Justification of Belief:  
A Primer

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I

I assume that for any given person and time, all propositions can be divided exactly into two sets: those believed by that person at that time and those that are not believed by that person at that time. This is, of course, idealizing a bit, ignoring the fact that the concepts of a belief and of a proposition are vague, but it will do no harm for present purposes.

The concept of a belief and the concept of a proposition each deserves a treatise unto itself. Here I have to take them for granted, except for the following few remarks. What I mean by a proposition is something that is true or false and that has the same truth-value at all times. To say that a person believes the proposition that \( p \) is the same as to say that the person believes that \( p \); and to say that is to imply that the person understands the proposition at least to some degree. A belief is a dispositional state that a person may be in even when not manifesting that state in any mental or bodily act. The term “belief” covers a wide range of phenomena. There are beliefs that the believer never explicitly articulates (and perhaps could not articulate), that are deeply embedded in the believer’s culture or the human way of life, imbibed early in life (perhaps even given innately). Some beliefs (such as beliefs as to what one is currently perceiving) arise and pass without any conscious articulation of them or of reasons for holding them, but the subject could easily articulate them, along with reasons, if the occasion arose. And there are beliefs that a person has arrived at through a process of inquiry and deliberation. Belief can have varying degrees of strength, from being inclined to think that . . . to being confident that . . ., but I shall here ignore the weaker degrees and use “belief” (and its cognates) as short for “confident belief” (and its cognates).

II

A belief can be justified or unjustified. It is the negative notion here that issues the orders. One \textit{ought} not to believe a proposition if, and only if, one \textit{lacks} justification for believing it. Given a particular proposition and person (whose beliefs can be appraised in this way), if it is not the case that the person ought not to believe the proposition, then she is justified in believing it, if she does so, and in any case, she has justification for believing it. This is so even if she cannot be said, in any ordinary sense, to have \textit{grounds} or \textit{reasons} for believing it, or to have \textit{evidence} of its truth. All that is required is that it would be wrong to reproach her for believing the proposition.

Any belief that one cannot help having must be justified, in a sense. If one cannot help it then one cannot be properly reproached for it. This notion of justification is broader than epistemologists are used to. There is a useful narrower sense in which some beliefs that are irrefutable, because they cannot be helped, are nevertheless not justified. For example, as a result of a bad experience with a large dog, a man is for a time unable to resist believing that any large dog that approaches him is about to attack him. Or a hypnotist is able to cause a subject to believe that, despite appearances and what past experience might lead him to expect, every tree in the United States has been cut down overnight. Such beliefs, we want to say, are not \textit{rationally} justified. It is rational justification that epistemologists have been mainly interested in and that will be the main concern of the rest of this paper. Hereafter, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise, “justified” and cognate terms should be taken in this narrower sense.

The fact that a belief is compelled does not mean that it is justified \textit{only} in the broader sense. Many of our rationally justified beliefs are ones that, in the circumstances, we could not have helped acquiring and could not cast off at will—for example, my
current belief, as I look out the window, that the sun is shining. It is generally a useful test of whether or not a belief is rationally justified to ask whether or not the subject would be justified in having it even if she could help doing so. But it may not be infallible. The subject should be able to apply the test to her own undiscardable beliefs. But perhaps she cannot even imagine what it would be like not to have the belief in question and perhaps the cause of this itself has justificatory force. The proposition may be one of those that one cannot entertain without (as Descartes put it) clearly and distinctly perceiving it to be true; or the belief may be a linchpin for the subject’s whole belief system so that if it were unjustified then so would be most of the framework of beliefs on which she continually relies. (Such a belief might be in certain very general regularities or a more specific belief as to how human life works; it might be innate or instinctive or inculcated early and be continually reinforced by the culture.)

Can we say that every person’s beliefs at every time divide into those that are then (rationally) justified and those that are not? No. The problem is not just borderline cases; those we can ignore. The problem is that the application of either of the pair “justified”/“unjustified” to a particular person’s beliefs presupposes that the person satisfies a certain condition that need not be satisfied by every person who has beliefs. The beliefs of a small child, for instance, cannot be said to be either justified or unjustified because the child altogether lacks any concept of the justification of belief, any sense of that sort of consideration in the formation and alteration of belief. (For similar reasons, small children cannot be said to be morally justified or unjustified in, deserving or not deserving of moral reproach for, any of their actions.) Unless a person has at least a modest hold on the notion of justification of belief, it would be absurd to reproach her for failing to measure up to standards of rational justification in some belief she has.

What we can say, I believe, is that for any person who is qualified to have her beliefs assessed in the dimension of justification, and for any time, that person’s beliefs at that time divide into those that are then justified and those that are not (ignoring borderline cases).

Trivial as this assertion may seem, it is not uncontroversial. There have, for instance, been subjectivists who would deny that any proper sense can be made of saying of a belief that it is, or is not, justified. On their view, we may use terms to express our attitudes towards beliefs, but they cannot signify a property or status that belongs to a belief on the basis of objective criteria. I do not know how to show that such a view is wrong, except by developing an account of the objective criteria for the application of these terms that provides a generally satisfying explanation and illumination of their intuitive use. I cannot attempt that grand task here, so I will merely record my working conviction that the subjectivist view is wrong.

