they are supposed to support. These connecting beliefs are supposed to serve the role of sustaining a support, facilitation, or inheritance relation between reason and belief that allows the potential transmission of warrant from one belief, or other source of reason, to some belief.

If epistemic admissibility genuinely requires the presence of connecting beliefs, then the epistemic regress problem quickly finds another avenue of success condition to exploit. For, in order for S to have an epistemically acceptable belief p, S will need some reason r that is appropriately connected by some further belief cr to p. But then **M1** will also apply to cr. If cr is a merely bald assertion, then it cannot do the job of sustaining support from r to p, so it will be necessary to demonstrate that it too is reasonable – this, we have seen, invites **M1**. What's worse, if we begin the project of trying to find reasons for cr, say r_2, we may need connecting beliefs between cr and r_2 – which will open yet another avenue for **M1**. This latter problem, that connecting beliefs may require further connecting beliefs, will be the focus of the second mode of my epistemic regress problem.

> **Epistemic Regress Problem, Mode 2 (M2)**: For S's reason r_1 to provide support for their belief p, S must have some reason cr_1 which renders the purported support for p by r_1 more than a merely bald assertion. For cr_1 to serve this function, it must not be a merely bald assertion, which means that there must be some reason *for it, r_2.* For r_2 to provide support for cr_1, S must have some further connecting reason cr_2 which renders

the purported support for cr_1 by r_2 more than a merely bald assertion. And so on, *ad infinitum . . .*

Fortunately, a similar problem has been given much treatment in the epistemology of logic, spurred on by Lewis Carroll's (1895) infamous "What the Tortoise said to Achilles". While few working on this particular problem seem to connect Carroll's regress to the epistemic regress problem, it will be crucial to have some rudimentary understanding of the status of the current literature to appreciate the mechanism of **M2**, how it might be used to block objections from those who might otherwise escape **M1**, and how the two modes combine.

2.2.1. Carroll's Regress

Carroll's (1895) account of the dialogue between Achilles and the Tortoise relates a conversation seemingly concerning the validity of inference from hypotheticals. Achilles and the Tortoise begin by agreeing upon an inventory of propositions to be discussed: A, B, and Z. Achilles is of the position that: (1) if A and B are true, then we must also accept that Z is true; (2) that A and B *are* true; and that (3) we must *consequently* accept Z. The Tortoise provides some resistance: (1) we may not agree that A and B are true, but still accept the hypothetical and (2) we may agree that A and B are true, but reject the hypothetical which links them to Z – in both cases, the Tortoise is under no compulsion to accept Z. While this begins as a relatively germane conversation about hypothetical inference, the Tortoise then prompts Achilles to attempt to *force* them to accept Z from their present position of merely accepting A and B. When Achilles muses that the Tortoise would first have to accept the hypothetical that links A and B to Z, the Tortoise agrees to do so – but in a strange twist of events, the Tortoise insists that it is nevertheless *still* not forced to accept Z so long as Achilles has not explicitly made clear that the mutual truth of

the antecedents and the conditional requires the acceptance of the consequent. The Tortoise suggests that this latter point should be added as a premise to the original argument, but once Achilles has done this, it becomes clear that the Tortoise intends to utilize their old strategy again and again. That is, just because the Tortoise now accepts A, B, the hypothetical that links them to Z, and a new hypothetical that links the acceptance of the aforementioned premises to the truth of Z, it doesn't necessarily follow that Z because Achilles must first "force" the Tortoise to recognize a *new* hypothetical linkage between *these* propositions and Z.

What exactly Carroll was up to in this dialogue is an open question. Some seem to think that Carroll is puzzled about the nature of logical force on our belief – can we ever *really* be compelled to accept some particular conclusion by logic?[27] Others view Carroll's regress as a puzzle about the grounds for logical inference[28], or the grounds of inference simpliciter[29]. And still others think Carroll was simply confused (or trying to provoke some controversy) about the nature of hypotheticals[30]. Those who believe the latter interpretation is closest to the truth typically hold that Carroll's problem is resolved by following Russell's (1903) suggestion that Carroll merely confused hypothetical implication with logical implication. Once the Tortoise has granted the original premises, including the hypothetical that allows the inference from the truth of A and B to Z, the Tortoise is wrong to insist that the execution of this hypothetical requires the instantiation of its support as an additional premise. The Tortoise need only look back at what they've already granted to see that Z follows.

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[27] See Besson 2018, Engel 2016, Ryle 1946, and Wisdom 1974. Many of these conversations begin to touch on issues of practical reasoning (see Railton 1997).

[28] See Besson 2012 and 2018, Boghossian 2003, Engel 2016, Philie 2007, and Wright 2001. These conversations are largely about the grounds for deductive rules of inference. I will return to some of these accounts in Chapter 4 when I survey potential grounds for foundational beliefs.

[29] See Engel 2016, Philie 2007, and Stroud 1979.

[30] See Brown 1954, Pavese 2022, Russell 1903, Smiley 1995, and Wisdom 1974.

But there is something in Carroll's regress that harkens back to the problem of the facilitation of reasonability, whether intended or not. On one reading, the Tortoise seems to be concerned that their reasons might not sufficiently support a claim unless they possess the requisite connecting beliefs as well. Further, the Tortoise seems to see that these connecting beliefs might not do the connecting we need them to do without some *further* connecting beliefs. Though Wisdom (1974) certainly seems to think that Carroll is ultimately just confused about the nature of logical implication, I find his treatment of Carroll's problem to be the most fruitful towards understanding the problem of the facilitation of reasonability for my purposes.

Wisdom argues that the Tortoise has made a mistake in *orders*. While it is perfectly reasonable, on his view, to question the truth of A and B and the hypothetical that links them to Z, the Tortoise does something "perverse" in refusing to grant Z after they have conceded to grant those aforementioned truths. Wisdom seems to think that this is so, not because the questioning of the affirmed hypothetical's supporting role from A and B to Z marks some kind of irredeemable confusion, but because it is a *second-order concern*. Now, Wisdom makes it clear that second-order concerns like this one are worthy conversations to be had and that there *is* room for the Tortoise to reasonably question the supporting role that affirmed hypotheticals play, but these second-order concerns cannot be treated as though they are on the same level of discourse as the primary propositions the Tortoise and Achilles are engaged with. So, when the Tortoise insists that the hypothetical's supporting role should be counted as a new premise, they are insisting on violating some norm regarding the conservation of the order of discourse. If you want to question the validity of modus ponens, that's an acceptable thing to do, but not within an attempted use *of* modus ponens. This leads Wisdom to conclude that Carroll's presentation of the problem *does not* lead to a regress, but that a different kind of regress *could be* generated – a

vertical one along orders of discourse. On Wisdom's view, the Tortoise would be within their rights to question the use of modus ponens, and, if not convinced by the answers they received at the second-order, to subject those answers to scrutiny at some new, higher order of discourse. This could continue, but Wisdom is careful to note that such continuation is only potential, because, as soon as the Tortoise is satisfied with one of the answers they receive at a higher order of discourse, the discourse collapses back to the first-order in resolution.

I propose that the facilitation of reasonability, and thus my **M2**, functions with a similar analysis to Wisdom's (1974) treatment of Carroll's problem, though extended beyond mere deductive inference. S's belief that *p* requires some reason *r* in order to avoid merely bald assertion, and it seems like we may need some reason *cr* for thinking that *r* actually supports *p* in any relevant way, but discussions about the effectiveness of *cr* are problems of a higher order. Thus, the second mode of the epistemic regress problem is a vertical regress in that it allows us to ascend across orders of discourse, until we arrive at the order of metaepistemology. Which is to say that eventually, if the skeptic remains as persistent as the Tortoise, we will run out of first-order connecting reasons that allow us to think that some first-order belief (*r*) makes the acceptance of some other first-order belief (*p*) epistemically admissible. At this point, we will need to find a strategy that ameliorates this fact if we want to avoid the skeptical conclusion. Perhaps, we might reason, our first-order beliefs can support one another circularly – thus rendering the exhaustion of our supply of reasons acceptable. Or perhaps we might reason that some of our beliefs enjoy special status as foundational, and these beliefs do not fall prey to the demands of **M1** *at all*. Both of these strategies, and others like them, are *metaepistemic* reasons that we can provide on behalf of our first-order connecting reasons. I *can*, hypothetically,

explain why my reasonable belief that *r* makes my belief that *p* reasonable, but to do so, I will need to ascend to another level of discourse.

But why should the fact that I have some account of circular reasoning or foundational belief satisfy the persistent skeptic (or any curious interlocutor)? Obvious questions remain unanswered: (1) Are these second-order beliefs reasonable? And (2), even if they are granted to be reasonable, what makes us think that they sufficiently supply the ground for our particular first-order beliefs?   This latter question is the mechanism by which **M2** continues to transcend levels of discourse – for it seems like the reasonability of our metaepistemic commitments will not be enough if we cannot put them into practice. When I say that **M2** is a *vertical* regress, I only mean to say that is a challenge to keep ascending orders of discourse infinitely, or until we acknowledge that we have run out of metaepistemic grounds to give. **M1** is thus a *horizontal* regress in that each instance of questioning it generates must remain in the initial order of discourse or be rendered "perverse" per Wisdom (1974). However, it would be a mistake to think that this means that *only* first-order beliefs are subject to **M1**, as each time **M2** is used to ascend to a higher order of discourse, the beliefs at that level will be subject to **M1** on their own terms as well. In this way, **M1** and **M2** combine to form something like a ladder, rather than the linear picture that is often ascribed to the epistemic regress problem. Armed with this understanding of **M2** and its interaction with **M1**, I now turn back to the "easy" objections to the epistemic regress problem – externalism, blind yet blameless reasoning, and pragmatism.

3.   Replies to Externalism

As earlier explained, externalism about reasons is typically seen as an easy answer to the traditional epistemic regress problem[31], and this fact does not seem to be altered by my retooling of the problem in **M1**. The externalist, broadly construed, regards a belief in p to be reasonable so long as S is properly attuned to the world in some way in virtue of their believing p – I borrow the expression "attunement" from Cling (2014) who uses it to refer to certain accounts of human epistemic flourishing. For my purposes, "attunement" serves as a catch-all expression for the ways in which various theories necessitate certain kinds of connections between the world, the believer, and belief. Generally, externalism is cast as a view about justification – that is, it is a view about the conditions under which epistemic agents can be said to be justified in their beliefs. What these views hold in common is a rejection of the access requirements that the internalist places on justification and an endorsement of some model of attunement.[32] The internalist is usually charged with the requirement that S's justification in believing that p necessitates that S has access to that which renders p justified.[33] Defined oppositionally then, externalism is the view that we do *not* always require access to the justificatory status of our beliefs in order for them to count as justified. Indeed, many forms of externalism hold that we do not need to have access to our justifications for our beliefs *at all* in order for our beliefs to count as justified.

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[31] Some argue that externalism is the *only* acceptable answer to the problem – see Van Cleve (2003), for example.
[32] Not all who go in for the attunement model of reasoning are externalists. As Cling (2014) notes, eliminative materialism may qualify given its wholesale rejection of beliefs. Some kinds of naturalized epistemology and some forms of pragmatism may qualify as well.
[33] For instance, Bach (1985, p. 250) claims, "Internalism .. treats justifiedness as a purely internal matter: if p is justified for *S*, then *S* must be aware (or at least be immediately capable of being aware) of what makes it justified and why."

From this understanding of externalism follows a shift in understanding regarding the nature of justification. While an internalist is more likely to sponsor a notion of justification that is dialogical in nature – under which reasons can, and perhaps should, be offered on demand for one's beliefs – the externalist may lay claim to a number of noncognitive sources of justification as well. Perhaps, for example, one is justified in believing *p* so long as one stands in the right sort of causal relation to the fact that makes *p* true. Armstrong (1973), for instance, defines a causal theory of justification as follows:

> "The central notion in causal theories may be illustrated by the simplest case. The suggestion is that Bap [a believes p] is a case of Kap [a knows p] if 'p' is true and, furthermore, the situation that makes 'p' true is causally responsible for the existence of the belief-state Bap. I not only believe, but *know*, that the room is rather hot. Now it is certainly *the excessive heat of the room* which has caused me to have this belief. This causal relation, it may be suggested, is what makes my belief a case of knowledge." (p. 158)

So, by Armstrong's causal view, a belief counts as knowledge (and is thus reasonable) so long as the belief is true and the matter of fact that makes the belief true was responsible for the holding of that belief. While Armstrong does have some worries about such a view – how it should handle reasonable beliefs about the future and how to handle cases in which all conditions are met but knowledge should perhaps not be attributed – what is clear is that this view does *not* require anything like access to one's reasons.

Another important externalist touchstone, Goldman's (1979) reliabilism[34], is less dismissive of the notion of justification which the causal theory seems to replace entirely with its causal component. Cashing out his externalist version of justification instead, Goldman claims that: "If S's believing p at t results from a reliable cognitive belief-forming process (or set of processes), then S's belief in p at t is justified." (p. 116) or, more simply: "[. . .] a belief is justified in case it is caused by a process that is in fact reliable, or by one we generally believe to be reliable." (p. 121). So, while Goldman clearly maintains some notion of justification, the success condition guarding the status of justified belief is still not something that awareness of that condition or its fulfillment. This is because Goldman's reliabilism allows *the world* to determine whether a belief-forming process is reliable or whether or not a belief is formed by a process that we generally believe to be reliable (whether we are attuned appropriately) – both of these conditions are a check against the world for matters of fact, not a claim against the believer that would require them to make a defense of their believing. So, when the skeptic challenges the reliabilist to defend the notion that their belief in p is justified, the reliabilist can (and ought to) say that such a thing need not be accessible to them. Either p was formed by some reliable belief-forming process, or it was not, and our awareness of that fact does nothing to settle the matter. If this sort of view is to count as a view of justification (and thus as a view of reasons in my sense), then it clearly cannot be expected that an individual should be able to supply their reasons for each of their beliefs as required by **M1**.

Typically, criticisms of externalism charge that the externalist's notion of justification has strayed far enough that it is no longer a useful measure of epistemic responsibility. That is,

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[34] Williams (2016) refers to the wave of work following Goldman's (1979) argument for reliabilism as the "Reliabilist Revolution" in epistemology, and while much of that work has since caused some divergence from Goldman's original view, its influence is still unmistakable.

epistemologists who are concerned with evaluating the conduct of epistemic agents sometimes argue that the externalist does not supply the right tools for such a job. It may be, for instance, that a subject S could have come to a belief *p* through some reliable belief forming process and so be justified in their belief, but nevertheless have formed the belief *irresponsibly* – where such a situation does not seem possible within the internalist framework of justification. Some of BonJour's (1980/1985) clairvoyance cases are notably intended to demonstrate this lapse explicitly[35], and some externalists, internalists, and others have since voiced similar concerns.[36] Others, like Fumerton (1995) view externalism as acceptable on theoretical grounds, but distasteful when put into practice – for Fumerton's part, he sees the externalist as devoid of a certain degree of intellectual curiosity, presumably because they see no need to consider the reasonability of their own reasons. While I, too, am sympathetic with the concerns generated by BonJour's (1980/1985) cases, my reply to the externalist will much more resemble Fumerton's (1995) in approach. That is, I want to maintain my disjunctive account of reason by granting that externalism *is* an acceptable theory of reason, and in so doing, I will concede to some degree that the externalist is capable of escaping even my version of the epistemic regress problem – but only at a cost.

To put it plainly, first-order questioning of the sort that **M1** demands cannot capture the externalist. The externalist will always be able to claim that a subject is properly attuned to the

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[35] Bergmann (2006, p. 12) summarizes Bonjour's (1985) concerns with his Subject's Perspective Objection: "If the subject holding a belief isn't aware of what that belief has going for it, then she isn't aware of how its status is any different from a stray hunch or an arbitrary conviction. From that we may conclude that from her perspective it is an accident that her belief is true. And that implies that it isn't a justified belief."

[36] See Boghossian (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003), Cling (2014), Dretske (2000), Enoch and Schechter (2008), Philie (2007), and Wright (2001). Dretske (2000) colorfully refers to the externalists who see no reason to rectify this apparent problem as "mad dog reliabilists". Philie (2007) adopts a unique strategy of attacking externalism by suggesting that the externalist must maintain peculiar ontological commitments in order to sustain the reasonability of logical inference. While these ontological commitments are generally mild when the externalist is considering a problem like chicken-sexing, they may prove to be much stranger when the problem is grounding modus ponens.

world in forming some belief, or they are not – there is no further supply of reasons they need to draw from. Nevertheless, it is still a fair question as to whether or not being "properly attuned" to the world should make a subject's beliefs reasonable. Now, it would be a mistake to expect this question to be answered just like any other first-order belief, because the reasonability of the externalist's first-order beliefs *depends* on the answer to this question – whether or not they are aware of it. Because, if, as a matter of objective fact, attunement to the world *did not* constitute justification, then the externalist would be wrong to claim that their first-order beliefs are reasonable just in case they are appropriately attuned.

