INFINITISM, SKEPTICISM, AND THE REGRESS PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT

It is a common view that rationally held beliefs require reasons sufficient to justify them. One debate about the nature of justification is defined by the Regress Problem, which offers four different accounts of the structure of sufficient reasons. I argue against the more popular foundationalist and coherentist responses to the problem, contending that infinitism, (the view that the structure of justification-conferring reasons supporting a belief is endless), can provide a viable theory of adequate justification. The version of infinitism I defend entails adopting an infinitist approach to propositional justification combined with a contextualist approach to doxastic justification. After the details of the foundationalist and coherentist solutions are discussed, I evaluate various versions of contextualism and describe how these different formulations can influence a response to the Regress Problem. To conclude, I articulate a contextualist-infinitist solution to the Regress Problem, arguing that this solution not only avoids the problems presented by foundationalism and coherentism, but also that it provides a viable account of how context-based factors influence knowledge claims by affecting our standards for justification.
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## CHAPTER

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCING THE REGRESS PROBLEM

Justification is typically considered to be a necessary condition for knowledge yet also the most opaque and controversial of the three components, justification, truth, and belief, that make up the standard account. The reason for this assessment has been due in part to the impact of the Regress Problem in traditional epistemology. This is a problem that continues to be significant because it raises a concern about our ability to have knowledge by challenging the possibility that there can be adequate justification for our beliefs. As this chapter will show, there have been many attempts to solve this problem, but as of now no general consensus exists about the correct solution.

Put briefly, the Regress Problem is a dispute over the structure of justification, specifically the question of how to understand the configuration of reasons that justify our beliefs. When we try to answer this question, the regress inherent in the attempt to justify beliefs appears. If we seek justification for a particular belief, we’re looking for a supporting reason for thinking it to be true. This supporting reason in turn requires a reason of its own to justify our accepting it as well, and for all inferentially held beliefs this pattern continues, seemingly without end. Thus, it appears that the justification for any belief consists of a vicious infinite regress of reasons. This is a problematic conclusion since it leaves us with a theory of knowledge according to which no belief can ever be adequately justified. However, there are four possible solutions to this problem: (1) we can never have sufficient justification for our beliefs and hence lack knowledge (skepticism), (2) our beliefs can still be justified because the infinite regress of reasons is
non-vicious (infinitism), (3) there are non-inferential basic beliefs that justify all further justified beliefs (foundationalism), or (4) our beliefs are mutually supported and justified as a whole because they form a coherent system (coherentism).

The main concern raised by this problem is that without the support of a proper theory of the structure of justification, (i.e., one that can successfully respond to the Regress Problem), the only possible outcome will be skepticism about justification. Such a result is problematic for the traditional analysis of knowledge, the view that knowledge consists of justified, true beliefs, (hereafter the JTB account), for if skepticism is true and we have no adequate account of justification, it follows that we also cannot have an adequate account of knowledge. The consequence of this conclusion is either that it is impossible for us to have any knowledge whatsoever, or if we do know things, we can never know what it is that we know since we cannot be sure which of our beliefs are justified. Either result is disastrous for any non-skeptical account that requires justification as a necessary condition for knowledge, which makes the Regress Problem of acute significance for anyone attempting to defend a non-skeptical epistemology using the JTB account. In light of this problem, as things currently stand the burden lies with the traditional epistemologist to come up with some way of combating the skeptic’s conclusion.

While there is still no consensus on just how to solve this problem, foundationalism and coherentism are typically viewed as the two viable contenders. And instead of considering infinitism, an increasingly popular alternative response for those unsatisfied with the foundationalist and coherentist solutions to the Regress Problem has
been to turn away from the JTB account altogether and counter skepticism with an account of knowledge outside of traditional epistemology, typically with a theory that removes justification as a necessary condition for knowledge and because of this, rejects the Regress Problem. However, despite the difficulty of solving this problem, I think it is premature to abandon the traditional JTB analysis altogether, and the goal of this chapter is to provide some reasons that explain why this pursuit is worthwhile. Section 1 accounts for why the Regress Problem has remained unanswered by discussing several historical responses to it and how these various approaches have failed to establish a consensus about the correct solution. Section 2 then discusses the nature of justification and its connection to skepticism in more detail, offering an overview of the features that an adequate theory of justification would need to have in order to combat skepticism. What I hope to show by the end of the chapter is that the Regress Problem is still a pressing concern that it is relevant to epistemology today, that there is still room for debate over how to best deal with it, and in light of this, that further exploration of a solution to the Regress Problem will need to focus on the overlooked and under-discussed infinitist account.

Section 1: The Epistemic Regress through History

Richard Rorty once recommended that we view the history of philosophy as a continual, never-ending dialogue carried out among those who share the same background knowledge and who are pursuing answers to or refinements of a set of
questions that has been part of this dialogue for a long time. According to Rorty, this perpetual dialogue among philosophers defines what philosophers do:

Philosophers are philosophers not because they have common aims and interests (they don’t), or common methods (they don’t), or agree to discuss a common set of problems (they don’t), or are endowed with common faculties (they aren’t), but simply and solely because they are taking part in a single continuing conversation. (2008, p. 411)

Keeping Rorty’s account of philosophical progress in mind, the rest of this section will consider past prominent theories of knowledge as part of a dialogue in the history of epistemology, building upon each other through various refinements of theories of the nature of justification and also the concern over the possibility that justified beliefs are possible despite the skeptic’s claims to the contrary. The section will be divided into subsections based on divisions already commonly used to mark different eras in the history of philosophy that are chosen here based on shifts in responses to the Regress Problem or, in Rorty’s terms, shifts in the dialogue philosophers throughout history have engaged in over the nature of justification. The goal here is to review accounts in the canon about issues relating to the structure of justification and the Regress Problem in an attempt to shed some light on how this debate has progressed and where things stand today.

The reason I wish to turn to a historical survey at this point is because I take it that historical analysis can bring insight to the study of current problems. As Stroud (2011) notes:

Historical awareness and sensitivity to the sources of the philosophical problems of human knowledge are essential to the proper understanding of those problems, and hence to an understanding of the subject itself. Without informed recognition of how the central questions and ideas of
Thus, looking to the historical progression of the Regress Problem is essential for assessing the present debate between foundationalism and coherentism, and is useful not just for making sense of the reason for concern over the structure of justification raised by this problem, but also how we ought to understand the goals of internalist epistemology and the JTB account of knowledge.¹

The historical sources I will refer to in this section all implicitly or explicitly attempt to explain the nature of justification. Of course, the views to be discussed here do not comprise an exhaustive survey of all discussion of internalist accounts of justification in the canon, but those that are covered here have been chosen because they offer accounts of knowledge and justification that together form a more or less coherent narrative that can inform our current understanding of the JTB paradigm. Each view has one or more of the following characteristics:

1. It directly discusses the Regress Problem.

2. It is part of the standard story given today when describing responses to the Regress Problem.

3. It has been influential for determining the current debate over the nature of justification.

In sum, the accounts described below will prove to be important for understanding the development of the Regress Problem because in addition to offering theories of

¹ The traditional JTB account of knowledge is usually described as internalist in contrast to the externalist view. Internalism is essentially the position that the reasons for belief must be in some sense available to a subject or she must to some degree be aware of the reasons for her belief to count as justified, while externalism denies that such availability or awareness of reasons is a necessary condition for knowledge, instead suggesting that, for example, properly caused or grounded beliefs might be sufficient.
justification that fall under one of the problem’s four possible solutions, they meet at least one of the above criteria.

*a. Ancient Philosophy: The Original Formulation and Refinement of the Problem*

Perhaps the earliest formulation of the Regress Problem can be found in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, where he defines the four alternatives that constitute the possible solutions to the problem as we understand it today. His own endorsement of the foundationalist solution runs as follows:

Our own doctrine is that not all knowledge is demonstrative: on the contrary, knowledge of immediate premises is independent of demonstration…for since we must know the prior premises from which the demonstration is drawn, and since the regress must end in immediate truths, those truths must be indemonstrable. (72b, 18-23)

According to the standard interpretation of Aristotle’s epistemology, the foundations for inferential justification rest in *nous*, or first principles that make up the basis of all scientific knowledge. In Aristotle’s foundationalism, our inferential knowledge is grounded in some basic beliefs (or first principles) for which justification is not necessary because these beliefs are both non-inferential and indemonstrable.

Aristotle’s strategy is to offer an argument by elimination: Since we cannot accept the problematic circularity of the coherentist’s solution, the vicious regress of the

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2 See Book 1, Ch. 3, 72b-73a for Aristotle’s description of what we now call infinitism, skepticism, and coherentism.

3 Aristotle describes *nous* as the following, (which has been translated as *rational intuition* in this version of the text): “by rational intuition [*nous*] I mean an originative source of scientific knowledge [*episteme*]” (88b, 36-37). Furthermore, he concludes *Posterior Analytics* with the following explanation: “If, therefore, it is the only other kind of true thinking except scientific knowing, intuition [*nous*] will be the originative source of scientific knowledge” (100b, 14-16).
infinitist, or just plain skepticism about justification, foundationalism stands as the only viable alternative. Aristotle is thus typically credited with setting up the Regress Problem and then also solving the problem with a foundationalist account of justification. His account of *nous* establishes and further describes the solid basis for the classic foundationalist position used by the likes of Descartes to combat skepticism.

Often cited as the next stage in the development of the Regress Problem is the Pyrrhonian account from the first and second centuries CE which, ironically, uses Aristotle’s Regress Problem as a means of defending skepticism.\(^4\) Contemporary epistemologists make much of the ancient skeptic’s formulation of the Regress Problem as (what’s known now as) the Agrippan Trilemma, (a trilemma because it takes the three non-skeptical responses to all be problematic), perhaps because in post-Cartesian epistemology the threat of external world skepticism is taken seriously and Agrippa’s Trilemma is seen as the origin of this threat.\(^5\) Though the Pyrrhonian skeptic does not specifically discuss the nature of justification, the concern that she raises is one that applies to our question about the structure of justification, for she suggests that rather than succumb to dogmatism (the foundationalist conclusion that there are basic, non-

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\(^4\) At least this is the standard story. Though I have found no direct discussion of Aristotle’s account of knowledge (*episteme*) in Sextus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonianism*, others have made much of the connection between Aristotle and the Pyrrhonians as starting the debate over the Regress Problem. For instance, Sosa (1997) writes, “A main epistemic problematic, found already in Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, presents a threefold choice on how a belief may be justified: either through infinitely regressive reasoning, or through circular reasoning, or through reasoning resting ultimately on some foundation. Aristotle himself apparently takes the foundationalist option when he argues that rational intuition is a foundational source of scientific knowledge. The five modes of Agrippa, which pertain to knowledge generally, again pose the same problematic, the “Pyrrhonian” problematic” (229).

inferential beliefs), one should suspend judgment regarding the truth of one’s beliefs, and hence suspend judgment about whether one has knowledge.

The Pyrrhonian solution to the Regress Problem is for the most part found in the writings of Sextus Empiricus, a skeptic from the 1st century CE, who recounts the options for responding to the Regress Problem in terms of the “Five Modes.” Unlike the four options articulated by Aristotle, Sextus’ Five Modes point to five possible solutions to the Regress Problem. In addition to the Mode of Regress, (what we now call infinitism), the Mode of Hypothesis, (what we now call foundationalism), and the Mode of Circularity, (what we now call coherentism), the Mode of Disagreement and the Mode of Relativity represent two different forms of skepticism. The Mode of Disagreement describes the skepticism that arises when one offers counterarguments to any proposed statement of belief that in turn leads one to question the reasons for holding a belief. This undermines the certainty one could have about her beliefs by raising doubts about whether it is possible for a subject to recognize what constitutes sufficient justification. This Mode thus promotes the general Pyrrhonian attitude mentioned earlier, that disagreement over the truth must lead to the suspension of belief about a proposition whose truth is in question.

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6 The Five Modes and Ten Modes are discussed in Sextus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonianism*, Book 1, Sections 14 and 15. Also interesting to note is that the Problem of the Criterion, (described in Section 2), also finds one of its first formulations in Book 2 of the same text.

7 Criticisms of the Pyrrhonian view often cite the conclusion of the Mode of Disagreement as problematic because it suggests that there are very few propositions we can legitimately form beliefs about.
The Mode of Disagreement differs from the Mode of Relativity, the other skeptical solution presented as part of the Five Modes. The Mode of Relativity is a summary of the conclusion drawn from another set of skeptical argumentative strategies employed by the Pyrrhonians, the Ten Modes, which offer reasons to think that a subject cannot accurately determine the truth of a particular proposition because the justification one has in favor of it is always relative to one’s own perspective. If each subject’s perspective of the truth of a proposition is relative to and dependent on one’s present circumstances and other beliefs, it cannot be said with any degree of certainty that a source of justification can give one a sufficient reason for thinking a particular belief is true. Given that the world may be perceived differently for each individual at any given point in time, (e.g., different for the sick and for the well, different for the rich and the poor, different on Tuesday and Saturday, etc.), the Pyrrhonian concludes that there is a significant distinction between the way things appear to us and the way they really are. If this is the case, the result is that we cannot conclude that we have justification for any beliefs about things in the objective world, but only for how things appear to each of us idiosyncratically. Again, this conclusion supports the general claim of Pyrrhonianism, which is that we should suspend judgment about the truth of propositions, and hence refrain from making knowledge claims about them. Thus, the Pyrrhonian responds to the

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8 In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle actually engages with the sort of cases of disagreement described in the Ten Modes and rejects them. He describes the skeptic’s view in the Mode of Disagreement as follows: “And again, they say that many of the other animals receive impressions contrary to ours; and that even to the senses of each individual, things do not always seem the same. Which, then, of these impressions are true and which are false is not obvious; for the one set is no more true than the other, but both are alike” (1009b, 8-11). He continues by criticizing the skeptical position from his foundationalist perspective: “they seek a reason for things for which no reason can be given; for the starting-point of demonstration is not demonstration” (1011a, 11-13).
Regress Problem by accepting that most of our beliefs cannot be adequately justified, which leads to the conclusion that, in most cases, we lack knowledge.

b. The Modern Dominance of Foundationalism

Echoes of Aristotle’s foundationalist solution can be found in Descartes’ *Meditations* inasmuch as both accounts defend empirical knowledge using foundationalist first principles. Some have also argued that Cartesian foundationalism developed in response to the Pyrrhonian skeptic’s description of global skepticism in the Ten Modes. According to this interpretation, Descartes attempts to overcome external world skepticism, (or offers a response to the Mode of Relativity described by the Pyrrhonians), by proposing indubitable foundational principles, his ‘clear and distinct perceptions.’ Others, however, have claimed that Descartes constructs a new form of skepticism in the *Meditations*. Bermúdez (2000) claims that Descartes’ form of global skepticism was in fact wholly original and did not have a direct antecedent in Pyrrhonian skepticism since Descartes’ view “is predicated on the existence of radical error in the common-sense view of the world, and yet cannot provide anything more than a hypothetical replacement for the common-sense view of the world” (353). This understanding of the problem of skepticism is quite different than the Pyrrhonian view, for it would seem that the Pyrrhonians don’t offer an alternative theoretical conception of...
the world as a “replacement” for the world directly perceived. The possibility of global skepticism based on doubt about a single general proposition, (e.g., ‘I’m not being deceived by an evil demon’), does not factor into the Pyrrhonian approach to understanding doubt. Instead, only particular propositions are subject to skepticism. One could even argue that the claim made by the Cartesian global skeptic is too dogmatic for the Pyrrhonian to accept, and so the possibility of such general hypothetical skepticism would itself be something the Pyrrhonian would suspend judgement about.

However, Descartes appears to have an anti-dogmatic approach to establishing the correctness of foundationalism, for his argument in the *Meditations* sets out to use skepticism as a means of proving the foundationalist account of justification. Though he makes no mention of the Regress Problem directly, by systematically doubting the entirety of his beliefs Descartes attempts to reach a core of propositions that are indubitable and which designate beliefs that are non-inferentially justified and infallible. In doing so, he offers a foundationalist response to the skepticism about justification that is raised by the Regress Problem. He writes:

*Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight to the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested.* (1985, p. 12)

To reach this state of doubt, Descartes begins by pointing out errors in perceptual judgments as indicating problems in the use of perceptual experience as justification for
beliefs about the external world and then considers the possibility of hypothetical skepticism about knowledge of the external world as such by using various thought experiments in which our beliefs about the world as a whole are put into doubt. For instance, if we cannot discriminate between dreaming and waking states or between the external world as objectively real or as a deception, it seems we have insufficient justification for believing the external world is as we have assumed, and furthermore have insufficient justification for any beliefs about things existing in that world. In light of this skeptical conclusion, Descartes finds that only the belief that he is in fact thinking remains indubitable. Starting from this clear and distinct perception, Descartes establishes, so he argues, an *a priori* foundation for empirical knowledge and therefore a foundationalist solution to the Regress Problem.

We can contrast this version of foundationalism to the foundationalist solution offered by Thomas Reid. Reid rejects Descartes’ attempt to find a foundationalist basis for knowledge in indubitable first principles, for while he agrees with the Cartesian assumption that knowledge must rest on some non-inferential basis, he disagrees with the view that empirical knowledge can rest on *a priori* first principles. Instead, the main contribution to discussions of the Regress Problem by Reid’s theory of justification can be found in his proposal of epistemological naturalism. Reid criticizes Descartes’ skeptical method as incapable of establishing a foundation for knowledge because it

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10 The conclusion drawn here is based on the Closure Principle: if I know some proposition P and P entails another proposition Q, then I know Q. The Cartesian skeptic’s position is based on the negation of the principle: If I don’t know some proposition P (e.g., that there is not an evil demon deceiving me) and P entails Q (e.g., that this is my hand), then I don’t know Q. In other words, if I don’t know some general proposition, it follows I don’t know any specific proposition entailed by it either.
outlines a means of reaching first principles in a psychologically unnatural way, and thus one not based on actual human knowers. As Reid sees it, if we analyze our normal everyday experience of the world, we will conclude that global skepticism would never naturally arise. Reid argues that it would not be possible (except in a kind of philosophical mood of reflection) to systematically doubt our perceptions of the world in the way Descartes outlines in the *Meditations*. Instead, he claims that experience shows that believing in the existence of external objects is indubitable because it “is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine: I even took it upon trust, and without suspicion” (1975, p. 84). According to his view, it is unnatural to even question beliefs about the world in the way Descartes does. Cartesian skepticism, Reid argues, is in direct conflict with ordinary belief formation, what he calls common sense, and the average person’s everyday experience. Instead, Reid’s response to the Regress Problem depends on taking some beliefs formed on the basis of common sense to be self-evident, and hence, foundational. First principles, or foundational principles that form the basis of justification, rest on what common sense reveals. As he writes:

> Nature hath not left us destitute of means whereby the candid and honest part of mankind may be brought to unanimity when they happen to differ about first principles. When men differ about things that are taken to be first principles or self-evident truths, reasoning seems to be at an end. Each party appeals to common sense. (1975, p. 257)

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11 Reid also criticizes Descartes’ attempt to establish first principles by reference to the benevolence of God: “It is strange that so acute a reason did not perceive that in this reasoning there is evidence of begging the question. For, if our faculties be fallacious, why may they not deceive us in this reasoning [that God is benevolent] as well as in others?” (1975, p. 276).
Here it seems that Reid could also be offering a solution to Pyrrhonian skepticism of the sort described by the Mode of Relativity by appealing to basic and general principles common to all. So while Descartes and Reid have different accounts of what constitutes foundationalist principles, they agree that there is a way of overcoming skepticism and that foundationalism is the correct account of justification.

c. The 20th Century: A Rejection of the Problem

The shift to an empiricist form of foundationalism with Reid predates (and arguably influenced) popular accounts of the structure of justification in the 20th century, most of which also turned towards a naturalistic or scientific approach to knowledge, as we see in the logical positivists’ search for a scientific foundation for knowledge in immediate sense experience. Since serious consideration of the coherentist solution to the Regress Problem arises in the logical positivists’ debate, we also find in the logical positivist (and logical empiricist) movement the birth of the contemporary debate over the structure of justification.

The debate over the structure of justification within the logical positivist movement was possible because logical positivism was not entirely cohesive, though until recently it had frequently been portrayed as such.12 Kitchener’s (2004) overview of epistemological differences in prominent logical positivist philosophers suggests that divisions within logical positivism coincided well with the division between

12 According to Kitchener (2004), it was not until the 1990’s that more subtle accounts of the logical positivist movement accounting for these distinctions became more widespread.
foundationalist and coherentist responses to the Regress Problem. Within the logical positivist movement, Kitchener notes that:

Schlick was probably the most conservative. His conception of epistemology, although perhaps containing some naturalistic elements, was basically in the mold of traditional philosophical (empiricist) epistemology. Neurath, perhaps the most radical of the three leaders, endorsed naturalistic epistemology explicitly…Carnap lined up in the middle, attempting a negotiation and compromise between the divergent views of Schlick and Neurath. (41)

One the one hand, Schlick’s epistemology represented the traditional foundationalist conception of justification, and on the other, Neurath offered what would be considered a naturalized epistemology rejecting the traditional account of justification in favor of coherentism.

The epistemological distinction between Schlick’s foundationalism and Neurath’s coherentism developed out of a debate over the nature of ‘protocol sentences,’ or statements of observations that were thought to make up the basis of scientific or empirical meaning. Protocol sentences were taken to be statements that could be directly verified by experience and to which all other statements could be reduced.\(^{13}\) Divisions among the logical positivists about how to understand the structure of justification stemmed from disagreement over the foundational status of these protocol sentences.

We can put aside Carnap’s account of justification here because it is not clear which response to the Regress Problem he endorsed. This is perhaps because, as Kitchener notes, he attempted to mediate between Schlick’s foundationalism and Neurath’s coherentism. For Schlick, justification finds its foundation not in protocol

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\(^{13}\) See Carnap (1934).
sentences, but in ‘confirmations,’ the non-inferential basis of protocol sentences themselves that make up immediate observations.\textsuperscript{14} According to his view, protocol sentences or statements can never be foundational because they are never indubitable, and they can never be indubitable because they are hypotheses derived from some immediate experience and are beholden to this experience as a source of their truth, making them reliant on these experiences for their own justification.

As a further defense of his own foundationalist view, Schlick also discusses his disdain for the opposing Neurathean coherentist position, stating that, “It fails altogether to give an unambiguous criterion of truth, for by means of it I can arrive at any number of consistent systems of statements which are incompatible with one another” (1959, p. 216). Schlick’s objection to Neurath’s view is an articulation of one of the most common complaints about coherentism (to be discussed in Chapter 3), that there is no standard of reference for determining the truth of one’s coherent belief system. While one’s beliefs may successfully justify each other, there are insufficient reasons to conclude in addition to this that they are true. But Neurath (1959) defends coherentism on the grounds that “\textit{There is no way of taking conclusively established pure protocol sentences as the starting point of the sciences. No \textit{tabula rasa} exists}” (201). He further supports this point with perhaps his most famous contribution to epistemology, the so-called “Neurath’s

\textsuperscript{14} Schlick (1959) describes the distinction between confirmations and protocol sentences in the following way: “If I make the confirmation ‘Here now blue,’ this is \textit{not} the same as the protocol statement ‘M.S. perceived blue on the nth of April 1934 at such and such a time and such and such a place.’ The latter statement is a hypothesis and as such always characterized by uncertainty…In protocol statements there is always mention of perceptions…while they are never mentioned in confirmations. A genuine confirmation cannot be written down, for as soon as I inscribe the demonstratives “here,” “now,” they lose their meaning” (226).
Boat” example: “We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-rock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials” (201). For Neurath the goal of inquiry into protocol sentences is not to use them as the foundation for knowledge, but rather to ensure that they form a cohesive system with other statements in our language since it is impossible to separate the epistemic status of current experiences from the background of past ones. Neurath supports coherentism because he doubts that we can have any theory-independent immediate and unbiased experience of the world, whereas Schlick argues that precisely this sort of unbiased experience is the basis for knowledge. The contrast between foundationalist and coherentist responses is clear in this debate. The controversy surrounds differences in theory about the existence of non-inferential basic beliefs. Again, the foundationalist essentially posits that such beliefs must exist, while the coherentist denies their possibility.

Later in the 20th century, Quine took the coherentism of Neurath a step further by adopting the view that the paradigm of traditional epistemology was itself at fault for making the problem of justification so difficult, and so in order to successfully deal with the problems facing epistemology this old paradigm needed to be replaced. In an extension of the reductionist project of Carnap and the logical positivists, Quine conceived of justification in a radically new way by rejecting the idea that a theory of knowledge should be based on theoretical epistemological principles, and instead suggesting that discussions of knowledge or justification should be cut out of philosophical discourse entirely and translated or reduced to purely scientific terms.
According to Quine, the traditional JTB account of knowledge focuses on defining knowledge and justification via conceptual analysis and speculative considerations often carried out independently of, and with little consideration for, scientific evidence. He argues that epistemological pursuits ought to be considered on par with scientific ones, so that “epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz. a physical human subject” (2008, p. 533).

Arguably, it seems that Quine’s way of naturalizing the traditional paradigm is to reject a foundationalist structure of justification and support a coherentist one. However, he doesn’t simply pick sides within the internalist picture of justification, he also points out its limitations and in particular the shortcomings of the logical positivist account of knowledge. As he writes, “The old epistemology [of logical positivism] aspired to contain, in a sense, natural science; it would construct it somehow from sense data. Epistemology in its new setting, conversely, is contained in natural science, as a chapter of psychology” (2008, p. 534). He argues that we ought to stop thinking of epistemology as a normative enterprise and instead recognize its connection to science, that it too ought to offer, or at least be continuous with, a descriptive account of human beings of the sort science provides.

In response to Quine’s view, and in an attempt to go beyond his account of naturalized epistemology, Rorty (2008) suggests the following:

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15 Whether we should consider Quine as a foundationalist, coherentist, or something else entirely does not really matter for the discussion of his view here, for what I wish to highlight in this context is how his rejection of the JTB paradigm represented a further development in the controversy surrounding the Regress Problem.
Quine, after arguing that there is no line between science and philosophy, tends to assume that he has thereby shown that science can replace philosophy. But it is not clear what task he is asking science to perform. Nor is it clear why, natural science, rather than the arts, or politics, or religion, should take over the area left vacant. (171)

Rorty’s alternative view is that history has led us to the point of realizing that traditional epistemology and its justificatory regress is a problem that should altogether be abandoned, not just reframed as a question that a different discipline ought to answer, as Quine had proposed. Rather than consider an alternative to the traditional JTB account in order to solve the same problems of traditional epistemology as he claims Quine had done, Rorty rejects the legitimacy of such pursuits altogether.

One might argue that this eliminativism about epistemology seems to be the natural extension of Quine’s push towards reducing epistemology to science. This does seem to be the case for Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism, which contends that epistemology, though not an element of scientific study, is a social phenomenon. He claims that at its core, “justification is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice” (2008, p. 170). Rorty’s behaviorist account of justification essentially amounts to a complete rejection of traditional normative epistemology in favor of a descriptive account of human practices that considers epistemological inquiry as a useful fiction, a way of explaining human behavior that, while pragmatic, does not defend or promote any independent epistemic principles.

On the other hand, not all philosophers in the 20th century agreed with Rorty’s rejection of epistemology and with it the dissolution of the Regress Problem. For
instance, in the debates between Roderick Chisholm and Wilfrid Sellars there is a return to a discussion of the structure of justification as a conflict between foundationalism and coherentism. While Chisholm held on to a classic foundationalist account of justification, Sellars, though critical of foundationalism, offered a coherentist alternative within the JTB paradigm, indicating that despite the proposals of Quine and Rorty, both thought of the traditional paradigm as one worth working within.\textsuperscript{16} Chisholm and Sellars perhaps held on to the divisions within the paradigm because, like the contemporary epistemologists described in the following section, they still found value in the questions classic internalist epistemology has traditionally tried to answer. The fact that these questions remain part of the discussion even after numerous attempts to eliminate them, seems to stand as a testament to the fact that these are still intriguing problems open for debate and discussion today.

It is important to note that there has been no discussion of the infinitist solution to the Regress Problem in this historical overview. This is because there is really only one canonical figure who entertained a theory of justification that resembled infinitism, C. S. Peirce. In a couple of his early papers, the closest Peirce gets to defending infinitism is to

\textsuperscript{16} See Chisholm (1966) and Sellars (2008). Another example of a defense of traditional epistemology can be found in Stroud (1984) who offers an account of why Quine’s naturalist picture of epistemology is problematic, arguing that it leads to skepticism about knowledge and justification. While Quine contends that he has left the JTB account of knowledge behind by naturalizing epistemology, by Stroud’s lights, it appears that rather than rejecting the paradigm altogether, Quine has instead adopted a skeptical account of justification (and hence the skeptic’s solution to the Regress Problem) because turning to a completely scientific or psychological account of the source of knowledge, as based in ‘irritations’ or ‘stimulations’ of sense organs, leaves us with no way of determining the truth of our understanding of the world derived from the information acquired via those sensations and therefore leads to external world skepticism. Kim (1988) also offers an argument against Quine’s reductionist picture of epistemology as psychology, stating that this leads Quine to “repudiate” normativity and “go out of the business of justification.” The problem, as Kim sees it, is that “if justification drops out of epistemology, knowledge drops out of epistemology,” and epistemology itself disappears (1988, p. 389).
note that there cannot be any stopping point to inference, since any specific inference requires its own reasons. He believes that this observation about the nature of justification raises the question of “whether there is any cognition not determined by a previous cognition” and, at this point, concludes that there is not (1868, p. 112). The only way to explain this fact about the structure of knowledge is, he contends, to say that inferences never end, which would mean that he must hold that infinitism is true, (even though he doesn’t describe justification using this term or discuss the Regress Problem). Yet, this view is subsequently dropped and in later works there seems to be no mention of the possibility of infinite inferences, so it is hard to gauge how committed Peirce was to the infinitist position. It took over a century after Peirce’s early articles for infinitism to again be taken seriously by any philosopher.17

\textit{d. Historical Summary}

In sum, from looking at the history of the debate we can see that the solutions to the Regress Problem have generally oscillated between foundationalism and coherentism, with skepticism out of the running as a serious contender after the Pyrrhonians and virtually no debate about the infinitist solution. In the brief presentation in this section, we see the beginnings of the standard internalist account of knowledge in modern philosophy with Descartes and the development of the classic foundationalist theory of

\footnote{17 And this philosopher, Peter Klein, is one of a handful of contemporary epistemologists considering the plausibility of infinitism today.}
justification by Reid, who amended Descartes’ version of the non-inferential basis of justification by making the grounds for knowledge strictly empirical.

