

## A Localist Solution to the Regress of Epistemic Justification

A venerable epistemological problem arises when we reflect upon the activity of offering reasons for our beliefs: it seems that it is impossible, in principle, to provide an adequate defence of any belief. This problem is commonly called ‘the regress of justification.’<sup>1</sup> Standard solutions fall into three basic camps: foundationalism [e.g., Alston 1989a, b, c], coherentism [Bonjour 1985], and — most recently — infinitism [Klein 1999]. In this paper I will propose another option, which I term ‘localism’.<sup>2</sup> This view’s guiding idea is that being justified is (roughly) a matter of being able to draw upon one’s background conception to supply good reasons for believing as one does. More particularly, I will propose that to be justified is (roughly) to be able to draw upon one’s background beliefs to provide good reasons which one correctly and responsibly takes there to be no reason to doubt. As will become apparent, this proposal differs importantly from the familiar solutions.

For many philosophers weaned on the writings of Quine, Austin, Wittgenstein, and Sellars, something like my proposal is bound to seem right. All four shared the broad idea that while being justified involves being able to muster appropriate support for one’s beliefs, the activity of justifying ‘comes to an end’. All four also held — contrary to foundationalism’s doctrine of basic beliefs — that no beliefs have a justificatory status wholly independent of one’s other beliefs. My goal here is to develop this combination of views in a way that is sensitive to the concerns and insights which have driven subsequent epistemological theorizing.<sup>3</sup>

I begin with some preliminaries regarding my aims and theoretical presuppositions.

First, in the sense of the phrase that concerns me here, *being justified* is a status attaching to persons with regard to their beliefs. This status requires something other than merely having good evidence, since someone might have good evidence and yet not be justified in believing as he does because he holds his belief on the basis of ridiculous reasons. Consequently, the question, ‘What is it for a person to be justified in believing as he does?’ is different from the question, ‘What is it for certain propositions or evidence to support a given proposition?’ My concern here is with the first question.

Second, my discussion will assume three widely-shared (though not undisputed) claims.

A. Justification is ‘truth-conducive’. One reason why being justified is good or valuable is that being justified makes it more likely, in some appropriately objective sense, that one's belief is true.

B. Being justified requires responsible or blameless belief: one must have done as much as could reasonably be expected to attain a true belief, and one must not have culpably neglected any relevant information.

C. There is a coherent concept of being justified which requires more than responsible or blameless belief [Goldman 1989; Alston 1989d,e,f; Pryor 2001: 114-15]. For instance, someone who has learned to argue by affirming the consequent, and who cannot be brought to see the invalidity of such arguments, may be perfectly responsible and blameless in believing that *p* on the basis of an argument from *If p, then q* and *q*. Nonetheless, he should not believe that *p* on such grounds; no one should. His belief is not justified in this stronger sense.<sup>4</sup> This stronger notion is my topic in this paper. It corresponds to a status to which we attach great importance in everyday life.

Finally, one caveat should be noted. The approach to epistemic justification urged here is intended to apply only to our beliefs about the objects and events in the world around us ('empirical beliefs', in the usual parlance). It is unclear to me how, or whether, a similar approach might apply to beliefs about mathematics, logic or our own minds.

My discussion will proceed as follows. Section I articulates the problem of the regress as it arises within the activity of justifying beliefs. Section II considers what a theory of justification must be like in order to avoid this problem. As will become evident, a standard diagnosis is incorrect: the threat of regress can be avoided even if we accept that being justified always requires the ability to justify one's belief. Section III describes the structure of our justificatory practice. This discussion points the way to a localist account of justification, and sections IV and V develop this account and explain how it satisfyingly resolves the problem. Finally, section VI compares the proposed view to the familiar alternatives.

### *I. The Problem of the Regress*

The problem of the regress is standardly posed in terms of general considerations about the nature of inferential justification [Alston 1989a; Bonjour 1985]. I will begin, however, with the ordinary conversations in which we offer reasons for our beliefs. My reason for doing so is this. If a theory of inferential justification engenders a vicious regress, this merely reveals an inadequacy in the theory. The traditional problem of the regress, however, aims to show our lack of justified beliefs by revealing an incoherence in our actual justificatory practice. It is therefore best to begin by considering how that problem might arise through reflection upon our practice.

Imagine that someone invites you to defend a belief. You offer what you take to be a good reason for believing as you do, but your interlocutor asks you to support this reason and

continues in like fashion at each step. In what follows, I will call this character ‘the persistent interlocutor’. When we imagine engaging in sincere conversation with the persistent interlocutor, we reach a familiar quandary. To refuse to provide reasons at any point would seem arbitrary and dogmatic. To repeat yourself is to have argued in a circle. And even if you could go on infinitely offering reasons for your empirical beliefs, it is hard to see how this could, by itself, constitute an adequate defence.<sup>5</sup>

We should note several points about this situation. First, there isn't anything wrong with the interlocutor's question, at least in certain cases. It is clearly acceptable if he thinks that there is reason to doubt the truth of your belief or suspects that you arrived at it in an untrustworthy way. But the question could also be appropriate even if he had no such reservations. For instance, if I am talking with an expert in a field about which I know little, I might be motivated by a genuine desire to learn when I ask what her reasons are for believing a certain claim.

Second, we generally take the justificatory status of a person's belief to be tied to what he can say in response to such queries. If a person in optimal circumstances couldn't come up with anything at all, or could only come up with a manifestly inadequate defence, then we would ordinarily conclude that he isn't justified. And since no belief can be justified by appeal to an unjustified belief, we would judge that every belief which he has based upon the belief in question is not justified either. For this reason, our apparent inability to respond adequately to the persistent interlocutor seems to show that none of our beliefs are justified.

Third, it seems that if we really were justified, we should be able to say something which would make it wrong, or show why it would be wrong, for the interlocutor to go on asking for justifying reasons. We want a way to say ‘Shut up!’ which isn't dogmatic but instead has the right sort of normative and justificatory force. And it seems that there ought to be such a way.

Despite the appropriateness, on occasion, of asking someone to defend his beliefs, *something* seems to be going wrong in the persistent interlocutor's repeated request for reasons.

In sum, it seems that if the justificatory status of a given belief is — as it seems to be — tied to the adequacy of the reasons one is able to offer in defence of it, then none of our beliefs can have the status *justified*. This conclusion conflicts with our pretheoretical conviction that it is possible for us to have justified beliefs. But that's not all that is puzzling here. Our justificatory practice seems incoherent, insofar as the persistent interlocutor's requests for reasons seem to be simultaneously licensed and misguided.

One possible response is to deny that justificatory status is tied to one's ability to provide reasons for one's belief. Having made this move, one could then regard the apparent incoherence of our practice as an epistemologically irrelevant sideshow. But must one respond in this fashion?

My goal is to articulate another way. I will propose an account of justification which does not generate a structural regress even though it retains the pretheoretical thought that whether one is justified has something to do with one's ability to offer reasons for one's belief.<sup>6</sup> The key, as I will propose, is a description of our practices which shows why, despite appearances, they are not incoherent. Once we have such a description, justification itself will no longer seem so puzzling. First, however, we need to get clearer about the theoretical options.

## II. *Getting Started*

Is there no way both to hold that being justified requires the ability to provide reasons *and* to avoid a structural regress of the sort dramatized by the character of the persistent

interlocutor? To approach this issue, let's consider an account of justification which accepts this requirement and clearly does generate a structural regress.

Suppose, first, that being justified requires having adequate reasons or grounds for believing as one does. It is natural, then, to accept an additional requirement like this:

1. In order to be justified, one's belief must be based upon an adequate reason or ground.

This requirement goes beyond our initial supposition, since it says that it's not enough that one *have* adequate reasons or grounds; the belief must also be based upon, or held on the basis of, those reasons or grounds. A standard argument for this requirement runs as follows [Kitcher 1992: 60; Kornblith 1980: 601 – 3]. If being justified requires having adequate reasons or grounds, then there must also be an appropriate psychological relation between the person's belief and the reasons or grounds possessed by the person, for otherwise there will be no distinction between the person who is justified in virtue of certain reasons or grounds and the person who has the same reasons or grounds but is not justified because she holds her belief on the basis of other, inadequate reasons or out of wishful thinking. This psychological relation, it is assumed, is that of being *based upon* or *the reason for which one's belief is held* — the so-called 'epistemic basing relation.'