Moving to the second-order then, the externalist now seems on the hook for explicating the reasonability of their commitment to externalism *as a view of reason*. This, of course, threatens to generate a regress in the mode of **M2**. The idea is that, at some point, the externalist will be forced to contend with their view of justification as an epistemic commitment at a level of discourse at which such questions are appropriate. If their metaepistemic commitment goes unfounded, then it is not clear that any of their lower-order beliefs can be reasonable. At this point, there are a variety of options for the externalist who, like Achilles, is patient enough to endure such questioning. It may be that externalism about justification is a reasonable metaepistemic commitment to hold. Perhaps we might hold it because it seems more useful than a commitment to internalism. Or, stronger, perhaps an attunement view of justification is, itself, *self-evident* or *given*. In either case, this sort of externalist seems to be grounding their metaepistemic commitment to attunement in some belief that *does* threaten to generate an **M1** regress. Why? Because these sorts of strategies are not, themselves, externalist. In this momentary lapse of their affiliation with externalism, this sort of externalist reopens the entirety of their view back up to the epistemic regress problem – call this sort of externalist, who attempts

to support their acceptance of externalism with non-externalist reasons, *lightweight externalists*. Internalism functions as a poison pill for the lightweight externalist – any amount of it within their meta-epistemological commitments will subject them to the epistemic regress.

The obvious solution, then, is to *only* utilize the attunement model of justification all the way up and all the way down. Thus, an externalist, in reply to concerns about the reasonability of accepting an attunement model of justification, should claim that their higher order beliefs are reasonable (in attunement with the world), or they are not. In the end, this strategy should stop the second mode of the epistemic regress from coming to fruition as well. While this may seem like a sort of dogmatic insistence of a metaepistemic commitment, it strikes me that the *thoroughgoing externalist* simply has no other option, and so must refuse to motivate their metaepistemic commitments any other way on pain of succumbing to an unacceptable degree, which is to say *any* degree, of internalism.

Those outside the grips of externalism are like to see thoroughgoing externalism as an irresponsible wager (if the externalist is wrong, then they may have little to no reasonable beliefs in actuality) or, worse, a lack of intellectual curiosity. Something like this latter criticism is usually motivated by a distinction like Enoch and Schechter's (2008) division between thinkers and theorists. "Thinkers", on their view, can utilize belief forming methods well or poorly without knowing anything about them – this seems to fit with an attunement model of justification. But "theorists", on the other hand, need to have some understanding as to how and why these belief forming methods work, lest their theories be woefully incomplete. The internalist worry about thoroughgoing externalism, then, is that they leave their theories incomplete – the thoroughgoing externalist seems to be *using* some theory of reason, but they

give no indication that they possess, or even want to possess, some more robust *understanding of* that theory.

For my part, I think that thoroughgoing externalism will always prove an adequate escape from the epistemic regress problem because the view creates a situation wherein it will always be "perverse" (per Wisdom 1974) to demand a shift in order of discourse. But I do not see this as any great victory over the skeptic. Indeed, the end result of such a view is similar, if not functionally equivalent, to a kind of Humean Pyrrhonism that seems on the rise.[37] This variety of Pyrrhonian skepticism does not seek to rid itself of any beliefs, but only judgments *about* those beliefs – perhaps they are true, perhaps they are not, perhaps they are reasonable, and perhaps they are not. On this view, *epochê*, properly undertaken, does not require that we should cease living as thinking things, but that we should suspend judgment *about* our beliefs – even, as Eichorn (2020) notes, our ability to understand reasoning metaepistemically. The only difference between this form of skepticism and a thoroughgoing externalism, that I can tell, is that the thoroughgoing externalist seems to consistently think that they *are correct* without having any reason accessible to them for thinking that this is so, where the sort of Pyrrhonian I am describing may subject their beliefs to varied levels of criticism or acceptance for many different kinds of reasons. In the end, both views do not dispense with their beliefs in the face of the epistemic regress problem, both operate in the world (for the most part) as though their first-order beliefs are true, and both seem leery to motivate their views metaepistemically.

My concession, thus, comes with conditions. Thoroughgoing externalism escapes my formulation of the epistemic regress problem, but little seems to be gained over the skeptic in

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[37] See Eichorn (2020), Kyriacou (2020), and Rinard (2022) for examples. What makes this sort of Pyrrhonism distinctly Humean is, interestingly, to do with Hume's rejection of Pyrrhonism as an unlivable philosophy. The brand of Pyrrhonism that I allude to here shares these sentiments about beliefs at the first-order – a skepticism that demands we be rid of them is ultimately unlivable.

doing so – indeed, the position does not seem all that dissimilar to the *acceptance* of skepticism that I will urge in the final chapter of this work. The lightweight externalist, on the other hand, who *does* attempt to motivate their metaepistemic commitment to an attunement model of justification *is* subject to the epistemic regress problem. This is because **M2** threatens a vertical regress if the lightweight externalist does not ground out their metaepistemic commitment in a solution to **M1** at some order of discourse.

4.   Replies to Remaining Resistance

While Boghossian's (2003) theory of blind yet blameless reasoning is not originally constructed to extend beyond basic logical inference, it may nevertheless prove an attractive possibility for avoiding the epistemic regress problem. In his view, the use of a basic rule of inference need not be defended along metaepistemic grounds because the terms of its usage are inherent in the meanings of its ingredient concepts. Thus, to understand the meanings of "if" and "then" is to know how to use modus ponens. Clearly, this will not work for all forms of reasoning, but the epistemic regress problem may be defeated if we can demonstrate even one instance in which it fails to generate a regress. One way of interpreting the blamelessness of Boghossian's blind inferences is to think they somehow prove a special exception to the demands of **M2** – it would be inappropriate, therefore, for the skeptic to ask for metaepistemic grounding of these inferences. But there are a number of problems with this suggestion.

First, though the internalist was concerned that the externalist's view of justification lost sight of any notion of epistemic blameworthiness, one need not think that all unjustified beliefs are epistemically blameworthy. Thus, it may be that the skeptic can accept Boghossian's suggestion that we are blameless in reasoning in accord with modus ponens, while still

questioning whether such reasoning is *reasonable*. This again harkens back to the Humean Pyrrhonian I alluded to in the last section. On this view, very few forms of inference may be epistemically blameworthy because the Pyrrhonian, being in a state of *epochê*, has surrendered the means by which such assessments can be made. I do not see, therefore, that Boghossian's inferences could not be blind, blameless, *and* unreasonable.

These concerns aside, I do not see that Boghossian's account could realistically impede the regress of **M2**. The notion that modus ponens is a blind yet blameless form of inference is a second-order claim, but the line of questioning does not end here. (1) Why should we accept that this is true (**M1**)[38], and (2) even if it were true, why does this lend any claim of reasonability to particular first-order claims (**M2**)? Boghossian will need yet another instance of blindly yet blamelessly applying this second-order rule of inference to the individual instances of modus ponens that he sought to ground.

Of the three challengers to **M1**, only pragmatism remains. While I will, once again, charge that pragmatists cannot avoid a vertical regress from **M2**, this argument cannot be made complete until I have considered the traditional solutions to the epistemic regress problem. This is because the pragmatist, unlike the externalist and Boghossian, *does* seem to hold that they are responsible for evaluating their beliefs in order for them to count as reasonable. Though the pragmatist delays this evaluation until *after* the acceptance of some belief, it nevertheless must be done, for to continue on with an accepted belief without ever subjecting it to question runs against the very heart of the position. The potential for a pragmatist solution to the epistemic regress problem will thus depend on their ability to successfully ground some standard of

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[38] Boghossian (2003) has a companion piece, Williamson (2003), that suggests we should *not* accept Boghossian's (2003) account. For other resistance, see Besson (2012), Enoch and Schechter (2008), Rosa (2019), and Wright (2001). For defense and other similar views, see Boghossian (2000, 2001), Pavese (2022), and Philie (2007).

evaluation. This may be attempted in the manner of the externalist (in which case they are subject to all I have said previously), or it may be attempted using some other strategy. In the following chapter, I will introduce and evaluate the three classical solutions to the epistemic regress problem (infinitism, coherentism, and foundationalism) so that the pragmatist's inventory of options can be fully accounted for.

5.   Conclusion

From the minimal epistemic standard, that no merely bald assertions are epistemically admissible, established in Chapter 1, I have constructed two new modes of the epistemic regress problem. These modes are facets of the same problem in application to different orders of discourse. **M1** is an attack on our ability to supply reasons, but this mode is limited in scope in that it seems, as learned from Carroll's critics, that it lacks the ability to transcend levels of consideration. This feature of **M1** makes it seem as though there may be some "easy" solutions for avoiding the epistemic regress in the form of externalism and Boghossian's (2003) blind yet blameless reasoning. For this reason, I established a second mode, **M2**, that targets the connection between reasons and beliefs such that a vertical shift in the order of discourse *is* appropriate. In the end, while blind yet blameless reasoning seems entirely brought back within the scope of the epistemic regress problem, certain forms of externalism *do* escape. Specifically, the thoroughgoing externalist, who holds their metaepistemic commitment to externalism reasonable in the same regard as their first-order beliefs, escapes, while the lightweight externalist, who attempts to motivate their metaepistemic commitment to the view, does not. Having dispensed with (or left behind in the case of the thoroughgoing externalist) objectors who

would refuse to engage with the demands of **M1** and **M2** from the start, the task remains to

determine whether there are any available solutions to the problem that do so engage.

Chapter Three: The Collapse of the Three Classical Solutions into One

1.   Introduction

Because of the alterations I have made to the more traditional epistemic regress problem in Chapter 2, it will not do to simply assume (or baldly assert) that the classical solutions to the problem will fall prey to the same criticisms that they have faced since the time of Sextus Empiricus. In principle, it seems entirely possible that by broadening the scope of the problem to capture outliers like lightweight externalists and (as I will show in Chapter 5) pragmatists, I have inadvertently let others slip away. The purpose of this chapter is two-fold: (1) to demonstrate that by casting a wider net, I have not also been forced to loosen any knots; and (2) to argue that analysis of these classical solutions, aided by **M2**, reveals that they collapse into one, foundationalism – this latter finding will prove especially useful in conjunction with Chapter 4 when I begin my attack on the pragmatic solution in Chapter 5.

The three classical solutions to the epistemic regress problem were not initially presented as solutions, but rather as wholly unacceptable avenues for terminating (or embracing) the regress. The epistemic regress problem is also popularly known as Agrippa's trilemma or Münchhausen's trilemma.[39] Perhaps incorporating the word 'trilemma' better illustrates the standing that these three classical solutions were initially thought to enjoy. In no particular order, our options seem limited to the following: (1) we could embrace dogmatism to discharge the regress; (2) we could attempt to support our claims in a circular fashion, but in so doing condemn all reasoning to vicious circular reasoning lest we run afoul of the regress once more if we seek to say anything more substantial; or, (3) we could embrace the regress in concluding that

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[39] And "Fries's trilemma", though almost exclusively to Popper (1935).

reasoning does, in fact, require an infinite series of reasons and, in so doing, likely forgo the possibility of attaining knowledge.

From these three undesirable options, however, have sprung more sophisticated proposals for genuine solutions to the regress problem. Instead of mere dogmatism, some epistemologists now hold the notion that some reasons/beliefs are capable of grounding out the regress *for good reason*. This position, now called foundationalism, asserts that there are terminating reasons/beliefs such that we need no further reasons to justify our acceptance of them. In this way, the foundationalist denies the global applicability of **M1** – there are at least some beliefs that do not require an endless supply of reasons. Some reasons will need to be motivated by other reasons, granted, but eventually we will reach a supporting reason that is capable of standing on its own. While Sextus Empiricus seemed to think that this is only possible through dogmatic acceptance (which would violate our minimal epistemic standard of no merely bald assertions), foundationalists believe otherwise. The terminating reasons that foundationalists offer are thought to be special in some way. They stand on their own, not because we arbitrarily appoint them, but because of their source or nature. Some foundationalists (Bengson 2015, DePaul 2000, Descartes 1641/1996, Pryor 2005, Russell 1948) hold that these foundations are *self-evident*, or self-justifying – if they are right, then these beliefs provide their own justification or evidence. Others hold that some beliefs are primitive or given, such that it makes little conceptual sense to question such a belief.[40] Whatever their position on the special nature of foundational beliefs, foundationalists do not seem to think of their preferred foundations as mere dogmatic acceptances. For the skeptic to continue insisting on additional reasons once the

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[40] Indeed, some, like Wililamson (1997) hold that knowledge itself is properly basic. While there are functional similarities between these kinds of ideas and Boghossian's (2003) blind yet blameless reasoning, note that foundationalists argue that they are not merely blameless for holding their foundational beliefs, they are *justified*.

foundationalist's secure ground has been reached is thus to miss the significance of these foundational beliefs – there simply are no more reasons left to give, *nor are they required*.

From the undesirable stance that all of our beliefs may have to rely on one another in an unacceptably vicious circle, springs forth the more modern notion of coherentism. Coherentism, roughly, is the position that holds that some or all of our reasons are mutually supporting, or that they form a system of support such that no one belief is more fundamental than any other. Proponents of this view find that our reasons may support each other non-viciously.[41] Thus, on this view, the traditional epistemic regress problem can be answered fairly simply. There is no need to supply an infinite series of reasons or justification as suggested by **M1** because at some point (however widespread) there is circularity of support "built in".[42] There will, in other words, be a point at which we need not provide any *new* reason for our initial belief.

While there are differences amongst foundationalists, most of these differences have to do with the "special-making" feature of foundations (or what it is that makes a foundational belief foundational) rather than the basic structure of support that the foundations are thought to offer. The differences amongst coherentists however, are a bit more complicated.[43] For example, one popular picture of coherence theory comes from C.I. Lewis (1946) wherein coherence ("congruence" in his terms) is merely a means by which we can draw useful, perhaps truth-orienting, information from individually unreliable sources. The example Lewis favors is

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[41] See Bonjour (1985) and Elgin (2005).

[42] The extent to which this circularity is "built in" to our beliefs varies from philosopher to philosopher. Some only advocate for circular reasoning in regard to basic logical rules of inference; see Dummett (1974) and (1991) – Dogramaci (2010) suggests that Boghossian (2003) also belongs to this camp. Others, like Quine (1960), adopt a kind of circularity to the degree of holism.

[43] There are even some coherentists who make room for the sort of special beliefs discussed under foundationalism – these are typically referred to as "weak foundationalists". See BonJour (1985), again, for example. Generally speaking, the idea is that some "special" kinds of beliefs, typically those closely tied to experience, are needed in order to get the system of belief off the ground, but then coherence alone takes over the role of lending justification to further claims. Whether or not these coherentists are more properly considered foundationalists is an open debate (see DePaul 2000).

to consider several eye witness testimonies that all supply different information about some happening. Individually, it seems that we cannot trust these testimonies to lead us towards the truth, but if we attend only to that which coheres between them, we may make some progress. In this fashion, beliefs without any support are granted at least *partial* support by hanging together.

Another sort of coherentism, however, is that of Quine's (1960) variety of holism. In this view, while it is still the case that beliefs hang together lending one another support, it is also the case that reasonability can only be assessed of the entire scheme (or "web") of belief rather than any individual components within it. This is due to the fact that any individual belief within the web may be jettisoned or, conversely, held come what may in response to the web's contact with the world (experience). The web, as a whole, may reasonably account for experience or it may not, but it would be improper to examine its individual components along those same lines. However intricate or widespread one's coherentism, in all cases it remains the same that coherentists do not think, as Sextus Empiricus did, that beliefs relying on mutual support for their credibility alone is an epistemically damnable offense.

The final option of the three has not seen as much growth in popularity over the years, though it too has been given a name and a modicum of acceptance. Infinitism is the position that the regress of reasons prompted by **M1** is the *correct* picture of the reason-giving process. Thus, for the infinitist, a claim is not reasonable (or justified) unless there is an infinite series of reasons supporting it. And, while it is often thought that infinitism *just is* a skeptical position given that it seems like no infinite series of reasons could ever be provided[44], there are epistemologists who argue otherwise. Aikin (2008 and 2009) and Klein (2005) both argue, for instance, that it is a mistake to consider infinitism as a skeptical position in and of itself, though

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[44] See BonJour (1985), Cling (2008), Moser (1984), Porter (2006), and Post (1980).

both admit that it may be amenable with skepticism.[45] Indeed, many epistemologists who flirt

with infinitism seem to think that it yields us an *epistemic ideal* for epistemic agents to aim

towards, even if such an ideal can never be achieved in practice.[46] Thus, the position may leave

us, *in practice*, feeling as though we know very little, while nevertheless never forcing us to

capitulate to the skeptical conclusion that knowledge is an *in principle* impossibility.

     Before moving on, I should note that these three positions are normally cast in terms of

justification. Foundationalists believe, for instance, that a belief is justified so long as it is

adequately supported by some foundational belief (if the belief isn't foundational itself, of

course, otherwise the belief *just is* justified). Coherentists typically believe that a belief is

justified so long as it is properly supported by some network of other beliefs. And infinitists

believe that, in order for a belief to be justified, it must be supported by an infinite sequence of

justifications. This distinction is important because my formulation of the regress problem has

shifted its target from the success condition of justification (which is metaepistemically loaded)

to the success condition of having not made merely bald assertions. Because it seems far easier

to avoid making merely bald assertions than it does to provide justifications for our beliefs, it

may appear that these three solutions, whatever the traditional criticisms of them may be, will

have a much easier time escaping my form of the epistemic regress problem. This, however, is

not so.

