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EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY: AN ESSAY ON THE PROBLEM OF META-JUSTIFICATION

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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Another first principle is — *That the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious.* If any man should demand a proof of this, it is impossible to satisfy him. For, suppose it should be mathematically demonstrated, this would signify nothing in this case; because, to judge of a demonstration, a man must trust his faculties, and take for granted the very thing in question.

ABSTRACT

Epistemic circularity is, roughly stated, a property of an argument such that its conclusion must be true if one may be said to have a justified belief in its premises. An example is an argument for the general reliability of sense-perception that makes use of sensory beliefs among its premises; as William Alston has pointed out, epistemic circularity poses a difficult problem for defending the reliability of sense-perception. It is also a key element in for a related (and broader) meta-epistemological problem, dubbed here "The Problem of Meta-Justification." First we pose a question: how can we ultimately justify our standards of justification? The difficulty can be neatly stated in the form of a Meta-Regress Argument similar to the classic regress argument for foundationalism. The options offered by the Meta-Regress Argument are: self-support meta-foundationalism, meta-coherentism, meta-regressism, strict particularism, strict methodism, and meta-skepticism.

One might attempt to defuse the threat of epistemic circularity by attempting to show it to be "virtuous," rather than vicious. But no one has adequately argued that epistemic circularity is indeed virtuous, and several arguments can be deployed
showing it to be vicious. Meta-coherentists, drawing on insights related to the
Method of Reflective Equilibrium, might try to find ways to mitigate the viciousness;
but their attempts fail. Varieties of particularism and methodism, two positions on
the Problem of the Criterion, might also be offered as a way to escape epistemic
circularity; but these views too fall prey to serious objections.

The results of Chapters 1-3 of this dissertation, sketched above, appear to
support meta-skepticism. It is possible, however, that there are some beliefs that are
epistemically rational but nonjustified (i.e., neither justified nor unjustified). Such
beliefs can support justification standards without themselves being justified. In this
way, meta-skepticism can be avoided. This solution to the Problem of
Meta-Justification is developed in Chapter 4 in a way that owes a heavy debt to the
epistemology of the great Scots philosopher, Thomas Reid.
Dedicated to my mother
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my adviser, Professor George Pappas, for his help, criticism, and patience. I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee, George Schumm and Marshall Swain. All three committee members made comments that led to substantial improvements. A few, but far from all, of these comments are noted in the text and footnotes. George Schumm also made numerous proofreading corrections, for which I am grateful.

I would also like to express my gratitude to some other philosophy department professors and to some graduate students (including Robert Kraut, Joe Salerno, and Ty Lightner), as well as members of an internet discussion group, the Association for Systematic Philosophy.

Hearty thanks to Jimmy Wales for allowing me time off work to finish (and for giving me an extra incentive to finish), and thanks to Jake Rogers for help proofreading a penultimate draft.

Thanks to Carolyn Cutler for encouraging me to teach fiddle for a living for a while; following that good advice gave me the time and money to finish.

Finally, I wish to thank my mother, Lana Sanger, and some other people (especially Margarita Zagirova), for encouraging me to finish.
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INTRODUCTION

Ever eager to enforce a requirement that all philosophical claims be justified, philosophers are apt to run into a difficult predicament: that of requiring argument for the reliability of the most fundamental sources of our knowledge. Why this is a difficult predicament can be explained in short order, with a sort of example that will be familiar to most philosophers.

Suppose John is defending the possibility of perceptual knowledge against Dave's skeptical attacks. Dave brings up round towers appearing square at a distance, vivid dreams, evil deceiving demons, and brains in vats. The embattled John continually falls back on one sort of assertion: if it seems to him he perceives something, and the conditions are as good as he could ask for, then he is justified in believing what he perceives, despite strange doubts to the contrary. Dave finally decides to call John's bluff: "You keep asserting that your best perceptual appearance claims are veridical; all right, now give me an argument for your assertion. I don't have to keep bringing up different grounds for doubt; all I want you to do is to justify your assertion."

John agrees (no doubt due to his lack of experience with the likes of Dave). "Let's take the sense of sight as an example. Well, just yesterday I was walking home
and I thought I saw my good friend Mary on a doorstep nearby. As I got closer I confirmed that it was Mary. And, once, I was wandering around in the biology department and saw something greenish through a glass doorway that looked like a frog. I went into the room and both smelled and heard, and got a good look at that frog. And of course these are only a few examples. The point is that over and over, it appears to us that we see, or hear, or smell something, and then later we come to a position where we can confirm that what we thought we perceived was indeed the case. This is how anyone knows that his best perceptual appearance claims are veridical. None of your skeptical doubts constitutes any good reason to doubt this."

Dave, having received an expected answer, springs his trap: "But look here. You used your senses to confirm what your senses told you; in order to confirm each perceptual appearance claim, you made one or more further perceptual claims. So you are begging the question. If you are permitted simply to assert that you 'confirmed' (by your senses) that it was Mary in the doorway, then you are taking for granted, indeed, that your best perceptual appearance claims are veridical. But that's precisely the claim I asked you to support."

John's mode of arguing involves what has, within the last twenty years, come to be called epistemic circularity. On one rough formulation, an argument is epistemically circular when having a justified belief in the premises of the argument requires already having a justified belief in the conclusion. Thus the argument is not circular in the ordinary sense. But an appropriate response to an epistemically
circular argument is always, "What is the point of offering this argument? If you think it is successful, you didn't have to present it at all."

This dissertation is a study of epistemic circularity, especially as it applies to arguments for fundamental standards of justified belief. The focus is on epistemic circularity per se, an abstract or reoccurring phenomenon that problems such as Cartesian skepticism and the problem of other minds have in common. In this regard my project might be compared to a study of regress arguments: such arguments can be found in epistemology, logic, philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, and no doubt other areas, but surely the fact that the argument type is widespread is no reason to think that its study need be unmanageably lengthy. Moreover, if the argument type is widespread, precisely that is an excellent reason to focus on it and for a time put aside the particular details of its particular varieties.

The discussion has been organized in terms of various competing solutions to a single basic problem, the Problem of Meta-Justification (PMJ): very roughly, how are standards of justification themselves ultimately justified? As I will explain in Chapter 1 and elaborate in Chapters 2 and 3, answers can be organized, surprisingly neatly, as responses to a Meta-Regress Argument. Along the way various theories and methods merit discussion, including (among others) inductive justifications of induction, reflective equilibrium and related coherence methods of theory confirmation, particularism and methodism, and skepticism.

My own solution, developed after laying out criticisms of the competition, is distinctly Reidian: there are fundamental cognitive processes involving
sense-perception, memory, reasoning, etc., that, we have no choice but to assume, give us mostly true beliefs. The practice of forming the most obviously true beliefs based on these most fundamental cognitive processes is known as (in an old sense of the term) *reason*. The core intuition behind my solution is this: it is silly to ask that we use reason to support the claims of reason's reliability, or to think that anything important is established thereby. As Reid wisely suggested (see the dissertation's frontispiece), we can take reason's reliability for granted, and there is nothing whatever wrong with such a move.

Issues surrounding the adjudication of these theories and concerning the PMJ have dominated the work of influential philosophers in this century at least as much as in prior centuries. But the PMJ has been, perhaps, of particular importance in recent years. With renewed interest in the epistemology of Thomas Reid, and attempts to get clear on the nature and merits of the Method of Reflective Equilibrium, not to mention the important work of William Alston on the topic of epistemic circularity itself, there is a need to formulate the PMJ clearly and discuss the constraints that may be placed on its solution. I hope this dissertation makes a positive contribution in that regard.
CHAPTER 1

ON JUSTIFYING STANDARDS OF JUSTIFICATION

I. Justification Standards.

In the last few decades, epistemologists have focused much attention on the notion of justified belief, often, but not only, to inform their accounts of knowledge. Discussions in more recent years, however, have made it plain that 'justification' has some unwieldy ambiguities. One of these ambiguities, much-discussed, is that between justification as a deontological notion (one about how we are permitted or ought to believe; this has been associated with internalism), and as a nondeontological notion (one about whether our beliefs are in a proper, e.g., causal, relation to the facts; associated with externalism). But if any consensus has been built on this issue, it is that justification is indeed a deontological notion,¹ and in any case that is an assumption I shall be making in the following.

William Alston makes a worthy attempt at clarificatory reform in his article "Epistemic Desiderata."² Alston's basic point is that different epistemologists have had different - if related - concepts at which their theories are aiming. Thus, rather than quibbling over which concept to attach to 'justification', for example, it would be far better to let that word go and focus instead on what he calls 'epistemic desiderata'. In effect, Alston recommends that we give accounts of epistemically desirable states, states that are best expressed in entire sentences. Rather than formulating conditions for justification, Alston would have us focus on more precisely-described, but clearly epistemically valuable states, such as 'S has adequate grounds (reason, evidence) for the belief' and 'S’s belief that p was formed in a reliable way'.

This is an extremely valuable suggestion but not one that I will be able to act upon - though my overall discussion gives it very roundabout support. This dissertation will focus on justification, since very many theories of positive epistemic status in the twentieth century were couched in terms of justification. This might turn out to have been a mistake (and by the end of Chapter 4 I hope to have made it clear why this has to some degree in fact been a mistake), but for the present I will follow accepted practice and usage.

'Standard' is used here as a catch-all term that can cover various manner of expression that epistemologists are prone to: 'principle', 'rule', 'criterion', 'norm', or

even 'desideratum'. The particular form of justification standard of which I will speak – for purposes of clarity and uniformity – is the following:

(JS) If S’s belief that \( p \) meets (nonepistemic) conditions \( c \) (where \( c \) might include subjective or nonsubjective states of S and S’s environment) at time \( t \), then S is justified in believing that \( p \) at \( t \).

So when I use 'justification standard', 'standard of justification', and 'j-standard', I should be taken to mean something of the form (JS). Whether one wishes to say that this is a partial reduction, analysis, or definition of 'justified belief', or a statement about supervenience conditions, is irrelevant to my project; what I have to say will apply equally to such epistemic generalizations, no matter how they are regarded.

Obviously, far from all claims that epistemologists have been concerned to argue about can be directly expressed in the form (JS). But the points I have to make about claims of this form can be applied, more or less straightforwardly, to at least many claims of other forms. Note that the problems I shall raise concern standards that do not merely translate talk of justification into some other epistemic terms (such as having evidence); the problems I shall raise concern standards that are attempts to explain justification in nonepistemic terms.

II. The Problem of Meta-Justification.

I will discuss at length The Problem of Meta-Justification (or PMJ), which may be described, very roughly, as the problem of determining how we can justify standards of justification without ultimately begging the question. To help elaborate this rough account, I invite the reader to consider two closely related questions:
(1) For some standard of justification, what is it in virtue of which belief in it is, or could be, justified?

(2) For some standard of justification, how can we justify it?

Let us briefly set aside the differences between these two questions and discuss why we should care about any such question at all. The same curiosity that properly motivates investigation into first-order epistemological questions—e.g., "In what circumstances is a visual belief that p justified?"—can and should also motivate investigation into second-order epistemological questions. If we are well-motivated in asking what the conditions of justification are, and (acting on our motivation) we produce a j-standard, then we would appear to be equally well-motivated in asking how we are justified in believing the j-standard.

Now consider the difference between the two questions. Question (1) asks for an account of that in virtue of which belief in a standard is justified; (2) asks that we justify the standard. Question (1) asks that justifiers be adduced, or at least that it be shown that they exist; (2) asks for an act of justification. That the questions are different is clear, even if it should turn out that they require the same sort of answer.

Indeed, one might well think that the questions require the same sort of answer: namely, something that can be converted into an argument that has a j-standard as its conclusion. I wish to defend this view. It assumes, in the case of (1), that

(1a) Whatever it is in virtue of which belief in a standard of justification is (or could be) justified, can be properly interpreted and evaluated as an argument.

and in the case of (2), that
(2a) The act of justifying a standard of justification is, or may be interpreted and evaluated as, giving an argument.

In what follows, I will examine the merits of (1a) and (2a).

To begin with (1a). If one does adduce the justifiers of a belief in a standard, then regardless of whether they are presented as premises of an argument in which the standard is the conclusion, nonetheless the justifiers-cum-standard – the standard’s meta-justification – may be treated as an argument. Here is why. If the same relation of support that must hold between the premises and conclusion of a good argument does not hold between the adduced justifiers and the standard, then regardless of how the latter is presented, the justification will be rejected. The standards of successful support are the same as the standards of good argumentation. So other philosophers may interpret and evaluate the justifiers (regardless of how they are billed) as premises of a meta-justificatory argument.

Admittedly, evaluating a proposed meta-justification in this way might require considerable and difficult interpretation. If, for example, someone insists that it is coherence with a doxastic system that justifies a coherentist j-standard, it is not immediately obvious how this coherence-cum-standard is to be formulated as an argument. And unfortunately when philosophers do take up the Problem of Meta-Justification their attempts are often rather sketchy. But in order to evaluate their claims that their standards are successfully justified, such an argument – or some sort of story that can be converted into an argument – must be spelled out in sufficient detail. The coherentist should not expect us to accept on his say-so, or with only
sketchy generalities, that his standard is successfully supported by the coherence of his (or some) doxastic system.

It is now common for externalists to insist—what is admittedly not obvious at first glance—that in some circumstances it is possible to be justified in a belief even when one cannot say what the justification is (what the justifiers are). Perhaps first-person appearance beliefs (e.g., “It seems to me I am seeing something orange and round”) have such a justification. In such cases it is possible, perhaps, to adduce the justifiers for the belief, but obviously one should not attribute an explicit argument to the believer. So externalists might on these grounds disagree that a meta-justification ought be interpreted, and evaluated, as an argument. Our externalist might say that it is possible to be meta-justified in believing a standard, without being able to say what the justification is.3

As powerful as this basic externalist insight is for solving other problems in epistemology, it is of little help here. Suppose I advance (for example) a reliabilist j-standard, and when I am asked, “What justifies you in believing that?” I reply, “The fact that my belief in this standard is the result of a reliable process.” Suppose, however plausible that might be, that in the next breath I insist that I need not be aware of these justifiers, and that hence they are not part of an argument. We scarcely know how to reply to such a move. Are we to evaluate whether the alleged meta-justification succeeds in supporting the standard (because it is presented as doing so), or aren’t we (because it is denied that it constitutes an argument)? At any

rate, until the meta-justification is actually spelled out in such a way as can be construed as an argument, we shall be unable to determine whether it actually does support the standard. 4 So, for all I have said so far, the reliabilist could be correct that his standard is meta-justified; but until he specifies what the meta-justification is, he hasn’t done anything interesting philosophically.

Perhaps someone might try to bypass these concerns by arming himself with an existence proof: he can show that a meta-justification for a standard exists, even if he cannot say what it is. His proof is not an argument for the standard (and is not, thus, itself a meta-justification); it is, rather, an argument that a meta-justification exists.

Notice, however, that this does not contradict (1a), which says that a standard’s justification can properly be expressed and evaluated as an argument. Indeed, the existence proof imagined here does not answer the original question (1): what is it in virtue of which belief in the standard is, or could be, justified? Simply to be told that the meta-justification exists does not satisfy our curiosity about what it is. Indeed it would only increase that very curiosity by showing that there is a meta-justification to be formulated. After all, we are probably not seriously in doubt

4 Here one might object that reliabilism does not claim that the premises of the above-described argument support reliabilist-justified beliefs; but it seems I am saying that reliabilism claims just that. This objection represents a misunderstanding of my view. My view is that, however a reliabilist might want to characterize the supports relation that is alleged to hold between a reliable process and the resulting belief, and whatever precisely the reliabilist might want to say is doing the supporting, it must be the case that a description of the thing doing the supporting must logically support the proposition believed. Unless that’s the case, the reliabilist has not offered an account of epistemic support, the kind of support that properly informs an account of epistemic justification. This seems to me to be a quite minimal constraint; a stronger constraint, one that would pose serious problems for both foundationalism and reliabilism, would have it that the supporters themselves must logically support
about the meta-justifiability of some basic standards; what piques our curiosity is precisely how their meta-justification works.

Next consider (2a), according to which the act of justifying a standard is, or may be interpreted and evaluated as, giving an argument. This is not always true, at least according to the way that ‘justify’ has been used by some philosophers. In his classic essay “De Principiis Non Disputandum...?”, Herbert Feigl distinguishes between two senses of ‘justification’: validation and vindication. The Problem of Meta-Justification can be neatly solved, if we are willing to justify standards in the sense of vindicating them; validating standards might require arguments for them, but vindication does not. Let us see what merit there is to this move.

As far as I can make out, for Feigl, to validate is to give a good argument, while to vindicate is to offer a kind of “‘pragmatic’ or ‘instrumental’ justification” according to which it is shown that the adoption of the principle (up for vindication) is the best means to attaining some desired end. Whether a j-standard is successfully vindicated, then, depends on what end it is taken to serve, and on how well it serves that end.

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the justified beliefs. For further discussion, please see the discussion of the “supports constraint” in Ch. 2, Sect. VII.


6 Nicholas Rescher, in Methodological Pragmatism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), offers a solution to the problem along these lines (see p. 230).

7 Ibid., p. 122.
A dilemma may be used to show that an argument (or something that can properly be regarded as an argument) will be required in any justification of the sort that satisfies a typical epistemologist's curiosity about the PMJ. Assume for both horns of the dilemma that someone advances a j-standard and then attempts to justify it by vindicating it.

Suppose, on the one hand, that the end that the standard is supposed to serve is a truth-linked quality; in other words, the end in question is truth, probable truth, or some epistemic quality that is supposed to secure one of these. If this is the end to which the vindication is directed, there is no substantial difference between vindicating and arguing. For the principle to be vindicated in this sense is simply to show that adopting the principle is an excellent means to gaining a true, or a probably true, belief. The vindication may then be evaluated in just the way that an argument is evaluated.

Here it might be objected that, notwithstanding the fact that the vindication may be evaluated as an argument, nonetheless the vindication is not itself, and is not intended as, any manner of argumentative support. But it does not matter how this sort of vindication is intended. It succeeds only if it can in fact serve as argumentative support for the standard. Correspondingly, the extent to which it fails to offer argumentative support for the standard is precisely the extent to which it fails as this sort of vindication.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the end that the standard is supposed to serve is not a truth-linked quality -- for example, the end might be to secure as much
pleasure for the believer as possible. In that case, the vindication of the standard, no matter how successful, will not satisfy a typical philosopher's natural desire to justify the standard. Evidently, when we ask how we might justify a standard of justification, we want to be told something other than that the standard will give us pleasure. That might be nice to know but it is irrelevant to what we were asking about. In short, we are seeking an epistemic justification, which excludes some kinds of vindication.

Hence, if someone advances a vindication of a belief in a j-standard, then either the vindication may be treated as an argument, or else it is not the sort of thing that we asked for, that will satisfy our curiosity.

The considerations of the last few pages are intended to support the claim that, however exactly the question is formulated, when we get curious about the justification of standards, it is only good arguments for those standards (or what may serve as such arguments) that will satisfy us.

Some more prosaic considerations can help convince us of the same thing. Epistemologists habitually advance standards of justification, and other epistemologists habitually call them to task for it, not only stating specific objections to those standards, but also asking for and evaluating positive arguments for the standards. And so, however all the talk about justification, justifying, validation, and vindication might be, we do as a matter of course require arguments for the standards we advance. To say this is not to argue that such behavior is rational – but it does, at least, lay a heavy burden of proof squarely on whomever wishes to deny that some
particular j-standard does not require argument in order to be justifiably held or propounded. We certainly do not, for example, let reliabilists off the hook simply because, according to their theory, they might be justified in accepting their theory without knowing that that are so justified.

Philosophers are not, of course, the only people who accept j-standards. At the very least, scientists, lawyers, and other intellectuals accept various standards as well. And indeed such people could be justified in believing their standards without being able to produce anything like a rigorous argument for those standards. Why not philosophers as well, then? It is the unique, special task of philosophy to face such problems as the PMJ. For a philosopher to renounce such a problem without giving it any serious consideration is to propose a radically different conception of what it means to be a philosopher. So naturally, in our capacities as philosophers at least, we do not want to know simply whether we are justified in accepting our standards of justification but whether we can support those standards with good arguments, or what the meta-justification is.

8 Though in fact theoretically inclined scientists and lawyers are concerned about, if not defending their standards in a way that might satisfy philosophers, at least clearly enunciating their standards of theoretical acceptability, or of evidence. In such clarification of standards there is a process of weeding out the bad standards that lends some positive epistemic value to those that are left.

9 Apropos this claim: Ernest Sosa proposes what he calls an “argumentative account of justification,” according to which for a belief to be justified is for a subject to justify, or have justified, it, which means offering “considerations or reasons in its favor.” Though one would think the point deserves more discussion, he argues rather briefly that this “dictionary definition” of ‘justification’ should be adopted, and so epistemologists should let that word go; instead we should talk in terms of ‘appropriate’ and ‘apt’ beliefs, which have positive epistemic value without reasons, justifications, etc. The implication for my project is that, while one might concede (1a) and (2a), one need not concern oneself with the Problem of Meta-Justification at all. This is an interesting proposal; I will advance a similar proposal in Ch. 4. See “Methodology and Apt Belief” and “Equilibrium in Coherence?” in Sosa, Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 253ff, 260ff.
So henceforth I will treat meta-justifications as arguments for j-standards.

One more point of discussion about the PMJ is apropos here. We might well imagine someone offering the following argument:

The PMJ is the problem that, when we try to go very deep justifying our j-standards, there is a circularity problem involved in the attempt: any belief in a j-standard that is justified will be justified in accordance with a j-standard. Now, ordinarily, in order to be justified in holding a belief (including a belief in a j-standard), one doesn’t have to justify all the supporting beliefs all the way down; one can just take a lot of beliefs (including beliefs in standards) for granted. So on the ordinary sense of ‘justification’, there is no problem about meta-justification. On a stricter (indeed, impossibly strict) sense, which requires that one justify all the justifiers for any belief in order for the belief to be justified, it is obvious that one can’t fulfill the requirement, since one will obviously have to take some j-standard for granted. That just means we can reject the stricter sense of justification, leaving us with the ordinary sense. In that case, we can indeed just take some standards for granted. So there’s no real problem here; why go on talking about it, then?

This is, in fact, rather similar to my own approach to the PMJ. But I maintain that there is a real problem, or at least, that there is a lot of real work to be done in explaining why it is not such a problem after all.

Anyone who offers the above sort of argument has a lot of questions to answer. In what sense would a meta-justification involve us in circularity? If it is not simply premise circularity, then is there really anything wrong with it? (If there’s nothing wrong with the circularity in question, perhaps we can provide a meta-justification in the stricter sense of ‘justification’.) Perhaps according to an ordinary sense of ‘justification’, we can take a lot of beliefs for granted and still be justified in holding those beliefs – but what sorts of beliefs can be taken for granted? Those are just a few of the more obvious questions that come to mind; as we will see, there are many others that come up in an in-depth exploration of the PMJ.
So if the conclusion we will arrive at in Chapter 4 — that we will simply have
to take some standards for granted — already appears obvious, one should bear in
mind that simply saying this does not constitute an adequate discussion of the
problem, nor does it address the various bold attempts philosophers have made to
solve it head-on. It might turn out that the PMJ, like many philosophical problems, is
indeed another pseudo-problem; but in order to be fully justified in making that
claim, an in-depth exploration of the problem is needed.

III. Track Record Arguments.

We advance j-standards and their meta-justifications for a good reason: it is
precisely these standards that purport to say when we are justified and hence on the
path to truth. Truth is what we are ultimately after, and the standards purport to tell
us when we can say with impunity that we have it (or at least, under which conditions
it exists, regardless of whether we can say this or not). This is why so-called criteria
of truth can be regarded as falling under the purview of my discussion of j-standards.

That same desire for assurance of the truth of our beliefs also motivates
epistemologists’ attempts at meta-justification. It would indeed be puzzling for a
philosopher to go to the trouble of distinguishing justified from unjustified beliefs,
and then leave that work itself unargued-for — hence leaving his belief in his work
itself possibly unjustified.

But attempts at, or descriptions of, meta-justificatory argument have led to the
discovery of some famous circularities — the problem of the criterion, Descartes’
circle, and the problem of the justification of induction, to name just three. These all display a single kind of circularity: epistemic circularity. To come to grips with such circularity, then, we must examine the sort of meta-justificatory argument that gives rise to it.

I do not propose (the impossible) to examine each argument for every standard that has been proposed, or even to begin by examining a few. Instead, I will present the form of what is perhaps the most obvious inductive type of argument for standards: the so-called track record argument. In presenting this argument my goal is ultimately to explain what epistemic circularity is. (And thus my goal is not to reconstruct anyone’s actual argument for a j-standard.)

Since they are generalizations, the most obvious — not to say the only — way to argue for justification standards is by inductive generalization. The strategy is to list a number of specific instances where the desired conditions hold, and where the subject’s belief is justified; then generalize. The result is a track record argument. The argument’s form is thus:

(1a) S’s belief that $p_1$ meets conditions $c$ at time $t_1$.

(1b) S is justified in believing that $p_1$ at $t_1$.

(2a) S’s belief that $p_2$ meets conditions $c$ at time $t_2$.

(2b) S is justified in believing that $p_2$ at $t_2$.

(na) S’s belief that $p_n$ meets conditions $c$ at time $t_n$.

(nb) S is justified in believing that $p_n$ at $t_n$.

(C) Generally, if S’s belief that $p$ meets conditions $c$ at $t$, then S is justified in believing that $p$ at $t$. 

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The "conditions c" here can refer to any of a variety of epistemically relevant conditions: cognitive states of S as well as facts about S's physical environment, reliability, proper functioning, habits, history, or other circumstances.\(^\text{10}\)

The obvious question to ask is: "How was it determined that S's belief was justified for each (nb)?" In other words, there will be a demand for a systematic way to confirm, or at least to account for the possible justification of, each particular justification claim in the premises.\(^\text{11}\) A very simpleminded reply\(^\text{12}\) to this would be to specify, for each (na)/(nb) pair, a conditional "bridge principle" to the effect that

\[
\text{(BP) If (na), then (nb). (If S's belief that } p \text{ meets conditions } c \text{ at time } t_n, \text{ then S is justified in believing that } p \text{ at } t_n.)}
\]

After all, it is the fact that a belief that \(p\) meets conditions \(c\) that, according to the theory advanced in the conclusion, accounts for why the belief is justified.

But (BP) would just be an instantiation of (C) (as can be seen by inspection).

One might hope for further support for each such instantiation of (BP), but this seems unlikely at best.\(^\text{13}\) So one might as well consider any particular instance of (BP) as an

\(^{10}\) Cf. William P. Alston, "Epistemic Circularity," in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 327; and elsewhere in Alston's recent work. The only significant difference between this formulation and Alston's is that the argument form above has a consequent in terms of \(p\) being justified for S, whereas in Alston's formulation \(p\) is said to be true. (So each (nb) would read, "\(p_n\) is true at \(t_n\).") As we shall see shortly, this is ultimately an unimportant difference.

\(^{11}\) One solution to the PMJ (viz., particularism) rejects this demand. That solution will be evaluated (and rejected) in due course.

\(^{12}\) Obviously, a more sophisticated reply would be to specify a standard which has it that if some non-(na) related condition is met, then (nb) holds. This sort of reply will be very important in coming to grips with the PMJ, but for purposes of simplicity epistemic circularity may most easily be introduced via the simpleminded reply; no questions will be begged thereby.

\(^{13}\) Though as we shall see, some solutions to the PMJ (viz., meta-coherentism and regressivism) attempt to do something like this.
arbitrary case; in other words, the purveyor of the track record argument appears
prepared to advance the claim, for any of S's beliefs that meet conditions c at time t,
that it is justified precisely because it meets those conditions. But then (C) would
follow immediately by universal generalization, which would appear to show that the
original argument was question-begging or circular. In what precise sense it was
circular remains to be explored.

Epistemologists faced with the problem of arguing for each (nb) in a track
record argument are apt to try a more oblique route. Some might, if pressed, suggest
a pair of “bridge principles.” The first would state that (na) implies that the belief is
probably true (given the conditions of belief); this would specify how the conditions
specified as epistemologically important are indeed truth-linked. The second in turn
would state that the probable truth (given the same conditions) of the belief implies
(nb) – that the belief is justified. I take it that this is implicit in many epistemologists’
atttempts to argue for their epistemic standards; having allegedly shown the qualities
they regard as epistemically important to be truth-linked, they infer that those
qualities are what make beliefs justified (or warranted, etc.).

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14 Cf. Ch. 2, Sect. VI (“The Arbitrary Case Argument”). Moreover, the conclusion would follow by
inductive generalization from all the (BP)'s taken together; so the other premises would not be needed.

15 “Truth-linked” is Goldman’s term; see Alvin I. Goldman, Epistemology and Cognition (Cambridge,
MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 3 and elsewhere. Epistemic qualities are “truth-linked” when
they are either necessary or sufficient conditions for truth (or probable truth). Goldman is, of course,
ot the only epistemologist who speaks of truth-linked qualities (or standards, which may also be
called ‘truth-linked’). Laurence Bonjour, for example, says: “The basic role of justification is that of a
means to truth, a more directly attainable mediating link between our subjective starting point and our
objective goal” (The Structure of Empirical Knowledge [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
1985], p. 7). More generally, at least amongst realists not of the Putnam variety, most epistemologists
do speak of central epistemic properties as truth-linked (which, it is often said, explains the desirability
of those properties).
For example, a reliabilist might wish to argue for the following (still
formulaic) version of (BP):

(BPR) If S’s belief that $p_n$ is the result of a reliable belief-forming process
(such as sense-perception, memory, etc.) at $t_n$, then S is justified in
believing that $p_n$ at $t_n$.

My suggestion is that the reliabilist would argue that

(3) If S’s belief that $p_n$ is the result of a reliable belief-forming process at
$t_n$, then the probability of the truth of S’s belief that $p_n$, given that it is the
result of such a process, is >0.5.

Furthermore, as a reliabilist he holds:

(4) If the probability of the truth of S’s belief that $p_n$, given that it is the
result of a reliable belief-forming process, is >0.5, then S is justified in
believing that $p_n$ at $t_n$.

From which (BPR) follows.

But this again allows our reliabilist to forego the earlier track record argument
altogether: arguing for any arbitrary $p_n$ from (3) and (4) to (BPR) would constitute an
equally good argument for a reliabilist version of (C). Now suppose our reliabilist
can defend (4) on some linguistic grounds (it expresses part of what ‘justified’ means,
say); he will still have to defend (3). He will have to show that a process of
belief-formation that he regards as reliable does in fact elicit more true than false
beliefs. And here again the most obvious sort of argument is a track record argument,
which differs in a few details from the track record argument outlined above.

For purposes of clarity I will present the form of this second sort of track
record argument:

(1a) S’s belief that $p_1$ meets conditions $c$ at time $t_1$.  

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(1b) $p_1$ is true at $t_1$.

(2a) S’s belief that $p_2$ meets conditions $c$ at $t_2$.

(2b) $p_2$ is true at $t_2$.

(na) S’s belief that $p_n$ meets conditions $c$ at $t_n$.

(nb) $p_n$ is true at $t_n$.

(C) Hence, if S’s belief that $p$ meets conditions $c$ at $t$, then $p$ is probably true at $t$. Or: the probability of $p$’s being true, given that S’s belief that $p$ meets conditions $c$ at $t$, is $>0.5$.

This argument is, perhaps, a little less obviously problematic than the first track record argument. But a similar question again arises: “How was it determined, for each (nb), that $p_n$ was true?” The epistemologist advancing the argument naturally believes he has a test for a claim’s truth, namely, whether S’s belief in that claim is justified; after all, justification is truth-linked on his view. And he believes he knows when a belief is justified, namely, when it meets conditions $c$. So the way to determine for each (nb), whether $p_n$ was true, is to see whether the belief that $p_n$ met conditions $c$; if the conditions are met then the belief is deemed true. But of course this is none other than the bridge principle that besmudged our earlier track record argument with the charge of circularity.

A more concrete example should help clarify the problem. Suppose our reliabilist wants to argue that, when a belief is the result of something visually appearing to be the case, in excellent conditions and with no defeaters, then the belief is true. He amasses a number of cases such as the following. (1a) I believe there is a green teacup on my desk; I seem to see a green teacup on my desk; there is plenty of light, the air is clear, I am fully awake, etc., etc.; and I am aware of having no reason
whatever to disbelieve that there is a green teacup on my desk. And, moreover, (1b)
there is a green teacup on my desk.

When asked how I confirmed (1b), that there is a green teacup on my desk,
the obvious (not to mention factual) answer is that I looked on my desk and saw the
teacup. But then it was precisely a belief such as (1a) that confirmed (1b). Now, if
our reliabilist maintains that (1a) actually does provide the needed support for (1b),
then he also assumes that (1a) implies (1b). But this latter is simply a bridge principle
that instantiates (C) – what he was trying to argue for. And if it holds in the arbitrary
case of the teacup, (C) follows immediately by universal instantiation. The reliabilist
was assuming, or presupposing, his conclusion. So he was, in a certain sense, arguing
in a circle.

None of what I have said so far should be taken to imply that all arguments
for j-standards are so obviously subject to epistemic circularity. For all I have said so
far there might be many that do not encounter the problem at all. I have spoken about
one particular way of arguing for j-standards – but presumably, the most obvious way
– in order to have a plausible context in which to discuss the topic I shall take up in
the next section of this chapter, viz., epistemic circularity itself.

IV. What Epistemic Circularly Is.

The term ‘epistemic circularity’ is a technical term, and hence its definition is
open to some stipulation. Nonetheless, the term serves a specific function, and

\[16\] And some have suggested getting rid of the term ‘circularity’ in this context; e.g., Sosa: “Admittedly
the circle involved is not the ordinary sort where we reach the conclusion only by circling back to the
many cases of its application are easy to recognize and difficult to dispute. We want a definition of 'epistemic circularity' to cover those obvious cases. The definition should also identify what it is about an argument that impels us to apply the epithet. Given all that, there are grounds to dispute about different accounts of epistemic circularity and to argue for a better one, if available.