Another line of objection notes that for a great many of a qualified person’s beliefs it will often be odd, or fail to make sense, to say that the belief is justified or that it is unjustified. For example, it will be odd for me, or anyone else, to say, out of the blue, that my current belief that I exist or that I have two hands is justified or that it is not justified. Having described such a situation as one in which it fails to make sense or is a misuse of language to say either thing, or one in which the question of which is true fails to arise, one may be tempted to infer that it is a situation in which there is no fact of the matter. This does not strictly follow and it must be presumed mistaken if there is a better explanation of the oddity of the saying. It seems to me that there is. It is the same sort of oddity that there is in expressing, apropos of nothing, the indisputable truth that $1 + 1 = 2$ (or, for that matter, the indisputable falsehood that $1 + 1 = 3$ or the disputable falsehood that I am now neither justified nor not justified in believing that $1 + 1 = 2$). It is simply the oddity of saying that which the context

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There are, I am sure, other points in the present paper with which Malcolm would strenuously disagree. Well, he has only himself to thank for my being interested in such topics. I have him to thank for these and many others among my philosophical interests, and for most of my philosophical ideals.
gives no point to saying. Language is being misused in the sense that obvious principles of rational discourse are being violated. There is senselessness in the sense of pointlessness.

The other explanation of the senselessness—that there is no fact of the matter—has one particularly awkward feature (pointed out by H. P. Grice in his William James Lectures). On this explanation, whether or not the sentence in question expresses a true-or-false proposition is relative to the circumstances surrounding its utterance, rather than to the situation that the utterance purports to be about. It becomes possible that, relative to one set of possible circumstances for uttering "s is justified in believing that p", there is a fact of the matter as to whether or not s is justified in believing that p, but, relative to another set, there is not, even though the facts about s that determine the fact of the matter in the first case are also there in the second case. For any person s, time t, and proposition p, it is no doubt possible to imagine circumstances that might arise in which there would be point in saying either that s was at t justified in believing that p or the contradictory. If that is so, then we have a way of defining what it is for it to be true absolutely that s is justified at t in believing that p. It is for the facts about s and t to be such that, should circumstances arise that would give point to saying it, they would guarantee the truth of what was said.

Finally, a difficulty for our trivial-seeming claim may be seen in the fact that we can never actually take on the whole of a person's beliefs and, starting from no assumptions at all as to which are justified, determine which are and which are not. This may be thought to show that the notion we have is not that of a belief's being categorically justified, but rather that of a belief's being justified if certain other beliefs of the subject, whose truth the subject has taken for granted, are justified. That conditional predicate, it may be thought, is really the one we always apply, and expresses the only notion of justification that we have. Again, the view is not really supported by the consider-
III

It can happen that at a particular time a person has justification for believing a certain proposition but does not then actually believe it. For at least some propositions, it is possible that at a time when one does not believe the proposition there obtains a condition such that if one were then to believe the proposition then one would, simply in virtue of that condition, be justified in that belief. For example, someone may read in the newspaper that the number on the ticket she owns is the winning number in the lottery, and in consequence have justification for believing that she has won the lottery; but, out of extreme fear of disappointment, she refuses to believe this until the money is actually handed over to her. Or a person who is not abnormally given to misremembering may occasionally be unreasonably distrustful of her memory: although it seems to her that she clearly remembers putting matches in her backpack, she hesitates to believe this until she has checked it. We can say that, for any given person and time, all propositions divide into those that the person then has justification for believing and those that the person does not then have justification for believing. Let us refer to the set of propositions that person s at time t has justification for believing as J_st. What we have just pointed out is that J_st need not be included in the set of propositions that s believes at t (which we can refer to as B_st).

I said that cases where a member of J_st is not also a member of B_st are ones in which there obtains at t a condition such that if the proposition in question had been a member of B_st, and the condition obtained, then s's belief in it would, in virtue of that condition, have been justified. It might be thought that this description of such cases must be incomplete. It might be thought that if there is such a thing as having justification for believing what one does not actually believe, it will have to be described in the following way: there obtains a condition such that if s had been caused (prompted, led) to believe the proposition by that condition then s would have been justified in believing it. This contention would be motivated by the idea that the justification of a belief must always be a matter of how the belief is caused, must consist in the belief's being produced or sustained by the right sort of factors. But I am disinclined to accept this idea. It seems to me no more likely to be true than the corresponding idea about the moral justification of action. The considerations in terms of which it is explained why some action is morally justified—e.g., that it was justifiedly believed by the agent not to harm anyone or not to be in violation of the agreement—need have little to do with what actually motivated the agent to perform the action. It need not even be the case that the agent would not have performed the action had no such justifying factors been present. A similar situation may obtain, it seems to me, with respect to the justification of belief. Suppose that the lottery winner, though not prompted to believe that she had won the lottery by her knowledge of what she saw in the newspaper and of what was said in a telephone call to her from a lottery official, was subsequently prompted to believe it by her being told it by a gypsy fortune teller (in whom she has irrational confidence). It seems to me that she is justified in this belief. She is not justified by the gypsy fortune teller, but rather by those factors that, if she had not believe it, we would cite in explaining why she nevertheless has justification for believing it. She should not be reproached for the belief. After all, she could respond to such a reproach by citing the newspaper report and telephone call, her knowledge of which we must admit to have justifying force. She may, however, be reproached for being moved to believe by her knowledge of what the fortune teller said. So it does not seem to me always necessary that the condition constituting justification of a belief has to be something on which the belief is dependent—or, more accurately, has to have the form that the belief is dependent on such-and-such factors. Instead of any actual causal connection, what is always necessary, as I will argue below, is that the condition constituting justification be directly accessible to the subject; so that the subject could take account of it, could be influenced by it, if she wished.