     While it is true that I have suggested that a reason (in my sense) could be *anything* that

separates epistemically admissible beliefs from those that are not, **M1** still demands that these be

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[45] Aikin (2010) calls this "crypto-skepticism". Crypto-skepticism is a kind of skepticism caused by a position that does not demand skepticism by its own tenets but may result in skepticism once its standards have been fully applied – this is a sort of inadvertent skepticism caused by a position's not being deliberately "antiskeptical" (p. 46).

[46] See Aikin (2010) and Cling (2014).

supplied. Thus, while the foundationalist is perfectly within their rights to claim that they will use their notion of, say, self-evidence to supply the reason we seek in order to avoid merely bald assertion, the avenue for further questioning remains open along the following lines. When a foundationalist's belief p is to be reasoned, it still must be supported by some reason (in my sense) r. It may be that r is a self-evident belief, and so the supply of reasons ends there for this particular belief, but it is still fair to subject the foundationalist to **M1** *up until* that point. This is no different than how the foundationalist contends with the traditional regress problem, but **M2** provides space for new forms of challenge. Why, the skeptic might ask, should this notion of self-evidence be taken to provide support for your claims, either generally or for p specifically? Perhaps this claim of support is a merely bald assertion – and so it goes. All of this is to say that my formulation of the regress problem does not allow any special avenues by which the three classical solutions may escape by some other means than they might traditionally employ.

2.   Three Become One

I begin with a short discussion of Fumerton's *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (1995) which has inspired much of my strategy in the remainder of this chapter. While Fumerton is not concerned with addressing the epistemic regress problem as his primary aim, he *is* focused on analyzing the threats of skepticism at large and whether or not there are positions that adequately rebuff these threats. More specifically, seeing it as a great contender for the skeptic's challenge, Fumerton's primary aim is to evaluate the degree to which externalism successfully avoids problems like the traditional epistemic regress. Again, externalism usually refers to the position that we do not require access to that which makes our beliefs reasonable or justified. We might, if externalism is true, have reasonable or justified beliefs without ever knowing that they are so;

so long as we are appropriately attuned to the world in some way, we are justified. This constitutes a rejection of the implied internalist thesis that you must *know that you know* something – usually referred to as the KK-thesis. Fumerton is interested not only in whether externalism adequately escapes from skepticism, but in whether the costs of doing so are acceptable.

On the face of things, Fumerton finds that externalism does appear to successfully avoid the skeptical problem as the externalist may consistently hold that their beliefs could be reasonable without ever knowing (or having access to) the reason that makes this claim so; nevertheless, he finds the position wanting. To put Fumerton's central argument briefly, he argues that externalism is a metaepistemic position in its own right and thus in need of justification, or, rather, meta-justification. If the externalist produces an externalist meta-justification for the view, then they have missed the point. In an illustration of this criticism applied, Fumerton states:

> If a philosopher starts wondering about the reliability of astrological inference, the philosopher will not allow the astrologer to read in the stars the reliability of astrology. Even if astrological inferences happen to be reliable, the astrologer is missing the point of a *philosophical* inquiry into the justifiability of astrological inference if the inquiry is answered using the techniques of astrology [. . .] If I really am interested in knowing whether astrological inference is legitimate, if I have the kind of philosophical curiosity that leads me to raise this question in the first place, I will not for a moment suppose that further use of astrology might help me find the answer to my question. (p. 177)

Thus, Fumerton argues that the externalist is forced to defend their metaepistemic commitments by some other means (thus opening themselves up to the skeptic's challenge once more) or insist, seemingly dogmatically, on their metaepistemic commitments with no further ground. From this, Fumerton takes it that externalism *fails* on metaepistemic grounds.

While my approach to addressing the externalist is clearly distinct – I think that a thoroughgoing externalist *is correct* to "stick to their guns" with attunement-style responses to warrant-seeking questions from the skeptic, even at the level of the metaepistemic (and I think this is perfectly epistemically acceptable) – the strategy Fumerton exploits is notably similar in spirit. In effect, Fumerton has attempted to take skeptical issues vertically, towards metaepistemic grounding of positions regarding reasonability – much in the same way I intend to use my **M2** mode of the regress. The basis of Fumerton's argument, then, is to charge a kind of metaepistemic begging of the question against the externalist. And while I do not think that such a challenge deals much of a blow to the thoroughgoing externalist, I will argue that a similar approach proves effective against most of the traditional responses to the epistemic regress problem. Thus, using **M2**, I will show that the same sort of argument could successfully be applied against the infinitist and the coherentist, though importantly *not* against the foundationalist.

2.1.   Infinitism

The non-skeptical infinitist holds that a non-terminating series of reasons *can* provide credibility for some belief or claim. Employing a similar strategy to Fumerton's against the externalist, however, I mean to claim that this is a metaepistemic view requiring a defense in its own right. Infinitism, as a metaepistemic account of the nature of justification, cannot merely be

adopted arbitrarily (as this would violate our minimal epistemic standard), but it also lacks the ability to support itself at the order of the metaepistemic, unlike thoroughgoing externalism. While this kind of externalist proposes to provide a regress terminating reason *every time* they are challenged, even at the level of the metaepistemic, the infinitist does not have this ability. To render their metaepistemic commitment reasonable, then, the infinitist will have to: (1) defend their understanding of justification by their own lights – which is to say, to provide an infinitely long series of reasons for *it*; (2) motivate their metaepistemic commitment by reference to some account of justification that is *non-infinitist*; or (3) accept that they have committed to their view of justification dogmatically. Clearly, option 3 is no solution as this merely condemns the infinitist to one of the results of Sextus Empiricus' trilemma from the start. Option 2 also does not seem available, as an endorsement of some other view of justification is inconsistent with the infinitist's claim that infinitism is the *only* correct view of justification. Finally, there is good reason to believe that an infinitist could *never* satisfy the requirements of option 1, for an infinite series of reasons must be prohibitively long – infinitely long. But without this infinite series of reasons, there does not seem to be a reason to adopt infinitism in the first place.

The infinitist is not without response, of course. Aikin (2010), for instance, clarifies that the infinitist is "interested in reasons one *could give*" not necessarily any actualized chain of infinite reasons (p. 105). Thus, infinitism, construed as an aspirational position – one in which the proper norms are defined, but not necessarily one that would allow for the fulfillment of those norms – does need to insist that we can *actually* provide an infinite series of reasons. However, when the acceptance of infinitism *itself* is in question, this sort of response does not suffice. Simply put, infinitism, by the infinitist's reckoning, is a merely bald assertion unless we

have an infinite series of reasons for it – and we do not, even if we might understand (or aspire to) what this would require.

In order to secure legitimacy as something more than a merely bald metaepistemic position, infinitism must find firmer ground, and, in so doing, it loses its identity to its more defensible metaepistemic replacement. Specifically, I will argue that this replacement *must be* foundationalism because it is the only classical solution that does not succumb to the same fate. Because I will be making much the same move in the next section when I address the coherentists, I will save the finer details as to why foundationalism must serve this role until the final section of this chapter.

I have thus far provided a fairly short treatment for the infinitist. While often ignored by broader epistemology, infinitism has developed into a fairly intricate body of views within contemporary epistemology. The sort of infinitism I have been discussing is most similar to Klein's (2005), but he is not alone. Aikin (2010), for example, mounts an attempt to defend infinitism as a reasonable position, but in so doing rejects the particularities of Klein's infinitism. Aikin, for example, accepts that some of the criticisms against infinitism have been impactful and that this requires some modification away from a pure form of the view. Deutscher (1973), for instance, points out that the mere connection of beliefs to one another (even to infinity) does not seem to make such a chain of beliefs reasonable:

> Could it be one vast delusion system? Is a man reasonable in holding one belief because he holds another whose propositional content is suitably related to the first, even if he holds the second on account of a third which is suitably related to the second, and so on? Might not a man just dream up a system and be ingenious enough to always extend his story in logical fashion? How can the mere continuous

extension of a belief system guarantee the rationality of the members of the system?

(p. 6)

What Deutscher is getting at is that the infinitist, of a certain stripe, does not seem to place any sort of importance on the state of the world in their account of justification; and, in so doing, run the risk of creating more or less coherent strings of reasons that do not point us towards truth at all. Aikin's (2010) response is to differentiate between what he calls pure and impure epistemic infinitism.

Pure epistemic infinitism is the sort we have already seen – it is necessary, in order for a belief to be justified, for it to be supported by an infinite series of reasons *and* this is the only way in which a belief may be justified. *Impure* epistemic infinitism, on the other hand, is the view that there must be at least one infinite series of reasons supporting a belief in order for it to be justified. The important difference here is that impure epistemic infinitism opens the door to other forms of justification as well – they may even prove to be necessary – so long as there is also at least one infinite series of reasons involved. Aikin, then, attempts to resolve the problems with pure infinitism by embracing a degree of foundationalism with his impure infinitism, creating what he calls modest infinitism (borrowing from Gillett 2003). For Aikin (2010), our beliefs must in part be supported by an infinite chain(s) of reasons in order to be justified, but which chains of reasons are acceptable is in part determined by experience (itself not supported by anything else). This experiential element allows Aikin to incorporate a means by which the infinite series of reasons of the infinitist can "bump against the world" in order to alleviate concerns like those found in Deutscher (1973). As I will show in the following section, this strategy of incorporating some element of foundationalism has been utilized by the coherentists as well (BonJour 1985, Haack 1993).

Gillett (2003) anticipates such a move and offers a response that is similar in kind to my own. Rather than pure and impure, Gillett uses the terms "bold" and "modest" to describe much the same thing. Where *bold* infinitism holds that infinite series of reasons are "determinant of justified belief", *modest* infinitism holds that infinite series of reasons are only a "marker of justified belief" (2003, p. 715). He offers the following challenge:

> [I]f there can be a belief that is a non-arbitrary reason, but not in virtue of some further belief being a non-arbitrary reason, then one is left without any reason why an unending array of non-arbitrary reasons is necessary for justification and one plausibly abandons Infinitism. (2003, p. 715)

In other words, if the modest infinitist accepts that a reason can be given that, itself, requires no other reasons, then they have formally given up the view of infinitism. Aikin (2010), I think rightly, points out that this challenge only goes through if we assume that our epistemic positions ought to remain pure (non-pluralistic). Aikin's own position is one that is unabashedly mixed and thus, he thinks, it avoids this issue. So long as one incorporates the necessity of infinite series of reasons into the mix *somewhere*, one remains some form of infinitist – so the thought goes.

Where my challenge and Gillett's challenge differ is that I am seeking to bring the attack to the level of the metaepistemic – not just as a challenge of consistency, but as a challenge against acceptance in the first place. I am not overly concerned with whether one can or cannot properly call themselves an infinitist depending on their other commitments, but rather with the acceptance of *any form* of infinitism as a metaepistemic view. If we are not permitted merely bald assertions, then we are not allowed them at any level.

There is, however, a ready reply in Alston's notion of level confusions (1980) that should be addressed sooner rather than later. Alston charges that skeptics (especially those trying to generate some form of regress) are commonly guilty of a level confusion in which they seem to believe that one must be justified in holding some belief *about* an epistemic principle in order for that epistemic principle to actually do the work of justifying. On Alston's view, one need not have justification for one's metaepistemic standard regarding justification *in order* for one's lower-level beliefs to be justified. There is a difference, in other words, between being justified in believing something and being justified in your belief about being justified in believing. Enoch and Schechter's (2008) notion of "thinker" seems to track much the same thing. A thinker, on their view, does not need to understand a theory in order to employ it. And I think this is correct when applied to certain epistemic views – like thoroughgoing externalism and non-normative epistemologies. However, I am not merely accusing the infinitist of having an "unjustified" metaepistemic commitment about justification; I am accusing them of having committed a merely bald assertion at some level.

While the traditional epistemic regress problem is centrally involved with the notion of justification, the form of the problem that I have presented is not. Because the success condition that my form of the problem is attacking is the achievement of avoiding merely bald assertions, there is no level confusion. I am not merely questioning why the infinitist believes infinitism is a *justified position*, I am asking why the infinitist believes their metaepistemic commitment is not a *merely bald assertion*. If a particular philosopher elects to have justification serve as the sole epistemic means by which merely bald assertions are sorted from non-bald assertions, so be it, but that is not a

commitment that I want to presume, and I should like to hear reasons for thinking that it must be so. To apply Alston's (1980) argument now is to miss the point. Yes, there is a distinction to be made between a belief's actually being reasonable and our reasonably believing that a belief is reasonable, but so long as we are on the hook for avoiding merely bald assertions, we are equally responsible for motivating our metaepistemic theories that allow us to do this.

Aikin (2010), for what it's worth, does do some work towards answering the challenge I pose. For him, infinitism is a position that we should consider because it best fits several criteria that he seeks to establish about the nature of justification. Thus, a reason for accepting infinitism could just be that it meets these specific criteria. Specifically, Aikin's desiderata for justification include: being subject-relative, being truth-directed, being shareable, being dialectical, coming in degrees, being fallible and correctable, and being required for intellectual integrity. (p. 11-12). The issue is that once you begin to play the skeptic's game, you may be in for the long haul; for now that candidate reasons have been provided for thinking that infinitism might not be just a merely bald assertion, we can ask the same of these new reasons. Why are these specific desiderata necessary for a good theory of justification? Why does infinitism best serve this function? And on it goes. We will have to turn to some form of reason that answers the question for itself, ending the regress, or find ourselves unwitting dogmatists.

2.2.   Coherentism

For the coherentist, the measure of a belief's epistemic worthiness is bound up in how it fits within the overall picture of our belief system. Indeed, some coherentists (see BonJour

1985) argue that it is inappropriate to judge a belief's worthiness individually altogether; instead, these coherentists argue, a belief system *as a whole* is justified or it is not.[47] Thus, the skeptic employing the epistemic regress problem is either (1) to be answered with an account as to how one's belief coheres with some others or (2) asking the wrong sort of question altogether (because it is a belief *system* in need of defense, not some individual claim). In this section I will show why this solution is unsuccessful in the face of this new regress problem. My strategy will be much the same as that I took with the infinitist – I will argue that the coherentist needs to motivate the notion of coherentist justification in order to employ it as means of supplying reasons and that this motivation cannot be supplied by the theory itself.

While coherentism is a much more broadly accepted position than infinitism[48], it is not without its own detractors. Bertrand Russell, famously opposed to the view, delivers two attacks against the view in his *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) that are worth mentioning at the start. Also worth mentioning is that Russell's target in making these two arguments is actually the coherentist theory of *truth* rather than justification, and while a coherentist theory of truth may imply a coherentist theory of justification, the implication does not necessarily flow both ways. Nevertheless, the arguments that Russell makes here are easily tailored to fit my present needs. On to Russell's first argument:

> The first [difficulty] is that there is no reason to suppose that only *one* [sic] coherent
> body of beliefs is possible. It may be that, with sufficient imagination, a novelist
> might invent a past for the world that would perfectly fit on to what we know, and
> yet be quite different from the real past. [. . .] it seems not uncommon for two rival

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[47] This is similar to the Duhem-Quine problem, though Bonjour (1985) is considering other scenarios in which a belief system may be subject to evaluation in addition to encounters with aberrant experience.
[48] According to the 2020 PhilPapers Survey, nearly 20% of respondents accept or lean towards coherentism as a theory of justification while only 1.47% accept or lean towards infinitism.

hypotheses to be both able to account for all the facts. Thus, for example, it is possible that life is one long dream, and that the outer world has only that degree of reality that the objects of dreams have; but although such a view does not seem inconsistent with known facts, there is no reason to prefer it to the common-sense view, according to which other people and things really do exist. Thus coherence as the definition of truth fails because there is no proof that there can be only one coherent system. (1912, p. 191-192)

This argument should seem familiar as it more or less expresses the same concerns that Deutscher (1973) has with infinitism – could not some brilliant person simply make up a series of well-connected reasons altogether detached from the world? And would this not satisfy the infinitists' demands? Russell's (1912) concern is this: it does not appear as though there is a ready method for adjudicating between two or more equally coherent systems of belief. Just as it seemed that the infinitist might have to accept *any* infinite series of beliefs (linked together correctly) as justified, so too might the coherentist have to accept *any* coherent system of belief as justified. This was a problem for Russell because he wanted truth to be singular and resolute and it does not appear that coherentism (as a theory of truth) makes room for that. As a theory of justification however, the problem seems to be that the coherentist (like the infinitist) has no way of grounding the selection of their view against any number of alternate yet equally reasonable views. What makes any one coherent set of beliefs preferable to any other if both are truly cohesive? Such a question cannot be answered by resort to coherentism once more.

The natural response to such a concern is to include some element of experience – again, much like we saw with the infinitists. First, there is BonJour's (1985) attempt to salvage the view by incorporating what he calls, "cognitively spontaneous beliefs". These spontaneous

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beliefs are involuntary reflections of experience that are, in some fashion, justified in themselves. To be fair, BonJour's view is fairly technical in that he does not think that all justification is suitable for the achievement of knowledge. These cognitively spontaneous beliefs are thought to possess *some* level of justification, but not a sufficient amount of it to ever satisfy the justification component of knowledge. That said, the idea is that these minimally justified, cognitively spontaneous beliefs can empower systems of coherent belief to achieve that degree of justification as a whole by serving as the initial source of justification that a coherent system can then be built upon. Further, by incorporating the role of experience, BonJour hopes to avoid the sort of objection we have seen from Russell (1912) and Deutscher (1973).