In the 20th century, arguments for an empiricist foundationalism were further developed by the logical positivist movement. While the logical positivists agreed that the basis of knowledge was scientific, their accounts of the structure of justification varied, and within the movement there was a split into two camps, between those who endorsed foundationalism and those who endorsed coherentism. Neurath’s coherentist holism helped inspire Quine’s holistic picture and his naturalized approach to epistemology and Quine’s claim that epistemology ought to be absorbed into the sciences ultimately led to his rejection of the pursuit of solutions to epistemological questions from within the JTB paradigm. Finally, a significant blow to the JTB account came from Rorty’s rejection of epistemology as a legitimate philosophical pursuit. Put briefly, the general historical summary offered here tracks the birth of the Regress Problem with Aristotle, its use for the promotion of skepticism by the ancient Pyrrhonians, the further development of alternative foundationalist and coherentist solutions to it in modern and 20th century philosophy, and more recently, the rejection of it as a legitimate concern. Yet today’s continued debate over the Regress Problem indicates that the rejection of the problem altogether has yet to become the dominant view.

Given this survey, is it fair to say that Rorty’s description of philosophical progress is correct? Is there an answer to the Regress Problem, or has history really just shown us the debate will never be resolved? I think the conclusion to be drawn from looking at the major responses to the Regress Problem is that historically, though
foundationalism has been a common response, no clear advantage has been established for any of the four solutions. History shows the dissatisfaction with the paradigm philosophers have used in the discussion of justification thus far. Perhaps this indicates that traditional internalism is indeed flawed and needs to either be revised or rejected. However, at this point, I think it is too soon to draw this conclusion since there has been virtually no debate considering the plausibility of infinitism. While the other alternatives have been repeatedly discussed and critiqued, infinitism remains largely unexplored. If the fact that the foundationalist and coherentist solutions have yet to solve the Regress Problem is an indication that they cannot provide satisfactory solutions, the consideration of the infinitist account of justification becomes extremely important as a last defense of the traditional JTB account of knowledge and the internalist conception of justification.

Section 2: Justification and Skepticism in the Regress Problem

Having discussed some of the prominent responses to the Regress Problem, let’s now look at what’s involved in the debate currently. This section will examine some of the concerns surrounding the tension between having adequate justification for our beliefs and skepticism about this possibility. It is, of course, because of the threat of skepticism that epistemologists are motivated to find solutions to the Regress Problem. Examining some of the issues arising from skepticism about justification will therefore help give us a sense of what is at stake in discussions about the Regress Problem.
a. What is Justification?

Of the three conditions making up the JTB account, justification is perhaps the most problematic. One explanation for the difficulty is that a subject’s justification has an unusual role to play in knowledge since it serves as a bridge between two different spheres, a subject’s inner mental life represented by her beliefs and the external objective world she inhabits that makes her beliefs true. For traditional internalist epistemologists, part of the problem of developing an account of justification is explaining how humans are capable of being aware of the connection between these two elements of knowledge, that is, between beliefs and the truth that they ought to represent. Skepticism, in contrast, can be thought of as a view that either denies that there is such a connection or denies that we are capable of being aware of this connection when it exists. In other words, skeptics tend to adopt one of two positions, citing the impossibility of adequate justification as either making human knowledge impossible or making it impossible to know whether we have any knowledge.

There have been many attempts more recently to bolster a theory of justification against skeptical challenges, and though these efforts have convinced some, they have not removed the threat of skepticism entirely, nor have they led to a general consensus about the nature of justification and the best solution to the Regress Problem. What these attempts have done, however, is to provide a sense of what sort of questions a theory of justification should be able to answer and the role that such a theory should have in an account of knowledge. What can be gathered from these attempts is a set of specific conditions a theory of justification ought to meet.
One of these attempts comes from Roderick Chisholm, who outlines some conditions for an adequate theory of justification through the discussion of a dilemma he claims arises in any attempt to develop a theory of knowledge. Chisholm (1977) called this dilemma the Problem of the Criterion. According to Chisholm, on the one hand, it seems that a theory of knowledge ought to have the goal of determining the extent or scope of human knowledge by delineating the kinds of things we can possibly know from what, if anything, we cannot. On the other hand, a theory of knowledge also needs to establish certain principles or criteria that can guide our determinations of what will count as knowledge. The dilemma is that in order to achieve the latter goal one has to already have achieved the former. But to achieve the former goal, one needs to have clearly established principles relevant to achieving the latter. Thus, it appears that one must assume one of these components in a theory in order to determine anything about the other.\textsuperscript{18} The result is, of course, that it is impossible to develop a theory of knowledge that can answer both of these concerns. Either a theory must adopt \textit{methodism} and assume a set of principles that describe what particular things we can know in order to then determine the scope and extent of human knowledge or adopt \textit{particularism} and assume what things we can have knowledge about in order to determine the epistemic principles that make this knowledge possible.

\textsuperscript{18} Cling (2014) describes the concern as one in which we must always assume a response to the question “How do we know?” in order to answer the question “What do we know?” or \textit{vice versa} depending on the sort of approach you take, making it impossible to ever find an independent answer to both questions. See Fumerton (2008) for more on the effect of the Problem of the Criterion on the skeptic’s attack against the possibility of knowledge.
Particularists who suppose the range of what we can know in order to determine the nature of epistemic principles assume that we have knowledge in the first place, and therefore that an analysis of the concept of knowledge just describes the knowledge we already possess. The skeptic can easily attack this approach by questioning the assumption that we have any knowledge in the first place. To counter the particularist’s premise that we do in fact know things about the world, the skeptic points to the inadequacy of the evidence for thinking that we have knowledge to begin with. Alternatively, the skeptic might agree that it is rather absurd to say that we completely lack any knowledge of the world whatsoever, but still claim that it is impossible to know which of our beliefs are true and which are not, since it would be impossible to form a theory of justification that gives us a way of determining between successful and unsuccessful instances of knowing without first establishing principles that determine the epistemic status of our claims.

Problems also arise for methodists starting with the other assumption, that we are aware of the epistemic principles that determine knowledge and that the job of epistemologists is to use these principles to determine the range of things that can actually be known. The JTB account is itself a classic example of the methodist approach as it outlines conditions that must be met in order for a subject to have knowledge. One way the skeptic can challenge the methodist’s approach is to question whether these principles offer accurate conditions for knowledge without having incorporated evidence from examples of successful knowledge claims.
It may seem that a comprehensive theory of justification that supposes neither the particularist’s nor methodist’s assumptions is the only possible way of getting out of this dilemma. Such a theory would have to avoid making any assumptions about either the scope of possible knowledge claims or the principles that determine what knowledge is. Unfortunately, as of yet no such theory has been developed. However, another alternative adopted more recently by externalist and non-traditional epistemologies has been to avoid the problem altogether by arguing that the internalist conception of justification is not a necessary condition for knowledge, and therefore that any problems that arise for traditional JTB accounts stem from having mistakenly made it a requirement. As Cling (2014) notes, it may be possible to overcome both the Regress Problem and the Problem of the Criterion by adopting externalism, since the externalist contends that a subject does not need an awareness of either the reasons justifying her belief or the epistemic principle determining those reasons in order for her to have knowledge. Since there is no requirement on the externalist view that we be aware of the justification conditions for a belief, (or even that there are any such conditions), the externalist can focus on determining the scope of what’s known, not by having catalogued the epistemic principles that guide the capacity for knowledge, but by observation of cases we describe as instances of knowing. The methodist approach loses its significance, and thus the problem is solved. Additionally, the traditional formulation of the Regress Problem is not relevant to the externalist view since the question of the structure of a subject’s justification for her belief is not significant for the determination of whether she has knowledge either.
If the comprehensive theory of justification that could solve Chisholm’s dilemma is out of the question for the traditional internalist, then what might we hope to achieve by developing a traditional internalist theory of justification, and what sort of elements would this theory need to include? Why not just accept an externalist account of justification and stop worrying about these problems altogether? The answer comes down to a decision about whether one finds it valuable (or even possible) to pursue the development of an account of how one can know when and if she has knowledge.\(^\text{19}\)

Though traditional internalist epistemology may not be capable of describing the nature of knowledge entirely, it does extend our understanding of knowledge from the perspective of the knower, which is something that externalism does not adequately address. Thus, the motivation for supporting the internalist perspective comes, in part, out of a desire to know whether and in what cases a subject can count a particular belief of hers as knowledge, and isn’t, I believe, something that epistemologists ought to give up.

\subsection*{b. Problems from Skepticism}

From the above discussion we see that epistemological skepticism, particularly skepticism about justification, is the central obstacle for developing an adequate theory of justification and, in turn, a successful theory of knowledge. Frequently, skepticism is divided into two types. The first, global skepticism, is the rejection of the idea that we can have knowledge, (or, as we’ve seen, know that we can have knowledge), about the

\(^{19}\) This view has been described by Hilpinen (1970) and Hintikka (1970) as the KK-thesis, roughly, that knowledge requires knowing that one knows. Internalism is often associated with the KK-thesis, and the view has become central point of contention between internalism and externalism.
external world. The other, local skepticism, is a more common form that questions whether we have, or can know if we have, knowledge about a particular type of beliefs or their source. Examples of local skepticism include cases where one doubts that memory can serve as a source of justification or that we can have any knowledge of moral principles or knowledge of the past. It can also take the form of doubt about whether knowledge of a particular thing is possible, such as knowledge of the existence of God or what happened prior to the Big Bang. While local skepticism is certainly important for the methodist’s project of determining what we can possibly know, the kind of skepticism that concerns us here is global skepticism, since the global skeptic challenges the broader claim that we have any knowledge whatsoever.

Due to the perceived inability of traditional epistemology to combat the threat to the JTB account posed by global skepticism, some have rejected the traditional picture in favor of an alternative they believe is capable of avoiding skepticism altogether. For instance, Williams (1996) has suggested that the way to remove the threat of skepticism is to reject what he calls *epistemological realism*, the view that there is an independent, objective external world that exists separately from human subjects. By rejecting this view, Williams is effectively denying that there is such a thing as the “external world” that exists as an object of epistemic inquiry distinct from a knower. The view Williams thinks best represents the epistemological realism he rejects, including the false division between a knower and the external world is foundationalism, and in particular, the Cartesian foundationalist view.
Furthermore, since foundationalism appears to Williams to be the only serious account of justification in the traditional paradigm, (for he does not consider the infinitist solution to be plausible and argues that coherentism has a foundationalist basis), he ultimately concludes that the internalist account of knowledge succumbs to skepticism. As a replacement to the traditional paradigm, Williams considers an alternative contextualist account of justification that, he contends, can maneuver around the skepticism inherent in the traditional epistemologist’s position. Briefly, his idea is that different contexts of knowing require sets of supporting reasons determined by the context in which the belief is held and, specifically, the information relevant to a subject in that context. The contextualist account thus lessens the threat of skepticism by making the skeptic’s attack only local instead of global. For the contextualist, skepticism is bound by the context in which it arises.

While contextualism does offer an interesting response to skepticism, I think Williams misses the point by considering global skepticism to be so damaging that it is better to drop the traditional epistemological paradigm than allow the skeptic to continue to challenge the possibility of knowledge. On the contrary, the skeptic’s view is to a degree a welcome reminder of the importance of trying to develop responses to internalist concerns about how a subject can both have knowledge (in the sense of being aware of

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20 Of course, given that this discussion is leading up to an exploration of the plausibility of the infinitist account of justification, I must disagree with Williams that foundationalism represents the only viable account in the traditional paradigm, and thus furthermore do not think that the failings of foundationalism must lead to the abandonment of that paradigm altogether.

21 The ability of the contextualist account to respond to the Regress Problem will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.
the fact that a certain state of affairs obtains) and also how she can know that she has knowledge (say, by meeting certain subjective conditions of justification). Avoiding an answer to both of these questions as Williams does by using contextualism as a replacement for the traditional JTB paradigm may prevent having one’s view challenged by skepticism, but from the internalist perspective it also means accepting a position that no longer offers a theory of justification and knowledge that adequately accounts for the problems originally at issue. As many of the more traditional-minded epistemologists have noted, if you reject the questions epistemology is traditionally supposed to answer, then it is hard to see how you can still be doing epistemology.22

It might be more productive to instead view skepticism not as the bane of epistemological inquiry, but a dialectical tool useful for advancing a theory of knowledge. As Stroud (1984, p. 256) notes, the value of studying skepticism lies in its ability to give us “a more accurate understanding of how our familiar everyday knowledge actually works.” He goes on to claim that, furthermore, epistemological skepticism is “a benefactor of human reason in forcing us to pursue that question [of how knowledge works] at levels we would have no reason to reach, or even consider, without it.” Williams attempts to eradicate epistemological inquiry of skeptical questions because he thinks of skepticism as an entirely artificial or unnatural approach to epistemology instead of thinking, as Stroud does, that the skeptic’s view is a necessary check on the

22 See Fumerton (1995) and Kim (1988), who note that it may be better to consider these rejections of classic internalist questions to be a form of psychology or neuroscience, and suggest that such philosophers leave epistemology to those who want to continue to pursue the questions about the concepts of knowledge and justification that have always guided it.
strength of a theory of knowledge. Additionally, as BonJour (1985, p. 15) writes, the value of skeptical challenges to the possibility of knowledge is so beneficial to the development of rigorous epistemological theories that “if skeptics did not exist, one might reasonably say, the serious epistemologist would have to invent them.”

Therefore, I think that instead of seeing skepticism as undermining the foundationalist, coherentialist, or infinitist responses to the Regress Problem, it makes more sense to view the skeptic’s objections as a means by which we can better refine theories of knowledge and justification. It is best to think that skepticism acts as a catalyst for driving epistemological inquiry, including the debate over how to solve the Regress Problem, because it helps us develop and refine the questions and problems studied in epistemology. And thus, though they may face skeptical challenges, internalist accounts of justification following the JTB paradigm should not for this reason be rejected outright or replaced with an externalist or non-traditional account of knowledge.

In sum, I’ve tried to show that the skeptical view of knowledge and justification need not be perceived as a threat to the possibility of finding a solution to the Regress Problem. The possibility that skepticism is true helps motivate attempts to solve this problem, and while this has led some epistemologists to reject the traditional internalist account of justification altogether, I suggest that we hold on to the possibility of solving the Regress Problem using one of the internalist responses until they have all been thoroughly examined. However, before examining infinitism, I will turn to the current

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23 See Fogelin (1999) for a direct response to Williams’ attempt to overcome external world skepticism. According to Fogelin’s account, skepticism is not only necessary for the progress of epistemological inquiry, it is also an entirely natural position to take in the course of epistemological questioning.
state of the debate between coherentism and foundationalism and will examine the plausibility of each side. If neither foundationalism nor coherentism prove to be attractive solutions to the Regress Problem, the only recourse for the internalist is to accept an infinitist solution or concede to the skeptic and abandon the traditional JTB paradigm.
CHAPTER 2
NON-INFERENTIALITY AND THE PROBLEMS OF FOUNDATIONALISM

Foundationalist theories of justification have dominated responses to the Regress Problem since its formulation by Aristotle.\(^{24}\) The foundationalist account has developed significantly in recent years, however, due to a number of different positions that have been put forth to defend foundationalism. In an effort to make sense of the options available to the foundationalist today, in this chapter I approach the most prominent varieties of foundationalism with a critical eye and assess the main objections to current and canonical foundationalist positions. The purpose of this is to determine the shortcomings of foundationalism as a solution to the Regress Problem, and thereby support the possibility of infinitism as a plausible alternative.

In Section 1 I begin a survey of prominent foundationalist positions by offering a minimal definition of foundationalism in terms of the property of non-inferentiality, a property of beliefs essential to all forms of internalist foundationalism, which currently make up the majority of foundationalist positions.\(^{25}\) I then discuss several other properties foundationalists of one kind or another have claimed to be necessary for basic beliefs in addition to non-inferentiality and organize foundationalist accounts based on which of

\(^{24}\) See Aristotle *Posterior Analytics* Book 1, Ch. 3, 72b-73a.

\(^{25}\) Recall that internalism is the metaepistemological claim that a subject must be aware of her reasons for a belief in order for that belief to be sufficiently justified, and in turn for her to have knowledge. In contrast, externalism denies that the awareness of one’s reasons for a belief is a necessary condition for knowledge.
these additional properties are taken to be essential properties of basic beliefs. In Section 2 I expand the description of foundationalism from Section 1 to include a discussion of externalist foundationalism and contrast it to internalist varieties. In Section 3 I discuss common objections to both internalist and externalist foundationalism. Lastly, in Section 4 I present a new objection to the foundationalist account of justification that questions the foundationalist’s conception of non-inferentiality and in so doing, attempts to undermine all versions of foundationalism discussed in Sections 2 and 3. I conclude by claiming that this objection to foundationalist non-inferentiality raises significant questions about whether this property is sufficient for proving that foundationalism offers a theory of justification that can provide an adequate solution to the Regress Problem.

Section 1: The Properties of Basic Belief

According to most contemporary epistemologists, the main argument for accepting foundationalism rests on the claim that the structure of justification proposed by foundationalism offers the only viable solution to the Regress Problem. Support for the foundationalist solution usually involves listing the reasons why alternative accounts of justification either fail to stop the regress or appear incoherent. This argument is sometimes called the Regress Argument for foundationalism, but to avoid any confusion with the Regress Problem, I will instead call it the ‘Master Argument’ for

foundationalism, as it is used to support all varieties of foundationalism. Given the widespread use of the Master Argument to defend foundationalism, it will need to be the focus of this examination if an alternative account of justification is to gain any ground as a plausible solution to the Regress Problem.

*a. The Master Argument*

Let’s look at the argument in more detail. The proponent of the Master Argument must take the following principles to be true:

P1: For any justified inferential belief B, the justification of B must either end in some non-inferential basic belief or not.

P2: If the justification of B ends in a non-inferential belief, then justification ends in a belief requiring no justification of its own and foundationalism is true.

P3: If the justification for B does not end in a non-inferential belief, then the justification of B continues forever (as the infinitist holds) or forms a closed loop (as the coherentist claims).²⁷

The argument then runs as follows. Given the existence of B, it must be the case that either foundationalism is true, or infinitism or coherentism is true. The foundationalist then assumes P3 to set up a *reductio*, adding the following:

P4: If the justification of B continues forever as the infinitist holds, then justification entails a vicious regress.

P5: If the justification of B forms a closed loop as the coherentist claims, then justification is circular.

P6: If justification entails a vicious regress or is circular, then it fails to provide sufficient justification for B.

²⁷ I do not include skepticism, the fourth possible solution to the Regress Problem, because it rejects the assumption made by these principles that adequate justification is possible for human knowers. The skeptic’s solution should be thought of as stemming from the rejection of the existence of any B to which P1-P3 apply.
Based on this account, it cannot be the case that either coherentism or infinitism provide justification for B, and hence it is also not the case that the justification for B does not end in a non-inferential belief; i.e., P3 is false. The foundationalist can then conclude that the justification for B must end in a non-inferential belief, and that foundationalism is therefore true.

According to P2, foundationalism is defined as the theory of justification that claims there must be some termination point for inferential justification in a basic, non-inferential belief. Based on this definition, we only have a minimal description of the property of non-inferentiality to work with: non-inferentiality is the defining property of a belief which distinguishes it as one for which no further justification is needed. Non-inferentiality is the necessary and sufficient condition for foundationalist justification because it captures the one requirement put forth in the Master Argument for foundationalism, that chains of inferential justification must end with a belief that requires no further justification. Foundationalists claim the property of non-inferentiality is instantiated by a certain class or classes of beliefs, and that this property is what enables beliefs of a particular sort to serve as the termination point of inferential justification required by the foundationalist solution to the Regress Problem. An examination of this property will thus reveal the essential commitments of foundationalism in general, while any differences in how non-inferentiality is defined or

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28 Throughout this discussion I will use the terms “basic belief” and “non-inferential belief” interchangeably.
applied among various foundationalist theories will reveal differences within the foundationalist camp.

b. Properties of Foundationalist Justification

Let’s now look at ways of expanding this definition by fixing the meaning of several other important terms frequently used in discussions of foundationalist justification. These will be given in the taxonomy below, which will provide a set of properties that different versions of foundationalism claim basic beliefs may also have in addition to non-inferentiality. We can then use this account to distinguish between versions of foundationalism based on which of these additional properties a particular foundationalist view will claim basic beliefs are required to exhibit. After describing these properties, I’ll discuss how various forms of foundationalism take these properties to be required of basic beliefs in addition to non-inferentiality. Developing these distinctions will in turn help us assess the ability of any particular version of foundationalism to respond to the Regress Problem and various objections to the foundationalist account of the structure of justification.

Again, non-inferentiality can be defined as follows:

**Non-Inferentiality**: A belief B has the property of non-inferentiality just in case B does not depend on any other reasons to be justified

To this, three other properties can be added:

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29 This taxonomy is inspired in part by Alston (1971).

30 I leave open here what can count as a reason. Depending on the particular version of foundationalism, a reason may be a belief, some other mental state, or just a proposition.
**Infallibility:** A belief B has the property of infallibility just in case it is necessary that B is true

**Indemonstrability:** A belief B has the property of indemonstrability just in case B does not appear capable of proof

**Indubitability:** A belief B has the property of indubitability just in case B is not capable of being doubted

Each of these three additional properties can be viewed as ways of further refining non-inferentiality. While non-inferentiality just supplies the property of not requiring any further justification to beliefs, and hence provides the conditions that make them basic, these other properties add different explanations for why it is that basic beliefs do not require justification.

One other way of grouping these properties will be important here, and that is to distinguish them as either *intrinsic* properties or as *relational* properties. Intrinsic properties are called such because they are properties of beliefs held independently of any other factors. A belief’s intrinsic properties do not depend on a particular state of affairs, any further evidence or information, the context of the belief, or the state of the belief holder. Relational properties, on the other hand, are properties of beliefs that do depend on one or more of these contextual factors. Furthermore, intrinsic properties are necessary properties since there are no factors that can influence the addition or removal of them from the beliefs that instantiate them, whereas relational properties are contingent.

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31 Though I have been describing these properties as properties of beliefs above, it is important to note that there are really two groups of properties described here, those that apply to beliefs and those that apply to propositions. However, as is somewhat common, I will describe all of the above properties generally as properties of basic beliefs in this paper. Describing these properties as properties of beliefs should not be problematic since propositions and beliefs are so closely related. Beliefs are attitudes we take towards propositions that affirm their truth. For example, if I believe that today is Thursday, then I’m affirming that the proposition ‘today is Thursday’ is true. Thus, propositions make up the content of beliefs.
properties of the beliefs that have them because they may be added or removed based on changes in the factors listed above.

Both non-inferentiality and infallibility are intrinsic properties in the sense that there is no further evidence or information that could change whether beliefs had these properties. While non-inferentiality is a property of basic beliefs for all foundationalist theories of justification, for foundationalist theories that consider the foundations of knowledge to be certain infallibility is often taken to be a property of all basic beliefs as well.\(^{32}\) Infallibility makes a belief certain because, according to those foundationalists who claim that basic beliefs have it, it is a property that makes it impossible for a belief that has it to be false. Infallibility further supports non-inferential beliefs by providing a reason why basic beliefs do not require further justification. According to views that claim that basic beliefs are infallible, the reason is that these beliefs are necessarily true.

Infallibility is different from the relational properties of indemonstrability and indubitability, however. Consider indemonstrability as the property of appearing to a subject to be unproven and incapable of proof, in the sense that no demonstration or conclusive explanation can be given of an indemonstrable belief’s truth or falsity. Note that one could understand indemonstrability in two senses. In strong sense, indemonstrability describes a relation between beliefs such that one belief cannot be confirmed or denied by reference to another. In the weak sense, it describes a relation between a belief and the subject who holds it. A belief is weakly indemonstrable if the subject has no reasons available to her that can confirm or deny it. It is this weak version

\(^{32}\) One example of this sort of view would be the Cartesian account of the certainty provided by ‘clear and distinct perceptions’ that make up basic beliefs.
of indemonstrability that I am concerned with in this discussion. In the sense I’m using here, indemonstrability adds the further condition that basic beliefs do not require any further justification because they appear true and incapable of proof.

Since indemonstrability refers to a belief’s inability to be proven by a subject, it picks out a property capturing the relation between a belief and its holder. Indemonstrability is additionally a contingent relational property because its application to a belief depends upon a subject’s awareness (or lack thereof) of reasons for believing it. However, since it is possible that a subject may come across information which reveals that a seemingly indemonstrable belief can actually be proven on the basis of a series of reasons previously unknown to a subject, it must be noted that indemonstrability is not a precise guide for determining non-inferential beliefs. Being aware that a belief is indemonstrable does not imply that believing it requires no reasons, just that the subject is not currently aware of any reasons that support it. Indubitability picks out a relation between a belief and a subject, such that if the belief has the property of indubitability, then the belief holder cannot doubt it. Indubitability extends the description of basic beliefs given by non-inferentiality by suggesting that the reason why a basic belief requires no further justification is because it cannot be doubted.

In sum, non-inferentiality and infallibility appear to be intrinsic properties of beliefs in the sense of applying to beliefs independently of any other influences. For this reason, it can also be said that they are necessary properties of the beliefs that have them. In contrast, indemonstrability and indubitability appear to be relational properties of beliefs in the sense that whether a belief has one or both of these properties depends on
whether a subject is aware of any evidence or potential defeaters for them. The awareness of such factors is subject to change in light of new information or a change in the context of believing, and for this reason basic beliefs only contingently have these properties.

While the four above properties do not offer an exhaustive account of all the properties that have been ascribed to basic beliefs by foundationalists, they can provide us with a sufficient number of differences that divide foundationalist accounts into smaller groups. Noting these differences will make it possible to determine the commitments of a range of foundationalist views. This will also serve us in understanding the major objections raised against foundationalism, which will be discussed in Section 3.

We can group foundationalist theories based on which of these properties a theory includes in its description of basic beliefs.33 We see that the number of properties required by any version of foundationalism tapers off as the strength of the theory decreases. At one extreme, the strictest foundationalist theories could require basic beliefs to be non-inferential, infallible, indemonstrable, and indubitable. All other internalist foundationalist accounts remove the requirement of infallibility, but leave in

33 Such a division has already been described in somewhat different terms by BonJour (1985, pp. 26-29). BonJour distinguishes between three kinds of foundationalism, labeled into distinct groups by what he judges to be the epistemic force of basic beliefs in each version. Aptly named ‘strong,’ ‘moderate,’ and ‘weak’ foundationalism, according to BonJour these different types define foundationalist theories in terms of “the degree of noninferential epistemic justification” basic beliefs have (26). Strong foundationalism refers to any foundationalist position that claims that basic beliefs must be infallible, moderate foundationalism represents any foundationalist theory that contends that basic beliefs are sufficient for justifying other beliefs, yet are also fallible, and weak foundationalism is any view that takes foundational beliefs to be fallible and highly defeasible, typically requiring that such beliefs be corroborated by other forms of justification in order for them to make other beliefs justified. Such “hybrid” theories, as they are often called, will be discussed in the following chapter in the context of the coherentist solution to the Regress Problem.
place non-inferentiality, indemonstrability, and indubitability.\textsuperscript{34} These fallibilist theories reject infallibility by contending that if infallibility is a required in addition to non-inferentiality, the foundationalist criteria for basic beliefs is too strict to allow us much knowledge, if any at all, which is not a consequence fallibilists are willing to accept.

Indemonstrability and/or indubitability will also be requirements for any internalist foundationalist theory, because as relational properties, they make it possible for a subject to recognize which of her beliefs are basic, and thus signal to a subject which of her beliefs could be non-inferential. However, indubitability and indemonstrability cannot replace non-inferentiality and infallibility, for while they indicate to a subject which beliefs could be basic, they are not sufficient for confirming that they actually are. In a given situation, while it may seem, based on the information currently available to a subject, that a belief is basic because it has one or both of these properties, further evidence might reveal defeaters or new undermining evidence that proves that the subject was mistaken in thinking that her belief was indemonstrable and/or indubitable, and hence that it was non-inferential.

\textsuperscript{34} Weak foundationalism as BonJour conceives of it drops non-inferentiality as a requirement, and leaves only indubitability and indemonstrability in place. Yet, since non-inferentiality is the necessary condition for the Master Argument for foundationalism precisely because this property stipulates that there is a termination point to justification, not just that it seems to us that there is one, weak foundationalism is not able to respond to the Regress Problem using the Master Argument and because of this, is arguably not even a form of foundationalism.
Section 2: The Externalist Alternative

There is one omission in the above account of foundationalism as it stands. Though the outline of foundationalist positions in the previous section gives us an indication of the varieties of internalist foundationalist theories, it doesn’t consider how externalist foundationalist theories of justification fit in. Beginning in the late 1960s, the externalist alternative to the classic internalist foundationalist picture gained in popularity in response to what some argued were the insurmountable skeptical consequences of internalist foundationalism, especially in its strongest forms. Externalism was developed as an alternative based on the desire to combat skepticism coupled with an increasingly popular trend discussed in the previous chapter towards naturalizing philosophy to align it with developments in science. According to the externalist picture, justification as the internalist conceives of it is not a necessary condition for knowledge. All varieties of externalism deny that a subject must be aware of the reasons justifying her belief, which means that a subject need not be aware of what makes basic beliefs basic, or be able to recognize which of her beliefs have this status. Externalists therefore do not think the relational properties of indubitability and indemonstrability are properties of basic beliefs.