3. I am assuming that there is always just one such set, that there are not alternative maximal justified sets, each of which is such that s at t has justification for believing all of its members together and it is not included in any larger set of which the same is true. This assumption is convenient for economy of exposition but it is not, I think, essential for any of the points I wish to make. Cf. note 7 below.
to ensure that her belief was justified and she recognized the relevant principles of justification.

The property of belonging to $J_{st}$ (for some $s$ and $t$) is a supervenient property of a proposition. That is, it is a property it has in virtue of other properties it has that can be specified without attributing that property to anything: it can acquire or lose this property only because of a change in some other thus neutrally specifiable property. So there must be correct principles of justification that, for any person $s$ (qualified to have justified or unjustified beliefs) and time $t$, take us from sufficient neutrally specified information to a determination of the membership of $J_{st}$. Let us call these the J-principles. The J-principles can be thought of as telling us, for any given proposition, what counts as a sufficient condition for that proposition’s belonging to $J_{st}$ (for some $s$ and $t$) and what counts as a necessary condition. (If we know everything of that sort that the J-principles have to tell us, then we know everything they have to tell us.)

4. I pointed out earlier that any person $s$ for whom there is a set $J_{st}$ must at $t$ have at least a minimal grasp of the concept of justification of belief. This means that the person must believe at least some of the correct J-principles. (A person may believe J-principles without being able to articulate them. That a person believes a certain J-principle can show itself in the person’s being sensitive in the appropriate way to the considerations referred to in the principle in deciding what to believe or in appraising the justification of her or others’ beliefs.) This in turn means that any sufficient condition for membership in a J-set that the J-principles lay down will have to include this condition that the subject believes a minimal number of the J-principles. Does this mean that some J-principles will be involved in a kind of self-reference, referring to a totality of items of which they themselves are members? Even if it did, it is not clear that it would be objectionable, but it seems that such self-reference can be avoided. It could be arranged that all of the J-principles but one refer simply to people who are qualified to have justified or unjustified beliefs, rather than to people who accept a minimal number of the J-principles. Then the remaining J-principle could say that to be qualified to have justified or unjustified beliefs is to accept some minimal subset of those other J-principles. Thus the total set of J-principles would entail propositions of the form "If (or only if) condition $C$ obtains and $s$ believes a minimal number of principles $P_1, \ldots, P_n$, then $q$ belongs to $J_{st}$", but none of these propositions would be among the principles $P_1, \ldots, P_n$. Rather, among $P_1, \ldots, P_n$ there would, for each of those propositions, be a corresponding proposition of the form "If (or only if) condition $C$ obtains, then $q$ belongs to $J_{st}$".

IV

It must be possible for there to be an epistemically perfect person. That is, it must be in principle possible for there to be an $s$ and $t$ such that $s$ has no unjustified beliefs at $t$—$B_{st}$ is included in $J_{st}$—and, moreover, as $t$ changes $s$ keeps $B_{st}$ included in $J_{st}$ by knowing the correct J-principles and having a sufficiently strong will to adhere to them (and no irrational compulsions or external interference to defeat her). It should be possible that knowledge of the J-principles would enable $s$ continually to know the boundaries of $J_{st}$ and, given sufficient will, thereby (for the right reasons) continually to keep $B_{st}$ within those boundaries. If this were not so, then the concept of justification would scarcely be coherent: the principles of justification would lay down a guide to forming and altering belief that even a person with a complete grasp of them and commitment to them, and with the best will in the world, might be unable to follow correctly or unable to know that she was following correctly. Any account of the moral justification of action that had the corresponding consequence would, clearly, have to be ruled unacceptable or else taken as showing that the notion of moral justification itself is incoherent and unacceptable. I see no reason why we should not say the same for the notion of justification of belief.

I wish to note two important consequences that follow from the point that such epistemic perfection is possible. First, for the propositions belonging to $J_{st}$ (for any $s$ and $t$), there must be neutral facts sufficient to make them members of $J_{st}$ that are directly accessible to $s$ at $t$. That is, each such fact must be such that $s$ needs at $t$ only to give clear-headed attention to the question of whether or not a fact of the relevant sort obtains in order to be aware that it does. They cannot be such that they could obtain while $s$ was unable to know that they did without a process of investigation. For if any such facts relevant to determining the membership of $J_{st}$ were thus beyond $s$'s direct grasp at $t$, then it could be that, no matter how thorough $s$'s grasp of all the correct J-principles and no matter how strong $s$'s will to adhere to them, it is beyond $s$'s power to ensure that $B_{st} \cap J_{st}$ does not expand as $t$ changes. For then $s$'s position at some time might be that $s$ could not then and there determine for some propositions.
whether or not they belonged to \( J_{st} \). Their status could change, from being in to being out of \( J_{st} \), or vice versa, without s's being able to detect the change when it occurs. A set of instructions aiming to give signs by following which one will stay on the right path must use signs that can be detected from the relevant points on the path.