Haack (1993) utilizes a similar sort of strategy with the proposal of her foundherentism theory of justification. In this view, certain kinds of experiences (those normally attributed to theories of acquaintance, like perceptual experience, experience through memory, and experience through introspection) can serve as evidence for beliefs without, themselves, being beliefs at all. The propositions derived from these experiences are said to be able to noninferentially justify proper experience-based beliefs. The importance of this strategy is that Haack blocks the foundationalist from laying claim to some noninferentially justified belief (as these experiences are *not* propositional or beliefs themselves) while simultaneously maintaining some component of experience by which the coherent system of beliefs can be tethered to the world.

Here again we find room for concerns similar to those against the infinitist. Gillett (2003) challenged the notion that infinitism was anything more than a foundationalism if it allowed itself to incorporate foundationalist elements – the same challenge can be made here. Indeed, that challenge has been issued by BonJour (1985) towards his own view (now called

"weak foundationalism"), by Bonjour against Haack's foundherentism (1997), and by Tramel (2008). These challenges all involve some form of targeting the noninferentially justified element of experience baked into the views. While I think these criticisms are effective against the sort of coherentist would seeks to contaminate their view with some other metaepistemic standard, I will argue that there is a simpler way to go about this challenge, one that will lead directly into my own metalevel critique of the view.

> For this challenge we need only return to Russell (1912):

> The other objection to this definition of truth is that it assumes the meaning of "coherence" known, whereas, in fact, "coherence" presupposes the truth of the laws of logic. Two propositions are coherent when both may be true and are incoherent when one at least must be false. Now in order to know whether two propositions can both be true, we must know such truths as the law of contradiction. [. . .] But if the law of contradiction itself were subjected to the test of coherence, we should find that, if we choose to suppose it false, nothing will any longer be incoherent with anything else. Thus the laws of logic supply the skeleton or framework within which the test of coherence applies, and they themselves cannot be established by this test. (p. 192)

What Russell's attack amounts to is a charge of plain metaepistemic commitment that the coherentist is unable to ground by their own lights. Without some predetermined means by which the coherentist can establish the governance of coherence (what beliefs cohere and which do not – or which systems of belief cohere and which do not), the theory is simply of no use. But this means of evaluating coherence at the first-order cannot, itself, be established by coherentism at the order of the metaepistemic, and any attempt to do so will generate a regress of

the mode of **M2**. This seems to leave two options for the coherentist: (1) embrace the elements needed to get coherentism off the ground dogmatically or (2) yield to some other theory that *can* properly motivate the needed elements – foundationalism.

Now, as with the infinitist, Alston's (1980) charge of level confusion must be met. For the coherentist has it available to them, satisfying solution or not, to claim along with Alston that a theory of justification does not need to be demonstrably justified, itself, in order to do the work of justifying. In other words, coherentism as a theory of justification may be perfectly well suited for accounting for which beliefs (or belief systems) are justified *without* having a story to tell as to how the theory itself is justified.[49] Once again, however, I am not asking why the coherentist believes that coherentism is justified; I am asking why the coherentist thinks that the crucial elements required for their view are not merely bald assertions. For this reason, moving vertically to the metaepistemic level will not serve as any refuge to the coherentist. Metaepistemic or not, if we buy the notion that merely bald assertions are epistemically inadmissible, then no commitment escapes unquestioned. By what means is coherence evaluated? And what grounds the tools necessary for those evaluations? These questions demand answers that the coherentist is unable to give without abandoning their project – for, in motivating the metaepistemic commitments necessary to get coherentism off the ground, the coherentist will have demonstrated that they are anything but.

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[49] I have witnessed similar discussions in which Russell's second argument is waved away with Carnap's internal-external question distinction – the idea being that which beliefs (or belief systems) cohere is an internal question, but the larger questions Russell demands answers to are external.

2.3.   Foundationalism

Foundationalism seems uniquely poised to address the epistemic regress problem because of its explicit incorporation of noninferentially justified beliefs. That is, foundationalists maintain a metaepistemic commitment to beliefs that are inherently *regress terminators*. Depending on the foundationalist in question, these beliefs may take many different forms, but shared amongst them are two components: (1) these beliefs achieve justification automatically and self-sufficiently, and (2) these beliefs can be used, inferentially, to extend justification to other, less immediate beliefs. The first component mentioned will allow the foundationalist (on the face of things) to escape from **M1** should such foundations be located. To see why, let us review the two challenges that have so far plagued infinitism and coherentism.

First, there is the challenge that a system of justification does not, necessarily, connect with the world. You may have an infinite series of well-structured reasons or a coherent set of beliefs that were merely conjured by some brilliant creative mind – so the worry goes. How are we supposed to sort these systems of belief from one another if they all fulfill the criteria established by our theories of justification? Foundationalism, it seems, is immune to such worries. This is because it does not merely base its notion of justification on the way in which beliefs are related but by the intrinsic quality of some certain beliefs. That intrinsic quality, whatever the foundationalist in question calls it, is thought to be *truth-directed*. Thus, the foundational belief *itself* tells you that the belief in question is more than merely potentially true. It is no wonder that infinitists and coherentists alike readily soften their views to include foundationalist elements when faced with this challenge – the foundationalist's response is immediate and conclusive. Now it goes without saying that this only works if there *really are* beliefs with this intrinsic quality, but I will leave that discussion for the next chapter.

The second, more crucial, challenge is that a theory of justification must, in some way, be shown not to be a merely bald assertion of a higher order without relying on elements that point towards another theory of justification as its ultimate ground. Here too, foundationalism has a unique solution. If there truly are foundational beliefs with the special intrinsic feature foundationalists allege, then it seems that foundationalism is the *only* classical solution to the regress problem that can ground itself. Because a foundational belief's reasons are self-providing, there is an answer to the charge of merely bald assertion before it is even uttered. In the case of a properly foundational belief, in other words, *to believe is to know*. Thus, the foundationalist's answer to the first-order sort of question which began the regress with **M1**, will serve as their answer to the metaepistemic question as well (why should we accept that foundationalism is the proper view of justification?). What reason do we have for accepting foundationalism as anything more than a bald assertion? If it is possible to acquire a genuinely foundational belief, then reason is self-presenting. That the belief in question is more than merely potentially true is made evident by its foundational quality.

All of this is not to say that the foundationalist will have no troubles with the epistemic regress problem at all. Indeed, because the foundationalist will eventually want to draw inferences from their foundational beliefs, they will still suffer **M2**, but even so, not to the same degree as the other two positions. Because **M2** attacks the linking of a reason and a belief (rather than the assertion of a belief), it will prove especially damaging to infinitism and coherentism which place the means of acquiring justification *solely in* relations between beliefs. Indeed, with **M2** in play, it isn't clear that infinitism or coherentism could establish any non-bald claim, *even if* their metaepistemic commitments were granted freely. Before a belief system can be said to cohere, for example, its beliefs must "hang together" in a certain way. **M2** attacks the individual

"hanging together"s of those beliefs such that, even if we had a preestablished way of checking the relations between beliefs for proper cohesion, it would still be an open question as to whether we had good reason for concluding that those checking conditions were properly fulfilled in each individual case.

Again, foundationalism isn't immune to this kind of attack, but it does have some saving grace that the other two classical solutions do not. Even if **M2** eliminates the ability to draw inferences from one belief to another without merely bald assertion, the foundationalist still gets to keep their foundational beliefs (if there are any). That might not be much, but any little bit will allow us to escape the fate of Sextus Empiricus.

3.   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that infinitism and coherentism both suffer the same fatal challenges from the epistemic regress problem – they require that we either commit to their metaepistemic accounts of justification baldly or that we diversify our account of justification by incorporating some other metaepistemic account that *is* capable of grounding across levels of discourse. Given that the latter option is the only one of the two that does not immediately violate the minimal epistemic standard of Chapter 1, I take it that infinitists and coherentists are right to introduce more moderate forms of their views in which an element of some other theory is adopted. Foundationalism, I contend, is the only remaining option given that it *does* seem, in principle, capable of grounding itself metaepistemically. And so, the three classical solutions to the epistemic regress problem amount to one real possibility: foundationalism.

In the next chapter I will explore some of the differences between foundationalists with special attention given to the special-making feature of foundational beliefs. This will be done to

ensure that my proceeding arguments *against* foundationalism are sufficiently general. Some of the arguments I have applied in this chapter will see further use when I attack the pragmatist's solution to the regress problem in Chapter 5. For that reason, and because an easy solution to these sorts of criticisms is to latch onto foundationalism (as we have seen with the infinitist and the coherentist), it will be imperative to close off the door of foundationalism to the pragmatist here and now.

Chapter Four: The Case Against Foundationalism

1.   Introduction

Foundationalism, generally speaking, is the view that while there are reasonable beliefs formed through some inferential practice, there are *also* some non-inferential reasonable beliefs. Foundationalists further hold that those beliefs which *are* inferred, are inferred in light of some set of our non-inferential beliefs. While this inferential dependency need not be immediate – an inferred belief may be inferred because of other inferred beliefs – there should be some point along the path of inferential support wherein we ground out in some number (or perhaps just one) non-inferential belief.

This structuring of the reason-giving process does seem intuitive. For example, I believe that my neighbor enjoys playing golf because I have seen him carrying his golf clubs to and from his vehicle and because he has related previous enjoyable experiences of his golfing to me. However, I recognize that I only believe that I have seen my neighbor transferring his golf clubs because of other inferred beliefs – (1) given that he seems to be in possession of them so frequently and that he communicates to me that he has had some enjoyable experiences golfing, I infer that they are at least his golf clubs to use and that he is not simply transporting them for someone else; (2) I infer that my perception is at least somewhat reliable given that I seem to successfully navigate the world at least most of the time; and likely a host of other seemingly trivial beliefs. If we continue this process of tracing dependencies along inferential lines, we will eventually arrive at a non-inferential ground(s) – these are our foundations.

It is no wonder, then, that the foundationalist appears to have an easy answer to the epistemic regress problem. The epistemic regress problem, traditionally presented, *just is* an

attack on the reason giving process. If we, at any point, fail to provide a reason in support of a belief, then that belief is unreasonable – so goes the traditional epistemic regress problem. If the foundationalist is permitted the move towards accepting some non-inferential but nevertheless reasonable beliefs, then the challenge of the traditional epistemic regress problem will have been met because no reason can be demanded to stand for this kind of belief. Indeed, it is the very lack of these non-inferential, yet reasonable, beliefs that delivers the downfall of the infinitist and coherentist. Because both views are wholly wrapped up in evaluating the patterns of inference and the overall fit of the total of inferred beliefs to one another, there is no point at which they can successfully address the skeptic's challenge.

In this chapter, I will argue that while foundationalism seems better equipped as an attempt to escape from the epistemic regress problem, it will nevertheless be insufficient for resolving the problem in the modes I present. I will begin with some explication of the nature of foundational beliefs (those beliefs that are reasonable albeit non-inferential) given that there seems to be no universal agreement amongst (especially contemporary) foundationalists[50]. I will then argue that, whatever one's approach to delimiting foundations, there is something (be it the means by which a belief was formed, the incorrigibility of the belief, or otherwise) that makes these foundational beliefs "special" – this is what I will refer to later as the *special-making feature* of foundational beliefs. This must be the case because there is no reason to think that a non-inferred belief is reasonable merely in virtue of the fact that it is non-inferential. I may have all sorts of arbitrarily formed beliefs that lack inferential support – this in itself is not epistemically laudable. Thus, there must be *something* that sets some non-inferred beliefs apart

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[50] See DePaul (2000), Porter (2006), and Triplett (1990) for inventories of more contemporary foundationalist views.

from others – whatever that is, I will refer to as the special-making feature of foundational beliefs.

My primary attack against foundationalism as an answer to the epistemic regress problem will flow from the distinction made above between those non-inferred beliefs that maintain some degree of "specialness" and those that do not. While it may be possible to conjure up any number of examples of arbitrary non-inferential beliefs that clearly lack any epistemic credit, I will argue that it is also possible to conceive of non-inferential beliefs that *appear* to possess epistemic credit when they *should not* or, rather, when we should have no reason to assume that they do. Further, I will argue that it will, in principle, be possible to mistake one of these non-inferred beliefs which merely *appears* to possess some epistemic credit with a properly foundational belief. If this possibility remains open, I argue, we may never have the grounds to identify foundational beliefs at all – a death knell to at least most forms of foundationalism.

Lastly, I will draw out the consequences of **M2** to show that the perceived potential for foundationalism to solve the epistemic regress problem has been historically overblown. Specifically, I will show that establishing firm foundations, even if possible, is insufficient for resolving the larger threat of the epistemic regress problem – the challenge that we may not be able to attach reasons to claims in a non-bald manner at all. Because **M2** attacks the notion that a given reason actually does the supporting role it is assigned, it will continue to rear its head even *if* firm foundations are secured. If the foundationalist can secure their foundations, that is still no small thing, but the utility of the view remains in question. If Descartes could establish only the *cogito* and nothing more, the *Meditations* would have been a much shorter, and far less interesting work.

2.   On What Makes a Foundation Foundational

Accounts on the nature of foundational beliefs typically begin with the standard established by Descartes in his *Meditations*. Specifically, Descartes holds that a foundational belief ought to be indubitable, or that we must be *certain* about our beliefs in order for them to count as foundational. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, then, is foundational because there is no room to doubt it. Further, this indubitability should come about, not inferentially, but through direct apprehension. As Descartes (1996) argues in response to the "Second Set of Objections" to the *Meditations*, "when someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist' he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind." (AT VII 140)

Thus, for Descartes and epistemologists like him, a proper foundational belief is one that cannot be doubted *and* one that makes this fact apparent to us without need for inference. This is why many may refer to foundational beliefs as *self-evidently true* – the truth of the belief is said to make itself *evident* to the believer. This form of foundationalism has been called classical foundationalism, strong foundationalism, and (not necessarily disparagingly) "old-fashioned foundationalism" (DePaul, 2000). BonJour (1985) further clarifies the position in stating that the classical foundationalist holds that foundational beliefs must be infallible, incorrigible, indubitable, *and* certain. This is no short order and many foundationalists have since moved away from the foundationalism of Descartes in light of the demandingness of the view. In contemporary epistemology, it is much more common to practice modest, or weak, foundationalism in which one's foundations are not thought to be *certain* but are merely in a position such that we have *no sufficient reason* to doubt them. That said, as DePaul (2000)

notes, there are some signs of reemergence for the "old-fashioned" foundationalist in contemporary epistemology.

There are a great many forms of modest foundationalism that have their own particularities regarding the source of justification for foundations – too many to discuss in exhaustive detail, though Triplett (1990) offers a fairly extensive if somewhat dated account. Uniting their accounts, however, is the notion that our foundational beliefs need not be certain or infallible; rather, most modest foundationalists hold that a foundational belief is justified just in case we have no reason to think it is false. The specifics of what makes a foundational belief foundational are a bit more complicated for the modest foundationalist. Many of them land on a particular sort of relationship or another between the believer and the belief in question. For example, many adhere to an acquaintance theory of foundational beliefs in which a belief is foundational so long as the believer is *in an acquaintance relation* with said belief (Russell 1913, for example).

In such a view, a belief need not be completely removed from the possibility of doubt in order to serve as a foundation, but the believer is in a special relationship with the belief such that there is *no reason* to doubt said belief. These sorts of beliefs are often referred to as *given* in that they are presented directly to the believer. Other forms of modest foundationalism express a similar notion with only minor distinctions – Fales (1996), for instance, holds that *transparent access* to the belief is required to make the belief foundational. Other acquaintance-like views seek to clarify just what can, and cannot, be relied upon to serve as a foundation in lieu of this relationship between believer and belief. Beliefs formed immediately through sense-experience, for example, are by and large the most popular candidates for foundational beliefs amongst such modest foundationalists.

Whatever the case may be, whether a foundational belief is made so because it possesses a particular kind of epistemically laudable property (like self-evidence) or because it is held in a certain kind of relation to the believer (as in the acquaintance relation), there is some feature of foundational beliefs that makes them stand apart from other, non-foundational beliefs. It is this "special-making" feature that makes foundational beliefs admissible *despite* the fact that they are non-inferential. It is thus the obtaining of this fact that grants a foundational belief its status. The attack that I will now levy against the foundationalist will target our ability to discern when the above-mentioned fact obtains. There is reason to think, I argue, that we will *never* be in a position to know when a belief legitimately expresses this special-making feature, and thus, we may never be in a position to lay claim to any particular foundations.