According to standard accounts of the basing relation, a belief can be based upon a particular reason or ground even if its possessor is incapable of articulating that reason or ground [Harman 1973, chapter 2]. Let's assume, for the time being, that this is correct.<sup>7</sup> In order to maintain the pretheoretical link between being justified and being able to justify one's beliefs, we therefore must add the following requirement:

2. In order to be justified, one must be able to justify one's belief by articulating one's reason for holding it (the ground upon which it is based).

In addition, since a justificatory defence succeeds only to the extent that one is justified in holding the beliefs appealed to in that defence, let's add a final requirement:

3. In order to be justified, one must be justified in believing the reasons one would offer in defence of one's belief.<sup>8</sup>

(1) – (3) generate a structural regress. By (1), the belief must be based on a particular ground (call it G1). By (2), one must be able to state that ground. By (3), one must be justified in believing G1. This requires, by (1), that one must base one's belief G1 upon an adequate ground G2. By (2), one must be able to state G2. By (3), one must be justified in believing G2. Etc. It should be clear that this regress does not terminate. Either the chain of justifying considerations is circular, or it continues infinitely. And it is worth noting that if it continues infinitely, then it requires not merely that one have an infinite number of beliefs of the right sort, but also — and quite implausibly — that there be an infinite set of psychological facts regarding the bases of one's beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

The problem with (1) – (3) is particularly clear if only beliefs can play the role of grounds or reasons. But the regress is not avoided even if we allow that other psychological states, such as perceptual experiences, can be adequate grounds for beliefs. For then requirement (2) says that one must be able to defend one's belief by stating that one is having the relevant perceptual experience, requirement (3) states that one must be justified in believing that this is so, and requirement (1) states that one must hold *this* belief on the basis of adequate grounds. It may not be clear what these grounds could be, especially if it is required that they not be question-begging, but this consideration does not stop the regress.

Which requirement is the source of the problem? According to a common diagnosis, (2) is the culprit. William Alston, for instance, denies it across the board [1989: 82, 83 fn. 3; also

Pryor 2000]. More circumspectly, Michael Williams and Robert Brandom hold that it is triggered only by certain conversational or dialectical circumstances: roughly, one has a ‘default entitlement’ to a belief even if one is not able to provide reasons in its favour, unless some interlocutor has a reason to think that it is false or was acquired in an unreliable way [Williams 1999: 51; Brandom 1994: chapt. 4 sect. 1 – 4].<sup>10</sup>

Neither solution is fully satisfactory. For one thing, both views fail to do justice to our justificatory practices. Regardless of whether it is conversationally appropriate to ask them to do so, we expect mature adults to be able to offer *some* considerations in defence of their beliefs — even if only, ‘I’m an expert in the matter,’ ‘I see it right there,’ or ‘Look, there is no reason to think that things are otherwise’. If they cannot do so (for reasons other than exhaustion, aphasia, etc.), we take this to reflect negatively upon them as believers.<sup>11</sup> This point holds even if one maintains that the concept of *being justified* which is significant for epistemological theorizing does not always require being able to provide reasons in favour of one's belief. Consequently, abandoning or limiting requirement (2) will not remove the apparent unsatisfiability of the demands imposed by our practice.

Moreover, (2) can be retained. For requirements along the lines of (2) and (3) do not force a vicious regress, so long as we reject requirement (1). To see this, conceive of being justified as consisting in the possession of a certain ability, the ability (roughly) *to justify one's belief by offering good reasons in its favour*. By requirement (3), one must be justified in believing these reasons. So on this conception, being justified in holding a given belief will require a larger set of interlocking justificatory abilities with regard to many other beliefs. However, neither requirement (2) nor (3) entails that in order to be justified one must be able to exhibit *all* of these justificatory abilities in the course of a single justificatory episode. Instead,

we can understand (2) and (3) as requiring only that for each belief, one must be able to give good reasons for holding *it*, given a background of other justified beliefs, within a form of conversation governed by a rule of non-repetition. To justify any one belief, one exhibits one's possession of an appropriate fragment of the larger network of abilities. Given this conception, we can accept without fear of regress that our ordinary evaluations of people's beliefs are guided by a norm requiring the ability to provide good reasons.

It can seem unsatisfactory to conceive of justification as consisting, even in part, in a set of interlocking abilities to offer reasons for one's beliefs. For it is tempting to think, with requirement (1), that a belief is not justified unless it is already based upon an adequate reason or ground. On this view, the ability to defend one's beliefs will seem to be merely an ability to report or express this pre-existing structure of basing relations. Given the implausibility of the suggestion that this structure is infinite and non-repeating, it will then seem that the interlocking set of abilities can only indicate that we hold our beliefs on the basis of circular arguments.

However, we do not have to think in these terms. For the motivation for (1) — the need to allow for cases in which two people have the same good reasons or grounds but only one is justified — does not require that the justified person's belief must already be based upon those reasons or grounds. We can instead require that the justified person (A) be in a position to sincerely offer the reasons in defence of the belief and (B) not already hold the belief on the basis of bad reasons or out of wishful thinking, self-deception, or anything of the sort [Leite 2004]. And, as I have argued elsewhere [2004], we can hold that which considerations constitute the reasons for which a person holds a particular belief is often determined — sometimes for the first time — by what goes on when the person attempts to justify the belief: formulating reasons is often not a matter of reporting or expressing prior facts about what one's belief is based upon, but

rather of *making it the case* that one holds one's belief for particular reasons rather than others. If we look at matters in this way, then we can accept with equanimity that the propositions believed by a given person stand in complex, crisscrossing relations of mutual evidential support: while these interlocking evidential relations undergird the network of abilities in virtue of which one is able to justify a given belief by offering good reasons which one is justified in believing, they need not be taken to indicate that one holds the belief on the basis of a circular argument. It's one thing to say that being justified in holding a given belief depends upon, or requires, being justified in holding others, quite another thing to say that the first belief is based upon the others. A reciprocal dependence relation of the first sort is not *ipso facto* a reciprocal basing relation, and it need not force any vicious circularity at all.

For clarity, then, I restate (2) as:

(2\*) In order to be justified in believing any P, one must be able to provide a good reason (or reasons) for believing it.

(I formulate (2\*) thus for brevity. Glibness and rationalization don't do the trick; one must be speaking sincerely, offering reasons which one believes and takes to be adequate, and one must not already hold the belief on the basis of bad reasons or out of wishful thinking, self-deception, or anything of the sort.) Correspondingly, I restate (3) like this:

(3\*) In order to be justified in believing any P, one must be justified in believing the considerations to which one might appeal in support of believing it.<sup>12</sup>

The suggestion, then, is this. The activity of justifying has what I will term a *local* structure: it requires one only to defend a target belief (or a limited set of target beliefs) with good, non-circular reasons drawn from amongst one's justified background beliefs. In consequence, one can satisfy (2\*) in virtue of being able to articulate good reasons for holding one's belief by drawing in appropriate ways upon one's background beliefs. Suppose, then, that an interlocutor

stops requesting reasons after you've asserted something,  $r$ , which you are in a position to support with good reasons but haven't yet based upon any particular reasons. Suppose, too, that the relevant background beliefs form an evidentially interlocking set and that you have not explicitly based any of them on any other considerations. Then, given what has happened so far, you could currently have the ability, with regard to each of the relevant background beliefs, to provide good reasons for believing it, given the others as background. You could consequently satisfy (2\*) with regard to each of those beliefs, and, provided any other relevant requirements are met, you might very well meet the demands imposed by (3\*) as well. So on the proposed view, each of the relevant background beliefs might be justified and so too might your belief  $r$ . Thus (2\*) and (3\*), by themselves, do not generate a vicious structural regress. It is worth considering whether they can provide a workable beginning for a theory of justification.

The proposal so far is compatible with a wide variety of views, including the coherentist view that a belief is justified only if it is part of a total view with certain virtuous features (consistency, inferential integration, perhaps explanatory integration, etc.). However, as we will see shortly, the proposal can also be developed in a very different, and perhaps more plausible, way.

### III. *The Structure of Justificatory Conversations*

Though (2\*) and (3\*) do not generate a vicious structural regress, they will allow the problem of the persistent interlocutor unless we can identify a point at which, according to our justificatory practice, the interlocutor should stop requesting justifying reasons. In this section I will identify such a point. In the next section, I will show how it can guide us towards a theory of justification.