The task before us now is to decide what it is about the track record arguments explained in the foregoing section that is epistemically circular. To my knowledge it was James Van Cleve who coined this term\(^{17}\) (though by no means is he the first to have identified the concept). There is no shortage of formulations of what epistemic circularity is in the literature; two prominent accounts are by Van Cleve and Alston. According to the Van Cleve, an epistemically circular argument is an argument such that

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\text{a necessary condition of using it to gain knowledge of (or justified belief in) its conclusion is that one already have knowledge of (or justified belief in) its conclusion.}^\text{18}
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According to the Alston, epistemic circularity

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\text{involves a commitment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be justified in holding the premises.}^\text{19}
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\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 558.

Let me begin my own discussion of epistemic circularity by repeating a few rather obvious things about it. First, however plausibly characterized, epistemic circularity is evidently different from what has been called premise circularity — in other words, that sort of circularity in which the conclusion, or some single claim that is the roughly same in meaning as the conclusion, is found among the premises. The conclusion of an epistemically circular argument need not be found in any form among the premises; that can be seen rather easily in the track record arguments discussed in the foregoing section.

Second, epistemic circularity is different from what has been called rule circularity — that is, that sort of circularity afflicting an argument where the conclusion is in the form of an inference rule, and that very rule licenses the inference from the argument’s premises to its conclusion. For example, rule circularity would afflict an argument in which modus ponens, stated as a theorem, were the conclusion, and the argument for this conclusion were itself in the form of modus ponens.

How then is epistemic circularity different from rule circularity? The mere fact that I use a certain inference rule in coming to a conclusion, as is necessary for rule circularity, does not in itself entail that I must have knowledge of that rule in order to get a justified belief by its use. I can use a rule without even knowing I am doing so. For example, I might conclude, from the knowledge that Joe had either soup or salad, and that he did not have salad, that he had soup; but to conclude this I evidently do not need even to be aware of disjunctive syllogism as a rule of inference.

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So, for Van Cleve at least, it is possible to have an argument that is rule circular but not epistemically circular.\textsuperscript{21}

Here is a reply to the foregoing: to get a justified belief from an argument, one must not only believe each premise justifiably, but one must be justified in believing that the inference is correct.\textsuperscript{22} But this reply cuts no ice, simply because one can be justified in believing that the particular inference is correct without knowing that the covering rule is correct.

Consider next how Alston can draw the rule/epistemic circularity distinction. The mere fact that an argument is rule circular does not entail that we are committed to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be justified in holding any of the premises. Again, it is possible to get justified beliefs from arguments made when one is scarcely aware of just which rule one is following. So, on Alston's account too, it is possible to have an argument that is rule circular but not epistemically circular.

But according to my own account, yet to come, it might turn out that all rule circular arguments are epistemically circular; still, I doubt that this is a criticism of my account. Perhaps we should consider all rule circular arguments epistemically circular after all. Moreover, the fact remains that there are epistemically circular arguments that are not rule circular; examples were given in the previous section.

\textsuperscript{21} Van Cleve, ibid. In any case, however, rule circularity is clearly a different concept from epistemic circularity.

\textsuperscript{22} For a favorable discussion of requiring justified belief that “the premises are ‘properly connected’ to the conclusion,” for good (justified belief-conferring) arguments, see Richard Feldman, “Good Arguments,” in Frederick F. Schmitt, ed., Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), pp. 159-188.
I have argued that epistemic circularity is different from premise and rule circularity. So what, exactly, is epistemic circularity itself? Van Cleve’s and Alston’s accounts are significantly different from each other; and there are some difficulties with both accounts. So, after examining their accounts, I will offer my own.

For Van Cleve, a necessary condition of using an epistemically circular argument to gain a justified belief in its conclusion is this: one must already have a justified belief in the conclusion in order to be justified (by the argument) in believing the conclusion. But on Alston’s view, the necessary condition is this: the conclusion is presupposed true if one is justified (by the argument) in believing the premises. Van Cleve focuses on the conclusion, and Alston on the premises; who is right, or does it even make a difference?

Van Cleve’s account can in a sense accommodate Alston’s. Suppose that for a certain argument a necessary condition of being justified in believing the premises is that one already believe the conclusion justifiably. But now, since the premises are used to support the conclusion, from this it follows that a necessary condition of being justified in believing the conclusion on the basis of this argument is that one already be justified in believing the conclusion — as Van Cleve has it.

Similarly, suppose that for a certain argument, in order to be justified in believing that the inference from the premises to the conclusion is correct, one must

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23 One might well imagine a third account of epistemic circularity, on which the necessary condition is this: one must already have justified belief in the conclusion in order to be justified in believing the inference from the premises to the conclusion. Notice that this might be hard to distinguish from rule circularity.
already believe the conclusion justifiedly. But to be justified in believing the conclusion on the basis of this inference, one must be justified in believing this particular inference to be correct.\textsuperscript{24} From these two claims it follows that a necessary condition of being justified in believing the conclusion on the basis of this argument is that one already be justified in believing the conclusion — again, as Van Cleve has it. If there were any such arguments, I think they would be epistemically circular; but on Alston's account they would not be.

Let me present some preliminary findings. Generally, I am discussing how one may be justified in believing a claim on the basis\textsuperscript{25} of at least two sorts of beliefs about an argument, namely, (1) beliefs in each of the premises and (2) the belief that the premises are properly connected to (support) the conclusion. Both sorts of belief (at least) have to be justified, if one is to be justified in believing the conclusion on the basis of the argument.

For some arguments, one must either already be justified in believing, or at least presuppose (for Alston), the conclusion, in order to be justified in believing the argument's premises or inference. For any such argument, it follows that one must already be justified in believing, or presuppose, the conclusion in order to be justified in believing the conclusion (on the basis of this argument). And, in any such case, it seems, the argument in question is epistemically circular. I will include these insights in my own account of epistemic circularity.

\textsuperscript{24} Note that this is not to require awareness or knowledge of any inference rule licensing the inference.

\textsuperscript{25} In other words, one's belief in the conclusion is supposed to be based on one's belief in the premises (at least). What precisely this "basing" amounts to is a topic I will not broach here.
Now I come to a different point. For Van Cleve, epistemically circular arguments are such that one must already have knowledge of or a justified belief in the conclusion. Van Cleve’s notion is stronger than Alston’s, according to which one must only presuppose the conclusion. Again, who is right, or does it make a difference?

I think it does make a difference. Van Cleve introduces his notion of epistemic circularity with these words: "Under what circumstances is an argument viciously circular? I submit that it is so under one circumstance only: a necessary condition of using it to gain knowledge of (or justified belief in) its conclusion is that one already have knowledge of (or justified belief in) its conclusion." Van Cleve is surely right to say that epistemic circularity is vicious, on this account. Then he goes on to maintain that certain inductive arguments for induction not epistemically circular on this account.

But on first consideration of typical sorts of examples of epistemic circularity, it does not seem quite as obvious that the circularity is vicious as it is on Van Cleve’s account. So if it is possible to define ‘epistemic circularity’ in such a way that its viciousness does not in effect follow by definition, then we should do so.

Alston’s approach is different. He says that epistemic circularity involves only being committed to the conclusion as a presupposition, which might, perhaps, be a kind of belief. Presumably it need not be a justified belief. So it appears to be, as

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26 Van Cleve, ibid.

27 On what exactly this term ‘vicious’ means, see the end of the present section.
far as his definition goes, an open question as to whether epistemic circularity is vicious. This approach is better.

Another reason for preferring Alston's approach is that we want a term that actually does apply to a variety of different arguments supporting j-standards, or supporting claims about the reliability of sense-perception, induction, and other cognitive practices. But at the same time, if we do want to say that it applies to arguments regarding these various standards and cognitive practices, we will not want to have the term defined in such a way that epistemic circularity is vicious by definition. Even if it should turn out that all epistemic circularity is vicious, we should have to argue for that point, if for no other reason than that some distinguished philosophers disagree with it.

To these considerations I wish to add an insight of my own, inspired by my examination of track record arguments: to be justified in believing one or more of the premises of an epistemically circular argument, it must actually be the case that the conclusion is true. This leads me to suspect that it is irrelevant whether one have, prior to making the argument, a belief in the conclusion (and perforce it is irrelevant whether such a belief were to constitute knowledge, as Van Cleve has it). For, when we examine an argument, in order for us to pronounce it epistemically circular, it is sufficient that any justified belief in the premises (or the inference step) requires that the conclusion to be true. This in fact is just what happened - twice - in our discussion of track record arguments.
Philosophers use epistemically circular arguments in an attempt to show that beliefs in various conclusions are justified. But after examination, we know that in order for us to use an argument to gain a justified belief in the argument's conclusion, we must also have a justified belief in the premises (and inference). And we realize that, in order for us to have a justified belief in at least one of the premises (or the inference), the conclusion must be true. That realization by itself, it seems, is enough to impel us to charge the argument with epistemic circularity. There is no need to consider whether the conclusion was antecedently believed; that's irrelevant to the argument's circularity.

Suppose a student used an epistemically circular argument to argue that sense perception is reliable. This student had no belief about the conclusion before constructing the argument, we will say. Moreover, the student did not see that his conclusion had to be true, in order for his belief in some premise to be justified. Surely that failure of insight on the student's part would hardly persuade a teacher, who did have the insight, that the student's argument was not circular. So there is no reason to hold that the proponent of an epistemically circular argument need antecedently know or for that matter believe the conclusion of the argument.

On Alston's account, we are committed to the conclusion as a presupposition of taking ourselves to be justified in believing one or more of the premises. But an even simpler account is available. There is no need to puzzle out what our commitments are or what 'presupposition' means exactly. It suffices simply
to note that the claim that there is a justified belief in one or more of the premises implies that the conclusion is true.

So I propose the following account of epistemic circularity, similar to but also importantly different from both Van Cleve’s and Alston’s:

Def. An argument A for conclusion c (understood by S) is epistemically circular for S if (i) if S were justified in believing that c on the basis of the set of S’s beliefs about A, then S would be justified in believing each of A’s premises and that A’s inference is correct (= justifying beliefs about A), and (ii) for at least one of the justifying beliefs about A, if S were to have a justified belief in it, then c would be true.

The purpose of clause (i) is to identify a set of beliefs as those which, allegedly, justify S’s belief in the conclusion of an argument. Clause (ii) then states the essential characteristic of epistemically circular arguments: the truth of the conclusion is a necessary condition of the justification of one of the aforementioned justifying beliefs.

George Schumm has produced an interesting possible counterexample to this definition:

John has a belief.
Therefore, someone has a belief.

This argument satisfies the conditions of the definition – if someone has a justified belief in the premise, it follows that the conclusion is true – but it is far from obvious that it is epistemically circular. For anyone who is unwilling to say that Schumm’s argument is epistemically circular, it constitutes a counterexample to my definition.28

28 Another example:

John has a justified belief.
Therefore, someone has a justified belief.
In that case, however, Schumm’s argument would also be properly regarded as a counterexample to Alston’s definition of ‘epistemic circularity’ as well. As we have seen, according to Alston’s definition, an epistemically circular argument is one in which we are committed to the conclusion as a presupposition of our taking ourselves to be justified in holding the premises. In the case of Schumm’s argument, we are definitely committed to the conclusion – that someone has a belief – as a presupposition of our taking ourselves to be justified in believing the premises. If we suppose ourselves to be justified in holding a belief, we presuppose that someone has a belief (we do).

So two distinct definitions of ‘epistemic circularity’ have the same interesting feature, namely, being open to challenge using Schumm’s argument. This might be regarded as some evidence for the view that in fact Schumm’s argument is not a counterexample at all. But plainly such a view would have to be explained. After all, one might wonder whether the following argument might also be regarded as epistemically circular:

\begin{itemize}
\item The moon is made of green cheese.
\item Therefore, someone has a belief.
\end{itemize}

This is an argument such that, if someone has a justified belief in the premise, it follows that the conclusion is true; it doesn’t matter what the premise is, in fact. But why think this argument is epistemically circular?
Let me try to make it plausible that these arguments are in fact epistemically circular. Suppose I wanted to argue that someone has a belief. I offer some premise(s) and conclude, "Therefore, someone has a belief":

(A) \[ \frac{p}{\text{Therefore, someone has a belief.}} \]

I then endorse (A) as follows: "This shows that I have a justified belief that someone has a belief."

My endorsement of (A) is odd; after all, if I want to say my belief in the conclusion of (A) is justified on account of (A), then I am presupposing that someone (namely, me) has a belief, which presupposition happens to be the conclusion (A).

Like track-record arguments that are patently epistemically circular, if (A) is circular, it is not obvious that it is viciously circular; still, some might think, it does seem question-begging in some interesting way, at least insofar as I want to put it to use to show my belief that I have a belief is justified. Still, why should (A) be called circular at all?

Let's say you demand to know how (A) justifies my belief in (A)'s conclusion; I proceed to explain that my belief in the premise(s), \( p \), is justified. You might then object – very sensibly – that I am presupposing the conclusion in defending the claim that I get a justified belief in the conclusion from (A). It is typically just this feature of (A) – that, in defending the claim that I get a justified

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29 Notice, again, that nothing in this discussion depends on what my premises are; so it doesn't matter whether I assert, dogmatically, that John has a belief or, absurdly, that the moon is made of green cheese.
belief in the conclusion, I presuppose the conclusion – that leads us to say, of other arguments that have this feature, that they are epistemically circular.

For example, consider a track record argument for the reliability of sense perception, of the sort discussed in Section III above. Suppose we wish to explain how such an argument gives anyone a justified belief that sense perception is reliable. In doing so, we defend the argument's premises, but we also presuppose the conclusion. Thus, in explaining how a track record argument gives anyone a justified belief that sense perception is reliable, we presuppose the conclusion. (A) shares that very feature; so we can, with good sense, call it 'epistemically circular' as well.

So, on further consideration, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that both Alston's definition of 'epistemic circularity' and mine would have it that (A) is epistemically circular. As, for example, Alston's definition has it, epistemic circularity “involves a commitment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be justified in holding the premises.” We may apply this to (A): we are committed to the conclusion, that someone has a belief, as a presupposition of our supposing that we have a belief in the premise(s) at all. It is admittedly a bit strange that the latter is true of (A) regardless of what the premises are – but what difference should that make for our identifying an argument as epistemically circular?

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31 It is also worth pointing out that the arguments in Ch. 2 (which are intended to show that epistemic circularity is vicious) might apply just as well to arguments of form (A); this would require some demonstration, but if correct, it is further evidence that arguments of form (A) ought to be considered epistemically circular.
This discussion has the curious and interesting implication that all arguments for the claims “Someone has a belief” and “Someone has a justified belief” — and perhaps others — are epistemically circular. Consequently, if I want to claim that all epistemic circularity is unacceptable, then I must be willing to defend a further claim, namely, that no argument either for “Someone has a belief” or for “Someone has a justified belief” is acceptable. Not everyone will be happy with this result.

It is fortunate for the consistency (not to say the plausibility) of my own views that, in Chapter 4, I sketch a theory on which one might want and expect this result. According to this theory, some claims that cannot be given plausible non-epistemically circular arguments are precisely those that may be taken for granted in argumentative discourse — claims that I will call, in Chapter 2, “philosophical starting-points.”

But the considerations of the last two paragraphs suggest an even more serious objection to my definition (and Alston’s). Consider any argument the conclusion of which expresses a necessary condition (on my account) or a presupposition (on Alston’s account) of any claim to the effect that one of the premises of the argument is justified. Any such argument is epistemically circular on these accounts of epistemic circularity.

For example — arguably, and quite plausibly — such propositions as ‘Something exists’ and ‘There is consciousness’ are presuppositions of the justification of belief in any premise (of any argument whatsoever), and their truth is

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32 Raised by Marshall Swain in communication.
a necessary condition of such justification. Consequently, on both Alston’s view of
epistemic circularity and mine, any argument with such a conclusion is epistemically
circular. If I provide any argument whatsoever for the view that there is
consciousness, one may forthwith charge my argument with epistemic circularity.
Even more dramatically, if one also holds the view that epistemic circularity is
unacceptable, he cannot accept any argument at all for such a view.

This is a very interesting result, and it is possible that we should regard the
result as, simply, a philosophical discovery. If I were to bite the bullet at this point,
however, and assert that such arguments are indeed epistemically circular, it would
make my claim in Chapter 2, that epistemic circularity renders an argument
unacceptable, far more controversial than I hope it to be. It might even be the case
that, on the commonsense meta-epistemology urged in Chapter 4, we should welcome
the view that certain obvious truths, such as those expressed by ‘Someone has a
belief’, ‘There is consciousness’, and ‘Something exists’, cannot be given an
acceptable argument. But as it is no part of this dissertation’s purpose to defend
such sweeping claims, I should avoid advancing a view that commits me to them.

Consequently, I propose simply to restrict the extension of ‘epistemic
circularity’ to those arguments whose conclusions either are j-standards or make
assertions about the reliability of cognitive processes. This might have the effect of
excluding some arguments that we might, on reflection, want to regard as

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33 Perhaps the epistemic circularity of arguments for such claims could be used to support the view that
they are principles of common sense and not in need of argument; cf. Ch. 4, Sect. III. This is an
interesting prospect I regret not having the time to explore here.
epistemically circular. But none of the examples considered in this dissertation
would be excluded, nor would many (or perhaps any) of the arguments discussed in
the modest literature about this subject.

So here is a revised definition that avoids the above, alleged counterexamples:

Def. An argument A for conclusion c (understood by S), where c is either
a justification standard or an assertion that some doxastic practice is
reliable, is epistemically circular for S if (i) if S were justified in
believing that c on the basis of the set of S's beliefs about A, then S
would be justified in believing each of A's premises and that A's
inference is correct (=justifying beliefs about A); (ii) for at least one of
the justifying beliefs about A, if S were to have a justified belief in it,
then c would be true.

I will address one last issue in this section. Central to this dissertation's
argument is the claim that all epistemic circularity is vicious; there is no "benign"
epistemic circularity. Without attempting to say what vicious circularity in general is,
I can give an account of what it is for epistemic circularity to be vicious:

Def. The epistemic circularity of an argument is vicious if the circularity
renders the argument such that one cannot be justified (in either an
externalist or an internalist sense) in believing the conclusion on the basis
of beliefs in the argument’s premises and inference step.

This is what I will mean when I say that an argument's epistemic circularity is
vicious. Moreover I think it is fairly obvious that it is also what other people mean
when they discuss the viciousness of epistemic circularity. Epistemic circularity's
particular vice is that it keeps us from getting justified beliefs. So, for example, when
Alston says that the epistemic circularity of an argument does not prevent us from
using it to gain a justified belief that sense perception is reliable, I will describe his

34 For an explanation of the meaning of ‘doxastic practice’, see Ch. 4, Sect. II.
view as that the argument's epistemic circularity is not vicious (and is, rather, virtuous or benign).

V. Licensing Standards.

The PMJ as I presented it in Section II consists of little more than a question: For any given standard of justification, how can one show that (belief in) it is itself justified? Formulated this way, there is not one problem but many; there is a different problem for each standard. But my thesis is that there is a problem about justifying standards of justification in general. I shall have to get some more background work on the table before I can present this general problem with adequate precision.

Central to the discussion to come is the view that standards can license belief in an argument – which is to say the standards license the beliefs in the premises of an argument and the belief that the inference from those premises to the conclusion is correct. So I will speak of licensing standards of premises, of inferences, and (by extension) of entire arguments.

I will say that meta-justificatory arguments have licensing standards. Examples of what I mean can be seen in the track record arguments discussed in Section III; the bridge principles, of the form “If (na), then (nb),” were presented as licensing, or explaining the justification of, each (nb). It will be helpful to clarify this talk of licensing standards further.

Suppose that I accept an argument, $A$, and on its basis have a justified belief that $p$. Then I must have been justified in believing the premises of $A$, and in making
the inference from those premises to $p$. Now the core intuition behind this talk of a licensing standard is the notion that an argument's premises and inferential move are, insofar as they are justified for me at all, justified in accordance with some $j$-standard(s).

So, for example, if $A$ is of the form *modus ponens*, then "there is" some $j$-standard that says, roughly,

If someone understands how the conclusion follows from the premises, and the argument is in the form *modus ponens*, then that person is justified in believing that the conclusion follows from the premises.

I want to say that something like this rule "licenses" my belief in argument $A$, by licensing my belief in $A$'s inference. I shall not attempt to explain what understanding how conclusions follow from premises amounts to; that's obviously a matter for another day.

One difficulty comes in saying exactly what standard does license belief in the premises, or in the inference, of a given argument. When arguing, only very rarely do I advance any standards according to which I think I am justified in believing the premises and inference. Even if I did, I might be wrong about it. And even if we can agree that, in an argument of the form *modus ponens* something like the above-stated rule licenses belief that results from the inference, it is still a matter of considerable deliberation and potential disagreement exactly how the rule ought to be stated. It appears to follow that for any given argument, several competing standards might explain how belief in its conclusion is justified (or not); and so speaking of the licensing standard appears tenuous at best.
But this difficulty of arriving at an adequate account of licensing does not entail that one cannot explain the sense of ‘licensing standard’ in general. I propose the following as a plausible account:

Where \( p \) is the conclusion of argument \( A \) and \( S \)'s belief that \( p \) is based upon beliefs in \( A \)'s premises and inference step, a justification standard, \( J \), licenses \( S \)'s belief that \( p \) iff \( J \) is the best explanation for the fact either that (1) \( S \) justifiably believes one or more of the premises of \( A \), or of the fact that (2) \( S \) justifiably believes the inference from the premises of \( A \) to its conclusion.

This account of licensing admittedly does not give any indication of what standards do “best explain” why \( S \) is justified in believing the premises or in making the inference. That is a topic for another, no doubt very lengthy discussion. Still, I would be remiss if I did not give a few words now about what I mean in saying that a licensing standard best explains why someone is justified in a belief.

Here I may advert to some platitudes about the methodology of epistemology (at least contemporary epistemology). The central challenge of a theory of justification is to say what it is in virtue of which various of our beliefs are justified. In examining candidate accounts, the method most commonly used is to discuss whether an account “rules” correctly (correctness being decided by “intuitions”) on a number of different (often highly contrived and difficult) cases. This is essentially abductive reasoning, or inference to the best explanation: the best account of justification will be the one that explains the highest proportion of cases, including tough cases.

I shall be making another assumption that will be discussed later, namely, that whenever one generates a justified belief through the use of an argument, some
standards do license the argument. But at least one view – a version of particularism – would have it that some meta-justificatory arguments have no licensing standards at all. I will evaluate and reject this view in Chapter 3.

VI. How Justification Standards are Interrelated.

Just as the regress argument generates talk of “basic beliefs,” the Meta-Regress Argument to be introduced anon will generate talk of “basic j-standards.” It will be useful to explain the notion of basicality in advance. But basic j-standards are only some of the possible elements at which a meta-regress ends, if it does end. So it will be equally useful to define in advance several other relations that standards can have to each other: for example, standards might be, at least hypothetically, mutually supporting.

Throughout this section I will speak of support that one standard may have for another. On this, three points of clarification are in order. First, I mean this not in a “success” sense, but a merely putative sense. So you may substitute “alleged support” wherever I have used “support.” Second, when applied to j-standards, ‘support’ is to be understood in a special sense, as according to the following recursive definition. Clause (i) is the base clause; (ii) is the recursive clause; (iii) is the closure clause.35

For any justification standards, \( J_1 \) supports \( J_2 \) in a doxastic system \( D \text{ iff} \)

(i) \( J_2 \) is the conclusion of an argument in \( D \) that includes \( J_1 \) among its licensing standards, or

35 But note that I will continue to use ‘support’ when applied to ordinary beliefs in the ordinary sense.
(ii) \( J_1 \) supports \( J_n \) (in the sense explained in (i)) and \( J_n \) supports \( J_m \), etc., which supports \( J_2 \); and

(iii) no other j-standards support any other j-standards in \( D \).

Third, strictly speaking, this supports relation exists between beliefs in standards; i.e., it is merely shorthand to say that one standard supports another. Hence supports relations between (beliefs in) standards will be said to exist in a given doxastic system. There are, granted, rather few j-standards in anyone's doxastic system, and so there are rather few of the above-defined supports relations. Thus we might, alternatively, speak of supports relations between standards apart from any doxastic system – in much the same way that one might speak of propositional justification rather than doxastic justification. But I am supposing we will want to formulate the Meta-Regress Argument as an argument about the (doxastic) justification of beliefs in j-standards, which is the natural way to understand the subject of the PMJ, after all. So it will be best to speak of supports relations as holding between beliefs in j-standards that exist (where else?) in a doxastic system.

For any given standard, as I will now explain, there are three possible supports relations that it can bear to other standards.

In the ordinary regress argument, the possibility is raised that some beliefs are justified but not justified by any other beliefs. Such beliefs are often said to be 'self-evident' or even 'self-justifying'. But these beliefs need not be, and typically are not, held to be beliefs that (whatever this might mean) bear the (ordinary)
supports relation to themselves. The latter sort of possibility is rarely considered seriously at all.

In the Meta-Regress Argument, however, a closely analogous possibility must be considered seriously. A surprising number of people have held that there is nothing wrong with an argument for a standard that is licensed by that same standard. In such a situation one may properly identify a “self-supporting” standard:

A justification standard $J$ is self-supporting in a doxastic system $D$ iff $J$ supports $J$ in $D$.

This means that a self-supporting $J$-standard will be one that licenses an argument with itself as the conclusion. The track record arguments from Section III contain a couple of examples. A plausible historical example might be Descartes’ criterion of truth; as the famous “Cartesian circle” would have it, a long chain of argumentation is supposed to support the claim that whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true, but arguments for crucial elements of this chain (viz., that God exists and is not a deceiver) are licensed by this same criterion.

Another possible relation between standards is mutual support:

A justification standard $J_1$ is mutually supported, and $J_1$ and justification standard $J_2$ are mutually supporting in a doxastic system $D$ iff $J_1$ supports $J_2$ in $D$ and $J_2$ supports $J_1$ in $D$.

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37 Descartes’ criterion of truth may be better regarded as a “mutually supported” standard: see just below.
Suppose $A_1$ is used to argue for standard $J_1$, and belief in one of $A_1$’s premises is licensed by standard $J_2$. Suppose further that in the doxastic system under consideration, $J_2$ is the conclusion of another argument, $A_2$, itself licensed by $J_1$. I want to say that in such a situation $J_1$ and $J_2$ are mutually supporting and, individually, each is on that account mutually supported.

There might be, however, a whole group of standards with complex support relations in this way. It might be the case that $J_1$ supports $J_2$ only by licensing the first in a long chain of arguments, each licensed by a different standard, and the last argument in this chain has as its conclusion $J_2$. And so long as $J_2$ also licenses an argument for $J_1$, they are mutually supporting and both, individually, mutually supported.

There is one other possibility: the notion that there is an infinite regress of standards supporting a given standard. One may speak of a standard that is “infinitely” supported, so long as there is an endless chain of standards supporting it:

A justification standard $J_1$ is infinitely supported in a doxastic system $D$ iff $J_1$ is supported by $J_2$, and $J_2$ is supported by $J_3$, and so on ad infinitum, in $D$.

Self-support, mutual support, and infinite support are all properties that standards can have in virtue of their support relations with other standards. But there are other properties that standards can have in virtue of their lack of such support. Such a property is basicity. Again, the notion of basicity must not be confused, in this context, with the notion of self-support. As I will use the word,
A justification standard $J$ is basic in a doxastic system $D$ iff the belief that $J$ is justified in $D$, but the belief that $J$ is not supported (in the ordinary sense) by any argument (or by any justifiers that bear the ordinary supports relation to $J$) in $D$.

So a standard is basic only if a belief in the standard is both justified and not the conclusion of any argument (or, per the remarks in Section E above, by anything that may be converted into an argument). Basic standards exist only if it is possible to meet both conditions at once.

Finally, it is quite possible that a standard is simply unsupported in a doxastic system. The following definition names and describes that situation:

A justification standard $J$ is a posit in a doxastic system $D$ iff it is not the case that $J$ is justified in $D$, and $J$ is not supported by any argument in $D$.

It is a logical possibility, of course, that the same standard be self-supporting, mutually supported, and infinitely supported. But posits are necessarily not basic and vice-versa, and neither can be self-supporting, mutually supported, or infinitely supported.

With this background in place, we are ready to come to grips with the Meta-Regress Argument.

VII. The Meta-Regress Argument.

In the ordinary infinite regress argument, well known to epistemologists, a given belief is said to be justified. Then it is asked what justifies that belief, and then

\[\text{38 Notice that we might get a start on pinning down the notion of properly basic j-standards by substituting "need not be" for "is not" here.}\]
what justifies *that*, and so on until we have run to the end (or the beginning) of the justifying beliefs. This series of beliefs is the “regress.”

The *meta*-regress I wish to introduce consists of a series, not of ordinary beliefs, but of (beliefs in) licensing standards. It is “*meta-*” in that it concerns beliefs about which beliefs are justified. It has an ancient predecessor in Sextus Empiricus’ *diellelus*.39

The ordinary regress argument can be used to support various contrary conclusions; it can, for example, be used to argue for either foundationalism or coherentism. I intend to use the Meta-Regress Argument (MRA) to support the view that some standards of justification cannot themselves be shown to be justified; i.e., one cannot justify belief in certain important standards. And so, in Chapters 2 and 3, I will be filling out Chapter 1’s sketch of the MRA to show that the Problem of Meta-Justification cannot be solved by any frontal attack. Having done that, though, I will argue in Chapter 4 that that this position is not necessarily a skeptical position. So on to the argument itself.

Suppose S accepts a certain standard of justification, \( J_i \). We raise the question central to posing the PMJ: *what justifies S in accepting \( J_i \)?* Suppose S claims to have an argument and says that his beliefs in each of the premises and in the connection of the premises with the conclusion are what justify his belief that \( J_i \). In other words,

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39 Thus Sextus Empiricus: “[W]e do not allow them to adopt a criterion by assumption, while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress *ad infinitum*” (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* II.20, trans. R. G. Bury [Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990], p. 101).
(1) S’s beliefs about an argument (perhaps a track record argument), $A_1$, justifies S in accepting $J_1$.

This is the answer one should expect, given what I wrote in Section II about what will constitute a solution to the PMJ.

Assume further that

(2) $A_1$ has at least two$^{40}$ licensing standards; call one of them $J_2$.

In that case, there are two basic possibilities:

(3a) $J_2$ is identical to $J_1$.

(3b) $J_2$ is not identical to $J_1$.

If (3a), then $J_1$ is self-supporting. In this case we may say S is committed to

*self-support meta-foundationalism* (or *self-supportism* for short), which is the view that some self-supporting standards of justification exist.

Suppose instead that (3b): $J_2$ is not identical to $J_1$. Then we ask what justifies S in believing $J_2$. Here there are a number of possibilities. First, suppose:

(4a) S has an argument $A_2$ for $J_2$, which is licensed by $J_1$.

Or (the analysis will be the same) suppose:

(4b) S has a series of arguments supporting $J_2$, and at some point in this series, an argument is licensed by $J_1$.

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$^{40}$ The standard in virtue of which the premise(s) are justified probably cannot be the same as the standard in virtue of which S is justified in inferring the conclusion from the premises. But the minimum number of licensing standards has no bearing on explaining the Meta-Regress Argument. The claim that there must be *some* licensing standards is one that will be examined in Ch. 3.
In either case, $J_1$ is mutually supported (because $J_1$ and $J_2$ are mutually supporting).

S is committed to **meta-coherentism**, the view that some mutually supported $j$-standards exist.

Another option is:

(4c) S claims to accept (dispositionally) an infinite series of standards, or that “there is” an infinite series of them, supporting but not containing $J_1$.

Then S believes that $J_1$ is infinitely supported. And then S apparently accepts **meta-regressism**, the view that infinitely supported $j$-standards exist.

Each of these possibilities is unacceptable.

The trouble with self-supportism is that arguments containing self-supporting standards are, necessarily, epistemically circular. This can be argued for briefly as follows. Since $J_1$ is self-supporting, $J_1$ licenses belief either in one of the premises or that the inference holds; but if the premises and inference are justifiedly believed and $J_1$ succeeded in licensing them, then $J_1$ is true. But according to the definition defended earlier in this chapter, to say that $A_1$ is epistemically circular is to claim: if S were to have a justified belief in one of the premises of $A_1$, or that its inference holds, then (it follows that) $J_1$ would be true. Hence, if $J_1$ is self-supporting, then $A_1$ is epistemically circular.

The crucial premise here is that, in order to be able to succeed in licensing an argument — to explain, successfully, that in virtue of which the argument gives someone a justified belief in its conclusion — a standard must be true. Admittedly, a false $j$-standard could be the best explanation available for all we know; but if it really
is false, then from an objective point of view it fails to account for the justification of anything. Or else calling the standard “false” is meaningless: I think the only good meaning to give to the claim that a standard is false is that it does fail to account for the justification of that for which it purports to account.

As I will be concerned to argue in Chapter 2, epistemic circularity is vicious; hence self-supportism, committed as it is to justifying standards through the use of epistemically circular arguments, must be rejected.

In Chapter 3, I will be concerned to discuss the merits of meta-coherentism (in large part through examining the prospects of the method of reflective equilibrium as a solution to the PMJ). It too, however, rather obviously falls prey to epistemic circularity. But defenders of ordinary coherentism are concerned to argue that a “large enough” circle can mitigate the viciousness of circularity. I will examine (and reject) a similar claim in the context of meta-coherentism and epistemic circularity.