Externalists tend to replace the internalist theory of justification with some sort of causal story or account of warranted beliefs based on reliable processes. Alvin Goldman has described both variations of the externalist’s project. The causal view maintains that for a subject S to have knowledge, there must be a causal chain reaching from a state of affairs to a subject’s belief about this state of affairs (Goldman 1967). In Goldman
(1979), this view is incorporated into the reliabilist theory of knowledge which claims that a subject is in possession of knowledge when her belief has both the correct causal relationship to a fact and is caused by a reliable process. That is, “the justificational status of a belief is a function of the reliability of the process or processes that cause it, where (as a first approximation) reliability consists in the tendency of a process to produce beliefs that are true rather than false” (Goldman 1979, p.10). Stated in this manner, one can consider the causal condition to be what guarantees the truth of a subject’s belief and the reliability of the mechanism by which the belief is caused to be what warrants her belief.

A third version of externalism comes from Armstrong (1973), who developed an account which he called the “thermometer model,” a version of externalism that rejected the causal view and focused on nomological connections, (or “law-like connections in nature” (1973, pp.166-169)), between belief states and states of affairs that reflected the propositions that were believed. According to this view, just as a thermometer reading corresponds to the temperature of the surrounding environment, a non-inferential belief corresponds to a state of affairs that makes the belief true. However, for Armstrong, that a state of affairs provides the content of a belief does not necessarily mean that a causal relation between a belief and a state of affairs exists. He holds that it is not always the case that a given state of affairs causes the existence of a belief by supplying the content of a belief, and for this reason rejects the causal theory (169).

Though all externalist views claim that basic beliefs are non-inferential and are not indemonstrable or indubitable, different forms of externalism can take different
stances on whether infallibility is a property of basic beliefs. Since infallibility is an intrinsic property of non-inferential beliefs, not a relational one, it could be a property some externalist theories of justification would require in addition to non-inferentiality. Of the versions of externalism described above, it seems two could require infallibility. Both the causal theory and the thermometer model claim that some type of nomic relationship exists between a state of affairs and a belief state, either because a state of affairs causes a belief or because a state of affairs and the propositional content of a belief have some non-causal law-like connection. Given that infallibility is a property that makes basic beliefs necessarily true, one might argue that having a causal or nomological connection to a state of affairs would result in a belief’s being necessarily true. Supporters of reliabilism, on the other hand, would most likely reject infallibility as a requirement for basic beliefs because it is the case for most reliabilist theories that the connection between a belief and the reliable source from which it stems does not guarantee that the belief is true. Instead, by stating that a belief is produced by a reliable source, externalists tend to suggest that a given source makes the production of true beliefs very likely, though not absolutely guaranteed.

One objection raised against the externalist account in any of these forms is the concern about whether externalism can provide a theory of justification at all since it drops the internalist view, and hence whether it can be described as a form of foundationalism or be used as a solution to the Regress Problem. BonJour (1978) has some insight into this concern specifically for Armstrong’s brand of externalism. He writes:
There is, however, some uncertainty as to how views of this sort in general and Armstrong’s view in particular are properly to be interpreted. On the one hand, Armstrong might be taken as offering an account of how basic beliefs (and perhaps others as well) satisfy the adequate-justification condition for knowledge, while on the other hand, he might be taken as simply repudiating the traditional conception of knowledge and the associated concept of epistemic justification, and offering a surrogate conception in its place – one which better accords with the “naturalistic” world-view which Armstrong prefers. (114)

The problem BonJour is pointing out here is an instance of this general concern about whether externalism is capable of responding to the Regress Problem using the Master Argument for foundationalism. Some epistemologists, especially those who are staunch defenders of internalism, have claimed that externalists no longer deal with the problem that is facing internalist accounts because they reject the traditional conception of justification by denying that the subject’s awareness of the reasons for her belief is a necessary condition for her justification. Recall that internalists claim that in addition to non-inferentiality, basic beliefs must also have at least one of the relational properties, either indemonstrability or indubitability. The problem with externalism from the internalist point of view is that by rejecting the traditional account of justification as requiring a subject’s awareness of the reasons for her belief, and the claim that basic beliefs must have relational properties, externalist views are not offering a foundationalist solution to the Regress Problem.

One response the externalist can make to this worry is to point out a distinction between two different forms of the Regress Problem: one “structural” problem about the relationship between beliefs and supporting reasons and one “dialectical” problem about the relationship between a subject and her recognition of the source of the reasons for her
beliefs. By removing the requirement that a subject be aware of the justification for her beliefs, the externalist can still offer a response to the structural form of the Regress Problem by explaining the relationship between non-inferential beliefs and the inferential beliefs they support. What externalism cannot do, however, is respond the dialectical form of the Regress Problem, since this form of the problem raises a question of how a subject is aware of the non-inferential basis of her beliefs. However, the externalist could claim that though the dialectical form of the problem cannot be answered using an externalist account of justification, solving the structural Regress Problem is what ultimately matters for understanding the structure of justification anyway.

The externalist view that only the structural problem is essential for solving the Regress Problem can be supported by what was determined earlier to be the one requirement for a foundationalist account as proposed by the Master Argument, non-inferentiality. Based on this account, if externalist views require non-inferentiality to be a property of basic beliefs, they too should be considered as potential foundationalist solutions to the Regress Problem. The causal theory, reliabilism, and the thermometer model are all attempts to explain how beliefs requiring no further justification can be the basis for other beliefs and so do appear to endorse non-inferentiality as a requirement for basic beliefs. However, since all three theories contend that the subject need not be aware of the reasons for her belief (i.e., she need not know that she knows), all three would reject the need for indubitability and indemonstrability for determining that beliefs are basic. Therefore, another way of describing the difference between internalist and

35 See Audi (1993), Chapter 4 for more on this distinction.
externalist accounts of justification is to note that while both views offer foundationalist responses to the Regress Problem by positing non-inferential beliefs, externalism rejects the need for properties that indicate to a subject that her beliefs have this status.

Section 3: Objections to Foundationalism

Objections to foundationalism often focus on several different strategies for undermining the foundationalist’s account of justification, and these tend to apply whether that view is internalist or externalist. Some of these objections come from critics proposing alternative theories of justification and some are objections raised by other foundationalists who want to promote one particular version of foundationalism. I will now turn to consider four common and influential objections to foundationalism representing both of these approaches. These four objections can be divided into two types, one which attacks particular kinds of foundationalism based on what foundationalists claim to be the propositional content of basic beliefs and another which attacks the foundationalist structure of justification by questioning the plausibility of non-inferential beliefs.

The first group of objections deals with a controversy surrounding a particular type of propositional content that could make up the content of basic beliefs. In general, it seems that basic beliefs are often described as affirming the truth of propositions describing either a particular class of mental states about which one is introspectively aware, or a particular class of experiences themselves. While foundationalists might
disagree about the legitimacy of any number of sources of the propositional content of basic beliefs, (viz., introspection, sensory perception, testimony, divine revelation, etc.), a central controversy stems from the question of whether one should claim that perceptual experience has propositional content, and thus whether such experience can provide the contents of basic beliefs.

i. Sellars’ Dilemma. This objection was originally put forward by Wilfrid Sellars to attack foundationalist views that claim that perceptual experience furnishes the content of basic beliefs.36 Sellars contends that when the foundationalist claims that we can use the deliverances of sense perception or some other direct experience of the world to ground our knowledge claims, she implicitly accepts that what’s given in experience is already a belief of some sort. Perceptual experience would only be able to serve as the non-inferential grounds for a chain of inferences of it had the structure of a belief, and thus if it was itself propositional. However, if perceptual experience were propositional, it would entail that some justification would be needed to accept beliefs that have perceptual experience as their content. The result would be that such beliefs would not be non-inferential. If, on the other hand, the foundationalist argues that perceptual experience is not propositional, it is not possible to claim that such experience comprises basic non-inferential beliefs. Hence, Sellars argues, the foundationalist faces a dilemma when it comes to determining the content of basic beliefs. Whether one thinks it possible that the propositions about which we form beliefs are the direct deliverances of

36 See Sellars (2008) and another formulation in BonJour (1985). When the objection was originally formulated, Sellars had “Givenists” like C.I. Lewis in mind as the sort of foundationalist he wanted to challenge. A more recent proponent of the view that perceptions have propositional content is McDowell (1994).
perception will determine whether one accepts that perceptual experience has propositional content and their response to this dilemma.

   ii. No Propositional Content. The previous objection is closely related to this one, which questions the plausibility of perceptual experience having propositional content directly. The objection raised against the view that perception has propositional content claims that perceptual experience cannot be propositional and hence cannot be the content of basic beliefs. Those who reject the view that perception has propositional content outright might defend the view that perception is not propositional by means of a fineness of grain argument, claiming that perceptual experiences often seem richer or more complex than our concepts or their linguistic representation would allow. They argue that if we cannot capture the richness of perception with our concepts, the reason for this must be that perceptual experience is not concept-laden or propositional.37 Another reason sometimes offered in the attempt to deny that perception has propositional content is that the consideration of propositional content as already given in direct perception goes too far in intellectualizing perceptual experience. Supporters of this view argue that if perceptual experience were propositional, any non-linguistic being that lacks the capacity to have concepts and propositional attitudes could still access propositional content in perception. They conclude that unless we want to claim that other animals have conceptually rich perceptual beliefs, we cannot claim that perception

37 See Dretske (1969) and Evans (1982).
has propositional content, and thus that perceptual content cannot comprise the content of non-inferential basic beliefs.\(^{38}\)

iii. External World Skepticism. In order to counter the above criticisms of the idea that perception has propositional content, one could raise the challenge made by the external world skeptic. Any foundationalist view that assesses the justification of inferential beliefs on the basis of non-inferential beliefs comprised not of perceptions with propositional content, but of the direct awareness of inner states, immediate appearances, or some other source, faces a problem of connecting such mental states to the objective world. The skeptic warns that there is no guarantee, or even a very likely possibility, that what a subject considers to be the content of basic beliefs isn’t ultimately just illusion or hallucination, and because of this, there is no way of determining whether our beliefs are justified. On the other hand, this objection is also effective against theories that claim that basic beliefs can be about general propositions describing more than just the deliverances of sense perception. If the foundationalist claims that basic beliefs are not merely about immediate experience, but broader and about things in the external world directly, the skeptic can also question what could possibly justify such beliefs. In this case, the problem remains that relying on reasons internal to the subject in order to justify beliefs about the external world doesn’t get us any closer to affirming that our method of obtaining knowledge about the world is itself accurate. The challenge remains for the foundationalist to show how we can trust such beliefs to accurately represent the external world.

\(^{38}\) See Peacocke (2001).
iv. Arbitrariness. The problem of arbitrariness is a different sort of objection because it challenges the foundationalist to give further evidence for non-inferential beliefs. Klein (1999) articulated this objection as a concern about whether there are any basic beliefs at all because of what he sees as the arbitrariness of the foundationalist choice of what kind of belief counts as basic. He questions the foundationalist’s claim to have found a non-inferential kind of belief that can justify all inferential beliefs, suggesting that what will count as such a source can only be arbitrarily or randomly decided precisely because the kind of beliefs that are non-inferential cannot be justified by any further beliefs. There can be no other answer to the question of why a belief is basic, so the objection goes, other than just, ‘because it is... ’ which clearly is making an arbitrary assumption about a belief’s being non-inferential. This objection is based in part on the idea that foundationalism ought to be able to explain its fundamental position (the existence of non-inferential beliefs) in order to be taken seriously, but must fail in any attempt to do so because providing such an explanation would be giving reasons for beliefs that are supposed to be self-justifying.

Foundationalism, so Klein argues, requires picking a point at which justification is no longer required for belief, but then must argue why this stopping point does in fact mark the end of a justificatory chain. Either there must be some explanation of why a series of reasons stops, in which case that series doesn’t actually end in a non-inferential belief, or if there is no reason why a series of inferences stops, then the stopping point, or basic belief, must be randomly decided.

39 See Klein (1999) and BonJour (1978) for different formulations and defenses of this objection.
Huemer (2003) responds to Klein by arguing that his criticism begs the question against foundationalism, for arbitrariness “charges that foundationalism is unacceptable because it holds that one can be justified in accepting…a claim for which there are no reasons…But this is simply to repeat the thesis of foundationalism, appending the assertion that the thesis is unacceptable” (143). Huemer thinks that Klein’s objection is unfair as it is not an argument against foundationalism so much as a rejection of the basic premise of the view, (that non-inferential beliefs exist). Klein could in turn defend his objection by suggesting that the possibility of arbitrariness indicates that the burden of proof should be placed on foundationalism to provide a criterion for determining which beliefs are basic. In this sense, the problem of arbitrariness questions why we should accept Huemer and other foundationalists’ claims that a particular class of beliefs are non-inferential if the foundationalist cannot supply justification for why they have this property. Klein’s view is that an explanation capable of convincing a non-foundationalist is not possible given foundationalism’s basic premise, that non-inferential beliefs do not require any reasons to be justified.

Section 4: One Final Objection and Conclusions

Klein’s objection contends that basic beliefs are arbitrary and that it is not possible to determine which beliefs are non-inferential because the foundationalist cannot offer reasons why a belief is basic, while Huemer raises the concern that Klein is simply rejecting the plausibility of foundationalism’s basic premise without offering any reasons.
for doing so. In order to avoid Huemer’s criticism I want to suggest a different problem with non-inferential beliefs, which is that the problem is not that non-inferential beliefs are arbitrarily determined, but that there is insufficient evidence of their existence.

*a. Are There Non-inferential Beliefs?*

Like arbitrariness, this objection is an attack on the plausibility of the foundationalist’s claim that there is a set of basic beliefs that can always serve as the stopping point of a series of inferences. One problem is that the properties that point to the existence of basic beliefs for a subject, indemonstrability and indubitability, are not capable of providing a robust criterion for determining whether beliefs are non-inferential. They cannot guarantee that beliefs used as the basis for a chain of inferences are really non-inferential. Given that these properties are relational, whether a belief has them is determined by the evidence available to a subject at a given time, and as such these properties are only contingent indicators of possible non-inferential beliefs.⁴⁰ We only ever have defeasible evidence that a belief is non-inferential, and therefore cannot prove conclusively that any non-inferential beliefs exist. While basic beliefs would no doubt stop the regress of inferential justification, foundationalists cannot provide evidence that any class of beliefs *must* be non-inferential. In turn, in order to accept the foundationalist account one must amend the theory by adding a qualification stating that

⁴⁰ The awareness of other reasons for or against a indemonstrable or indubitable belief may be in part determined by a shift in the context of believing. While I might consider a particular belief to be indubitable in my daily life, other considerations may influence that same belief and lead me to doubt it in a different context, say one of philosophical reflection.
though non-inferential beliefs are required for foundationalist justification, it isn’t possible to conclusively determine which beliefs have this property, or that any have it at all.

The foundationalist may respond that conclusive proof of non-inferential beliefs is not necessary for claiming that basic beliefs exist and that indemonstrability and indubitability are sufficient indicators of the existence of non-inferential beliefs. These properties are capable of providing a good reason for thinking that a belief is basic and that foundationalism is true. But one could then ask why we should take indubitability and indemonstrability to be indicators of the existence of basic beliefs in the first place by arguing that the foundationalist must provide some account of the connection between relational properties and non-inferentiality. The lack of such an explanation could suggest that foundationalism is a somewhat *ad hoc* solution to the Regress Problem, for though it claims that indubitability and indemonstrability are signs of the existence of non-inferential beliefs that can stop the regress, there isn’t evidence that non-inferential beliefs exist as ultimate or final end points for chains of inferences. The reason the foundationalist offers for thinking there are non-inferential beliefs is that the Master Argument requires there to be, not that there is independent evidence of their existence.

The foundationalist could still deal with this problem by adopting an externalist view, claiming that the subject’s awareness of non-inferential beliefs isn’t necessary for her justification, but instead that what matters is that there are some beliefs that can stop

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41 One could for example, just adopt a positivist view of justification and claim that various contextual factors create provisional stopping points in the regress of reasons that are subject to change as contexts shift. See Engel (2014) and Van Cleve (2005).
the regress, even if we don’t know which ones they are. This would allow the foundationalist to avoid the problem of having to determine which beliefs are non-inferential for a subject by making the reliance on the appearance of indemonstrability and indubitability inconsequential. However, as described in the previous section, by rejecting relational properties the externalist account can only provide a solution to the structural form of the Regress Problem, not a comprehensive solution to the Regress Problem that can also deal with the dialectical regress. While this would satisfy some accounts of the Regress Problem, someone with strong internalist intuitions might argue that a better solution would be able to solve both forms of the Regress Problem.

Bracketing the debate between internalism and externalism, there are a couple of general points foundationalists might make to support their view. They claim that foundationalism gives the best account of justification because it is a theory that seems to match what is arguably the standard pre-philosophical way we understand the structure of justification, (i.e., we tend to stop giving reasons to justify our beliefs at some point because we believe that they are satisfactorily justified by the reasons that have been given). Additionally, foundationalism offers the simplest solution to the Regress Problem because it doesn’t require a defense of a serious problem like facing a circular justification structure or an infinite regress. A problem with these suggestions as defenses of foundationalism has to do with the difference between these rather pragmatic considerations for foundationalism and the question of whether the foundationalist account of justification is true. The difference, as Fumerton (1995) notes, is that such reasons are “unrelated to epistemic reasons precisely because the justification or rationale
they provide does not relate in the appropriate way to the truth of the proposition” (18).

We often give reasons for a belief that have nothing to do with whether that belief is true, but instead with whether it is in some way valuable or useful to believe. Given that the goal of developing a theory of justification and a solution to the Regress Problem is to offer an account of how we know that our beliefs are true, we need to promote a theory that can itself be justified based on reasons we have to believe it is true, and not merely because of its practicality, utility or simplicity.

Perhaps one other suggestion the foundationalist might make is that we compare the problems faced by foundationalism to those faced by coherentism and infinitism, from which we would conclude that despite objections to foundationalism, the coherentist and infinitist alternatives are far less plausible than the foundationalist’s view. However, this is essentially the point made by the Master Argument that motivated the turn to the foundationalist solution in the first place. The coherentist and infinitist alternatives will have to prove more problematic than foundationalism in order to justify accepting a foundationalist solution to the Regress Problem. Without more detailed consideration of the plausibility of these other responses, it doesn’t seem that we can determine yet that foundationalism ought to be considered the solution to the Regress Problem outright.

I leave it up to the reader to decide if the foundationalist account of basic beliefs seems compelling enough to solve the Regress Problem. What is required for making this decision is a consideration of the alternative solutions to the Regress Problem, (which will be tackled in the chapters to follow), the determination of whether an externalist account of justification can satisfy the concern raised by the Regress Problem, an account
of the criterion for determining non-inferential beliefs, and finally, some response to objections raised against the plausibility of different accounts of the propositional content of basic beliefs. The following chapters will describe the alternatives that remain, focusing first on the traditional opponent of foundationalism, coherentism. Though this investigation may require the examination of theories of justification outside of the standard responses to the Regress Problem, for now my intuitions remain with the JTB paradigm and an important goal of traditional epistemology, that we determine how a subject knows when her beliefs are justified and hence when she has knowledge. Therefore, I think it essential to account for all of the possible solutions to the Regress Problem from within the traditional paradigm before relinquishing it in favor of an account based on non-standard accounts of knowledge.
CHAPTER 3

COHERENTISM AS A FORM OF FOUNDATIONALISM

Aside from some interest in assessing coherentism using probability theory, discussions of coherentism, either supportive or dismissive, have recently been few and far between. Though it has been several decades since coherentism lost the limited popularity it once had, there isn’t a consensus about what caused the decline of coherentism as a viable solution to the Regress Problem. My aim in this chapter is to determine why coherentism is now largely disregarded in the hope that doing so will also reveal why coherentism is not a serious alternative to foundationalism. I argue that the main reason why coherentism has declined and why it can be ruled out as a solution to the Regress Problem is that it does not offer a tenable stand-alone theory of justification. Theories that rely on coherence alone to explain justification are too problematic to be accepted and those accounts that use coherence as one of several conditions for justification are essentially forms of foundationalism.

In Section 1 I discuss the distinction between coherentist and foundationalist accounts of justification and describe the necessary conditions for a justified, coherent belief set. Section 2 outlines common objections to the coherentist account of justification and assesses some responses to these objections. I then turn to hybrid views of justification in Section 3, focusing on the possibility of a tenable combination of foundationalist and coherentist views. Based on several common ways of defining coherentism in the literature, I claim that the coherentist theories that might be viable implicitly rely on foundationalism, and therefore that coherentism is either implausible or
amounts to a form of the foundationalist view of justification. Thus, I suggest that coherentism is not adequate as an independent solution to the Regress Problem, and in turn conclude that the only plausible non-skeptical solutions to the problem are foundationalism and infinitism.

Section 1: Varieties of Coherentism

a. The Coherentist Structure of Justification

In the most basic sense, the difference between foundationalist and coherentist theories of justification arises from a difference in the manner in which beliefs are supported by reasons and how these reasons are related to each other. Foundationalism and coherentism are often distinguished from each other through the use of metaphors describing actual structures. The classic versions of these metaphors are of a building consisting of a foundation and a superstructure that rests on top of it for the foundationalist and a raft or small boat composed of many pieces bound together for the coherentist.42 Some accounts also use metaphors from the natural world: the foundationalist structure of justification is said to resemble the growth of a tree, with many branches spreading outwards from a single stem. Such a structure is pictured below, with \( B_1 \) through \( B_n \) representing various inferential beliefs that depend on the basic non-inferential belief \( B_0 \) for their justification (with an ellipsis signifying however many intermediary beliefs are part of the chain extending from \( B_0 \) to \( B_n \)). Branches off of

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42 For a discussion of these metaphors, see Sosa (1980) and Neurath (1959).
the main stem (B₀ to Bₙ), such as B₀ → B₂ → B₃ or B₀ → B₁ → B₅ → B₆ → B₈ represent other chains of reasons separate from the chain supporting Bₙ, but which are grounded in the same non-inferential basic belief, B₀.

Figure 1. The Foundationalist Structure of Justification

Foundationalists and coherentists offer contrasting accounts of the way beliefs are linked to each other, for the latter deny the former’s central thesis, that non-inferential beliefs play an essential grounding role in the structure of any chain of inferences, such as that pictured above. For the coherentist, no particular part of a justificatory chain provides the level of security that non-inferential beliefs are able to supply to the foundationalist structure. Instead, the coherentist often likens justification to a web composed of interconnected beliefs that mutually support each other. Each belief in the system is used both as justification for some other beliefs in the system and is justified by other individual beliefs in the system. The justificatory relations between beliefs in this system are asymmetric or unidirectional (as represented by the one sided arrows in the following illustration). This version of coherentism preserves the linear structure of justification adopted by foundationalism, (which also offers an asymmetrical account of
the justificatory relations between beliefs), but, as shown below, the coherentist structure is composed of beliefs (B₁ through Bₙ) none of which have the foundational status of basic non-inferential beliefs and which instead enter into mutually justifying relationships with each other.

Figure 2. The Coherentist Structure of Justification

For instance, suppose that the recently incorporated belief Bₙ has been included in the above set because it lends justificatory support to another belief, B₇, (as the unidirectional arrow indicates), and is itself justified by beliefs B₅, B₈, and B₉. Note that through a number of intermediary beliefs, all beliefs in the set lend support to and are supported by each other to some degree. Though supporting Bₙ, the reasons B₅, B₈, and B₉ ultimately receive some justification from B₇, which is the belief that is, in turn, justified by Bₙ in this set. The relationship between Bₙ and B₇ illustrates the interconnectedness of beliefs in the coherentist picture. This is a significant departure from foundationalism, which claims that the structure of justification consists of beliefs that supply justification only to other particular beliefs, while the structure of justification
for coherentism allows the same belief to justify and be justified by another. Having pointed out this difference, we can now tentatively define the two views as follows:

**Foundationalism:** For any inferential belief B, B is justified iff it is derived from a linear, non-repeating chain of beliefs that terminates in a non-inferential, self-justified belief.

**Coherentism:** For any inferential belief B, B is justified iff it is supported by other beliefs in a linear, reciprocally justifying belief system in which no non-inferential beliefs are necessary for justification.

Some version of the above is typically cited as the standard coherentist view, especially by foundationalists attempting to use the Regress Argument (or what I previously called the Master Argument) to support foundationalism. One problem with the account of coherentism described here, however, is that there appears to be devastating circularity in the justification of beliefs if justification is based solely on the coherentist criterion. The reasons used to justify a given belief on this account are thus in part themselves justified by the same belief they are supposed to support. The worry for the coherentist then is that this circularity undermines the plausibility of coherentism as a viable solution to the Regress Problem.

In response to this concern, some coherentists have rejected the linear account of justification described above, and have instead favored a different version of coherentism that considers the justification of a belief to come not from another particular belief, but from the belief set as a whole. On this account, there is no direct justificatory chain connecting beliefs to one another. Instead, each of the beliefs in a set is justified only in relation to all the other beliefs in that set. Since justification results not from the relations
between individual beliefs, but rather from the relations between all beliefs in a set, this form of coherentism avoids the problem of circularity.

Insofar as this version of coherentism requires the consideration of the entirety of a belief set for conferring justification, we can call it a holistic or embedded view of coherentist justification.\(^{43}\) For instance, the justificatory relationship between, e.g., \(B_4\) and \(B_1\) in the diagram above would not be unidirectional in the sense that one belief is related to another by being a reason for it, but rather the relationship is of two beliefs that are mutually supported by their membership in the same set.\(^{44}\) Furthermore, a new addition to the set, \(B_n\), would be justified by being adopted as a member of a coherent set of beliefs, while also supplying further justification to the set as well.

In sum, while linearism describes the common account of coherentism often cited in discussions of the Regress Problem, holism has been offered as a form of coherentism that can avoid circularity and provide a more viable solution to the Regress Problem.\(^{45}\) Instead of requiring that individual beliefs support and are supported by various other beliefs in a complex inferential chain, holism relies on the cumulative inferential connection among the beliefs in an entire system to provide justification for each belief.

\(^{43}\) See Elgin (2005, p. 166) and Williams (1996, p. 275) for definitions of holistic coherentism.

\(^{44}\) What constitutes “coherence” will be discussed in the subsection that follows. We can leave the definition of coherence open at this point since it does not affect the distinction between two forms of coherentism made here.

\(^{45}\) See BonJour (1985) and Lehrer (1999). BonJour’s position is that of the holist, claiming that “the justification of a particular empirical belief finally depends, not on other particular beliefs as the linear conception of justification would have it, but instead on the overall system [of beliefs] and its coherence” (1985, p. 92), while Lehrer denies holism, writing that “coherence itself does not depend on global features of the [belief] system” (1997, p. 31).
that is a part of it. Hence, the two distinct forms of coherentism can be distinguished as follows:

**Linearism:** For any inferential belief B, B is justified iff (1) it is part of a coherent set or system of beliefs and (2) it is justified by and a justifier for some number of other beliefs in the set.

**Holism:** For any inferential belief B, B is justified iff (1) it is part of a coherent set or system of beliefs and (2) is justified by and a justifier for the set of beliefs as a whole.

It is still an open question whether holism is a stronger account of coherentist justification than linearism, however, but this is a question that will be reserved for discussion later in the chapter. Before determining whether linearism or holism can offer a satisfactory coherentist solution to the Regress Problem, we must get clear about what it means for a set of beliefs to be coherent and what standards a set must meet for it to be appropriate to apply this term. Linearism and holism require somewhat different conditions for coherence, and this too will affect which of the two accounts is stronger since it will influence the degree to which the main objections to coherentism apply to either view.

*b. Conditions for Coherence*

The definitions given above present two forms that a coherentist theory of justification can take. These forms, linearism and holism, though capable of explaining how a belief can be justified on the basis of its inclusion in a coherent set, fail to specify the conditions that make a set coherent. Knowing the conditions for coherence is essential
to the project of determining whether coherentism is a viable solution to the Regress Problem, given that some objections question whether the coherence of a belief set is even possible. Furthermore, since linearism and holism have different standards for some of these conditions, the objections to coherentism attacking the conditions for coherence may affect linearism and holism differently. With this in mind, we can analyze the conditions necessary for the coherence of a set of beliefs in order to assess the differences between linearism and holism.

Authors have identified a variety of different conditions required for a set of beliefs to qualify as being coherent. The various conditions often presented in the literature seem reducible to the following four: consistency, completeness, mutual support, and anomaly avoidance. Consistency is the only condition of the four to not admit of degrees. The other three are gradable conditions that a coherent set of beliefs may have to various degrees once the consistency condition is met. The conditions can be defined as follows:

A consistent set is one that includes no contradictions, no pairs of beliefs that cannot both be true. The reason that this is the only condition for the coherence of a set not to admit of degrees is that just a single pair of contradictory beliefs would undermine the meeting of this condition and ensure the inconsistency of the entire set of beliefs. For instance, take the following pair of beliefs: “Garfield is a cat” and “Garfield is not a cat.”

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46 These conditions are discussed using somewhat different terminology in overviews of coherentism by BonJour (1985), Dancy (1985), and Huemer (2010).