Consider what I will call ‘justificatory conversations’, conversations characterized by a person’s sincere attempt to vindicate his or her entitlement to a belief by providing adequate reasons in its defence and responding to objections.<sup>13</sup> Such conversations instantiate precisely the structure we’re looking for. At a certain point in such conversations a request for further justifying reasons is inappropriate, and the defendant’s pointing this out may legitimately terminate the justifying episode, so long as the defendant possesses reasons in favour of the belief at issue.

An example will make this vivid and highlight several important points. Imagine the following justificatory conversation, conducted under normal conditions. (To keep things perfectly clear, suppose that A’s spouse has no information which bears either way on the truth of A’s statement at stage I.)

Stage I:

A (coming out of her study): ‘My sister is unhappy with her job.’

A’s spouse: ‘Why do you think that?’<sup>14</sup>

Stage II:

A: ‘I just talked to my mother on the phone, and she said so.’

A’s spouse: ‘Why do you think it was your mother?’

A’s spouse’s second question is obviously inappropriate, even ridiculous, given that conditions are of the usual sort. If A’s spouse had some reason to suspect falsehood, unreliability, or irresponsibility in A’s belief about her recent conversation, then some such question would be acceptable. But A’s spouse has no such reasons. Correspondingly, A could legitimately respond by shrugging off the request for further reasons or dismissively saying such things as, ‘There’s no reason to doubt it’ or ‘Is there some reason to think otherwise?’ The situation here thus contrasts sharply with stage I of the conversation. For at that stage, A’s sincere engagement in the activity of justifying required A to offer justifying reasons.

This difference is not well explained in terms of conversational or practical factors external to the rules governing justificatory conversations. For instance, the inappropriateness of A's spouse's final question does not seem to reflect considerations of etiquette, propriety, or practical utility, since it would be strange in otherwise normal circumstances even if no such considerations militated against asking it. Likewise, by offering the above dismissive responses A does not abandon the justificatory form of conversation altogether (as she would if she said, e.g., 'Look, I'm busy' or 'Don't be rude'). Rather, she offers an appropriate response within that form of conversation.

The appropriateness of these responses indicates that the burden has shifted within the justificatory conversation. If A's spouse is now to press the demand for justifying reasons without being ridiculous, he must supply what he takes to be reasons of an appropriate sort. To do so, he can't simply state an hypothesis incompatible with the truth, reliability or responsibility of A's belief. Instead, he must provide something which he takes to tell in favour of the truth of some such alternative hypothesis. And if he can supply no such considerations, then — even though A is sincerely engaged in the activity of justifying — A is not required to offer any further reasons.

This won't be so, however, unless A also meets certain requirements. Suppose, for instance, that A completely lacked beliefs about how telephones work, what her mother's voice sounds like, how her mother would identify herself on the phone, and the like, so that she could not provide any reason whatsoever for thinking that it was her mother with whom she had just spoken. In these conditions (and in contrast with the ordinary case), we would not judge it appropriate for her to shrug off the request for further justifying reasons or to ask simply, 'Is there some reason to think otherwise?' These responses would be sheer dogmatism. And if A's

spouse were apprised of A's situation, it would be appropriate for him to take A's inability to answer his last question as an indication of a shortcoming in her believing as she does about her sister's job satisfaction. Consequently, in order for A appropriately to dismiss the request for further justifying reasons, A must have background beliefs which at least seem to both parties to tell in favour of the truth of the belief in question.

In what follows I will use 'terminating claims' as a label for claims (such as A's claim at stage II in the above example) for which it is incorrect, for reasons internal to the structure of the activity of justifying, for the interlocutor to demand further justifying reasons and for which the defendant need not provide further justifying reasons even when sincerely engaged in the activity of justifying. Since the same proposition can be a terminating claim in one justificatory conversation but not in another, these claims cannot be accounted for purely in terms of their propositional content. What is crucial seems to be some feature or features of the circumstances in which the claim is advanced. The question before us, then, is this: under what conditions is a claim a terminating claim?

My view, to be defended in a moment, is that a claim is a terminating claim when the defendant correctly and responsibly takes there to be no reason to doubt it. First, however, I want to examine an important alternative. According to Michael Williams and Robert Brandom's 'default and challenge' account of our practice, a terminating claim is reached just when the interlocutor possesses no reasons for thinking that the defendant's belief is false or held in an irresponsible or unreliable way. There is something right in this account. At stage II in the above example, A's spouse's request for reasons is inappropriate unless he takes himself to have reasons for thinking that A's belief somehow comes up short. This point aside, however, the account misdescribes our practice. Consider stage I of the example, for instance. Here, contrary

to the suggested account, the request for justifying reasons is acceptable even if A's spouse has no particular reason to suspect falsehood, irresponsibility, or unreliability in A's belief. Suppose, for instance, that A's spouse simply has no information which directly bears on the issue. (In fact, the request would be legitimate even if A's spouse took himself to have good reasons for thinking that A had formed the belief in some acceptable way or other and was likely to be right.) Likewise, even if A's spouse has no particular reason for suspecting A of error or irresponsibility, it is not acceptable for A to dismiss the request or to reply, 'Is there some reason to think I'm wrong?'<sup>15</sup> However, these responses would be legitimate, if the 'default and challenge' model were correct.

The model misdescribes stage II of the example as well. According to the model, a terminating claim can be reached, and the defendant may offer a dismissive reply, even if she possesses no reasons whatsoever in favour of her belief. As we have seen, however, this too is incorrect.<sup>16 17</sup>

To approach a more accurate account, let's consider what goes wrong at stage II of the example. Here's the situation A's spouse is supposed to be in:

- (1) He understands how justificatory conversations work.
- (2) He is sincerely engaging in a justificatory conversation, not playing around or making a joke.
- (3) He has all of the background beliefs that we would expect someone to have in circumstances of his sort (which are perfectly ordinary). He has had the ordinary sort of experience with telephones, knows A as well as one ordinarily knows one's spouse, believes that nothing funny has been going on regarding his wife and her family or the telephone, etc.
- (4) He is not mentally deficient, failing to

put two and two together, or making a mistake. (5) He asks A why she thinks it was her mom, meaning thereby to engage in a justificatory conversation.

I find the described position *absurd*, much like that of a master chess player who means to engage in a game of chess, recognizes the position of his pieces on the board, doesn't make a mistake, and yet moves one of his pawns one square backwards and to the left. Such a thing can't be fully coherently imagined. If we grant that the person isn't mentally deficient, playing around, or making an error, then we are left with this:

A. He grasps the norms governing the activity.

B. He fully intends to engage in the activity.

C. He has the background information necessary to apply the norms, and he makes no mistake in doing so.

D. He does something which violates the norms governing the activity.

This is a clear case of pragmatic incoherence: someone who, intending to follow the norms, does something which – given his background information and competence – he takes the norms to forbid.

Only at stage II is A's spouse's behaviour pragmatically incoherent. Why not at stage I? At stage I, (A), (B), and (C) above are true. (D) isn't. So the difference must concern A's spouse's background information. At stage II, but not at stage I, he must believe something which – if true – would make the request for further reasons incorrect. The crucial question, then, is this: What does A's spouse believe at stage II but not at stage I? The answer is that at stage II he believes a great deal about how A arrived at the belief in question and about the likelihood that the belief, arrived at in that way on that occasion, will be true. More particularly, he believes (as any ordinary person would) (1) that there is no reason at all to suspect that A's

belief is false, and (2) that A possesses a background conception of the world sufficient to enable her to responsibly and correctly believe that this is so. Stage I of the example differs from stage II in this respect. I therefore suggest that it is this difference which explains why the second request for justifying reasons is pragmatically incoherent. An interlocutor regards a defendant's claim as a terminating claim when the interlocutor takes there to be no reason for doubt and takes the defendant responsibly (and correctly) to do so as well.

A similar point applies to the defendant. As we've seen, one natural reply to A's spouse's request would be this: 'Look, there's no reason to doubt it.' For this reply to be appropriate, A must believe that there is no such reason and must take herself to be responsible in so doing.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the defendant, too, regards a claim as terminating when she takes there to be no reason for doubt and takes herself to be responsible in so doing. When the interlocutor agrees on this, the conversation comes to a mutually satisfying conclusion.

What, then, is the relevant norm governing justificatory conversations? When both parties are proceeding correctly, both parties take the norm to be satisfied by taking there to be no reason to doubt the defendant's claim and taking the defendant to responsibly believe this as well. So the norm, it appears, is something to this effect:

Don't request further justifying reasons if the defendant correctly and responsibly takes there to be no reason for doubt; under such conditions the defendant need not provide further justifying reasons (though she must believe things which constitute such reasons).