3.   Underdetermination with Mere Ungiveupability

The attack on foundationalism that follows finds a lineage in the arguments against foundationalism by BonJour (1985) and Bergmann (2006). BonJour (1985), then a coherentist arguing against foundationalism, draws a distinction between a belief's possessing of (what I have called) the special-making feature of foundational beliefs and the access one has to that fact. Thus, BonJour holds, in order for one to claim justified belief in *p* in light of its possessing of the special-making feature, one must also be justified in believing that *p* possesses the special-making feature and that this special-making feature does the work of justifying that it is supposed to do. If this is true, then it is possible to generate a regress over foundational beliefs as one will need to demonstrate for every instance of a proposed foundation that they are justified in holding it to be foundational. If this is possible, then it seems like the belief was not foundational in the first place given that it was possible to motivate it by appealing to something

else; but if it is not possible, then it isn't clear, by BonJour's lights, that we have any right to lay claim to the proposed foundation. A similar worry can be found in Descartes (1996) if one examines the Cartesian circle, a body of objections to Descartes' apparently circular reasoning in which he defends his version of the special-making feature (the ability to be clearly and distinctly perceived) in virtue of God's nature as a non-deceiver while also defending his belief in the existence of such a God in virtue of certain clear and distinct perceptions. It seems clear that Descartes faced a similar challenge to that BonJour expresses: the felt need to justify the conditions under which a candidate foundational belief is granted status.

Bergmann (2006), in arguing against internalism more generally, finds a narrower target in the foundationalist as well. He argues that the classical foundationalist holds a view that he refers to as strong-awareness internalism (SAI) which is simply the view that we must be aware of or have access to that which gives any particular belief justification in order for it to count as justified for us. This SAI is motivated by a particular thesis Bergmann holds the internalist committed to:

> If the subject holding a belief isn't aware of what that belief has going for it, then
> she isn't aware of how its status is any different from a stray hunch or an arbitrary
> conviction. From that we may conclude that from her perspective it is an accident
> that her belief is true. And that implies that it isn't a justified belief. (2006, p.12)

Thus, to avoid the worry that one's belief in a particular candidate foundational belief is accidental, the foundationalist might adopt SAI in which we ought to have access to whatever grants that candidate foundational belief its status (the special-making feature I refer to). Like BonJour (1985), Bergmann (2006) concludes that this kicks off a vicious regress, for, if we are on the hook for this awareness, then it stands to reason that we could also be wrong about our

conclusions that we are aware of any candidate foundational belief's having of the special-making feature, so we ought to be aware of what makes that initial awareness acceptable and so forth. It follows that a candidate foundational belief *p* should require *p** (a reasonable belief that *p* has the special-making feature) which should require *p*** (a reasonable belief that *p** is reasonable…) and *p****, and so it goes.

There are many replies to these forms of objections, the easiest among them being a dismissal of the sort of internalism that BonJour and Bergmann attribute to the foundationalist. Bergmann (2006) gives some reasons for thinking that the internalist ought not dismiss his notion of SAI so readily since it would mean relinquishing much of what they value in respect to how philosophy should be conducted – i.e., we would have to give up on the idea of conducting inquiry with assurance. Some argue that there is room for a purely externalist foundationalism as well (Fumerton and Hasan, 2022) which would seemingly make escape from the regress posited by BonJour and Bergmann trivial, if it were not a variety of what I have called lightweight externalism which still maintains *some* degree of commitment to internalism.

That said, there are also foundationalists who think they can meet the challenge without relinquishing any commitment to internalism. Rogers and Matheson (2011), for instance, argue that the special-making feature (they suggest a particular kind of seeming) ought to do double duty in the sense that it yields non-inferential justification *and* "non-inferentially justifies the conceptualization of itself as being related to the truth or justification of that belief." (p. 17). If this is possible, then we would not need to appeal to further beliefs as Bergmann (2006) and BonJour (1985) require in order to secure a candidate foundational belief's status, and thus we may avoid the regress they seek to generate. Fales (1996 and 2014) has a similar sort of response in that he holds that a justified belief in foundational-candidate *p* entails upon reflection

p*, *p***, etc… Thus, if we have *p*, there is no need to do additional work to meet Bergmann's (2006) challenge – we might not ordinarily think of *p**, but upon reflection we could easily find it justified. In a sense, then, both of these sorts of replies suggest that the special-making feature of a candidate foundational belief should be sufficient for our acceptance of that belief. But, while I think this is something of a forced choice if one is to maintain an internalist foundationalism, I find these solutions overly optimistic. In what follows, I will present my case that there is at least one conceivable defeater that cannot be eliminated for *every* candidate foundational belief, even if we do presume that the special-making feature of foundational beliefs should make their "specialness" apparent to us.

The form of my argument is as follows: foundationalists may not be responsible for further judgements that their candidate foundational beliefs *really are* foundational so long as the special-making feature makes the belief's status apparent in virtue of the belief's having it *unless* there is a conceivable way in which a candidate foundational belief might merely *appear* to have this special status when it truly ought not. If this latter possibility is conceivable, then it is conceivable that we could be in error *even if* we are in a state of appreciating a candidate foundational belief's status as directly apparent.[51] Further, if there is genuine underdetermination between the two possibilities (that we have successfully identified a foundational belief or we have not), then the foundationalist no longer has the grounds by which to claim that the regresses of BonJour (1985) and Bergmann (2006) can be dismissed due to the nature of the special-making feature. In order to collapse this underdetermination to settle the

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[51] Boghossian (2000) seems to share a similar worry for foundationalism, though he is not, here, concerned with the epistemic regress problem but rather with the intuitive acceptability of foundationalism as a theory: "No one has supplied a criterion for distinguishing those propositions that are self-evident from those that – like the parallel postulate in Euclidean geometry or the proposition that life cannot be reduced to anything biological – merely seemed self-evident to many people for a very long time." (p. 239)

matter securely as to whether a candidate foundational belief *really is* foundational, we will need some further test by which to distinguish erroneous cases. This in turn would require beliefs that are somehow more foundational than our proposed foundations, and they too would be subject to the same scrutiny. The task of successfully identifying foundations, then, is doomed to initiate a regress and thus the epistemic regress problem is inescapable for the foundationalist.

In order for my argument to succeed, however, I will need to identify a kind of belief that could reasonably be mistaken for a belief that genuinely possesses the special-making feature. For this, I turn to Quine's notion of *ungiveupability*. In *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1951), Quine sums up his radical version of confirmation holism as follows:

> [. . .] it becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. Revision even of the logical law of the excluded middle has been proposed as a means of simplifying quantum mechanics; and what difference is there in principle between such a shift and the shift whereby Kepler superseded Ptolemy, or Einstein Newton, or Darwin Aristotle? (p. 41)

Quine's view is thus that the totality of our beliefs, our "webs of belief", must meet the world all at once. This means that any new experience we gain from the world is to be judged in accordance with and accommodated for by the entirety of our belief system instead of some

more local set of beliefs restricted by relevance. Perhaps a new experience could be accommodated with very little shift in our present belief systems, but so too might they require us to make certain alterations. Quine's point is that these alterations may occur *anywhere* within our belief system and still prove sufficient for accommodating said aberrant experience. We might find that dismissing a surface belief that holds little significance is the best way to accommodate the new experience, or we might find that we need to revise our fundamental rules of inference – either strategy could be said to be successful.

There is also room in Quine's system, then, for holding certain beliefs to be unrevisable *come what may*. If there is no objectively preferred strategy for a system of belief's handling of aberrant experience and there are multiple ways to skin the cat so to speak, then it is also possible to preserve certain beliefs despite whatever experiences come along. For Quine, then, any statement (or belief) could be held *ungiveupably* or held in such a way that it is immune to revision even in the face of apparently disconfirming evidence. Quine is careful to make the point that no belief is *in principle* ungiveupable; indeed, he argues quite the opposite – all beliefs are, in principle, open to revision. What I now suggest, however, is that it is at least conceivable that some of our beliefs are held ungiveupably *without our having made the decision to hold them so*. In other words, I see it as a distinct possibility that there could be beliefs that we cannot help but believe – to us, they would seem undeniable, perhaps even incorrigible, or self-evident.

Thus far, the foundationalist should have little objection. Quine is no foundationalist, but the notion of ungiveupability should not be offensive to the foundationalist so long as it is detethered from his notion that all beliefs are, in principle, revisable. This is because a proper foundational belief *ought to be* ungiveupable. If the only thing going for a foundational belief is that it partakes in the special-making feature of foundational beliefs, then it will be vital for this

special-making feature to maintain conviction regarding said belief, otherwise it will prove

insufficient to support the belief's claim to foundation in the first place and this situation will

lead us straight into the regress of Bergman (2006) and BonJour (1985). But, if the special-

making feature of foundational beliefs is sufficient to maintain one's conviction in a foundational

belief, then there will never be a grounds by which we can dismiss such a belief so long as we

have gained it. Indeed, I charge that it is this *feeling* of ungiveupability that so many

foundationalists appeal to *as* the crucial aspect of the special-making feature of foundational

beliefs. Descartes' notion of clear and distinct perception or (more directly) immunity to doubt,

Fales (1996) notion of transparency in regard to the justificatory status of foundational beliefs,

and the seeming of Rogers and Matheson (2011) all rely on some notion of undeniability. To

have appropriate access to a foundational belief, in some sense, is to be compelled by it in such a

way that no reasonable person could believe otherwise given the circumstance. But I think that

the foundationalist mistakes ungiveupability for sufficient reason to believe at their own peril.

We would like to think that if a belief is truly ungiveupable (not just because we choose

to do so, per the Quinean sense, but because we *cannot help* but hold on to it), that this

ungiveupability should mean something about the worthiness of said belief. Perhaps these sorts

of beliefs are inherent to the kinds of creatures we are in the environments we developed in – if

so, then maybe we have *good reason* for trusting them to some degree; they have been shaped by

the world we find ourselves in after all.[52] But this hope will prove insufficient. First, the notion

that true ungiveupability points to something that is at least likely to have some degree of truth to

it is, itself, a metaepistemic claim in need of support. In our task of seeking to avoid merely bald

assertion, we cannot simply help ourselves to intuitions even if they would potentially allow us

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[52] Williamson (2007) makes such a case for the reliability of counterfactual (and, more generally, *a priori*) reasoning.

to bootstrap the non-inferential justification we need in order to get foundationalism off the ground. What reason do we have for suggesting that an ungiveupable belief is one that even likely points towards something epistemically desirable – like truth? An answer to this question will undoubtedly launch the epistemic regress anew, which will not do given that a satisfactory answer to this question will be needed to motivate the notion that ungiveupability functions as a special-making feature of foundational beliefs in the first place.

Second, I see no reason why a truly ungiveupable belief could not be adrift from the world altogether – that is, it does not appear that an ungiveupable belief necessarily tracks truth (or some other epistemically desirable end) just because of its ungiveupability. If this is the case, then it should be conceivable that we could hold *merely* ungiveupable beliefs, or beliefs that, while truly ungiveupable, do not get us any closer to our epistemic ends. Herein is the threat to foundationalism. If it is conceivable that some truly ungiveupable beliefs are merely ungiveupable, then it will be impossible to sort those beliefs that do grant epistemic credit from the ungiveupable beliefs that do not. There are no degrees to true ungiveupability – such beliefs are entirely recalcitrant – and so there is no test by which the two categories can be sorted. But, if the foundationalist recognizes a foundational belief *by* its felt ungiveupability, then this impossibility of sorting merely ungiveupable beliefs from fruitful ungiveupable beliefs will expose the foundationalist to the potential for error. This potential for error will inevitably reopen the foundationalist to the skeptic's challenge.

A foundationalist's response to the epistemic regress problem is only as good as their ability to secure foundational beliefs. The usual challenge of the skeptic seems inapplicable to the foundationalist at this level, however, because these foundational beliefs are supposed to speak for themselves. However, if it is possible that these proposed foundational beliefs are

actually just *merely ungiveupable beliefs*, then it is possible for the foundationalist to attribute

foundations where there are none. Given this, it is not inappropriate for the skeptic to ask how

the foundationalist has come to believe that their proposed foundations are appropriately

attributed. Could these proposed foundations not merely be ungiveupable? Might *all* proposed

foundations be merely ungiveupable? The foundationalist who is accustomed to shooing away

the skeptic at this level is now faced with a choice: engage with the skeptic in order to establish

the merit of their foundations or baldly assert that their proposed foundations are not merely

ungiveupable.

If the foundationalist chooses to baldly assert that their proposed foundations are not

merely ungiveupable, then they will be in violation of the minimal epistemic standard regarding

the epistemic inadmissibility of merely bald assertions. Then they will have regressed (in the

other sense) back into the dogmatic sort of foundationalism that Sextus Empircus codified as one

of his unacceptable modes for addressing the epistemic regress in which one accepts some

belief(s) *ad hoc* merely to get the ball rolling. However, if the foundationalist agrees to engage

with the skeptic along these grounds, they invite the earlier mentioned attacks of BonJour (1985)

and Bergmann (2006) in such a way that they will not be able to hold off a regress of another

sort. That is, if the foundationalist agrees that they are on the hook for their claims about any

particular candidate for foundational belief before that belief is to be counted as foundational,

then they will never be able to meet the skeptic's demand. For, to do so, the foundationalist

would require some other pre-established foundations from which to draw upon, but these too

would have been subject to the same criticism. There simply will be no way to perform the

bootstrapping that made foundationalism so uniquely suited for addressing the epistemic regress

problem in the first place. In sum, just because a belief *appears* to possess the special-making

feature of genuine foundational belief, it does not follow that it necessarily *is* a proper

foundational belief. It may be the case that there is genuine underdetermination between a

merely ungiveupable belief and one that actually possesses the special-making feature of

foundational belief. Because of this, recognition of foundational beliefs by this special-making

feature will be insufficient to address the skeptic's charge of possible bald assertion. To meet the

challenge, the foundationalist will need to say something that stands in favor of their chosen

foundational beliefs over and above the mere fact that they appear to participate in the special-

making feature, but in so doing, will expose the fact that this makes them incapable of

bootstrapping themselves out of the skeptic's challenge after all. While I think this challenge is

conclusively damning if left unmet, I will also endeavor to show that the potential success of

foundationalism in addressing the epistemic regress problem is overblown even if we could

ignore the present difficulties in the following section.

4.   Limiting the Potential Success of Foundationalism

I will begin this section, for the sake of argument, in assuming that we *are* capable of

successfully identifying legitimate foundational beliefs. There is still reason to think, I maintain,

that foundationalism will fail to alleviate all of the difficulties that come with the epistemic

regress. This is because the epistemic regress problem also constitutes an attack on our ability to

use reasons to support *further* claims – i.e., it is not only an attack on our ability to ground out in

something firm like a foundation, but also on our ability to conduct inference. Thus, even if the

foundationalist's non-inferential yet credible beliefs are granted, it is still not immediately clear

that they will have sufficiently defended the ability to draw inferences from said non-inferential

beliefs given **M2**.

Imagine that we have identified a properly foundational belief – say that it is self-evidently true and refer to it as SE1. SE1 depends on no other beliefs for its epistemic support and thus functions non-baldly without reliance on any chain of inference. However, most of the claims we make are unlikely to be like SE1 – more than likely, they will be inferred. Additionally, for the foundationalist, these inferred beliefs must be inferred on the grounds of some non-inferential beliefs like SE1. So, we can further imagine an inferred belief, call it B1, that depends on SE1 in such a way that assertions of B1 are made non-bald in virtue of SE1. This would seem to satisfy the demands of regress problem **M1** given that B1 terminates in some other belief that justifies itself, but **M2** is not so easily quelled. The second mode of the epistemic regress problem will demand that we establish that the support relation between SE1 and B1 is something more than a mere bald assertion as well. For, if the support relation between the two that grants epistemic credit to B1 on behalf of SE1 is bald, then there is no reason to conclude that B1 inherits any credit at all. The notion that this support relation between the two beliefs *does* allow the facilitation of epistemic credit, then, is a claim of its own in need of defense. At some point, the foundationalist will need to rely on another foundational claim, SE2, in order to ground out the claim B2 (that SE1 supports B1) lest **M2** threaten to generate another regress of the classical sort, **M1**. But **M2** is pernicious, and we will find ourselves, once again, on the hook for establishing that the support relation between SE2 and B2 is not merely bald.

Perhaps there are some few foundational beliefs that will cover the credible linkage of foundational claims to inferred beliefs such that we need not generate a regress of the first sort every time we wish to infer a derived belief from a foundational one – some laws of logic or basic inference rules, for instance, might fulfill this sort of role. If inference rules could be

established as foundational, then it seems, on the face of things, that we could ground out the support between SE1 and B1 *without* the need for a second inferred belief (B2) as SE1 and SE2 (the rule of inference) ought to be sufficient for B1. But there is an important difference between knowing an inference rule (or at least having good reason to assert it) and knowing when it is appropriate to employ it – anyone who has endeavored to introduce students to logic can attest to this fact. Thus, my knowledge that SE2 does not immediately grant me the ability to see that SE1 *really does* support B1 – I also need to understand that SE2 is applicable to this form of proposed support relation. For this reason, it will not be possible to discharge the need for B2 (the inferred belief that SE1 supports B1) *just because* SE2 (the rule of reasoning connecting them) is self-evident.

This is because of the fact that our inference rules are general in form – they generally apply to propositions structurally, without concern for their semantic content. I can know that "if p, then q; p; therefore, q" without recognizing the potential to perform *modus ponens* over individual semanticized propositions. This generality usefully allows our inference rules to apply to a host of inferences, but it is also the reason why said inference rules cannot be used to terminate **M2** as well. There will always be a judgement to be made as to whether a particular support relation between one claim and another *really does* fit the schema of even foundational inference rules.

