PERCEPTION AND BASIC BELIEFS: ZOMBIES, MODULES, AND THE PROBLEM OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

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Here I set the stage, putting the issues in their historical context. I introduce a theory I call “External Object Foundationalism”, according to which some basic beliefs are beliefs about external objects and not merely beliefs about simple a priori truths and one’s current mental states. I explain how this view, construed as an epistemological view and not a metaphysical view about the nature of perception, is poised to solve the traditional skeptical problem of the external world as well as offer a handy solution to the perennial problem of whether there is a principled distinction between perception and inference and if so, where to draw the line. External Object Foundationalism raises a very important question, one central to this book: if some beliefs about external objects are basic, which ones?

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I sharpen the standard taxonomy of doxastic and nondoxastic theories, invoking two orthogonal principles: the Belief Principle holds that only beliefs can serve as evidence for beliefs; the Grounds Principle holds that every justified belief is one that is based on evidence. Though the former principle is often cited as the central slogan of doxastic theories (the diametric opposite of externalist theories like my own), it is actually a principle that the externalist can embrace. I rehearse the standard arguments against doxasticism and explain how the rejection of doxasticism along with the acceptance of the Belief Principle can serve as an argument against the Grounds Principle and therefore in favor of a nonevidentialist epistemology.

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I lay out a sustained attack on what I take to be the standard view in contemporary epistemology, experientialism, which maintains that basic beliefs are justified by the corresponding experiential state. Though experientialism has traditionally been attacked mainly by coherentists with the intention of establishing a doxastic theory, I attack it in order to defend a nonevidentialist theory, in accordance with the strategy of the previous chapter. I use a cognitive scientific approach and Chapter 2's distinction between evidential and nonevidential justifiers to breathe new life into a—vaguely—Sellarsian argument against experientialism. Whether experiential states are conceived as low level states (sensations) or high level states (percepts), they cannot serve as justifying evidence for basic beliefs. They certainly cannot be necessary for the justification of these beliefs. I offer an independent argument for the thesis that only beliefs can serve as justifying evidence for beliefs. I try to explain away the intuitive appeal of experientialism by pointing out that our intuitions only demand some epistemic role of experiences and not the role attributed to them by the experientialist.

Chapter 4: Perceptual Systems and Perceptual Beliefs

I explain and defend the view that a perceptual belief is a belief that is the output of a perceptual system, i.e., a perceptual module, where the notion of a perceptual module can be characterized in nonepistemic and nonexperientialist terms. The concept of a perceptual module and the more general concept of a cognitive system are derived from contemporary work in cognitive
neuroscience. Not only does this give us a principled and naturalistic distinction between perceptual beliefs and other beliefs, but I argue that it gives us an intuitively correct one. The theory has the result that zombies and other creatures utterly lacking in perceptual experiences can nonetheless have (justified) perceptual beliefs.

Chapter 5: Perception, Clairvoyance, and Reliability

1 Simple Reliabilism and the Norman/Truemp Objections

2 Clairvoyance and Basicity

2.1 Underspecification and the “Clairvoyance Challenge”

2.2 Perception and Other Cognitive Abilities

2.3 “Meta-Incoherence”

3 Reliability and Basicity

3.1 Clairvoyance and Defeat

3.2 Experientialist Reliabilism

3.3 Early Reliabilism

3.4 Teleological Reliabilism

A famous class of counterexamples to reliabilism involves clairvoyance and similar odd cognitive capacities and is generally taken to show that reliability is not sufficient for justification. I argue that merely by invoking the distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs, and insisting only that reliability is sufficient for the justification of basic beliefs, the reliabilist is immune to such counterexamples. The reliabilist theory that I have developed thus far holds that perceptual beliefs are basic, and I argue that this theory does not invite clairvoyance-type objections. I argue that other influential reliabilist attempts to answer the clairvoyance objection ultimately fail, and so will any such attempt that does not explicitly appeal to the basic/nonbasic distinction and require inferential support for the nonbasic beliefs.

Chapter 6: Basic Beliefs

1 The Delineation Problem

1.1 The Desiderata

1.2 A Systems Theory of Basicity

1.3 Counterexamples and Replies

2 Intuitions and Beyond

2.1 Descriptive and Normative Epistemology

2.2 Cognitive Science and Basicity

2.3 Illustration: Why My Philosophy is More God-Friendly than Plantinga’s

2.4 Reflective Equilibrium and Etiological Constraints

Here I extrapolate from my account of perceptual beliefs and propose a general theory of basic beliefs: a basic belief is one that is the result of the noninferential operation of a primal system: an inferentially opaque cognitive system that has resulted from an interplay of learning and innate constraints. I explain all this and argue that it gets the cases intuitively right. I go on to argue that
we can transcend and improve on these naive intuitions by turning to the empirical sciences to correct our untutored assumptions about which cognitive systems there are, where they come from, and what their outputs are.

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The final evaluation of a theory of basicality is best done in the context of a full theory of justification, and since the framework is already in place, deriving a sketch of a wholly general theory from the foregoing is not too difficult a matter. In particular, the cognitive system approach to basic beliefs has a natural analogue in my notion of a basic inference, and the use of this notion makes it possible to flesh out an inferentialist version of reliabilism. Though reliabilists have had little to say about inferential justification, this is a subject we need not avoid. A fairly detailed version of reliabilism, I hope more plausible than its predecessors, emerges. (It is summarized on pp. 309-11.) Despite its proclivity for inferential justification, I argue that the resulting theory is still wholly externalist, albeit in a way that avoids notorious problems for earlier externalist theories. I finish by returning to the epistemological problem of the external world and explaining how and in what sense my theory solves this problem.

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