So meta-coherentism must be rejected as a solution to the PMJ. In the same chapter, meta-regressism (none too plausible to begin with) will be dispatched.

So now suppose, after we reject (3a), (3b), (4a), (4b), and (4c), S returns to the original claims that were needed to generate these possibilities: (1) and (2). If all of these possibilities are incorrect, it must be because either (1) or (2) was incorrect. But is it reasonable to reject either of these claims?

Suppose S accepts (1) but rejects (2), and so argues:

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41 This assumes that this is an exhaustive list of possibilities generated by (1) and (2): (3a), (3b), (4a), (4b), and (4c). The assumption seems plausible in light of common experience with regress arguments.
(5) There is not at least one licensing standard in virtue of which belief in
the premises (of \( A_1 \)) or in the inference is justified.

In other words, there are some (successful) meta-justificatory arguments that lack any
licensing standards; there are some standards that lack any support by any other
standards. Can this claim be made out plausibly? It would seem so, since this is
essentially the approach that so-called particularism (Chisholm's word\(^{42}\)) takes to the
PMJ. While particularism was formulated as a solution to Chisholm's so-called
Problem of the Criterion (which differs somewhat from the ancient problem), it can
be readily construed as a solution to the PMJ.

The particularist holds that we must, in order to defend any criterion of
justification successfully, begin with particular instances of justified belief, to be
determined without reference to criteria. It so happens, however, that getting very
clear on the structure and presuppositions of the MRA, as I have tried to do in this
chapter, also makes it clear that the particularist is committed to some very
implausible claims. As I will explain in Chapter 3, I think it is especially implausible
that there might be a belief that is justified, but not justified in accordance with any
standard of justification at all. I will also argue in Chapter 3 that particularism,
construed as a solution to the MRA problem (as it is plausible to do), is committed to
this view. I will explore the issues involved in construing particularism in this way,
and will ultimately reject it.

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\(^{42}\) See Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Problem of the Criterion," in The Foundations of
Knowing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 66.
So let us suppose that S backs up to the beginning of the MRA and rejects the premise that undergirds all of the other options: (1). So it is nothing like an argument that justifies S in accepting $J_1$. S claims, instead:

(6) S is justified in accepting $J_1$ without argument and without making any reference to justifiers that can be interpreted, or construed, as an argument.

So S is committed to the view that there are basic j-standards. We might well call S's view basic meta-foundationalism. Surely, S's view is at least as deserving of the name 'foundationalism' as self-support meta-foundationalism, since (unlike the latter) it posits genuinely basic beliefs, i.e., beliefs that are justified but not by other beliefs.

Nonetheless I will prefer a briefer and more familiar name, again due to Chisholm: methodism. The methodist offers a solution to the Problem of the Criterion that can also be construed as a solution to the PMJ, as follows. We begin our work in epistemology by (somehow) fixing upon a set of j-standards, and subsequently applying those standards to particular beliefs to argue that they are, or are not, justified. We can also use those standards to argue for derivative, more specialized standards.

In Chapter 3, I will introduce a fundamental objection to methodism that I will briefly outline now. If some belief may be called 'justified', then there is something (called its 'justifier(s)') in virtue of which it is justified. This is a fact about the meaning of ‘justified’. Even if, as (6) has it, the justifiers are not beliefs, there are some sort of justifiers, i.e., facts in virtue of which the belief is justified. Moreover, if the belief is justified by those justifiers, the supports relation must hold between these
justifiers and the belief. And so S, in claiming that he is justified in accepting $J_1$, is committed to the existence of some items the descriptions of which must bear the same (supports) relation to the belief that $J_1$ that the premises of an argument would have to bear to $J_1$. In that case, (6) is false. In short, in Chapter 3, I will elaborate some points from Section II above as a refutation of methodism.

It would appear that we are left with the view that nothing (ultimately) justifies S in accepting any standard of justification. Put differently, all j-standards are, if supported at all, ultimately supported only by mere posits.

It might be thought, then, that we are left with what may be called meta-skepticism. But an option remains, that, if correct, promises to keep us from having to swallow this bitter pill. Suppose that, according to some established sense of ‘rational’, it is possible for belief to be rational without supporting reasons. I claim that there are some standards that S can believe rationally but not, in any ordinary sense, justifiably (or unjustifiably, for that matter), and for which he cannot offer any even slightly plausible argument (or describe supporting circumstances that can be restated in argument form).

Some standards, I will maintain, describe rational belief-formation. To accept such standards is perforce to accept that certain kinds of beliefs are rational. Given such standards, noncircular arguments for j-standards are in the offing. In Chapter 4, I will elaborate and defend this position, which is deeply indebted to and informed by the meta-epistemologies of Strawson, Wittgenstein, and most of all the great Scots philosopher Thomas Reid.
It should be enormously obvious to epistemologists that the MRA covers ground that has already been covered both recently and in the very distant past in various ways. Some of the more obvious historical figures that come to mind are Sextus Empiricus, Hume, Reid, and Wittgenstein. Recently this ground has been trodden, most prominently, by Alston, but also by Chisholm, Sosa, and many others. I believe the present approach to organizing the problem and related arguments has the advantage of being particularly clear and straightforward.

This approach also has a further advantage, specifically over Alston's approach in *The Reliability of Sense Perception*. Alston devotes about one hundred pages of that book to showing that various attempts to solve (something like) the PMJ cannot escape epistemic circularity. This work, while doubtless useful and interesting, may be bypassed if the MRA is successful. For whereas Alston might have shown piecemeal that many particular theories each cannot escape epistemic circularity, the MRA aims in part to show why those theories in general, and any of their undiscussed competitors, could not escape it. Indeed, I point to the MRA as the best explanation of why the arguments of those one hundred pages of Alston's were suffused with a strong odor of inevitability.

CHAPTER 2

IS EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY VICIOUS?

I. What’s Wrong with Self-Support Meta-Foundationalism?

Alston and others deny that it is necessary, to be justified in believing a justification standard on the basis of an argument, to adduce or even be aware of the licensing j-standards for the premises of the argument. They claim, moreover, that it is perfectly possible to be justified in believing such an argument’s premises without even being aware that that in virtue of which we are justified in believing the premises of the argument is the conclusion itself. Such considerations they cite as making self-supportism plausible.

Thus, in the sense defined in Chapter 1, a standard might support itself: the standard might license an argument containing that same standard as the conclusion. But such an argument is, as I pointed out in Chapter 1, epistemically circular. Hence Alston and other defenders of self-supportism are concerned to argue that epistemic circularity is not vicious. If they are correct, then self-supportism has an excellent chance of being the proper solution to the Problem of Meta-Justification.
Robert Nozick is a self-supportist who has clearly seen this circularity and embraced it. His attitude is typical. Speaking of a doxastic system containing epistemically circular arguments, he writes:

Looking at the overall structure, however, we seek just such [epistemic] “circles”. It is not surprising that some features objectionable in intermediate connecting links within a structure might be desirable in fundamental principles that underlie the whole structure. Local vices, global virtues. It is desired that there be principles which underlie and yield the rest, which subsume themselves and so do not dangle or lead to infinite regress. The discovering and uncovering of such fundamental truths is not a crisis or trauma for philosophy, but a triumph.¹

Nozick does not give any reasons at all to think that the “local vice” of epistemic circularity is a “global virtue” when embedded in a “global” system’s foundations. He simply states the claim baldly, though eloquently, with the appearance of having given an argument for the view. I am reminded of G. E. Moore’s so-called “Open Question Argument” against naturalism on that score; practically everyone admits that the argument is no good, but they continue to say that the argument makes the trouble with naturalism intuitive. Similarly, declarations such as Nozick’s have, no doubt, made it seem plausible that epistemic circularity is benign, without having given any good reasons for thinking so.

The plan of this chapter is simple. First, I will use Alston’s view to introduce the self-support meta-foundationalist’s stance toward epistemic circularity. Second, I will interpret and evaluate arguments, by Braithwaite, Black, and Van Cleve, that the circularity is benign. I will conclude that none of those arguments do any more than

shift the burden of proof to the person who thinks that the circularity is vicious. And so, third, I will meet that burden of proof, by presenting four arguments that the circularity is vicious. I will conclude that self-supportism must be rejected.

II. Alston’s View as an Introduction.

On Alston’s view, epistemic circularity is a puzzling difficulty, but it is not vicious in the sense defined in Chapter 1. He says this in several places, but his most complete discussion of this point is found in his essay “Epistemic Circularity." What Alston describes as a “track record” argument for the reliability of sense-perception has as its conclusion (Alston’s numbering) (II), while (V) is admittedly presupposed by the argument’s premises. Quoted from Alston’s essay:

(II) Sense experience is a reliable source of perceptual beliefs.

(V) If one believes that p on the basis of its sensorily appearing to one that p, and one has no overriding reasons to the contrary, one is justified in believing that p.

Alston proceeds as follows. Consider a track record argument roughly of the form of the second from Chapter 1, Section II above, though applied specifically to sense perception. Now, (V) resembles a generalized form of what I was calling a “bridge principle” in Chapter 1. According to Alston and other reliabilists, something like (V) needs only to be true in order for one to be justified in various perceptual beliefs (premises of the form (nb); see Chapter 1, Section III). It is crucial to realize, for Alston, that being justified in believing all the requisite (nb)’s in a track record

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argument does not require being justified in believing (V); it requires only that (V) be true. "So what's all the fuss?" one might say. "Sure, we can see that track record arguments are circular; we might find them unpersuasive for that reason. But their unpersuasiveness to us, happily, does not mean that one could not, in theory, get a justified belief in (II) using a track record argument. So their epistemic circularity is not vicious."

In order to make this argument go through, Alston has to talk about the conditions under which one can get a justified belief in a conclusion based on an argument for it. But we may put aside that talk, I think, and concede that, at least at first glance, his analysis looks right. As I would put it: we certainly do not need to be justified in believing j-standards in order to have beliefs justified in accordance with those very j-standards. We can be justified in holding premises such as (nb) to be correct, while being ignorant of some things in virtue of which we are so justified. We can even be justified — Alston goes on — in believing the conclusion on the basis of such premises, even though the truth of the conclusion is a necessary condition of our being justified in believing the premises.

This is (as we shall see) similar to the solution to the problem of induction given by Max Black, James Van Cleve, and others who argue for inductive justifications of induction. It is possible to use induction to argue that induction is reliable, without saying that we must first, as a precondition of our using such an argument, know that induction is reliable. In everyday life and in science, it is no
criticism of inductive practices that we lack a justification of those practices; why
should it be any different, then, when arguing for induction?

These sorts of moves are understandably persuasive – or perhaps “seductive”
would be a better word. For all their persuasiveness, they do not seem to take full
account of the problem. As Alston himself puts it, “This is to offer stone instead of
bread.” A track record argument can justify belief in its conclusion only if its
conclusion is true. If we are not simply going through the pointless exercise of
reaffirming what we already consider obvious, it will not satisfy us to give an
argument for a conclusion when we are aware that in making the argument we are
taking the conclusion for granted.

Alston has an excellent way of bringing out this point. He says that the
reliability of crystal ball gazing, for example, might well turn out to be defensible if it
is reliable. Similarly for any sort of strange, occult practices. But if we took it for
granted that crystal ball gazing were reliable, and then produced a track record
argument showing its success, no one would be impressed. Why, then, should we be
impressed by epistemically circular arguments for the reliability of sense perception,
or for some principle of induction?

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3 Reliability, op. cit., p. 17.

4 See Alston’s “Belief-forming Practices and the Social,” in Frederick F. Schmitt, ed., Socializing
40. This point was brought out 36 years earlier by Henry E. Kyburg, Jr., in his reply to Braithwaite’s
attempt (to be discussed anon) to give an inductive argument for induction. Comparing induction with
“the Oblonsky Method of tea-leaf reading,” Kyburg says, “Both methods are in the same logical boat.”
See “R. B. Braithwaite on Probability and Induction,” British Journal for the Philosophy of Science 11
Throughout *The Reliability of Sense Perception*, Alston insists that epistemic circularity poses a deep and difficult problem. But Alston’s position there was curious. After everything he said about what a problem it is, he still maintained the position that we can get a justified belief from a circular track record argument. If all we wanted was to justify our beliefs, Alston said we can do that with an epistemically circular argument; it does not even matter that we know that we are presupposing the conclusion.

So perhaps it should not be surprising that Alston reversed his view more recently: “I now think that I overreacted to the problem of epistemic circularity. ... [I]f we are going to rely on an epistemically circular argument anyway, we might as well go with the more ambitious ones that seek to show it to be true that SP [the belief-forming practices associated with sense perception] is reliable.”

So in his most recent published writing on the subject, he appears to hold that epistemic circularity is not such a problem after all. But what about the fact that epistemically circular track record arguments are equally available for all sorts of disreputable practices, such as crystal ball gazing?

Those practices, Alston says, might not display *significant self-support*. Sense-perception gives us information about the physical make-up of the senses, which information allows us to fine-tune our accounts of why and when sense-perception is reliable; and similarly for other natural cognitive processes such

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as memory and reasoning. But this sort of self-support cannot be assumed to be a
feature of occult practices.

Alston now apparently regards his trenchant analysis in *The Reliability of
Sense Perception*—showing how attempt after attempt to argue for basic j-standards
runs afoul of epistemic circularity—was beside the point. If there is nothing wrong
with epistemic circularity *per se*, then there was no point in showing how all those
arguments were epistemically circular.

I completely disagree. Alston, Black, Van Cleve, and all the rest have made
an important realization— that justified belief in the premises does not necessarily
require justified belief in what the argument presupposes—but have incorrectly
inferred that epistemic circularity is benign, and hence entirely underestimated the
size of the problem.

III. Arguments for Benignity.

Other writers, including R. B. Braithwaite and Max Black, have promoted
self-supportist solutions to the problem of induction, as has, more recently, James
Van Cleve; Van Cleve also has a self-supportist way out of the Cartesian circle.
These writings are generally directed to the problem of induction rather than
epistemic circularity, but it is not difficult to see their relevance. It is worth
investigating whether their arguments might be converted into good arguments that
epistemic circularity is not vicious.
So let us begin with R. B. Braithwaite, who in his 1946 Tamer Lectures proposed that inductive arguments for inductive policies are not viciously circular. He describes inductive reasoning as "the use of inductive policies," where "inductive policies" are "policies for establishing general hypotheses in accordance with inductive principles of inference on the basis of empirical data"; "inductive principles," in turn, are said to be "those discussed in books on inductive logic and scientific methodology," which include "simple enumeration" and "principles of elimination."

Following Peirce, Braithwaite claims that inductive policies are to be justified by pointing out their effectiveness (in the past); this he calls a predictionist justification of induction. He claims that when a policy satisfies a certain (rather complicated) criterion of effectiveness, it is justified; in that case, inferences made in accordance with the policy are "valid," and beliefs in the inferred conclusions (under certain conditions) are "reasonable." Without explicating the entire criterion of effectiveness (which is unnecessary for our purposes), it may be adequately summarized as follows: to be effective, a policy must be such that, in a given time period, "many" of the hypotheses established by its use both (1) have not been empirically refuted, and (2) have been empirically confirmed at least once.

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8 Ibid., pp. 259-61.
As Braithwaite himself points out, many will identify a circularity in an attempt to justify an inductive policy by pointing to its effectiveness. To be justified in believing the premise— that a policy is effective— evidently requires another inductive argument. If the inductive argument licensing belief in the premise depends on a different inductive policy, there is no circularity; but the same problem of justification arises for that policy. Hence either we have an infinite regress of inductive policies, or we shall have to say that an inductive policy establishes its own effectiveness— which at first glance appears to be viciously circular. If we nix the infinite regress option, the predictionist justification of induction presupposes the validity of induction by simple enumeration, and “the validity of induction by simple enumeration presupposes its own validity; and this, it is alleged, is a viciously circular justification for induction.”

Braithwaite’s reply to this problem predates Alston’s stance toward epistemic circularity by about forty years. “The first move in the rebuttal” of the circularity charge, Braithwaite writes, “is that the proposition ‘presupposed’ in the predictionist justification of an inductive inference does not function in the inference as an additional premise.” In other words, when we argue for the effectiveness of an inductive policy by using simple enumeration, no rule of simple enumeration operates

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9 In a passage that is very interestingly similar to the MRA; ibid., p. 274.

10 It is induction by simple enumeration that will take us from the claim that a policy has been effective in the past to the claim that it is effective, period.

11 Ibid., p. 275.

12 Ibid.
as a premise in the argument. To say that it does immediately raises a different, but very familiar, infinite regress.\(^{13}\) So the circularity here is not premise circularity.

"I do not wish to deny that there is a sort of circularity" in this case, Braithwaite says, "but it is a peculiar sort of circularity whose viciousness is by no means obvious."\(^{14}\) Braithwaite goes on to enumerate a number of different criteria for the reasonableness of an inferred belief \(q\), and reduces the possibilities to three (\(p\) is a single conjunctive premise of the argument, and \(r\) is the rule licensing this particular inference):

VI \(B\) reasonably believes \(p\) and believes \(r\).

VIII \(B\) reasonably believes \(p\), and \(r\) is true.

IX \(B\) reasonably believes \(p\) and believes \(r\), and \(r\) is true.

Braithwaite says that arguments for the effectiveness of an inductive policy that fit these criteria for a person "will be valid without any circularity"\(^{15}\) — by which he evidently means premise circularity. (Later he stresses, "In none of these three cases is there any vicious circularity."\(^{16}\)

Braithwaite appears to take the considerations described in the foregoing three paragraphs as decisive. Having established that the inference in question is not premise circular, he says that in the case of VIII in particular, it is possible for the

\(^{13}\) Viz., if we must regard a rule licensing any inference at all as among the premises of the argument, we may as well add the rule explicitly to those premises; but then there would have to be a second rule that licenses the original premises plus the first rule. So the second rule is added to the premises; but then there would have to be a third rule, and so on.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 277.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 281.
inferred belief to be reasonable by these criteria, "whether or not the inferrer knows or believes" that the inference policy he uses "is effective or indeed whether he considers the question of its effectiveness at all." Braithwaite admits that an inductive argument for the effectiveness of an inductive policy has an "implicit circularity"; but this is no trouble, because "the implicit circularity only arises from the inference-machine becoming self-conscious about the way in which it operates."²⁸

Of course, this is very similar to what Alston has said more recently about epistemic circularity. But it is hasty and unwarranted to conclude on such grounds alone that epistemic circularity is not vicious. It is surely interesting and important to recognize that epistemic circularity does not entail the more obviously vicious premise circularity and that one need not even be aware of the rule that licenses an inference that justifies a given belief. But it might be the case – and is in fact – that the reason epistemic circularity is vicious has nothing to do either with premise circularity or with awareness of a licensing inference rule. That is what I will argue in the sections following the present one.

Of all the philosophers I will discuss in this section, Max Black is most famous for arguing, in a series of articles in the 1950’s and ‘60’s, that inductive

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¹⁶ Ibid., p. 283.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 282.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 290.
arguments for induction are not vicious. His argument differs slightly from
Braithwaite's. 19

Black presents two so-called "self-supporting" arguments for (admittedly
idealized) inductive rules. ("Self-supporting" is a surprisingly apt name given my
label for the move in the MRA under examination in this chapter.) For example:

(a1): All examined instances of the use of R₁ in arguments with true
premises have been instances in which R₁ is successful.

Hence:

All instances of the use of R₁ in arguments with true premises are
instances in which R₁ is successful. 20

R₁ is this rule: "To argue from All examined instances of A's have been B to
All A's are B." 21 Black points out that this argument has been "so formulated that
(a1) is governed by R₁." 22 In other words, R₁ is supposed to be the inference rule that
licenses the inference from the premise to the conclusion of (a₁). (That is easy to see:
replace 'A' in a₁ with 'examined instances of the use of R₁ in arguments with true
premises' and replace 'B' with 'instances in which R₁ is successful'.) But the
conclusion is tantamount to the claim that R₁ is "reliable" (as Black says). And so we

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19 As Black says, "Braithwaite is one of the very few writers who do not think that inductive
justifications of induction are viciously circular. But I think he is unnecessarily restrained in his
conclusions on the matter and my own treatment follows somewhat different lines." Max Black, "The
Inductive Support of Inductive Rules," in Problems of Analysis: Philosophical Essays (Ithaca: Cornell

20 Ibid., p. 197.

21 Ibid., p. 196.

22 Ibid.
have an argument such that its conclusion claims that its own licensing inference rule is reliable.

Black proceeds to argue that there is no sense in which this argument is "guilty of circularity." He says that there are two ways that an argument can be circular: first, what we earlier called "premise circularity," and second, the situation that obtains when "at least one of the premises is such that it is impossible to get to know its truth without simultaneously or antecedently getting to know the truth of the conclusion." (The latter situation, if not coextensive with epistemic circularity by my definition, clearly is a variety of epistemic circularity.) Black spends considerable time arguing (successfully) that (a1) is not circular in either of these senses. He appears content to think that this disposes of any concerns about any vicious circularity.

Black asks when the use of an inductive rule R1 might be legitimate; to sum up his discussion, he says that the most stringent requirements will have us subject R1 to searching criticism. If R1 survives such criticism, its use is, certainly, legitimate. Black then asks, "Can a self-supporting argument be correct without triviality?" He appears to admit that (a1) might well be trivially self-supporting:

Well, no doubt, inductive inferences will have been used in the course of finding good reasons for one's confidence in the reliability of R1... If that very same inductive evidence for R1's reliability is now produced again

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23 Ibid., p. 198.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 204.
as the premise of \((a_1)\), \((a_1)\) will indeed yield no new knowledge, and will then, indeed, lead to useless repetition of what was known at the outset.\(^{26}\)

The point is that if, when \(R_i\) was subjected to criticism, we produced a lot of evidence that is now adduced in the premise of \((a_1)\), then \((a_1)\) will be trivial. But he goes on to say (his italics), "[T]here is nothing in the specification of \((a_1)\) that requires us to confine ourselves to the evidence that we previously had for \(R_i\)'s reliability."\(^{27}\) We may, then, supplement the evidence we previously had for \(R_i\)'s reliability with new evidence, and this will strengthen our argument for the conclusion of \((a_1)\). Hence our argument might be self-supporting but not trivially so.

If Black is right, we may use self-supporting (rule circular) arguments to augment the probability of an inductive rule whose basic reliability is already established.\(^{28}\)

That is not a claim that we need evaluate here. Even if true, it does not bear on how we could, without triviality (or vicious circularity), establish the basic reliability of an inference rule in the first place. No doubt some sort of bootstrapping technique is unobjectionable, once a weak version of a rule is on the table. But that does not impugn or otherwise bear on the criticisms we have in store for epistemic circularity.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., pp. 204-5. Cf. Max Black, “Self-supporting Inductive Arguments,” in Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 209ff. Black writes: “I have no intention of claiming that the self-supporting argument can definitively establish or demonstrate that the rule is correct. Indeed, I do not know what an outright demonstration of the correctness or legitimacy of an inductive rule would be like” (p. 212).

So, Black, like Braithwaite, points out that self-supporting inductive arguments are not premise circular; Black adds that we may use such self-supporting arguments to bootstrap our way to stronger rules. As we shall see, that is not enough to establish the virtuousness of epistemic circularity.29

We have examined various attempts to mitigate the viciousness of epistemic circularity; these attempts make a variety of quite legitimate claims, but none of them actually shows that epistemic circularity is not vicious. Braithwaite is content to point out that the “implicit circularity” that is admittedly part of inductive arguments for induction is not premise circularity and thus nothing to worry about. Black makes a different point, saying in effect that, given a weak induction rule, one can bootstrap one’s way up to stronger versions; that might be perfectly correct. Alston and Van Cleve30 point out that one need not be aware of an argument’s licensing inference rule, or of what justified belief in the premises presupposes, when the inference rule, or a presupposition, is the argument’s conclusion. But in none of these cases has anyone actually succeeded in giving a positive argument that epistemic circularity is benign.

Perhaps we shouldn’t expect anyone to do this; proving a negative is often very difficult. But clearly the burden of proof has been shifted onto those who think that epistemic circularity is vicious. Several leading twentieth-century philosophers

29 Ibid., p. 206. On p. 202, Black does acknowledge that “it is conceivable that circularity of a kind more subtle than any we have yet considered might arise in the satisfaction of the epistemic conditions for the legitimate use of our self-supporting arguments.”

advanced various views on why epistemic circularity might be vicious, and they successfully showed that it is not vicious for any of those reasons. It is now up to their opponents to show why it might be vicious, if they still think it is.

So I will attempt to meet this challenge. Many people who come across epistemically circular arguments feel that something is seriously amiss in them. The following four arguments should locate exactly the source of this intuition. To begin, then, with the Argument from Philosophical Requirements.

IV. The Argument from Philosophical Requirements.

It is possible to be justified in believing the premises of a track record argument without that belief being consciously based, for its justification, on the j-standard stated in the conclusion. This point I concede. But I do not concede that it is possible to satisfy ordinary philosophical requirements on being justified in believing a philosophical claim on the basis of an argument, if that argument is epistemically circular. Let me explain.

In attempting to demonstrate the viciousness of epistemic circularity, we might seriously apply remarks in defense of such circularity to actual attempts to justify actual standards. Will such an approach actually wash?

Philosophers, inquisitive as they are, look into how various claims can be justified, what inferentially depends on what, and so forth.\textsuperscript{31} If they notice (as they

\textsuperscript{31} Ernest Sosa has named a way of opting out of the circularity problem, which involves quelling this inquisitiveness: \textit{the avoidance strategy}, meaning avoidance of the question of whether a given “faculty” is reliable. Sosa himself concludes that this strategy is not necessary to deal with the problem; but I simply think that it is impossible for actual philosophers to achieve. As much as they
often do) that one cannot be justified in believing the premises of a certain argument, 
unless another, perhaps questionable proposition is true, they are apt to describe this 
state of affairs:

(JP) One can be justified in believing a certain set of premises (and hence, 
the conclusion on the basis of these premises), only if a given proposition 
is true.

It is quite natural for philosophers to investigate whether such a necessary 
condition actually holds — that is, whether the proposition in question is true — by 
bringing forth various considerations for and against it. This happens a lot in 
discussions of a wide variety of philosophical topics. Of course, it does not happen 
always with every such necessary condition, as I will discuss below.

When we come across Alston on epistemic circularity (and others writing on 
induction or Descartes’ circle), we encounter a curious phenomenon. Alston does not 
give a track record argument for the reliability of sense-perception; he only talks 
about such arguments. Well, suppose that he has given a full-blown track record 
argument for the reliability of sense-perception, in addition to the rest of his 
philosophical work. But he does not bother to investigate whether a certain 
proposition, on which the argument depends, actually is true. So even though he 
adopts that the proposition must be true if the argument is to succeed, he fails to 
argue for the proposition.

might talk about avoiding the question, their colleagues and their consciences will not let them. 
Moreover, as Sosa himself implies, this is a non-philosophical response to the problem and as such 
does not merit consideration — any more than “Up yours!” would merit discussion as a response to 
“How do you know that ρ?” See Ernest Sosa, “Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles,” Journal of 
In our fictional Alston’s defense, one might point out that a track record argument itself constitutes sufficient investigation of the truth of its conclusion and hence of the proposition on which the argument depends. But in any other philosophical context, the latter move would be regarded as obviously question-begging and hence illegitimate. What is in question is whether a track record argument for a j-standard about sense-perception actually can be used to show belief in the standard to be justified. We discover and are now well aware that track record argument for the standard in question is successful in this regard only if the conclusion is true. Hence it is natural for us (at least, in any other philosophical context) to require some entirely separate argument for the conclusion. When our fictional Alston does not fulfill this requirement, he shirks his intellectual responsibilities.

It does not help to say that the actual Alston merely discusses epistemically circular arguments, and does not offer such an argument himself; that’s irrelevant to my point. Hardly anyone ever actually gives the sort of circular arguments they’re fond of talking about (except, perhaps, Descartes and a very few others). Avoiding the attempt makes it easy to dodge the difficult questions they would face if they made the attempt — difficult questions that Descartes did famously face. What Alston says about epistemically circular arguments is that an argument that presupposes its own conclusion can supply ample justification of our belief in that presupposition. My claim is that if such an actual argument were to be made in (what else?) a philosophical context, no one would buy it. And rightly so.
Nor does it help here to say that we can be justified in believing the premises without being antecedently justified in believing the conclusion. For, in a philosophical context, it is usually the case that we naturally and properly require that, if the premises are justified by any further considerations, those further considerations actually be adduced. When we discover that the conclusion is among the considerations essential to justifying the premises, we do, and should, throw the argument out as ill-suited to its purpose.

To put my objection in different words. Alston and his like argue, in essence:

(i) If S is justified in believing the premises of epistemically circular argument A for justification standard J, then (provided other conditions are met) S is justified in believing J on the basis of A.

(ii) S is justified in believing the premises of argument A for justification standard J.

(iii) Hence, S is justified in believing J on the basis of A.

Suppose S is our fictional Alston; Alston has given track record argument A. We charge him with begging the question. In his defense, he states (i)-(iii): a meta-justification. Now, (i)-(iii) is a metalevel argument, made by a philosopher (Alston) in defense of a philosophical claim (that Alston is justified in believing J on the basis of A). In this context, we may ask: What evidence can be adduced in support of (ii)? Is it simply being asserted without any argument at all?

Here Alston faces a dilemma. Suppose the answer is “Yes.” So he thinks he can assert that he’s justified in believing the premises of A without giving any argument for that assertion. Notice, the question for Alston is not whether he is justified in believing each (nb) without arguing for each (nb). The question is: In a
philosophical context, can Alston legitimately assert, without argument, the following metalevel claim: “I am justified in believing each (nb) (along with the track record argument’s other premises)”?

It seems not, particularly when we can see that justified belief in the premises requires the truth of the conclusion Alston wishes to draw. If we permit such a move, there is no good reason why Alston should not be allowed simply to assume that the conclusion is true and forego arguing altogether.

Suppose now that the answer is “No” – that (ii) is asserted with some argument. Then I suppose Alston’s argument would be roughly like this: “We have reliable belief-forming practices that result in beliefs stated in the premises of A; hence, those beliefs are justified.” In that case, Alston never had any point in making the track record argument at all. He might as well have asserted J without argument, since he was going to do so eventually anyway (at least, after heavy questioning).

It is easy to see that we have forced the fictional Alston, who before gave an argument that was merely epistemically circular, to a much more obviously vicious circularity. If the j-standard J can be stated roughly as that we do in fact have reliable belief-forming processes (of some particular sort), then when Alston offers the argument in favor of (ii), including J as a premise, then he obviously begs the question. We may throw his argument out.

Perhaps this is a bit too fast. Notice that when Alston makes the argument in favor of (ii), which includes J as a premise, the ultimate conclusion of his argument is
not \( J \) but instead (iii), i.e., that Alston is justified in believing \( J \) on the basis of \( A \).

That is not premise circularity.

The problem quickly resurfaces. If Alston is to be justified in believing (iii) on the basis of this philosophical argument (i)-(iii), and he is justified in believing premise (ii) in part on the basis of \( J \), then he must be justified, antecedently, in believing \( J \). In order to be situated properly to justify his belief that \( S \) is justified in believing \( J \) on the basis of \( A \), Alston must already be justified in believing that \( J \).

And philosophers, being inquisitive as I said, will of course want to know what justifies Alston in believing that \( J \). As we assumed (in this section, anyway) at the outset, the best that Alston can do is to give a track record argument (that meets certain conditions): something like \( A \). And now we have come around full circle.

It is not as though Alston does not know he is in this situation described by the present line of reasoning. In Alston's own terms, all that I have shown is that no belief in any \( j \)-standard can be "fully reflectively justified" (FRJ). Alston explains:  
"When a belief has been FRJ, no questions are left over as to whether the subject is justified in accepting some premise that is used at some stage of the justification." A belief is FRJ only if it has been successfully supported by an argument, and each premise of that argument has in turn been successfully supported, and so on. Obviously, barring premise circularity, FRJ is impossible.

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In my comments about what philosophers properly require of themselves and each other, I did not wish to imply that it is always required, for each one of their claims, that some argument be given for that claim. There are, because there must be, exceptions.

It is possible to give a persuasive argument that there must be exceptions. Assume first that ought implies can: if I ought to do something, in any plausible sense of ‘ought’, then there is some sense in which I am (or, perhaps, was) able to do what I ought. Contraposing: if there is no sense in which I am (or was ever) able to do something, it is not the case that I ought to do it. Apply that insight to the case of philosophical argumentation. Surely it is impossible to “argue for everything”; hence it is not the case that one ought to argue for everything.

After having made this concession, can I still maintain, against Alston, that epistemic circularity is vicious? Perhaps not on these grounds. The Argument from Philosophical Requirements depends on the premise that philosophers do rightly require of each other that they adduce their justification when they can say what it is. And I have come to the conclusion that when philosophers do this, they discover that when they broach the subject of epistemic circularity, they run in a fairly tight circle. But they must be permitted to say something without argument. Why not, then, (i) and (ii)? Or better yet, the premises of \( \mathcal{A} \)?

More generally, where, in this circle, should one begin? The answer is not clear. It is not clear what the proper starting-points in this area of philosophy are. By this talk of starting-points, I mean starting-points in philosophical argumentation;
hence the items constituting starting-points are premises of philosophical arguments, or claims that support other claims but that are not given any support themselves. A proper starting-point would be, then, some statement, made in the course of doing philosophy, that is neither given any support by any other statement nor properly regarded as in need of any support. Evidently, what makes the notion of “proper starting-point” so obscure is this: it is unclear what, if anything, makes a statement properly regarded as in need of argumentative support.

This is not an issue that I can properly adjudicate here, however interesting and important it might be. I can observe, however, that Alston’s defense of epistemic circularity as (in at least some cases) virtuous implies that he believes the premises of epistemically circular arguments are among the proper starting-points of philosophy. Is there anything wrong with that?