A J-principle specifies a condition relevant to determining whether or not a proposition belongs to \( J_{st} \). Let us say of one that does this in terms of neutral facts directly accessible to s at t that it is a usable J-principle. Then the first important consequence of the point made in the paragraph before last can be put this way: some set of correct J-principles that is complete, in the sense that it can determine \( J_{st} \) for any s and t, must all be usable.

The other important consequence of the possibility of epistemic perfection is that some complete set of usable and correct J-principles is such that anyone who accepts them is justified in doing so. If epistemic perfection is possible, then it is possible for the beliefs of someone who accepts such a set of J-principles and follows them perfectly all to be justified. This includes the beliefs in those principles. But if belief in those principles is justified in that case, it is hard to see how it could fail to be justified in all other cases, where the believer accepts the principles but does not adhere perfectly to them (through inability or reproachable failure) or has beliefs that are in accord with the principles only accidentally. That a person fails to adhere faithfully to a principle she believes, or is in accordance with it unintentionally, is certainly not sufficient to make it the case that her belief in it is not justified. So S’s acceptance of those principles is justified if she does, and also if she does not, always follow them faithfully; that is, it is justified in any case. So the qualifications for membership in \( J_{st} \) for some complete set of usable, correct J-principles are quite minimal: s has at t only to believe the principles (or, even less, s has only to understand them, but must do at least that; see below, Section VII).

It does not follow that this minimal condition suffices to make every correct and usable J-principle belong to \( J_{st} \). There might be such a principle that is contingent. The principle gives correct results in just those possible worlds, of which the actual world happens to be one, in which there obtains some general (neutrally specified) fact \( G \). Perhaps some J-principles that prescribe situations in which a proposition is justified by non-deductive inference are of this sort. A justification for accepting any such contingent J-principle, \( P \), must be one of two sorts. It could be by (deductive) inference from \( P \) if \( G \), and \( G \), where one has independent justification for \( G \). Or it could be that one cannot help accepting \( P \) and that one’s disposition to be justified by \( P \) in forming or altering one’s beliefs is inborn, or trained into one at an early age, in such a way that one could simply never become able to suspend it while waiting for independent justification for \( G \). (But one could, in this case, have justification for \( G \) that is dependent on \( P \), that is by inference from \( G \) if \( P \), and \( P \).) Either way, one’s justification does not consist merely in one’s understanding \( P \), or even one’s believing \( P \). If this is right, then what does follow from the conclusion of the preceding paragraph is this: there must be a complete set of usable, correct J-principles that are all non-contingent.\(^5\)

V

In the rest of this paper, I want to take up a question that has been brought to the fore by the debate in recent epistemological literature over “foundationalism” vs. “coherentism”. To what extent is the membership of a \( J_{st} \) determined by internal relations among propositions?

An internal relation among propositions is one that follows from the content or forms of those propositions. For example, among the propositions:

\(^5\) The weaker thesis, that there must be some complete set of correct J-principles (usable or not) that are all non-contingent, can be shown by an independent and more obvious argument. If J-principle \( P \) gives correct results in worlds in which \( G \) but not in worlds in which \( not-G \), then \( P \iff G \) is itself a J-principle that gives correct results no matter how the world is, a necessary J-principle. The set of all necessary J-principles derivable in this fashion from contingent ones, plus any other necessary J-principles there may be, yields all the same results for the actual world as does any set of J-principles that holds in the actual world. Thus, if there is a set of J-principles sufficient to determine the membership of any \( J_{st} \) in the actual world, there must be such a set all of whose principles are non-contingent.
Every Persian rug is rectangular.
My only Persian rug is rectangular.
My only Persian rug is circular.
If my only Persian rug is rectangular, then it is not circular.
Every Persian rug I've observed is rectangular.

there obtain (among others) the following internal relations:
(i) (2) is a universal instantiation of (1).
(ii) (5) is deducible from (1).
(iii) (5) is the antecedent of (4).
(iv) The negation of (3) follows by modus ponens from (2) and (4).
(v) (1) and (5) are both instances of the propositional form 'Every F is G'.
(vi) (1)–(5) are all about Persian rugs.

And we may allow that a single proposition can enter into a “monadic internal relation” in virtue of having a certain sort of content or form. So further examples of internal relations among (1)–(5) would be:
(vii) (5) is an instance of the propositional form 'Every F I've observed is a G'.
(viii) (4) is a conditional.
(ix) (1) is about Persian rugs.