Some clarification may be helpful. I mean to be using the phrase 'reasons for doubt' in an ordinary and natural way, the way in which it figures in our justificatory practice. As I understand it, the claim that there is no reason to doubt is an objective claim about what is the

case and what those things tell for or against. The claim asserts, in part, that nothing is the case which tells against the truth of the belief. (I will say more about this in the next section.) I take responsible belief, in this case, to require at least appropriate responsiveness to a sufficiently wide-ranging background conception of the world. (Again, I'll say more about this later.) So the suggested norm involves two sorts of conditions: (1) conditions pertaining to the defendant's state, and (2) fully objective conditions pertaining to what is the case in the world independently of either party's beliefs or other attitudes.

The norm's objective aspect leads to a distinction between mere *incorrectness* and *ridiculousness* in the interlocutor's behaviour. A's spouse's behaviour at stage II is ridiculous, insofar as it involves witting violation of the demands of the norm as he sees them, and his question is therefore appropriately dismissed in one of the ways discussed above. In contrast with this sort of case, however, an interlocutor can make an *incorrect* move despite having done his best to conform to the norm. Suppose, for instance, that the interlocutor incorrectly takes something to be the case which tells against the defendant's claim, and that he appeals to this consideration to support his request for further reasons. Then it would not be acceptable for the defendant to dismiss the request out of hand; she must explain to the interlocutor why the consideration is false, or why, if true, it doesn't tell against her claim. Here too, however, she need not provide further reasons for her claim. Rather, she needs to correct her interlocutor's misapprehension. So since a terminating claim is a claim for which the norms governing justificatory conversations do not require the defendant to offer further justifying reasons, a consideration *is* a terminating claim in a particular justificatory conversation if the defendant correctly and responsibly takes there to be no reason to doubt it. A consideration can be a terminating claim even if the interlocutor fails to recognize it as such.<sup>19</sup>

One important implication should be noted. The objective nature of the norm places a significant constraint upon anyone who would participate in a justificatory conversation. To do so, one must have beliefs about the world. Otherwise, it would not be possible for one to reach any conclusion about whether a terminating claim has been reached.

If this account is correct, then there is no incoherence in our justificatory practice. In order to attain a satisfactory position within this practice, one must believe things which tell in favour of whatever belief one has expressed. But it is nonetheless inappropriate for the interlocutor to go on requesting justifying reasons indefinitely. The norms governing the practice forbid demanding justifying reasons if the defendant correctly and responsibly believes that there is no reason to think that things are otherwise. Accordingly, the interlocutor should stop when he reaches a point at which he takes this to be so. If the interlocutor completely lacks relevant background beliefs, then he will never reach such a point. However, this simply reveals that he is not yet fit to participate in that (or perhaps any) justificatory conversation. Like a young child, what he requires is education, not more justifications: he needs to be told how things are. The persistent interlocutor thus either violates the norms governing the activity of justifying or else he displays incredible ignorance about the world. He does not reveal an incoherence in our justificatory practice.

#### IV. *Being Justified: a Localist Proposal*

The preceding section addressed only the structure of our justificatory practice, not the conditions one must meet in order to be justified. This section addresses the latter question.

First, a comment on my intentions. I will not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct application of the word 'justified', an 'analysis' of the concept of justification, or

a theory of the nature of the property of being justified. Rather, I will offer something like a Carnapian explication: a theoretical construction which may not perfectly match any pretheoretical notion, but which serves a certain philosophical purpose. The purpose, in this case, is to provide a ‘possibility proof’: to show how there could be an attainable epistemic status involving certain requirements and meeting certain desiderata, and how that status could figure in a coherent epistemic practice. My hope is that the constructed notion is similar enough to a familiar status to remove the worries prompted by the problem of the regress and illuminate our actual practice.

My proposal takes its lead from the structure and requirements manifested in our practice. However, I do not claim that one is justified if one performs, or is able to perform, in a way that is acceptable to all relevant participants in a justificatory conversation [Rorty 1979; Annis 1978]. I reject this view for three reasons. First, it implausibly relativizes an individual’s justificatory status to the conversational participants. For instance, it has the consequence that someone could be justified in holding a belief about the future on the basis of astrological considerations if all relevant parties to the conversation find such a defence acceptable. Second, and relatedly, it does not preserve an adequate connection between justification and truth. Finally, it does not square with our actual practices of justification and assessment, since we draw a distinction within our practice between actually being justified and merely being taken by all relevant parties to have successfully justified a belief. (Consider, for instance, cases in which we revise our assessment of someone’s belief upon later discovering that the offered reasons were false.)

Here, then, is how our practice can guide us in developing a theory of justification. When we take someone to be justified in virtue of having successfully justified a belief, it is because we take him or her to have performed in a way that meets certain requirements. A theory of

justification can therefore be developed by articulating those requirements. To put it sloganistically: to be justified is to be able to meet the requirements which structure our justificatory practice.

What we see in our practice is this. We do not judge someone to have successfully justified a belief unless we judge that she has defended it (or is able to defend it) by appealing to a consideration which there is no reason to doubt and which she responsibly takes there to be no reason to doubt, or to a series of reasons terminating with such a belief. And so long as she does not currently hold her belief on the basis of inadequate reasons or in some irresponsible or irrational way (such as wishful thinking), we would ordinarily judge someone who meets this requirement to be justified in believing as she does. In making such judgments, we are not advertent to the fact that we are *aware of* no reasons for doubt, but rather making an objective claim about the reasons that there are. If we were to become aware of reasons for doubt of which we had been ignorant, we would revise our evaluation of the person's belief accordingly. This is not to say that we would charge the person with irresponsible belief. But quite apart from the truth-value of the belief, we would feel that there was an inadequacy in the person's position.

Accordingly, I propose that for a person to be justified in believing as she does is, roughly, for her to be able to provide good reasons for her belief, ultimately by appealing to considerations which she responsibly and correctly takes there to be no reason to doubt. To develop this proposal, I will supplement the earlier requirements (2\*) and (3\*) with the following two-tiered requirement (4). For convenience, I will first restate (2\*) and (3\*). I will comment momentarily on how I understand the key terms in my proposal.

(2\*) In order to be justified in believing any P, one must be able to provide a good reason (or reasons) for believing it.

(3\*) In order to be justified in believing any P, one must be justified in believing the considerations to which one might appeal in support of believing it.

(4) It is a necessary condition for being justified in believing P that:

A. Base Clause

- a) there is no reason to doubt the truth of P,
- b) one is in a position to terminate a justificatory conversation by adverting, in a responsible way, to the claim that there is no reason to doubt the truth of P (or to something to that effect),
- c) one does not currently believe P on the basis of some bad reason or in an irresponsible or irrational way.

OR:

B. Adequate-Grounding Requirement

- a) one is able to defend believing P by appealing to a consideration Q, or to a chain of good reasons beginning with a consideration Q, which:
  - i) one believes
  - ii) is in fact a good reason for believing P (or a good reason for believing the next consideration in the chain of good reasons supporting P)
  - iii) meets conditions (4Aa) – (4Ac) (substituting ‘Q’ for ‘P’ as appropriate).

Several clarifications are in order.

First, though requirements (2\*) through (4) form the core of a viable notion of justification, they are not sufficient. For instance, meeting conditions (2\*), (3\*) and (4B) is not sufficient for being justified, since one could meet these conditions even if one currently bases one’s belief on some other, bad reason or holds it out of wishful thinking.<sup>20</sup>

Second, I nonetheless proceed on the assumption that satisfaction of conditions (2\*) and (4A) with regard to a belief P, the considerations to which one might appeal in defence of believing it, the considerations to which one might appeal in defence of believing those considerations, etc., is sufficient for being justified in believing P.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, for every belief P which satisfies (4A), condition (3\*) can be replaced with the requirement that one be able to provide a good reason for believing P which satisfies (2\*) and (4A). Concerns about conceptual circularity in the account can thus be averted, despite the fact that (3\*) requires that

one be *justified* in believing the considerations to which one might appeal in defence of the belief.

Third, several terms in these conditions require comment.