Now, there is one solution remaining for the foundationalist to escape **M2**, but it gives up so much that I believe the foundationalist will find it anything but. It is theoretically possible that one could have foundational beliefs that perform the role of inference rules for *all* individual support relations between the non-inferential and the inferred. So, for instance, instead of holding *modus ponens* in general form to be foundational, one might hold that "if a shape has

four sides and four right angles, then it is a rectangle; a square has four sides and four right

angles; therefore, a square is a rectangle" to be foundational on its own along with an admittedly

absurdly bloated number of other such inference rules. With these more specified inference

rules, we would not need to undergo the process by which we are forced to evaluate whether or

not SE1 actually applies to B1 – SE2 (the inference rule) has this feature built-in. The

consequence of such a move, however, is that we will have effectively transferred all inference

to the foundational. Given that the foundationalist believes we must start from our foundations

and work our way up, it stands to reason that a foundationalist with such a view could construct

the entirety of their possible worldview from their foundational views alone. The worry is that

by transferring so much to the foundational level, we give up on the idea of building from firm

foundations to weaker, yet still reasonable, conclusions – the division between the non-

inferential and the inferred is lost. What's more, the world would actually need to support these

sorts of specified inference rules as foundational beliefs, as wishing that they were so will be

insufficient for claiming them as true foundations.

A second, yet still ineffective, solution for the foundationalist is to propose a third kind of

foundational belief that binds foundational inference rules to more specified inferential claims.

One way of thinking of this is to imagine something like a manual for translation – something

that grants the ability to convert semanticized inferential claims into formal elements that the

foundational inference rules can range over *without* our needing to establish that the rule is

applicable in each and every special case. So, we may need SE1 (which supplies the grounds for

the content of B1), SE2 (which supplies the inference rule linking SE1 to B1), and SE3 (which

translates B1 into something usable without inference for SE2), but we may avoid the necessity

of B2 in doing so, and thus avoid regress. The problem, of course, is that we will also need to

know when it is appropriate to use SE3 to translate inferred semanticized claims. Just as inference rules are generalized, so too are rules of translation. It is possible that I may fully accept certain rules for formal translation and still wonder whether or not they apply to a particular proposition(s).

Any way around it, it seems, the foundationalist will find that the epistemic regress in **M2** is inescapable if they mean to do any building at all atop their foundations. While it is an understandable, and reasonable, sentiment to want to build your structure on firm ground, the bare ground itself is not a structure. And so too is the foundationalist's response to the skeptic ineffective if they fail to support the reason-giving process. Thus, foundationalism is not the answer we were promised after all. *Even if* foundations can be secured, the moment a belief is formed or a claim is made based on inference, we are back within the grips of epistemic regress. What's worse, it is not at all clear that we *can* secure foundational beliefs given that any genuine candidate for foundational belief will be underdetermined with a belief that is merely ungiveupable. The conclusions of Chapter 3 reveal this to be more than a mere stumbling block, for if the other traditional solutions to the epistemic regress problem collapse into foundationalism, and foundationalism cannot be expected to prevail, then we are fast running out of available options.

5.   Other Avenues for Foundations

There is another body of views, which could be construed as foundationalist, that I owe at least some brief response to. These views are united in opposition to the picture I have painted of foundationalism thus far in that they do not hold their foundations to be certain, beyond doubt, or (in some cases) a kind of belief at all. Specifically, I am referring to views like Pryor's (2000)

account of perceptual justification and the body of views that I will loosely call phenomenal conservatism that have grown around Huemer's (2001) first use of the term. These views all rely on some moderate form of "the given" which serves as potential foundation – what makes their form of the given moderate is that these thinkers all admit that their initial source of justification *could* lead us to error, thus they are a kind of fallibilistic foundationalist. On these views, we begin with something like a perceptual experience or a seeming (as in, "it seems to me that this argument is valid" or "it seems to me that this coffee has gotten cold") that grants, immediately, some degree of justification to a belief. A belief formed in light of a seeming or a perceptual experience is then held to be justified unless defeaters arise. This "justified until proven otherwise" approach has led some of these thinkers to identify their positions with dogmatism[53], though I think it is important to clarify that I do not think that this form of "dogmatism" is what Sextus Empiricus had in mind as an altogether untenable option. That version of dogmatism is not amenable to change which is forced by reason at any level – there simply are no epistemic defeaters in principle, though a dogmatist of this sort may still change their beliefs for other non-epistemic reasons. The use of "dogmatism" by these newer positions seems to do with the relative ease at which justification can be gotten on their view and the "innocent until proven guilty" model of that justification they accept.

What distinguishes these views from the sort of foundationalist I have considered thus far is that they do not hold their foundations to yield any certainty to their ensuing beliefs. To say that a belief p is justified because it is supported by some seeming x is just to say that p has *something* going for it, not that it must, necessarily, be true. Given my minimal epistemic standard, these views are clearly admissible – they clearly delineate those beliefs that might be

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[53] See Pryor (2000) and Tucker (2010) especially.

merely potentially true and those that we have some reason to believe. So how do they fare

against my version of the epistemic regress problem? At first glance, it appears (or seems) that

they might have an easy path of escape – after all, my version of the epistemic regress problem is

targeting our ability to succeed in the delineation between a merely potentially true belief and

one with some (any) reason. Thus, because I have lowered the bar from something as lofty as

justification, I have seemingly declared that if positions like phenomenal conservatism are

successful, they will have succeeded in bypassing the regress. I have several responses.

First, if a seeming is something like a belief[54], then it will clearly be faced with the same

challenges as any other foundational belief. Namely, it will be fair to subject it to the test of **M1**

– do we have reason to think that this "seeming belief" is reasonable? If it is not, then a belief

that is purportedly made reasonable by it (alone) does not, after all, have anything going for it

epistemically. As a foundationalist position, it will be proper to reply that the "seeming belief"

needs no further accounting, but it is important to note that this is not what positions like

phenomenal conservatism say. These positions claim that *a belief that is justified by a seeming*

is justified until there are known defeaters, *not* that the seeming is, itself, justified. The sanctuary

of the old-fashioned foundationalist, that foundational beliefs ground *themselves* through

something like self-evidence, is not available here, which means that these positions, so

construed, will have to meet the demands of **M1**. Thus, I think the more charitable interpretation

of these alternative foundations is *not* to construe them as beliefs at all. Instead, the idea goes,

our beliefs can be justified by other kinds of mental phenomena – like perceptual states

(including the introspective variety), experiences, or inclinations to believe. I won't attempt to

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[54] Cullison (2010) gives reason to doubt that this is the case.

settle the matter here as there is no general consensus amongst phenomenal conservatists[55] and I do not think settling the issue would alter my response in any case – on to my second concern.

Assuming that a seeming is not a belief but that it is nevertheless capable of granting some kind of justification to a belief, my old strategy of employing **M1** will not do – that is, the regress seems to terminate at the point at which the path of reason ends in a non-belief. Nevertheless, I do think that this form of phenomenal conservatism can potentially still be captured. First, while I will not attack the notion that we can have seemings (though this may be an available target), I do think that there is unfounded confidence in regard to how these seemings relate to which beliefs. Suppose S believes *p* because of a seeming *x*. My challenge is not that we should question the existence or availability of *x*, but instead the idea that *x* is ultimately in support of *p*. How should I know, the idea goes, that my experience, *x*, of a particular photograph taken under certain lighting conditions suggests that a dress is blue and black or, alternatively, white and gold? The phenomenal conservatist is likely to reply that either belief would be justified by such an experience, but I mean to target something deeper than the discrimination between alternatives. My concern is that we might need to have a reason for thinking that a seeming connects to any belief *at all*.

When I say that "it seems to me that 'A&B; therefore, A' is a logically valid inference," is it really true that the feeling, sensation, *whatever* the seeming I have is, suggests that this is so? I do not think that phenomenal conservatists have in mind that we must make some kind of inference about our seemings in order for them to be useful for the justification of our belief – instead, it seems that they trade on the ability of a seeming to *directly* lend credence to some belief based on the content of both. But this sounds like a form of externalism (which

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[55] See Tucker (2013), for a discussion of the arguments for and against the construal of seemings as belief, inclinations to believe, and experiences.

phenomenal conservatists may be happy to accept) in that it places the fulfillment conditions of justification (at least in the case of seemings) outside of our agency. Whether or not a belief is justified because of a seeming, then, is a matter of fact about the world – about whether our believing is properly attuned to our seemings. This leads me to an attack of the metaepistemic variety.

As discussed in Chapter 2, a position like externalism may have difficulty motivating itself metaepistemically if the expectation is that those motivations should be in any way accessible. This expectation of accessibility, however, is rejected, at least when universally applied, by the externalist. This leads to the consequence that an externalist could, with consistency, refuse to motivate their commitment to externalism metaepistemically because they may hold that an attunement model of justification is most suitable. In the end, this allowed the externalist to escape from my version of the regress, with the caveat that they concede to harbor no internalism whatsoever (because including any modicum of internalism means opening themselves back up to the regress problem). Because of this, I concluded that the throughgoing externalist (described above) was not all that dissimilar from pragmatic skeptics who go on claiming their beliefs to be reasonable despite having no accessible reasons for thinking so. The only difference, I argued, was that the thoroughgoing externalist seems to insist on maintaining the ability to claim that they *really are* justified. I now charge that the phenomenal conservatist, at best, occupies the same position.

The phenomenal conservatist should not attempt to satisfy the challenge of satisfactorily linking any given seeming to the belief that it purportedly supports because this will inevitably lead to an **M2** regress – how do we know that the reasons provided in support of this linking do the job *they* are supposed to do? They should also refrain from holding that their seemings are

just a kind of belief that supplies justification for other beliefs – because this would trigger **M1**. But what remains is that we simply don't have a metaepistemic reason for why certain seemings support certain beliefs. We either just *accept* that they do (which would be the unacceptable kind of dogmatism that Sextus Empiricus wants to avoid) or we think they *actually* do even if we cannot explain how (in which case, the position faces the same fate as the thoroughgoing externalist). In the end, then, I acknowledge that a view like phenomenal conservatism *could* escape my regress, but only under certain conditions: (1) that their view of seemings does not place these seemings on the same order as the beliefs they are meant to justify and (2) that they are willing to obliterate entirely our ability to provide any metaepistemic account for the view. If these two conditions are met, then I see the victory over the skeptic here to be a Pyrrhic victory at best, for there is no functional difference between the two.

6.   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that while foundationalists seem to escape from the first mode of the epistemic regress problem, **M1**, on first glance, they nevertheless succumb alongside the other two classical solutions. This is because the task of identifying foundations cannot be undertaken in such a way that the process is made entirely non-inferential. While Bergmann (2006) and BonJour (1985) argue that the identification of a foundational belief requires a regress in the form of **M1**, I argue that the real challenge is in distinguishing potentially foundational beliefs from merely ungiveupable beliefs. Indeed, I proposed that some merely ungiveupable beliefs could be non-cognitive, or treated as ungiveupable by us without our having chosen to treat them as such, and that such a possibility would mean that we could *feel* as though these beliefs were just as foundational as properly foundational alternatives. If this is a possibility, then any potentially foundational belief will *always* be underdetermined with merely

ungiveupable beliefs. This effectively rules out responses to Bergmann (2006) and BonJour (1985) that contend that no **M1** regress is generated regarding the identification of properly foundational beliefs because the "specialness" of these foundational beliefs is somehow apparent to us.

I further argued that even if we assume that the foundationalist can get around **M1**-type concerns regarding the status of foundational beliefs, the foundationalist will nevertheless be incapable of grounding any beliefs *but* those foundational beliefs. This is because **M2** requires that a subject S not only has some reason *r* for their belief *p*, but a reason that appropriately connects *r* to *p*. Thus, just because *r* might be self-evident, or foundational by some other means, it does not immediately follow that *p* is reasonable. Even if we assume that these connecting beliefs that allow for inference between self-evident beliefs and non-self-evident beliefs are *themselves* self-evident, it still does not necessarily follow that the usage of any particular connecting belief is appropriate in application to *r* and *p*. It seems, then, that even if foundationalists are successful in defeating **M1** (and they are *not*), they are nevertheless paralyzed by **M2**. In the following chapter, I will argue that pragmatism, while an extremely popular alternative to something like foundationalism, *at best* fares no better as a solution to the epistemic regress problem and, worse, might *also* collapse into a form of foundationalism itself.

Chapter Five: Why Pragmatism Cannot Save Us from the Regress

1.   Introduction

Pragmatism, in and of itself, is a seemingly attractive position. It captures and enshrines one of the most basic epistemic notions that many epistemologists believe to be universally accepted – the notion that we might be wrong (Cohen 1988, Haack 1979, Holliday 2015, Reed 2002). However, the acceptance of this fallibility (or corrigibility in some circles[56]) need not be met with the sort of paralyzing reservation of the skeptic who accepts that they can never defeat worries about the potential for error. Instead, the pragmatist accepts the possibility of error and continues on in spite of it. Yes, perhaps some (or many) of our beliefs will end up false, but we can sort things out as we go – exchanging bad beliefs for (hopefully) better ones as the need arises. Pragmatism is more than just the acceptance that we may be wrong – the global skeptic believes this too, after all. The sort of pragmatism that I am targeting couples this open admission of the possibility of error with a certain sort of *optimism*, or the willingness to give inquiry a try without the reassurances of incorrigibility. The sort of pragmatism that I am targeting, then, is something like Putnam's view of Pragmatism:

> From the earliest of Pierce's Pragmatist writings, Pragmatism has been characterized by antiscepticism … [even though] conceding that there are no metaphysical guarantees to be had that even our most firmly held beliefs will never need revision. That one can be both fallibilistic *and* antisceptical is perhaps *the* basic insight in American Pragmatism. (1996, p.10)

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[56] Reed (2002) offers some good reasons for thinking that we should not use fallibility and corrigibility interchangeably – namely, because we may have incredibly strong justification for a belief (and think it incorrigible) while it is still false.

This sort of pragmatism provides a direct response to the epistemic regress problem – we do not need to answer the skeptic to their satisfaction because they have gotten things in the wrong order to begin with. Indeed, the pragmatist may think that the skeptic misses the point of believing in the first place – it is not to find some *certain* truth, but to get things "close enough" for our purposes. Getting things "close enough" should not require an infinite series of reasons.

The notion that I should be able (or, worse, required) to provide reasons for my claims misses the point that we can gather these reasons *along the way*. To be a pragmatist in this sense is to be something of an epistemic experimenter. Beliefs, claims, propositions, etc. may be accepted *without* good reason and tested out against the world. If the belief seems successful, great, we may keep it around for at least a little longer; but if it seems unsuccessful, no (epistemic[57]) harm done, we will simply accept another in its place. Thus, the skeptic's demand that we have our supply of reasons ready at hand places the cart before the horse – for the pragmatist, the act of reason giving is an ongoing *activity* not a ritual that must be performed *before* adopting a belief. Indeed, Popper (1935) admits that this activity of continual reason giving is ongoing to such an extent that it could be considered an infinite regress in its own right since it, in principle, can never be expected to end – though he quickly notes that such a regress would be innocuous "since in our theory there is no question of trying to prove any statements by means of it." (p. 87)

Reichenbach (1949) presents a parable that may help to illustrate the position:

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[57] There are some who would argue that accepting beliefs without good reason could result in at least some non-epistemic harms. For instance, take Clifford's (1877) parable of the shipowner who comes to believe (for no good reason) that his vessel is safe for carrying passengers when in fact it is not. Clifford warns us that believing without good reason could have disastrous consequences and for this reason he condemns the practice both epistemically and morally.

A blind man who has lost his way in the mountains feels a trail with his stick. He does not know where the path will lead him, or whether it may take him so close to the edge of a precipice that he will be plunged into the abyss. Yet he follows the path, groping his way step by step; for if there is any possibility of getting out of the wilderness, it is by feeling his way along the path. (p. 482)

One can imagine Reichenbach's blind man committing to a certain direction because he has no choice, but nevertheless altering his heading as new information arises. If the blind man's left foot suddenly finds itself unable to find ground, the blind man may update his heading for fear of having found the cliffside. If the blind man's stick encounters an object in his path that is much taller than he is, he may update his belief about the passability of this direction. In each case, the blind man adopts some belief, tries it in the world, then revises said belief based on some later assessment – these are the methods of the pragmatist that I now address.

The pragmatist I address in this chapter is thoroughgoing and fallibilistic to its core. This is not always the way of things for fallibilists and pragmatists more specifically. As Haack (1979) points out, even Pierce who "stresses that any of our beliefs may be mistaken, that our beliefs can never be absolutely certain, perfectly precise, or completely universal" struggles where it comes to the perceived necessity of some mathematical truths (p.37). The issue, which is not an uncommon one for fallibilists, is how to account for necessary truths in general. How can we, the problem goes, remain committed thoroughgoing fallibilists when there are some *incorrigible* truths out there? Worse, what if those truths are so undeniable that we cannot even *pretend* to doubt them? These worries, if not met with a stern doubling down on the acceptance that we may be wrong, may lead one to make exceptions. And, if these exceptions are made, the sort of lightweight pragmatism that emerges as a result will immediately fall prey to the

arguments I have presented thus far, for these exceptions to the rule are nothing more than proposed foundational beliefs.