I think one point can be urged against it. If indeed there is a fairly tight circle in which the relevant premises and standards surrounding these meta-epistemological issues can be found, and essentially we must choose somewhere to begin in the circle, then why choose to assume the premises of an epistemically circular argument? Why not, instead, simply assume that the certain standards are correct, or that sense perception and other basic ways we have of gathering knowledge are reliable? We are, admittedly, assuming such things in saying that we can have a justified belief in

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34 Marshall Swain uses a term that might be more apt: ‘stopping-point’. In calling the claims in question ‘starting-points’, I do not mean to imply that we actually begin philosophical inquiry or exposition with such claims.

35 Though it will arise again in a different form in Ch. 4, when I advance my own view as to what one proper meta-epistemological starting-point is.
the conclusion of epistemically circular arguments. So what possible motivation can we have for failing to make the assumptions themselves the "starting points"?

The motivation is obvious. Those who want to depend on epistemically circular arguments to support their j-standards and their claims about the reliability of sense-perception (etc.) want to give such conclusions the appearance of support that an argument can give. To make the conclusions — on which claims to having justified beliefs from such arguments depend — into philosophical starting-points appears to be so much question-begging. So the defenders of epistemic circularity want to argue for such starting-points, if only to remove some of the appearance of begging the question — but only some of the appearance, because after all, admittedly, knowledge claims based on epistemically circular arguments do in fact beg the question just as egregiously.

So, I advocate (in Chapter 4) simplifying the situation by openly assuming what will have to be assumed in any case.

This does not, admittedly, by itself constitute a knock-down argument that epistemic circularity is vicious. The Argument from Philosophical Requirements at a minimum establishes that we shall have to choose some philosophical starting-points from among a limited set of propositions. We can choose some and build question-begging arguments for the others; or we can simply choose as starting points those others.
The latter choice seems most sensible, because it avoids begging the question. In this way we undercut the motivation for relying on epistemically circular arguments and, hence, for maintaining that they are not always vicious.

V. The Equal Availability Argument.

Consider what Alston says about epistemic circularity in, for example, The Reliability of Sense Perception. He does not say that it is vicious. "Epistemic circularity does not in and of itself disqualify the argument," he says. Then he goes on,

But even granting that point, the argument will not do its job unless we are justified in accepting its premises; and that is the case only if sense perception is in fact reliable. This is to offer stone instead of bread. We can say the same of any belief-forming practice whatever, no matter how disreputable.

The trouble, then, as we discussed in Section II above, is that epistemically circular arguments can be given for both good and bad practices, and hence such arguments cannot be used to distinguish reputable from disreputable practices or true from spurious j-standards. This strikes me as an excellent reason to believe epistemic circularity as such is vicious; but Alston himself was initially unclear on that point. In fact, Alston's earlier position on the viciousness of epistemic circularity is rather difficult to pin down.

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36 Or, you might want to say, it does so openly. In Ch. 4, Sect. V, however, I argue that this sort of move cannot properly be described as "begging the question."

37 Reliability, op. cit., p. 17.

38 Ibid.
Alston said (as quoted above) that circularity "in and of itself" does not disqualify an argument (apparently for the purpose of getting justified beliefs). But he also says further down on the same page, "Hence I shall disqualify epistemically circular arguments on the grounds that they do not serve to discriminate between reliable and unreliable doxastic practices." So circularity "in and of itself" is not disqualifying, but the fact that circular arguments can be made for reputable and disreputable practices alike is enough to disqualify those arguments. This is, at best, a puzzling conjunction of claims:

(1) Epistemic circularity, "in and of itself," does not disqualify an argument.

(2) Epistemically circular arguments are equally available for reputable and disreputable practices alike; hence, all epistemically circular arguments are disqualified (for that reason).

Recall now that Alston has modified his position, so that according to his most recent article on the subject, he is now willing to accept some epistemically circular arguments—in order (for example) to justify belief in the reliability of sense-perception and other practices that display "significant self-support" (henceforth, in this section, "self-support"). So it appears he now rejects (2). Alston still maintains, however, that those circular track record arguments for the reliability of practices that do not display self-support, such as crystal ball-gazing— the "mere

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39 Ibid.

40 And apparently contradictory. Regardless of the reason, either all epistemically circular arguments are disqualified because they are epistemically circular, or some of them aren't. Statement (1) does not actually state that some epistemically circular arguments are acceptable, however. In any event, what follows will not turn on any claim that Alston held inconsistent views.

track record arguments" (MTRAs) — are “under the ban of being equally available for any doxastic practice whatever, no matter how disreputable.”

So Alston now advocates (1) together with a modified version of (2):

(3) Epistemically circular track record arguments are equally available for reputable and disreputable practices alike; hence, epistemically circular track record arguments for doxastic practices that lack significant self-support are disqualified (for that reason).

To make sense of this modified view, it is important to bear in mind that Alston wants (contrary to his original aim) to rely on epistemically circular arguments to show that sense perceptual doxastic practice (SP) is reliable. So he has to produce a way to distinguish two varieties of epistemically circular arguments, to wit, the virtuous and the vicious.

He proposes a way to make the distinction: the arguments for the doxastic practices that are self-supporting can be virtuous, while the arguments for the doxastic practices that are not self-supporting are vicious. The former arguments are not merely track record arguments; apparently, they exhibit the fact that a doxastic practice is self-supporting. The latter arguments, on the other hand, are “mere track record arguments” and do not exhibit a practice’s self-support.

Why, I wonder, are the allegedly vicious arguments held to be vicious at all? Alston’s stated view on this is that such MTRAs are under a “ban of being equally available for any doxastic practice whatever.”

But this is very puzzling. After all, why is it that MTRAs are indeed equally available for the unacceptable practices? It is precisely because such arguments are

\[\text{Ibid. p. 43.}\]
epistemically circular. It isn’t because they are track record arguments and it isn’t because they do not exhibit a doxastic practice’s self-support. As anyone familiar with the phenomenon of epistemic circularity knows very well, it is epistemic circularity itself that explains why MTRAs are equally available for unacceptable practices. Hence, if it is the equal availability of mere track record arguments that makes them vicious, and it is epistemic circularity that makes them equally available, then (it seems reasonable to suppose) epistemic circularity *per se* is vicious. This argument is worth spelling out a bit more carefully:

(i) If a type of argument is equally available for patently unreliable doxastic practices, then that type of argument is unacceptable.

(ii) Since MTRAs are equally available for patently unreliable doxastic practices, they are unacceptable.

(iii) But it is epistemic circularity that makes MTRAs equally available for patently unreliable doxastic practices.

(iv) Therefore (probably?) all epistemically circular arguments are unacceptable (vicious).

Admittedly, the conclusion does not follow deductively. Perhaps, as Alston’s defenders will want to suggest, I am missing the point. The point is that arguments that exhibit a doxastic practice’s significant self-support are different from MTRAs precisely because they exhibit that self-support. Objectionable practices cannot be given such arguments; so, such arguments are not equally available for objectionable practices, unlike MTRAs. So it is not only the epistemic circularity of an argument that makes MTRAs equally available for objectionable practices.

But what else is it that makes them equally available? Again, mentioning the fact that MTRAs fail to exhibit a doxastic practice’s self-support is not needed in
order to explain their equal availability. Epistemic circularity alone does the job. And if it is epistemic circularity that explains why MTRAs are equally available for bad practices, then it is epistemic circularity that explains why MTRAs are (and ought to be) under a ban.

So if Alston holds that arguments that exhibit a practice's self-support are acceptable, they are thus solely in virtue of their self-support, or so I think Alston is committed to holding. This is an important point to realize.

Note now that in order to make it clear that SP does, in fact, display significant self-support, one must make use of sense-perception; this is why such arguments for the reliability of SP are epistemically circular. But if Alston uses self-support as a way to distinguish virtuous from vicious epistemic circularity, then it is the fact that the argument does exhibit self-support that neutralizes any erstwhile vicious epistemic circularity. And in that case, the very property (self-support) that is supposed to neutralize epistemic circularity itself makes the argument epistemically circular.

Suppose, then, that I maintain (on any grounds whatsoever) that every instance of epistemic circularity is vicious. Then I shall not be willing to take Alston's proffered method of distinguishing good from bad circular arguments seriously at all. Perhaps if Alston had a way to distinguish the virtuous circular arguments that did not involve committing circularity, I might be persuaded. In short,
Alston’s way of distinguishing virtuous and vicious epistemic circularity is itself question-begging.\(^{43}\)

This point can be brought out in a slightly different way, not by assuming that all instances of epistemic circularity are vicious, but by assuming that they’re all virtuous. Suppose I am generous – I want to welcome all doxastic practices into the fold of the intellectually respectable. (So I maintain that tea leaf reading, crystal ball gazing, wild guessing, and so forth are all perfectly reliable.) Fortunately for me, I can produce arguments for my views, but they are epistemically circular track record arguments. Next I learn that, according to Alston, my MTRAs are under a “ban” precisely because such arguments are equally available for the practices that, it so happens, I maintain are reliable. I demand to know why Alston has the ban in place. I am told that those practices do not display significant self-support, while SP, for example, does. But I am not persuaded. I demand to know why it should matter that a practice doesn’t display self-support, i.e., why a circular argument that doesn’t exhibit the practice’s self-support is, hence, viciously circular. How can Alston reply?

Alston says that SP displays significant self-support – relying on SP permits a high degree of reliable prediction and control – while crystal ball-gazing does not.\(^{44}\)

But so what? Alston cannot distinguish virtuous from vicious circularity by his proposed method without assuming that some practices are, indeed, correctly

\(^{43}\) A very similar reply to Sosa is elaborated below.

\(^{44}\) Cf. Reliability, op. cit., p. 138.
regarded as disreputable. I contend that Alston simply begs the question in the favor of the reputable practices. After all, what makes his criterion for distinguishing viciously from virtuously circular arguments plausible is that arguments supporting practices we believe, antecedently, to be illegitimate are ruled unacceptable.

If Alston’s point were that circular track record arguments for reliable practices are acceptable simply because the practices are, in fact, reliable, then he might have a way to draw the distinction. This might be what Alston’s point reduces to, if the above line of argument is correct.

Interestingly enough – however that might be – this is just how Ernest Sosa does draw the distinction:

Why not distinguish the [crystal ball] gazers and the [ordinary] perceivers in that, though both reason properly and attain thereby coherence and justification, only the perceivers’ beliefs are epistemically apt and constitute knowledge? On this view, the crystal gazers differ from the perceivers in that gazing is not reliable where perceiving is. ... [T]he perceivers can know their theory to be right when they know it in large part through perception, since their theory is right and perception can thus serve as a source of knowledge. The gazers, being unreliable, cannot serve as a source of knowledge.

Epistemic circularity is acceptable, Sosa boldly proposes, but only when the process described in the conclusion really is reliable. The conclusion might have to be true in order for the premises to be true, but this doesn’t matter because the conclusion is true. That is not the case with crystal ball-gazers. So that is how an otherwise

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45 I.e., a virtuously circular argument would be one supporting a positive claim about the reliability of some obviously reliable practice, while a viciously circular argument would be one supporting a similar claim about an obviously unreliable practice. Of course, if we aren’t sure about the reliability of a practice, we won’t know whether the circularity of the argument is vicious or virtuous.

upstanding epistemically circular argument can avoid the unfavorable comparison with an argument about crystal ball-gazing.

The correct response to this is obvious — namely, that Sosa begs the question. Exactly how he begs the question is worth making explicit. Sosa implies in his article that he can infer from the claim that perception is reliable (call this claim “PR”), the claim that an epistemically circular argument for the reliability of perception is not viciously circular (call this claim “NVC”). Without even glancing at the details of the inference from PR to NVC, we can see immediately that PR requires support (by Sosa’s own lights). And of course, it is an epistemically circular argument that supports PR (again, by Sosa’s own lights). Sosa can thus be justified in believing that PR only if this epistemically circular argument for the reliability of perception is not viciously circular — which is to say, Sosa can be justified in believing that PR only if NVC is true.

Hence, Sosa’s argument that a particular inference is not viciously circular is itself a textbook example of epistemic circularity. This is clever, perhaps, but unacceptable. We could grant that it might be the case that some epistemic circularity is benign. It will not do, in any case, to try to resolve that issue with an epistemically circular argument; any philosopher with his wits about him will reject any philosophical argument that depends on its own conclusion.

47 That this sort of move would itself result in a circularity is something that Alston foresaw: “Since even significant self-support exhibits epistemic circularity, I will refrain from taking it to be an independent reason for supposing the doxastic practice in question to be reliable. Because self-support requires assuming the practice in question to be a reliable source of belief, it provides evidence for reliability only on the assumption of that reliability; and that is hardly evidence in any straightforward sense” (Reliability, op. cit., p. 139).
Sosa is expecting this sort of reply. As he says, “According to Barry Stroud, the perceivers can at best reach a position where they can affirm the conditional proposition that if their perception is reliable, then they know.” Sosa is unimpressed; he is perfectly willing to assert the antecedent: “Perception is, of course, reliable while gazing is not. Therefore, the perceivers are right and apt both in their particular perceptual beliefs, at least generally, and in their theory of knowledge — for it all rests in large measure on their reliable perception.”

But Sosa’s way of distinguishing benign from vicious circularity is successful only if epistemic circularity is not always vicious. This is another conditional proposition. Analogously, Sosa might make the smug assumption that epistemic circularity is not always vicious. But this is not as easily or uncontroversially assumed as that perception is reliable. So the trouble now is that his argument will not convince anyone — such as myself — who is not willing simply to assume that epistemic circularity is not always vicious.

Moreover, for anyone — such as myself — armed with positive arguments that epistemic circularity is always vicious, Sosa’s way of distinguishing benign from vicious circularity will appear to be simply unjustified, since the premise, PR, is not justified by the (epistemically circular) argument offered for it.


49 Ibid., pp. 428-9.

50 In other words, while many (e.g., philosophers of common sense) would not have any quibbles with the basic notion of simply assuming that sense perception is reliable (although this claim would have to be refined), it is not nearly as uncontroversial or common-sensical to take for granted that epistemic circularity is not always vicious.
To sum up. Suppose that epistemic circularity is benign and that the mere fact of its circularity does not disqualify it as a candidate for justifying beliefs. Then we may construct epistemically circular track record arguments for standards regarding crystal ball-gazing, tea leaf-reading, and similar dubious belief-forming practices, according to which such practices could be responsible for justified beliefs. If tea leaf-reading results in justified beliefs, then Helga the Mystical is justified in the premises she forms based on the use of tea leaf-reading; and then her track record of (unsurprisingly) successful tea leaf-reading can justify her belief that tea leaf-reading gives her justified beliefs. Now, if epistemic circularity is benign, then nothing is wrong with Helga’s argument as far as its epistemic circularity goes. But that’s absurd; surely there is something wrong with Helga’s argument, and it certainly appears to be due to the fact that it begs the question in a peculiar way. Hence epistemic circularity is vicious. Nothing Alston or Sosa has said successfully controverts this argument.

VI. The Arbitrary Case Argument.

My next, third argument that epistemic circularity is vicious follows an unusual strategy, and it should be helpful to lay out this strategy in advance. I stipulate that an argument is epistemically circular and I make some observations about that argument. Then I explain that if my observations about this first argument are correct, then it follows that a second argument is constructible. Then I stipulate further, for reductio, that the first argument’s epistemic circularity is benign, from
which it follows that the second argument is cogent; but this second argument plainly is not cogent. Hence, I conclude, the stipulation that the first argument's epistemic circularity is benign is false. But the first argument was an arbitrarily chosen argument. Hence epistemic circularity in general is vicious.

Here we go then. Suppose we have a track record argument \( A \) for some \( j \)-standard, and let us stipulate that the argument is epistemically circular. \( A \) contains this pair of premises:

\[(1a) \text{S's belief that } p_1 \text{ meets conditions } c \text{ at time } t_1.\]
\[(1b) \text{S is justified in believing that } p_1 \text{ at } t_1.\]

The conclusion is:

\[(C) \text{If S's belief that } p_n \text{ meets conditions } c \text{ at time } t_n, \text{ then S is justified in believing that } p_n \text{ at } t_n.\]

For someone advancing \( A \) as that which justifies his belief, his belief in \( (C) \) is justified only if beliefs in \( (1a) \) and in \( (1b) \) are both justified. Bearing in mind that \( A \) is epistemically circular, we may say that the truth of \( (C) \) is a necessary condition of \( S \) being justified in believing at least one of the premises or that the inference is valid. So let us suppose that the truth of \( (C) \) is a necessary condition for the claim that \( (1) \) (that two-part premise in particular) is true. *Given* this supposition, it follows from the claim, "S is justified in believing \( (1) \)" that the conclusion is true.

*A reductio ad absurdum* can be constructed here. In addition to the above stipulations, suppose further that epistemic circularity is benign. In that case, we may

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\[^{51}\text{A similar argument may be constructed using an Alston-style track record argument, where the two premises considered would be: } (1a') \text{S's belief that } p_1 \text{ meets conditions } c \text{ at time } t_1; \text{ and } (1b') p_1 \text{ is true at } t_1. \text{ The conclusion would be modified in the obvious way.}\]
say that S has justified his belief that (C) on the basis of beliefs about A. Hence S is justified in believing all of A’s premises. Moreover, recall that (1) is a premise such that S’s being justified in believing it implies the truth of the conclusion.

If these stipulations are correct, then we are committed to the cogency of another argument, as follows: we state the premise “S is justified in believing (1),” from which we immediately deduce that (C). But this argument is obviously unacceptable. (C) does not follow from “S is justified in believing (1).” Hence we may conclude the reductio by rejecting the assumption that epistemic circularity is benign. It is vicious; saying so allows us to avoid the claim that S’s being justified in believing (1) does imply, by itself, that (C).\footnote{Interestingly enough, it is Sosa who, in another article, suggests this very sort of argument: “AR [an epistemically circular track record argument] does seem anyhow viciously spiral, since it could only succeed as a sound and rationally persuasive inductive argument through the immediately patent existence of a deductive argument to the same conclusion, one that demands nothing more as premises than the inductive argument requires as premises or presuppositions (implicit assumptions) for its successful use as a means to rational persuasion” (“The Coherence of Virtue and the Virtue of Coherence,” in Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], p. 202).}

It should be obvious that I am not claiming that the track record argument, as introduced by S, is itself a deductive argument. I am claiming, instead, that one needs only one pair of premises such as is found among the premises of a track record argument, and the assumption that epistemic circularity is not vicious, and the conclusion does follow deductively.

The point bears restating in other words. Suppose again that A is epistemically circular and that the circularity is benign. Suppose this benignity allows S to justify his belief that (C) on the basis of beliefs about A. Hence S is
justified in believing (1) (arbitrarily chosen). Therefore, probably, (1) is true. But (1) was arbitrarily chosen. Hence, by universal introduction, together with the fact that the original argument was benignly circular, we may deduce that (C) immediately. But that is simply too fast. In drawing this conclusion, we have not used any other of the premises; we have simply assumed that S can have a justified belief on the basis of the original (circular) argument.

And this suggests that the original track record argument was viciously circular. Surely the j-standard does not follow from one arbitrary pair of premises. So if the mere fact that a track record argument’s epistemic circularity is benign implies that an argument can be constructed where such an inference can be made, then epistemic circularity is vicious.

To bring the point out in a rather different way, consider the following thought experiment. Suppose we are given data from some psychologists who are testing the reliability of a queer belief-forming process, QP. The psychologists tell us that their subjects use QP, but we have no idea as to what the process is. We can ourselves check as to whether the beliefs are true (we are told that we are not using the tested process in doing so). So we can formulate premise pairs to the effect that QP was used in forming the belief that p at t (as the psychologists tell us), and that p is the case (as we confirm for ourselves); similarly for q, r, s, etc. Now, we shall not be the least bit tempted, after one instance of this sort of premise pair, to conclude hastily that QP is reliable. And indeed, we would be no less tempted to conclude that QP is reliable if we knew that the experimental subjects were justified in their beliefs about
one case. If we were to conclude this, then we would be seeming to beg the question very objectionably.

Compare this to the case of an obviously epistemically circular track record argument, for the reliability of SP, say. We know right away from the fact that it is epistemically circular that it just does not matter how many cases of sense-perception that we consider; if we can in even one case *justifiably* assert both that it perceptually appears, in certain circumstances, that \( p \), and that the belief that \( p \) is justified, then we (philosophers, who see the epistemic circularity) can with just as much or little justification assert that the conclusion is true. The particular premise pair that one adduces is arbitrary, because the pair will be confirmed in every case: the methods we use to determine truth are similar in every case.

In brief: the view that epistemic circularity is benign allows that an epistemically circular argument’s conclusion follows very quickly, when we know that if it follows at all, it does not follow so quickly.

VII. The Supports Argument.

In my final argument, I shall try to show that epistemic circularity makes it impossible for anyone to construct a good argument for certain \( j \)-standards or for the reliability of the associated processes. So if beliefs in those \( j \)-standards are justified, they are not justified by beliefs about epistemically circular arguments.

There are a number of constraints that one might reasonably expect successful theories of justification to fulfill. One such constraint — what might be called *the*
supports constraint – is that the alleged justifiers for a belief (whatever sort of thing they might be) support the belief they justify. I take it that this is uncontroversial.  

Consider then what I believe is a consequence of the supports constraint:

(SC1) It should be possible in principle to construct cogent arguments for the (at least) probable truth of justified beliefs by adverting, in the premises, to the alleged justifiers of those beliefs.

This is simply a necessary condition of a justified belief having justificatory support. If such arguments are not constructible, the theory of justification in question is to be rejected. So, even on an externalist theory of justification, it should be possible to construct arguments of the sort described. This is not to say that anyone has to have access to such arguments, or that the premises of such arguments are beliefs in anyone’s doxastic system; it is only to say that the theory, externalist or not, must permit that such arguments be constructible. Indeed, I think that if such an argument, for the probable truth of a justified belief, is not constructible (by God, an “ideal observer,” or other suitable fiction) given the theory’s resources, then in fact the theory fails to account for the justification of that belief.

Beyond that, however, I think that a proper formulation of the supports constraint will have it that the supports relation is nonreflexive: the alleged justifiers for a belief give nonreflexive support to the belief they justify. A belief cannot

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53 Nonetheless, some argument for the even more basic claim, that justified beliefs necessarily have justifiers, is given below in Ch. 3, Sect. VII, “Strange Justified Beliefs.”
Correspondingly, we may restate the foregoing consequence of the supports constraint as follows:

(SC2) It should be possible in principle to construct cogent arguments that are not premise circular for the (at least) probable truth of justified beliefs, by adverting in the premises to the alleged justifiers of those beliefs.

Any justifier of a belief, whether or not it itself is an item that is believed, must be expressible in such a way that it gives noncircular support of the belief contents; I think that follows from the very notion of support.

But someone might wonder how (SC2) would be applied, for example, to a foundationalist theory. Consider basic perceptual beliefs, which, the foundationalist alleges, are directly justified not by beliefs but by experiences. In that case, when our ideal observer (not the person whose basic beliefs are now in question) “adverts” to the alleged justifiers of the basic perceptual beliefs in accounting for those beliefs’ justification, whereof exactly does that adverting consist?

It does not consist of expressing the contents of a belief, which perhaps would be what adverting would consist of in the ordinary case. Rather, it might consist of describing the contents of an experience; that description then would bear some sort of logical relation of support to the contents of the basic belief. Exactly how our ideal observer might describe a raw experience we shall have to leave up to phenomenologists and logical positivists. But regardless of the solution, however

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54 More precisely, the contents of a belief cannot render that same belief justified by standing in the relation of support to itself.

55 This is similar to the problem that the foundationalist faces when asked, “We understand what it means for one belief to support another; but what does it mean for an experience or raw feel or what have you to support a belief?”
indeed we make sense of various sorts of item supporting a belief, surely our notion of support is a logical notion, i.e., essentially it amounts to an argument being constructible between a description of the supporting item and the supported belief.

Now let us consider how these constraints, together with the problem of epistemic circularity, wreak havoc on an epistemically circular argument for a sample theory of justification: reliabilism. Let us suppose that the conclusion, a reliabilist j-standard, is a claim of the general form:

(RP) If S’s belief that $p_n$ is a result of process R at time $t_n$, then S is justified in believing that $p_n$ at $t_n$.

Consider the premise pair (1a) and (1b) again but now suitably modified to support (RP). What lends support to the fact that (1b), viz., that S’s belief that $p_1$ is justified, according to our reliabilist? It is the fact that the belief is the result of process R.

It follows that S has a belief in (RP) that is based on an argument with a premise — viz., (1b) — that is believed justifiably in virtue of R’s being reliable. But then we apply (SC2) to the situation. It looks as though our reliabilist is committed to the view that the content of the belief in the reliability of R — i.e., belief in (RP) — is inferentially supportable by a claim that R is reliable (i.e., what justifies S’s belief that $p_1$). That is false; the supports relation is not reflexive.

But we are forced to this conclusion whenever we accept that epistemic circularity is benign and offer an epistemically circular argument in support of our favored j-standards. If epistemic circularity is benign, then I can succeed in getting a justified belief from an epistemically circular track record argument; and what successfully justifies me in believing one or more of the premises is the conclusion of
the argument. But that implies that the content of the conclusion can support itself (with the premises as intermediaries). And that is simply not how the supports relation works.

Hence, epistemic circularity is vicious. To suppose epistemic circularity to be benign would be to commit to something false, viz., that the supports relation can be reflexive.

VIII. Conclusion.

Let us put this chapter’s work into the context of the Meta-Regress Argument.

One way to end a regress of j-standards is to suppose that we can get justified beliefs in some standards via arguments that are licensed by those same standards. Such standards would be, in the jargon introduced in Chapter 1, self-supporting. The view that self-supporting j-standards exist is called ‘self-support meta-foundationalism’ or ‘self-supportism’ for short. As explained in Chapter 1, the arguments in virtue of which given j-standards are considered self-supporting are, necessarily, epistemically circular. Hence, if it should happen that epistemic circularity is vicious, i.e., that one cannot get a justified belief in a j-standard via an epistemically circular argument, then no j-standard can be successfully self-supporting. The aim of the present chapter has been to argue that indeed epistemic circularity as such (as opposed to only varieties thereof) is vicious. So if this chapter’s arguments have been adequate to their aim, self-supportism is false.
It should be useful to reiterate why self-supportism is so plausible to so many. We can and do use basic belief-forming practices in confirming all sorts of beliefs. Indeed, it is overwhelmingly plausible to think that we are limited, in forming our rational, warranted, or justified beliefs, to a fairly small set of such practices (if they are construed generally enough). So why not think that those same practices can be applied to themselves, particularly because they work very well everywhere else? And then why not think that some basic j-standards could not, by the same token, support themselves?

This chapter’s arguments should have made my answers to these questions clear. I will add now, however, that to suppose that basic belief-forming practices cannot confirm their own reliability is not to impugn the success of basic belief-forming practices in general. There is nothing contradictory or even strange, I would suggest, about the notion that a given practice cannot confirm its own reliability, or that basic j-standards cannot support themselves. Common sense and intuition have nothing directly to say on these issues. So we might as well follow the best arguments on these issues and thus, I maintain, reject self-supportism.
CHAPTER 3

OTHER ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS TO
THE PROBLEM OF META-JUSTIFICATION

I. Introduction: Coherentism and Meta-Coherentism.

Meta-coherentism is the view that mutually supported justification standards exist. On the one hand, like self-supportists, meta-coherentists believe that, ultimately, standards do give support to themselves. But, on the other hand, meta-coherentists also believe that standards do not support themselves via single, relatively simple arguments like track record arguments, but via an entire doxastic system containing a web of arguments — arguments themselves licensed by a variety of other standards. So meta-coherentists react to the Problem of Meta-Justification differently, but not entirely differently, from self-supportists.

Ernest Sosa conveys very well the attraction that meta-coherentism has over self-supportism:

How else indeed could one determine the reliability of one’s sources of belief than by considering the accuracy of their deliverances and assessing them on that basis? ...

What is wrong in the newspaper case [in which we accept new reports because they cohere with old reports, which we have taken at face value
in the past; an example of self-support], even as a case of simple reasoning is, it now appears, the narrowness of one's purview in judging the newspaper reliable simply on the basis of a set of data one knows to be remediable and relevantly too narrow; namely, the reports of that very newspaper accepted at face value. ... So the circle can perhaps be widened to make it after all benign. Perhaps comprehensive coherence is after all a legitimate court of appeal.1

Meta-coherentalism has considerable intuitive appeal when one considers simply that we are restricted in all our inquiries to using whatever background assumptions and cognitive tools we have at our disposal. It would seem then that any justification of those assumptions and tools will require the use of those same assumptions and tools. Hence the following has some intuitive appeal: the circularity involved in presenting a coherent system, in an attempt to solve the PMJ, should be permitted if for no other reason than that it is unavoidable. As I will argue, this intuitive appeal is deceptive, and meta-coherentism must be rejected.

On any pure coherence theory of justification, what justifies us in accepting any belief is simply the belief's coherence with, and place within, a coherent system of belief. "Coherence" means at a minimum consistency, but usually also describes such relations as confirmation and explanatory simplicity.2

Coherentism thus characterized is clearly not equivalent to meta-coherentism. Meta-coherentism does not, at any rate, entail coherentism. One might be a meta-coherentist, thus holding that mutual supports relations exist among j-standards, and yet be a foundationalist on the object level. In that case, one simply holds that

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the reason that one's foundationalist standards are justifiably believed is that they cohere with each other via their various outputs and via background beliefs. But one would of course have to make specific (and perhaps dangerously ad hoc) exceptions for the justification of foundationalist standards within a more general foundationalist theory of justification. Beliefs in standards are, after all, candidates for justification just like any other beliefs, and so if they are singled out as being justified in a way that is different from other beliefs, that special treatment would have to be well-motivated.

On the other hand, it is more natural, if one is a coherentist, also to accept meta-coherentism. On most versions of coherentism, a belief's justification is due at least to the fact that the belief is contained in a coherent doxastic system; and usually a system is considered coherent only if there are mutual confirmations among the beliefs. It would follow that on most versions of coherentism, at least, any given j-standard is going to add at least some degree of confirmation, and thus warrant, to other standards, and receive warrant in return.

However all that might be, to the extent to which meta-coherentism resembles, or entails aspects of, coherentism, the several well-known criticisms of the

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3 Cf. what Paul Moser says about his own project of meta-justification. He says it "resembles the sort of justification for physical-object proposition characterized in §3.2 [roughly, an explanatory coherence account]. In both cases justification derives from propositions’ having a sort of maximal explanatory power for one relative to a data base and to a set of competing propositions. Such an analogy between justification of physical-object propositions and meta-justification for epistemic principles is highly desirable; for both are, after all, species of epistemic justification" (Knowledge and Evidence [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], pp. 261-2). This is not to deny that it is possible to accept coherentism and also reject meta-coherentism as I have defined it. Bonjour's view in The Structure of Empirical Knowledge, op. cit., may be an example.
latter may be applied to the former.^{4} Alston goes so far as to rule meta-coherentism immediately out of court on the strength of the criticisms against coherentism:

Coherence theory holds that individual beliefs gain positive epistemic status ... by virtue of being involved in a total system of beliefs that is coherent. ... Reciprocal support is the rule rather than the exception. From this standpoint there is nothing disturbing about the circle involved in using perceptual beliefs to support the principle that sense perception is reliable. ... However, for purposes of this essay I am setting aside coherence theories without a hearing. I take it that the live possibility of a multiplicity, perhaps an indefinite multiplicity, of incompatible but equally coherent systems of equal comprehensiveness is sufficient to show that internal coherence cannot be the whole story of what gives beliefs a positive epistemic status.^{5}

Alston, then, rejected meta-coherentism for the same reasons that he rejected coherentism. While I share Alston's disdain for coherentism, I am also aware that desperation in the face of the Meta-Regress Argument might push us to try to meld some unobjectionable form of meta-coherentism with foundationalism.^{6} In that way we might try to avoid the typical objections to coherentism -- with what success it is hard to say.

II. Meta-Coherentism and Epistemic Circularity.

A further argument, specifically against meta-coherentism (in addition to those against coherentism alluded to above), would be helpful. And one is possible.

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^{6} And if I am not mistaken this is basically what both W. V. Quine and Paul Moser have tried to do, although perhaps not specifically in reaction to anything like the Meta-Regress Argument.
To wit: meta-coherentism is committed to the benignity of epistemic circularity; but epistemic circularity is in fact vicious; therefore, meta-coherentism is false.

It is common to deny that the circularity involved in a system of mutually supported standards is vicious. Again, as Alston says, "a coherence theorist will not be at all disturbed by the pervasiveness of epistemic circularity, since circularity (of the right sort) holds no terrors for him."\(^7\)

Alston is right: epistemic circularity does not bother some representative coherence theorists. Nelson Goodman, in advocating a deductive justification of deduction, and an inductive justification of induction, with a goal of what is now called "reflective equilibrium," writes, famously, that the resulting circles are not vicious but "virtuous."\(^8\) Rescher, in one of his many books advocating a coherence method of theory confirmation, wrote, "There is thus no reason to concede that the circle at issue is vicious or otherwise vitiating."\(^9\)

But again, the PMJ is likely to push some to desperate measures – including the denial that meta-coherentist justifications involve epistemic circularity at all. Meta-coherentists are hard pressed to deny, plausibly, that the existence of mutually supported standards does entail the existence of viable epistemically circular


arguments. So we should, to make the full force of the problem felt, close off all possible avenues of escape. How, then, can it be shown that meta-coherentist justification does indeed make use of epistemically circular arguments?

As follows. According to meta-coherentism, mutually supported j-standards exist. In other words, meta-coherentism has it that, when S is justified in believing some standard, $J_1$, S has an argument $A_1$ for $J_1$; but $A_1$ is licensed by another standard, which itself is justified by another argument; and we iterate the chain, or web, of argumentation as needed; then we conclude with an argument $A_2$ for a standard $J_2$, where $J_2$ licenses the most recent member of the chain of argument that leads to $J_1$; but $A_2$ is itself licensed by $J_1$. That is the logical structure of meta-coherentist justification.