47 Some have argued that it is the only necessary condition for coherence as well. See BonJour (1985, pp. 94-96) for discussion.
A set would be inconsistent if it contained both of these beliefs, and in turn, that would make it incoherent. Thus, a set is either fully consistent or it isn’t. It fails to be consistent if and only if it contains a contradiction, and if it fails to be consistent, it fails to be coherent.

The other three conditions all rely on a particular conception of what it means for a single belief to be relevant to a set of beliefs. The field of relevance for a set of beliefs consists of those concepts that a particular group of beliefs have in common and thus determines what beliefs should be included or excluded from a particular set. Take the following coherent set of beliefs: “Cats are animals,” “Cats are living things,” and “Cats have fur.” Examples of beliefs that would be relevant to this set could be, “Cats are mammals,” or “Some cats are domesticated,” for these beliefs further describe qualities of cats consistent with the concepts that make up the beliefs that are already part of the set. However, there are other less obviously relevant beliefs, such as “The Cheshire Cat is not a living thing” and “Sphynx cats are furless.” While such beliefs involve concepts that are relevant to the set, they seem incompatible with some of the other beliefs it contains. Since these beliefs involve shared conceptual content, they are still relevant to each other if considered to be members of a set of beliefs grouped together according to a concept or concepts (in this case, “cat”) that they share.

48 The problem here is different from a single contradictory belief in a set, such as “A cat is not a cat.” This belief is false and thereby prevents a set from meeting other coherence conditions, but not because it produced an inconsistency among beliefs in the set.

49 They do not, however, lead to logical inconsistency in the set, for even though “Cats are living things” and “The Cheshire Cat is not a living thing” seem to be incompatible propositions, they are not contradictory in the sense of one being the denial of the other, as the proposition “Cats are living things” is to the proposition “No cats are living things.”
Additionally, the degree to which these three conditions obtain will depend on the particular form of coherentism adopted, for a holist may have more difficulty meeting these conditions than the linearist given the holist’s stricter requirements for the justification of a belief, namely, that it depend on support from all of the other beliefs in that set. Thus, for the holist, it is not just that those beliefs directly linked to each other in an inferential chain must be relevant to each other, all the beliefs in the set must be to some degree.

The first of the gradable conditions based on the relevance of beliefs in a set is \textit{completeness}. A set of beliefs achieves greater completeness as a subject incorporates more beliefs that are relevant to the concept(s) around which the set is organized and that are also consistent with the beliefs it already contains. Total completeness would entail the inclusion of all beliefs in a particular field of relevance in the same set. However, given the difficulty of creating an absolutely complete set, meeting the completeness condition for coherence won’t typically require total completeness, but instead will amount to meeting a certain threshold of being more complete than incomplete in the sense of including more relevant beliefs than irrelevant ones, or beliefs that have no conceptual connection to the other beliefs in the set.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{50} Additionally, the completeness condition leads to improvement in the justification of a set because greater completeness ought to increase the likelihood that the beliefs in a set are true. The requirement of the completeness condition, that any beliefs that are part of the field of relevance for a set be incorporated into that set, forces a subject to include beliefs that, though conceptually relevant, might also undermine the justification of other beliefs in that set. This can act as a check on the justification of beliefs since it prevents the development of a set that ignores potential defeaters that would challenge the justification of other beliefs in that set, and in turn, potentially undermine their truth.
This is not to suggest that it isn’t important to try to support conceptually relevant yet seemingly incompatible beliefs in a set. Determining how to revise beliefs in order to incorporate them successfully in a set improves the coherence of that set. This activity is described by the second gradable condition, \textit{mutual support}, which is the requirement that beliefs in a set provide either support for or explanation of each other, as this is what makes them hang together in a unified group. For example, in the set outlined above, which includes the beliefs “Cats are animals” and “Cats are living things,” beliefs that increase mutual support might be, “Cats are mammals” or “Mammals are animals” because these beliefs develop a clearer sense of the general concept (“cat”) that determines that set’s field of relevance. In turn, this support enhances coherence by making each belief better justified in light of its conceptual connections to other beliefs in the set.

The third gradable condition, \textit{anomaly avoidance}, states that a coherent set should include as few irrelevant beliefs as possible. BonJour (198, p. 99) defines an anomaly as follows: “a fact or event…which is claimed to obtain by one or more of the beliefs in the system of beliefs, but which is incapable of being explained…by appeal to other beliefs in the system.” Given the account of mutual support just given, it makes sense to think of these anomalies as consisting of beliefs that undermine the justification of a set by either failing to support and explain, or failing to be supported and explained by, other beliefs in the set. Note the difference between beliefs that are irrelevant to a set and those which are conceptually relevant but seem incompatible with other beliefs in a set. Unlike the following pair of beliefs from the set described above, “Cats are living things” and “The
Cheshire Cat is not a living thing,” which have conceptual content in common with the set and can be made compatible with one another and the other beliefs in a set through the addition of further relevant beliefs, a pair of beliefs such as “Sam Waterston played Jack McCoy on Law & Order” and “There are 59 calories in a medium sized peach” seem to have no conceptual relation to other beliefs in the set with a field of relevance relating to cats, nor to each other, and hence would count as anomalies. Anomalies should be avoided, therefore, because they introduce unrelated concepts which decrease the conceptual interconnectedness of the beliefs in that set and, in turn, damage the set’s overall coherence.

How, then, do these conditions apply to linearism and holism? Recall that for the linearist, each individual belief in a coherent set can justify and is justified by one or more beliefs in that set, while according to the holist, each individual belief in a coherent set is justified by the set as a whole. The consistency condition applies to both forms of coherentism equally, for a belief set cannot include even a single contradiction and still be coherent, regardless of the structure of that set, but the same is not true of the other conditions of completeness, mutual support, and anomaly avoidance.

For the holist, all of the beliefs in a set play a role in the justification of any belief incorporated into it. Therefore, the existence of beliefs that are conceptually relevant to the set yet appear to conflict with other beliefs in it make completing the set more difficult for the holist. The holist must consider all of the beliefs in the set when assessing the relevance and compatibility of any particular belief, while the linearist only needs to check the relevance of beliefs that directly justify or are justified by a particular belief in
that set to meet the three gradable conditions. For instance, though it is the case that too many anomalies may undermine the coherence of a set of beliefs for a linearist, a few anomalies would have less of an effect on the justification of beliefs in a linearist set than a holist set because these anomalies would only affect beliefs involved in direct inferential connections with them, viz., those beliefs that immediately justify or are justified by them. According to the holist’s account of justification, anomalous beliefs are more devastating to the coherence of a set because they would necessarily have an effect on the justification of the entire set, not just the justification of beliefs directly connected to them in a chain of inferences.

In sum, all four conditions apply to both forms of coherentism, but completeness, mutual support, and anomaly avoidance are harder to establish and maintain in a holist set than in a linearist set due to the inability of holism to tolerate beliefs that fall outside of the field of relevance for a set without those beliefs significantly affecting the justification of that entire set. For now, we need not be concerned with establishing the exact threshold required for meeting these conditions for either form of coherentism. Just noting that holism has greater difficulty meeting these conditions, and in turn, greater difficulty establishing coherence, will prove useful when it comes time to assess objections to coherentism in the following section as well as for determining if coherentism is essentially a variety of foundationalism in Section 3.
Section 2: Objections to Coherentism

This section provides an overview of five objections that are frequently raised against coherentism. The purpose of covering these objections here is to determine the shortcomings of both the linearist and holist forms of the view. In addition, analysis of these objections will shed light on the claim made by some that coherentism implicitly depends on a form of foundationalism. The first three of the objections that follow attack the general plausibility of the coherentist structure of justification and apply equally to linearism and holism. The fourth and fifth objections question the acceptability of particular conditions for coherence, with the former undermining the linearism and the latter undermining holism.

1. The Alternative Systems Objection. According to both linearists and holists, the justification of a set of beliefs is entirely internal to that set, since it is completely based on the relationship between the beliefs that make up the set. However, as BonJour notes, “an appeal to coherence will never even begin to pick out one uniquely justified system of beliefs” since “there will always be many, probably infinitely many, different and incompatible systems of belief which are equally coherent” (1985, p. 197). In other words, coherence alone is not a sufficient indicator of the greater likelihood of the truth of one set of beliefs over another, for there is no direct correlation between the level of coherence of a set and its likelihood of being true. Equally coherent sets could vary

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51 The names used here for the first three objections comes from BonJour (1985), though the objections themselves are quite common in the literature. Objection iv is best known from Klein and Warfield (1994) and objection v can be found in Huemer (2010).
wildly in their truth values. Objections to coherentism on these grounds thus suggest that the decision to accept one set of beliefs justified over another on the basis of coherence alone can only be made arbitrarily.

To resolve the problem of having to decide between equally coherent sets of beliefs, BonJour (1985, pp. 141-144) claims that the coherentist should stipulate an additional condition for coherence, which he calls the Observation Requirement. According to this principle, the beliefs in a coherent set should be held to a standard of acceptance based on observational, sensory evidence. BonJour thinks that if we judge the initial plausibility of beliefs against input directly received through the senses, we have at the very least some grounds for determining the veracity of competing belief sets. According to BonJour, direct sensory experience gives rise to “spontaneously held” beliefs, i.e., beliefs that we come to hold automatically because they are based on information passively obtained through perception. Such beliefs, though they are not themselves justified according to the coherentist standard, are given some credence simply because they spontaneously arise in us. BonJour claims that though the spontaneous adoption of such beliefs does lead to the conditional acceptance of them, the question of whether they are justified is only determined once we judge their coherence with other beliefs in a given set.

One potential problem with using BonJour’s Observation Requirement to defend coherentism against the Alternative Systems Objection is that accepting the Observation Requirement is akin to accepting a form of foundationalism. According to BonJour’s account, it appears that spontaneously held beliefs are similar to basic beliefs since they
serve as a self-justified foundation for determining the justification of other beliefs. Because they do not require their own justification in order to be adopted as part of a set, spontaneously held beliefs play the same role in a chain of inferences as the foundationalist’s non-inferential basic beliefs. Consequently, such an appeal to basic beliefs would make the coherentist structure of justification essentially reliant on a form of foundationalism as it would require accepting the principle that justification requires some non-inferential basis.

BonJour’s response to this concern is to suggest that it is essential to view spontaneously held beliefs as not being self-justifying, but as incapable of being justified until they are incorporated into a coherent set. For BonJour, instead of supplying justification for other beliefs, spontaneous perceptual beliefs that meet the Observation Requirement just serve as a way of differentiating between plausible and implausible belief sets with the caveat that such beliefs should not be thought to confer justification on a set until that time at which the coherence of the set can be determined.

This strategy is thought to be capable of avoiding the accusation that coherentism actually adopts a foundationalist structure, but it seems somewhat spurious. Even if the Observation Requirement provides information useful for distinguishing between different potentially justified beliefs, one might still wonder whether this reliance on spontaneously held beliefs is acceptable by questioning whether these observation-based beliefs should be provisionally adopted and used as markers of other true beliefs just because they naturally occur to us. One might argue that reliance on such *prima facie*

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52 See Fumerton (1995, p. 148) for support of this position.
acceptable beliefs to determine the coherence of a set amounts to a form of dogmatism favoring immediate and direct perception. Additionally, even if BonJour’s strategy works in cases where we must choose between simple belief sets that can easily be traced back to direct sensory experience, it seems difficult to apply the Observation Requirement in cases where a comparison must be made between sets composed of many abstract or theoretical beliefs that don’t have a clear connection to perceptual experience. In such cases, the charge that one can only arbitrarily accept one set over another still seems to apply, unless some other foundational belief, perhaps some non-inferential *a priori* principle, were to be cited that could lead one to distinguish differences in these sets. If BonJour’s additional condition is the only viable means for choosing one belief set over another, it remains an open question whether coherentism avoids the adoption of a basic foundationalist principle.

**ii. The Input Objection.** Another potential problem for the coherentist arises when we consider the relationship of a coherent set of beliefs to the external world. While the foundationalist attempts to secure justification in something external to our beliefs by proposing that there is a basis for our beliefs in an objective source such as direct perceptual experience, unless one incorporates the Observation Requirement there is no such connection between our beliefs and the objective world, for justification is only a matter of relations between the beliefs that are part of a particular belief set for the coherentist. By locating the source of the justification of beliefs in an independent state of affairs, foundationalists are able to provide a response to the skeptic’s challenge that we have no knowledge of the external world. Alternatively, no form of coherentism requires
any connection to the external world since beliefs in a coherent set are not justified by
anything outside of that set. Like the Alternative Systems Objection, the Input Objection
suggests a way that coherentism could lead to skepticism, namely, that the coherentist
provides no explanation for how any beliefs or propositions outside of a coherent set
could influence the justification of beliefs in that set. Without establishing a justificatory
link to the external world, so the argument goes, coherentism fails to provide evidence
that our belief sets match up to reality.

As is the case with the previous objection, BonJour (1985, pp. 112-113) uses the
Observation Requirement to respond to this concern by distinguishing between the source
of a belief and its justification. He argues that spontaneously held beliefs that are
the products of our experience of the external world are what provide the input required to
connect coherent sets of beliefs to reality and which secure their justification according to
an independent and objective standard. Though this might provide the requisite
connection to reality the coherentist needs to resolve the Input Objection, whether this is
a satisfactory response to the objection will still depend on whether the Observation
Requirement can be defended against the charge of being a foundationalist principle of
justification.

Though the above objections do not conclusively undermine coherentism, they do
raise serious doubts about coherentism’s plausibility as a solution to the Regress
Problem. BonJour’s response to these objections indicates at the very least that some
further condition must be added to the coherentist’s account to ensure that concerns about
the seemingly arbitrary choice between equally coherent belief sets and the inability of
coherent sets to connect to reality can be dealt with adequately. However, if a foundationalist principle is required to respond to these objections, we’re left with a concern about whether coherentism can maintain its independence from foundationalism. We will put this question aside for the moment until the other objections to coherentism have been addressed and the dilemma of whether to accept the consequences of these objections or adopt foundationalism has been considered.

iii. The Problem of Truth. In addition to disagreeing about the structure of justification, the views of foundationalists and coherentists also often diverge because they tend to rely on different theories of truth. While foundationalists typically claim that the truth of our beliefs is determined by their correspondence to a state of affairs, some coherentists claim that the truth of our beliefs stems from their coherence with each other. Questions have been raised about the viability of the coherentist theory of truth, for it essentially takes the same relations between beliefs described by the coherentist theory of justification and uses them as a determining factor for truth as well, making truth and justification beholden to the same standard. Adopting coherence (say, by requiring consistency among beliefs) to determine the truth of beliefs, and then in turn adopting that same standard of consistency in order to determine the justification of beliefs as well seems incorrect, for it makes truth and justification too closely related and perhaps even indistinguishable. No motivation is provided for accepting either theory, except that if the standard is already in place for one, it should also be used for the other. As BonJour notes, such independent motivation or “metajustification” for a theory “depends on the independent claim to acceptance of the concept of truth which is invoked” (1985, p. 109).
If truth and justification rely on the same principle, as is the case for the coherentist, the relationship between truth and justification is problematic because it lacks this metajustification.

Additionally, one might argue that the coherence theory of truth is a rather ad hoc account that has been proposed to shield the coherentist view of justification from skeptical attacks. The idea here is that skepticism can be avoided by adopting a coherence theory of truth and justification because if truth needs to be determined by coherence alone, a coherentist account of justification need not be concerned that a coherent set fails to incorporate input from the world to support the justification of belief sets. Relying on the external world for justification would only matter if, as the correspondence theory of truth suggests, the criterion of truth depends on matching a proposition to the way world is. However, without any additional evidence to support its plausibility, this fails to provide a sufficient reason for accepting coherentism.

*iv. The Truth Conduciveness Objection.* This objection and the one that follows are more directly concerned with the conditions for coherence described in the previous section. Recall that the completeness condition suggests that the greater the number of relevant beliefs added to a coherent set of beliefs, the more justified that set is. Klein and Warfield (1994) have argued against the idea that completeness lends support to the coherence of a belief set, for they contend that there is no connection between the completeness of a set and that set’s likelihood to contain justified beliefs because there is no reason to think that a set’s likelihood of being true is determined by how complete it is.
Their proposal is based on thinking of justification in terms of probabilities. According to a common fallibilist understanding of justification, each of my beliefs has a subjective probability of being true that is less than 1 but greater than 0, the exact number of which is determined by the strength of my justificatory reasons. Klein and Warfield (1994, p. 119) suggest that the way to assess any theory of justification is to “see if an increase in whatever the theory in question says justification is implies an increase in the likelihood of the truth of whatever the theory says the bearer of justification is.” They argue that a coherent set of beliefs would actually be less justified than any particular belief in that set because when one multiplies the probabilities of each belief in that set, the overall probability of the set, and hence its overall justification, will decrease rather than increase, (e.g., if belief A has a 75% probability of being true and belief B has a 80% probability of being true, together that set has only a 58% probability of being true). The probability of the truth of the set as a whole will decrease as more beliefs are incorporated into it. Consequently, since the set will actually be less justified the more beliefs that are a part of it, it is false that an increase in completeness leads to an increase in justification.

In response to this proposal, Bovens and Olsson (2002) have argued that when assessing the probability that all the beliefs in a set are true, the coherence of the set of beliefs itself should also be taken into consideration, not just the probability of each individual belief within the set. The fact that the set itself is coherent should, Bovens and Olsson claim, count as a reason to think that the beliefs that make it up have a higher probability of being true. The additional consideration of the coherence of the set as a
whole can mitigate the decrease in probability that comes from simply multiplying the probabilities of individual beliefs, and would show that it is not necessary that a larger, more complete set of beliefs is less likely to be true than a smaller one.

Bovens and Olsson’s response depends on thinking that the coherence of a belief set is itself a reason for thinking that a set is justified, but it is not clear that accepting this claim doesn’t just amount to endorsing a fundamental principle about the correctness of coherence as the standard for justification that is itself justified by its coherence with other beliefs in that set. According to this interpretation of coherentism, the belief that “the coherence of a set indicates its justification” would need to be already held by a subject prior to any determination of the coherence of the set itself for there to be a reason for thinking that sets of beliefs ought to be justified on the basis of their coherence. It would seem that one held a foundationalist principle of justification if this were so because a subject would rely on the belief that “the coherence of a set indicates its justification” without it being justified according to coherentist standards.

Additionally, it is important to note that even if Bovens and Olsson’s strategy does not commit the coherentist to accepting a foundationalist principle, it still only works as a response to the Truth Conduciveness Objection for the holist version of coherentism because the linearist does not take the coherence of a set as a whole to be a sufficient reason for thinking that the set is justified. Since linearists endorse the view of coherence that Klein and Warfield’s objection attacks, namely, that connections between individual beliefs within a set determine if a set is justified, linearists will need to find another way of dealing with this objection than that proposed by Bovens and Olsson.
v. The No False Beliefs Objection. This last objection from Huemer (2010) states that coherentism fails because the existence of false beliefs leads to problems for the justification of sets of which they are members. The objection can be thought of as a version of the problem illustrated in Preface Paradox, but applied to coherentism. As the author of a work of non-fiction might express in a preface, each belief expressed in her book has been thoroughly checked for accuracy, and so she believes that each is true. The author also realizes, based on her past experience of reading other similar works, that it is extremely likely that there are nevertheless some false beliefs expressed in her book as well. Thus, the paradox is that while she has good reasons to believe that the book contains no errors, she also has good reasons to believe that it must contain some errors.

The tension here is between thinking, on the one hand, that our beliefs are justified because we have reasons for thinking that they are true, and on the other hand, believing that in general we probably have some false beliefs, which past experience (and acceptance of a fallibilist view of knowledge) would seem to indicate. It thus seems probable that any seemingly justified coherent set contains some false beliefs, though we don’t know which ones they are, and that these false beliefs could be used erroneously to lend justificatory support to other beliefs in the set. If this is the case, a set seemingly justified according to the coherentist account might prove to actually be unjustified due to the prevalence of false beliefs that meet the conditions for coherence. Huemer’s concern in the No False Beliefs Objection is that coherentism offers no way of avoiding this possibility.
The objection appears to attack the plausibility of the mutual support condition for coherence specifically. Recall that this condition proposes that a set increases in coherence based on how well the beliefs in the set are able to support or explain each other. However, if there is always a high probability that there are some false beliefs in a set, then it is also likely, according to coherentism, that those false beliefs will be used in the justification of some other beliefs in that set. Huemer’s point is that if one doesn’t know which beliefs in a coherent set are false, but knows that there must be some false beliefs in the set, the coherence of the set as a whole will be undermined by those false beliefs. Since all belief sets are likely to contain some false beliefs, no set of beliefs justified by coherence alone would be able to avoid the reliance on false beliefs for its justification. The conclusion, then, is that coherentism is not a satisfactory account of justification.

In response to this charge, Kvanvig (2012) contends that the Preface Paradox need not show that coherent sets of beliefs must include some false beliefs because, returning to the above example, we could consider the author’s justification for her belief that the information in the book is correct to be of a different sort than the justification she has for the belief that there must be some errors in the book. As Kvanvig argues, the former belief is supported by direct evidence stemming from the fact-checking of the author while the latter depends on a general principle she follows that most, if not all, books contain some factual errors. The justification for this latter belief, that there must be some false beliefs in any such book (or belief set), is not as strong as the justification for the belief that there are none. This second belief is based on the direct examination of
the book, or of each belief in the set, and the first is just a generalization that may apply to most, but perhaps not all, cases. The fact that these two beliefs use different sources for their justification indicates that there actually is no direct tension between them, and hence, Kvanvig concludes, no paradox involving the acceptance of two incompatible beliefs.

Yet it would seem that the odds are still high that the majority of coherent sets do contain some false beliefs, and one could argue in response to Kvanvig that there is no reason to think that a generalization about the existence of false beliefs in coherent sets, even if the justification of these beliefs is based on different standards, is any less justified than the individual beliefs in a particular set. Additionally, the No False Beliefs Objection applies to linearism and holism differently because the standards for the condition of mutual support are different for the two forms of coherentism. As discussed in the previous section, holism requires stricter standards for mutual support since the justification of beliefs in a holistic coherent set depends on the justification of the set as a whole, while for the linearist, beliefs directly connected in a chain of inferences provide mutual support for each other. The No False Beliefs Objection would be more damaging to the holist’s conception of coherence than the linearist’s because false beliefs in the linear system of justification would only significantly affect the justification of beliefs directly linked to them in a chain of inferences, instead of undermining the justification of the set as a whole. In sum, though this objection deals more damage to holism than linearism, the Truth Conduciveness Objection applies to linearism more directly than
holism, as does the problem of circularity mentioned at the outset. It seems, therefore, that neither view can be described as clearly the best form of coherentism.

Section 3: Is Coherentism Foundationalism?

\textit{a. Alternative Accounts}

Let us return now to the more general debate. One might respond to the first three objections raised here by arguing that a compromise can be made between foundationalism and coherentism, as found in “hybrid” theories of justification that propose other options than the four traditional responses to the Regress Problem common in the literature. The most well-known hybrid view is Susan Haack’s Foundherentism. Haack suggests that a principle like BonJour’s Observation Requirement affects coherentism enough to “hybridize” it with foundationalism because it allows non-inferential beliefs to be a standard for justification in addition to a belief set’s coherence (2008, p. 136). According to her account, it isn’t possible to maintain a strictly coherentist theory of justification while allowing spontaneously held beliefs to influence the acceptance of different coherent sets or individual beliefs within a set. Instead, she proposes a new theory of the structure of justification, foundherentism, which combines BonJour’s suggestion that coherent sets must rely on non-inferential beliefs derived from perceptual experience with the view that a significant part of the justification of beliefs comes from their coherence with other beliefs in a given belief set.
Haack proposes a crossword puzzle analogy to make sense of how foundationalism and coherentism can be combined. Since a crossword puzzle consists of two components, short clues and empty boxes arranged in a particular way to fit the clues together, in order to complete the puzzle one must fill in a word based on the clues associated with particular boxes, using nearby boxes that have already been filled in to help determine the word the clue is hinting at. The clues provide input from something external to the puzzle and are given to the puzzle completer without any justification or explanation. The puzzle completer doesn’t question whether or not to accept them, but assumes that they must be adhered to if one is to finish the puzzle. The clues serve as a basis for determining the responses that will fill the boxes, and therefore represent a foundationalist component of justification. The box structure, on the other hand, represents a coherentist element of justification since it is the framework guiding the interconnection of the clues. Both elements are required to complete the puzzle, for without the clues, one would fill in the boxes randomly, not knowing whether the words chosen were correct, while without the boxes, the connections between the clue answers would be unknown. Thus, the foundherentist argues that without the input provided by non-inferential beliefs, the content of a belief set would lack proper justification, and the set would face problems like the Alternative Systems Objection. The foundherentist also agrees with the coherentist that just relying on the foundationalist account of justification doesn’t capture the justificatory support provided by the relationship among beliefs. This can only be explained by coherentism.
By combining elements of foundationalism and coherentism in this way, foundherentism can offer a response to the first two objections raised against coherentism, (the Alternative Systems Objection and the Input Objection), because it allows that non-inferential beliefs have an important role to play in coherentist justification, yet aims to show that the reliance on non-inferential beliefs does not also require accepting traditional foundationalism. Specifically, foundherentism tries to offer a way of employing the solution offered by BonJour, namely, the use of the Observation Requirement to give credence to spontaneously held beliefs, without falling victim to the objection to BonJour’s view that claims that spontaneously held beliefs are non-inferential and therefore require one to accept foundationalism. Haack argues that foundherentism can remain distinct from foundationalism because though foundherentism allows basic beliefs to partially supply their own justification, beliefs also receive additional necessary justificatory support from being members of a coherent set of beliefs.

Overall, Haack’s proposal adopts BonJour’s reliance on spontaneously held beliefs in a way that tries to reconcile the foundationalist leanings of BonJour’s solution with his desire to promote a coherentist account of justification. Foundherentism prevents coherentism from collapsing into foundationalism by suggesting that the coherence of a set of beliefs can add to the justification of seemingly non-inferential beliefs too, and thus, that neither form of justification is sufficient on its own. However, the question remains whether the proposed foundherentist compromise between the two views is
plausible, i.e., whether it is possible to maintain a balance between foundationalist and coherentist principles of justification without fully endorsing either view.

Tramel (2008) has argued against Haack’s attempt to hybridize foundationalism and coherentism by stating that any adoption of a foundationalist principle of justification amounts to the adoption of foundationalism. To rely on non-inferential beliefs for any amount of justificatory support is to accept the foundationalist’s basic position, he claims, regardless of whether coherence is also thought to provide additional justification. His account relies on the distinction between “pure” and “impure” forms of foundationalism. The purest or strictest form of foundationalism would be one that claims that non-inferential beliefs not only require no external justifiers, but that to maintain their status as basic beliefs they must have none. Such a foundationalist account would have to reject the need for further justificatory support for basic beliefs based on coherence.

Alternatively, impure forms of foundationalism could allow for additional reasons as further justification for non-inferential beliefs. According to these impure varieties, basic beliefs can possess mixed sources of justification, some of which stems from their non-inferential status and some of which stems from other beliefs.53

Tramel argues that this impure view still amounts to a form of foundationalism, however, since he considers foundationalism as essentially the position that there are non-inferential beliefs, or beliefs that do not require justification from any other source to be justified, at the base of adequately justified chains of inferences. Foundationalism as it

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53 The idea that there are degrees of foundationalism based on differences in the reliance on non-inferential beliefs as a source of justification is not new. See BonJour’s (1985) discussion of “weak foundationalism,” the view that even non-inferential beliefs have to gain some justification from other beliefs.
is commonly conceived does not additionally claim that justification from other sources, such as other beliefs or the coherence of a set of beliefs, must be banned from improving the justification of non-inferential beliefs. Thus, Tramel claims, there is no distinction between impure forms of foundationalism and Haack’s foundherentism. As long as a theory of justification posits the existence of non-inferential beliefs as the basis of the justification of a series or set of beliefs, by definition that theory amounts to a form of foundationalism. Consequently, there can be no hybridization of foundationalism and coherentism as long as non-inferential beliefs are an essential part of the structure of justification. Thus, if Tramel is correct, Haack’s theory just amounts to a form of foundationalism, and a hybrid theory of justification like foundherentism, or the similar proposal made in BonJour’s Observation Requirement, is incapable of overcoming the objections raised against coherentism.

b. Coherentism Depends on Foundationalism

We can now return to the concerns raised in Section 2 regarding the ability of coherentism to remain independent of foundationalism. Objections i-iii described several ways a coherentist might have to modify her view and in so doing be required to adopt a foundationalist principle that, if Tramel’s suggestion is to be believed, could potentially alter the coherentist position to such an extent that it would become a version of foundationalism. In the concluding pages of this chapter I will argue that this is in fact the only plausible fate for coherentism. To see why this is the case, let’s return to the prior objections.
The first three objections raised problems that seemed capable of being resolved by adopting some version of BonJour’s strategy, viz., by referring to some external source that could provide additional support for beliefs in a coherent set. However, as described in the previous section, this strategy was shown to fail because it led coherentism into a form of foundationalism, despite the attempt to hybridize the two theories in the manner proposed by Haack. Even BonJour (2010) has now changed his view of coherentism’s plausibility, accepting foundationalism as the better theory of justification. As he writes, “the problem of making sense of the believer’s own access to his system of beliefs and its coherence…[can] only be dealt with in an essentially foundationalist way,” that is, by using some idea of spontaneously held beliefs to ground the coherence of a set of beliefs in the external world (115).