First, the notion of a *reason*. Reasons are considerations which tell for or against holding a given belief. As I mean to be using the notion here, whether a consideration P is an epistemic reason to believe Q is a matter of objective evidential relations between propositions. It does not depend upon what any individual or community believes about what tells in favour of what. A consideration is a *good* reason if its truth tells in favour of the truth of the proposition in question to an extent adequate to warrant one in believing the proposition on its basis. I leave it an open question what determines whether a consideration is a good reason, except that it will depend, at least in part, upon objective factors to the extent that relations of evidential support are an objective matter. The claim that there is (or is not) a reason of a certain sort is thus a claim about what is the case and what it tells for or against. To say that there is a (good) reason for holding a particular belief is to say that something is the case which tells (adequately) in favour of its truth. A *reason for doubt* is a consideration whose truth tells against the truth of the belief in question or against the reliability of the way in which it was acquired. So I understand the claim that there is no reason for doubt to mean, at least in part, that there are no true propositions which in fact tell against the truth of one's belief.<sup>22</sup> I will assume, for the purposes of this discussion, that this claim is sometimes true. (Certain forms of sceptical argumentation attempt to attack it, but they are not my present topic.)

The notion of 'telling against' which I have in mind is closely related to the notion of a *natural sign* or *indicator*. I do not yet have a favoured account of these notions. For my purposes here, three pretheoretical constraints on an account are relevant.

A. Instances of error, by themselves, are no sign or indicator of present falsehood. For example, the fact that — as it may be — someone in the Ukraine was deceived twenty-five years ago by a papier-mâché mock-up of a desk would not, taken by itself, tell against the truth of the proposition that there is a desk before me now.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, it is not a reason for doubt. (I take this verdict to accord with our ordinary judgments.) What is a sign or indicator of what depends upon causal connections in the world, and there are no appropriate connections in this case. Of course, certain statistical correlations may tell against the truth of a belief, but this is because they indicate underlying mechanisms or causal connections of an appropriate sort.

B. On this understanding of the notion of ‘telling against’, there is a significant difference between (1) a situation in which nothing is the case which tells against the truth of *p*, and (2) a situation in which one lacks any information regarding whether anything is the case which tells against the truth of *p*. In the latter case, it would be irresponsible to draw a conclusion about whether anything is the case which tells against the truth of *p*. Accordingly, as I mean to be using the term ‘reason for doubt’, if our best investigation yields no information either way, then the correct answer to the question, ‘Is there any reason to doubt that there is an even number of electrons in the universe?’ is, ‘I don’t know.’ The correctness of this answer does not itself provide one with a reason to doubt, but rather to suspend judgment.

C. As perhaps goes without saying, the notion of ‘telling against’ is not one of logical entailment. Something can tell against the truth of *p* even when *p* is true. And it is logically possible for there to be nothing which tells against the truth of *p* and yet for *p* to be false. This last point is significant, because it ensures that satisfaction of requirement (4A) does not entail the truth of one’s belief. The account thus respects the pretheoretical idea that being justified is compatible with false belief.

Given this conception of reasons for belief and doubt, the proposed account satisfies the demand that justification be truth-conducive. In particular, satisfaction of requirement (4A) is what does the trick. When — as (4A) requires — there is no reason for doubt, that constitutes an excellent reason for believing as one does. Given a law-governed, non-atomistic world such as ours, if nothing at all is the case which tells against the truth of P, then it is extremely likely, in an appropriately objective sense, that P is true. Requirement (4) thus guarantees that if one has a justified belief, it is highly likely that one's belief is true.

A second crucial notion requiring clarification is the notion of *responsibility*. In accordance with my initial assumption that justification requires responsible belief, (4A) requires that one be in a position to *responsibly* defend one's belief by appealing to the fact that there is no reason for doubt. This in turn requires that one meet the requirements for responsibly believing that there is no reason for doubt. This requires one not to have overlooked any relevant evidence, or to have failed to seek out any further evidence, which one reasonably could be blamed for failing to take into account. Furthermore, it requires appropriate sensitivity to one's background conception, in two regards. First, one should not form the belief that there is no reason for doubt unless one's background conception is sufficiently rich and appropriate in its details. Second, one must not believe that there is no reason for doubt despite believing something which one takes to be a good reason for doubt or which one could be blamed for failing to take to be such a reason.

We often meet these requirements. Consider, for instance, an ordinary case in which you take there to be no reason to doubt that you are seeing a white car. In many such cases, you could hardly be faulted for having failed to undertake further investigations or be charged with negligently having overlooked something. Likewise, in many such cases you have a sufficiently

rich and appropriate background conception and don't believe anything which you take to be, or could be blamed for failing to take to be, a good reason for doubt.

It might be suggested that one couldn't responsibly believe that there is no reason for doubt unless one did so on the basis of an argument from one's total conception of the world. If that were right, two problems would arise. First, a vicious regress of basing relations would be induced. Second, it is implausible that we could actually make use of our total background conception in this way. Fortunately, however, the suggestion is incorrect. One can responsibly hold a belief without holding it on the basis of an argument, since appropriate sensitivity to the relevant aspects of one's background conception requires only that one's belief-forming dispositions be responsive to the presence, or absence, of the relevant factors in one's background conception [McDowell 1998a, 1998b].

I turn now to a last issue relating to requirements (2\*) – (4). After addressing it, I will put all the pieces together. (2\*) requires that one be able to provide a good reason for one's belief. How can this requirement be met in a case satisfying condition (4A), that is, a case in which one is in a position to terminate a justificatory conversation by adverting, in a responsible way, to the claim that there is no reason to doubt the truth of the belief in question? The answer is that if one correctly and responsibly believes that there is no reason for doubt and understands that the fact that there is no reason for doubt provides an excellent reason for belief, then one can support one's belief by adverting to this fact. Consequently, one can satisfy (2\*) by being in a position to correctly and responsibly point out that there is no reason for doubting one's belief.

A problem can seem to arise regarding justificatory appeals to the claim that there is no reason for doubt. By requirement (3\*), the claim that there is no reason for doubt can't do any

justificatory work unless one is justified in believing it. By (2\*), this requires that one be able to provide a good reason for believing it.<sup>24</sup> But how could one possibly do so?

The answer is perhaps surprising. Here, too, one is able to provide a reason in virtue of satisfying condition (4A). To see this, consider that if one's belief, that there is no reason to doubt P, is true, then it will also be the case that there is no reason to doubt *it*. For if there were reason to doubt it, then it wouldn't be true after all, since anything which tells against the claim that there is no reason to doubt P constitutes a reason to doubt P (even if only a very weak one). Consequently, if one satisfies (4A), then one is in a position to provide a good reason for *both* one's belief P and one's belief that there is no reason to doubt P. In both cases one can note that there is no reason to doubt.

Such a justificatory defence would not be question-begging. Take P to be a contingent claim about the world which does not involve any claims about reasons. P is manifestly distinct from *there is no reason to doubt that P*, since the latter makes a claim about what else is the case and what it tells for or against. Consequently, the claims *there is no reason to doubt P* and *there is no reason to doubt that there is no reason to doubt P* are distinct as well; each says that nothing is the case which tells against the truth of a claim, but the relevant claims differ in the two cases. Thus, *there is no reason to doubt P* asserts, roughly, that nothing is the case which tells against the truth of P, while *there is no reason to doubt that there is no reason to doubt P* asserts, roughly, that nothing is the case which tells in favour of something's being the case which tells against the truth of P. It is true that on my assumptions these two claims will be materially equivalent in any world like ours. However, that would not suffice to show that the envisioned justificatory move is question-begging.<sup>25</sup>

Let us consider, then, the justificatory status of the higher-order belief that there is no reason to doubt the belief that there is no reason to doubt P. By requirements (2\*) and (3\*), one must be able to provide a reason for this belief, a reason which one is justified in believing. In virtue of satisfying condition (4A) one is in a position to do so, simply by pointing out that there is no reason to doubt *it*. That claim, in turn, may be supported in the same way, and so on and so on. The ability to provide a good reason for each higher-level belief is thus guaranteed in the very same way as one's ability to support the bottom-level belief about the world, the belief P. One is able to justify each of them in virtue of responsibly and correctly believing that there are no reasons for doubt regarding the truth of P.