Now, it is far from clear that, according to the definition of 'epistemic circularity' given in Chapter I, $A_1$ by itself is epistemically circular. That would, after all, obviate the need of supporting its premises with other arguments. But an effective indirect argument, for an equally devastating claim, is possible. Let $A_i$ be the argument constructed out of the series $A_2, ..., A_i$, with the ultimate conclusion $J_i$, and supplemented as follows. $A_i$ is divided into some number of intermediate

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10 This claim will receive some support below. Moser, op. cit., p. 264, is one of the few people who uses something like a meta-coherentist justification of epistemic standards, and yet denies that it involves any circularity. He writes: "Explanatory particularism also avoids the problem of circularity by denying that we can justify our epistemic principles solely by what those principles countenance as knowledge or justification. On this method, the role of epistemic intuitions in meta-justification frees us from such circularity." As far as I can make out, this is a simple non sequitur. To this Amico, op. cit., pp. 100-1, effectively replies that Moser's approach is essentially the Method of Reflective Equilibrium applied to epistemic claims, and that this method requires further justification, which justification presumably leads either to regress or circularity.
arguments, the conclusion of each being used to argue explicitly for some premise or the inference step of the next. If indeed $A_i$ is justifiable on the basis of the arguments $A_2, ..., A_1$, then I claim (1) such an $A_i$ is constructible, and (2) $A_i$ could justify $J_i$. But in this case $J_i$ is self-supporting; hence, we may use an argument used in Chapter 1, Section VII, to conclude that $A_i$ is epistemically circular. The upshot is that the chain of meta-justificatory arguments for any mutually justified standard can be strung together so as to make the standard self-supporting, whereupon the epistemic circularity involved in the meta-justification becomes more evident.

Hence, if a standard is mutually supported, then that same standard can be self-supporting. But the arguments of Chapter 2, if sound, show that no standard can be self-supporting. So by modus tollens no standard can be mutually supported. Therefore meta-coherentism is false. By this accounting, all of the arguments against self-supportism apply equally well to meta-coherentism. This is more than adequate grounds on which to reject meta-coherentism, I think.

But meta-coherentists are apt to bring out certain considerations, not addressed in Chapter 2, with the hope of mitigating the viciousness of circularity. These considerations do not always appear in the context of the PMJ per se, but in discussions of theories and methods that appear to be committed to meta-coherentism — especially the Method of Reflective Equilibrium. So, next we will turn to some

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11 Or in terms of doxastic rather than propositional justification: If S believed that $J_i$ on the basis of beliefs in each of the premises of $A_i$ and that each of the component inferences involved in $A_i$ is correct (and perhaps some other conditions were met), then S would be justified in believing that $J_i$.  

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questions surrounding that method, in order to determine whether its use might, somehow, mitigate the viciousness of epistemic circularity.\textsuperscript{12}

III. Can MRE Help to Mitigate the Viciousness of EpistemicCircularity?

First, however, we should come to an understanding of what the Method of Reflective Equilibrium (MRE) is that is adequate for our purposes.

The phrase ‘reflective equilibrium’ was introduced by John Rawls\textsuperscript{13} to indicate a mental state achieved after undergoing a process that, roughly put, involves adjusting and re-adjusting accepted moral principles and considered judgments about the morality of particular actions so that they cohere with each other. Once this state of coherence has been achieved for a person, that person is said to be in ‘reflective equilibrium’, and in particular, ‘narrow reflective equilibrium’. ‘Wide reflective equilibrium’ means a state achieved after moral principles and judgments are made to cohere not only with each other but also with a wide variety of background assumptions.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} One might well observe that Alston’s “significant self-support” defense of epistemic circularity against the equal availability argument, discussed in Ch. 2, Sect. V, essentially involves arguing that the coherence of a doxastic practice’s outputs does, in fact, mitigate the viciousness of epistemic circularity. Hence the following discussion may be regarded as a continuation of the considerations brought out in Chap. 2, Sect. V.


\textsuperscript{14} For discussion of the distinction between ‘narrow’ and ‘wide’ reflective equilibrium, see Norman Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics,” \textit{Journal of Philosophy 76} (1979): 256-82.
The basic notion of the MRE, without being so named, was introduced (at least to the current generation of philosophers) by Nelson Goodman. In a brief discussion in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, Goodman writes:

How do we justify a deduction [a particular deductive argument]? Plainly, by showing that it conforms to the general rules of deductive inference. ... Yet, of course, the rules themselves must eventually be justified. ... But how is the validity of rules to be determined? ... Principles of deductive inference are justified by their conformity with accepted deductive practice. Their validity depends upon accordance with the particular deductive inferences we actually make and sanction. If a rule yields unacceptable inferences, we drop it as invalid. ... The point is that rules and particular inferences alike are justified by being brought into agreement with each other. *A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend.*

Assume that we have at our disposal some stock of "intuitions," or "considered judgments," as well as tentative generalizations about how some evaluative concept is to be applied. Then, to arrive at a justified generalization about the applicability of the concept, we need only — to put it roughly — render this set of intuitions and generalizations as coherent as possible while retaining as many of the original members of the set as possible. Whenever we discuss generalizations about the applicability of nearly any important evaluative word, and the question of the justification of such generalizations arises, MRE, or something much like it, often naturally suggests itself. MRE has been thought applicable not just to the confirmation of moral principles, but also to deductive and inductive inference rules, and most notably for our purposes, of course, to standards of epistemic justification.

As Paul Moser writes:

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Moral theorists sometimes appeal to a strategy of ‘reflective equilibrium’ to justify an ethical theory. It seems that we can use an analogue of this strategy in epistemology. The analogue in epistemology begins with one’s having certain tentative, revisable epistemic intuitions about particular instances of justification and knowledge. It then involves one’s asking what explanatory epistemic principles, if any, entail those putative instances of justification and knowledge. ... The epistemologist often works back and forth between epistemic principles and considered judgments. One sometimes revises considered judgments about particular cases in light of effective explanatory principles; ...\(^{16}\)

We can see here that Moser’s account of the justification of epistemic principles closely follows Goodman’s account of the justification of inference rules.

Obviously, just reading the passages cited above, many questions are left unanswered. What is a “tentative, revisable epistemic intuition,” and how do I distinguish it from other beliefs? How do I decide which “explanatory epistemic principles” to test against these intuitions? What exactly is involved in the “back and forth” work? Exactly when am I warranted in dropping an intuition, or a principle – i.e., how do I know when the coherence of my doxastic system is strengthened when I do so?

Because we will not examine the merits of MRE in general, it will be unnecessary for us to answer such questions here. We need only answer two questions. (1) Does MRE, somehow, involve meta-coherentism? (2) Insofar as it does, does it offer some unique way to mitigate the viciousness of epistemic circularity? Fortunately, to address these questions we do not require any detailed account of MRE and how it might proceed.

\(^{16}\) Moser, op. cit., p. 261.
To take up the first question, then: does MRE entail meta-coherentism?

Strictly speaking, the answer is no. MRE is a method of formulating j-standards. It is a method of inquiry, not a theory about when the act of justification succeeds. MRE is intended to state a more or less systematic way of arriving at particular sorts of claims, and as such it is not, or not necessarily, an account of how to justify those claims. Moreover, as epistemologists should know, an account of justifying, or of the act of justification, is quite a different thing from an account of justified belief, or that in virtue of which a belief is justified. So MRE is in fact two steps removed from the latter sort of account. To call it, without further ado, a kind of meta-coherentism would be a mistake.\(^{17}\)

In fact, that is not the mistake that some people have made; rather, some have thought, mistakenly, that MRE is a kind of, or is committed to, foundationalism.\(^{18}\)

Criticizing that view, Michael DePaul nicely sums up:

I see the Method of Reflective Equilibrium as being first and foremost a method. It is a heuristic device for organizing our moral beliefs, a manner of conducting our moral inquiries. Foundationalism, on the other hand, is primarily a type of account of the epistemic status of our beliefs.

\(^{17}\) In a related context, Susan Haack draws a similar distinction: "I do not, of course, deny the genetic point, that the codification of valid forms of inference, the construction of a formal system, may proceed in part via generalisation over cases — though in part, I think, the procedure may also go in the opposite direction. ... But I do claim that the justification of a form of inference cannot derive from intuition of the validity of its instances" ("The Justification of Deduction," *Mind* 85 [1976]: 118). Cf. also Daniels, op. cit., p. 259n.

\(^{18}\) Those making this mistake include R. M. Hare, "Rawls' Theory of Justice — I," *Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1973): 144-55; and Peter Singer, "Sidgwick and Reflective Equilibrium," *The Monist* 58 (1974): 490-517. Apparently some have thought MRE is committed to foundationalism based on their (false) impression that MRE involves the positing of some epistemically privileged set of beliefs (probably intuitions about particular cases, rather than principles), from which the epistemically less-privileged principles ultimately get their warrant. On that, see Michael R. DePaul, "Reflective Equilibrium and Foundationalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 59-69, as well as Daniels, op. cit., pp. 264ff.
Hence, foundationalism and reflective equilibrium are not really positions on the same topic, although they are surely positions on related topics.\textsuperscript{19}

Nonetheless, it is common for MRE to be regarded as entailing, or being otherwise closely connected to, coherentism. Sosa puts it this way: "Wide equilibrium seems equivalent to a pure coherentism which at any juncture would always opt for the most harmoniously and comprehensively coherent view available."\textsuperscript{20} DePaul describes MRE as a "coherence method" and specifically argues in this article that MRE is compatible with coherence theories of justification.\textsuperscript{21}

That's fine, but how exactly is MRE, as a method, associated with a theory of justification? Is there some way to show that MRE somehow entails that standards that result from its use are justified in accordance with meta-coherentism? Probably not; this is a difficult issue, and one we needn't fully engage here anyway, because the point of bringing up the MRE at all is to determine whether it offers any resources whereby the epistemic circularity of meta-coherentism is mitigated. So let us focus on that issue.

Sosa wrote an article on the topic of the relation between method of inquiry and theory of justification. Sosa proposed this account:

\textsuperscript{19} DePaul, op. cit., p. 58.

\textsuperscript{20} "Equilibrium in Coherence?" \textit{Knowledge in Perspective}, op. cit., p. 262. Read literally, this is of course just nonsense. Wide equilibrium is a state of mind; pure coherentism is a theory of justification. On the one hand, obviously, Sosa does not mean that the state of mind "seems equivalent to" the theory; but on the other hand, it isn't clear what Sosa does mean, exactly.

A belief is justified (warranted, reasonable, ...) if it is obtained or supported by appropriate use of an adequate organon.²²

Indeed, MRE might be regarded as such an “organon” by some of its proponents.

Now, whatever you might think of Sosa’s account of justification – some externalists will object to it right away – at least it does forthrightly state a view on the relation between method and justification (including, evidently, meta-justification). I will argue now that even if Sosa’s view has the relation between MRE and (meta-) justification correctly stated, MRE still will not help to mitigate the viciousness of circularity.

So let us assume that it is claimed for MRE that it results in an allegedly justified belief in a justification standard $J$, which belief justifies (in part) beliefs in other standards, and which is itself justified (in part) by those beliefs in the other standards. So MRE is said to result in a mutually justified belief that $J$, and if such a belief is (successfully) mutually justified, then meta-coherentism is true. We then charge this alleged meta-justification with epistemic circularity; how can the proponents of MRE try to counter the charge?

Let us begin with Goodman again:

This looks flagrantly circular. I have said that deductive inferences are justified by their conformity to valid general rules, and that general rules are justified by their conformity to valid inferences. But this circle is a virtuous one. The point is that rules and particular inferences alike are justified by being brought into agreement with each other. ... The process of justification is the delicate one of making mutual adjustments

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between rules and accepted inferences; and in the agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either.\textsuperscript{23}

This appears to be everything that Goodman has to say about the circularity problem. As far as I can tell, all that Goodman does is to describe this peculiar sort of circularity between rules and inferences, and then claim, “in the agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either.” That claim perhaps commits him to some sort of meta-coherentism, but it certainly does not explain how such meta-coherentism alleviates the circularity problem. Despite its seeming lack of substance,\textsuperscript{24} this passage – its view of circularity – has been very influential.

Nicholas Rescher does not defend MRE \textit{per se} but a method of which MRE might be an example. In Rescher’s method, which he calls “instrumental justification,” by his own admission there is a circularity, one that is virtually the same as the circularity involved in MRE (and thus, on our present assumption, in meta-coherentism).\textsuperscript{25}

Rescher claims that this sort of circularity is benign (“nonvicious”) because “the argumentation is \textit{comprehensively systematic}, placing its several elements into a

\textsuperscript{23} Op. cit., p. 64.

\textsuperscript{24} Goodman is not alone here; a very similar sort of hand-waving not uncommonly backs up otherwise very rigorous, complex theories of justification. For another example, see Robert Nozick, \textit{Philosophical Explanations} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 1981), pp. 278-9, quoted above in Chap. 2, Sect. I.

\textsuperscript{25} Rescher, \textit{Methodological Pragmatism}, op. cit., p. 25ff. Rescher sometimes avoids the term “circle,” preferring “cyclical” just as Sosa sometimes prefers the term “spiral.” Very roughly, Rescher’s procedure is to propose a method of inquiry, derive some alleged truths by its use, act on those truths, and then determine whether the action was successful; then, based on the success or failure of the action, the method is altered accordingly and the procedure is repeated. Since the method is evaluated according to the success of actions, this is supposed to be a “pragmatic” or “instrumental” justification.
coordinate framework which unites them within one over-all nexus of mutual substantiation.” He also says that this sort of justification is not “unidirectional” but instead “a systematic union” of “method” and “thesis.” So far, Rescher appears to have no more insight than does Goodman about why meta-coherentism does not involve any vicious circularity.

Later Rescher does say something usefully different: “There is thus no reason to concede that the circle at issue is vicious or otherwise vitiating, for what is actually involved is simply a feedback process of a type nowadays familiar from the study of self-regulatory systems” like “a self-evaluating servomechanism.” Rescher explicitly affirms that the reason his method of meta-justification is not viciously circular is that it is a “cyclic process.” Repeating a claim in the course of carrying out a process is not necessarily viciously circular – or, indeed, circular at all.

Rescher sums up this approach as follows:

All of these structurally analogous problems [different instances of epistemic circularity] have a structurally analogous solution – viz., that the paradox arises from taking a strictly static point of view, and that these difficulties vanish when [one] regards the issue from the dynamic perspective of a cyclic feedback process.

There is surely some initial plausibility to this view. If justification is regarded as a “process,” rather than something “static,” then perhaps there is nothing wrong with a claim that is repeated several times throughout the process.

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26 Ibid., pp. 101-2.

27 Ibid., p. 103.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p. 104.
This will not do, however. As I explained, a method of inquiry must not be mistaken for a theory of justification. But it appears Rescher has not only mistaken one for the other, he has gone on to say that since one can repeat the same claim while engaging in a process, without any vicious circularity, therefore there is no vicious circularity involved in the assertion that the process results in a justified belief.

This does not follow. Here is a dilemma. On the one hand, following Rescher's method is alleged to generate a standard's justification. But in that case, there is a vicious circularity, if sufficient weight is given to my arguments in Chapter 2. Or, on the other hand, following the method is not alleged to constitute a justification, but only a way of generating theses, in which case there is no circularity at all, but also no attempt at a meta-justification.

Rescher's point and my answer to it can be stated differently. First Rescher's point: "Yesterday I argued that q on the basis p. Today I argued that p on the basis of q. You will see a vicious circularity here only if you view all of my arguments as part of one static system. But arguing is a process that changes from day to day. There is no circularity if we focus on one part of the process at a time, one day at a time."[^30]

This line is a little like what the polygamous airline pilot says — you know, the one who claims to be monogamous. He's got only one wife at a time! He doesn't see them all at once! Less flippantly, I respond with a dilemma. If we regard the arguments in which p and q occur as part of one "static" system that is supposed to

[^30]: Thanks to Joe Salerno for this line of argument.
give expression to the justification for \( p \) and \( q \), then clearly, given the conclusions of Chapter 2, there is a vicious circularity involved in the system. Nothing that we have seen from Goodman or Rescher controverts that. But if we take Rescher’s advice and shift our focus to what transpires just “today,” to limited parts of the process of argumentation, then we never, on any “one day” as it were, succeed in showing that standards of justification are accepted justifiedly. After all, Rescher would have it that justification is due to the coherence of an entire system.

It looks like Rescher is trying to avoid the consequences of his meta-coherentism. The meta-coherentist says that justification is due to mutual support relations between standards; but we cannot properly grasp and evaluate those relations unless we regard an entire meta-justificatory system at once, as something “static.”

To sum up. The point of this section’s discussion is that certain methods of inquiry (loosely) associated with meta-coherentism – the Method of Reflective Equilibrium, Rescher’s “instrumental justification,” among others – are frequently treated as ways to mitigate the viciousness of epistemic circularity. But we are typically left in the dark as to how the use of these methods renders the circularity any less vicious. Rescher and others appear to have convinced themselves that repetition of a claim while engaging in an inquiry does not necessarily involve any circular reasoning at all. That is true enough, but what we are interested in are meta-justifications, not simple inquiries. Meta-ethicists and other proponents of MRE might, then, wish to use the method’s resources to defend meta-coherentism against
charges that it permits vicious circularity; but, as far as I have been able to discern, the method lacks adequate resources for the job.

IV. Does the Size of the Circle Matter?

There's another, fairly common way to defend meta-coherentism against charges of vicious circularity. Briefly, the strategy is to admit that small circles are indeed vicious, but if a circle in question is "large" enough, it is virtuous. Let us introduce this strategy with an analogy Sosa discusses; the reliability of sense perception can be understood by analogy with the reliability of a newspaper.

The inaugural issue of the *Podunk News* just arrived and I want to know if it is a decent newspaper. Perhaps I don't get out very much and until now haven't read too many newspapers. But what the *News* says is internally consistent from day to day; and, being an unfortunately gullible sort, I tend to believe what I read. Today I read, "There were 27 murders last year in Podunk." So I believe that; then, when I return again to the pages of the *News* tomorrow, I find my new belief confirmed again. (E.g., "Mayor Decries Rising Murder Rate.") After enough cases like this, I conclude that the *News* is reliable. That's an example of a "small" circle: I believe

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31 It is a bit misleading, though common, to speak of the "circle" as large. Those steps of an argument that make the argument circular need not be very numerous in order for the "circle" to be considered "large." Loosely speaking, an entire argument might be said to be, or to contain, a "large" circle if the argument itself were quite large and complex, and the elements that make it circular are a relatively few in number. So the claim under examination in this section is that, if epistemically circular reasoning is embedded within a large, complex argument (a "system"), then the circularity is, or may be, virtuous.

that \( p \) because the *News* says that \( p \) and the *News* is reliable; but I believe that the *News* is reliable, in part, because the *News* says that \( p \) (which I believe).

Similarly, the world our senses present to us is "consistent"—apparently rule-governed—and we simply tend to believe that what appears to our senses exists in about the way it appears. It visually appears to us that \( p \), and the sense of sight seems reliable, and so we tend to believe that \( p \). But, armed with the belief that \( p \), upon finding further (visual) confirmation of \( p \), we conclude that our sense of sight is, generally, reliable. That is, essentially, what is going on in a track record argument, and it runs about as small a circle as in the case of the *Podunk News*.

But now the meta-coherentist leaps to the defense of these naïve newsreaders and perceivers. These accounts of what’s going on, he says, are oversimplified. It is not just from the *News* itself that I learn about the world at large. I also catch the news on TV and radio, and occasionally have an opportunity to speak to people directly involved with news events. The reports are generally consistent. This wide array of consistent data is best explained by the claim that the *News* is generally telling the truth. If among those data to be explained are claims made by the *News*, that’s all right; the argument might be circular to that small extent, but the data, together with the claim that the *News* is reliable, are coherent. Any circularity is to be expected and surely does not impugn the justification of this claim about the reliability of the *News*—as long as the rest of the argument, in which the circularity is embedded, is large enough.

Similarly with sense-perception. It is not only data about present visual experience that support the thesis that visual perception is reliable; a wide array of
data from other sense modalities and from other beliefs (e.g., the belief that our faculties would have evolved in such a way as to provide us with mostly true beliefs) corroborate the conclusion we might draw from raw visual data alone.\textsuperscript{33} The argument might still be circular, but only due to a relatively small portion of the argument—i.e., that portion in which beliefs about what I see both support and are supported by the claim that visual sense perception is reliable.

The relevant question to ask is: what difference does it make how large the circle is (i.e., how large the argument is in which the circular reasoning is embedded)? Surely the assertion, that large circles are virtuous because they are large, needs support—perhaps a minimal amount of support for those grasping for ways to defend meta-coherentism, but some support nonetheless. But the literature is strangely silent on this point. At best, we get hints. Teasing out the hints will involve us in some unavoidable, but (it is to be hoped) forgivable, obscurity.

For example, Sosa writes:

How else indeed could one determine the reliability of one’s sources of belief than by considering the accuracy of their deliverances and assessing them on that basis? In the absence of cognitive science, there appears no other way. ... So the circle can perhaps be widened to make it after all benign. Perhaps comprehensive coherence is after all a legitimate court of last appeal.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{33} The difference at issue between a “tight” and “large” circle is reflected in the difference between narrow and wide reflective equilibrium. An objection to the method of narrow reflective equilibrium—that it is too conservative, and thus unreliable—is analogous to the objection to the first Podunk News argument, or the “tightly circular” track record argument for the reliability of sense-perception. Correspondingly, the proposal to widen MRE to include a broad variety of background assumptions (and thus hopefully to escape charges of conservatism) has as its analog the proposal to allow “large” circles as virtuous.

\textsuperscript{34} Sosa, Knowledge in Perspective, op. cit., p. 202.
So, suggests Sosa, we have no choice but to admit epistemic circularity. This is the best we can do in evaluating the reliability of, e.g., sense-perception; so it is best to assume that any circularity involved is acceptable.

But, evidently, these “wide circle” arguments are not the only “court of last appeal” we might devise. There are, after all, the other options in the Meta-Regress Argument to consider. So if the suggestion is that we must learn to live with epistemic circularity because it is the only option open to us, then given what we have already explained, the suggestion may be rejected, because there are indeed several other options to consider (and canvassing them is precisely what this dissertation is about).

From conversations with various philosophers and from other obscure passages in various defenses of meta-coherentism, I gather that there is a second view on why the size of the circle should make any difference. Namely, the addition of the epistemically circular element — that is, of premises that are themselves justified in accordance with the conclusion — adds to the overall coherence of the argument. (Henceforth that “element” of the argument will be known as the offending premises.) More precisely, the offending premises are neatly (but unsurprisingly) explained by the conclusion. So, what complaint should we have about the addition of data that strengthens the argument? Indeed, if the set of the other premises, which do not depend on the conclusion for their justification, is large enough, then any “harm done” by the circularity is small.

This second view could stand a bit more elaboration. The idea is that an epistemically circular argument’s coherence is increased by the offending premises;
and this increased coherence somehow overrules, or outweighs, or gives us adequate reason to ignore, the fact that the offending premises make the argument circular. One might understandably wonder how it is that we can simply ignore a clear defect in an argument at all; but humor our meta-coherentist on this point for a bit.

About this line of argument one need only ask: if the contribution of the offending premises (i.e., those that are justified in accordance with the conclusion) is small enough that little "harm" is done by the resulting circularity, then why not remove the offending premises altogether? For example, why not try to construct an argument for the reliability of sense-perception without using any beliefs gained by the use of sense-perception?

Suppose one is tempted to answer, "Good idea – indeed, why not?" Then one contemplates abandoning meta-coherentism altogether for some other solution to the meta-regress problem listed in Chapter 1. Meta-coherentism by its very nature involves epistemic circularity, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter.

So suppose, instead, that one remains true to meta-coherentism; one opts to say that the contribution of the offending premises is essential and that there is no other way to defend the reliability of sense-perception, or any number of basic j-standards for that matter. But then, clearly, one is abandoning the position that little "harm" is done by the resulting circularity. After all, if the success of an argument for the reliability of sense-perception crucially depends on the very premises that make the argument circular, and if the argument is admittedly vicious precisely to the extent to which it is circular, then that viciousness is no small matter.
There is no good reason, as far as we have seen, to think that the size of the circle in any way mitigates the viciousness of epistemic circularity. It might be a popular notion to think so, but it is apparently groundless.

In this chapter, the thrust of my argument has been that meta-coherentism posits the existence of epistemically circular arguments. But such circularity is vicious, as was argued at length in Chapter 2. As far as we have been able to ascertain, the meta-coherentist lacks any grounds on which to claim that the viciousness of that epistemic circularity is, somehow, lessened by adopting his position. Neither the Method of Reflective Equilibrium (and Rescher’s “instrumental justification”) nor the claim that the size of the circle matters, have been shown to render the arguments from Chapter 2 any less forceful. Indeed, after close examination of the meta-coherentist’s defense of the claim that epistemic circularity can be virtuous, we have found that this defense rests on either bald assertions or else confusions.

V. Meta-Regressism.

The Meta-Regress Argument, like the ordinary regress argument, permits a position according to which a belief (in a j-standard, in this case) is justified by an infinite chain of other beliefs. In Chapter 1 this position was introduced and called *meta-regressism*. In particular, the view is that, for some j-standard, so-and-so accepts (dispositionally) an infinite series of standards, or that “there is” an infinite series of them, supporting but not containing the standard. (‘To support’, you will
recall, in this context means ‘to license belief in a premises or premises of an argument that justifies belief in a conclusion’.)

The view that infinite chains of dispositional beliefs can justify anything seems implausible on its face and has gained only some (only a very few, in print) adherents. So there is, I think, no need for us here to rehearse the half-dozen or more arguments on either side of the issue. The following more modest discussion ought to suffice for the bare purpose of putting meta-regressism to rest.

We are considering meta-regressism as a possible solution to the PMJ, which, as we concluded in Chapter 1, is essentially the problem of offering a satisfactory argument for a j-standard. On first glance, to countenance meta-regressism as a strategy for solving this problem seems tantamount to claiming that one could, somehow, produce an argument with an infinite number of steps.

But, of course, such a thing can be described logically. One could very easily describe how the soundness proof of a deductive system could be iterated ad infinitum. The description might be reworked and reinterpreted as an argument for the reliability of deduction as a belief-forming procedure (call this ‘DDP’ for ‘deductive doxastic practice’). Then one claims, of the proof thus indicated, that it is what provides adequate justification of DDP.

This raises an important question, however. Is it the proof itself (something abstract and merely indicated, never described in all its detail) or else the description of the proof (something spoken or written down, or perhaps just entertained mentally) that is claimed to justify DDP? What we are presented with is not the proof itself,
because that's infinite, and we are finite creatures. What we get is a description of the proof — which, perhaps, we might also call "the proof," but speaking more loosely.

As we epistemologists are examining the description of the infinitely long proof, hoping for a justification of DDP, it is evidently not this indicated proof that directly justifies our belief. If anything, as far as we finite humans are concerned, it is the description of the proof, or rather, some belief about a described proof, that does any direct justifying. If we are persuaded of anything, it will be that (1) this infinitely long proof exists, and that (2) it, an abstract object, is adequate to support DDP. Fortunately, neither (1) nor (2) requires that we have an infinite number of beliefs, dispositionally or otherwise. But, unfortunately for hopes we might have had for meta-regressism, we are now proposing a different solution to the PMJ; our new proposal could be any number of other solutions, e.g., some variety of meta-foundationalism. The fact that some premise in a solution to the PMJ makes reference to an abstract proof with an infinite number of steps hardly commits one to meta-regressism.

My claim is that the following is always going to be the case with an alleged meta-regressism: the infinite regress (proof) is described, but then evidently it is not any infinite series of beliefs that is doing the justification, but rather the less ambitious project of believing that this proof exists and is adequate to its purpose. This claim of mine is an empirical observation, open to falsification, but, I think, clearly true. Anyone we see busily engaged in rehearsing as many steps of an infinite proof as he could before he died would perhaps be said to have some extra evidence that the proof, an abstract object, exists — but even that's highly doubtful, of course.
The proof rehearser would not, of course, be said to believe the conclusion of the proof just on the basis of having believed many of its premises. This is not how such proofs are used by human beings, and it could not be otherwise with us.

If one objects that we could have an infinite number of dispositional beliefs — a question I won’t comment on — and thus that it is still quite possible that beliefs in all of the premises of an infinite proof are what justify belief in the conclusion, I offer the following reply. The relevant question appears to be an empirical one: if an infinitely long proof is in fact used to justify my belief in its conclusion, what best accounts for that doxastic justification? Is it my single, occurrent belief that the proof exists, or is it instead an infinite number of dispositional beliefs, most of which I am unaware of having? Economy alone dictates that the former answer is correct.

Considerations of economy generally dictate that meta-regressism is a theoretical option open only to God, who is up to the job of believing an infinite number of things. In accounting for human justification, if a believer makes reference to infinitely long proofs, we do not, on account of that, have to say that the believer is committed to meta-regressism. Hence, alleged meta-regressists can be neatly dealt with under the other options listed in the Meta-Regress Argument. Most of them, I speculate, would be properly classified as self-supportists, and in that case the arguments in Chapter 2 would be brought to bear.

Now we abruptly switch gears.
VI. The Problem of the Criterion.

The ancient Problem of the Criterion (POC), introduced by Sextus Empiricus,35 and the modern variety due to Roderick Chisholm,36 have a great deal in common with the Problem of Meta-Justification. Indeed, the three positions that Chisholm outlined on the problem, viz., methodism, particularism, and skepticism, are each positions one might take on the PMJ. It will be instructive, before we evaluate methodism and particularism, to introduce the POC in some more detail. We will focus on Chisholm’s formulation of the problem.37

It seems to me I know quite a lot about my immediate environment; for example, that the light is off in this room, that music is playing, and that there are birds chirping away outside my window. But, Chisholm says, such knowledge-claims about commonplace facts open one up to skeptical inquiry: how do I know that birds are chirping away outside my window? I might supply a general reason, or criterion, according to which I know: if it seems to me that there are sounds, etc., in ordinary conditions, etc., then I know that there are birds, etc. But again the skeptical inquiry can be pressed: how do I know that this criterion is true? Here, Chisholm says, it is natural to support the criterion by referring to many individual instances of knowledge. Indeed, it is obvious that I do know about the birds, whether the light is on or off, and many other facts about my immediate


37 The following is very loosely adapted from “The Problem of the Criterion,” ibid.
environment. We may construct (and justify) a criterion of knowledge based on a lot of individual cases.

But here the skeptic appears to triumph. He says, consider these two questions you are attempting to answer:

(1) What do I know? What is the extent of my knowledge?

(2) How do I know it? According to what criteria can I be properly said to have knowledge?

"Observe," the skeptic says, "that you justified your answer to (1) with your answer to (2); and then you justified your answer to (2) by referring back to your answer (1). You are arguing in a circle. And indeed it couldn’t be any other way. You cannot answer (1) without first having answered (2), and you cannot answer (2) without first having answered (1). Since you cannot answer either without begging the question, you lack both knowledge and any reliable criteria according to which you might show that you have it."

There are, according to Chisholm, two possible replies to the skeptic. One might begin with an answer to (1), specifying several instances of knowledge; the procedure then is to formulate a criterion in accordance with those instances. This approach is called particularism. On the other hand, one might begin with an answer to (2), specifying some criterion of knowledge that one antecedently regards

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\[38\] The associated doctrine would be called "particularism" as well, viz.: that it is best to use instances of knowledge to arrive at a criterion of knowledge, without antecedently making reference to any such criterion to choose the instances.
as certain, or at least sufficiently plausible; then one decides on the epistemic status of particular beliefs by reference to that criterion. This is the approach of methodism.\(^{39}\)

Chisholm is a particularist, but he nonetheless holds that any particular position on the POC "begs the question" against the other positions.\(^{40}\) The particularist simply takes his knowledge-instances for granted, "begging the question" against the methodist who believes a criterion is needed to identify the instances; the methodist takes his criterion for granted, "begging the question" against the particularist who insists that some support for the criterion is needed (inductive support by instances, in particular). Of course, none of this implies that those espousing either one of the positions must beg the question in the precise sense of having no arguments for the position itself (e.g., particularism), or against the contrary position (e.g., methodism). That is, what are taken for granted are not particularism and methodism themselves, but instead the criterion and knowledge-instances that the doctrines are about.

Recall what the meta-justification problem asks: for any given standard of justification, what is its justification? Of course, the word 'criterion' as used in the Problem of the Criterion is another one of many names for a broad category of claims I refer to as "justification standards" (or even more broadly, "epistemic standards"). So the particularist, at any rate, is concerned to solve the PMJ.

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\(^{39}\) Again, "methodism" may also mean something like this: it is best to use an antecedently decided-upon criterion of knowledge to determine particular instances of knowledge, without supporting the criterion with any such instances.

\(^{40}\) Chisholm, op. cit.
A particularist’s argument for his criterion is inductive. The procedure is to gather a lot of clear instances of knowledge, and then devise a criterion that best explains why they are all instances of knowledge.\textsuperscript{41} When the criterion is settled upon and the argument is written down, it will closely resemble the sort of track record argument described in Chapter 1 – something like this:

- (1a) S’s belief that $p_1$ meets conditions $c$ at time $t_1$.
- (1b) S knows that $p_1$ at $t_1$.
- (2a) S’s belief that $p_2$ meets conditions $c$ at time $t_2$.
- (2b) S knows that $p_2$ at $t_2$.
- (na) S’s belief that $p_n$ meets conditions $c$ at time $t_n$.
- (nb) S knows that $p_n$ at $t_n$.
- (C) Generally, if S’s belief that $p$ meets conditions $c$ at $t$, then S knows that $p$ at $t$.