The fourth and fifth objections raised problems for the linearist and holist forms of coherentism, respectively. Holism fares better in its ability to respond to concerns that the more complete a set is the less likely it is to be true and avoids the problem of circularity facing linearist accounts of justification, while linearism may be less affected by the damage to justification caused by the possibility that false beliefs are used for the justification of other beliefs in a coherent set, and can also more easily meet the conditions for coherence than holism. Thus, though these two objections do not attack coherentism on the basis of its connection to foundationalism, they do supply additional reasons for thinking that neither linearism nor holism offer viable accounts of the coherentist position.
Tramel’s suggestion above, that any reliance on non-inferential beliefs in a theory of justification amounts to accepting foundationalism, was a response to hybridized forms of coherentism that allow for other forms of justification in addition to coherence. One possible reply to Tramel’s objection would be to admit that we ought to reject hybrid accounts of justification, instead endorsing a “pure” coherence theory that rejects reliance on the Observation Requirement and holds that justification must be derived from coherence alone. Even this attempt at pure coherentism would fail to avoid foundationalism, however, for the contention that “coherence is the ultimate source of justification” would have to be interpreted as a belief about the structure of justification, one that would need to be believed to be true prior to determining the justification of any particular beliefs or belief sets, precisely because it would serve as the rule for establishing such justifications. If, however, such a principle must be believed *a priori* in order for coherentism to succeed as a theory of justification, coherence alone can’t be what makes beliefs and belief sets justified. Instead, the fundamental principle of justification for the coherence theorist would be a basic non-inferential principle, one that would not be justified by any other belief since it would be looked to as that which guided the justification of other beliefs. As Klein (2007, p. 16) has put it, according to the coherentist “all propositions in the coherent set are justified for [a subject] because they are members of a coherent set which are the contents of [a subject’s] beliefs.”\(^{54}\) “Being a member of such a set of coherent propositions” would then be the foundational property

\(^{54}\) See also Klein (1999, 2014, p. 111).
that confers justification to them, and one would have to conclude that coherentism, even in its purest form, ultimately endorses foundationalism.

Alternatively, as Van Cleve (2005) points out, a coherentist could avoid relying on foundationalism in two ways: According to the first, the coherentist could claim that the principle that states beliefs are justified by coherence would itself be justified by its inclusion in a coherent set, that is:

A proposition p affirming a relation of coherence would be justified only because the subject is justified in believing that p belongs to a coherent system...only because the subject is justified in believing that *p belongs to a coherent system* belongs to a coherent system, and so on. (178)

Perhaps Van Cleve’s coherentist isn’t bothered by the circularity of using the coherence of a set of beliefs to justify the belief in a principle of coherence, but for many this sort of circularity is not acceptable without some other compelling support. This is something that coherentism doesn’t seem to have.

The second option for the coherentist is to take a route also available to the foundationalist and adopt an externalist account of justification. Using this approach, one could avoid the problem of circularity or of having to accept a foundationalist principle as the basis of the structure of justification by simply rejecting the requirement that the subject be aware of the principle justifying her beliefs. For the externalist coherentist, having knowledge would not require having justification in the traditional sense, and therefore an awareness of the structure of justification and the need to solve the Regress Problem would also no longer have much significance. With this maneuver the coherentist could avoid adopting a traditional foundationalist principle of justification, but it would require sacrificing an internalist view of knowledge as well. However, given
the goal of this project, to respond to the Regress Problem, this is not a viable solution. The externalist avoids questions about the structure of justification in the form of reasons a subject has for believing something, but it is precisely justification as a set of reasons a subject has or could use to support her belief that the foundationalist and coherentist solutions to the Regress Problem are supposed to provide.

c. Is There Room for Infinitism?

Having spent these first few chapters discussing the plausibility of the most popular responses to the Regress Problem, it is now time to turn to infinitism, the only non-skeptical solution that remains. The forgoing accounts of foundationalism and coherentism have, I believe, pointed out the limitations of both views. If there is no way to modify coherentism to prevent it from sliding into a form of foundationalism, the coherentist solution to the Regress Problem is no longer viable, and foundationalism becomes the only available non-skeptical solution to the Regress Problem besides infinitism. However, as the previous chapter attempted to show, foundationalism faces its own pressing problems that must be resolved before it can be accepted as a viable theory of justification. Because of the concerns raised against foundationalism there, it seems that the best course of action now is to consider the remaining options. Consequently, the following chapters will be dedicated to examining infinitism.
CHAPTER 4
FORMS OF INFINITE JUSTIFICATION

Many objections have been raised against infinitism’s plausibility as a solution to the Regress Problem, but the majority of these objections have only dealt with infinitism at a rather superficial level. Most discussions of the Regress Problem have attempted to dismiss the infinitist account as quickly as possible, as it is taken to be patently obvious that infinitism is an implausible theory. This judgment, usually just based on a passing glance at the view, tends to stem from the belief that an infinite regress of reasons is vicious and therefore that a theory based on such a regress is simply absurd or contradictory. Given the widespread acceptance of this conclusion, the focus of this chapter will be to support the claim that an infinite justificatory regress of reasons need not be vicious and thus the fact that infinitism posits an infinite regress of reasons should not be seen as a substantive reason for rejecting it. I argue that a deeper look at the nature of infinite regresses reveals that many of the objections to the plausibility of an infinite epistemic regress can be neutralized and that, once it’s considered as presenting a benign infinite regress, the theory can be a viable solution to the Regress Problem.

Even at first glance, however, infinitism doesn’t seem that implausible. Certainly we can imagine continually questioning our beliefs, that there is always the possibility that we could keep asking, “But why?” in response to any reason we use for justification.

55 Here and throughout this chapter a reason should be understood as either a proposition or a belief (which is an attitude a subject has towards a proposition) that adds evidence for the truth of another proposition or belief as part of a chain of inferences.
The problem instead seems to stem from a consideration of the consequences of adopting such a view of justification. Here, I’ll try to defend infinitism from these concerns. To do so, I begin in Section 1 with a discussion of various concepts of the infinite, the nature of infinite regresses, and how an infinite regress of reasons might be made benign. Section 2 then responds to several objections to infinitism common in the literature. Lastly, in Section 3 I discuss in more detail the form a viable infinitist theory of justification would need to take if it is to be considered a possible solution to the Regress Problem.

Section 1: Varieties of Infinite Regress

a. Two Kinds of Infinity

While the concept of infinity dates back to the ancient world, it has not maintained a stable meaning over time. Aristotle described the infinite as having two forms, one being the more common traditional conception of infinity as signifying the property of being boundless and endless, which was dubbed the “actual” infinite, and another novel form that Aristotle called the “potential” infinite, a form of infinity that described a series that was in some sense bounded or limited, and not one that continued without any restriction.\(^{56}\) For example, we tend to think of the spatiotemporal extension of the universe or a series of integers as being infinite in the actual sense. In contrast, the potential infinite can be represented by a response to one of Zeno’s Paradoxes regarding the division of space. Given that a line segment seems ever divisible into smaller

\(^{56}\) See Barrow (2005, pp. 25-30).
segments, it is infinite in the sense of being infinitely divisible. However, it is not infinite in the sense of being infinitely long. The two end points of the segment put limits on its length, yet within the bounds of those end points, the division of that line segment into smaller and smaller pieces could continue without end, thus making one property of the segment the capacity to be potentially infinite. Similarly, a potentially infinite series may exist between two points in time, for an hour may be divided into smaller and smaller moments in time without end, even though the hour is bounded by the limits of 0 and 60 minutes.

Additionally, while the concept of the infinite has been utilized in a number of explanations ranging across such disparate subjects such as the calculation of the area under a curve or in discussions of the properties of God, for our purposes the infinite must be understood as a property of a regress, specifically a regress of reasons. A regress should be thought of as a series of successive steps that repeat, and in the case of an infinite regress, a series of steps that repeat endlessly. Specifically, in the case of a justificatory regress, in a chain of inferences each successive step consists of a reason, typically a belief, used as justification for accepting the preceding belief. To claim, as the infinitist does, that the structure of justification takes the form of an infinite chain of reasons is just to say that the regressive steps consisting of reasons to justify a belief never come to an end.

The distinction between the potential and actual infinite also applies to infinite regresses. On the one hand, a regress in infinitum is one that is bounded or limited, and

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57 See Rescher (2010, p. 7).
thus one that can be described as potentially infinite. It is still a regress since it involves a series of ever repeating steps, but ones that occur between two boundaries, such as the division of an hour into increasingly smaller moments of time described above. In contrast, regresses *ad infinitum* are boundless in the sense that there is no restriction on the number of steps in the regress that can be taken. The passage of time is sometimes described as being infinite in this sense, for we can trace moments backwards in time without ever coming upon a first moment or event that set off the succession of moments. This form of regress makes use of the traditional conception of actual infinity. It is also this form, a regress *ad infinitum*, that the infinitist argues comprises the infinite regress of reasons.

The *in infinitum* form of regress fails to provide an adequate structure of justification for an infinite, linear chain of beliefs. The reason, as Klein (2003b, p. 726) hints at when describing the difference between what he calls “infinitistic foundationalism” and infinitism, is that an *in infinitum* regressive structure describes a form of linear justification in which there is an infinite chain of inferences supporting a belief, yet at its base this chain is ultimately supported by some sort of foundational non-inferential belief. An infinitistic foundationalist could argue that between the non-inferential basis for a chain of inferences and the belief to be justified there could be an infinite number of supporting reasons, so long as they all ultimately depend on the same non-inferential belief for their justification. This sort of *in infinitum* infinite regress would be one that occurs within certain boundaries and thus cannot represent the endlessness of

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58 See Rescher (2010, p. 15).
an infinite regress as it is conceived of by the infinitist. Only a regress *ad infinitum*
describes a structure of justification where each reason for a particular belief has its own
reason supporting it, that reason has a reason supporting it as well, and so on without
there being any end point to the chain of inferences that provide justification. Unlike a
regress *in infinitum*, which may consist of an infinitely large chain of inferences, but a
chain that still has a stopping point in a foundational non-inferential belief, a regress *ad
infinitum* is infinitely long without the possibility of ending, and hence is entirely
unbounded.

However, *ad infinitum* infinite regresses have typically been used to undermine
rather than support a position. Often it is argued that *ad infinitum* infinite regresses are
vicious, meaning that the appearance of an infinite regress in a theory can be taken to be
an indication that the theory is problematic. If the infinitist’s regress is understood to be
vicious, it’s no wonder that infinitism has been so casually dismissed. For instance, and
most significantly for the infinitist’s proposal, the Regress Argument (or, as I have called
it previously, the Master Argument) for foundationalism is one example of an argument
according to which the viciousness of the infinite regress is offered as sufficient proof
that infinitism should be ruled out as a solution to the Regress Problem.

It is an oversimplification to think that all infinite regresses must be vicious,
however. Some regresses are in fact innocuous or benign since they lead to no
contradictions nor contain any false propositions. If the infinite regress of reasons
postulated by infinitism can be shown to be benign, infinitism cannot be so cursorily
dismissed as leading to a *reductio*. And, in addition, even if infinitism’s benignity doesn’t
prove its correctness, at the very least it ought to lead to the conclusion that the infinitist position must be considered as carefully as foundationalism and coherentism as another possible solution to the Regress Problem.

b. Infinitist Regression Rules

Determining whether the infinitist account could be benign rather than vicious requires that we examine the “regression rule” that constitutes the infinitist’s regress. A regression rule is essentially the formula employed in a particular regress that is used to perform each successive step, and in a recursive regress, the same rule must be used in each step that continues the regress. By examining the regression rule of a particular regress, it is possible to determine whether that regress will lead to a contradiction or false proposition, and thus whether it is vicious or benign.

One account, from Wieland (2013), describes two forms that the infinitist recursive regression rule can take, both of which represent common ways of understanding an infinite regress of reasons in the literature. He calls these two rules the “Paradox Schema” and the “Failure Schema” (2013, pp. 95-99). The Paradox Schema is the regression rule most commonly adopted to represent the infinite regress of reasons found in reductio arguments against infinitism, as it is often taken to reveal a contradiction in the infinitist’s justificatory regress. The regression rule in this case is “X is a reason for Y,” with the first term X replacing the second term Y in each successive step, and a new term being added in X’s position, (i.e., W is a reason for X, V is a reason

for \( W \), \( U \) is a reason for \( V \), etc.). Thus, each successive term added will always require its own reason, \textit{ad infinitum}. This version of infinitism is often taken to lead to a contradiction because, on the one hand, being non-skeptics, most of us believe that we do in fact have knowledge, (which entails that we have justified beliefs). This belief is undermined by the infinite regress based on the Paradox Schema, for this regression rule suggests that any belief we hold will always require a further reason, a reason for the further reason, and so on, endlessly. If the need to supply further reasons for a belief fails to come to an end, that belief appears to never reach a threshold of support from these reasons to ensure that it is adequately justified. The resulting dilemma is that it appears that we lack knowledge, though we simultaneously believe that we do have it (102).

The Failure Schema uses a regression rule that follows a somewhat different pattern. Instead of the repetition being the same for every step in the regress, the steps alternate between (i) satisfying the subject’s need to justify her belief and (ii) the providing of a reason for a belief in response to (i) (101). The pattern thus runs as follows: (i) subject \( S \) needs to justify belief \( B \), (ii) \( S \) provides a reason \( R \) for \( B \), (i) \( S \) needs to justify her belief in \( R \) (in order for \( R \) to be a reason for \( B \)), (ii) \( S \) provides a reason \( R_1 \) for \( R \), (i) \( S \) needs to justify her belief in \( R_1 \) in order for \( R_1 \) to be a reason for \( R \), and so on. This form of the regress is also usually considered vicious because it never resolves the problem of whether the belief \( B \) is justified. The justification for the original belief gets pushed back in each successive step of the regress since the reasons (\( R, R_1 \), etc.) used to justify \( B \) are first in need of justification themselves before they can in turn provide support for \( B \).
c. Introducing Doxastic and Propositional Justification

The infinitist does, however, have a way of defending the benignity of an infinite regress of reasons. If it can be shown that these regression rules do not lead to the conclusions described above, then infinitism need not entail a vicious regress. In the distinction made by some between *propositional* and *doxastic* justification there is, I think, a way to achieve this result. Propositional justification refers to the justification for a belief that consists of reasons a subject could use in the course of justifying her belief, viz., the reasons that make a given proposition true for a particular subject, regardless of whether she actually makes use of them. Doxastic justification describes the subset of these reasons that are actually used by a subject to justify her belief. Propositional justification is necessary for doxastic justification, since it is only if reasons are available and capable of counting as reasons for a subject that it is possible that a subject could end up using these reasons as justification for her belief. One must, in other words, have access to the reasons for believing that a proposition is true (the belief in it must be propositionally justified) in order for a subject to successfully base the justification of a belief upon those reasons (and so for her to be doxastically justified).

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60 As Van Woodenberg and Meester (2014, p. 225) put it, doxastic justification requires that there be a believing subject aware of the propositional justification of a chain of inferences. Additionally, as Klein (2007, p. 6) notes, “doxastic justification, and not mere propositional justification, is the necessary condition of [knowledge] in the ‘traditional’ JTB set of necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for [knowledge].” See also Bergmann (2007). For an overview of the traditional account of the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification. For an alternative formulation of this distinction, see Turri (2010).

61 Externalists consequently need not be concerned with this distinction, for they don’t take doxastic justification to be necessary for knowledge.
Infinitists such as Klein (2014) suggest that we should consider propositional justification to be actually infinite and doxastic justification instead to be finite in order to successfully respond to the charge that the regress of reasons postulated by infinitism is vicious. According to his view, there exists an endless chain of good reasons that could justify a belief, but only some of the reasons will make up the chain that ends up being used by a subject to justify her belief. This doesn’t mean that we must concede that the structure of justification is finite and that one of the finitist solutions to the Regress Problem is correct, however.

Instead, finite doxastic justification suggests that the stopping point for the need of reasons for a belief is determined by what is necessary for a particular subject’s justification. The chain of inferences that justify a belief for a particular subject is determined not by a non-inferential basic belief, but by the conventions of a given context relative to the subject attempting to justify her belief. I agree with Klein that the stipulation that only propositional justification is infinite is necessary if one wishes to properly defend infinitism, but in addition to his proposal, the reason I think that the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification is essential is that it provides a way of showing that the infinitist regress is not vicious. Thus, the rest of this section will focus on applying the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification to infinitism, in order to determine whether use of either the Paradox Schema or Failure Schema can result in a view that doesn’t entail a vicious regress.
d. Why the Infinitist Regress isn’t Vicious

Recall that the Paradox Schema was thought to result in a conflict between the generally held view that we do in fact have justified beliefs and the conclusion of the regress, that a belief can never be adequately justified. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it draws a conclusion about an infinite regress that conflates propositional justification and doxastic justification. The Paradox Schema suggests that propositional justification is infinite, that every proposition requires a reason in order for it to be justified, and every subsequent reason requires its own reason. The supposed problem, however, results from combining this account of propositional justification with the general statement that we take ourselves to have justified beliefs. But there is no contradiction between these claims when viewed with the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification in mind, since the former refers to the reasons that justify a particular belief and the latter to our awareness of these reasons. By considering propositional justification as consisting of an infinite series of reasons and doxastic justification as consisting of a finite number of reasons relevant to a particular subject, it is plausible that, following the Paradox Schema, an infinite regress would not be vicious. The regressive pattern of justification for reasons for a given belief could continue endlessly without a subject needing to actually hold all of these reasons as part of her justification for it.

The Failure Schema will also not lead to a vicious infinite regress if propositional justification is conceived as being infinite and doxastic justification as being finite. Recall that the Failure Schema consists of alternating steps: (i) supplying a belief in need of
justification and (ii) providing justificatory support for that belief. The steps of the regression rule here both refer to doxastic justification because they address whether a particular subject can justify a belief. The viciousness of this version of the regress supposedly comes from the inability of these steps to solve the problem of justifying a belief based on an infinite series because they prevent the belief originally in need of justification from ever getting the justification it needs, (since there is always another belief in the form of an intermediary reason that will need to be justified before the belief in question can be sufficiently justified). Since the infinitist has already stipulated that doxastic justification is finite, however, this form of regress is irrelevant to the infinitist project. The rule represented by the Failure Schema focuses on a subject’s justification for a belief, and the infinitist agrees that this form of justification is finite. According to the infinitist’s view of finite doxastic justification, a subject will (i) have a belief in need of justification and (ii) provide reasons for it for a fixed number of times, as determined by her context.

Thus, if the foregoing reasoning is sound, it is possible to conclude that there is at least one way infinitism can be formulated that is benign, due to the fact that these regression rules as originally conceived have not accounted for both doxastic and propositional justification. While the Failure Schema no longer applies to the infinitist’s account of propositional justification, the Paradox Schema can be thought of as the appropriate regression rule for an infinite regress of reasons that defends finite doxastic justification and infinite propositional justification. In addition to this, however, there is
another objection to infinitism’s ability to overcome viciousness, Gillett’s (2003) structural objection.62

Gillett’s objection raises a worry about the form of the infinite regress of reasons that follows the regression rule described in the Failure Schema, but applied just to propositional justification. If one revised the Failure Schema to describe propositional justification alone, the regression rule would take the form of alternating steps back and forth between (i) there being a belief in need of justification and then (ii) a reason that would serve as that belief’s justification, independent of a subject’s context. A continuation of this pattern would then seemingly lead to the conclusion that no belief is justified because its justification is always in need of further reasons. Gillett’s worry is that if infinitism is correct, it would seem impossible for any belief to count as a reason to begin with, for as the Failure Schema indicates, the problem for infinitism is that justification appears to be endlessly passed off to another reason, and that, consequently, there would never be a justified belief to get the process started. In turn, the regress would be vicious and it would be impossible to adequately justify any of our beliefs.

Klein (2003b) counters this objection with the contention that infinitism is a theory about the structure of justification alone, and as such, isn’t designed to answer the question of why justification exists in the first place. The assumption here is simply that of the non-skeptic, i.e., that we do in fact have satisfactory justification for at least some

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62 Another concern is that the infinitist’s concession that only propositional justification is infinite amounts to an abandonment of infinitism, for it means that the infinitist is no longer claiming that doxastic justification, the sort of epistemic justification that many epistemologists trying to solve the Regress Problem are really concerned with, is infinite. This second concern will be discussed in the following chapters.
of our beliefs and that what needs to be explained by epistemologists is how the process of justification works. This response appears unsatisfactory, however, because it seems to concede that infinitism, or any solution to the Regress Problem for that matter, cannot explain why (or whether) we have justified beliefs, just that if we do, they must be related in a certain way. The Regress Problem (as I’ve described it previously) doesn’t make this supposition, but instead considers the skeptic’s view that we have no justification to be a live possibility, not something that can simply be assumed as incorrect. What might instead be a better response to Gillett’s objection is to point out that there are other infinite regresses that we generally consider unproblematic even though they lack a defined first step, such as regresses of motion and causation, which are accepted without the need to determine their origins. It is possible that the regress of justification could be analogous to these cases, and therefore that no original or basic justified belief would need to be in place in order to accept an infinite regress of reasons. Until an explanation is required in these other cases of acceptable infinite regresses, there is no reason to think that the infinitist’s regress should require one either.

Section 2: Common Objections to Infinitism

Even if we can successfully avoid the viciousness of the infinitist’s regress by suggesting that the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification rules it out, there are other objections that the infinitist must respond to. Fortunately, a number of
these challenges can also be answered if infinitism is understood as a theory about infinite propositional justification and finite doxastic justification.

a. *The Finite Minds Objection.* This objection has taken several forms, each of which attacks infinitism’s plausibility by suggesting that subjects like us who have finite mental capacities cannot possibly have an awareness of infinite chains of reasons. (i) One form claims that infinitism fails because it requires a subject to have an infinite amount of time to go through and catalogue an infinite number of reasons in order to have sufficient justification for her beliefs. (ii) Another proposal is that infinitism fails because it would require that a subject be aware of an infinitely complex proposition about the entire infinite chain of reasons supporting a belief in order to have sufficient justification for a belief. (iii) Lastly, the classic form of the objection simply holds that infinitism cannot be correct because it is impossible for a subject with a finite mind to hold an infinite number of beliefs.\(^6^3\)

To respond to these objections, it may be useful to understand the relationship between propositional and doxastic justification in terms of the difference between *subjective* and *objective* reasons.\(^6^4\) Whatever reasons in a justificatory chain that a subject could be aware of at a given time count as reasons that are *subjectively available* to that subject, for they could be used by her in the course of justifying a belief in a given context. The sum total of all the reasons that could possibly be used as support for a given

\(^{63}\) For more on the various forms that this objection can take, see Harker (1984).

\(^{64}\) This difference is discussed in more detail in Klein (2003b, p. 722). He describes objective availability as comprising “person-neutral features” of reasons since this form of availability refers to the suitability of beliefs to count as justificatory reasons, whereas subjective availability refers to “person-centered features” of reasons, or whether a subject can use these reasons as part of her justification.
belief regardless of whether they are reasons that a subject is aware of or are actually used by a subject in the course of justifying a belief are *objectively available* reasons. Though they may not currently factor into a subject’s actual justification or count as reasons that might be given to further support a justified belief given the subject’s particular context, they have met the standards required for being good reasons for that belief in some context. In other words, objectively available reasons consist of all the possible reasons that could be used to justify a particular belief, while subjectively available reasons comprise a set that can justify a belief for a subject based on the context that subject finds herself in. As Klein (1999) writes, “there might be a good reason, r, that is objectively available for use by any person, but unless it is properly hooked up with S’s own beliefs, r will not be *subjectively* available to S” (300). Subjectively available reasons are “hooked up” with a subject’s beliefs by being relevant to them given her context.

Klein never mentions the relationship between subjectively and objectively available reasons and doxastic and propositional justification, but I take it to be that a subject’s possible doxastic justification for a belief, or the reasons she could use to justify a belief when making a knowledge claim, consists of subjectively available reasons for that belief. These subjectively available reasons must also be objectively available, that is, meet the standards of being good reasons, whatever they might be, for that belief for any subject in any context. Objectively available reasons in turn seem to represent the propositional justification for a belief, as both describe the infinitist chain of inferences that serves as the justification for a belief in all contexts. However, the subject is never
aware of the infinite set of reasons supporting a particular belief. She will never have
access to the entirety of the propositional justification for her belief, or knowledge of all
of the objectively available reasons that justify it, for only some context-determined
segment of the total justification is ever required for her doxastic justification for a belief.
Thus, the concern that the subject would be incapable of ever successfully holding the
reasons needed for the sufficient justification of her belief disappears since the subjective
availability of reasons doesn’t require that a subject be aware of the entire infinite chain
of objectively available reasons that justify her belief.65

(i) In the first case of the Finite Minds Objection, the problem for the infinitist is
based on holding that infinitism requires a subject to be aware of every reason in the
chain of inferences supporting a particular belief in order for that belief to be justified.
Since all human subjects are finite, it is therefore impossible that any subject has the time
required to trace the infinite chain of reasons supporting a particular belief. The
assumption here is that infinitism requires a subject to take the time to consider each
reason in the entire chain of reasons supporting a belief in order to be sufficiently
justified in holding that belief. In other words, the objection suggests that according to an
infinitist account of justification, a subject’s doxastic justification must be infinite.
However, if infinitism is understood in terms of the previously described distinction
between doxastic and propositional justification, the infinitist doesn’t have to defend the
claim that doxastic justification is infinite, and this objection loses its force. Though the
number of reasons in a chain of inferences may indeed be infinite, a subject does not need

65 However, Klein (2007) suggests that an infinite number of reasons needs to be available to a
subject according to an infinitist account of justification. I take issue with this point in Chapter 6.
to be aware of each of these reasons in order to have a justified belief, but just a certain number of them determined by the context in which she is attempting to justify a belief.

(ii) According to the second form of the Finite Minds Objection, infinitism fails because it requires that a subject be aware of a proposition about the entirety of the justificatory chain supporting a belief in order for that belief to be adequately justified. It appears inappropriate to hold infinitism to this standard, however, when it is not a requirement for other theories of justification. For instance, a foundationalist might require that a subject be aware of some of the intermediary steps in a chain of reasons that justify a belief as well as the non-inferential basis for this chain in order for a belief to have sufficient justification, but the chain of reasons supporting a belief could be so long that, though not infinite, would still make it impossible for a subject to be aware of in its entirety. The same could be true for a belief set assessed using a coherentist theory of justification. On no traditional account of justification is the subjective awareness of the entirety of a chain of reasons necessary in order for a subject to have justified beliefs. If foundationalists and coherentists can suppose lengthy chains of reasons beyond the cognitive capacity of believers, why shouldn’t the infinitist be able to do so as well?

(iii) The third form of the objection, that finite minds can never hold an infinite number of beliefs, also loses its potency if doxastic justification is thought to be finite. While it may indeed be impossible for us to hold an infinite number of beliefs – both psychologically and physically – some have argued that this is only the case for “consciously held” beliefs (Harker 1984), or those which comprise one’s doxastic justification. The scenario in which a finite mind must have access to an infinite number
of reasons never arises since the totality of objectively available reasons for a belief extend beyond just the set of those that are required to justify a belief in a particular context and thus are not part of the doxastic justification one has for a belief.

Alternatively, as Klein (1999) notes, even if there are infinite reasons for a subject’s justification, that does not mean that a subject must be aware of them all concurrently or at any future point. Instead “we have the capacity to form beliefs about each member” of an infinite series of beliefs, though it is not the case that “we have already formed those beliefs” (303). The doxastic justification a subject has will never be infinite, but a subject does, on Klein’s view, have the potential to continue giving reasons for a belief without coming to an end to those reasons.66

b. The Total Justification Objection. The second kind of objection infinitists are often faced with concerns the absurdity of infinite propositional justification, regardless of whether a subject’s doxastic justification is finite or infinite. The concern is that if propositional justification is as the infinitist claims, it would mean that, ultimately, every reason justifies every other reason to some degree because the propositional justification for a particular belief would at some point include all other beliefs. The effect would be that every belief is over-justified because it is justified by every other belief.67 However, this objection seems to overreach in its understanding of the nature of an infinite chain of

66 Of course, the reasons why we should think that propositional justification is infinite even though we only seem to require finite doxastic justification will need to be filled out in greater detail, since one could, after all, claim that the finitude of doxastic justification suggests that propositional justification is also finite. This issue is addressed in Section 3 and the following chapters.

67 See Post (1980) for a defense of this objection.
reasons. It certainly seems that there could be an infinite chain of reasons that did not include every possible belief. For instance, an infinite chain of beliefs about numbers could exist that certainly doesn’t include a huge number of other beliefs irrelevant to that particular chain.

Additionally, even if the supposition made by this objection were true, surely the order in which reasons appear in a chain of inferences makes a difference in the justification of different beliefs. As Peijnenburg and Atkinson (2014) argue, for the infinitist, the farther away a reason is from the belief it justifies, the less of an influence it may have on the justification of that belief.\textsuperscript{68} The strength of each reason would be reflected in the order in which each appeared in the justificatory chain. So even if it were true that each belief receives support from every other, the order of supporting reasons would vary for each belief in need of justification, and therefore the justification for a belief, though infinite, would not be identical to that of every other belief.

Alternatively, once could avoid the Total Justification Objection by suggesting that the infinite justificatory regress doesn’t require providing reasons to support one particular belief endlessly, but that each step in a chain of inferences reveals a new reason in need of its own justification.\textsuperscript{69} Each reason would then count as a belief in need of justification itself, and so the regress wouldn’t consist of an infinite chain of reasons supporting a single belief, but a continual shift of the belief in need of justification. The

\textsuperscript{68} It may have more influence if one is a foundationalist, since those reasons would be closer to the non-inferential basic belief that stops a justificatory regress and serves to justify all of the other beliefs in that chain.