There are two crucial points here. First, there is no structural or logical bar to following out this series of reasons infinitely. Consequently, in virtue of understanding the nature of epistemic reasons and correctly believing that there is no reason to doubt P, one comes to occupy an ideal position: starting from the correct and responsible claim that there is no reason to doubt P, one can always (in principle) generate the next claim in the series, and so on, and each of these beliefs will be both true and responsibly held. Once you have the responsible and correct belief that there is no reason to doubt that p, the rest comes for free.<sup>26</sup>

Second, I have suggested that satisfying (2\*) and (4A) at each step is *sufficient* for being justified. If this is correct, then an important result emerges: one's beliefs would remain justified if one stopped at any given point in the series. Nothing would, so to speak, 'hang in the air.' Wherever one stops, it will be with a claim which is responsibly believed and which there is no reason to doubt. And one would be in a position to generate a true, good reason for believing it which in turn satisfies the relevant conditions. Consequently, one can be justified in believing that there is no reason for doubt (regarding p) — and so in believing p — *in virtue of responsibly*

*and correctly believing that there is no reason for doubt regarding p and understanding how the relevant reasons work.*

This proposal might raise two worries.

First, it might be wondered whether we are psychologically capable of forming the relevant beliefs. I don't think that this is a serious concern. It is true that the mind boggles after the third or fourth iteration of 'there is no reason to doubt'. However, we are capable of following out the series indefinitely by using demonstrative or pronominal formulations. Consider, for instance, the following dialogue: A. 'There's no reason to doubt p.' B. 'Why do you believe that?' A. 'Well, there's no reason to doubt it.' B. 'Why do you believe *that*?' A. 'Because there is no reason to doubt *it*.' This conversation could go on interminably, if it weren't for the finitude of A and B's life spans.

Second, it might be worried that the view requires us to have an infinite number of beliefs. It is not clear how problematic, if at all, this would be [cf. Klein 1999]. Regardless, however, the proposal does not require it. What the proposal requires is that one currently possess a certain ability: the ability to justify one's belief by offering good reasons, for which one can offer good reasons, etc. It may be that on certain views of belief, one would want to say that in order to have this ability, one must currently have all of those beliefs (perhaps 'implicitly'). But for our purposes here, we don't need to take a stand either way. What matters is that this is an ability which we can possess.

The upshot, then, is that in the ideal case, if one satisfies (4A) with regard to a given belief, one can thereby fully satisfy the demands of (2\*) and (3\*) as well. Consequently, even if the interplay of (2\*) and (3\*) did generate a justificatory regress, or even if one gave into the

demands of a persistent interlocutor, one could *in principle* still have justified beliefs. Someone who satisfies (4A) is in a position which is fully secure.

Admittedly, few ordinary people will recognize the availability of the justificatory moves I have been discussing. However, this does not matter. Their beliefs can be justified nonetheless. Here's why. Condition (4A) requires one to be in a position to responsibly advert to the claim that there is no reason to doubt P. This requires one to have an appropriately rich background conception, a set of beliefs about the world which is sufficiently large and wide-ranging. Suppose that one meets condition (4A) with regard to each of those background beliefs as well. And so on. As a result one will have a rich, complex network of background beliefs, all of which satisfy (4A). Two important points should be noted about this situation. First, if one has such a network of background beliefs, then it will also be the case that for each belief in the network, one will believe other things which one takes to tell in favour of its truth. Second, by (4A) it will actually be the case that there is no reason to doubt each of the beliefs in the background set. Given how our world works, then, for any given belief P in the set there will be other considerations about the world which one believes, which one takes to tell in favour of the truth of P, and which *do* tell in favour of the truth of P. As a consequence, one will meet requirement (2\*) with regard to each belief in the set. Given the assumption that satisfaction of (2\*) and (4A) with regard to the belief in question, the beliefs one might appeal to in its support, and so on, is sufficient for being justified, the conditions of the proposed account of justification are therefore met, for each belief in the set, if one possesses a set of responsibly held beliefs which there is no reason to doubt, each of which it would be responsible for one to believe there to be no reason to doubt, and which evidentially interlock in an appropriate manner. Thus an

ordinary person can have justified beliefs, on the proposed view, simply in virtue of possessing a sufficiently rich set of background beliefs satisfying conditions (2\*) and (4A).

The suggestion, then, is this. An ordinary person has justified beliefs in virtue of having a rich and wide-ranging set of beliefs, each of which the person is in a position to correctly and responsibly take there to be no reason to doubt and for each of which the person possesses some other belief(s), also in the set, which the person correctly and responsibly takes to support the truth of the belief in question. The person is justified in holding each member of such a set. And the person's remaining empirical beliefs are justified, if they are, in virtue of the person's ability to defend them by making appropriate use of considerations in the set.

#### V. *The Persistent Interlocutor Redux?*

This view can appear vulnerable to the problem of the persistent interlocutor. (2\*) requires that one be able, with regard to each belief in the set, to provide a good reason for holding it. Suppose, then, that a persistent interlocutor requested reasons for these beliefs. Wouldn't an ordinary person ultimately be forced to offer a circular defence? No. The key here is the local structure of the activity of justifying, as discussed in sections II and III. As we have seen, serious and sincere engagement in the activity of justifying requires you to provide justifying reasons until you hit a terminating claim, at which point you may dismiss the request for further reasons but must believe things which tell in the claim's favour. If you satisfy (4A) with regard to the terminating claim and an appropriate range of other beliefs, then you *do* believe things which tell in the claim's favour, and you are consequently able to offer good reasons for believing as you do. However, the structure of the activity of justifying does not require you to exercise this ability. You are therefore fully able to succeed in the activity of

justifying. The persistent interlocutor doesn't get a foothold. (As should be plain, this amounts to a more detailed specification of the situation sketched at the end of section II.)

This appeal to the structure of our justificatory practice can seem inadequate to the problem. For one can imagine the persistent interlocutor saying something like this: 'I'm not challenging your beliefs or your entitlement to hold them; I'm not engaging in the justificatory form of conversation at all. I just want to know what reasons you could possibly have for your beliefs. So it is grandstanding to say that you aren't required to reply.' And he might continue, 'If you do reply, you will either go in a circle or stop arbitrarily. That indicates that your situation is unsatisfactory.'

There are several points to be made here.

First, if the proposed account of justification is accepted, then the alleged shortcoming in one's situation does not have any relevance for the justificatory status of one's beliefs. If one meets (2\*) – (4A), the beliefs in question are justified.

Second, even if we ignore the first point, there is nothing unsatisfactory or problematic about the situation if one has a set of beliefs of the requisite sort. None of the beliefs is held on the basis of a circular argument, since no basing relations have yet been established.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, each belief in the set is responsibly held, each is likely to be true, and for each belief, one has the ability to offer good reasons for holding it — reasons to which the same points apply. What more could be wanted?

Third, even if one did take up the challenge, it is not true that one would have no choice but to go in a circle or stop arbitrarily, since there is also the possibility, in principle, of appealing to the series of higher-order 'no reason to doubt' claims. That one is in a position to defend one's belief in this way highlights the epistemological satisfactoriness of one's situation.

Fourth, it is not true that if one stops providing reasons when our practice permits one to stop, one stops arbitrarily. For it is not epistemologically arbitrary that *that* is where our practice entitles us to stop.

This point should be emphasized. There is some tendency to think that the structure of our justificatory practice is just a matter of how we happen to do things, shaped perhaps by considerations of convenience and cultural taste but purely arbitrary from an epistemological point of view. This is not so. Imagine a justificatory conversation between two ideally rational individuals who accept the proposed account of justification and recognize that (as I argued earlier) someone who satisfies condition (4A) is in a position which is fully secure. Suppose that the defendant in this conversation appeals to a consideration which both parties take the defendant to believe in a way that satisfies condition (4A). In that case both parties — insofar as they are rational — will take it to be evident that the defendant fully satisfies conditions (2\*) – (4). For this reason, there would no longer be any point in continuing the justificatory conversation. And this wouldn't be for reasons of mere practical convenience or politeness. The point of articulating reasons in defence of one's belief is to establish that one is justified in believing as one does. But both parties would take it to be established that the defendant is justified in believing as he does in virtue of satisfying (2\*) – (4). Consequently, it would be pointless in this situation to follow the persistent interlocutor in requesting further justifying reasons. A justificatory conversation between ideally rational individuals who accept requirements (2\*) – (4) would therefore have precisely the structure exhibited in our ordinary practice. This consideration rationalizes the structure of our practice. For suppose that the proposed account of justification is correct. In that case, the structure of our practice is the structure that would be displayed in the practice of a fully rational person who fully understood

the correct account of justification. So if the proposed account is correct and we meet conditions (2\*) – (4) with regard to an appropriate set of beliefs, there is nothing problematic, unsatisfying, or arbitrary about stopping exactly where our ordinary practice permits us to stop.