The hard abductive work goes into formulating “conditions $c$” in a precise enough way that for all of the (nb)’s (which are taken for granted), their corresponding (na)’s are true. The inductive formulation of the argument above just tabulates the work.

Consequently, at first glance, the particularist looks like a self-supportist – recall that self-supportists take track record arguments to be adequate to support j-standards. Belief in each (nb) is said to be justified in accordance with (something close to) the conclusion. But let us have a closer look at the situation.

\textsuperscript{41} The notion of explanation at work here will receive heavy use later on. Evidently, what is meant is not \textit{scientific} or \textit{causal} explanation, but meaning explanation. Nonetheless, the term ‘explanation’ is apropos just considering the procedure required to produce the needed account, namely, abduction, also known as argument to the best explanation.
Essentially, the particularist claims that he can fix on particular instances of knowledge without, antecedently, having a criterion to decide that they are instances of knowledge. In the track record argument above, the particularist would say that each \((nb)\) is true, and that he needs no criterion – or other epistemological standard – to decide that it is true. He takes them all for granted, and is happy to do so. So now the particularist looks less like a self-supportist; he appears to want to claim that it is neither the conclusion (the criterion he arrives at) nor any other epistemological standard that justifies his knowledge-claims in his argument’s premises.

This discussion makes a certain confusion plain. The particularist might not have arrived at his instances of knowledge by the use of a criterion; but does he claim that those instances are, nonetheless, instances of belief that are justified in accordance with a standard? Or are we to take his disavowals of the use of a criterion as an indication that he also denies that the beliefs he claims to be knowledge are justified in accordance with any standard?

The particularist might, when confronted with this confusion, wish to clarify his position by saying that his knowledge-claims are indeed justified in accordance with some standard or other. Perhaps he will explain that particularism is a philosophical method that does not commit him to a meta-epistemological position, and that his meta-epistemological position is, as it turns out, (e.g.) self-supportism. If that’s the case, we may confront the particularist with the arguments from Chapter 2, and the issue is finished.

But the particularist might, on the other hand, claim that his position is quite distinct from self-supportism. On this variation, his position is indeed that there are
some knowledge-claims that not only may he assert without support, but that are justified without there being any standard according to which they are justified. It is possible that certain beliefs are justified, but not justified in accordance with any standard of justification; and the knowledge-claims he takes for granted, in arguing for a criterion, are indeed such justified beliefs. In that case, he claims that his argument for the criterion lacks any licensing standard, to use the terminology introduced in Chapter 1, because the premises lack a licensing standard.

The latter variety of particularism is what we will examine in this chapter; let us call it strict particularism.

It is not hard to understand that a similar confusion can arise for the methodist. That is, when the methodist claims that he knows that a certain criterion is correct, are we to say that there is some further criterion in accordance with which his belief in the criterion is constituted as knowledge? If so, the methodist might well espouse meta-coherentism or some other meta-epistemological position, while maintaining that methodism is just a philosophical method. But if not – if the methodist says there is no further criterion – then he shares with the strict particularist the view that certain beliefs are correctly regarded as justified, but not justified in accordance with any standard of justification. And then we will call his view strict methodism.

The strict varieties of particularism and methodism each combine similar meta-epistemological views with different methodologies. What we will examine next is the meta-epistemological view they have in common.
VII. Unlicensed Meta-Epistemology.

Strict particularism and strict methodism make a similar proposal. The proposal is that there are some epistemic claims — claims that centrally involve epistemic terms such as ‘knowledge’, ‘justification’, and ‘evidence’ — that are true, but for which there is no licensing standard. And a licensing standard of an epistemic claim is, as discussed in Chapter 1, an epistemic standard that best explains the fact that the epistemic term correctly describes what the claim alleges it to describe.

As an example, let’s take the classic claim of a classic particularist. “Here is one hand,” said G. E. Moore, holding up a hand.\(^2\) We may attribute the following epistemic claim to Moore as well: “I know that this is a human hand.” An epistemic standard would be a licensing standard for this claim, if that standard best explains why Moore was correct to say “I know this is a human hand.” We need not attempt to formulate the standard precisely, but a rough example would be something like this: “If it seems to someone that he is clearly seeing something just a foot or two away from him in good light, and it appears to him that he is fully awake, sober, etc., and he has no reason to think his senses are deceiving him, then he knows that he is clearly seeing that thing.”\(^3\)

Our claim, then, would be that this standard best explains the fact that Moore knows that this is a human hand. The standard provides a sufficient condition for


\(^3\) Perhaps this standard would itself be derived from a more general (and perchance even more complex) standard about vision, or sense-perception. Plainly, one issue in deciding whether a certain standard “licenses” an epistemic claim is at what level of specificity the standard is to be formulated. A similar issue is much-discussed by reliabilists under the heading of “the generality problem.”
knowledge that applies to many different cases, including the present case; and not only does the obtaining of the condition imply that Moore knows, it explains that he knows. In the example, we might say, it explains this fact at least as well as any other standard can. The Holy Grail of recent epistemology has been to formulate epistemic standards that succeed in this way— that explain epistemic facts (if you will) better than, or at least as well as, any other contenders. The standards that succeed in this are the standards, as I say, that "license" a belief's claim to justification (thus the usefulness of the word 'license').

Consider what the strict particularist might say of this case: there is no such explanation. It is certainly a fact that Moore knows that this is a human hand— that's granted— but there is no standard to appeal to, that explains why Moore knows in this instance.

But a more clever particularist might present his position as follows: "There is no criterion that does the explanation— that's my essential position, after all. But that hardly means there's no explanation at all for this instance of Moore's knowledge. Obviously, he knows it is a hand because he sees it in good light, etc. The point is that there is no generalization— 'covering law,' or criterion, or j-standard, or whatever you'd like to call it— that contributes to the explanation."

These two contrasting defenses naturally lead one to the question whether strict particularism is indeed committed to the position that there is no explanation whatsoever for fundamental knowledge-claims; the defense just presented answers the question in the negative. Thus far, admittedly, the strict particularist has been described only as lacking a criterion that accounts for particular knowledge-instances;
admittedly, it is a logical possibility that there could be such an explanation without a covering criterion. After all, there have been views of causal explanation, e.g., Wesley Salmon's, that reject the "covering law" model.

But the sort of explanation needed here is semantic explanation: we are looking for an account, even a very partial account, of the meaning of 'know' that explains why this application of the word is correct. However matters of causal explanation might be, semantic explanation does clearly require the application of a criterion, or generalization of some sort -- a universally quantified conditional claim.

If that's correct, then the strict particularist is committed to the claim that there's no explanation for the fact that 'know' applies in Moore's case. Or, at least, there is no adequate explanation, because an adequate explanation would require the application of something like a criterion. He just does know it.

Moreover -- to return to the main thread of the discussion -- the strict particularist collects together a number of such (unexplained) epistemic claims, and uses them to arrive at a criterion (an epistemic standard). That's his basic procedure.

Similarly, the strict methodist begins with a standard that he claims to know (or to be justified in believing), and about which he says, essentially, there is no explanation of the fact that he knows (is justified in believing) it. Moreover, he uses this standard to arrive at a number of epistemic claims.

\[\text{One could make a case, as well, that the particularist cannot posit the existence of justifiers, such as Moore's seeing his hand; that is, though of course Moore does see his hand, his seeing it does not stand in a relation of justification to his belief that he expresses by saying, "Here is one hand." After all, suppose that the strict particularist did want to say that Moore's seeing his hand justified his claim; then he would have to say that Moore's claim has a justifier, but there is no applicable standard of justification. That's at best a paradoxical conjunction of claims.}\]
Plainly, then, one way to evaluate the merits of strict particularism and of strict methodism would be to decide whether any epistemic claim, whether about epistemic standards or about other, more particular beliefs, could possibly lack an explanation for the fact that the epistemic terms it contains are correctly applied.

There are some terms that lack such explanations, of course — terms that are *semantically primitive*, we might say. For example, an ontologist might suggest that 'object' is a term such that there is no (informative) way to account for the fact that it does correctly apply, when it does; others might suggest, instead, that 'property' and 'relation' are such terms. In systems of logic, two connectives are often presented without explanation; one might well say, for example, that the occurrence of 'and' in a sentence lacks any explanation, which hardly keeps sentences that employ it from being true.

Presently at issue is whether there are some epistemic terms, such as 'know' and 'justified', that are semantically primitive in this way. Or rather, the issue is whether they are primitive in some uses, but not in others; after all, both the methodist and the particularist are, of course, busily formulating adequate explanations for the application of epistemic terms. The particularist, for example, takes a lot of epistemic claims for granted and uses them to fix on a criterion, i.e., a statement that explains when an epistemic term such as 'know' is correctly applied.

Why think, then, that some uses of epistemic terms are semantically primitive? More precisely, why think that the uses of 'know' in the (strict) methodist's claim to know that his criterion is correct, or in the (strict) particularist's allegedly clear cases of knowledge, are semantically primitive? The formulation of
the POC makes it clear enough: only if those uses of epistemic terms are semantically primitive can we escape “the wheel” of epistemic circularity (and hence, allegedly, skepticism). This accounts for why methodists and particularists do in fact regard some uses of epistemic terms as semantically primitive.

But the challenge remains: can they give some other, non-question-begging reason for thinking that those uses of epistemic terms are semantically primitive? Very likely the answer is in the negative, because on the face of it, to suppose just those uses of epistemic terms to be semantically primitive appears ad hoc. In addition, consider the following two arguments; the essential point in both is that strict methodists and particularists, to avoid epistemic circularity, must regard as semantically primitive more than they were prepared to admit.

First, on particularism. As we have seen, the strict particularist constructs an argument that greatly resembles the track record arguments presented in Chapter 1. And, as we saw in Chapter 1, there are a number of conditions on using an argument to get a justified belief in an argument’s conclusion: not only must one believe the premises justifiedly, one must, in addition, believe justifiedly that the conclusion follows from the premises. The strict particularist insists that he knows the premises without justifiers, or anything else that would explain or account for how he knows them. But we may ask him: how do you know that the conclusion, the criterion you generate from instances of knowledge, follows from the premises? By some sort of induction, evidently. But what licenses you in making the inference?

Here the particularist faces a nasty dilemma. On the one hand, he might reply that there is some epistemic rule regarding which inductions are justified, and that this
particular induction follows that rule. But that puts him back "on the wheel," of course: even if he claims that he need not know what the rule is, the arguments surrounding that defense from Chapter 2 are easily brought to bear. On the other hand, he might say that this particular induction is justified, but there is no licensing rule, nothing that accounts for its justification. And here again we may say that his solution appears *ad hoc*. If he is permitted to say that this inference is justified without some covering explanation, then why is he not permitted to assume that virtually any inference is similarly justified?

Second, on methodism. The argument here is much the same. The methodist claims to take a certain criterion for granted. But in addition, like the particularist, he must take for granted whatever inference rule he uses (in applying the criterion). Since he is already assuming one "criterion," what's another to him?

But worse than that — supposing that his criterion is a conditional claim of the form, "If S satisfies conditions c, then S knows that p" — he must take for granted all of the instances of the antecedents of his criterion. For example, a methodist Cartesian might assert: "If I clearly and distinctly perceive that p, then I know that p." For every p that the Cartesian wants to say he knows, he must take for granted that he is justified in believing — without any explanation — that he clearly and distinctly perceives that p.\(^{45}\)

And now the methodist faces the same dilemma that the particularist faces. Either he relents and says that there is some way to account for the justification of his inferences and for the antecedent-instances of his criterion, in which case he is subject to charges of epistemic circularity; or else he insists that these particular uses of the epistemic terms are, again, primitive, in which case his position seems increasingly *ad hoc* and thus untenable.

The strict particularist and methodist might object that everyone must take some terms as primitive, after all. So why should it be a problem that they take certain epistemic terms as primitive? Why should there be any requirement to explain this at all — so that charges of *ad hoc* positing of primitive terms have any negative force at all?

To be clear, the problem is not merely that the particularist and methodist must take certain uses of epistemic terms to be primitive. The problem, properly understood, lies in the fact that the particular use of the terms that are taken to be primitive are so taken precisely in order to solve a philosophical problem, the POC. But the fact that taking just these uses of these terms does allow one to solve the POC does not appear to be anything like a good reason to regard just them as primitive.

While, granted, everyone must take some terms as primitive, it does not follow from that that the choice of terms is arbitrary, or that terms may be chosen simply in order that problems can be solved handily. Presumably, there are reasons
why primitive terms ought, in philosophy, to be taken as primitive, just as there are reasons why certain propositions may be taken as philosophical "starting points" while others may not.

If the explanation of why a philosopher takes some, but not all, uses of some epistemic terms to be primitive is that doing so permits one to solve the POC, one can very justly accuse him of doing something *ad hoc*. The fact that taking these terms to be primitive allows one to solve the POC is not a reason to think that the terms ought to be taken as primitive. This is a philosophical error on the order of taking as an axiom a proposition that nearly everyone believes to require and to be amenable to argument. The fact that doing so might handily avoid some philosophical problem is not a reason to think the proposition ought to be taken as an axiom.

VIII. Strangely Justified Beliefs.

The reader might think we have been a bit too quick in dismissing particularism and methodism. Perhaps there is something to what they, in their strict varieties, say. One way to regard their shared assumption is that there are certain claims that are justified without justifiers, i.e., without anything doing the justification. Surely there is some (perhaps minimal *prima facie*) plausibility to the odd notion that a belief might be justified — that one ought to believe it, that it has some claim to being true — in spite of the fact there is nothing "doing the

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46 And in fact I have my own theory as to why certain terms ought, in philosophy, to be taken as primitive, but it would take us too far afield here to present it. Suffice it to say that such theories are possible, even if (rather surprisingly) they have not been proposed very often.

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justification.” And if such an animal might exist, then surely the strict particularist or
strict methodist might have correctly identified these strangely justified beliefs. (For
convenience, let’s refer to these beliefs as indeed strangely justified.)

Foundationalists might be initially attracted to the view that strangely justified
beliefs exist, since they are committed to the existence of properly basic beliefs – i.e.,
those that are justified, but not justified by other beliefs. But notice now that properly
basic beliefs are not strangely justified. The typical foundationalist claims that there
are indeed justifiers for basic beliefs. Typically, the justifiers are mental states such
as perceptual appearances and internal sensations; accordingly, there are conditions
for the application of ‘justified’ as applied to basic beliefs. A strangely justified
belief, by contrast, is not justified by anything at all; nothing like mental states
account for its justification, because nothing at all accounts for its justification.

I suspect that foundationalists, when properly inducted into these mysteries,
will want to have nothing to do with strangely justified beliefs.

Notice too that strangely justified beliefs are not what have been called “blind
posits,” i.e., beliefs that are simply taken for granted, or for which no claim about
their justification is made. Our strict methodist does wish to claim that his ultimate
criterion is justified. If he did not make that claim, methodism could scarcely be
called a solution to the POC. It would be better regarded as a variety of skepticism,
since it is the skeptic, after all, who essentially makes the claim that neither
knowledge claims nor criteria for knowledge can be justified.

Strangely justified beliefs thus compose an epistemic category that is, today,
not well known or commonly considered. One might be apt to add that strangely
justified beliefs have had little currency in the history of philosophy; but this is, on reflection, not so clear. It was not until the twentieth century that the terminology of "justification," "warrant," and the like became widespread. Earlier discussions of foundations tended to be couched in language that was not so closely tied to notions of justification, e.g., 'first principles', 'axioms', and 'maxim'. It would be a matter of some historical debate whether, just to take one example, Locke's "maxims" (or, what might be the same thing, beliefs in maxims) are best regarded as properly basic beliefs, strangely justified beliefs, or blind posits.\(^{47}\) (Possibly the historic question would be best left unresolved.)

However that is, I suppose the main reason that, at present, strangely justified beliefs are not widely discussed by epistemologists is expressed in the following line of reasoning. Strange justification is justification without justifiers. If I say that "This is a hand" is justified strangely, my claim is that "This is a hand" is justified, but that nothing at all does the justifying. There is nothing that stands in some relation to the belief, in virtue of which the belief is justified. But, I suppose, it is so common to think that justification does absolutely require justifiers, that this requirement is hardly ever given expression. It seems essential to the very notion of justification that there be justifiers. Indeed, one ordinary (mainly non-philosophical) use of the word 'justification' is practically synonymous with 'reasons' or 'evidence' or 'argument' — i.e., with the justifiers themselves, and not with any quality that a belief might have thanks to support by the justifiers. So we can take it that there

simply is not any legitimate sense of ‘justification’ according to which the use of
‘strangely justified’ can be countenanced at all.

This line of reasoning is admittedly tenuous. But, given the very slight
plausibility of the existence of strange justification to begin with, a stronger argument
does not seem necessary.

Insofar as strict methodism and particularism are committed to the existence
of strangely justified beliefs, then, that is another objection to those theories.
Considering, as well, the objection that the theories require the *ad hoc* positng of
certain uses of epistemic terms as primitive, we may put strict methodism and
particularism to rest. Moreover, the looser versions of methodism and particularism
are, as we said, in principle indistinguishable from other proposed solutions to the
PMJ, which have been refuted in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter. So we must
look elsewhere for a solution to the POC and the PMJ — or else accept a skeptical
result.

IX. Conclusion.

It is time to put this chapter’s work in context. We have, essentially,
eliminated a series of proposed solutions to the Problem of Meta-Justification, thus
expanding the Meta-Regress Argument presented in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 2, we found that self-supportism must be rejected: j-standards
cannot support themselves without running afoul of a vicious epistemic circularity.
And, as we found early in the present chapter, meta-coherentism doesn’t make the
situation any better by positing a circle or loop of standards; that proposal too runs
afoul of epistemic circularity. It does not help to suggest that the process of developing a coherent system does not intrinsically involve arguing in a circle (which is just irrelevant to the question of epistemic justification). Moreover, mentioning the size of system in which the circle is embedded does not help to mitigate this circularity in any discernible way.

Another logical possibility is meta-regressism – that there is an infinite series of j-standards, with each j-standard the conclusion of an argument that is licensed by another j-standard that is itself the conclusion of another argument, and so on ad infinitum. But, however things might be for God, the most parsimonious account of how human beings might use such an infinite series of arguments to arrive at a justified belief is not to suppose that we have an infinite number of dispositional beliefs, but rather that we have a belief in the existence of an infinitely long argument, and this latter belief is what does any justification. Any proposal resembling bona fide meta-regressism will, thus, reduce to some other solution.

Next we considered strict particularism, the view that j-standards are justified by premises about particular instances of knowledge or justified belief – but there are no criteria by which the application of ‘know’ or ‘justified’ to those premises can be explained. But that ‘know’ or ‘justified’ do apply here without explanation (i.e., that particular instances of the use of these terms are semantically primitive) to just these premises appears to be simply ad hoc. Worse, at least on some versions of strict particularism, there are no justifiers for the premises. But that there could be justified beliefs without justifiers is extremely implausible.
So we might fall back to strict methodism, the view that j-standards are justified but that there are no instances of justified belief and no other standards that justify them. This view faces the same problems that strict particularism faces: it involves *ad hoc* reasoning and appears to be committed to the extremely implausible view that "strangely justified beliefs" exist.

Are we left, then, with the view that j-standards are not, ultimately, justified at all — that the best we do is to make some "blind posits"? Isn’t that tantamount simply to skepticism? These questions will be explored in the next chapter.
A REIDIAN META-EPISTEMOLOGY

I. Meta-Skepticism.

Variations on the Meta-Regress Argument can, like the ordinary regress argument, be used to support various conclusions, depending on how (or whether) one proposes to end the regress. The ordinary regress argument's typical conclusion is foundationalism. An alternative conclusion, which is usually considered an option particularly to be avoided, is skepticism, e.g., the view that no belief is justified. Now it appears that, after an extended presentation of my own Meta-Regress Argument, I have arrived not at meta-foundationalism but at a meta-skeptical conclusion. But this is not quite obvious and will require further investigation.

So the purpose of this chapter is to determine what conclusions ought to be drawn from the results of the first three chapters. Among the recommended conclusions to be advanced is that meta-skepticism can be avoided. Toward the end of avoiding it, I will advance a theory of rationality according to which it can be plausibly claimed that certain fundamental standards might be rationally, if not justifiably, believed, and that those standards license arguments that support (and
justify) nonbasic standards. A number of highly contentious issues and objections will have to be addressed along the way.

Let us begin by formulating what may be advanced, uncontroversially, as one significant conclusion of Chapters 1-3. (It would be controversial to draw certain other conclusions, which I shall nonetheless draw later on in this chapter; but we will start with the following less-controversially-drawn conclusion.)

It might well be that there are many j-standards that receive support from arguments the premises of which are themselves justified in accordance with other j-standards. But if we press the issue, we encounter a regress. And as I have argued, we cannot accept arguments alleging that standards support themselves, either via a single argument or many. Moreover, as advanced in the Chapter 3, to suppose that it is precisely the premises of an argument for a basic j-standard that are justified but somehow not in accordance with a standard or justifiers – or to suppose the same of the standard itself – is ad hoc and probably absurd as well. So when we ask, of a given standard, “What is the justification of this standard?” we are stuck saying, “Ultimately, nothing. There might be some immediate supporting arguments, but if the issue is pressed there is nothing that ultimately justifies this or any j-standard.”

This claim can be stated more precisely as follows:

(C) For any given justification standard, \( J \), acceptance of it is either not justified, or ultimately receives support only from beliefs that are themselves not justified (regardless of how many intervening beliefs there might be between the ultimately supporting beliefs and the standard).

This is what I take Chs. 1-3 to have established.
I think most would be willing, without further ado, to call (C) an unacceptably skeptical conclusion; but that charge is, I think, hasty. Let me explain. Skepticism comes in a variety of forms, two of which are relevant to formulating the charge:¹

(SK) Global skepticism: no belief is epistemically justified.

(MSK) Meta-skepticism: no belief in a justification standard is epistemically justified.

A particularly strong indictment of (C) would involve claiming that, first, it entails (MSK), and second, since (MSK) entails (SK), (C) also entails (SK), i.e., global skepticism. Let us see what merit there is to these charges, beginning with the second, stronger charge.

While (SK) obviously entails (MSK), the entailment in the opposite direction is less obvious. In his famous diallelus argument, Sextus Empiricus appears to have assumed this opposite entailment;² that is, he assumed that in order to have knowledge, one must have a criterion according to which that which one claims to know is true, since the use of such a criterion would be the only way to demonstrate knowledge. And if one cannot demonstrate knowledge, Sextus assumed, one cannot legitimately claim to have it. Hence, failure to defend any criterion of truth would indicate that one does not know anything (or at least that one cannot legitimately claim to know anything).

¹ Note that the two forms considered here are nonmodal and restricted to justification. For a discussion of various forms of epistemological skepticism, see George S. Pappas, “Some Forms of Epistemological Scepticism,” in Pappas and Marshall Swain, eds., Essays on Knowledge and Justification (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 309-16.

But Sextus' view appears to assume that, in order to be justified in holding a belief, one must be aware of that in virtue of which one is justified in holding the belief. But as self-supportists are keen to point out, and as Alston persuasively argues in "Level Confusions in Epistemology," there is little support for this assumption.

Even if (C) is innocent of entailing global skepticism, meta-skepticism would be burden enough, at least as far as philosophers are concerned: it would remove a good reason to pursue a major part of epistemology. If we believed that no j-standards could be justified, what would be the point of debating about different theories of justification? There would be no point that was related to truth, at least. We might still have political motivations or other motivations not related to truth-seeking. But I believe most (not all) philosophers today are not nearly as interested in the mere political impact of their philosophical views as they are in whether their views are true. Accordingly they have reason to try to avoid meta-skepticism.

David Hume and a number of philosophers following after him have made the point (in various ways) that skepticism, as a philosophical theory, need not have any noticeable effect on our everyday attitudes, views, and decisions; hence they reject one objection to skepticism, viz., that it would render ordinary life impossible. So one might suggest that a similar argument is available in defense of meta-skepticism.

Whatever the merits of this sort of argument, the meta-skeptic cannotavail himself of it. Meta-skepticism is a meta-level theory, about philosophical claims.

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(j-standards); to accept this theory seriously is to believe, sincerely, that no j-standard (among which are included some of the most cherished theories of epistemology) is justified. If no standard is justified, then the activity of offering an epistemic justification for a standard will always fail to demonstrate the standard's justification. Just that activity is what exercises philosophers engaged in the theory of justification; hence, their activity is doomed to failure, if meta-skepticism is correct.

Traditional epistemologists will accept, then, that meta-skepticism must be avoided. Essentially, if we are duly persuaded of (C), then to avoid meta-skepticism, we must find a way to hold onto the following conjunctive claim:

1. All beliefs in justification standards are either not justified, or ultimately supported by beliefs that are themselves not justified; and some beliefs in justification standards are epistemically justified.

Evidently, for the conjuncts making up (1) to be consistent, it must be true that some beliefs in j-standards are epistemically justified but are ultimately supported (only) by beliefs that are themselves not justified. In other words, some justified beliefs receive their justification from beliefs that are not justified. That is contrary to what might appear to be one of the most basic canons of epistemology, to wit:

2. If S is justified in the (nonbasic) belief that p, then S has some other justified belief (or beliefs) q that supports the belief that p.

Indeed, this might be regarded as following from a few uncontroversial claims, including an account of 'nonbasic belief', such as the following:

Def. The belief that p is nonbasic for S iff p is justified only by other of S's beliefs if p is justified for S at all.

Consider also in this context the supports constraint, advanced in Chapter 2:
The alleged justifiers for a belief (whatever sort of thing they might be) support the belief they justify.

From these two claims it follows that nonbasic beliefs are supported by other beliefs, which is not precisely what (2) says. What (2) adds is that the justifiers that support a nonbasic belief are themselves *justified* beliefs.

It seems intuitive that nonbasic beliefs possess whatever degree of justification they have due in at least large part to the degree of justification their supporting beliefs have. Moreover, a belief that is not justified at all, it appears, cannot "give" any justification to other beliefs. If the belief that *q* is not justified, it cannot offer any justificatory support to the belief that *p*. Hence, if all j-standards are either not justified, or ultimately supported by beliefs that are themselves not justified, then no belief in j-standards is epistemically justified. The central conclusion of Chapters 1-3, (C), would appear to entail meta-skepticism.

It will take a considerable effort to show that appearances in this case, however plausible, are deceptive. Indeed, I wish the present chapter only to be construed as an attempt to show a possible way around meta-skepticism, not as a definitive refutation.

Here is the first step in the effort: it could be a category mistake to apply the concept of justification to some beliefs.

"Category mistake" describes the error of ascribing an attribute to an item in a category to which the attribute does not (literally) apply at all; for example, "My decision weighs five pounds" or "The sun is just." The meta-skeptical argument just
stated fails to acknowledge the possibility that the concept of justification might not apply to a certain class of belief at all.4

An example of a similar sort of category mistake, arguably, would be to insist that the law of bivalence applies to all ordinary language statements. For example, if I were to insist that the claim “She is taller” is true (or false), when it is unclear who “she” denotes and who or what she is taller than, I could very plausibly be said to be committing a category error in the sense that I am trying to attribute truth to a member of a category to which the attribute does not properly apply. To the contrary, one may argue, ordinary vague (or otherwise unclear) statements are neither true nor false; the concept of truth does not apply to claims that are sufficiently unclear.

So one might identify three general categories of belief: the justified, the unjustified, and those such that it is a mistake to call them either justified or unjustified (nonjustified beliefs).5

Just suppose, then, that acceptance of a standard about (for example) the justification of some particular sensory beliefs is claimed to be nonjustified (neither justified nor unjustified) – that the concept of justification does not properly apply to that belief. Then one could well say that the belief in the standard is not justified; but one could not (accurately) say that the belief is unjustified. The question at issue is whether such a belief could possibly give justificatory support to other beliefs.

4 There is a symbolic approximation of this proposal: \(\exists p (\neg JBp \& \neg JB\neg p)\). This is approximate because all or nearly all philosophers will, of course, say that there are some beliefs such that neither accepting or denying them is justified. In Chisholm’s lingo, such beliefs should be withheld. So what the symbols leave out is the claim that it is a category mistake to apply the concept of justification to certain beliefs at all.

5 This proposal will be elaborated in Section VI below.
The meta-skeptic might insist that, regardless of whether the concept does or does not apply, (2) holds: a nonbasic belief is not justified unless it is supported by a justified belief. Admittedly, that insistence has significant force.

But give due consideration to this possibility: while it is on all hands unacceptable to say that an unjustified belief (i.e., one that has a certain kind of negative epistemic status) gives justificatory support to a belief, it might be possible that a belief, of which it makes no sense to say it is justified or not, gives the required epistemic support to another belief by having a different kind of positive epistemic status. That is, there might be some belief that is nonjustified, neither justified nor unjustified, because the concept "justification" does not apply to it; nonetheless, it is rationally believed, or warranted, etc. And suppose that it is the sort of belief that can, in the terminology of Chapter 1, properly "license" arguments for various other beliefs, including beliefs in j-standards. In that case, (C) would not be contradicted: a derivative j-standard "ultimately receives support from beliefs that are themselves not justified," and the world is safe for the theory of justification.

This might seem to be a silly suggestion, contrived to avoid skepticism. The challenge before us is to make this suggestion plausible, particularly in the face of the admittedly persuasive insistence that a nonbasic belief is not justified unless it is supported by a justified belief. As it turns out, closely related (or supporting) suggestions were made by some of the most revered names in epistemology, including Reid, Moore, Wittgenstein, and Strawson, and so their names will appear, as appropriate, in what follows. I will develop a meta-epistemological theory most heavily indebted to the work of the great Scots philosopher Thomas Reid. This work
will help explain how, for all the problems raised in Chapters 1-3, one might still be in a position to reject meta-skepticism.

II. Toward a Theory of Minimal Epistemic Rationality.

How might it be that nonjustified beliefs can support justified beliefs? The following seems uncontrovertible: if a belief lacks any positive epistemic status, it cannot give epistemic support to another belief. In other words:

(3) If S is justified in the (nonbasic) belief that \( p \), then S has some other belief (or body of beliefs) \( q \), that both possesses some positive epistemic status and supports the belief that \( p \).

Contrast this with (2) from Section I above, which states that all justified nonbasic beliefs are supported by justified beliefs. To the contrary, it can be suggested that some nonbasic, justified beliefs are adequately supported by beliefs that are nonjustified but rational.\(^6\) The rationality of a nonjustified belief might be adequate to give epistemic support to an entire superstructure of justified beliefs.

A number of questions about this proposal are apt to leap to mind, but one should be dealt with right away, at least briefly. Namely, there is an epistemic circularity problem about justification; why not think that there would be an equally devastating problem for rationality?

The reason is that – on some notions of rational belief, and there are many – some rational beliefs, in order to be rational, need not be supported at all. As the

\(^6\) Or warranted, etc. As mentioned above, a number of different terms have been used to indicate some sort of non-deontological positive epistemic status. Perhaps the particular term of art here does not matter, although I will prefer “rational” in this discussion for reasons that will become clear.
Supports Argument from Chapter 2 indicates, the fact that justification requires noncircular support makes epistemic circularity unavoidably vicious. But some kind of rationality (or warrant, etc.) could be a variety of positive epistemic status that does not require support at all, noncircular or otherwise.

As an example (to be developed anon), a belief might be rational, in a relevant sense of 'rational', due precisely to the fact that it is a spontaneous result of a properly functioning doxastic practice, such as the practice of looking closely. The belief is constituted as rational on account of its source.\(^7\) In that case, its origin does not epistemically support its claim to rationality in the way that a basic belief allegedly receives justificatory support from a perceptual state. Properly speaking, one might argue, the belief is not epistemically supported at all and remains nonjustified. The fact that it results from a properly functioning practice merely accounts for its rationality.

But evidently, the notion of rationality at work here requires some explication. So our task is to develop an (at least minimally) adequate theory of epistemic rationality, on which a nonjustified belief (particularly, in a standard that might license an argument for a \(j\)-standard) might be rational. The central constraint on this theory is that it should permit us to argue that some rational but nonjustified beliefs offer adequate epistemic support to justified, nonbasic beliefs.

\(^7\) Or, alternatively, the source is constituted as rational on account of the rationality of the beliefs in which it issues. A topic we shall encounter below is the interdefinability of the rationality of doxastic practices and of beliefs.
It is worth considering whether the one recent prominent theory of epistemic rationality, due to Richard Foley, might serve the purpose. His theory in his own words is:

it is epistemically rational for a person to believe a proposition just if there is a way of arguing for the proposition that is uncontroversial for him. To claim this, however, is to provide only the barest outline of a general conception of rationality.

Beliefs in what Foley calls “uncontroversial propositions” are the sort with which my own theory will be most concerned (along with the doxastic practices that result in beliefs in such propositions). Foley’s view is presumably that basic beliefs are rational due to their being basic; hence the rationality of such beliefs is spelled out by an account of basic beliefs.

I don’t believe it would be appropriate to adopt Foley’s theory (even if I thought it were very plausible) for purposes of this dissertation. The theory that I shall advance is specifically designed to aid in solving the problems raised in this dissertation, and Foley’s of course is not. There is reason to think that the two theories really concern slightly different, but related, concepts: Foley’s concerns the concept that might be loosely described as “having reason to believe.” By contrast, mine concerns the concept of “being an instance of the use of reason.” Foley focuses on having reasons, while I focus on using reason. These are related but distinguishable concepts.

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As we shall see, however, there is one instance where my (rather sketchy) comments might usefully be supplemented by Foley’s attempt to characterize the rationality of basic beliefs. But for the outline of the theory I will try to develop a different account, much less detailed than Foley’s. I can perhaps be forgiven the lack of detail considering that the purpose of this chapter is, ultimately, to illustrate one possible way get around charges of meta-skepticism, given the results of Chapters 1-3. The theory I shall develop will, I think, suffice for that limited purpose.