Some of the internal relations among members of a \( J_{st} \) may figure in their qualifications for membership. For instance, there may be sufficient conditions for membership that have the following form: “\( p \) belongs to \( J_{st} \) if \( p \) has (internal) relation \( R \) to other members of \( J_{st} \).” Let us call any such principle an inference principle and the relation referred to in its antecedent, an inferential relation. More specific forms of inference principles might, for example, include the following: “\( p \) belongs to \( J_{st} \) if the conjunction of \( q \) and \( p \) is deducible from \( q \) belongs to \( J_{st} \)” or “\( p \) belongs to \( J_{st} \) if the conjunction of \( q \) and \( p \) has the relation \( R \) (not implying deducibility) to \( q \) belongs to \( J_{st} \) and there are no members of \( J_{st} \) to which \( not-p \) has the relation \( T \).” It is plausible to suppose that justification by non-deductive inference would be subsumed under principles of this latter form.

The J-principles may entail necessary conditions for membership in \( J_{st} \) of the following form: “\( p \) belongs to \( J_{st} \) only if \( p \) has (internal) relation \( R \) to the other members of \( J_{st} \).” For example, it is plausible to suppose that any given proposition is a member of \( J_{st} \) only if no other member of \( J_{st} \) is the negation of that proposition. Let us call any J-principle of this form a coherence principle and the internal relation referred to in its consequent, a coherence relation.

(Note that, since a sufficient condition must entail every necessary condition, every inferential relation must be defined so that a proposition's having it to members of \( J_{st} \) guarantees that the proposition has all the coherence relations to members of \( J_{st} \). If we start with a coherent set and enlarge it by application of inference principles, the resulting set will be coherent.)

Let us say that \( J_{st} \) has a foundational structure just in case it divides into two non-empty subsets, the foundational and non-foundational, such that the justification for every member of the non-foundational subset is, in some sense or other, founded on or derived from the justification of some members of the foundational subset, but none of the members of the foundational subset derives its justification from members of the non-foundational subset. If one specifies the sense of “founded on or derived from” as “attaches to it only because of an inferential relation; or chain of inferential relations, it has to”, then, it seems to me, one has specified a type of foundational structure that the typical \( J_{st} \) is very likely to have. For it requires only that the J-principles include some non-redundant inference principles—non-redundant in the sense that if they are applied to the largest subset of \( J_{st} \) yielded solely by other, non-inference J-principles (together with the neutral facts), then the inference principles will generate new members for \( J_{st} \). In that case, the maximal subset of \( J_{st} \) generated by the non-inference principles is foundational in the sense specified and the additional members of \( J_{st} \) generated by application of the inference principles to the foundational set comprise the non-foundational subset: every member of the latter is a member of \( J_{st} \) only because of an inferential relation it has to members of the foundational set,
but of no member of the foundational set is it true that it is a member of $J_a$ only because of an inferential relation it has to members of the non-foundational set. A member of the foundational set may have an inferential relation to members of the non-foundational set or to some combination of these—even to a set that contains itself—but this will not make it non-foundational, because its membership in $J_a$ is guaranteed by criteria independent of that inferential relation.

Recall the point made earlier (in Section IV) that some complete set of usable and correct J-principles is such that it is included in $J_a$ if $s$ believes (or even just understands) its members. This means that such a set of J-principles will, if $s$ believes its members, belong to the foundational part of $J_a$. For their justification will not depend on any inferential relations they have to other members of $J_a$.

VI

"Foundationalism" in epistemology has come to mean a sort of view that is stronger than the view that a $J_a$ (typically) has a foundational structure (in the sense just defined). It connotes also a claim of some further special status for the foundational members of $J_a$. Common to these further claims is the idea that the foundational members are determined at least partly by external considerations—ones independent of internal relations of these propositions—having to do with what is true of $s$ and $t$ (Descartes, for example, would cite what $s$ clearly and distinctly perceives at $t$). Attacks on foundationalism seem to focus as much on the further claims as on the claim of foundational structure. And it is interesting that the label "coherentism", which has become common for an anti-foundationalist position, suggests an emphasis on internal relations as determinants of $J_a$ and suggests that such determinants can do at least some of the job that a foundationalist would have done by external considerations.

One extreme to which foundationalism might, conceivably, be carried is that of holding that the foundational members of $J_a$ are determined entirely by external considerations and need satisfy no coherence requirements whatsoever: for each founda-

tional member of $J_a$ there is a condition sufficient for its belonging to $J_a$ that is independent of any of its internal properties or internal relations to other members of $J_a$. One extreme to which coherentism might be carried would be that of holding that the only sort of factor that needs to be taken into account in determining $J_a$ is that of internal properties and relations of propositions. I think it beyond doubt that the truth must lie somewhere between these two extremes. In the remainder of this paper, I would like to explain why and to try to narrow a bit further the area where the truth must be.