Finally, as I noted above, the persistent interlocutor can be seen as suggesting that when an epistemologist asks, ‘What’s your reason for believing that?’, she shouldn’t be understood as engaging in the justificatory form of conversation, but rather as attempting to uncover the structure of our reasons for our beliefs in order to discover in virtue of what our beliefs are justified [Chisholm 1982: 130-1]. If my proposal is correct, however, then this is the wrong approach: there is nothing to be learned about justification by going beyond the sorts of justifications which are offered and accepted in our ordinary practice. For on my proposal, nothing lies behind the ordinary sorts of justifications except our background conception of the world and the complex, crisscrossing relations of mutual evidential support which we recognize to hold amongst the propositions making up that conception. What it is to be justified can be seen on the surface of our practice.

## VI. *Localism and Its Competitors*

I have argued that if we conceive of being justified as a matter of possessing an appropriate set of abilities to justify our beliefs, then we need not fear a vicious regress from the claim that being justified requires the ability to provide good reasons for one’s beliefs. The basic idea, familiar from Wittgenstein and others, is that the provision of justifying reasons appropriately terminates when one reaches considerations which are, so to speak, held fast by one’s background conception of the world. I have attempted to develop this idea in a way which is compatible with the thought that justification, though not truth-entailing, is truth-conducive.

My suggestion is that one is justified primarily in virtue of the obtaining of a complex fact: the world is such, and one's beliefs and rational capacities are such, that one is able to successfully defend one's belief, ultimately by appealing to considerations which one correctly and responsibly takes to be beyond doubt.

This is merely an advertisement for a developed account. Many questions remain. For instance, our justificatory practices strongly suggest that being justified also requires the ability to overcome a certain range of objections to one's belief. But precisely which objections are these? To what extent, if at all, do the beliefs of one's interlocutors, or of some other parties, affect the range of relevant objections? Similarly, it seems that one can sometimes be justified in holding beliefs which there is, and which one recognizes there to be, some reason to doubt. Requirement (4B) allows for this possibility. But how strong must one's evidence be in these cases? To what extent, if at all, do conversational, practical, conventional or institutional factors play a role here? A fully developed account would answer these questions.

Even without a full development, however, my approach differs importantly from contemporary infinitist, coherentist, and foundationalist views.

With infinitism, it shares this much: there is a fully satisfying solution to the regress of justification only because there is an infinite, non-circular series of reasons which is in principle available for each of our justified beliefs. Unlike the infinitist, however, I have argued that a person can be justified in virtue of being able to provide good, justified reasons in defence of a belief, even if she is not in fact prepared to appeal to this infinite series of reasons.

My proposal is akin to what Michael Williams [1996: 114ff.; 1999] has called 'formal' or 'structural' foundationalism, since it holds that on any particular occasion the activity of justifying terminates with beliefs which need no justificatory defence. However, my proposal

rejects the core claim of contemporary foundationalism. According to contemporary ‘minimal’ foundationalists, there are *basic beliefs* whose positive justificatory status does not depend upon one's having any other justified beliefs [Alston 1989; Pryor 2000]. On the view I have proposed, coherentists are right that there is no such thing.

Unlike standard forms of coherentism, however, my proposal denies that merely having a coherent belief system is sufficient for being justified; one must possess a set of beliefs which there is no reason to doubt and which otherwise satisfy requirement (4A), and one can't be justified in holding any given belief unless one is able to provide good reasons for holding it. Moreover, I deny that one's total belief system must cohere in order for any particular belief to be justified. Non-integrated beliefs will be justificatorily irrelevant if they are evidentially irrelevant to the truth of the belief in question and to that of any relevant background beliefs, and even substantial incoherence in the total system is compatible with satisfying (2\*) – (4A) with regard to particular beliefs.

Furthermore, because of the way in which my proposal relates justificatory status to the real-world circumstances, it allows perception to play a justificatory role denied by most coherence theories. For instance, on my proposal the *fact* that one is seeing a tomato can be justificatorily relevant: when one takes there to be no reason to doubt that one is seeing a tomato, the real world circumstances can make the difference between success and failure if one attempts to justify the belief that there is a tomato there by offering, as a terminating claim, that one sees it. If one is not in fact seeing a tomato, then (given how our world works) something else will be the case which tells against the truth of one's claim to see a tomato. Consequently, one will be wrong to take there to be no reason to doubt that one is seeing a tomato, and so one's belief that one is seeing a tomato will not be justified. One's attempted justification will therefore fail.

Unlike standard forms of foundationalism, however, I have denied that any beliefs are justified purely in virtue of one's sensory experiences and independently of one's ability to offer reasons for holding them. Even perceptual experience does not, by itself, constitute a fundamental justificatory anchor.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This problem goes back at least to the ‘Modes of Agrippa’ described by Sextus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book I chapter xv.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1980’s views of this broad sort were often termed ‘contextualist’. I use the name ‘localist’ to distinguish my view from more recent contextualist accounts of the semantics of ‘know’ and its cognates. My view does not require or involve a contextualist semantics for any term of epistemic appraisal.

<sup>3</sup> Theories in this broad tradition are defended by Annis [1978] and Williams [1977, 1996, 1999].

<sup>4</sup> This point is a corollary of the truth-conduciveness of epistemic justification. Responsible or blameless belief does not, merely as such, make it any more likely that one's belief is true.

<sup>5</sup> There are cases in which one plausibly could believe an infinite number of propositions which form a series such that the truth of each member would tell in favour of the truth of its predecessor. However, the mere fact that one believes such a series of propositions, or is prepared to appeal to them in defence of a given belief, does not justify one in holding that belief. For example [Oakley1976], suppose that someone believes that there is a one inch red carpet stretching from his front door. He defends this by appealing to the claim that there is a two inch red carpet stretching from his front door. He defends this latter claim by appealing to the claim that there is a three inch red carpet stretching from his front door. And so on. It should be plain that the mere fact that he is prepared to go on infinitely in this vein does nothing at all to justify his initial belief, because possessing an infinite series of this sort does not make it any more likely that one's belief is true. As John Post has shown, an infinite series of propositions, each of which, if true, would tell in favour of the truth of its predecessor in the series, can be constructed for any arbitrary contingent proposition at all [1980].

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<sup>6</sup> For an extended exploration and defence of this thought, see [Leite 2004]. My emphasis upon the ability to provide reasons should not be taken too literally. The requirement I have in mind is satisfied if a person is incapable of communicating his thoughts because of disability but is capable of thinking about reasons and would cite good reasons to himself when deliberating about whether and why he should believe as he does [Leite 2004, sect. IV]. Some readers may be troubled by the implication that very young children and nonhuman animals don't have justified beliefs. This reaction looks less pressing if the notion of justification that I have in mind is kept clearly in view. Human adults have capacities which other animals and young children lack. We consequently expect more of them. It thus shouldn't be surprising that there are epistemic statuses which nonhuman animals and young children can't possess. In particular, as I have argued elsewhere, a creature is not even an appropriate candidate for the form of epistemic appraisal that is my topic unless it is able to hold its beliefs on the basis of particular reasons. But young children and at least many nonhuman animals lack this ability [Leite 2004, sect. III and V]. (However this may be, the question of the very *coherence* of my response to the problem of the regress remains of interest.)

<sup>7</sup> I reject this view in my [2004] and grant it here only for the sake of argument. It plays no role in the account of justification proposed in section IV of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Any account involving a requirement like (3) will be conceptually circular. However, it may provide illumination nonetheless by characterizing what it is to be justified in holding a *particular* belief. The ultimate hope, fulfilled in section IV, is to achieve a more general account by replacing an analogue of (3) with something non-circular.

<sup>9</sup> This point will raise a problem for Klein's 'infinetist' solution, if he accepts a version of requirement (1).

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<sup>10</sup> Neither Brandom nor Williams hold that default entitlement, in the absence of motivated challenges, is sufficient for being justified; one's belief must also have been formed in a reliable manner. This is how they propose to respect the link between justification and truth.

<sup>11</sup> This is the minimal lesson of Bonjour's example of Norman, who finds beliefs popping into his head which are in fact true and caused by a reliably faculty, but for which he cannot provide any reasons [Bonjour 1985: 41-45].

<sup>12</sup> A clarification. The modal phrase 'to which one might appeal' is intended to capture the modality involved in the ability to provide good reasons. This requirement should not be read as:

(3\*A) If S is justified in believing  $p$ , then, for all  $q$ , if it's possible that S appeals to  $q$  to justify believing  $p$ , then S is justified in believing  $q$ .