So without further ado, I will outline my own theory of rationality.

Various items are called ‘rational’, including actions, habits (physical and mental), people, minds, and beliefs, but it is the rationality of belief and doxastic practices with which we are now concerned. To further complicate matters, there are a variety of ways to approach an account of rational belief; or perhaps it would be better to say that there are a variety of senses in which the word ‘rational’ may be applied to belief.

Two senses will be introduced here. First, there is the sense of ‘rationality’ that is equivalent to an old use of the word ‘reason’ (or, poetically and reverently, ‘Reason’) that denotes certain doxastic practices or habits; second, the results of

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11 I adopt here Alston’s useful term; see, e.g., this gloss: “A prominent member of this group [of doxastic, i.e., belief-forming, practices] is the practice of going from sense experience (together, sometimes, with relevant background beliefs) to beliefs about things, events, and states of affairs in the immediate physical and social environment. ... Clearly, what I am calling a ‘doxastic practice’ is not a single belief-forming disposition, but some family, grouping, or system of individual dispositions, bound together in some important way. What binds the components together in the practice is some marked similarity in input, output, and/or function” (*The Reliability of Sense Perception* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], pp. 7-8).
engaging in those habits, i.e., particular beliefs, can be called ‘rational’. One may regard the noun, ‘rationality’ or ‘Reason’, as short for the doxastic habits, and the adjective, ‘rational’, as applying primarily to the resulting beliefs. So rational beliefs are the deliverances of the practice of rationality (or of Reason). That this sort of concept of rationality or Reason is robust, there should be little doubt: this notion was common throughout early modern philosophy, indeed being one of the leading epistemic notions of the age. It has perhaps become less common, among professional philosophers anyway, since then. The theory of Reason to be developed presently owes its heaviest debt to one of the greatest of the early moderns, Thomas Reid.**

In the sense in question, ‘rationality’ (or ‘Reason’) very generally denotes a habit of believing a certain way in certain circumstances. A bit more precisely, the

12 More than this can and will be said about the relation between ‘rationality’ and ‘rational belief’.

13 Supplanted, no doubt, by the concept of means-end rationality, which in epistemology is not particularly helpful by itself. A belief would be epistemically rational in this sense iff adopting the belief would be an adequate means to securing the end of truth. This account by itself is obviously inadequate, leaving as it does unanswered the question: “When is the adoption of a belief an adequate means to securing the end of truth?” Even as an account of the rationality of doxastic practices – a doxastic practice is rational iff it is an effective means to getting true beliefs – the means-end concept is not very helpful. Here the crucial unanswered question is: “When is a doxastic practice an effective means to getting true beliefs?” Nonetheless, as we shall see below, a complete theory of epistemic rationality ought to be able to be construed as an answer to these questions; so one may regard the means-end conception of rationality as supplying an important desideratum against which different theories of epistemic rationality might be applied.

14 See Thomas Reid, Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man, in William Hamilton, ed., Philosophical Works, Vol. I, 8e (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), Essay VI. For evidence that Reid had the broad conception of reason discussed here, see p. 425: “It is absurd to conceive that there can be any opposition between reason and common sense. It [common sense] is indeed the first-born of Reason; and, as they are commonly joined together in speech and in writing, they are inseparable in their nature. We ascribe to reason two offices, or two degrees. The first is to judge of things self-evident; the second to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are.”

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term denotes a collection (indeed, a highly integrated body) of doxastic practices including those originating with sense-perception, introspection, memory, perhaps a capacity for conception or perhaps some sort of "rational intuition" (which would be the source of a priori knowledge), varieties of reasoning, and reliance on testimony.

Thus, for example, the practice of believing what one sees when fully awake, one’s visual apparatus is working properly, and one is in otherwise good circumstances is part of what ‘rationality’ means. The habit of believing that those things one vividly remembers (and has no reason to suspect were somehow fabricated) actually occurred is another part of what ‘rationality’ means.

The "deliverances of Reason" – i.e., the beliefs that result from good doxastic practices – may themselves be described as ‘rational’. That is, in virtue of the fact that they are the results of rationality, certain beliefs are rational. However, by contrast, one could instead antecedently identify the rational beliefs and work one’s way (not unlike a particularist would have it) to an identification of the rational doxastic practices. Fortunately, it will be unnecessary to discuss any important issues lurking behind that observation.

This theory might be formulated in terms of supervenience or in some other way to avoid talk of meaning, if preferred. One might just as well say that the concept ‘rationality’, in one sense of this word, supervenes on the network of doxastic practices just mentioned. I doubt any crucial point depends on whether the view is stated in terms of meanings, supervenience, necessary truth, explications, or any other such item.
It appears clear enough that beliefs can be rational, in the sense under examination, without being supported by other beliefs. It is not necessarily, at any rate, in virtue of any such support that such beliefs have the property of being rational. For example, suppose I feel a sharp pain in my head, and I immediately form the belief that I am now suffering a headache. The belief is the result of the ordinary functioning cognitive apparatus of introspection, in good circumstances (the headache itself notwithstanding). I am perfectly rational in believing I have a headache, simply by virtue of this belief being the result of an instance of well-functioning introspective processes; and the belief is rational in this sense regardless of whether it is based on or supported by any other belief (except in the tenuous sense that it might be partly based on some “background beliefs”).

Obviously, to develop this theory further, it will be necessary to get clear about what practices we’re talking about. It is one thing to say that some sense-perceptual doxastic practice is part of what we mean by ‘rationality’; it is quite another to describe that practice in enough detail to be useful. We will address this problem next.

III. Rationality and Properly Basic Doxastic Practices.

The primary point of obscurity is one of generality. So far all I have said is that rationality is comprised of doxastic practices that originate with sense-perception,

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15 But in the case of beliefs formed by good reasoning, then of course in order for those beliefs to be rational in the present sense, they would have to be supported, and it would be partly in virtue of such support that they would indeed be rational. The point here however is that there are some beliefs that
introspection, memory, varieties of reasoning, reliance on testimony, and perhaps
conception or some sort of “rational intuition.” But I do not wish to be understood as
meaning that all doxastic practices originating with sense-perception, etc., comprise
rationality. I will narrow the concept in two ways.

First, there are some specialized doxastic practices – such as diagnosing
illnesses or deciding how to rule on a court case – that, while perfectly rational in a
sense, are too specialized to fall into the extension of the term ‘rationality’ as I shall
develop it here. It will suffice to develop a “minimal” conception of rationality.
 Accordingly, I will discuss what I shall call basic doxastic practices.

Second, human beings are of course not always rational in every mental act.
There are some irrational doxastic practices, such as forming beliefs about the future
based on horoscopes, or concluding that someone is a criminal simply because he
wears certain clothes. Hence I shall want speak of properly basic doxastic
practices.

So my next tasks are clear: to specify both the conditions under which
doxastic practices are basic and under which they are properly basic. This should
provide a clear enough idea of what is meant by ‘rationality’ on this minimal
conception.

Some informal remarks will help motivate my approach.

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can be rational – and thus have positive epistemic status, and thus might support nonbasic, justified
beliefs – without themselves being supported by other beliefs.

16 Of course, it may be possible to think up strange circumstances in which even these practices would
be rational; but, obviously, such practices are usually irrational.
The basic doxastic practices are those that are fundamental to our interface with the world. They are, moreover, practices the reliability of which cannot be established solely through the use of other practices; one might (very loosely) say that they are self-certifying.\(^\text{17}\) Hence, forming simple beliefs about the color of one's hand while looking at it in broad daylight, when one is wide awake, sober, etc., is about as good an example of the use of a basic doxastic practice as one could require. But forming beliefs about the length and color of a stick, when the stick immersed in muddy water, could not be called an example of that same practice. If one can reliably form beliefs about the length and color of the stick in that case, his reliability at doing so can be explained in terms of more reliable and ordinary practices, such as looking at the sticks while out of the water, and then carefully observing how their appearance changes when put into water.

These informal remark provides a clue to how the notion of 'basic practice' might be explicated. In short, the basic practices are those such that their reliability can be most plausibly established — if it can be established at all — only by means of epistemically circular arguments. It will be helpful to recall the definition of epistemic circularity.\(^\text{18}\) If one attempts to argue that basic practices reliably produce a preponderance (or the desired frequency) of true beliefs, then a necessary condition of


\(^{18}\) "Def. An argument A for conclusion c (understood by S) is *epistemically circular* for S iff (i) if S were justified in believing that c on the basis of the set of S’s beliefs about A, then S would be justified in believing each of A’s premises and that A’s inference is correct (= justifying beliefs about A); (ii) for at least one of the justifying beliefs about A, if S were to have a justified belief in it, then (it follows that) c would be true; and (iii) c is either a justification standard or an assertion that some doxastic practice is reliable."

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his being justified in believing either one of the premises, or the connection of the premises with the conclusion, is the truth of the conclusion itself.

An example will be helpful. Consider the following description of a sense-perceptual doxastic practice:

(BSP) A fully-awake, sober, and healthy observer $S$ seems to perceive an ordinary middle-sized object $o$ and its observational property $P$, in excellent conditions at a close distance; moreover, upon brief reflection $S$ is not aware of any reasons to believe $o$ does not have the properties it appears to have; and on the basis of that apparent perception, $S$ forms the belief that $b$, where $b$ is the proposition that object $o$ has property $P$.

For example, I, fully awake, sober, and healthy, seem to see a blue coffee cup on the desk, by all appearances illuminated by the sunshine coming in from the window. I am not aware of any reason to believe there is not a blue coffee cup on the desk. So on the basis of this apparent visual act, I form the belief that there is a blue coffee cup on the desk.

If I were to try to argue for the reliability of BSP (i.e., for the claim that beliefs described by BSP are probably true), it would be an extremely complicated business. But very probably the argument would have to contain at least two elements. First, it would have to contain premises to the effect that at various particular times, I have seemed to perceive various things and various of their properties, in particular circumstances as described in BSP. Second, it would have to contain premises to the effect that at those times, those things in fact did have those properties. Any argument that lacked these elements would, *prima facie*, be implausible; but an argument that had them could be construed as a track record argument.
But (recall from Chapter 1) how can a track record argument for such a fundamental doxastic practice avoid epistemic circularity? For each of the second variety of premise, some justification is required. For example, when I claim that, as it turns out, there really is a blue coffee cup on my desk, how is my claim supported? Surely by further (perhaps more careful) observations, which are further instances of BSP, no doubt. *Prima facie* at least, the most plausible sort of argument for the reliability of BSP will be an epistemically circular track record argument.

Perhaps I shall attempt to account for the justification of the premises by means that do not depend on sense-perception. Say I confirm the correctness of my belief via the memory of some testimony (I remember that a minute ago someone told me there is a blue coffee cup on my desk). The direction of this defense is transparently ridiculous, not least due to the fact that testimony requires reliable sense-perception in order to operate. More to the point, it is obvious upon reflection about the means of evidence-gathering we have at our disposal that none of them alone provides the necessary, detailed data that would confirm that what appears to our senses to be the case is in fact the case. No one has ever seriously tried to argue for the reliability of the most obvious examples of sense-perception in this way, and probably no one ever will.

But of course there is a tradition, particularly among empiricists, of trying to demonstrate a close connection between ideas, impressions, sense-data, etc., and external objects. A number of philosophers in this tradition (including, on some interpretations, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and various logical empiricists of the twentieth century) have suggested that we reduce talk of external objects to talk of
some mental objects, thus seemingly obviating the need to demonstrate reliability. But even these philosophers admitted and wished to account for the fact that not all sensory appearances are veridical (however they understood what “veridical” might mean). Regardless of one’s view of the existence of things beyond any alleged “veil of perception,” the problem of distinguishing reliable sense data from unreliable sense data will remain and with it the problem of epistemic circularity.

But just suppose that an argument for the reliability of BSP avoided circularity: in its premises it either made no reference to instances of apparent visual perception, or made no claims about the truth of beliefs formed thereby. In either case, one could not produce any sort of inductive or abductive argument for the reliability of BSP. So one would have to deduce it, presumably, from other sorts of premises. But it is hard to say, I think, just what those other premises might be. Moreover, to avoid epistemic circularity, they would have to be *a priori* premises – i.e., premises not supported by sense-perception but instead by some other (alleged) doxastic practice such as rational intuition.

Here the force of the Meta-Regress Argument may again be brought to bear. Supposing that one did produce a successful *a priori* argument for the reliability of sense-perception (as unlikely as that is, in light both of common sense and of failed attempts to do this by various philosophers\(^\text{19}\)), one would still be faced with the task of arguing for the reliability of one’s means of acquiring *a priori* justified beliefs.

\(^{19}\) That such attempts have indeed failed is the conclusion of Ch. 3 of Alston’s *Reliability of Sense Perception*, op. cit. – excellent work that I need not replicate.
There is a specific, limited list of doxastic practices of which remarks similar
to the above hold equally well, including those associated with memory,
introspection, deduction, and induction. The reliability of the most obviously correct
uses of any of these doxastic practices cannot be established purely by means of the
others. One cannot establish the reliability of one’s most vivid memories, even
bringing all the resources of reasoning, sense-perception, introspection, etc., to bear,
unless he is permitted to assume, somewhere along the line, that some beliefs formed
on the basis of memories are justified.

There are a couple of doxastic practices the status of which is a matter of
controversy. Whether testimony could be included on the list has been a matter of
some debate, but most recent observers (as well as Reid\(^{20}\)) believe that the reliability
of testimony in general cannot be established without relying upon testimony.\(^{21}\)
Moreover, whether some faculty of \textit{a priori} intuition should be included – as that by
which beliefs in basic truths of arithmetic, logic, etc., gain their justification – rests on
(and indeed defines key aspects of) an old debate.

However that might be, I think ‘basic doxastic practice’ can be satisfactorily
defined as follows:

\begin{quote}
Def. A doxastic practice is \textit{basic} iff the most plausible argument (or
series of arguments) for its reliability makes use of the practice itself (and
hence displays epistemic circularity).
\end{quote}

\(^{20}\) Thomas Reid, \textit{An Inquiry into the Human Mind}, in \textit{Philosophical Works}, op. cit., Ch. VI, Sect.
XXIV, pp. 194-201.

\(^{21}\) See, for just one example, Richard Foley, “Egoism in Epistemology,” in Frederick F. Schmitt, ed.,
\textit{Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge} (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield,
1994).
I am using the term ‘basic’ for this concept by analogy with the object-level concept of a basic belief. A basic belief is a belief that is justified but not justified by other beliefs; it is a belief that lies at the foundation of a structure, as it were, that is composed of other beliefs. Similarly, a basic doxastic practice is one that is so fundamental that its reliability must be assumed in any attempt to argue for its reliability, regardless of what other doxastic practices might be deployed.

This definition suffers from vagueness in its talk of arguments that are ‘plausible’, but it is, I hope, sufficient to pin down the concept for my purposes. Its vagueness is actually desirable insofar as it makes the decision whether testimony and rational intuition are to be counted basic practices turn on the right questions: do the most plausible arguments for the reliability of testimony or rational intuition display epistemic circularity? Or are all attempts to argue for the reliability of testimony without making use of testimony, or rational intuition without making use of rational intuition, obviously unsound? In any event, the clause ‘the most plausible’ seems necessary to include if only because obviously implausible arguments for the reliability of doxastic practices ought not to be allowed to bear on the decision whether to say the practices are basic or not.

Next observe that, at least as far as the proffered definition of ‘basic doxastic practice’ is concerned, some basic practices might not be reliable at all. In that case, the practices might be basic, but they are not properly basic:

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Another admitted point of vagueness: it suffers from a similar sort of generality problem that faces reliabilism. There are countless different ways of describing very closely-related doxastic practices. For instance, no doubt there are dozens of plausible substitutes for BSP as a basic sense-perceptual practice.
Def. A doxastic practice is properly basic for $S$ if $S$ is basic and virtually all of its resulting beliefs are among the most obviously correct (compared to all other beliefs).

What are some properly basic doxastic practices? They definitely include forming beliefs based on the most obviously correct uses of – again – sense-perception, memory, introspection, and deductive and inductive reasoning, and they probably include testimony, and possibly rational intuition or conception.

The concept of proper basicity for doxastic practices is, by this definition, vague, since it is at least somewhat vague what beliefs are described by ‘the most obviously correct’. But the point is that the properly basic practices do result in what appear to be, to the vast majority of sane, ordinary adult human beings, obvious truths.

By way of explaining what I mean here, the best I can do (short of writing another dissertation) is give examples and make some vague observations about them. To begin with the examples then: I very vividly remember what my address is, that my fiddle usually hangs on a nail on the wall in my kitchen, that the sun has risen every day, etc. No memories are more obviously correct than these. Similarly, I very plainly see that it is presently day outside, hear that there is music playing, feel myself to be sitting down, etc. There could be no more obviously correct uses of memory and sense-perception than those that resulted in these beliefs.

So this phrase, ‘the most obviously correct’, has a similar function to Chisholm’s account of ‘certainty’, which has it that that than which nothing is more
justified is, by definition, certain. To put my claim in Chisholm’s terminology: the properly basic doxastic practices definitely include (though might not be limited to) those basic practices virtually all of the issuances of which are certain (in Chisholm’s sense).

Moreover, among those beliefs that ‘the most obviously correct’ picks out are those that Moore identified in his famous essay “A Defence of Common Sense” – in particular, the common sense beliefs that he said “I know, with certainty, to be true.” To go back even farther, the beliefs to which I am referring also include what Reid called “first principles” and “principles of common sense.”

Admittedly, there are differences between Moore’s and Reid’s accounts of common sense (Reid’s is far more detailed, for one thing); Reid most usually cites as examples very general claims, whereas Moore cites particular claims. But of common sense beliefs, whether general or particular, Reid and Moore agreed that

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23 “p is certain for S = Df For every q, believing p is more justified for S than withholding q, and believing p is at least as justified for S as is believing q” (Roderick M. Chisholm, Theory of Knowledge 3rd ed. [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989], p. 12).

24 However, for reasons that will be made clear in later sections, I would define ‘certain’ in terms of some variety of positive epistemic status other than justification.

25 G.E. Moore, “A Defence of Common Sense,” in Philosophical Papers (New York: Collier Books, 1959), pp. 32-59. See esp. pp. 33-4. His list begins: “There exists at present a living human body, which is my body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes; …” (p. 33).


27 Particularly in the text cited in footnote 26. Whether or not particular beliefs should be called ‘principles of common sense’, it is clear that Reid regarded their truth as a matter of common sense: at op. cit., p. 425, he gives the name ‘common sense’ to the first “office or degree of reason.” The first “office of reason” comprises the faculties of judgment (or doxastic practices in Alstonian terminology) associated with perception, memory, and introspection, but not with reasoning (that’s associated with the second degree of reason).
there are none more obvious than they are. I would be willing to include both varieties of beliefs in the extension of the term ‘obviously correct’.

I hope these remarks make it clear that ‘obviously correct’ does not mean (literally) true. Someone who objected to my using the term ‘correct’ for what appears correct (to common sense) might prefer that I use scare quotes as follows:

Def. A doxastic practice is properly basic for $S$ iff it is basic and virtually all of its resulting beliefs are among the most obviously “correct” (compared to all other beliefs).

I have no objection to this.

Beyond the foregoing remarks, it is not my intention to characterize or defend common sense à la Reid or Moore but instead to employ their work in motivating a refutation of meta-skepticism. The fundamentals of this philosophy of common sense are of course not universally accepted. My own refutation of meta-skepticism will have to be regarded as conditional, its full demonstration awaiting a more adequate engagement of the topics and objections surrounding the philosophy of common sense.28

But I do not yet wish to assert (with Moore, for example) that the most obviously correct uses of our basic doxastic practices result in true beliefs, or even in mostly true beliefs. That’s a matter I will leave for a later section in this chapter; for all I have said so far, it might be the case that the most obviously correct uses of our

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28 Perhaps I could instead (though I will not) employ Richard Foley’s account (in The Theory of Epistemic Rationality, op. cit.) of “propositions such that $S$’s believing them gives him a reason, albeit not necessarily an indefeasible reason, to think that they are true” (p. 52), particularly because this is supposed to be an account of what makes basic beliefs rational.
basic doxastic practices result in mostly false beliefs. In that case it would not be particularly impressive to call any practices properly basic.

Here is an example of a basic practice that fails to be properly basic. A common deductive fallacy that may be considered a (narrowly circumscribed) doxastic practice is affirming the consequent: given the conditional ‘If P, then Q’, and given Q, infer that P. (For example: if there is fresh coffee in the cup, the cup is warm; the cup is warm; therefore there is fresh coffee in the cup. But it might be tea this time.) This inference procedure is part of a basic, but not a properly basic, doxastic practice, since any invalid inference rule will fail the test of producing beliefs virtually all of which are “most obviously correct.”

Here is a more exotic example of an improperly basic practice. Suppose Helga the Mystical claims to have a faculty of “special seeing.” This faculty, Helga says, permits her to “see” events on the other side of the galaxy. Now, there is no way that we could determine if the alleged deliverances of “special seeing” are correct. Moreover, Helga claims to “see” that she has been given this faculty by some mysterious beings on the other side of the galaxy, and no one else has been given this faculty. She offers an argument to the effect that “special seeing” is reliable, on these grounds; but it is, of course, epistemically circular. And indeed, this appears to be the most plausible argument Helga can give. So “special seeing” is a basic doxastic practice, according to the definition offered above. But it is plainly not
properly basic, since Helga's pronouncements about alien worlds are not among the
most obviously correct she might make.29

The above considerations, while still admittedly sketchy, give more substance
to the notion of epistemic rationality introduced in the previous section. Rationality,
or Reason, on this minimal account, is simply the collection of properly basic
doxastic practices. So, first, the practices that constitute (minimal) rationality are
limited to (some of) those such that the most plausible arguments for their reliability
are epistemically circular: they are "self-certifying," if their reliability can be certified
at all (which, on my view, it cannot be). Second, of these, the practices that constitute
(minimal) rationality are those such that virtually all of their resulting beliefs are as
obviously correct (or "correct") as any beliefs can be.

It will be useful to be able to speak of "standards of rationality", 'rationality
standards', and 'r-standards'. These standards state the relationship between rational
doxastic practices, which together constitute (minimal) Reason, and rational beliefs
that result therefrom. An account of such standards falls neatly out of the above
work: we simply associate a standard with each identifiable properly basic doxastic
practice, such that the practice is described in the antecedent and the belief is
described as rational in the consequent.

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29 This example might prompt a question: is it not possible that there are some doxastic practices which
are reliable, basic (not supportable except via self-support), and which do not result in "obviously
correct" beliefs? Perhaps "Christian Mystical Practice" as described by William P. Alston in
Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,
1991) could be cited as an example. I am willing to admit the mere possibility of such practices; at
least, the topic bears discussion. And if so, can we bootstrap our way to a justification of the reliability
of these doxastic practices (as I will propose, anon, that we can do for other doxastic practices)?
Fortunately, the validity of the results of the present chapter do not appear to turn on that difficult
question.
Here is a quick gloss on the translation scheme. Consider a doxastic practice described in the following form:

The practice of believing that \( p \) when such a belief meets (nonepistemic) conditions \( c \) (where \( c \) might include subjective or nonsubjective states of S and S's environment) at time \( t \), and the belief that \( p \) is undefeated.

One may identify an associated r-standard (or several\(^{30} \)). In general, the standard here could be described as follows:

If S’s belief that \( p \) meets (nonepistemic) conditions \( c \) (where \( c \) might include subjective or nonsubjective states of S and S’s environment) at time \( t \), and the belief that \( p \) is undefeated, then S is rational in believing that \( p \) at \( t \).

The converse translation scheme should be obvious. So I will speak of basic standards of rationality and basic r-standards as well as basic practices. A basic standard is simply one such that its associated practice is basic. A properly basic standard is simply a basic standard such that its associated standard is properly basic.

Consequently one may describe minimal rationality as what is described by the antecedents of properly basic r-standards.

IV. Strawson’s Dissolution of the Problem of Induction, and Salmon’s Criticisms.

A thoughtful critic might concede that the sense of ‘rationality’ developed here does indeed exist, and has been used historically, while insisting that it is not a particularly interesting sense of ‘rationality’. One clearly interesting sense, by contrast, is the epistemic version of means-end rationality, where the end is truth: in

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\(^{30}\) Depending on the strength of the rationality asserted in the consequent of the standard, various standards may be associated with the same practice.
short, we want our beliefs to be rational because forming beliefs rationally is the best means to having true beliefs. But to be told merely that a belief results from some particular uses of sense-perception, for example, is not to be told anything about the chances of that belief’s being true. As far as this theory goes, we might get to apply the epithet ‘rational’ to a belief, even though the belief is probably false. And why should we care at all that a belief is rational in this sense?

This is very similar to a criticism that Wesley Salmon made of a solution to the problem of induction credited to P.F. Strawson. Their exchange will be instructive to review now; from it, we shall be able to draw some important lessons about how the theory must be further developed. So let’s begin with Strawson.

Strawson formulated a solution to the problem of induction, or perhaps it should be called a “dissolution” of the problem, by analogy to a point he makes about deduction.\footnote{P.F. Strawson, \textit{Introduction to Logical Theory} (London: Methuen & Co., 1952), pp. 248-63.} Strawson advanced the view that to ask seriously whether deduction in general is valid would be “senseless,” since “to say that an argument, or a form or method of argument, was valid or invalid would \textit{imply} that it was deductive; the concepts of validity and invalidity had application only to individual deductive arguments or forms of deductive argument.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 249.}

In a similar way, Strawson said, as far as inductive arguments go, to be “reasonable” in making them is no more or less than to follow (or “apply”) inductive standards:
Similarly, if a man asked what grounds there were for thinking it reasonable to hold beliefs arrived at inductively, one might at first answer that there were good and bad inductive arguments, that sometimes it was reasonable to hold a belief arrived at inductively and sometimes it was not. If he, too, said that his question had been misunderstood, that he wanted to know whether induction in general was a reasonable method of inference, then we might well think his question senseless in the same way as the question whether deduction is in general valid; for to call a particular belief reasonable or unreasonable is to apply inductive standards, just as to call a particular argument valid or invalid is to apply deductive standards.\(^{33}\)

We can distinguish good from bad inductive arguments, of course, or reasonable from unreasonable, and it is well-known that the task of drawing such a distinction is daunting. But if the question is put whether induction in general is reasonable, Strawson says, the question is senseless: following inductive standards is part of what being reasonable is. Part of rationality (no small part either, I might add) consists of the habit of following inductive standards.

Some pages further on, Strawson put his point in terms of analyticity and meaning:

It is an analytic proposition that it is reasonable to have a degree of belief in a statement which is proportional to the strength of the evidence in its favour; and it is an analytic proposition, though not a proposition of mathematics, that, other things being equal, the evidence for a generalization is strong in proportion as the number of favourable instances, and the variety of circumstances in which they have been found, is great. So to ask whether it is reasonable to place reliance on inductive procedures is like asking whether it is reasonable to proportion the degree of one’s convictions to the strength of the evidence. Doing this is what ‘being reasonable’ \textit{means} in such a context.\(^{34}\)

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., pp. 256-7
Writing in a more innocent pre-Quinean-"Two Dogmas" era, Strawson had few qualms about making his point in terms of analyticity and meaning; but again, the point need not be made that way. One could just as well say, for example, that the rationality (or reasonableness) of inductions supervenes on the adherence to certain canonical standards of induction; or that, necessarily, if an induction is in accordance with some canonical standards of induction, then it is rational.

In any event, Strawson was very aware that this sort of solution to the problem of induction is not likely to be very satisfying to some, so he labored to make it more intuitive; but it will not add to our present purpose to review the latter work here.\(^{35}\)

Strawson's solution to the problem of induction is similar to my own theory of rationality: a belief can be rational, in the minimal sense developed, by its being a result of one of the doxastic practices (of which following inductive standards is one) that together constitute rationality. So my theory enlists the Strawsonian defense of the validity of deduction in general, and of the reasonableness of induction in general, and devises a similar Strawsonian (not to mention Reidian) account of the rationality of basic beliefs formed on the basis of our other ways of learning about the world: perception, memory, and the rest.

Salmon had a number of different criticisms of Strawson's view,\(^{36}\) that can without trouble be converted into criticisms of my view of rationality. Let us take the criticisms in turn.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., pp. 258-60.

*First objection.* Salmon declares, after briefly describing a theory about induction that he ascribes to Strawson, “If the foregoing theory is correct, empirical knowledge is, at bottom, a matter of convention. We choose, quite arbitrarily it would seem, some basic canons of induction; there is no possibility of justifying the choice.”

This is a *non sequitur*, although it might have had more force with readers when Salmon was writing (in 1957). That it is a *non sequitur* should be obvious because it is obvious that there are other possibilities, that account for the origin of inductive standards, in addition to an arbitrary choice that determines a convention. And Strawson’s position does not commit him to any of these possibilities in particular. There is nothing about the claim that inductive reasoning is part of what we mean by ‘rationality’ that commits Strawson to the view that the standards of induction (and thus empirical knowledge) are a matter of convention.

One might just as well say that it is purely a matter of convention that water is H₂O (since chemists happen to define ‘water’ that way), or that the bachelors of the world happen not to be married at present. But the only item along these lines that is a matter of convention is the connection of the word with the concept. The word ‘rationality’, as distinguished from most other words, has been arbitrarily associated in English with a certain collection of cognitive practices (that includes induction); that’s granted. But surely Salmon would not wish to infer from this truism that it is a

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matter of convention that the practices themselves are rational. But that does appear to be the inference behind Salmon’s objection to Strawson’s view.

Indeed, among the possible origins of various standards of induction, the one that leaps to mind as most plausible is not arbitrary convention but instead some manner of inbred, natural tendency developed no doubt through some evolutionary processes. As Quine famously observed, those who are poor at induction have a “pathetic but praiseworthy” tendency to die off. It is perfectly consistent with Strawson’s view (that following inductive standards is part of what we mean by ‘reasonable’)) that inductive standards should have an evolutionary origin. Beyond the simplest sorts of induction, however, something like the Method of Reflective Equilibrium will generate a canon of inductive standards (as I will explain in Section VII below).

Second objection. Here is an objection, commonly raised,\(^{38}\) to Strawson’s sort of move. Suppose that I advance the views that some inductive doxastic practices are rational because the practices constitute rationality and that inductively formed beliefs are perforce rational as well. Then, the objection goes, I still haven’t solved the problem of induction, because I haven’t identified which of the many possible inductive rules are the correct rules to follow. Perhaps I can say that some inductive practices are rational, but I haven’t specified which ones they are. Indeed, as

Goodman insists, there really isn’t any more to the problem of induction than the challenge of giving a precise account of correct inductive inference.

My theory of rationality provides only that some inductive doxastic practices are rational, and I haven’t said which ones. So one might be prepared to grant my claim, while maintaining (rather dubiously) that it is not controversial or at least not helpful. To distinguish the good inductive practices from the bad ones, one must have some way to make the distinction. How will I make this distinction without relying on some inductive rules (either to confirm some particular inductions, or to derive the rules that I say are good) and thus committing the very epistemic circularity I am laboring to avoid? In short, while I might have established that engaging in some generally-described doxastic practices is rational, I have not solved a problem that is just as crucial, viz., how to decide which of competing specific practices that fit in the general description (not all of which are rational) are the best.

Essentially, the challenge is to make the definition of ‘rationality’ precise by specifying very clearly which sorts of belief are “minimally rational” on account of their being formed as the result of (in this example) an inductive inference.

My response to this objection comes in two parts.

First, I may simply concede that, indeed, we lack a precise account of correct inductive inference and, by extension, of rational belief or Reason. But so what? Most of us are able to go through our lives, even those relatively rare moments in our intellectual lives in which we specifically claim to have rational beliefs,

39 Ibid.
embarrassingly inept at specifying the conditions when our beliefs are indeed rational. In spite of that, we can and in some cases do judge that many instances of belief are as obviously correct as they could be, and that they are rational. As is the case with so many of our concepts, we don’t seem to be any worse off for lacking a precise account to cover these and other cases of our rational belief. So one central claim of the objection—“to distinguish the good inductive practices from the bad ones, one must have some way to make the distinction”—is clearly false, in many cases anyway. In many cases, it is quite plausible to say that not only do we not need a precise account of rationality to be rational, we also do not need one in order to know that we are being rational.

If our concern is to avoid skepticism, then we will be concerned to solve the justificatory problem of induction. Strawson’s view (and mine) suffices to satisfy that concern. But if our concern is to get an exact idea of that wherein rationality consists, then we will have to engage in what has long been known to be a very complicated business.

In the second part of my response, which follows, I will attempt to address this latter concern. In discussions of the problem of induction and of similar problems associated with the justification of deduction and other topics, something like the Method of Reflective Equilibrium has been repeatedly proposed as a way to generate more precisified versions of unclear, general formulations of rules. As we saw in Chapter 3, this gives meta-coherentism no small amount of attractiveness; to

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40 Again, see Nelson Goodman, ibid., on formulating deductive rules; cf. Max Black on bootstrapping inductive rules (as discussed above in Ch. 2, Sect. II).
apply the Method of Reflective Equilibrium to j-standards is closely and naturally associated with meta-coherentism. But the problem with meta-coherentism, as I argued in Chapter 3, is that it is committed to the benignity of epistemic circularity while offering no unique resources to defend epistemic circularity against charges of viciousness.

Still, the same insight can be appropriated to develop the present theory of rationality, and this can be done without committing its defender to meta-coherentism. Essentially, the proposal is to develop and at the same time justify a theory of correct inductive inference by starting modestly. One finds sufficient conditions for weak inductive support by testing an account of such conditions against the least controversial (commonsensical) examples of excellent inductions. In so doing one applies, and takes for granted, simple, modest inductive standards. The following might be serviceable as a “simple, modest inductive standard” that one could (perhaps after some adjustment) take for granted in developing a modest theory of correct inductive inference:

For any weak account of inductive inference $A$, according to which an inductive inference has some inductive presumption in its favor, $A$ itself has some presumption in its favor if $A$ provides a model of a very wide variety of the most obvious examples of correct inductive inferences.