\textsuperscript{69} See Rescher (2010) for more discussion.
regress here might be more similar to a regress of questions.\textsuperscript{70} One can always ask, “But why is this the case?” about any reason used as justification, but each instance of such asking shifts the need for justification to a new proposition. This would be different from the regress described by the Failure Schema, in which justification keeps getting postponed by the need to justify the reason provided for the belief needing justification, and the reason for that reason, and so on. Instead, this regress would provide sufficient justification for a belief via some reason, and move on to finding sufficient justification for that belief which had been offered previously as a reason in yet another reason. The justification for any particular belief would thus be finite, but the chain of reasons in need of justification would continue onward endlessly.\textsuperscript{71}

Section 3: Doxastic Justification for the Infinitist

The above objections to infinitism require a response that relies on the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification in order to defend infinitists against these charges. One general concern is that this may be a distinction without a difference. There is a difference, however, and the key to understanding it is the contextual nature of doxastic justification for the infinitist. There have been several variations of

\textsuperscript{70} See Rescher (2010, p. 75).

\textsuperscript{71} Though this response offers an alternative conception of justification that avoids the above objection, it may not be compatible with the account of infinitism being presented here. This response doesn’t maintain the infinitist’s central claim that propositional justification is infinite, since each of the steps of this regress changes the belief in need of justification. Thus, this structure doesn’t represent the sort of regress endorsed by infinitism. However, regardless of whether this particular response is successful, the objection still fails to undermine the plausibility of infinite propositional justification.
contextualism presented recently in the literature, and assessing these is, I think, the first step in determining how to describe the relationship between doxastic and propositional justification that the infinitist must adopt.

First, let’s review the distinction between these two forms of justification. Propositional justification in itself is rather straightforward. It consists, for the infinitist, of an endless series of reasons that provide the complete justification for a belief. The propositional justification for any particular belief is out of our hands in a sense, for it exists independently of and with no influence from our awareness of it. The awareness of some series of reasons for a belief instead comprises a subject’s doxastic justification for that belief. Subjects successfully doxastically justify their beliefs only if they are both aware of the belief they hold and aware of a sufficient number of reasons they have for holding it. The difficulty lies in determining what counts as a “sufficient number” of reasons for doxastic justification, that is, just how many and what sort of reasons for a belief a subject must be aware of in order for that belief to be justified.

a. Contextualist Doxastic Justification

Most attempts to address questions about the standards for doxastic justification adopt a contextualist approach. This should not be surprising given how often it seems that a belief is held implicitly and unknowingly in the attempt to justify another, or left unjustified because the context dictates that certain assumptions that are made by a subject can be granted without question. There are many common examples of this. When drawing conclusions from more formally structured arguments, often times
premises are stated under certain context-determined assumptions that allow for various relevant beliefs to be assumed for the sake of the argument. Arguably, without such assumptions, it would be difficult to carry on inferring conclusions from premises, since doing so would force one to begin tracing out the justificatory chains for countless other beliefs. It seems, therefore, quite common and perhaps even essential that we assume the truth of a variety of beliefs in the process of justifying another. Though a skeptic might, in opposition to this view, argue that none of our beliefs have really achieved an adequate degree of justification without all relevant, supporting background beliefs having been considered and themselves justified, we don’t seem to require this strict sense of justification for typical knowledge claims.

Instead, one could argue that in a given justificatory context there will always be “a framework of justified commitments” supporting the reasons that are given, but which are never consciously recognized as reasons themselves (Polston (2014), pp. 183-184). These background assumptions differ from the subjectively available reasons that can be used as the doxastic justification for a belief because they do not directly justify beliefs the way that the reasons we provide for them do. They are the more general and seemingly uncontroversial beliefs, such as “I am not currently dreaming,” “I do not have implanted memories about the details of my life,” or “I know I am on planet Earth” that are implicitly held to be true, but which are so uncontroversial and uncontested (except in a skeptical scenario) as to be immune to the scrutiny placed on the beliefs that are in need of justification. While such statements may to some degree support many of our beliefs, it is precisely because of their ubiquity as reasons for other beliefs that they provide only
general and rather weak support. On the other hand, if in the course of providing reasons for a belief someone challenges a subject with a skeptical scenario by suggesting that she is not experiencing the real world, background assumptions about why she believes she’s not currently dreaming will, for instance, become relevant and then must be factored into the justification for the belief. Asking such a question changes the context of justification, and along with it, the beliefs relevant to the subject’s doxastic justification.

Peijnenburg and Atkinson (2014) argue that the shifting background assumptions capable of becoming relevant to doxastic justification depending on the context of inquiry do in fact suggest that propositional justification is infinite. As mentioned in the previous section, Peijnenburg and Atkinson claim that the strength of a reason’s support for a belief will depend on the place of that reason in a chain of inferences. They argue, furthermore, that the order of a particular chain will be determined by the context of justification. While a chain of inferences continues infinitely, only particular reasons are related closely enough to the belief in need of justification so as to have a significant role in determining whether it is justified. Consequently, the farther away one gets in a chain of inferences from the belief to be justified, the less influence a reason has. Peijnenburg and Atkinson call this phenomenon DIG or the “decreasing influence of the ground” (203). DIG states that the grounds or reasons for a belief are less and less significant in a regress of reasons the more removed they are from the belief in need of justification.72

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72 While Peijnenburg and Atkinson call the justification for a belief its grounds, I prefer to describe the beliefs that make up this justification as reasons. Following Klein (2014, p. 113), describing the connection between beliefs as one of grounding seems to imply that there is a causal relationship between the reasons used in the justification of a belief, viz., that one belief causes another. I agree with Klein that it doesn’t seem necessary to describe this relationship as a causal one at this point. Not enough
A subject’s doxastic justification for a belief is thus bounded by the context-relevant strength or significance of the reasons that can be provided for it, while the propositional justification for the belief itself is not dependent upon DIG or any contextual factors. In any justification attempt, at some point it appears that we are satisfied with the reasons given to support a belief, and the need to provide further reasons disappears. One explanation for this is that the amount of justificatory support these reasons provide is too negligible to make a significant difference for the justification of a belief given the context. What matters for establishing sufficient justification, Peijnenburg and Atkinson claim, is knowing when we’ve reached the point of no longer needing to supply reasons in a particular context, that is, the point at which reasons have such little impact on a belief’s justification that we no longer give them any weight.

b. Foundationalist Doxastic Justification

One might argue that DIG also supports the foundationalist account of justification, for it could be supposed that there is a non-inferential belief that stands at the basis of a justificatory chain even if we never reach it in the course of justifying a belief. The question could then be raised about why we should assume a chain of inferences is infinite instead of terminating in a foundational, yet very distant belief. But it would seem presumptuous to claim, having not yet reached a foundational belief in a

\[\text{has been done to determine, conclusively, that there is a causal relationship between reasons in an inferential chain.}\]
chain of inferences, that such a belief must exist. And if the significance of such a ground is too remote to matter for doxastic justification, it doesn’t seem that foundations carry much weight for a subject’s justification anyway.

Arguably, Wittgenstein’s discussion of justification in *On Certainty* provides a basis for this view. Though perhaps not himself an infinitist, Wittgenstein certainly offered a contextualist account of justification in *On Certainty*, and one that can be used to support infinitism. Wittgenstein discusses what he calls “hinge propositions,” i.e., basic propositions that cannot be doubted in the process of justifying a belief. One might think that his assertion that such basic propositions exist would indicate that Wittgenstein held a foundationalist view of the structure of justification, for his hinge propositions could be interpreted as providing the content of non-inferential basic beliefs. However, there is evidence that Wittgenstein does not think of these hinge propositions as entirely undisputable, and therefore foundational, for he also describes certain absurd scenarios in which such hinge propositions or background assumptions could become relevant and in need of justification themselves. In these scenarios, or “unheard of occurrences,” (as Malcolm (1986) calls them), the greater absurdity would lie in not doubting hinge propositions. Because hinge propositions are subject to questioning if

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73 The term “hinge propositions” comes from *On Certainty* 341: “The questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.”

74 Unheard-of occurrences crop up in *On Certainty* to describe hinge propositions put under stress in situations which provide evidence that contradicts or undermines them. The result is either that the evidence counting against a hinge proposition leads one to doubt and abandon it, or the tension between this new evidence and the hinge proposition causes a total loss of coherence to one’s system of belief. Wittgenstein leaves open which outcome is to be expected when one is confronted by an unheard-of occurrence: “What if it seemed to turn out that what until how has seemed immune to doubt was a false assumption? Would I react as I do when a belief has proved to be false? or would it seem to knock from under my feet the ground on which I stand in making any judgments at all?” (492).
the context so dictates, they cannot can provide the sort of certainty that foundationalism requires to be at the basis of knowledge claims.

What Wittgenstein seems to point to is a general principle about the nature of justification: the beliefs that it would be absurd to doubt are what a given context dictates you must assume. Therefore, it is only when absurd possibilities become real concerns based on questions raised in a given context that implicit beliefs and background assumptions in turn become subjectively available for a subject’s doxastic justification for a belief. For the infinitist, different parts of an infinite chain of beliefs will become subjectively available, and significant enough to affect a subject’s doxastic justification depending on what reasons are relevant in a given context. Similarly, context dictates when it is appropriate to stop giving reasons because continuing to do so would be inconsequential or absurd. This point would be reached when the reasons a subject supplies provide only very negligible support for a belief, or as DIG suggests, when the reasons are so far removed in a chain of inferences from the belief to be justified that they do nothing to add to a subject’s doxastic justification. The infinitist can thus defend the combination of finite doxastic justification and infinite propositional justification based the context-relativity of doxastic justification.

Overall, the purpose of this chapter has been to defend the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification as relevant to epistemic justification and essential for the development of a viable infinitist account. While the discussion of contextualism supports this position, the question of why we should accept the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification structured in the way the infinitist claims needs to
be answered, and will be central to the following chapters. The challenges ahead will be to explain the necessity of a contextualist account of justification, why contextualism need not be connected to a finitist account of propositional justification, and why propositional justification, and more specifically, infinitist propositional justification, matters for our understanding of epistemic justification in general.
CHAPTER 5

CONTEXTUALISM AND JUSTIFICATION

After the brief overview of contextualist doxastic justification in the previous chapter, it is now time to investigate contextualism in more detail. Recent proponents of contextualism have promoted the view on the basis of its ability to provide a theoretical framework that resolves the long standing tension in epistemology between ordinary knowledge claims and skepticism. The goal of contextualism is to account for both the pull of skeptical challenges that we feel in some circumstances and our rejection of the skeptic’s claims in others in order to explain how a compromise between these two attitudes towards skepticism is possible. In addition to this, contextualism also offers a plausible account of doxastic justification that clearly distinguishes it from propositional justification. As mentioned in the previous chapter, doxastic justification, or the justification that a subject has for her beliefs, depends on propositional justification, or the reasons that could justify a belief independently of any subject’s awareness of them. Though doxastic justification describes a subject’s reasons for thinking a given belief is true, it doesn’t include all of the reasons that are available to the subject to support her belief, regardless of whether she uses them or not.  

This chapter will suggest a way of linking a contextualist account of justification to the debate about the structure of

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75 I am using the term “available” here to describe the reasons that meet the standards of justification in a particular context as supporting the truth of a proposition for a subject in that context. As will be discussed in what follows, this means that propositional justification is a bit different for the contextualist than for the infinitist discussed in the previous chapter.
justification stemming from the Regress Problem in order to lay the groundwork for a viable infinitist theory of justification in the following chapter.

Though not often considered as such anymore, contextualism has previously been thought of as a non-standard solution to the Regress Problem. In one of the first formulations of contextualism, the view was presented as a theory of justification in rivalry with foundationalism and coherentism rather than as a general account of knowledge as it is commonly viewed today. As a solution to the Regress Problem, contextualism stops the regress of reasons by making the justification for our beliefs dependent upon the standards for justification that hold relative to a particular context.

As described by Annis (1978), contextualism thus conceived is not compatible with foundationalism or coherentism because both presume an invariant standard for justification. For the foundationalist, there are certain beliefs that retain their justification in any context because they are self-justifying. The existence of such beliefs is what provides the foundationalist with a solution to the Regress Problem, in the form of a stopping point in the series of reasons. The coherentist account of justification (if viewed as independent from the foundationalist view) also depends on an invariantist standard for justification. For the coherentist, the justification for the beliefs within a given set depends on the context-independent standard provided by the mutual support that the beliefs in that set provide each other with. Following Annis’ account, contextualism does seem to be at odds with other solutions to the Regress Problem, for according to the contextualist, the regress of reasons for a belief ends not with some non-inferential basic
belief as the foundationalist proposes, but with the satisfying of the justificatory standards of a context.\footnote{A similar view seems to be present in Van Cleve’s (2005) and Engel’s (2014) discussions of positivism, which is the view that the regress-stopping basis for belief is found in fundamental statements posited by a culture, community, or society.}

However, what Annis doesn’t make clear in his discussion of contextualism is what sort of justificatory regress he thinks contextualism can stop. It appears that he is only concerned with the Regress Problem as it relates to a subject’s justification for her beliefs, that is, with doxastic justification, for he claims that the regress comes to an end when the participants in an inquiry about the justification for a belief are satisfied by the reasons provided (216). Annis may be correct that contextualism can resolve this particular regress, but he is wrong to think that this makes contextualism incompatible with the other solutions to the Regress Problem, since his account makes no provision for a regress of propositional justification, and therefore cannot solve the Regress Problem in terms of the structure of all of the reasons for a belief.

Additionally, contextualism itself doesn’t offer a solution to the Regress Problem because it must remain neutral about which of the four standard accounts of justification (foundationalism, coherentism, infinitism, or skepticism) is the correct response. This neutrality is required in order for contextualism to maintain the position of mediating between between skeptics and non-skeptics about justification, and in particular, taking the skeptic’s challenges to justification and knowledge seriously. Because of its commitment to remaining neutral, contextualism can only respond to the dialectical
regress of reasons, not the structural regress. Foundationalists, coherentists, infinitists, and skeptics, on the other hand, take a stand about the structure of justificatory reasons beyond just those reasons actually used by a subject to support her belief, and therefore attempt to resolve the structural regress in addition to the dialectical regress. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, this means that a foundationalist, coherentist, infinitist, or skeptic can be a contextualist about justification in one sense, but must remain an invariantist endorsing one of these four standard responses to the Regress Problem in another in order to fully respond to the Regress Problem.

Section 1 of this chapter will discuss the connection between contextualism and skepticism, as part of the appeal of the former is usually thought to lie in its ability to successfully respond to the latter, as well as a concern raised against contextualism about the potential for relativity in the truth of knowledge ascriptions due to their context dependence. Section 2 responds to another significant problem for the contextualist stemming from the factivity of knowledge in order to develop an account that gives a more precise explanation of why contextual doxastic justification can be made compatible with an invariant account of propositional justification. I then go on to describe two common forms of contextualism and the problems with these forms in Section 3. I return to the connection between doxastic and propositional justification in Section 4, where I argue that contextualism as it has been formulated in this chapter, viz., as a theory about justification, is useful for solving the Regress Problem.

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77 As discussed in Chapter 2, the dialectical regress is a problem that concerns our ability to adequately justify our beliefs to ourselves and others, not a problem that concerns the structure that the reasons for a belief must take beyond their use in a subject’s doxastic justification.
Section 1: Defining Contextualism

a. A Compromise with Skepticism

The popularity of contextualism derives from the seemingly simple solution that it offers to the challenge to knowledge raised by skepticism. The skeptic’s approach to undermining knowledge claims often takes the form of questions about the plausibility of our reasons for believing that the propositions we claim to know are indeed true. For instance, a skeptic might raise some very broad and general undefeatable defeater, such as the fact that I cannot know that I’m not a brain in a vat, to undermine the justification of any belief that entails the absence of such a defeater (which, given the generality of the proposed defeater, would include a large swath of one’s closely held and supposedly secure beliefs).

The contextualist tries to explain potentially devastating skeptical claims of this sort by proposing that there is a context shift between ordinary instances of knowledge ascription and the context in which knowledge claims are undermined by skepticism. While it’s perfectly acceptable to say, for instance, that I know I have hands in an everyday context, this belief can be challenged in a more epistemically rigorous context where skepticism is taken seriously (e.g., I can’t really know that I have hands because I can’t really know that I’m not a brain in a vat). Thus, the contextualist argues, there is a sense in which we can both know that a proposition is true (when it is believed in context o, the context in which we make everyday, ordinary knowledge claims), and yet also
know fail to know that it is true (when it is believed in context h, a higher stakes philosophical context in which skeptical challenges have greater relevance). In this way, contextualism opens up the potential for a compromise between the skeptic who rejects standard knowledge claims and the epistemologist who defends them. Contextualists suggest that the skeptic’s context for knowledge ascription is distinct from the ordinary contexts in which basic knowledge claims (e.g., my claim to know that I have hands) are readily accepted. Skepticism is only a problem for knowledge when applied in the skeptic’s own context, one in which the standards for ascribing knowledge have been raised significantly. Thus, the contextualist can claim that it is true that we know that we have hands in everyday scenarios, yet also claim that the skeptic is correct in her more stringent context to claim that it is not true that we know that we have hands. According to the contextualist, the result is an epistemic compromise, not a contradiction.

Many formulations of contextualism state that ascriptions of knowledge depend on particular features of the context one is in because the truth of knowledge claims often vary with context. This formulation of contextualism is quite common, as the following definitions make clear:

[Contextualism] is a theory according to which the truth conditions of sentences of the form “S knows that p” or “S does not know that p” vary in certain ways according to the context in which the sentences are uttered. (DeRose 1992, p. 914)

‘Contextualism’ … is just an umbrella term for a wide variety of theories. Their common starting point is the thesis that the truth values of knowledge ascriptions (or ascriptions of epistemic justification) are context-dependent. (Brendel and Jäger 2004, p. 1)
The most widely discussed form of EC [epistemic contextualism] holds that the truth conditions for tokens of sentences that include ‘knows’ (and cognate expressions) vary with the attributer’s context. (Conee 2005, p. 51)

Contextualism holds that ascriptions of knowledge are context-sensitive – that the truth-value of sentences of the form ‘S knows P’ depends on contextually varying standards for how strong one’s epistemic position with respect to P must be in order for one to know P…. In essence, contextualism concedes that there is some truth to skepticism, but contains the damage by holding that the skeptical claims are true only relative to a typically strict context. (Cohen 2005, p. 57)

In epistemology, the most widely discussed version of contextualism is the view that knowledge-talk is context sensitive. According to this view, the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions (e.g. “S knows that p”) and knowledge denials (e.g. “S doesn’t know that p”) vary depending on the context in which they are uttered. (Hannon 2017, p. 1)

These definitions contend that the truth of a knowledge claim is relative to the standards of a given context, viz., the context in which a subject or ascriber makes a knowledge claim. But one consequence that follows from such accounts is that they seem to suggest that the contextualist allows that the same knowledge claim is both true and false, e.g., it’s true that “I know I have hands” (in one context) but it is not true that “I know that I have hands” (in another).

b. The Relativity Problem

Contextualism so described appears problematic because of the implications that follow from allowing the context of ascription to determine whether a subject knows a proposition to be true. The worry is that by claiming that knowledge ascriptions about one and the same proposition are acceptable in ordinary contexts and unacceptable in skeptical ones, the contextualist ends up suggesting that the truth of knowledge ascribing
propositions is context dependent as well. As the previously listed definitions show, contextualist accounts often make assertions about the relativity of knowledge claims without addressing the consequences of doing so for the truth of such claims.

The concern here stems from the possibility that the proposition “I know that S knows that p” can be true or false depending on the context in which it is uttered by an ascriber. To avoid the obvious contradiction here, that “I know that S knows p” is true in one context (i.e., a low-stakes ordinary context of ascription), but not in another (i.e., a high-standards skeptical context), the contextualist can suggest that the propositional content of a knowledge ascription must remain bound to the context in which it was uttered. Thus, the proposition stated in the low-stakes context is not identical to the proposition stated in the high-stakes context, and a contradiction is avoided. Such ascriptions should instead be considered as referring to two different propositions, spelled out as follows: In the low-stakes ordinary context, I claim that “I know (according to low standards) that S knows p,” while in a more skeptical context, I claim that it is not the case that “I know (according to high standards) that S knows p.”

Baumann (2008) offers a solution to this and other problems facing the contextualist by making a distinction between these standards as “knowing-high” and “knowing-low.” According to his formulation, knowledge is a “ternary relation between a person, a proposition, and a standard (or whatever else is responsible for the context dependency)” (589). This view of contextualism, which he calls “relationalism,” includes the context-based standards of justification as an explicit part of all knowledge ascriptions, thus making clear in any instance of ascription that knowledge is relative to
By relativizing knowledge claims in this manner, the contextualist can accept that she knows that S knows that p in a low-stakes ordinary context and that she doesn’t know that S knows that p in a skeptical high-stakes context without leading to a contradiction, for what it means for her to have a justified belief in each case has changed. Viewed in this way, contextualism determines the standards for the doxastic justification of a belief, that is, the standards by which one’s reasons for a belief are judged. These standards are what vary with the context of the ascriber, and hence are what make it possible for a subject to claim to know a proposition in an ordinary context but not in a skeptical one.

A skeptic could respond that this way of explaining knowledge ascriptions is an unsatisfactory response to the relativity problem, however, because the relativization of knowledge ascriptions to contexts makes every proposition expressed by an ascriber unique to its context, e.g., “I know-low that S knows that p” is different from “I know-high that S knows that p.” In a non-relativized case, denying a knowledge ascription in a skeptical context successfully meets the demands of the skeptic, namely, that it leads one to admit that they cannot know that S knows that p. Maintaining the same proposition across contexts also ensures that the lack of justification for a knowledge claim based on the skeptic’s standard also affects knowledge assessed using lower standards of justification, for if I do not know that S knows that p when the skeptic questions my...
justification, to avoid a contradiction in my knowledge ascriptions, I must also deny that I know that S knows that p in ordinary, low-stakes contexts. With such a strategy, the skeptic attempts to force a knowledge ascriber into admitting the truth of skepticism about justification across all contexts by suggesting that the standards of the skeptical context override any looser standards of justification.

Given this approach, it is understandable that the skeptic does not agree with the strategy of relativizing knowledge ascriptions to contexts. Doing so undermines the strength of skeptical attacks by limiting their range to only those contexts in which the skeptic directly raises concerns. While the skeptic may view this reduction in the scope of her challenge to knowledge as a misrepresentation of the force of skepticism, contextualism thus formulated does still grant skepticism a degree of serious consideration not typically found in other theories of knowledge and justification, for contextualism aims for a reconciliation between those defending claims that we have knowledge and opposing skeptical challenges instead of arguing against skepticism outright. While this means that skeptical challenges lose their impact in low-stakes contexts, it also grants the skeptic’s point that we lack sufficient justification for our beliefs in high-stakes skeptical contexts, and in doing so makes a significant concession to the skeptic, namely, that the skeptic’s view that we cannot have knowledge when a certain set of standards is used to assess our reasons is in fact correct. In turn, as we’ll see in the following section, to overcome another significant problem facing contextualism, non-skeptics must also make some allowances to skepticism.
Section 2: Factivity and Contexts

a. The Factivity Problem

Questions about the relativity of context-dependent knowledge ascriptions have been further impacted by the discussion of the factivity principle. As formulated by Wright (2005), the factivity principle claims that the statement of a knowledge claim implies the truth of the proposition one claims or is claimed to know. He explains this principle as follows:

Whatever the context, if \( p \) is known in that context, or if an ascription of knowledge is true in that context, then even if only very relaxed standards of justification are required in the context in question, that should entail that \( p \) is true. (242)

In short, “knowledge implies truth” (Baumann, 2008, p. 580). For the version of contextualism discussed above though, a knowledge claim can be true in one context and false in another, from which it follows (on the basis of the factivity principle) that one and the same proposition (viz., the proposition “I have hands”) is true in one context and false in another, when considered from a perspective independent of either context.

Unfortunately, this conclusion undermines one of the main attractions of the contextualist account, namely, its “evenhandedness,” as Wright (2005) describes it, or its ability to mediate between ordinary contexts of knowledge ascription and skeptical contexts of knowledge denial. As mentioned in the previous section, one of the strongest arguments for adopting contextualism is that it makes sense of the pull of skeptical challenges by allowing that both these challenges and our everyday ascriptions of
knowledge are warranted in their respective contexts. The factivity principle undermines the evenhandedness of contextualism by making it impossible for an ascriber of knowledge claims to accept both the skeptical context and the everyday or ordinary context (or the high-stakes context and the low-stakes context) as equally correct for evaluating a given knowledge claim unless she is willing to allow that the truth of certain propositions that serve as the content of knowledge claims is itself relative to context.

Thus, if a subject in an ordinary context makes a knowledge claim that the contextualist ascriber evaluates as true in that context, because of factivity the contextualist ascriber must thereby accept that the propositional content of this knowledge claim (e.g., that “S has hands”) is true. As Wright notes, the consequence of accepting the truth of a knowledge claim made in the ordinary context is that the skeptic’s denial of this knowledge claim cannot be taken seriously without leading to a contradiction in the truth of the proposition that the subject in the ordinary context claims to know and the proposition that the skeptic in the skeptical context claims cannot be known. For, given that knowledge implies truth:

Just in virtue of allowing that the [ordinary] and sceptical epistemic attitudes to \( p \) are each correct in their respective contexts, the theorist [contextualist] is committed to congratulating common sense on getting things right and to regarding skepticism as involving blindness to truth. (2005, p. 244)

The result is that the contextualist response to skepticism falls flat. Given factivity, the context of ordinary knowing and the context of skepticism about knowledge cannot be treated as equally legitimate epistemic positions by the contextualist. Instead, by accepting the legitimacy of a knowledge claim in an ordinary context, the contextualist
thereby endorses the truth of the proposition which the subject claims to know in that context, which in turn influences the contextualist’s judgment of that proposition in any other context. Hence, the skeptic’s challenges to having knowledge of the truth of this proposition are not given serious consideration.

Though it doesn’t seem feasible that the contextualist could give up the factivity principle given its importance to our traditional understanding of knowledge, perhaps she could defend her view by claiming that the propositions that make up belief contents in different contexts are themselves distinct from each other because, for instance, they contain hidden indexicals. For instance, believing “I know I have hands (at time $t_1$ in situation a)” would then be compatible with believing “I do not know I have hands (at time $t_2$ in situation b).” But this solution does nothing to help restore the original goal of contextualism, that of making ordinary knowledge claims compatible with skepticism. If the propositional content of a belief is itself different in the two contexts, the skeptic’s challenge to ordinary knowledge claims hasn’t actually been addressed, since the skeptic’s objection is to the claims to know those propositions that are believed to be justified according to low standards in ordinary contexts. The suggestion that the propositions that make up the content of our knowledge claims themselves vary with context is therefore not an adequate response to the skeptic’s objection, for it is not a response that addresses the challenge to knowledge the skeptic is proposing.
**b. Believing Without Knowing**

Alternatively, the contextualist can avoid the factivity problem by allowing that in skeptical contexts she cannot know that S knows that p, and therefore, given factivity, cannot *know* that p is true, even though she believes it is. In low stakes contexts, the contextualist knowledge ascriber does know that S knows that p, and therefore that p is true, so to remain consistent, she must maintain that p is true in all contexts, even if she cannot always claim to have adequate justification for the truth of p. Since the skeptic attacks the possibility of having justification for a knowledge claim about p, not the possibility of the truth of p itself, the contextualist doesn’t undermine the evenhandedness of her position towards skepticism, for she grants the skeptic’s point that she cannot know that p is true in a context where the skeptic’s standards are in use.

Admittedly, this solution requires that the contextualist violate the norm of assertion that states one shouldn’t assert what one doesn’t know. Originally formulated by Williamson (2000) as the “knowledge rule,” the norm states that “one must assert p only if one knows p” (243). In other words, one should only be warranted in asserting the truth of a proposition that one knows to be true. However, because of factivity, the contextualist in a skeptical context is forced to assert a proposition that, according to the high standards of the context, she cannot know to be true. Her assertion in the skeptic’s context is, in other words, Moore-paradoxical.79

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79 An assertion is Moore-paradoxical when it states that the asserter claims something is true, but that they don’t know it is true, e.g., “It’s raining but I don’t know it’s raining.” In other words, if one violates such a norm they “are committed to the assertion ‘Everyday propositions are true and I don’t know it,’” (Williamson 2001, p. 26).
Perhaps the violation of this norm is not an issue for the contextualist, for she could deny that the norm of assertion should be put in terms of knowledge, instead opting for a principle of proper assertion in terms of belief or justification, as has also been promoted in the literature.\(^8\) Adopting a norm of assertion that replaces the requirement of knowing with believing would allow a contextualist to avoid the violation of the norm of assertion in a skeptical context. Using such an alternative, the contextualist can still assert p while also admitting that she doesn’t know that p without violating the norm because she still believes p, even though her reasons for doing so (i.e., the justification she has for believing p is true in low stakes contexts) do not meet the standards of the skeptical context she finds herself in.

There is also a way for the contextualist to respond to the concern about factivity without violating the original norm of assertion stated in terms of knowledge assertion. The contextualist’s assertion that p in skeptical contexts in which she fails to meet the standards of justification (and hence cannot know that p) is based on her awareness of the justification she has for p in other lower-stakes contexts. So, the violation of the norm here only goes as far as applying to her ability to “know-high” that p, not her ability to “know-low” that p. While it may be meaningless to assert p based on low standards in a context using the skeptic’s standards for justification, it isn’t inconsistent with her endorsement of p in non-skeptical contexts. Therefore, the contextualist can continue to maintain evenhandedness despite the factivity problem by accepting the skeptic’s high standards as undermining the justification for her beliefs, while also granting that she

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\(^8\) Bach (2008) discusses redefining Williamson’s norm of assertion in terms of belief, so that it would read “one must assert \(p\) only if one believes \(p\).”
does know that \( p \) according to lower standards since she still believes that she knows that \( p \) in lower stakes contexts. This, in turn, maintains a compromise. While the skeptic must accept that the challenge skepticism raises to knowledge cannot apply in all contexts, the contextualist non-skeptic must also accept that there are contexts in which knowledge fails because adequate justification is impossible.