The extreme foundationalist view cannot be right if there are any coherence principles among the correct J-principles, that is, any internal relations that any member of a $J_a$ must have to the other members. And surely there are: for instance, the relation (mentioned above) of not being the contradictory of any other member of $J_a$. It is unlikely that such an extreme view has been held. We do not have such a view in any foundationalist view that holds that all truths of a certain sort belong to the foundational subset. (One variant of this would be the view that the membership of the foundational subset of $J_a$ comprises every proposition $p$ such that at $s$ believes that $p$ and it is necessarily true that if at $s$ believes that $p$ then $p$.) For in the requirement that they all be truths the view secures the satisfaction of at least some legitimate coherence requirements. Nor would we have this extreme in a foundationalist view that held that all the propositions believed by $s$ at $t$ having a certain sort of content are members of the foundational part of $J_a$. For this sufficient condition is specified partly in terms of an internal relation among the members of the subset: their all having a certain sort of content.

Consider now the extreme "coherentist" view, that if you know enough about the internal features of propositions (and also the correct J-principles) then you have all you need to determine $J_a$ for any $s$ and $t$. On such a view—and indeed on any

6. Lawrence Bonjour describes the view he presents in "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge," Philosophical Studies, 59 (1990):281–312, as claiming that "the epistemic justification attaching to an empirical proposition always derives entirely from considerations of coherence" (p. 308, n. 3, emphasis mine). This seems to place his view at what I have called the co-
view—the J-principles will have to include other than inference and coherence principles. If you consult the forms in terms of which I defined inference and coherence principles, in the preceding section, you will see that from such principles alone, together with the facts about internal properties and relations of propositions, nothing can follow as to what propositions belong to any Jst. But we can construct a set of J-principles formally capable of generating conclusions of the form 'p is a member of Jst' without using principles that consider any sorts of neutral facts other than internal relations among propositions. For instance, besides the inference and coherence principles, we could have a principle of the following form: let A be the set of all and only those sets of propositions (or all and only those sets drawn from some totality of propositions specified by their internal properties) each of which satisfies all the coherence and inference principles; then any maximal member of A—i.e., any member of A not included in any other member—is a (maximal) Jst.

It is clear, however, that no view can be correct that says that Jst can be determined by applying to the set of all propositions a function defined entirely in terms of internal relations of propositions. Any such view has the absurd consequence that Jst is exactly the same set for every s and t, that one could, in principle, determine what any person was justified in believing at any given time without knowing the person or time in question or, indeed, any contingent facts about the world at all. The J-principles cannot be like that. If anything in this area is obvious, it is that I have justification for believing now is different from what I had justification for believing at this time yesterday and from what Leibniz had justification for believing at noon on January 1, 1700 (Hanover time).

There can be no objection to thinking of the J-principles as determining Jst by applying a function defined entirely in terms of internal relations among propositions to some set of propositionalist extreme. But the details of the view he actually presents do not seem to justify this description, and he himself, in a sentence adjacent to the one from which I just quoted, says that his view "does not hold that the only factor which determines the acceptability of a set of empirical propositions as putative empirical knowledge is its internal coherence."

Justification of Belief

Let us in fact think of the J-principles as saying that Jst = D(Fst), where Fst is the "feeder" set and D is a function defined entirely in terms of internal relations among propositions. Clearly, D will have these properties if D(Fst) = C(Fst) U I[C(Fst)], where "C(\chi)" denotes the maximal subset of \chi that satisfies the coherence principles,? and "I(\chi)" denotes the maximal set that can be generated from \chi by iterated application of the inference principles. Whether or not Jst has a foundational structure will then be a question of whether or not there are any non-redundant inference principles and, if there are, whether or not C(Fst) furnishes any grist for them. What kinds of external considerations play a role in determining Jst will be a matter of how the J-principles define Fst. (The notion of the "feeder" set Fst should not be confused with the notion of a foundational subset of Jst defined earlier. That Jst = C(Fst) U I[C(Fst)] obviously does not guarantee that Jst will include Fst.)

We have seen that Fst must be defined at least partly in terms of external considerations. What sorts of external considerations? A rather simple answer to this might tempt us. It might be thought that the only external factor we need to consider is the question of what S believes at t and, therefore, that Fst can be neatly defined as the set of just those propositions that s believes at t—i.e., Bst. (This defines Fst partly in terms of which proposi-

7. Actually, nothing shown here warrants the assumption that there will always be no more than one maximal subset of Fst that satisfies all the coherence theories. In a situation that failed to satisfy this assumption there might be more than one way of dividing all propositions into those that belong to a (maximal) Jst and those that do not. It is not obvious a priori that such a possibility can be ruled out, but, as I said earlier (note 9), it is convenient, and (I believe) harmless for my purposes here, to ignore it.

8. R. Firth describes this position when he speaks of a coherence theory that limits "the class of basic warrant-conferring statements" for s at t to Bst. He suggests that this is the most plausible delimitation of this class. See his "Coherence, Certainty, and Epistemic Priority," The Journal of Philosophy, 61 (1964): p. 556.
tions of the form "At t s believes that p" are true and partly in terms of the internal relation that "p" has to such a proposition; an equivalent alternative would be to make F_{at} the set of all truths of that form and put the internal relation into the function D.)