As I argued in Chapter 4, it will be impossible to ground out a foundational belief in such a way that its status is *assured*, and, thus, the felt incorrigibility of some beliefs may do nothing to support the belief in question. But not all pragmatists need make room for these kinds of exceptions and all is not lost even for those who do, for the burden required in answering the regress problem is a singular one. Find just *one* instance in which the skeptic's challenge is satisfied and the challenge loses its teeth. Thus, even if the exception-making pragmatist will fall prey to the regress problem in some ways, they may still apply the usual pragmatist strategy with hopes of success elsewhere. That said, for the sake of clarity going forward, I will target the more thoroughgoing pragmatist with my arguments to come.

Bringing all of this together, the notion of pragmatism that I am replying to holds that: (1) any of our beliefs may be false, (2) as a result, certainty is impossible, (3) inquiry is nevertheless a worthy pursuit but, by 2, must be carried out without the reassurance of certainty, and finally (4) the way to carry out a pragmatist inquiry is to accept a claim provisionally and to test its success in the world.[58] How these tests are conducted and based on what standards of evaluation will differ from pragmatist to pragmatist – some may cash evaluation out in traditionally pragmatic terms like predictive power, some may adopt a sort of coherentism in which claims are evaluated by their coherence but still only provisionally accepted (as required by the pragmatist generally), and some may hold this to be an individual exercise while others

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[58] So, for example, we can imagine a pragmatist, call them Thales, who believes that everything is composed of water. In order to maintain their commitment to fallibilism, Thales must hold that this belief is potentially false and that they will never be in a position to establish it conclusively (for they could always find it false in the future). Nevertheless, Thales thinks it is appropriate to test such a belief against the world and so accepts the notion provisionally without any expectation of certainty. How the belief holds against the world, evaluated by whatever standard(s) Thales employs, will determine Thales' willingness to keep the belief around.

may hold that these tests and evaluations must be reached by consensus. In any case, to borrow Alston's (1993) notion, it seems that there must be *some* epistemic desiderata by which the pragmatists assess their provisional claims after contact with the world.

Herein lies the target of my first attack. Specifically, I will now argue that the pragmatists' selection of these epistemic desiderata, in as much as they are chosen as standards of epistemic acceptability, ushers in the same sort of problem faced by the compatibilists and the infinitists in Chapter 3. That is, the pragmatist will need to ground out their metaepistemic commitment to these evaluative desiderata with a view that is stronger than their own (foundationalism) or they will have to accept them dogmatically (which is antithetical to pragmatism's acceptance of fallibilism).

It should be clear, then, that my attack will focus on the fourth tenet I list for the pragmatist. So what of the first three tenets? Tenets 1 and 2 are both completely amenable to a skeptical position where the epistemic regress problem is concerned and so there is little need to focus on these. What sets pragmatism apart from skepticism, however, is their adherence to the remaining two tenets. Tenet 3, in which a commitment to inquiry is maintained in spite of a lack of certainty, is potentially open to attack, but I cannot help but regard it as a non-epistemic ideal about the epistemic. In the same way that I could suggest that I think pursuing beauty is a meaningful pursuit without making explicit how I think one should conduct this pursuit, I think it should be possible to find inquiry a worthy pursuit despite a lack of certainty without having yet defined the means by which that inquiry will be conducted. So, while tenet 3 does motivate the pragmatist to pursue a different route than some skeptics, it is best understood as something of a pre-theoretic incentive and is thus not subject to the criticisms of the skeptic who is exclusively concerned with the epistemic. Further, I will argue in the final chapter of this project that there

are skeptics who believe that inquiry is still a worthwhile pursuit despite having reached a suspension of belief. Tenet 4, however, in laying out the means by which inquiry *should be* conducted, remains an open target for such criticisms.

2.   Bald Metaepistemic Commitments

Thus far, we have seen that the pragmatist has the ability to avoid the epistemic regress problem by offering something of a promissory note, an assurance that their beliefs or acceptances will be tested against the world and reassessed if they are found lacking according to some set of desiderata. While the skeptic may claim that they are wrong (or epistemically irresponsible) for believing in this way, the pragmatist is also protected by the manner in which they take on their beliefs. None are sacred or enshrined; all are potentially revisable and may be given up should they fail to meet muster – so what if the epistemic acceptability of a belief is challenged if it can be discarded just like the rest? This lackadaisical approach to one's beliefs has its limits, however, even for the most thoroughgoing pragmatist. In this section, I charge that the pragmatist is more substantially committed to the evaluative desiderata they maintain for assessing the success of their beliefs than they may lead on.

In order to avoid merely bald assertion, recall that our minimally acceptable epistemic standard is that one should be able to provide a reason[59] to stand in epistemic credit for any given claim. At the level of first-order claims (there is a cat on the mat, the sun will rise in the East tomorrow, etc.), the pragmatist declares special exception in that they wish to forestall the required satisficing of the minimal epistemic standard until they have had such time as to test their provisionally accepted beliefs against the world. This does not mean, of course, that

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[59] Once again, a reason on my view is theory agnostic in that it just is anything that is taken to stand in epistemic support for a claim or belief.

pragmatists are intentionally making merely bald assertions, for, again, the acceptance of any given belief is provisional for them. The same, however, does not hold for their second-order claims (this belief offers more predictive power than another, this explanation is far simpler, etc.). While the pragmatist's evaluations, themselves, may be revaluated, retracted, or revised at some further point in the future (perhaps additional evidence will be gathered causing them to reassess their former evaluation, for instance), the tools used to make said evaluations require a much deeper sort of commitment.

Let us suppose, for example, that our token pragmatist holds predictive power as the sole member within their set of evaluative desiderata (a highly unlikely prospect, but useful for simplicity's sake). It follows, then, that when our pragmatist wants to assert that a belief is worthy of some epistemic credit, they do so *because* they believe it to have some satisfactory degree of predictive power. But why, the skeptic should ask, does predictive power count for anything when it comes to epistemic credit? Or, to use my terms, is the assertion that predictive power is an acceptable evaluative desideratum merely a bald one? This, you can see, leads to a regress in the mode of **M2**. If this were baldly asserted, then it isn't clear that any of the pragmatist's claims will *ever* inherit *any* epistemic credit given that the credibility of the pragmatist's claims is inherited by the fact that they perform well (or at least don't run afoul of) the pragmatist's evaluative desiderata. Once again, by moving up the ladder, we have fallen down the hole of regress.

To put the challenge more plainly: before using their evaluative desiderata to grant any epistemic credit to seemingly successful beliefs, the pragmatist must satisfy the minimal epistemic standard *in regard to* their evaluative desiderata. If the pragmatist fails to meet this challenge, there is no reason to think that the desiderata they have selected yield any sort of

epistemic credit at all. There are several options available for the pragmatist in response. First, and likely least desirable, is to admit that they are simply begging the question in regard to their metaepistemic commitments. While I think this is the least desirable approach for the pragmatist, it is nevertheless presented seriously, as it is not an altogether unheard-of approach in epistemology when dealing with the skeptic. Chisholm (1982), for example, responds to the problem of the criterion (a related and equally ancient problem to the one I am exploring here) thus:

> What few philosophers have had the courage to recognize is this: we can deal with
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> the problem [of the criterion] only by begging the question. It seems to me that if
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> we do recognize this *fact*, as we should, then it is unseemly for us to try to pretend
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> that it isn't so. (p. 75)[60]

The pragmatist, I think, will find this option especially distasteful given that begging the question runs afoul of their wish to leave everything open to test and revision.

The second option open to the pragmatist is to reject my assertion that they must hold their evaluative desiderata in such high regard. In other words, the pragmatist might insist that they *are* consistent in their disinterested treatment of their beliefs, even at the level of the metaepistemic. While I find this move intriguing, it simply pushes the problem further along up the ladder without any real gain. Let us return to our token pragmatist. Say in response to my challenge that their acceptance of predictive power as an evaluative desideratum could simply be a merely bald assertion, they, championing their thoroughgoing fallibilism, decry the notion that

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[60] Chisholm, it should be noted, still thinks he succeeds in defeating the skeptic in his treatment of the problem of the criterion. His argument is that the skeptical position is just one of the alternatives and that, if all of the alternatives require question begging, then it makes little sense to land on the option that tells us that we know nothing. Thus, opt for the position that tells us that we know things when all else is equal. G.E. Moore (1960) makes a similar move against a particular kind of skeptic in reducing their claims to merely competing logical possibilities that have little else going for them.

it is somehow sacred to them and declare that it could be revised at any time the world demands it. This was all well and good at the level of first-order claims, but this move no longer works (at least without creating further levels pointlessly) at the metaepistemic level. How should the evaluative desideratum in question be tested? We will need to have some desiderata to assess it with, of course. But now *those* desiderata fall prey to the same difficulty – why are *they* not merely baldly asserted? While Popper's (1935) fallibilistic regress was innocuous, it was innocuous only because it operated over first-order claims (his basic statements). Sure, a good pragmatist may have to keep their beliefs open to revision forever, but so long as the evaluative desiderata are secure, there is no reason to think that the position has been harmed. However, the kind of regress that looms now is over the evaluative desiderata *themselves* – such a regress is anything but innocuous for the pragmatist.

Lastly, the pragmatist could attempt to secure their evaluative desiderata by some other means. Perhaps, for instance, the pragmatist's evaluative desiderata are supported by a certain kind of coherence. There are problems here too. First, from Chapter 3, it follows that any position the pragmatist attempts to secure themselves to will ultimately collapse into foundationalism. So, while securing themselves to coherentism might seem attractive at first glance, since coherentism can make room for a great deal of revisability (thus already mirroring some of the pragmatist's tenets), it will nevertheless result in a collapse into foundationalism as the notion that coherence is sufficient for granting epistemic credit in and of itself has already been challenged (Chapter 5). But the pragmatist cannot accept a genuinely strong form of foundationalism. For a truly foundational belief is not open to revision without a similar shift in matters of fact. The core notion that the pragmatist began with, that all beliefs are corrigible,

simply becomes untenable. If the choice remains between a collapse into foundationalism and a dogmatic commitment to possibly bald assertions, then the pragmatist simply has no options.

The problem only gets worse as now that the means by which a claim inherits epistemic credit has been established for the pragmatist, **M2** rears its head once more. Recall that **M2** challenges not the assertion of our reasons for a belief but the supporting structure that unites that reason to the belief. In this particular case the challenge goes something like this: if you *could* establish that your evaluative desideratum are not merely bald assertions, would you know that your linking them to a particular first order belief of yours for epistemic credit was not a merely bald assertion as well? This challenge, which I refer to as the *evaluation problem*, will now be explored in greater detail.

3.   The Evaluation Problem

Though I see the evaluation problem and **M2** as the same problem, **M2** takes on renewed purpose when applied against the pragmatist. For this reason, the problem becomes something "more" – sharing in reference with **M2** but perhaps with an expanded mode of presentation. There is a simple reason for this: while **M2** focuses on the ability to draw inferences between beliefs, it also applies to evaluations which are of central importance for the pragmatist.

Here is the problem put simply: even if my evaluative desiderata are granted an (unwarranted) exception from the skeptic's demands, the claim that any given provisional acceptance of mine fits well within the parameters of those desiderata could, *itself*, be baldly asserted. Returning once more to our token pragmatist, let us grant, for the sake of argument, that predictive power can be non-baldly asserted as an epistemic-credit-granting evaluative desideratum. Then, let us imagine some provisional claim that our pragmatist has accepted some

time ago, call it *p*. In walking around the world with *p*, our pragmatist has found that *p* seems to satisfy the evaluative desideratum we have all accepted; thus, *p* ought to get at least some epistemic credit, for now. The problem is that we are now in a position to ask why this assertion, that *p* satisfies the evaluative desideratum, is presumed not to be bald when it very well could be. The very process of evaluating *p* as satisfactory *requires* the kind of inference that the **M2** regress targets. Thus, even if the pragmatist could avoid the standard metaepistemic objections deployed thus far, they would still find themselves faced with the epistemic regress problem.

Because the evaluation problem is simply another form of **M2**, it rears its head around every corner, not just for the pragmatist. When a coherentist claims that any particular belief of theirs coheres with the overall system, they are making an evaluation of fit – herein lies the evaluation problem. When the foundationalist adjudicates between candidates for foundational belief based on some predetermined criteria, they are making an evaluation of fit – herein, too, lies the evaluation problem. Thus, the underdetermination with mere ungiveupability argument I employed against the skeptic in Chapter 5 just is another form of the evaluation problem. The foundationalist is on the hook for evaluating whether or not a candidate foundational belief is truly worthy of the label foundational or whether it is merely ungiveupable, but the standard by which this evaluation is conducted cannot, itself, be baldly asserted.

What avenues, then, lie open for the pragmatist to this challenge? To effectively escape the evaluation problem, the pragmatist will have to present reasons for thinking that some system of inference or, more minimally, some method of evaluation, is not merely baldly asserted. Once this is in place, the pragmatist should be able to bootstrap themselves effectively out of the problem. The difficulty here, of course, is that this brings us back to a regress of the first sort. How is the pragmatist going to establish that a system of inference or evaluation is non-bald

without falling prey to our usual avenue of regress, **M1**? A system of inference or evaluation could be accepted provisionally, but a mere provisionally accepted system *just is* a baldly accepted (though perhaps not asserted) system. To give it epistemic credit, to render it non-bald, something (anything) must stand in epistemic support of it. But whatever stands in support will, in turn, face the same problem anew, and, what's worse, the support relation between the two will be challenged by **M2** – again, the epistemic regress problem, properly construed, is a ladder. While the point of pragmatism is that our provisional acceptances can be given credit through effective experimentation in the world, the difficulty remains that evaluating our acceptances as successful will require the non-bald assertion of some evaluative desiderata – and now we return to the regress in section 2.

On the face of things, it seems that the pragmatist must inevitably confront *both* forms of the epistemic regress problem. However, it should be noted that I have hitherto assigned the pragmatist a metaepistemic presumption that may not be welcome – that of internalism. Perhaps, it may be thought, the pragmatist may fare better unshackled from such a position.

4.   Other Considerations

Thus far, I have not broached the possibility that the pragmatist might accept some degree of externalism to escape from the problems that I have presented. While I do have more specific reasons for disassociating the pragmatist from the externalist, I also wished to give the pragmatist the most detached view possible given that I have already addressed externalism in Chapter 2. Thus, by presenting the pragmatist in the way I have, they are not doomed to share the same fate merely by association. Now that my basic treatment of pragmatism is out of the way, however, I would like to give the externalist pragmatist their due.

Taking the problems in turn, the externalist pragmatist is likely to respond to the metaepistemic problem I present in section 2 of this chapter without much concern. Yes, evaluative desiderata could be considered metaepistemic commitments, but those commitments are either truth-tracking (or some other good-making property relating to the world), or they are not. Thus, the use of these evaluative desiderata is properly attuned, or it is not, regardless of my cognitive access to that fact. This is the standard escape of the externalist – just because I have no cognitive access to my reason, it does not follow that I am without reason. Therefore, the epistemic credit of my beliefs does not depend on my ability to explain how they come to have it. For the pragmatist, in regard to the first problem, this means that they may be able to maintain their evaluative desiderata *without* feeling compelled to ascend the metaepistemic ladder in order to defend them.

In regard to the evaluation problem, the externalist pragmatist may have an even easier time of things. If the evaluative desiderata are granted ahead of time, as we did in our example above, then one need never *intentionally* deploy said criteria to form reasonable beliefs about the acceptability of our provisionally made claims. Claim *p*, from above, will either satisfy the desiderata or it will not, regardless of our ability to convincingly argue that it should. And, if externalism is true, and the world is such that *p really does* satisfy those criteria, then that should suffice for *p*'s inheritance of epistemic credit from those desiderata.

While all of this may seem attractive at first glance, it seems to critically run against the tenets of pragmatism. Why would a pragmatist posit the ultimate revisability of any and all claims and the eternal (perhaps infinite in Popper's case) exercise of experimentation and revision based on the results of that experimentation if one is willing to leave all of the responsibility for epistemic credit-granting to the world? The pragmatist accepts claims

provisionally not because the world may show them to be right somewhere down the line, but to test the beliefs for themselves. In order to test a belief against some desiderata effectively, presumably one ought to have some idea as to whether the test is working. A pragmatist that fully commits to externalism accepts claims provisionally so that they may be tested against the world according to some evaluative desiderata that they neither commit to fully nor feel compelled to defend. Indeed, I charge that a pragmatism that commits itself to provisional acceptances all the way down is Pyrrhonism by another name – concerned to such a degree with error that it fosters no genuine commitments at all.

Thus, the pragmatist and the externalist are misaligned – the externalist accepts that their beliefs are sometimes justified and that is the end of it, but the pragmatist must always have an eye towards fallibility. It is not enough that the world *might* make some of the pragmatist's claims true (or even reasonable), the pragmatist is keenly aware that they can never rest assured by those facts.