Section 3: Two Kinds of Contextualism

\textit{a. Conversational and Issue Contextualism}

Having described contextualism as a theory about the context-sensitivity of the standards for doxastic justification, we can now move on to a further distinction that applies to contextualism that represents different ways of defining contexts and shifts in context. The two forms of contextualism that develop from this distinction have been called conversational contextualism and issue contextualism.\(^{81}\) According to the conversational contextualist, the context that determines the standards for evaluating the justification of a belief is established by a dialogue about the justification for that belief that is being carried out between the believer and an interlocutor. The doxastic justification for having a belief is deemed adequate by the members of a conversation when it is agreed that sufficient reasons have been given to satisfy any questions about the justification of that belief during the course of the conversation. Conversational contextualism treats the reasons for belief that a speaker is and is not aware of in a given context.

\(^{81}\) See Brendel and Jäger (2004) and Williams (2004).
context as relevant for determining what standard of justification applies in that context, so this form of contextualism takes the skeptic’s challenge to a knowledge claim as inducing a shift of contexts within the conversation. In this case, skepticism becomes relevant once a skeptical interlocutor raises an objection to the justification provided by a subject for a belief.

In contrast, issue contextualism bases the determination of a context on the background setting and concerns that guide inquiry in a given situation. Unlike conversational contextualism, the context of justification is fixed not by a dialogue or inquiry about the reasons for a belief, but rather by the pragmatically relevant information that guides a subject’s actions. As described by Brendel and Jäger (2004), issue contextualism holds that “the relevance of error-possibilities – and thus the raising of the ‘level of scrutiny’ – depends on [a subject’s] background information and her practical interests in a specific issue-context” (160). For instance, a subject might spend more time and effort trying to ensure that she has a true belief about the departure time of her upcoming flight than she would, say, about the first performance date of Beethoven’s ninth symphony (unless, perhaps, she was a serious musicologist). Given the situation that the subject currently finds herself in, the importance of having knowledge of the former outweighs the importance of having knowledge of the latter, which is what makes the standard of justification for the former higher than it is for the latter. While, for the conversational contextualist, it is sufficient for someone to merely mention a new possibility or ask a question about the viability of the reasons for a belief in order to alter the context, for an issue contextualist such actions wouldn’t typically have this strong of
an effect unless they suggest additional reasons why the justification a subject has in a given context might be insufficient, in turn affecting the background assumptions made in that particular context and that were guiding a subject’s actions. Accordingly, the standards of justification for issue contextualism are not as easily alterable as they are for conversational contextualism, for only a change strong enough to affect assumptions relevant to the subject’s current task or interests would cause a shift in context.

On this account, skeptical objections to knowledge claims would only succeed if the considerations they introduce were already relevant to the pragmatic concerns of the subject in the present context. Thus, a pilot in the course of guiding a jet in for landing wouldn’t find her skeptical co-pilot’s questions as to whether she knows that she really has hands relevant or practically significant to her current task to the degree that they would pose a challenge to her claim to know (in this context) that her hands are on the controls guiding the airplane to the ground. Perhaps later, upon reflection, the pilot might consider the possibility that she doesn’t know that she has hands, but only once the immediate project of guiding the plane has been completed, that is, only when holding that belief was no longer necessary for her to execute the task that she was presently engaged in.footnote{82}

footnote{82} If this scenario were to be judged on the basis of the conversational contextualist account, then while the skeptical co-pilot’s concern would need to be taken seriously, so that the pilot would have to admit that she didn’t know she had hands, it is hard to see how this concession would lead the pilot to change her actions. She may admit that while she cannot know that she has hands, that needn’t prevent her from using those hands to land the plane. Alternatively, given the development of skeptical questioning over the course of their dialogue, a skeptical challenge by the co-pilot may have been at least somewhat germane to the conversation already in progress, perhaps promoted by the pilot’s own thoughts on the matter, or by some other relevant issue, like the confidence the pilot has in her flying skills.
b. Other Objections

While not framed as addressing either of these two forms of the view specifically, two additional objections to contextualism focus on the shortcomings of these forms by questioning contextualism’s ability to adequately respond to skepticism. On the one hand, an objection has been raised that contextualism concedes too much to the skeptic by allowing her to induce a shift in justificatory context merely by raising the possibility that a subject is mistaken in the justification of her beliefs. On the other hand, contextualism has also been charged with failing to take skepticism seriously by suggesting that skepticism only applies to beliefs in stricter contexts where epistemological concerns are explicitly under consideration when the skeptic’s objection is commonly taken to be directed at knowledge claims made in ordinary contexts of knowing. Therefore, by claiming that a context shift occurs when the skeptic questions our knowledge claims in ordinary contexts, and that skeptical questions hence only need be taken seriously in the philosophical contexts in which their challenges shift the discussion, contextualism fails to satisfactorily address the skeptic’s concerns. Contextualism thus appears to be attacked from two directions: it either grants skepticism too much leverage or it fails to adequately engage with the skeptic’s objections. In other words, on the one hand contextualism appears to concede too much to skepticism by taking the skeptic’s objections too

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83 See Hannon (2017), who describes the first account as being too “skeptic-friendly” since it inevitably leads to a shift to higher contexts (6). He also mentions another consequence of this shift, namely, that ignorance is ironically a preferable state epistemically to that of having knowledge, for any attempt at reflective knowing or consideration of one’s reasons would likely be undermined by skeptical possibilities, and therefore remove any confidence in one’s knowledge claims.
seriously in any context, while, on the other, also failing to take its challenges to knowledge claims seriously enough in contexts where they should matter.

The first objection, that contextualism is too lenient, attacks the conversational form by questioning the power given to the skeptical interlocutor in a conversation to raise the standards of justification at any point. The basic criticism of this form of contextualism is that it seems to grant the skeptic too much power in any given context by giving her the capacity to always raise the standards for justification at any time by mentioning salient error possibilities, regardless of how plausible or relevant skepticism seems in that conversation. This view of context shifts also doesn’t seem to reflect the way that we typically make sense of knowledge claims, for there are many ordinary contexts in which skeptical challenges simply do not have any sway because of their irrelevance to the subject’s reasons for believing what she does, as illustrated in the previous example of the pilot landing the plane.

As Brendel (2005) notes, since the conversational contextualist views context as changing with the raising of skeptical challenges or error possibilities, skepticism will always have the upper hand in any scenario. Given the power that skeptical challenges have according to this view, the result for all contexts would thus be skepticism about knowledge. Furthermore, the deference to skepticism in the conversational view leads to a paradox for contextualism. Skepticism appears to also have the power to put the justification for contextualism itself into question, thus destroying the balance contextualists seek between accepting the justification presented for ordinary knowledge claims and accepting the skeptical challenges to them. As Brendel points out, if the
examination of beliefs in high stakes skeptical contexts results in a denial that one has any knowledge in these stricter circumstances, this means that in such contexts the contextualist cannot herself know that contextualism is correct. Any such claim would prove unjustified in a higher stakes context where the contextualist fails to have adequate justification based on the skeptic’s standards. Consequently, the only way for the contextualist to justify her own theory is to assume the correctness of common sense ordinary standards over skeptical ones, even in high stakes contexts, thereby undermining the neutrality between ordinary knowledge and skepticism that contextualism claims to provide.

The second objection holds that contextualism concedes too little to the skeptic by denying that the skeptic’s objections to knowledge claims can apply to ordinary contexts at all. This objection is thus directed at issue contextualism instead of conversational contextualism since the concern it raises pertains to the inapplicability of skeptical objections to ordinary pragmatic contexts. The contextualist in this case preserves ordinary standards for justification by suggesting that certain questions are irrelevant in contexts focused on specific goals or problems, and thus that skepticism in such contexts is consequently unwarranted and has no effect on the justification of knowledge claims. In order for the skeptic’s questions about the justification for a belief to be taken seriously, the issue or topic guiding one’s activity must directly relate to epistemological questions, thereby introducing a change in context that preserves the original context of belief from skeptical questions.
As Wright (2005) points out though, this sort of context shift misses the point of the skeptic’s attack. The skeptic’s scope of questioning precludes contextualism because it raises concerns about issue-based contexts themselves, not about knowledge claims only considered in higher-stakes philosophical contexts. The stronger skeptical view, the one that attacks ordinary knowledge claims and that we often take to pose the greatest challenge to a theory of knowledge, directs its objections to knowledge claims made not in special philosophical contexts that require higher standards, but those made in what we consider the most straightforward, common, and uncontroversial contexts. Thus, as Wright notes, in promoting the idea of there being different standards of justification based on different pragmatically determined contexts as a way to appease the skeptic, the contextualist fails to take seriously the skeptic’s overarching project, which is to question the possibility of knowledge itself in any context.

Thus, by suggesting that knowledge claims are to be judged in a context-relative manner, the contextualist has already assumed that there are standards for knowledge that remain independent of skeptical questioning, namely those that are applied in ordinary low-stakes contexts. Such contexts are protected from the concerns that skepticism raises by these lower standards. To allow such contexts immunity to skeptical challenges,

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84 This is, after all, the kind of context to which skeptical possibilities like being a brain in a vat or under the spell of an evil demon are supposed to apply. See Kornblith’s (2000) distinction between “full-blooded skepticism,” the skeptical view that a subject can have no justification for her empirical beliefs (25) and “high-standards skepticism,” the view that there might be sufficient justification for our beliefs, but we’re unable to access it (26). According to this objection, the contextualist account doesn’t treat skepticism fairly because it only manages to supply a compromise for the high-standards skeptic, not the full-blooded skeptic. But, arguably, the full-blooded skeptic is the one who poses a serious challenge to knowledge. The high-standards skeptic has already conceded that justification is possible if the correct conditions are in place, and therefore presents a version of skepticism that is too weak to offer a serious challenge to the possibility of knowledge.
however, is to sell short the impact that skepticism attempts to have on our knowledge claims. In addition to making the most common contexts for knowledge immune to skeptical attack, issue contextualism also implies that the contextualist account of knowledge is itself immune to skepticism, for it is itself not subject to doubts when employed in the assessment of knowledge claims in any context. To accept the contextualist account of justification, i.e., to accept that beliefs can be justified in certain contexts but not in others, is to already deny that full-blown skepticism is plausible by denying that it can extend to contextualism itself.

Fortunately, a response to these concerns has already been given. Due to the factivity principle, the contextualist must concede to the skeptic that she cannot know in a skeptical context any of the things she believes to be true in lower-stakes contexts, including the belief that contextualism is true. In this sense, the contextualist does seem capable of granting the full-blooded skeptic’s point, while also not allowing it to affect justification in contexts with lower standards. Additionally, as described in the previous sections, in order for contextualism to uphold its pledge of evenhandedness, the contextualist must insist that the skeptic make some concessions to anti-skeptical views. Granting the skeptic’s challenge in all contexts would simply amount to endorsing the skeptic’s view of knowledge and justification, and hence would undermine contextualism’s independence as a theory of justification distinct from skepticism.

If these problems can be resolved, the task then becomes to determine which of the two forms ought to be adopted. As discussed previously, the factivity principle shows that the truth of a proposition won’t change when skeptical scenarios are raised, but the
amount of evidence required to know that a proposition is true will. So, if practical considerations allow for it, it is reasonable to have looser requirements for evidence and thus lower-stakes contexts for justification. In such contexts the skeptic’s point doesn’t change anything, practically speaking, for a subject about the matter at hand, even if the skeptic is correct, so it’s generally safe for the subject to ignore such doubts (unless the subject is already in a context where she is putting epistemological questions under consideration).

Thus, one approach that the contextualist can employ to determine the standards of justification when a skeptic raises questions about knowledge in a context is to consider what bearing these skeptical challenges have on the justification of the belief in question, based on the function of that belief in a larger set of beliefs relevant to the task a subject is currently engaged in. If the skeptic’s questions don’t interfere with the actions that the subject plans to take on the basis of the belief in question, those questions can be discarded as irrelevant. However, when a high degree of probability about the truth of a belief is of particular importance, and therefore more robust reasons are needed, the questions that the skeptic raises do become more salient.

It appears, then, that what should matter for determining contexts and shifts in context is that the questions about a belief raised in the course of a dialogue or an inquiry actually threaten that belief in a way that would have some impact on the subject’s practical interests or present tasks, so as to make skeptical attacks and high stakes contexts undeniably important to the justification of beliefs. Conversational queries can have the effect of raising the standards of justification or changing the context, but only
when they have some practical significance in that context, that is, only if they are related
to the issue or task at hand.\textsuperscript{85} Instead of conceiving of conversational contextualism and
issue contextualism as two distinct ways of describing contexts of justification, it makes
more sense to think of conversational contextualism as describing another factor that
might affect the background conditions of a subject’s context or that could influence the
subject’s current task. What best describes context shifts is a combination of
conversational and issue contextualism, a form of contextualism that adopts the idea of
changes in a dialogue as one of many different factors that define the issue or project that
guides a subject’s inquiry, and therefore, as one of potentially many influences affecting
the context.

Section 4: Contextualism and the Regress Problem

\textit{a. Contextual Propositional Justification}

The forgoing discussion of contextualism as a theory of justification has focused
on the context sensitivity of doxastic justification and responded to some of the problems
facing contextualism in order to make it more palatable as a theory of justification
relevant to the Regress Problem. In light of our discussion, it seems that Annis was
wrong to think that contextualism can provide an alternative to the four solutions to the
Regress Problem already discussed. While contextualism does offer a viable account of

\textsuperscript{85} An additional consequence of this conception of contextualism is that if questioning
contextualism is itself relevant to the subject’s task, then contextualism too is subject to skepticism.
doxastic justification, as I will argue in the following chapter, it cannot do the same for propositional justification and so cannot offer a complete solution to the Regress Problem. It will be necessary, therefore, to return to the four possible solutions to the Regress Problem discussed previously in order to develop an account of propositional justification that can both respond to the Regress Problem as well as be made compatible with a contextualist account of doxastic justification.

In the previous chapter I described the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification as one which distinguishes the possible justification of a belief, or the reasons that could be used by a subject to support her belief, from the justification that a subject actually has for a belief, or the reasons that the subject utilizes to support her claim that her belief is true. Accordingly, the doxastic justification for a belief will depend on her context: Subject s in context o does know that p (given the justification demanded by that context), but subject r in context h does not know that p (given the higher standards of justification required by that context). As discussed previously, this is different from claiming that p is true for subject s in context o and false for subject r in context h, however, because it is not that the proposition’s truth has changed, but that the amount of justification required to know that proposition’s truth has. Subject r simply fails to know p because of the insufficiency of her reasons given the situation she is in, even though p is true.

For the contextualist, propositional justification consists of all of the possible reasons that could be used in establishing doxastic justification for a subject’s belief in a given context, not simply all of the reasons that could possibly justify her belief in any
context, as the infinitist account of propositional justification suggests. The segment of a subject’s propositional justification that is necessary for her doxastic justification in a particular context will be established by either the subject or the ascriber in a context once they recognize what reasons are required for sufficient justification in that context. This means that doxastic justification will be subject to context-based changes due to changes in the standards for sufficient justification. Consequently, when a subject claims to know that \( p \), and therefore that \( p \) is true, what she is claiming is that she has adequate doxastic justification for her belief that \( p \) is true, but only in that particular context.

Since contextualism doesn’t offer an account of the structure of reasons supporting a given knowledge claim in a subject-independent way, but just an account of the standards for accepting a particular set of reasons for that claim, it cannot suitably respond to the Regress Problem on its own. It does not solve the problem of formulating the structure of invariantist propositional justification, which, as will be argued later on, is the central concern for the debate surrounding the Regress Problem. The following chapter provides an account of invariantist propositional justification that can supplement the contextualist view of doxastic justification presented here and which modifies the common understanding of propositional justification in a way that is necessary for a viable contextualist-invariantist hybrid account.

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86 Determining the propositional justification of indexical statements like “Today is cloudy” or “I am in Chicago” requires other relevant information that would allow for the determination of the truth value of the propositions they represent, e.g., “Today [July 15th 2017] it is cloudy [at GPS coordinates xy at 3 pm EST]” and “I [CF] am in Chicago [on July 15th 2017].” Such an expansion would be required to determine the truth value of any vague or context-specific proposition, and would in turn provide sufficient information for determining the propositional justification of that proposition.
b. The Plausibility of Externalist Contextualism

One further consequence of adopting a partially contextualist account of justification is that it seems to require that one reject externalism. While the contextualist view described above is strictly internalist, (as it describes the doxastic justification that a subject has for a belief and assumes that doxastic justification is necessary for knowledge), there have also been attempts to formulate an externalist variety of contextualism. For example, Lewis’ (1996) externalist contextualism attempts an answer to the Regress Problem by doing away with doxastic justification altogether. Lewis considers and rejects the kind of internalist contextualism described here, stating that he doesn’t think that “the mark of knowledge is justification.” He denies that “ascriptions of knowledge are context-dependent because standards for adequate justification are context-dependent” on the grounds that assessing standards of justification is not necessary for making knowledge claims (1996, pp. 550-551).

Given the internalist assumptions that have been made throughout this discussion, one response to Lewis’ brand of contextualism would be to return to the distinction between dialectical and structural forms of the Regress Problem. As Audi (1993) claims, it seems that there are two ways of understanding the regress of reasons. It might either be a regress consisting of the reasons that a subject has for her belief (the dialectical form) or a regress of the structure of the relationship between reasons themselves (the structural form). While externalism excludes the dialectical regress since it does not require that a subject be aware of the justification for her belief in order to have knowledge, as argued in Chapter 2, it seems that a complete account of the Regress
Problem, one that addresses the problem as it has been considered historically, must address the regress in both its dialectical and structural forms. The dialectical Regress Problem seems to be taken into account by doxastic justification since it explains the nature of justification as it applies to a subject’s awareness of her beliefs, while the structural regress problem is addressed by an account of propositional justification since it accounts for the structure of justificatory reasons themselves. Thus, a complete response to the Regress Problem cannot be strictly externalist, for it will need to addresses both regresses and thus include an account of both doxastic and propositional justification. However, it also follows that a complete response to the Regress Problem cannot be provided by contextualism either, since contextualism only provides a response to the dialectical regress. Hence, a contextualist-invariantist hybrid account is necessary for responding to both forms of the Regress Problem.

I haven’t discussed infinitism in this chapter because I wanted to present the contextualist account, and the significance of the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification for it, independently of any particular solution to the structural Regress Problem. The following chapter will, however, include an assessment of the viability of the three solutions to the Regress Problem discussed previously (viz., foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism) as accounts of invariantist propositional justification to be coupled with contextualist doxastic justification. Additionally, my argument for an infinitist solution to the Regress Problem, contextualist infinitism, will be presented and compared to the other solutions to the structural Regress Problem.
CHAPTER 6
CONTEXTUALIST INFINITISM

This final chapter offers a new account of infinitist justification, contextualist infinitism, which builds upon the discussion of contextualism from Chapter 5 in order to suggest a novel version of infinitism capable of yielding a non-skeptical solution to the Regress Problem. Contextualist infinitism develops the defense of infinitism in Chapter 4 and combines it with the account of contextualism in Chapter 5 by describing a theory of justification that makes plausible the combination of contextualist doxastic justification and infinitist propositional justification. While others have offered accounts of infinitism that embrace contextualism, the account I develop in this chapter combines the two in a way that I believe makes for a more robust account of infinitism that is ultimately stronger than other recent versions. While the view presented here may not dissuade staunch defenders of foundationalism or coherentism, I believe that it does at least prove that infinitism should be considered as a serious alternative to other accounts of the structure of justification.

I begin Section 1 with the theory of contextualist infinitism that I think best explains the nature of justification and contrast it with the standard invariantist infinitist account. In Section 2, I then discuss the most prominent version of infinitism in the current literature from Peter Klein and consider the differences between that view and the one that I present here. I conclude the discussion in Section 3 by addressing several concerns that could be raised about the view proposed in this chapter as it relates to the
conception of infinitism discussed previously before summing up the overarching argument of the dissertation.

Section 1: An Overview of Contextualist Infinitism

Given the concerns with contextualism raised in the previous chapter, a purely contextualist account of justification does not seem to be a sufficient response to both the dialectical and structural forms of the Regress Problem. However, a hybrid theory, a contextualist-invariantist account of justification, can provide a traditional non-skeptical response to the Regress Problem while also retaining elements of contextualism. In particular, the contextualist response to skepticism is useful for defending a traditional invariantist account of the structure of justification because contextualism engages with skeptical concerns about justification more directly than the three traditional non-skeptical solutions to the Regress Problem.\textsuperscript{87} Given the defense of infinitism in previous chapters, I believe that the strongest hybrid contextualist-invariantist account of justification will come from adopting, roughly, an infinitist view of the structure of propositional justification combined with a contextualist account of the standards that determine doxastic justification. In this section I will present an overview of contextualist infinitism, compare it to foundationalist and coherentist contextualist accounts, and discuss similarities between contextualist infinitism and externalism in order to show that the contextualist infinitism I offer here is viable as a theory of justification.

\textsuperscript{87} As discussed in Chapter 5, contextualism’s popularity is due in part to its focus on establishing a degree of compatibility with skepticism.
a. Doxastic and Propositional Justification

This contextualist-infinitist view requires amending the account of doxastic and propositional justification discussed previously by making a distinction between two forms of propositional justification. Essentially, this distinction introduces a third level of justification that makes a finitist-contextualist account of doxastic justification compatible with an infinitist account of propositional justification.

In the discussion of infinitism in Chapter 4, the distinction between doxastic justification and propositional justification was described as one that separated the set of reasons that a subject used to support her belief, or her doxastic justification for that belief, from an infinite set of reasons that could have been used to support her belief, or the propositional justification for that belief. This differs from the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification for contextualism discussed in the previous chapter. In that account, propositional justification was defined as the finite set of the reasons that could possibly be used to support a belief given the standards of justification in a particular context. Thus, though doxastic justification is described in a similar fashion in both accounts, there are two different forms of propositional justification at play in the infinitist and contextualist accounts of justification. The contextualist definition of propositional justification is ill-suited for infinitism because it still presents a finite, context-relative vision of the structure of justification, while the standard infinitist account of propositional justification does not apply to the contextualist account since it defends a context-independent standard of justification.
Making contextualism and infinitism compatible, therefore, will require that we reconcile the two views of propositional justification they defend. One way of explaining how the contextualist and infinitist accounts of propositional justification can be made compatible is to consider them as each providing a description of a different tier of propositional justification, resulting in a view of justification comprised of the shared contextualist account of doxastic justification and both forms of propositional justification. We can begin by clearly defining the two propositional forms. The infinitist account of propositional justification refers to the set of all of the possible reasons that could ever be used in any context to justify a belief, so we can call this form of propositional justification \textit{unrestricted} since it does not describe justification bound by the parameters set by a particular finite context.

In contrast, the form of propositional justification adopted by contextualist accounts may be called \textit{restricted} inasmuch as it describes a set of reasons that could potentially be used to justify a belief relative to a particular context regardless of whether a subject is in a position to appeal to all of the reasons in that set.\footnote{Thus, the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification in the previous chapter’s discussion of contextualism refers to two forms of restricted justification since they describe sets of reasons that are sufficient for the justification of a belief in accordance with the standards of a given context. Doxastic justification by all accounts will be a form of restricted justification.} Unrestricted propositional justification expands upon the set of reasons described by the contextualist account of propositional justification by including all of the reasons that would actually confer justification on a belief relative to any context in which reasons for that belief can be given, (or, in other words, independently of any particular context). Described in contextualist terms, unrestricted propositional justification is what would be required for
the justification of a belief in the broadest possible context that had the strictest possible standards. For the infinitist, this unrestricted context includes an infinite set of reasons. When combined in the contextualist-infinitist view, all three forms of justification can be understood as relating to each other in the following way: Doxastic and restricted propositional justification describe finite sets of reasons required to justify a subject’s belief in a context, while unrestricted propositional justification describes the complete, invariant set of infinite reasons that justify the belief across all particular contexts. A subject’s doxastic justification is a subset of the restricted propositional justification available in her context, which in turn is a subset of the complete set of reasons that could justify the belief for any subject and in any context.

This contextualist-infinitist explanation of justification can be further clarified by the distinction between the subjectively and objectively available reasons for a belief mentioned in Chapter 4. The subjective and objective availability of reasons can be thought of as in alignment with the distinction between restricted and unrestricted propositional justification. According to contextualist infinitism, for any context a subject finds herself in, objectively available reasons for a belief are those that could justify it

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89 Though unrestricted propositional justification can be thought of as representing the standards of the widest possible context of justification, or the one context that includes all other contexts, to distinguish it from finite contexts that guide the formation of a subject’s justification and what we tend to mean when we talk about contextualist standards of justification, I will at times continue describing unrestricted propositional justification as context-independent throughout this chapter.

90 The distinction between subjective and objective availability I’m making use of here is drawn from Klein (1999), who describes these two forms of availability in the following way: “There might be a good reason, r, that is objectively available for use by any person, but unless it is properly hooked up with S’s own beliefs, r will not be subjectively available to S” (300). As will be discussed in Section 2, though I initially follow Klein’s account of subjective and objective availability in my version of infinitism, given the differences in Klein’s distinction between doxastic and propositional justification and my own, the ways we understand subjective and objective availability end up being quite different.
regardless of context and thus are also those reasons that constitute the belief’s unrestricted propositional justification. The subjectively available reasons for the belief include all of the reasons that could be used in a given context for a subject’s doxastic justification for a belief, and thus describe the reasons that make up the restricted propositional justification for a subject in a given context.

The distinction in the availability of reasons thus refers to whether they are part of the set of reasons that depend on a subject’s context and whether a subject could potentially utilize them as support for her belief. In addition to these reasons, the reasons that are irrelevant to the justification of a belief in a particular context but that are still justification-conferring reasons for that belief in another are objectively available in the sense that in the broadest or most inclusive context, (i.e., as part of the infinite chain of supporting reasons for a belief across all contexts), they could be utilized as justification for that belief. In contrast, subjectively available reasons consist of only a subset of those reasons which are objectively available, as they are only those reasons that a subject could use to justify her belief based on the standards of justification in her context.

Given the conflicting, and one might even say opposing, views of the nature and structure of justification defended by contextualism and infinitism, there is no simple way of combining these accounts using the standard distinction between the doxastic and propositional forms of justification utilized frequently in the literature.\(^{91}\) Contextualist Klein does attempt to make sense of a contextualist infinitist structure of justification using the standard distinction between propositional and doxastic justification but, as will be discussed later in this chapter, fails to develop a workable infinitist theory because of the problems that stem from trying to combine these forms of justification without accounting for the differences between contextualist and infinitist definitions of propositional justification.

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infinitism requires that we make use of a three part conception of justification because the view incorporates both the structure of justification required by contextualism and the invariantist infinitist.

In addition to the ways just discussed there is also a way of bringing together these forms of justification that considers the impact of skepticism. As presented by the contextualist, the skeptic’s query asks whether sufficient justification for our beliefs is ever possible, and thus imagines the skeptic’s standard of justification as requiring the strictest possible context in which all the possible reasons that could be used to justify a belief are in fact necessary for its justification. The skeptical context is the broadest possible context of justification for a belief, or the context that would require that all of the objectively available reasons for a belief actually be accounted for in the justification of that belief, making it the context where subjective and objective availability coincide.

For the contextualist infinitist, the reasons comprising doxastic justification and restricted propositional justification in the most skeptical context are coextensive with the reasons that make up unrestricted propositional justification. The skeptic’s demand that sufficient justification include all the possible reasons that could justify a belief is met by the infinitist’s claim that there is such a set of reasons, an infinite set, that consists of all the possible reasons that could justify a belief regardless of context. The infinitist replies to the skeptic’s claim that contextualism’s loose standards are insufficient by suggesting

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92 Thus, to be compatible with the contextualist approach to justification, any of the non-skeptical invariant theories (foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism) that comprise the traditional solutions to the Regress Problem consider unrestricted propositional justification as constituting the widest, most inclusive context of belief, or the one with the highest standards of justification and requires all of the reasons that could support a belief to in fact be used to justify it.
that justification is possible in skeptical contexts by citing the invariant basis of the contextualist’s standards, which would be an infinite chain of supporting reasons.

In sum, let the three tiers of justification utilized in contextualist infinitism be explained by the following definitions:

1. Belief in any true proposition $P$ is doxastically justified iff for any $P$, $P$ is the propositional content of belief $B$, a subject $S$ believes that $P$, and $S$’s justification for $B$ meets the standards of justification set by $S$’s context.

2. Belief in any true proposition $P$ is propositionally justified in the restricted sense iff for any $P$, $P$ is the propositional content of belief $B$ and $B$ meets the standards of justification set by $S$’s context.

3. Belief in any true proposition $P$ is propositionally justified in the unrestricted sense iff for any $P$, $P$ is the propositional content of belief $B$ and there exists an infinite series of context-independent and subject-independent non-repeating reasons sufficient for the justification of $B$.