(3\*A) is absurdly strong. For almost any  $q$  you like, it is logically and metaphysically possible that S appeals to it to justify believing  $p$ . So (3\*A) entails that in order to be justified in believing  $p$ , one must be justified in believing almost every  $q$ . But not every  $q$  is relevant to one's possession of the ability demanded by requirement (2\*). By contrast, the following requirement, (3\*B), is too weak.

(3\*B) If S is justified in believing  $p$ , then, for all  $q$ , if S actually appeals to  $q$  to justify believing  $p$ , then S is justified in believing  $q$ .

Suppose (i) that S believes that  $p$ , (ii) that if asked S would appeal to  $q$  (and to nothing else) in order to justify believing  $p$ , and (iii)  $q$  is in fact a good reason for believing  $p$ . So far, then, S satisfies requirement (2\*). Suppose, however, that S is not justified in believing  $q$ . Intuitively, then, S is not justified in believing  $p$  either. That's part of what requirement (3\*) is meant to capture. (3\*B) does not yield this result, however. For

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suppose that S never actually appeals to  $q$  to justify believing  $p$ . Then, according to (3\*B), S's being justified in believing  $p$  does not require S's being justified in believing  $q$ . So (3\*B) likewise fails to capture the set of beliefs that underwrite one's possession of the ability required by (2\*). What we need is therefore something in between. That's the intuitive idea that (3\*) aims to capture. Hold fixed all of S's other beliefs and the real-world circumstances. Now consider all of the propositions which S would – if he were sincere and made no mistakes – put on a list of things which are true and which support believing  $p$ . If S already bases his belief upon a proposition on that list, then he must be justified in believing that proposition. If it is determinate that he would appeal to a particular proposition  $q$  (all else equal) to justify his belief, then he must be justified in believing that proposition. If it is not determinate what he would say if asked to justify believing  $p$ , he must (at least) be justified in believing some of the propositions on the list. The formulation of (3\*) is designed to accommodate, in a brief formulation, all three cases. To put it another way, the person must be justified in holding whatever beliefs relevantly figure in the ability that satisfies (2\*).

<sup>13</sup> We engage in such conversations as defendants when we sincerely wish to justify a belief, not merely to convince, satisfy, or please our interlocutors. And we most often engage in them as interlocutors when we wish to determine whether the speaker is justified in believing as she does or, by considering her reasons, to determine whether, and why, we should or shouldn't hold the same belief ourselves.

<sup>14</sup> In the imagined context this question would be a less formal way of asking 'What reason do you have to believe that?' I use the less formal expression in order to make the example as realistic and natural as possible. The less formal question can also be used to

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request an explanation for someone's belief, where the explanation may or may not involve giving reasons. The relation between the purely explanatory usage and the justificatory usage is unclear; for my purposes here, the request for reasons (where that may also involve an explanatory dimension) is what is relevant.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, A could simply refuse to enter into the justificatory exchange, e.g., because she is running late, but that is another matter.

<sup>16</sup> Brandom could allow that certain background beliefs are required for *semantic* reasons: without appropriate background beliefs, perhaps, one could not count as having a belief with precisely that content. However, Brandom's semantic constraints allow that one could have a belief even if one is not in a position to articulate any reasons in its favour, so they do not satisfy the demands which we see in our practice.

To make the point vivid, consider Brandom's archaeologist who can reliably sort Toltec and Olmec pottery without being able to provide any reasons in favour of her sorting, not even the obvious points that she trained with expert archaeologists, has had long experience in these matters, and has developed a superb track record [Brandom 2000]. Leaving aside the question of whether this person possesses knowledge (or justified belief), consider how you would actually react to her. Given her inability to support her claims, you would regard them with scepticism until you found out about her training and record. And if you did find out about her training and record, you would regard her as a marvel, a kind of idiot savant. For of course there *are* articulable differences between Toltec and Olmec pottery, and in her training they must have been made apparent to her. Why, then, can't she indicate what they are? Moreover, if she simply does not believe that she has a good track record or is generally any good at

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sorting ancient Mezo-American pottery (for instance, if she withholds judgment about the matter), then it would seem that her confidence in her sorting is dogmatic from her own point of view. She is, in this regard, a remarkable indicating device, not at all what we would ordinarily regard as a responsible, non-dogmatic believer. We would not look kindly on her blunt dismissal of our request for reasons.

<sup>17</sup> It is natural to think that terminating claims are points at which the defendant and interlocutor are, in some sense, in agreement. Taken literally, however, this suggestion is incorrect. At stage II, for example, there was no prior agreement between A and A's spouse about the truth of A's claim. Moreover, antecedent agreement is not sufficient for a terminating claim. For example, consider the case in which A's spouse already believes (at stage I) that A's sister dislikes her job, but also believes that A is likely to believe this in an unsatisfactory way.

Similar points defeat the suggestion that a terminating claim is reached just when the interlocutor, seeing no shortcoming in the defendant's belief, believes the defendant. The suggested condition is not sufficient, since A's claim at stage I might meet this requirement, but her spouse's request for reasons would still be perfectly legitimate. Furthermore, actual agreement is not necessary even after the fact. Suppose, for instance, that at stage II A's spouse believes there to be no reason whatsoever to suspect A's belief of falsehood or irresponsibility, but irrationally refuses to believe A's claim nonetheless. In that case no actual agreement would have been secured. Still, if all else were equal, it would be objectionable for A's spouse to request justifying reasons. A could legitimately respond by brushing off the request.

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<sup>18</sup> This reply will not be appropriate in every case in which the defendant takes there to be no reason for doubt. For instance, it would be dogmatic for A to reply in this way if her spouse were convinced that there *is* a reason for suspecting that her belief is false. I touch on this complication below. A claim may be a terminating claim, insofar as the defendant need not offer further reasons in support of its truth, even if it would be inappropriate for the defendant to react dismissively to the interlocutor's request.

<sup>19</sup> The example I've been discussing can be understood in such a way that A's request at stage I is *incorrect* (though not ridiculous) because A correctly and responsibly believes there to be no reason to doubt that her sister is unhappy with her job. This is not mandatory, however, and for my purposes here the example should not be understood in this way.

<sup>20</sup> It may also be that in some cases being justified requires the ability to reply to some appropriate range of objections. This is not germane to my purposes here.

<sup>21</sup> Again, this may be a slight idealization, as noted above. Nothing important for my purposes here turns on this issue.

<sup>22</sup> In the interest of clarity, I leave aside complications concerning the reliability of the way in which one formed the belief. It should be assumed throughout the following discussion that no reasons for doubt of this sort are present.

<sup>23</sup> Whether one agrees with this claim is, to a certain extent, purely a terminological issue. The proposed view works as advertised even if one rejects this claim, so long as one agrees that: (1) whether there is reason for doubt depends on what is the case and what it tells for or against, (2) that there are some cases in which the world is such, and

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the belief was formed in such a way, that there are in fact no reasons for doubt, and (3) that one can sometimes responsibly believe that one is in such a case.

<sup>24</sup> It should be kept in mind here that given our rejection of (1), it is not required that one already hold this belief on the basis of good reasons.

<sup>25</sup> It might be objected here that the two propositions also share a truthmaker (or are true in virtue of the very same facts). However, even if we grant this, the charge of question-begging doesn't follow. Two propositions can be materially equivalent (or indeed mutually entailing) and share a truth-maker, and yet it can be perfectly acceptable to appeal to one in defense of believing the other. Consider, for instance, the following exchange. A: 'This square's area is 25 feet.' B: 'How do you know?' A: 'Its side is 5 feet long.' Obviously, A's reply is not question-begging. (If, on the other hand, one wanted to slice truthmakers so thinly that these two propositions have distinct truthmakers, then a substantial case would have to be made for the claim that "There is no reason to doubt p" and "There is no reason to doubt that there is no reason to doubt p" share a truthmaker at all.) I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this issue, and to Jonathan Weinberg for helpful discussion.

<sup>26</sup> One might have qualms about whether the propositions involved would be too complex for us to handle. I will return to this issue shortly.

<sup>27</sup> Again, it is important to keep in mind that requirement (1) has been rejected.

<sup>28</sup> I would like to thank Luca Ferrero, Mark Kaplan, Ram Neta, Fred Schmitt, and Jonathan Weinberg for comments and discussion.

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