This suggestion is appealingly simple, but it will not work. The correct formula cannot be J_{at} = D(B_a), no matter how D is defined. If it were, we would have to accept that s can keep J_{at} the same over a stretch of time just by keeping her beliefs the same, no matter what other sorts of changes there may be in the meantime. But we should not accept this. Suppose I am watching a bird sitting on a branch, believing that I see such a thing. Suppose the bird flies away and my visual experience undergoes a corresponding change: it is as if I were seeing a bird fly away from the branch I saw it sitting on. But suppose I manage to keep my beliefs from changing accordingly: I continue to believe exactly what I believed a few moments ago when I saw the bird on the branch. I add no new propositions to the stock of those I believe, including none about what has happened to that bird since a few moments ago. (Never mind how I manage to do this or even whether or not it is in my power to do it; it needs only to be logically possible.) If the set of propositions I have justification for believing were at all times simply an internal function of what I believe, then that set would not change over the interval described. But surely it does change. Given the change in my visual experience (and the absence of any other unusual sense experience or memory phenomena) there is added to it the proposition that I saw the bird I was watching fly away; this is so whether I believe this proposition or perversely manage to keep from believing it.

The view under consideration would also mean that if I
9. Keith Lehrer, in his book Knowledge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), presents a view of essentially this kind. On his view (if I understand it correctly), J_{at} = D(F_{at}), where D is a function defined entirely in terms of internal relations and F_{at} is the set of all those propositions that describe s's "corrected doxastic system" at t, that is, all those propositions of the form "s at t believes that p" that are true and would still be true if s were an "impartial and disinterested truth-seeker" (see pp. 198-208). The last clause means merely that the belief in question has not arisen out of such a motive as s's very much wanting it to be the case that p.

could manage to change only my beliefs in a massive and coherent way then that would suffice to change the propositions I have justification for believing in an equally massive way. Suppose that nearly all of what I believe about my past is justified for me now. Suppose that I then suddenly shift from believing in that past to believing in one that is thoroughly different from it but equally coherent in itself and with my current experience, and suppose that I manage to do this despite there being no change in my memory impressions. They still deliver the same past I used to believe in but I now regard them as simply delusory: I think that I did not actually experience any of what I seem to remember experiencing. Imagine that my massive change in my beliefs and massive dismissal of my memory impressions is not related to any unusual developments in my perceptual experience or my memory impressions: I manage the feat by sheer will alone. The only unusual change is in the beliefs; everything else goes along normally. The bizarreness of this case may make it difficult for our intuitions to get a grip on it. One thing we would clearly not want to say about it, however, is that I could in this way, through unusual (and perhaps humanly impossible) control of my beliefs, massively and suddenly change what I am justified in believing: We might want to say that I have suddenly gone so crazy that "justified" and "unjustified" no longer apply to my beliefs, but we should not say that my new set of beliefs is mostly justified, just like my old set. Yet this is what we would have to say if we held that, for some internal function D, J_{at} is always D(B_a).

Clearly, other sorts of facts will have to be among those used as a basis for determining what belongs to F_{at}. The examples just considered suggest two other sorts that will have to be included. One comprises the facts as to what s's subjective experience at t is as if she were perceiving (seeing, hearing, etc.); these we may call the facts as to what propositions of the form "I perceive X" are delivered by s's perceptual experience at t. The other comprises the facts as to what it seems to s that she remembers having experienced or having come to know (e.g., it seems to s that she remembers having recently seen her glasses on her dresser, or it seems to s that she remembers having learned that any two sides of a triangle are proportional to the sines of
the opposite angles). I mean here that sense of “it seems to s that she remembers” that is implied by “s remembers” but such that “it seems to s that she remembers that p” is compatible with “s knows that not-p”. Facts of this second sort we may speak of as the facts as to what propositions are delivered by s’s memory-impressions at t. The appeal of the idea that the feeder set \( F_{st} \) could be simply \( B_{st} \) may depend, in part, on the fact that in the actual world \( B_{st} \) typically includes a great many, if not all, of those propositions delivered by s’s sense-experiences and memory impressions at t. But this is only a contingent connection, and it would not be plausible to say that the J-principles apply only in those possible worlds where that connection obtains. The fact that a certain putative principle gives correct results for certain possible situations but not for others demands explanation in terms of more basic, less restricted principles.

Another sort of fact that the specification of \( F_{st} \) should take into account is the facts as to what propositions s understands at t. A person can have justification for believing a proposition only if that person understands the proposition well enough to be capable of believing it. s’s having justification for believing a proposition that s does not actually believe should mean that all s has to do in order to have a justified belief in it is simply to believe it. But if s does not understand it well enough then that is not all that s has to do: s must first acquire an adequate understanding of it. We said that \( J_{st} \) should be defined in such a way that, given that \( B_{st} \) is already included in \( J_{st} \), all s needs in order to keep it so as t changes is a sufficiently strong will to do so (and a knowledge of the correct J-principles). These things should also be sufficient to enable s to keep \( J_{st} \) included in \( B_{st} \) (given that it once is).

If s already understands a certain proposition and has justification for believing it but does not yet believe it, then s can, normally, simply decide to believe it and forthwith do so. But one cannot acquire understanding of a proposition one does not yet understand by simply deciding to understand it and forthwith doing so. Justification is a normative notion and one should always be able to apply the consideration of justification directly to the decision whether to believe or not. If one ever had justification for believing what one did not understand, this consideration could in that case have no such role in influencing such a decision, for the lack of understanding would prevent the question from arising. So \( J_{st} \) should be a subset of \( U_{st} \), the set of propositions that s understands at t.