This account allows for a great deal of flexibility in the standards for the doxastic justification of our beliefs, for it accommodates looser standards of justification in low-stakes ordinary contexts of believing and stricter standards of justification in philosophical or skeptical contexts. It also avoids a commitment to a relativistic account of truth that has been a common source of trouble for contextualist accounts of knowledge by suggesting that the reasons that justify our beliefs in the unrestricted propositional sense of justification are part of a context-independent infinite chain of reasons. For the contextualist-infinitist doxastic justification is composed of context-specific subjectively available reasons, but justified beliefs in any context are also supported by an infinite chain of objectively available reasons established independently.
of a subject’s awareness or access to them which serve as the final context-neutral judgement for the justification of a particular belief.\footnote{There being an endless set of reasons justifying a belief does not imply that the belief doesn’t have a fixed truth value, but just that the reasons that make it justified, and therefore confirm the truth of its propositional content, will vary with each subject as dictated by their context. The features of the subject’s context and the background beliefs she holds will influence what reasons will be required to doxastically justify her belief.}

\textit{b. Other Forms of Contextualist Invariantism}

Let’s now look at how contextualist infinitism differs from other contextualist-invariantist hybrid views, and whether these other responses to the Regress Problem require a similar conception of three different tiers of justification. Though it’s not the case for infinitism, for foundationalism and coherentism unrestricted propositional justification consists of a finite set, either as a chain of reasons or a finite, albeit circular, network, respectively. According to both accounts, there is an end point to unrestricted propositional justification that is meant to undermine the skeptic’s contention that it is impossible to meet the standards of adequate justification. Interestingly, while the differences between foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism will be observable at the level of unrestricted propositional justification, they are not noticeable at the levels of doxastic and restricted propositional justification. It could be that sufficient justification in a context has any number of possible forms, while the structure of unrestricted propositional justification could take an entirely a different form than that which a subject uses for her doxastic justification. Doxastic justification, therefore, does not need to mirror the structure of unrestricted propositional justification. The two are not necessarily
linked. Since the structure of the doxastic and restricted propositional justification for a belief is determined by a subject’s context, the significant difference in structure between foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism will appear only at the level of unrestricted propositional justification.

I previously described contextualist doxastic justification as consisting of the reasons that a subject has to justify her belief, determined by the standards of justification for the context of her knowledge claim. It follows from this account that doxastic justification needn’t be solely foundationalist or coherentist because the context-sensitive structure of these forms of justification implies that they follow standards that are set by a specific context and therefore independent of the structure of unrestricted propositional justification. Instead, the appropriate structure of a subject’s doxastic justification for a belief may be fixed by the parameters for distinguishing contexts described in the previous chapter, such as the conversational context in which she makes a knowledge claim, the background conditions that guide her inquiry and belief formation, or both, depending on which form of contextualism one adopts.

While it may be the case that the justification subject S has for belief B in context C₁ has a foundationalist structure, one in which S’s reasons S for B originate in some direct, non-inferential perceptual experience, in a different context, C₂, S’s reasons for B might have a different structure altogether. It could be that in C₂ a coherentist theory of justification is more applicable, or that a stopping point to S’s justification for B may be determined by social, cultural, or conversational factors. In any such instance, doxastic justification is determined by the norms guiding the successful justification of a
knowledge claim in that particular context. Invariantists who adopt a contextualist account of the restricted forms of justification as part of their view must therefore accept that the structure of both restricted propositional justification and doxastic justification could be different than the structure of unrestricted propositional justification.

The contextualist-infinitist view stands apart from the contextualist-finitist alternatives, however, because the structure of doxastic and restricted propositional justification can never mirror the structure of unrestricted propositional justification for human subjects. No particular context but the skeptic’s would involve the impossible standard that required the entirety of an infinite chain of reasons for one’s doxastic justification. Given that finite human knowers could never consider the entirety of an infinite chain of reasons as justification for a belief, defenders of a contextualist infinitist theory of justification must accept that doxastic and restricted propositional justification will not have an infinitist structure. Instead, the structure of doxastic justification will be represented by finite solutions to the Regress Problem, for this structure will always, barring the adopting of the skeptic’s position, remain set by a finite context for a finite subject.

Though the finiteness of doxastic and restricted propositional justification in all non-skeptical contexts might suggest that we ought to consider unrestricted propositional justification to be finite as well, an infinitist conception of unrestricted propositional justification is actually better suited for pairing with contextualism. Unlike the finitist alternatives, infinitist unrestricted propositional justification is composed of an expansive enough set of reasons so as to, theoretically, be able to include the reasons justifying a
belief in an infinite number of contexts, (for we could imagine that there could be an endless number of contexts in which the belief could be held, and that would require a reason or set of reasons for that belief which would be unique to each of those infinite contexts). Foundationalist and coherentist accounts, on the other hand, require that there be a limited number of reasons comprising the unrestricted propositional justification for a belief and thereby limit the possibilities for the contexts in which that belief could be justified for a subject.

Additionally, while the discussion of these three forms of justification has assumed an internalist view of knowledge, it should also be noted that an externalist invariantist account could also be coupled with contextualism and even be made compatible with infinitism. A contextualist-externalist view of justification would be somewhat similar to the contextualist-invariantist account discussed here, for an externalist could also conceive of justification as divided into three distinct tiers, with both forms of propositional justification defined as those reasons or causes that could possibly lead to a subject’s knowledge, for instance by considering them to be nomologically relevant to the formation of a subject’s belief. Doxastic justification would then be decided by what actually caused a true belief in a subject. Another interesting consequence of the contextualist-infinitist view specifically is that, unlike foundationalist and coherentist approaches, for this view it isn’t possible for a subject to know that she knows her belief is justified by an infinite chain of reasons. She would only be capable of knowing whether she successfully satisfied the finite standards of her context, and thus if her belief was doxastically justified. Since a subject’s awareness of the reasons for a
belief is impossible at the level of unrestricted propositional justification, the infinitist and externalist would thus be in agreement that the internalist claim that one ought to know when one has knowledge breaks down at the broadest level of justification. The infinitist must accept that one need not know that their beliefs are justified in the unrestricted propositional sense in order to have knowledge.

c. Invariantist Infinitism

The view described in the previous section specifically addresses a contextualist-infinitist hybrid theory of justification, but the reasons why this hybrid view is preferable to a standard invariantist account have yet to be discussed. While I have so far assumed that contextualism is an attractive view of justification here, I argued in the previous chapter that contextualism should be adopted because it offers a strong response to skeptical challenges to justification and provides an account of knowledge that reflects our common practices of justifying beliefs. Based on that discussion, we can see that contextualist infinitism places more importance on skeptical challenges to knowledge than a standard invariantist form of infinitism, and for this reasons presents an attractive account of justification helpful for solving the Regress Problem. Contextualism admits agreement with skepticism in the sense that the skeptic is right to think that we cannot meet the standards of justification for our beliefs in extremely rigorous contexts, while also defending the plausibility of justification against skeptical attacks for beliefs held in looser contexts.
The contextualist approach differs significantly from invariantist accounts of the structure of justification by attempting a compromise with skeptical positions. The non-skeptic may find contextualism’s engagement with skepticism compelling because it attempts to incorporate the pull of skepticism that we do at times feel into a workable non-skeptical view of justification, even though the skeptic may not be satisfied with the contextualist suggestion that we do often have justification for our beliefs when following what the skeptic would consider to be inadequately low standards. One of the problems with standard invariantist solutions to the Regress Problem is that they all fail to take skeptical challenges seriously enough. By incorporating contextualism into an invariant account of the structure of justification, the infinitist concedes that there are some contexts, namely skeptical ones, in which the pull of skepticism is felt particularly strongly. By ignoring or rejecting skepticism outright, invariant responses overlook the value skepticism can have for strengthening arguments defending our ability to have sufficient justification and the assessment of knowledge claims.

Moreover, an invariant infinitist would need to provide an explanation for why the justification we have for our beliefs never appears to have the infinite structure that the infinitist claims it has. Unlike foundationalists and coherentists, who could claim that it is possible that a subject could be aware of the complete structure of the reasons used to support her belief, it is not possible for the infinitist to claim that a subject can know the entire infinite chain of inferences supporting her belief. By combining contextualism and infinitism, however, the contextualist infinitist can offer an explanation for why justification never appears to a subject to have an infinite structure and, furthermore, why
justification ultimately still has an infinitist form, even though doxastic justification appears to a subject to have the structure argued for by one of the competing theories.

Additionally, as I’ve assumed throughout this chapter, the response to the Regress Problem I’m developing here, as well as the accounts I’ve been arguing against, support an internalist account of knowledge. An endorsement of internalism might not be possible for the invariantist infinitist, however, for an invariant infinitist contends that fully adequate justification for a belief can only come from an infinite set of reasons, or that a subject’s doxastic justification (the reasons she uses to justify her belief) is part of an infinite chain of reasons that are actually subjectively available to support her belief. Since a finite subject could never fully doxastically justify her belief with an infinite number of reasons, the only possible form of sufficient infinitist justification is that the infinite chain of reasons support her belief without her awareness of them. To be justified, then, requires that her belief be caused or otherwise grounded in or connected to this chain, much like the unrestricted propositional justification of the contextualist infinitist view, but without any internalist component, i.e., without a way for the subject to be sufficiently doxastically justified according to a finite, knowable standard.

By restricting doxastic justification to a context, contextualist infinitism makes some portion of the infinite chain of reasons that justify a belief in the unrestricted propositional sense irrelevant to a subject and unnecessary for the justification of her beliefs, thereby limiting what portion of the infinite chain of reasons she ought to be aware of in order to be justified. Unlike the invariantist-infinitist account, which doesn’t distinguish between the structure of the restricted propositional justification for a belief
and the complete, unrestricted justification for it, contextualist infinitism contends that a subject can know that she has adequate justification for a belief because the reasons necessary for her justification come from a limited portion of an infinite chain that she can use in that context. In sum, if one wants to offer an internalist view of knowledge and justification and defend an infinitist account of the structure of justification, a contextualist-infinitist view must be adopted.

Section 2: Klein’s Infinitism

The few accounts of infinitism in the literature suggest that the contextual nature of doxastic justification is an indication as to why the structure of propositional justification ought to be considered infinite. Arguments for this point can take on different forms, but the focus here will be on the most prominent view among these from Peter Klein. As a contextualist-leaning infinitist, Klein denies that justification must be based on some form of absolute certainty or a “final guarantee” and instead argues that it requires some context-determined component (1999, p. 316). He claims that the contextual nature of doxastic justification means that we hold beliefs that are always subject to change, and thus describes justification as only ever offering “limited guarantees” of knowledge based on the reasons we come across in particular contexts. Klein suggests that there are various practical considerations that can guide inquiry and

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94 Klein has defended infinitism in numerous works over roughly two decades. I will focus on his 1999, 2007, and 2014 articles here since they deal more directly with the connection between infinitism and the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification than some of his other work.
shape our reasons, and which in turn provide the boundaries of various contexts of justification. As he writes, “How far forward in providing reasons [a subject] S need go seems to me to be a matter of the pragmatic features of the epistemic context – just as which belief are being questioned or which can be taken as reasons is contextually determined” (2007, p. 10). In addition to describing his form of infinitism and the problems facing his account, in this section I will also consider the difference between his view and my account contextualist infinitism.

**a. An Overview of Klein’s Account**

References to late Wittgenstein in his discussion suggest that Klein considers the scenarios that Wittgenstein describes in *On Certainty* (described in Chapter 4) as leading us to question the authority of the seemingly foundational beliefs we use for justification in specific contexts. As he puts it:

> In any given reason-giving context, some propositions are basic in the sense that it is permissible to believe them in the absence of a reason. Indeed, it would violate the applicable contextual norms to ask for a reason for them. These are the bedrock propositions as Wittgenstein referred to them. (2014, p. 121)

While the doxastic justification for a belief may be finite in a given context due to the standards or norms of justification in that context, that does not imply that the full justification for a belief is finite, for the propositional justification for a belief, as Klein understands it, is not subject to the standards set by any particular context. Changes in

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95 Practical considerations also supply stopping points for reason giving, e.g., “We get tired. We have to eat. We have satisfied inquirers. We die” (Klein 2007, p. 16).
background conditions, the focus of an inquiry, and our perceptions of a situation are all indications for Klein that doxastic justification must be contextual. Given the problems with the other solutions to the Regress Problem, however, he maintains that justification ultimately has an infinitist structure.96

Klein makes a good point about the value of contextualism for infinitism, but his explanation of the connection between the two views of justification isn’t complete. He describes the viability of infinitism as a theory of propositional justification, but does not account for the connection between infinitism and contextualism in the same way as I have presented it here. The main point of difference between Klein’s version of infinitism and the one I’ve developed lies in a different understanding of what constitutes propositional justification. Klein’s version of contextualist infinitism does not include the additional distinction between restricted and unrestricted propositional justification made here, which, I will argue, is problematic for his understanding of the compatibility between contextualism and infinitism.

96 For comparison, see Aikin (2009), one of the few besides Klein in the literature to defend infinitism, who claims that the main reason to think that infinitism is true is that the reasons we need to justify our beliefs seem to come to an end due to social or contextual factors, elements of a given situation that create artificial stopping points for the task of giving reasons. Those reasons that we do ask someone to present to support a belief will always be of a limited number determined by the current context. As Aikin points out, the benefit of this tentativeness is the avoidance of dogmatism about our beliefs. Contextualism keeps the dialogue about the strength of one’s reasons going, and thus keeps open the possibility that our beliefs will be challenged, that we’ll need to supply better reasons for holding them, and in turn that we will need to keep revising what knowledge claims we can make (60). The key insight from his argument for infinitism is that providing reasons in a shifting context is required for being a good knower, and therefore that infinitism is the most viable theory of justification since it is the theory most capable of incorporating these fluctuations.
b. The Differences Between Klein’s Infinitism and Contextualist Infinitism

Let’s begin with the distinction Klein makes between doxastic and propositional justification. Klein states that propositional justification consists of an “epistemically adequate basis” that is available to a subject regardless of whether she has any awareness of it (2007, p. 6). More specifically, he “conceives of justification of a proposition, p, [i.e., propositional justification] as emerging when the set of reasons for p is non-repeating and endless” (2007, p. 8), which shows that Klein holds that the propositional justification he refers to here is of the invariant infinitist variety, i.e., the unrestricted form of propositional justification, and thus an infinite chain of reasons provides the “epistemically adequate basis” for the justification of one’s beliefs.

Klein claims that a subject’s doxastic justification for a belief can never be certain or indubitable, and instead that it is to some degree unstable and, as he describes it, provisional. He states that, “[T]he infinitist grants that she has not finished the process of justifying her beliefs. There is always a further step that can be taken should we become dissatisfied with the point at which we stopped the progress of inquiry.” Thus, the subject herself is aware, on Klein’s account, that her justification is only tentative, for “no belief could ever be completely doxastically justified” (2007, p. 10). The instability of justification on his view comes from a lack of access to the grounds of a subject’s doxastic justification stemming from her inability to account for infinite chains of reasons to support her beliefs. While context might indicate a stopping point for giving reasons to justify a belief temporarily, because propositional justification has a solely infinitist
structure for Klein, additional reasons for a belief could always be added to a subject’s doxastic justification. In this sense, her doxastic justification can never be complete.

However, since Klein makes no distinction between restricted and unrestricted propositional justification, what he presents is a view of justification made up of a context-determined set of beliefs that consists of the finite set of reasons the subject is actually using for her justification and the endless chain of reasons that justify the belief (of which the reasons used by the subject are a part), with no clear explanation of how they connect to each other, and thus no account of how contextualist standards for doxastic justification can be adequate for the justification of a belief. Instead, it seems that Klein relies on the concept of provisionality as a way of explaining the tentative nature of doxastic justification and how it supports an ultimately infinitist structure. He states that:

I add ‘provisionally’ to call attention to the fact that the reason, say r, for x might not yet be doxastically inferentially justified. In such a case, if r is deployed properly by [subject] S for [belief] p, p becomes reason-enhanced even though r is not yet reason-enhanced…S [has] the right to believe that x on the basis of deploying r, but once a reason for r is called for, S needs to be able to provide a reason for r on pain of jeopardizing the epistemic status of x. (2014, p. 115)

Klein argues that one can accept a subject’s doxastic justification within a context, for she may have utilized a sufficient number of the reasons that support her belief given that context, but also considers the justification she has on this basis to be only provisional because the propositional justification for the belief remains incomplete or unfinished for her since it is infinite.
On his view, doxastic justification isn’t secure because shifts in context will lead a subject to require new reasons for her belief that she may not be in the position to provide, or even if she can provide these additional reasons, it is only a matter of time before more will be necessary to maintain her justification again. Her doxastic justification can thus be undermined by a very slight context shift. This implies that a subject is not capable of considering the standards of her context as acceptable for the complete justification of her belief. The context may always require that she incorporate further reasons from the infinite chain making up the propositional justification for the belief which, in turn, implies that contextualism cannot provide a viable theory of justification on its own or when coupled with infinitism.

I agree that the justification for a belief can never be ultimately settled and secure in the way foundationalists and coherentists would like, but contextualist infinitism as I conceive of it doesn’t require thinking of doxastic justification as being provisional in Klein’s sense. The addition of the form of restricted propositional justification provides a fixed set of reasons that determine what is required for adequate doxastic justification in a particular context, and by doing so, prevents doxastic justification from being undermined by every change in a subject’s context. Restricted propositional justification acts as a sort of buffer between a belief’s complete unrestricted propositional justification, which would be unknowable for a finite subject, and those reasons from that complete infinite set which she uses to sufficiently justify her belief, by outlining a finite portion of an infinite set that the subject could conceivably come to know in her context.
Thus, by claiming that doxastic justification stems directly from unrestricted propositional justification, Klein undermines the authority of contextualist standards. If the reasons used to justify a belief are picked from an infinite chain, the status of this justification can only be tentative, or provisional, as a subject would have to continually incorporate more of this infinite chain into her doxastic justification in order to more completely justify her belief. Given that there are infinite reasons that could justify it, the subject can never complete the task of adequately doxastically justifying a belief. Though the reasons that she utilizes to support a belief are finite and context-based, there is no finite limit placed on the number that would be needed to have complete doxastic justification. Restricted propositional justification, however, places a limit on questioning the sufficiency of one’s doxastic justification by clearly defining a finite set of reasons that can provide a subject with conclusive justification. From within a context, adequate doxastic justification for a belief would be secured by the standard presented by restricted propositional justification, for instance, in the form of the assumptions and motivations of the subject in that context. With the addition of restricted propositional justification, there would only be from some ultimate skeptical context, a context requiring the broadest possible set of reasons for a belief to be sufficiently justified, that doxastic justification would appear tentative or provisional in the way Klein describes.

For example, as a child a subject might believe the yellow ball in the sky is a star because her parents tell her it is. Later in the science classroom, she believes it to be so because of a diagram in a textbook that she finds to be trustworthy. Many years later as an astrophysicist, she finds that her previous reasons are no longer satisfactory, but
studies the stars herself, looks at spectroscopic measurements of the sun, and compares data from the sun to that of other stars in order to justify her belief. This pattern of alterations in what would count as adequate justification would seemingly continue ad infinitum. Given an infinite amount of time new, more refined methods of scientific investigation would create new standards of evidence in new contexts and would lead her to change the standards of justification for her belief that the yellow ball is a star. The reasons that were sufficient for making her belief count as knowledge in these different contexts are all ways that belief in the proposition “the yellow ball we call the sun is a star” is justified for her, though not at the same time in the same context.

Given that none of these reasons are available to her as context-independent evidence, however, does not mean that in each context she was only provisionally justified in her belief. On the contrary, she had adequate doxastic justification, given the set of reasons that could have been used to justify her belief, i.e., given the restricted propositional justification for her belief in each context. The spectroscopic measurements, for example, would not have helped justify her belief in this proposition as a small child, even if they do provide strong reasons to believe it in other contexts. Thus, some reasons that make up the unrestricted propositional justification for a belief will be irrelevant to a subject, given her context, and some of these reasons may never be used as part of her justification, even though they still count as reasons for her belief in the unrestricted propositional sense. To be sure, while the unrestricted propositional justification for her belief is certainly not provisional, the doxastic justification for her belief shouldn’t be thought of as provisional either precisely because it is determined by a
restricted set of reasons that are fixed by her context. Only when one considers the justification of a belief across all contexts, or, put differently, from the strictest of all contexts consisting of the infinite unrestricted propositional justification for a belief, would each of these examples of doxastic justification appear provisional and incomplete. However, as context-bound finite human knowers we never have access to this context, so this shouldn’t be a concern for our ordinary conception of doxastic justification.

c. A Comparison of Views

To summarize the difference in Klein’s distinction between doxastic and propositional justification and the one I presented in the previous section, we can compare our respective definitions. Klein (2007) defines doxastic and propositional justification in the following way:

A belief is doxastically justified for S iff S has engaged in tracing the reasons in virtue of which the proposition is justified far forward enough to satisfy contextually determined requirements. (11)

A proposition, p, is justified for S iff there is an endless series of non-repeating propositions available to S such that beginning with p, each succeeding member is a reason for the immediately preceding one. (11)

Modifying my own statements of the different forms of justification made in Section 1 to appear similar to Klein’s yields the following results:

A belief is doxastically justified for S iff for any proposition p, p is the propositional content of belief b, S believes that p, and S’s justification for b meets the standards of justification set by S’s context.

A proposition p is justified for S in the restricted sense iff for any p, p is the propositional content of belief b and b meets the standards of justification set by S’s context.
A proposition \( p \) is justified for \( S \) in the unrestricted sense iff for any \( p \), \( p \) is the propositional content of belief \( b \) and there exists an infinite series of context-independent and subject-independent non-repeating reasons sufficient for the justification of \( b \).

As I’ve already mentioned, the biggest difference in these accounts is that Klein doesn’t distinguish between forms of propositional justification. Note, however, that Klein also seems committed to doxastic justification as having the same structure as propositional justification here, for in his definition of doxastic justification above he states that a subject must trace the reasons for her belief far enough forward in order to satisfy the standards of her context (2007, p. 11). This suggests that the structure of doxastic justification is just a truncated portion of an infinite chain. I disagree with this point since, as I argued in Section 1, the structure of doxastic justification will be determined by context-based restricted propositional justification, not by the structure of unrestricted propositional justification, and thus may take any number of forms, some of which may not be linear in the same sense as unrestricted propositional justification, and none of which can actually be infinite.

The other significant difference in these definitions is found in the use of the term “availability.” Klein describes infinite propositional justification as consisting of reasons that are available to a subject in the sense that they might be utilized as part of her doxastic justification. In other words, should circumstances arise in which she needs further reasons to support her belief, additional parts of the infinite chain of reasons that comprise propositional justification would need to be added to her doxastic justification. Though he doesn’t mention the specific form here, such an account of availability seems
to correlate with subjective availability, as described in Section 1. As he states, “Infinitism could hold that a proposition, $p$, is available to S just in case there is an epistemically credible way of S’s coming to believe that $p$ given S’s current epistemic practices” (2007, p.13).

Since Klein refers to a proposition (or reason) as available to a subject, he appears to be defining the propositions that make up the infinite chain of reasons for a belief as capable of becoming part of a subject’s doxastic justification, thus suggesting that they are subjectively available to her. In addition, if the availability of these propositions is determined by a subject’s “current epistemic practices,” the use of these reasons by a subject appears to be determined by context. The problem with this, however, is that propositional justification, according to Klein’s account, isn’t context-determined, only doxastic justification is. If propositional justification is subjectively available, what sort of propositions are only objectively available on his view? Without a further distinction between forms of propositional justification, is there even a distinction between those reasons that are subjectively available and those that are objectively available?

For contextualist infinitism, the only instance in which thesubjectively and objectively available reasons for a belief would overlap would be in the context that required the complete infinite set of reasons for sufficient justification, but this isn’t a context that would ever be accessible to a subject. Even though Klein (2014) has claimed that doxastic justification is not infinite, his suggestion that the chain of subjectively available

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97 This interpretation also matches what he says about the distinction between subjective and objective availability in an earlier article: “Infinitism requires that there be an infinite set of propositions such that each member is subjectively available to us. That requires that we have the capacity to form beliefs about each member” (1999, p. 308).
available reasons for belief can be infinite does in fact suggest that it is possible that the
doxastic justification for a belief could be as well.98 This understanding of subjectively
available reasons does not square with a contextualist account of doxastic justification
nor line up with the relationship between subjective availability and restricted
propositional justification discussed in Section 1. As it was described there, doxastic
justification consists of the reasons a subject uses to support a belief and as such, are
reasons that are no longer just available since they have actually been utilized. These
stem from a larger finite set of reasons that are subjectively available to the subject, or
her restricted propositional justification, i.e., those reasons which, given the context, the
subject could use as justification for her belief.

Klein has not been able to appease either the contextualist or the infinitist with the
distinctions between doxastic and propositional justification and subjective and objective
availability he’s using in this account. Without a distinction between restricted and
unrestricted propositional justification, Klein must claim that the standards for
justification that we ultimately defer to for determining doxastic justification are the
invariant infinitist’s. Since justification only consists of the reasons a subject uses to
support her belief and the infinite series of reasons that actually do support her belief
according to his view, the subjectively available reasons, those that a subject could

98 See Klein (1999, p. 300), where he states that subjectively available reasons could be infinite
because they could be “non-occurrent.” The existence of an infinite number of beliefs, even if non-
occurrent or non-conscious, still implies that a subject has the potential to have an infinite number of
reasons comprising her doxastic justification for a belief. However, more recently he makes the distinction
between forms of justification using the difference between answering the question “What structure must
the reasons have in order to put us in a position to gain inferential knowledge?” and the question “about
what structure our deployments of reasons should take,” as a way of explaining propositional and doxastic
justification, respectively. He claims that “infinitism holds that the first is infinite, the second it not” (2014,
p. 114). Here he claims that doxastic justification is finite.
potentially use for her justification, are infinite and not contextual. Thus, Klein’s view does not actually defer to contextualism as providing a standard for the sufficient justification of a belief. If we try to correct this by only focusing on a subject’s provisional doxastic justification, which is context-bound, the influence that unrestricted propositional justification has on the determination of doxastic justification is undermined and the infinitist’s endless chain of reasons doesn’t influence a subject’s justification. If we take the subject’s standards for doxastic justification to be sufficient for justifying her belief, we must do by ignoring the fact that her reasons are part of an infinite chain. Therefore, Klein’s view must be interpreted as either conceding that justification is contextualist or that it is infinitist, but it cannot represent both views equally.

Even though I don’t think that Klein’s distinction between doxastic and propositional justification can successfully account for contextualist infinitism, there are still certain points about which we agree. The most significant of these is the idea that justification is nested, i.e., that doxastic justification is a subset of propositional justification, (or, for my view, that doxastic justification is a subset of restricted propositional justification, which is a subset of unrestricted propositional justification). Klein makes an important point about the relationship between the different forms of justification by stating that:

If there were no next reason available to us should the circumstances of inquiry require it, then the proposition that we originally began with is not justified and our original belief would lose the doxastic justification it had acquired through the process of providing reasons. (2007, p. 16)
Put differently, if contexts change and a subject cannot offer adequate reasons for the same belief she had sufficient reasons for in the prior context, this is an indication that her belief is false because it suggests that her belief isn’t part of a larger set of reasons, i.e., that those reasons she thought were sufficient aren’t actually part of the belief’s unrestricted propositional justification. I agree that what makes both accounts essentially infinitist is that they ultimately defer justification to an infinite chain of reasons, not just the standards set by a given context, but deny that Klein’s account has successfully explained the influence of contextualist standards for assessing a subject’s justification.

Section 3: Conclusion

Having outlined an account of contextualist infinitism, I want to close this chapter by summarizing the project of this dissertation. Overall, the purpose of the past six chapters has been to give infinitism serious consideration as a plausible account of the structure of justification for traditional epistemology. Investigation into this project has led to the following conclusions. First, the most significant conclusion to be drawn is that there is nothing inherently vicious about an infinitist solution to the Regress Problem. As I’ve presented it here, the infinitist view of justification does not entail any contradiction or impossibility that would exclude it outright as a view of the structure of justification. In addition, infinitism as it has been presented here may also be seen as a serious alternative to foundationalism and coherentism, given the problems that face those views. I don’t want to suggest that the contextualist-infinitist account proves that infinitism puts
an end to the debates surrounding the Regress Problem, but I do want to contend that the
claims I’ve made make the case for infinitism as a theory of justification worthy of
serious attention as a response to the Regress Problem.

Such conclusions were only drawn once the significance of the Regress Problem
had first been established through a historical overview of the debate over the nature and
structure of justification, which showed not only the significance that the problem has
had since Aristotle, but also the dearth of consideration of infinitism as a plausible
response. Another important source of support for infinitism came from considerations of
the two most popular solutions to the Regress Problem, foundationalism and coherentism.
The significance of the objections that have been raised against each were, I argued,
serious enough to warrant closer consideration of the infinitist view. However, a full
defense of infinitism requires understanding why, regardless of the problems of
foundationalism and coherentism, the infinitist account of justification stands as a
substantial theory of the structure of justification. Defending this required making use of
the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification, and in turn led to the
incorporation of a contextualist account of the standards of justification. The combination
of contextualism and infinitism showed how justification could have an infinite structure,
even if that structure was never a necessary part of a subject’s own justification for her
beliefs.

Though I’ve argued here that infinitism should be considered seriously as a
solution to the Regress Problem, it is beyond the scope of this project to discuss in detail
what particular form a structure of infinite reasons might take. An infinitist account of
justification is typically thought to take the form of an endless chain of reasons, but considering the contextualist addition to infinitism I present here, there could be more to the structure than the standard view suggests. Given that we never consider such a chain in the course of justifying our beliefs, the infinitist structure of unrestricted propositional justification is to some degree masked or hidden to us. Nothing bars the possibility that the structure of the unrestricted propositional justification for a belief could be something other than a single infinite linear chain. Instead, perhaps, it could constitute some sort of web of reasons interconnected at several points or a set of several independent or overlapping sets of reasons that eventually resolve into a single endless chain. As presented here, it is, at the very least, not out of the question that infinitism would be compatible with any number of different infinite structures. Perhaps, even, different types of beliefs would require structures of infinite unrestricted propositional justification that have different forms, e.g., empirical beliefs might be justified by several interconnected chains of reasons that eventually resolve into a single endless chain that consists of propositions describing perceptual experience. Thus, one path of further investigation would be to turn this purely tentative speculation into a developed theory of what the structure of justification could look like for the infinitist. Perhaps this is the next step for developing a comprehensive argument for infinitism.