Finally, there is yet one more take on this sort of pragmatism that requires special treatment – that of Harman's "General Conservatism" (2003). Harman writes:

In deciding what to believe or what to do, you have to start where you are with your current beliefs and methods of reasoning. These beliefs and methods have a privileged status. You are justified in continuing to accept them in the absences of a serious specific challenge to them, where the challenge will typically involve some sort of conflict in your overall view. Conflict is to be resolved by making conservative modifications in your overall view that makes your view more coherent in certain ways. Your goal in resolving conflict is to reach what Rawls calls a 'reflective equilibrium', in which your various views are not in tension with each other … The crucial point is that, to a first

approximation, continuing to accept what you accept does not require justification. What

requires justification is making changes in your view. (p. 5)

Harman's view, then, is that your beliefs should be considered epistemically acceptable up until

the point that they are not – which, for him, is when they become in tension with your overall

view. That Harman would fully align his General Conservatism with the pragmatism I presented

here is not given, but what seems clear is that General Conservatism allows for the provisional

acceptance of belief, that it holds those beliefs to be revisable, and that it determines the need for

revisability according to some epistemic desideratum. What is meaningfully distinct, and thus

granting of a potential out for pragmatists, is that Harman does not stall the process of granting

warrant to beliefs. While the pragmatist, on my presentation, usually finds their beliefs to be

reasonable *after* testing, Harman's General Conservatism begins with an assumption of

reasonability.

While General Conservatism offers an interesting shift, it nevertheless succumbs to the

epistemic regress as well. First, it is one thing to *say* that all of our beliefs are reasonable until

some experience indicates otherwise and for it to be so; thus, Harman may face the typical

metaepistemic regress that the infinitist and the coherentist faced in Chapter 3. But more

importantly, the means by which we determine *when* our beliefs are no longer in equilibrium

with one another will generate regresses of the sort faced by the typical pragmatist. That this is

the mark of a failing belief will need to be something more than a merely bald assertion, and how

we recognize when a belief has fallen out of equilibrium will require us to answer the evaluation

problem. Thus, even while Harman's General Conservatism requires us to address these

problems at different points, they are nevertheless equally present.

5.   Conclusion

While pragmatism seemed initially promising as an answer to the epistemic regress problem due to its ability to forestall the supply of reasons for a belief, I have shown that this strategy is ineffective. Because the pragmatist is committed to the never-ending project of evaluating their beliefs for the sake of reasonability, it follows that pragmatists require some metaepistemic standards by which they may conduct said evaluations. Because these metaepistemic standards require commitment to some second-order belief about reasonability, it follows that the pragmatist either needs to establish that these second-order beliefs are not merely bald assertions (in which case they are subject to **M1**), accept them dogmatically (in which case they are no longer pragmatists given their abandonment of fallibilism), or attempt a thoroughgoing pragmatism in which a commitment to these second-order beliefs is *also* provisional. While the first two strategies are unacceptable for the pragmatist, the third is untenable as it only elevates the problem to a new level of discourse given that these provisionally accepted methods of evaluating first-order beliefs will require some higher-order means of evaluation to evaluate *them*. Thus, the pragmatist never has any real possibility of escaping from **M2**.

Further, I argue that the pragmatist faces a special problem in the *evaluation problem*, wherein the demands of the epistemic regress problem will apply to their ability to carry out any in-practice evaluation of their first-order beliefs. Even if it is somehow settled that a pragmatist is entitled to the reasonability of certain desiderata regarding the reasonability of first-order beliefs, the pragmatist must still undertake the project of identifying which of their first-order beliefs meet their standards, which do not, and to what degree. Each of these claims may be a potentially bald assertion. Thus, the pragmatist ideal of maintaining reasonability by revising

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their beliefs in accord with later-gained information is responsible for inviting a regress resembling **M2**. In the remaining chapter, I will conclude with remarks about the future of the epistemic regress problem, how we should understand the consequences of this project, and why a skeptical conclusion need not be avoided.

Chapter Six: Going Forward by Looking Backward

1.   Introduction

As of yet, there are no easy solutions to the epistemic regress problem. In Chapter 2, I

revised the traditional epistemic regress problem such that it targets our ability to supply reasons

for thinking that our beliefs are not merely bald assertions. This alteration allowed me to make

certain metaepistemic demands of the infinitist and the coherentist in Chapter 3 that are no

longer subject to objections of level confusion. Specifically, because the skeptic, on my account,

is asking the infinitist and coherentist to motivate the notion that their beliefs regarding the

source and structure of justification are not bald, they are not, in effect, making the demand that

they somehow justify justification. When faced with this challenge, it became clear that the

infinitist and the coherentist were faced with a dilemma: dogmatically assert their standards of

justification or ground their notion of reasonable inference in some other metaepistemic standard

that *could* be motivated in the way the skeptic now demands. Because the foundationalist holds

that their foundational beliefs motivate *themselves*, I concluded that foundationalism was the

natural choice for the infinitist and the coherentist to fall upon.

In Chapter 4, I showed that the foundationalist cannot simply assume that the appearance

of whatever makes a foundational belief special is grounds for holding that a belief *is*

foundational. This is because it will always be underdetermined as to whether or not any given

candidate for foundational belief is, in fact, foundational or whether the belief is *merely*

ungiveupable. Further, I showed that the foundationalist will struggle to settle the second

presentation of the epistemic regress (**M2**) even if it were possible to land on firm foundations.

Because the foundationalist needs their inferential beliefs to inherit epistemic credit from their

non-inferred foundations, they will need to answer to **M2** which attempts to block any attempt at uniting a reason to a belief that it is proposed to support. To settle the issue, the foundationalist will either have to adopt highly particularized inference rules as foundational, effectively committing themselves to abandon the inferential side of things altogether or they will have to remain satisfied with knowing a scant few things (merely those things that they know to be foundational). These arguments combined show that foundationalism is not the safe harbor that the infinitist and the coherentist may have hoped for.

In Chapter 5, I considered the remaining option, pragmatism, a position in which one adopts beliefs merely provisionally in order to evaluate their performance according to some epistemic desiderata *post hoc* – the idea being that these provisionally accepted beliefs could inherit epistemic credibility in accord with their performance in retrospect. In this manner, the pragmatist could achieve a similar answer to the regress problem as the foundationalist but presumably without relying on the identification of certain foundations. However, I showed that even the pragmatist is committed to some foundation-like beliefs in that they cannot simply baldly assert that the epistemic desiderata they employ to evaluate provisionally accepted beliefs are worthy of any epistemic credit themselves. The pragmatist must either dogmatically commit to said desiderata (which runs contrary to their tenets and to the minimal epistemic standard of no merely bald assertions) or they too must ground out their metaepistemic commitments in something like foundationalism – an empty choice given Chapter 4. Further, I argued that, even if the pragmatist were capable of establishing their evaluative desiderata (or if they were simply granted for the sake of argument), the pragmatist would still encounter another form of the regress – what I called the evaluation problem. Effectively, I argued that determining whether or not any provisional belief met muster according to their evaluative desiderata would, itself, be a

claim that could be bald or not bald. Given this fact, the skeptic can target this evaluation as a source for regress. Because the pragmatist's claims gain credit *through* said evaluations, they will thus never be in a position to attribute epistemic credit to any belief.

Having found the potential solutions to the epistemic regress problem thus far lacking, I will now end with a few positive notes. First, I will make a few small suggestions for future avenues of avoiding or resolving the epistemic regress problem. Then I will introduce broader considerations about the consequences of this project. Specifically, I will argue that the skeptical conclusion need not be avoided, especially by the pragmatist, because it does not necessarily require us to change the way we live or the way we go about doing philosophy.

2.   Lessons Learned for Future Avenues

From the criticisms I have offered thus far, it should be possible to offer some guiding advice on other potential solutions to the epistemic regress problem. First, the charge that one's metaepistemic commitments are also in need of defense is perhaps the most damaging of the claims that I have made. Foundationalism seemed like an attractive solution to this problem because it supplied a means by which its first-order claims could be granted epistemic credit while simultaneously defending itself as a view about reasons along metaepistemic grounds. This strategy failed because it was possible to show that the foundationalist needs to make some judgements not grounded in their metaepistemic commitments (like whether any candidate foundational belief is merely ungiveupable or not). If it were possible to find some other solution that performed this sort of double-duty in regard to grounding the reasonability of its first-order claims and its metaepistemic status *without* falling prey to the same concern, such a solution would certainly be worth developing.

Further, one should take caution to avoid the evaluation problem. The evaluation problem will occur any time an epistemic standard is used to select some beliefs as epistemically credible from a pool of others that are not. In effect, the evaluation problem makes it such that any criteria-based assessment of status will not sufficiently ground the claims it means to. If the means by which evaluations are made could be given a status like a foundational belief, however, this could be the first step towards ameliorating this concern. Of course, establishing the standard is insufficient, as **M2** will challenge the successful application of that standard to any particular evaluation purporting to use it.

It might also be possible to object to my disjunctive account of reasons in such a way that justification is rendered the *only* means of tracking reasonability. If this is possible, then my use of **M2** might be blocked by Alston's (1980) level-confusion concern. This strategy, however, will require some higher metaepistemic discourse about the acceptability of different accounts of reason, and I am not hopeful that it can be concluded without running afoul of **M2** before the attempt is even began in earnest outside of some thoroughgoing externalism.

Finally, the reasonability of views like thoroughgoing externalism and something akin to Boghossian's (2003) blind yet blameless reasoning are certainly worthy of further investigation. If it were possible to object to the skeptic's demands, either to ascend to another level of epistemic discourse, or to supply reasons along the first-order, then the epistemic regress may be stopped before it ever begins. While the thoroughgoing externalist is unlikely to develop their view as a metaepistemic theory (on pain of becoming *not so* thoroughgoing), this seems a distinct possibility for a view like Boghossian's.

3.		What *Isn't* Under Threat

First, though I have found no successful solutions to the epistemic regress problem in this endeavor short of a thoroughgoing externalism, I wish to make it clear that it does not necessarily follow that there are none. My intent with this project was not to motivate a lasting (and hopeless) skepticism, but rather to inspire others to take these problems seriously. Further, even the admitted Pyrrhonian does not have the grounds from which to proclaim that a solution can *never* be arrived at for even the most daunting of skeptical problems – for, the suspension of judgement, *epochê*, requires a certain modicum of forced optimism. For the Pyrrhonian, *isostheneia*, wherein different views are equally compelling or uncompelling, is the proper catalyst for *epochê*, and *isostheneia* requires that we actually attempt to engage philosophically, or else there will be no reason to see competing views as such. Thus, the Pyrrhonian *must* continue to engage with problems like the epistemic regress problem and its potential solutions in good faith.

Even if it were possible to reject all possibility of solving the epistemic regress problem, it would, importantly, still not follow that philosophy (and inquiry more generally) is not worth doing. The attacks against the ability to give reasons presented in this project are exclusively attacks against the ability to provide reasons of a very specific sort – namely, epistemic ones. There are many other kinds of reasons one may have for pursuing some thing or another. For instance, I might pursue writing because I find it personally fulfilling. Someone might pursue the production of a certain kind of art because they find it aesthetically pleasing. And someone might pursue the advancement of some beliefs over others for some social or political reasons. There is no reason that philosophy could not be approached in much the same way.

It is also not the case that a Pyrrhonian conclusion requires us to give up believing that we *do* have reasonable beliefs. Indeed, Sextus Empiricus seems to think that we have no other choice where our everyday beliefs are concerned:

> … The standard of the Sceptical persuasion is what is apparent, implicitly meaning by this the appearances; for they depend on passive and unwilled feelings and are not objects of investigation. (Hence no-one, presumably, will raise a controversy over whether an existing thing appears this way or that; rather, they investigate whether it is such as it appears.)
>
> Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions – for we are not able to be utterly inactive.
>
> (PH 1.22-23)

As Eichorn (2020) notes, the Pyrrhonian *epochê* is to be reached even metaepistemically. The result of suspending belief at this level, however, has the result that the Pyrrhonian need no longer suspend belief about first-order matters. First-order *epochê*, in other words, is the result of first-order *isostheneia* caused by some second-order beliefs in rigorous standards of reason. But second-order *epochê* (or metaepistemic *epochê*) is the suspension of belief *about* standards of reason. If I cannot say that this or that standard of reason is the most appropriate, then I cannot say that I have grounds for first-order *isostheneia*, and thus *epochê* at the first-order dissolves.

To put it another way, Pyrrhonian skepticism does not require us to give up on our everyday beliefs because it leads us to suspend belief *about reason*. Thus, a Pyrrhonian may continue with their ordinary, first-order beliefs just like anyone else. In the end, then, the Pyrrhonian urges us not to attempt to *solve* the epistemic regress problem, but to use it as an

excuse to *move on* from matters metaepistemic[61] and to live our everyday epistemic lives with a newfound appreciation in the naturalness of our being – we have opinions because natural things must. This is a point that Hume, too, arrives at – though he regrettably seems to misidentify the Pyrrhonian as a kind of sophist:

> The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of the real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches. When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these

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61 Wittgenstein's (1969) *On Certainty* seems to make a similar point, and Pritchard (2015) uses this move to escape from "epistemic angst".

operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them. (EHU

12.21)

Compare the above now to Sextus Empiricus on similar matters:

A witty anecdote is told about Herophilus the doctor. He was a contemporary of

Diodorus, who vulgarized dialectic and used to run through sophistical arguments

on many topics including motion. Now one day Diodorus dislocated his shoulder

and went to Herophilus to be treated. Herophilus wittily said to him: 'Your

shoulder was dislocated either in a place in which it was or in a place in which it

wasn't. But neither in which it was nor in which it wasn't. Therefore it is not

dislocated.' So the sophist begged him to leave such arguments alone and to apply

the medical treatment suitable to his case. (PH 2.245)

From these passages, it is clear that both Hume and Sextus Empiricus decry the use of skeptical

argument in application to our everyday beliefs for exactly the same reason. We must go on

living, and nature seems to require us to have beliefs.

Rinard's (2022) pragmatic skepticism seems to constitute a revival in just these

Pyrrhonian sentiments[62]. On her view, we are right to agree with, who she calls, the "evidential

skeptic" who alleges that we have no support for our ordinary beliefs. Nevertheless, she argues

that it would then be wrong for us to *give up* our beliefs because we are better off *with them* in

the long run – indeed, she goes as far as to suggest that we might be "better off"

believing/talking as though we have knowledge. Cohen (1999) concludes his "Contextualism,

Skepticism, and Reasons" by mentioning the exact possibility that a skeptic might adopt

pragmatic attitudes despite believing that we, broadly speaking, have no knowledge. He

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[62] Kyriacou (2020) makes similar arguments, but she is hesitant to fully align with Rinard's (2022) evidential skeptic.

ultimately concludes that this view fares no better or worse, in most regards, to the contextualist picture he paints in order to *avoid* skepticism. On his view, whether we have knowledge, are justified, have reasons, etc. depends upon the context we occupy. When we are engaged in everyday living, the thought goes, the standards for what counts as knowledge are not as great as when we are in dialogue with a skeptic about our metaepistemic commitments. The pragmatic skeptic, then, relies on this same contextual move but not in order to say what is truly known and when, but rather the appropriateness of *saying* when something is known and when. Ultimately, Cohen suggests that the dispute between these two camps can never be satisfactorily resolved by argument – indeed, he suggests that his position begs the question in asserting that the skeptic is wrong. Nevertheless, Cohen opts for contextualism because he prefers a world where skepticism is false. This, I think, matches precisely the comparison I made between the Humean Pyrrhonian skeptic and the thoroughgoing externalist at the conclusion of Chapter 2. The two positions appear, functionally, the same. The difference is that the thoroughgoing externalist (and the contextualist) would like to maintain their ability to say that they know things – a privilege, I think, that is not worth maintaining at any and all costs.

So, all this is to say that the epistemic regress problem, properly used, is *never* a threat to the reasonability of our everyday beliefs – even our everyday *philosophical* beliefs. Instead, it threatens to reveal a certain kind of intellectual hubris if we seek to elevate our everyday beliefs beyond the opinions we find ourselves with to something of greater status. This attempt at elevation will always escalate to the metaepistemic, and therein lies the real source of *isostheneia*.

4.   A Minimal Standard for Epistemic Responsibility

I want to conclude with a note about epistemic responsibility. On many views, epistemic responsibility involves the tracking of an agent's reasonability – to be responsible in maintaining some belief is, to some degree, to have reasons for it. This point is what drives Enoch and Schechter (2008) to partially reject externalism – because they see the externalist as *failing* to notice the connection between epistemic justification and epistemic responsibility.[63] It is also what leads Boghossian (2003) to draw a distinction between blind beliefs and blind *yet blameless* beliefs. How are we to conceive of "blameless" believing in the light of Pyrrhonian skepticism? What does it mean to be epistemically responsible given metaepistemic suspension of belief?

While these questions require more development elsewhere, I will end with my thoughts on the matter such as they are. It strikes me that Pyrrhonian *epochê* inevitably leads to the conclusion that practically *all* beliefs are blameless. In yet another similarity to the thoroughgoing externalist, the Pyrrhonian must eventually drive a wedge between reasonability and blameworthiness since the Pyrrhonian is compelled by life to go on believing at the first-order and so, on their account, cannot be held blameworthy. This follows with some limited exception. If, in maintaining a belief, we knowingly do so in a fashion under which we *expect* our belief to be unreasonable, such a belief may not be blameless even for the Pyrrhonian. In other words, if we *flagrantly* commit to making merely bald assertions, we will have violated any *possible* view of reason willfully, and so be rendered epistemically blameworthy. This, it seems, is sufficient to establish a (very) minimal standard for epistemic responsibility – avoid flagrant violations of the minimal epistemic standard.

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[63] Enoch and Schechter (2008) also find fault with internalism, however, because they believe it associates epistemic justification too *strongly* with epistemic responsibility.

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