This result can be secured if and only if the J-principles require \( F_{st} \) to be a subset of \( U_{st} \) and require the function \( D \) to be closed on \( U_{st} \). Given our supposition about \( D \), the internal relations it might use to enlarge \( J_{st} \) beyond \( F_{st} \) are limited to inferential relations. So inferential relations must be closed on \( U_{st} \).

Requiring \( F_{st} \) to be included in \( U_{st} \) has a bearing on the way in which the facts as to s’s sense-experience and memory-impressions at t should be taken into account in specifying \( F_{st} \). It should not be by saying that \( F_{st} \) includes the intersection of \( U_{st} \) with the set of propositions reporting s’s sense-experience and memory-impressions at t (“s’s visual experience at t was as if she were seeing X”, “It seemed to s at t that she remembered that p”). It may be, for many an s and t, that few or none of those propositions are contained in \( U_{st} \). s may not have acquired the somewhat technical and sophisticated concepts of sense-experience and memory-impressions. But this should not prevent s from being justified in her perceptual and memory beliefs. So what we should say is that \( F_{st} \) includes the intersection of \( U_{st} \) with the set of propositions delivered by s’s sense-experience and memory-impressions at t (“I see X”, “I remember that p”).

A great many members of this intersection will also be members of \( B_{st} \). What other members of \( B_{st} \) should \( F_{st} \) contain? The complete answer to this may be difficult to discover, but at least part of the answer (to which I have already alluded) seems to me to be as follows. \( F_{st} \) should include those members of \( B_{st} \) mentioned earlier, where s finds herself incapable of not believing them and the reason for this incapacity has justificatory force: s “clearly and distinctly perceives” the proposition in question.

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10. This is not to say that propositions that do not belong to \( J_{st} \) but would do so if only they belonged to \( U_{st} \) are of no special epistemological interest as compared with those that would not belong to \( J_{st} \) even if they belonged to \( U_{st} \). Moreover, I am inclined to suppose that there is a special class of propositions distinguished by the fact that their merely belonging to \( U_{st} \) is sufficient to make them members of \( J_{st} \), and that this distinction is the basis of the distinction between a priori and a posteriori justification of belief.
or the belief is basic in s's belief system. If the contents of such beliefs are members of \( F_{st} \) then they will be members of \( J_{st} \)—i.e., s's beliefs in them will be justified—if and only if they are also members of \( C(F_{me,now}) \), the maximal coherent part of \( F_{st} \). This is as it should be.

It is not the case, however, that all members of \( B_{st} \) should \textit{ipso facto} be members of \( F_{st} \). Suppose I were now to choose to believe the proposition that intelligent life exists on exactly fifty-seven planets in our galaxy, or were suddenly to find myself unable to resist believing it. If this proposition were granted membership in \( F_{me,now} \) then it would surely also belong to \( C(F_{me,now}) \). It is hard to see what coherence principle could exclude it. Hence, given our supposition as to how \( J_{st} \) is a function of \( F_{st} \), it would also belong to \( J_{me,now} \). Yet in my present circumstances I would certainly not be justified in choosing to adopt this belief (and if I were unable to help believing it, this would be an irrational compulsion). Therefore, given our stipulation, it cannot be necessarily true that \( B_{st} \) is included in \( F_{st} \).

\section{VIII}

The foregoing points fall very short of giving a complete and informative specification of \( F_{st} \). But it has not been my ambition here to work out the content of the J-principles, either the coherence or the inference principles, or those determining the membership of \( F_{st} \). I have tried only to lay down certain basic, general points about these principles.

If there is such a thing as the objective justification of belief, there must be necessary principles that determine, on the basis of neutrally specified facts that are directly accessible to s at t, the set of propositions that s has (rational) justification for believing at t—the set \( J_{st} \). Belief in these J-principles (or something equivalent in the actual world) is always justified (so anyone who understands them has justification for believing them) and belief in at least a modicum of them must be an attribute of any person whose beliefs can be called either “justified” or “unjustified”. The J-principles can be thought of as determining \( J_{st} \) in two stages. First, they specify, on the basis of facts about s and t, a “feeder” set of propositions, \( F_{st} \). Second, they provide a function, defined entirely in terms of internal relations of propositions, that takes \( F_{st} \) into \( J_{st} \). This function has the form: \( C(F_{st}) \cup \{C(F_{st})\} \), where “\( C(x) \)” is defined in terms of coherence relations and “\( I(x) \)” in terms of inferential relations. \( J_{st} \) will have a foundational structure if there are non-redundant inference principles applicable to \( C(F_{st}) \). \( F_{st} \) must be included in the set of propositions s understands at t and the inferential relations must be closed on this set. \( F_{st} \) must contain the propositions delivered by s's sense-experience and memory-impressions at t, as well as some propositions that s cannot help believing; but it need not contain all the propositions believed by s at t.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} I am grateful to Sydney Shoemaker for a number of very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.