Obviously, the foregoing is not a principle of common sense in the sense that it just immediately springs to anyone’s mind. Indeed, it probably needs more adjustment itself. But it (or something like it) is among the most obviously “correct” things that one can say about which inductive inferences have some sort of support, and it is also designed to apply to accounts of inductive inference.
After taking some such basic inductive standards for granted, one develops and supports stronger and more sophisticated versions of the theory, which applies to a greater variety of inductive inferences. This neither involves one in an epistemic circularity, nor does it commit one to meta-coherentism.

More discussion of this sort of proposal may be found in Section VII below.

Third objection. Suppose that we arrive at some canonical view about what a good induction is (which is not merely conventional, and which was arrived at via something like reflective equilibrium). The full force of a third objection from Salmon could still be felt. Salmon writes:

It sounds very much as if the whole argument (that reasonable beliefs are, by definition, beliefs which are inductively supported) has the function of transferring to the word "inductive" all of the honorific connotations of the word "reasonable," quite apart from whether induction is good for anything. The resulting justification of induction amounts to this: If you use inductive procedures you can call yourself "reasonable" — and isn't that nice! (p. 42)

More to the point, as I said at the beginning of the present section, why should we care about a conception of rationality according to which it might be true that a rational belief is extremely improbable? The reason we want rational, or reasonable, inductive conclusions (or any other kind of beliefs) is that we want the truth.

It is for this reason that the accounts of 'rationality' and 'rational' given (or alluded to) above are admittedly not adequate by themselves. An account of the relationship between reason and truth must also be developed in order to show that indeed the sense of 'rationality' in question is worth caring about — that this sort of rationality is indeed something that, if possessed by a belief, could provide justificatory support to other beliefs. Specifically, to do the job it is required to do
here, rationality must be truth-linked. In the next section, I will turn to this refinement.

V. The Principle of Rationality.

Why should we care about a conception of rationality according to which it might be true that a rational belief is extremely improbable? Who cares about rationality if it doesn’t elicit the (probable) truth?

Here’s one possible answer: truth, and probable truth, are themselves to be assessed according to the same methods that we are honoring with the name ‘rationality’. So it is not surprising that rationality should elicit truth, since we determine both rationality and truth in just the same ways.

Of the many things one might say in reply to this claim, one serves to focus the discussion most sharply: viz., the claim doesn’t address the question. The question is, essentially, “Are rational beliefs probably true, in the sense of ‘rationality’ in question, and if not, who cares about rationality?” It might indeed be correct to say that both the rationality and the truth of a belief are to be determined in the same ways. But that only says how truth is determined; it doesn’t answer the question whether rationality does in fact elicit the truth.

If one treats these two questions as synonymous, one assumes that there is no more to truth than what we can determine the truth to be, i.e., one assumes the correctness of the pragmatist/anti-realist program. The skeptic might be happy to

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41 And obviously, I lack the space here to expound upon them.
admit that truth and rationality are determined in the same ways: it's just that we
don't know if our ways of determining the truth actually do give us the truth. To
simplify, the pragmatist disagrees with that, holding that truth is what we can
determine it to be, and thus essentially rules some kinds of skepticism out of court
without a hearing.

The reply that I shall advance does, perhaps, treat the skeptic in an equally
peremptory way, but it does so while maintaining a distinction between truth and
what-we-can-determine-to-be-truth (warranted assertibility, pragmatic truth, etc.). I
shall simply assume, without argument of any kind at all, that rationality elicits truth.
In fact, I would like to dignify this assumption by giving it the grand title The

Principle of Rationality, or PoR:

Beliefs formed as a result of those doxastic practices that constitute
rationality are, probably, true.

More briefly, rational beliefs are probably true. I believe this principle,
added to the account of rationality introduced in Section II, is the most promising way
to rescue Strawson's defense of induction from Salmon's objection (the second one
spelled out above). When Salmon jokes, "If you use inductive procedures you can
call yourself 'reasonable' – and isn't that nice!" the proper reply is: "Yes, it is,

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42 Obviously, I lack the space to engage any important issues surrounding the pragmatic view on this
issue here; but if it should happen that a pragmatic view of truth should aid my reply to the
meta-skeptic, so much the better for pragmatism and my solution.

43 Thomas Reid, Essays, op. cit., Essay VI, Ch. V, advances as a “first principle of contingent truth”
the following: “That the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not
fallacious.” (p. 447) (See this dissertation’s frontispiece.) His brief commentary on this first principle
(pp. 447-8) may be read as a summary of the views advanced in this chapter.
because it means many of the beliefs I have formed by induction are probably true."

And this implication is something that I assume without argument.

Let me try to be a bit clearer about what is being assumed. Since 'rationality' in the sense in question is short for a list of doxastic practices including sense-perception, memory, reasoning, etc., the PoR is equivalent to saying that sense-perception, memory, reasoning, etc., are (at least in their most basic uses) reliable. For a doxastic practice to be reliable is just for that practice probably to result in true beliefs. So one could just as well say that I assume, without argument, that the best doxastic practices associated with sense-perception, memory, reasoning, etc., are reliable. There is no need to go through complicated twistings and turnings in trying to avoid epistemic circularity, as the targets of Alston's *Reliability of Sense Perception* do; the reliability of sense-perception, and of other leading doxastic practices as well, can be assumed without argument.

I should also clarify what I mean when I say I *assume* the PoR. In claiming this I mean that I accept the Principle but I make no attempt to argue for it. It is not part of my meaning (though this is a closely related issue) that my belief is not justified (i.e., it lacks the property of justification); nor is it part of my meaning

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44 I am afraid the rest of this chapter's discussion blurs a potentially important distinction: it is one thing to say that a given (properly basic) doxastic practice produces, more often than not, true beliefs; it is another to say that each belief formed by such a practice is probably true. Evidently, the latter is an inference I will have to infer from the former. The basic inference is reasonably straightforward: ceteris paribus, rational beliefs are probably true on the evidence that they are the results of rational practices. But, of course, there are other factors that might weigh into our assessment of the probability of any given belief. Fortunately, the success of the sort of arguments described in Section VII does not seem to require any more than a weak presumption in favor of the beliefs described as 'rational'. So, while the present problem makes me nervous, it doesn't make me very nervous.
that my belief is not rational. It so happens (as will be made clear in the next section) that I hold that my belief in the Principle is not justified (nor is it unjustified; it is nonjustified). I also believe that my belief in the Principle is rational, but I am not concerned to argue for this and no part of this chapter’s argument depends on the claim that my belief in the Principle is rational.

I have no doubt that some people will be thoroughly unimpressed with this move — although, as we shall see in Section VIII below, Alston is (or at least was) willing to accept something like this solution. In any event, I have laid out a serious problem, to wit, that rationality in the sense introduced here might have little to do with truth, and solved it by “assuming it away.” More importantly, the assumption I propose to make would dismiss, peremptorily it appears, the Problem of Meta-Justification and the meta-skepticism that looms behind it. Why indeed should anyone take such a move seriously?

Most of the rest of this section will be devoted to answering this question: “Why should anyone take the mere assumption that rationality elicits truth seriously?” For anyone to take the assumption seriously, he would have to suppose that I am, or at least I could be, within my rights to assume it. And to declare (as I do) that I am within my rights to assume the PoR without argument is to presuppose I have no burden to prove it. So the question now at issue is closely related to some other questions: “Why think that I am within my rights to assume what I want to


46 Exactly how the declaration that I simply assume the PoR is correct constitutes a “reply” to meta-skepticism will be explored below.
assume?” and “Why think it at all plausible that there is no burden to prove what I want to assume?”

Suppose I did succeed in showing that I am “within my rights” to assume the PoR. This makes it sound as though I want to say I am justified (on a deontological account of justification) in assuming the Principle. Is that correct?

It is not. In claiming that I am “within my rights” to assume the PoR, I do not wish to claim that I am epistemically justified in making the assumption; I mean, rather, that I am not flouting any ordinary standards of philosophical discourse (of the same sort as those I mentioned in Chapter 2, Section IV).

In that case — a critic might wonder — precisely how does the claim that I am not flouting “ordinary standards of philosophical discourse” in assuming the Principle differ in meaning from the claim that I am justified in accepting the Principle itself? In other words, if I do succeed in showing that I am within my rights to assume the Principle, will I not have thereby demonstrated my justification in accepting it? And in that case, why am I saying I merely assume it?

To answer these questions, I will describe in more detail just what standards of philosophical discourse I am claiming not to flout. It should be self-evident to anyone familiar with ordinary accounts of justified belief that the satisfaction of such standards is neither necessary nor sufficient for justified belief, on such accounts.

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47 To be more precise, I claim that my belief (and anyone’s so long as he is similarly positioned) in the PoR satisfies certain conditions in which it is impermissible to hold me to an obligation to provide an argument for the Principle. See just below.
As a general rule, one has a burden to support whatever claim he makes. I will call this the “Burden-of-Proof Rule.” But there are certain exceptions to this rule; I will cite four.

The first exception can be expressed as follows: if it is simply impossible to give a non-question-begging argument for a claim, and the claim is as obvious as any claim can be, then one has no obligation to prove it. Examples of such a claim are some first-person subjective reports, e.g., claims to having sharp pains or to having the impression of seeing certain colors, etc. If it is impossible to argue for an obvious claim, one is not obligated to argue for it; ought implies can, so impossibility implies lack of obligation. Of course, one must bear in mind that it might be quite controversial whether a given claim is amenable to direct argument, and also whether it is “obvious” or not.

The second and third exceptions are due to pragmatic considerations — i.e., considerations surrounding the context, particularly the shared assumptions, of discourse.

The second exception to the Burden-of-Proof Rule rests on the observation that there are reasons, after all, that the Burden-of-Proof Rule is so widely urged. One who insists on its observance must, unless his insistence is frivolous, believe that there is some way that the (alleged) burden of proof can be met — not necessarily on behalf of a particular claim (which might, after all, be indefensible), but in general.

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48 To be clear, again, I am not saying here specifically that one is justified in making such claims, but that one has no obligation to prove them in philosophical discourse.

49 I owe this formulation of the point to George Schumm.
So the very use of the Burden-of-Proof Rule carries with it certain pragmatic assumptions, e.g., that language exists, that the language used has enough agreed-upon meaning for meaningful communication to be at least possible, that something that can in some cases serve as "proof" is possible, etc. If these propositions were not true, the very procedure (or language game, to speak Wittgensteinian) of asking for and supplying proof would be pointless. So it is reasonable to exempt such assumptions from the Burden-of-Proof Rule itself.

A third exception to the Burden-of-Proof Rule occurs when a similar sort of pragmatic argument is available. Suppose there is a claim that satisfies the following conditions. Either this claim, which is allegedly in need of support, is true or not; if it is not true, then (for whatever reason) there is no point in continuing the discourse. Now, for all that, it might be correct that there is no point in continuing the discourse, because the claim in question is false. But given that, in any case, we want to pretend at least that there is a point to continuing the discourse, it is acceptable to assume the claim in question.

A fourth exception to the Burden-of-Proof Rule occurs when all parties to the discourse in question agree that the claim in question is true. There might still be some interest on the part of some parties as to why the claim is true, i.e., how it might be supported, e.g., against a fictional skeptic. But for purposes of discourse, agreed-upon claims are commonly regarded as not in need of support — and all the more so if it is psychologically impossible for any of the parties to the debate to disbelieve the claim in question.
It so happens that my belief in the PoR is a case in which all four of the above exceptions apply, as I shall now try to show.

1. The assumption is not being made hastily. I propose essentially to “assume away” the Problem of Meta-Justification. But this does not mean that the problem has been dismissed in a hasty, peremptory fashion. After all, we have carefully framed the problem and examined and tested, in considerable depth, a variety of solutions to it. It is only after all of that work that the present approach to the problem is being proposed.

Recall that the problem involves asking the question, “For some standard of justification, how can we justify it?” and then observing that, in general, justifications offered for standards are themselves licensed by further standards. That generates the familiar regress and the problem of epistemic circularity. After the work of Chapters 2 and 3, upon a re-examination of the problem, one might very well conclude that it is an unsolvable conundrum, a problem that cannot be solved directly, in which case it should not be surprising that the proper response to the problem is to “dissolve” it.

In this connection, recall the first exception to the Burden-of-Proof Rule: if it is simply impossible to give a non-question-begging argument for a claim, and the claim is as obvious as any claim can be, then one has no obligation to prove it. A solution to the PMJ is tantamount to giving a direct argument for the PoR. I believe we have found that such an argument is impossible. But the Principle is indeed very obvious – not, perhaps, as obvious as any can be, but quite obvious. Hence I do not believe I have an obligation to prove it. This approach begs the question only in a
relatively weak sense: it assumes something essential to what was originally up for proof.

Of course, the mere fact that the problem has appeared intractable so far does not, by itself, give one the right to make what might appear to be an offensively question-begging response, and assert that the statement of the problem “rests on a confusion.” Indeed, it only makes such a response a bit more plausible. Fortunately, in the present case, more can be said in defense of such a response.

2. It is pointless to use Reason to establish the reliability of Reason. It should come as no big surprise that epistemic circularity faces us if we undertake a frontal attack on the Problem of Meta-Justification. Here is why. Such an attack essentially involves, for any doxastic practice, an attempt to argue that it is reliable. Of course, any attempt to argue for its reliability will make use either of premises (beliefs) outputted from the very doxastic practice in question or of some other. But assuming that one is approaching the problem in a rational way, all of the doxastic practices one might use make up what we call “rationality.” Hence one is attempting to use rationality to prove that rationality is reliable. Or, more precisely, one uses a part of rationality to prove that another (possibly the same) part is reliable; in that case the reliability of the first part remains to be established, presumably by rational means as well. This general procedure is pointless.

I say the attempt to demonstrate the reliability of our basic doxastic practices amounts to an attempt to use Reason to demonstrate that Reason will give us the truth. In that case, we should simply explicitly assume that Reason does give us the truth, i.e., just take the PoR for granted. After all, if we are asked to give some
reasons to believe the PoR, presumably the request is made because the skeptic thinks that this giving of reasons will make the PoR more probably true. And this assumes, of course, that the sorts of considerations adduced by acceptable argument will serve to increase the PoR’s probability. What sorts of considerations are acceptable? If any others are, then indeed those described as ‘rational’ according to our theory of rationality are, it being a minimal account of rationality.

The skeptic is apt to complain that here I am saddling him with a concept of acceptable argument he is not necessarily prepared to accept. But if not this concept (which concerns merely a very modest subset what should be considered rational beliefs), what then is acceptable? If the skeptic is attempting to keep us honest – to make us satisfy our burden of proof – then he himself does, pragmatically, take for granted some concept of rational, or otherwise epistemically upstanding, belief. And then what premises are epistemically upstanding?

Perhaps the skeptic will reply that the request for argumentative support does not commit him to any particular notion of acceptable belief; he requires only some sort of (noncircular) argumentative support, not the use any particular kind of premises.

Such a reply would be disingenuous, unless the skeptic were playing some sort of patently pointless academic game, the object of which is to require arguments from all comers and then supply criticisms of all premises. For the Burden-of-Proof Rule to be applied with a purpose, there must be a robust concept of how the burden of proof can be met; that involves, among other things, some tolerably clear notion of
which sorts of beliefs are acceptable. Our minimal theory of rationality is (among other things) an attempt to specify a small subset of such beliefs.

It is reasonable, then, to suppose that the non-frivolous skeptic is pragmatically committed to the acceptability (to some degree) of beliefs designated as 'rational' according to our theory. In other words, someone who applies the Burden-of-Proof Rule to the PoR with a serious, non-frivolous purpose is pragmatically committed to the PoR. Thus he is asking us (perhaps among other things) to use minimally rational beliefs to support the claim that minimally rational beliefs are probably true. What makes the request non-frivolous is precisely our shared assumption that those sorts of belief are indeed probably true. But if we have that shared assumption, there is no point to making the request. We may as well explicitly take the PoR for granted.

Note again that this is not meant to be an argument, either direct or indirect, for the PoR. It is meant to be an argument that there is no burden to prove the PoR.

3. A Reidian pragmatic argument. This one can be stated more briefly. Either the PoR is correct or it is not. If it is not, then one (or more) of the basic ways we have of knowing about the world is not reliable, in which case, very probably, this and all reasonings are pointless anyway, being based on bad information. The other possibility is that the PoR is correct. In either case, it is unreasonable to insist that

50 This argument greatly resembles an argument Thomas Reid makes against an extreme skeptic: "Let scholastic sophisters entangle themselves in their own cobwebs; I am resolved to take my own existence, and the existence of other things, upon trust; ... He must either be a fool, or want to make a fool of me, that would reason me out of my reason and senses. I confess I know not what a sceptic can answer to this, nor by what good argument he can plead even for a hearing; for either his reasoning is sophistry, and so deserves contempt; or there is no truth in human faculties — and then why should we reason?" (Reid, Inquiry, op. cit., p. 104) It also resembles later pragmatic arguments for the reliability
there is a burden to prove it. If the principle is correct, we haven’t gone wrong in assuming it; the reason we would want an argument supporting the PoR, after all, is in order to show that it is probably correct. If it is incorrect, the falsehood of the principle renders any consideration of dialectical rights pointless anyway, because, essentially, anything goes. In either case, there is no point in saddling us with a burden to support the PoR.

Again, note that the conclusion here is not that the PoR is correct, but rather that the Burden-of-Proof Rule does not apply to it.

I think the only plausible reply to this argument is to maintain that our account of rational belief might have the precise account of rational belief wrong. In that case, the PoR might be wrong, but we would still have some other, more rigorous notion of rationality to apply. The question then is how we can decide which of competing accounts of rationality are correct. This is, of course, one of Salmon’s objections to Strawson all over again. To reiterate what I said about that objection: evidently we must follow something like the Method of Reflective Equilibrium in formulating just how we want our account of rationality to read. The sketch of rationality given in this chapter should suffice for present purposes; no account of rationality that can seriously aspire to the name will contradict this view, though it might greatly clarify or add to it.

of induction, e.g., Reichenbach’s. See Wesley C. Salmon, The Foundations of Scientific Inference (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967), pp. 52-4. However, I believe my argument differs from both of these arguments in the conclusion that is being urged.
4. Acceptance of the Principle of Rationality is virtually universal and involuntary. Consider the claim being taken for granted. It is entirely natural and overwhelmingly widespread to assume, without argument (and even without conscious thought) that the beliefs described as ‘rational’ by our theory of rationality are correct. We take this for granted throughout our everyday and scientific endeavors: “Beliefs formed as a result of those doxastic practices that constitute rationality are, probably, true.”

Of course, throughout the bulk of human history and presumably human prehistory, more fully developed views of rationality were not understood or accepted. And the principle, as formulated, would likely be rejected by a variety of irrationalists, for religious, political, or other reasons. So how can I say that the principle is something accepted nearly universally?

It has taken humankind a long time to arrive at the present Western scientific conception of that wherein rationality consists. E.g., sophisticated standards of induction and probability theory, which in modern Western civilization are taught, accepted, and practiced as a matter of routine (by sophisticated thinkers) first had to be formulated and promulgated. Similarly, deductive logic did not spring full-blown from the heads of early barbarian hordes, or any other peoples; it had to be developed by Aristotle, Leibniz, Frege, and many others.

Indeed, virtually all of the very basic ways we have of knowing about the world are, in various professional and academic contexts, subject to

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51 We might ascribe such a belief to most people de re, rather than de dicto. Most people have few beliefs about rationality per se.
carefully-formulated standards. Scientists, physicians, and lawyers have very specialized, stringent standards governing what should count as a reliable observation. Cognitive psychologists study memory with a view to informing historical interpretation and courtroom decisions based on eyewitness testimony, and lawyers, journalists, and researchers of all sorts have elaborate standards governing the reliability of testimony. Experimental psychologists also caution against easy conclusions about the operation of the human mind drawn from introspection—a point that, once heeded, revolutionized psychology in the twentieth century.

All of this is simply to say that we do have sophisticated standards of justified belief. But those same standards have elaborated the modern, scientific, and professional conception of what is rational and what is not. (And a large part of a modern liberal and scientific education consists in being trained to understand and employ that conception; at some colleges today, over $20,000 per year is required to make a student fully rational.)

It is this detailed, sophisticated, highly-developed conception of rationality that is rejected (or parts of it are rejected) by irrationalists of various stripes. At least some religious fideists and mystics might be said to reject the view that reasoning (and particularly arguments about the existence and nature of God) can elicit the truth. Superstitious folk of all sorts reject the claim that in order to know the nature and cause of (at least some sorts of) empirical objects, experiment or careful observation by the ordinary senses is necessary. And postmodernists, radical academic feminists, and others in contemporary academia self-consciously reject the necessity of careful, rigorous reasoning for many topics, saying that whatever
knowledge is possible can be had in other ways (e.g., via something like feminine intuition, or perhaps just toeing the current party line).

This being admitted, virtually no one, including such irrationalists, unless they are literally insane, ever honestly denies that rationality produces the probable truth, in a more basic, fundamental sense of 'rationality', the sense in which "Man is the rational animal" is true.\textsuperscript{52} Aristotle's dictum does not mean that man is the animal that can properly depose a witness, prove theorems in modal logic, apply the laws of the probability calculus, and make accurate descriptions of what he sees on a microscope slide. Our daily dependence on (and facility with) all manner of commonplace generalizations, observations, the simplest of inferences, and so forth is adequate demonstration of this fact. It is rationality in this humble sense that so obviously elicits truth.

And as I shall argue below, we have no choice in the matters of whether to believe that these "most obviously reliable uses of the practices that constitute rationality" are reliable; nor do we have any choice whether to believe some particular issuances of these practices. We cannot, for example, decide simply to disbelieve what our eyes tell us and what we vividly recall. This is not only rational, it is involuntary. Indeed, it appears that the extent to which beliefs about doxastic practices and their results are involuntary (for the vast majority of humankind, at least) is the extent to which those practices can be described as 'rational' in the sense in question. In other words, one may say that man is the rational animal at the very

least to the extent to which he has no choice but to rely on certain doxastic practices, which practices constitute a minimal sort of rationality.\textsuperscript{53}

Recall now the fourth exception to the Burden-of-Proof Rule: a proposition that is accepted by all parties to a dispute need not be supported. That’s precisely the case here. So it would appear we have no burden to prove the PoR.

There is a possible difficulty in applying this exception to the rule to the PoR, namely, that, regardless of whether \textit{in fact} the PoR is accepted by all parties to a dispute, some of them might deny accepting it. I am not convinced that the fact that a skeptic \textit{claims} to deny or withhold the PoR should be allowed to make any difference for purposes of assessing whether one really does have a burden of proof, but I am willing to concede that the issue is unclear. Nonetheless, even if this exception were objected to by skeptics who claim to deny or withhold the PoR, there would still be the three other exceptions to trot out.

Let’s review this section’s four points. First, the assumption of the correctness of the PoR was made only after carefully examining the alternatives. Second, it appears pointless to use rational doxastic practices in order to argue for the reliability of rational doxastic practices. Third, either the PoR is correct or it is not; in either case, no harm is done by assuming it without argument. And fourth, after all, the PoR is something that, properly understood, we all have no choice but to believe anyway.

\textsuperscript{53} Again, cf. Reid, ibid.
These points are enough, I think, to discharge my burden to prove that I have no burden to prove the PoR. But they are not, nor are they intended to be, a defense of the PoR itself.

VI. Nonjustified Beliefs.

The foregoing theory of rationality was outlined specifically in service of a solution to a problem, and it will be helpful at this point to review the problem in order to understand what tasks still lie before us.

I said that Chapters 1-3 supported the following conclusion:

(C) For any given justification standard, $J$, acceptance of it is either not justified, or ultimately receives support only from beliefs that are themselves not justified (regardless of how many intervening beliefs there might be between the ultimately supporting beliefs and the standard).

This disjunctive conclusion appeared to entail meta-skepticism. But in an attempt to avoid a meta-skeptical conclusion, I proposed that some nonjustified but rational belief might license arguments for $J$-standards, thereby plausibly avoiding meta-skepticism while satisfying the second disjunct of (C): $J$-standards ultimately would receive support from rational beliefs that are themselves not justified.

Two tasks are before us now: first, to argue that indeed the required supporting beliefs are “nonjustified but rational”; and, second, to explain the solution in more detail. The present section is devoted to the first task, and the next is devoted to the second.

We call beliefs that are neither justified nor unjustified, because the concept ‘justification’ is inappropriately applied to them, nonjustified. It is not contentious to
claim that unjustified beliefs exist, but it might well be contentious to claim that nonjustified beliefs exist. So why suppose that there are any nonjustified beliefs?

To summarize in advance (and oversimplify): there are some beliefs that it is psychologically impossible for us (normal adults) to withhold and, thus, for which we are not responsible; so we have no particular permissions or obligations with regard to such beliefs, since permissions and obligations attach only to acts for which we are (at least possibly) responsible; but since justification is a deontological notion, it makes little sense to say that those most basic beliefs that we cannot withhold are justified (or unjustified). I will develop this argument in four parts.

This line of argument bears some resemblance to that of William P. Alston in his essay, "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification."^54 Alston's conclusion is as follows:

We have examined several forms of a deontological conception of epistemic justification in terms of freedom from blame in taking up a certain propositional attitude. All of these but one was seen to be untenable by reason of requiring a degree of control over our propositional attitudes that we do not enjoy. The only version that escapes this fate was seen to be not the sort of concept we need to play a central role in epistemology. Therefore, despite the connotations of the term, we are ill advised to think of epistemic justification in terms of freedom from blame for believing.^55

The following, however, does assume that justification is a deontological concept, which is something I take to be a matter of semantic fact (the admitted "connotations of the term" at the very least, as Alston says). Plantinga, in Warrant:

^54 Reprinted in Epistemic Justification, op. cit., pp. 115-52.

^55 Ibid., p. 152.
The Current Debate, unlike Alston in the above-mentioned essay, takes this to be one main reason to demote justification from its privileged place. The reader may if he wishes construe the present section (and by extension, this entire dissertation) as another argument for that thesis.

1. It is psychologically impossible to withhold some particular kinds of belief. I maintain that there are some propositions that it is psychologically impossible to disbelieve or even withhold (at a given time). For example, it is impossible for me (in present circumstances, of course) to disbelieve or withhold the belief that my name is "Larry Sanger," that I have been alive for longer than a day, that as I write it is day and the sun is shining, that $2+2=4$, that other persons exist, etc. There is a potentially infinite list of such platitudes that I could not so much as withhold. In some sense, in present circumstances, I must believe them. I will describe such beliefs as 'irresistible'.

That many of our beliefs are not under our immediate voluntary control is a common view among contemporary epistemologists, who (elaborating the view) comment frequently that beliefs of the sort just listed certainly cannot be denied, at least not immediately and without great effort (and perhaps for most people, at all).

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57 A sense that might require considerable work to tease out.

58 See, for one example, Richard Swinburne, Faith and Reason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 25. For another, see Alston, ibid., p. 152, and also Reliability. op. cit., pp. 120-1.
This point is emphasized by Wittgenstein at length.\(^9\) The point is simple enough when properly understood, but some clarifications are in order.

As a philosopher, I might write as though I could doubt this sort of obvious truth (e.g., when discussing Cartesian skepticism, I might pretend to doubt that I possess legs). But it does not follow from the mere fact that I and others can discuss such doubts at length (indeed, with considerable erudition and footnotes) that we can actually succeed in making ourselves have them.

Those contemporary philosophers fond of pointing out that we lack privileged access to our mental states should be comfortable admitting this. But before misgivings about privileged access became popular, Hume (famously) admitted that he could maintain his skeptical doubts but only in the confines of his study,\(^60\) which admission has inspired some interesting reflection on the nature and possibility of being a skeptic. My present claim, entailing for instance that Hume could not doubt the existence of the desk at which he philosophizes, seems to be at odds with his own claim to doubt this very sort of thing (while in his study). My claim could be construed as an attack on Hume’s skepticism;\(^61\) but it needn’t be. I can at least concede the point to the skeptic (without unnecessarily engaging this particular issue at length) that we can understand doubts and skeptical propositions and debate their


\(^61\) Indeed, this formed the basis of Wittgenstein’s critique of skepticism in *On Certainty*. 

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merits, even if at no point do we ever succeed in believing them. And such debate can, of course, be of tremendous value.\textsuperscript{62}

Surely some beliefs that one could not at a given time so much as withhold can and do change nonetheless. We can conceive of circumstances in which I discover that what I firmly believed to be my name is not my name, that it is night when it appears to be day, and so forth. So to say that some particular beliefs are presently irresistible is not to hold that, through the presentation of the right kinds of evidence, we could not (in any circumstances) eventually be persuaded otherwise. Beliefs that I claim to be presently irresistible are not, for all that, infallible.

Next I wish to identify a class of beliefs that are irresistible in the above-described sense. For very many adult human beings, very often, the belief that their own senses supply them with basically accurate information cannot be denied. Similarly, at most times most people would find it impossible to doubt that their most vivid memories of events are of events that actually occurred (even if they would admit that they could be wrong about some details). The same remarks apply to other of the most basic ways we have of gathering information about the world: introspection, testimony, rational intuition and/or concept-formation, deduction, and induction.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{62} On these latter points I may be differing with Wittgenstein, who doubted that it makes any sense at all to claim to doubt certain propositions. He appears to have held, in \textit{On Certainty}, that a claim to deny some propositions should be taken as evidence that the person trying to make the denial doesn’t even understand the proposition.

\textsuperscript{63} Again I am in agreement with Alston, and also with Swinburne, op. cit., who writes: “It is because one set of inductive standards seem to me intuitively right and my use of them is not under the control of my will, that I trust that the resultant beliefs indicate how things are.” (p. 26)
In general, then, I would endorse the principle that, at most times, most adult people cannot (if they try, for whatever reason they might do so) withhold beliefs resulting from the “most obviously correct” uses of sense-perception, introspection, memory, etc. This principle is, I think, probably true in stronger versions; i.e., I think that the vast majority of people cannot, even if they try, doubt the deliverances even of less-than-most-obviously-correct uses of sense-perception, introspection, memory, etc. But we can employ the principle in its relatively weak version.

Distinguish between individual irresistible beliefs that result from these doxastic practices, and second-order beliefs, equally irresistible, that these doxastic practices are reliable. I think it is fairly obvious that both classes of belief are, for most persons at most times, indeed irresistible.64

2. We are not responsible for these beliefs. The next point can be developed more briefly. It is a platitude that normative responsibility65 for an act (that is, praiseworthiness, culpability, blameworthiness; as distinguished from merely being a cause) requires freedom, in some sense. If I am responsible for stealing, then I stole freely. So if I am not free to act other than how I do act, then I am not responsible for the act I perform (even if I caused it to happen). There are ancient disputes to be settled about what ‘free’ means in these sorts of locutions, but nothing I shall say here will depend on any particular theory of freedom.

64 One might wish to insist that there is no essential difference between these classes of beliefs: what it means to say that the belief that these doxastic practices are reliable is irresistible is precisely for the individual beliefs that result from these practices to be irresistible. I am not sure if anything important rests on drawing a distinction here (or failing to do so).

65 But not legal responsibility.
It is an equally obvious platitude that, if I cannot do otherwise than what I in fact do, then I am not acting freely. A traditional (and notoriously vague) account of 'freedom' (better viewed as a constraint on more detailed theories of freedom) has it that I am free if I could have done otherwise.

Consider now these two platitudes together. It follows from them, together with the observation in the first part of the argument above, that we (the vast majority of adult human beings) are not responsible, in a normative sense, for holding the belief that the most obviously correct uses of sense-perception, introspection, memory, testimony, rational intuition and/or concept-formation, and reasoning are correct. If we believe that our eyes and ears give us reliable intelligence, that our memory (properly used) is generally accurate, etc., that's through no virtue or fault of our own.

3. Talk of obligations and permissions with respect to such beliefs is nonsense.

First allow me to state and elaborate the thesis here: talk of duties, obligations, and even permissions, etc., to act a certain way can be made sense of only on the assumption that one is responsible for the action. Indeed, it is responsibility, or potential responsibility, for the action (or the action's consequences) that makes talk of obligations, etc., coherent at all. Where one cannot speak of responsibility for an act, one also cannot with sense use normative descriptions of the act.

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66 The point could perhaps be made simply by saying that it is false (rather than merely "odd," or "nonsense," or "wrong," etc.) to say either that S is, or that S is not, permitted to believe that p. In this case, one would have to be clear that the fact that it is false to say that a belief is obligatory does not imply that it is permitted. Exactly how to characterize the mistake — is it nonsense, merely "odd" or "strange," false, etc.? — seems to make little difference. But for purposes of consistency, I will say my thesis is about a 'category error': it is a category error to ascribe categories of permission and obligation to acts for which we are not responsible.
The best we can do is deny that 'ought' or 'may' apply to the act, while being quick to insist that such denial does not mean that the act is forbidden or permitted. So, e.g., if I say, "It is not the case that you are permitted to believe that \( p \)," I should not be taken to imply, "You are forbidden from believing that \( p \)." For purposes of clarity, however, I prefer to say that, with regard to acts for which we are not responsible, it does not make any sense to say we 'ought to' or 'may' perform them.

This thesis can be made plausible with the help of some examples.

Consider an example drawn from ethical theory. Suppose we are told that Martha is babysitting a little boy who is wading in a shallow pond — but the boy drowned when he slipped and fell, while Martha simply sat by and watched. Surely, we say, she ought to have helped. But then we are told that Martha desperately wanted to help and did her best, but she was confined to a wheelchair and physically could not get to the boy. Now it is obvious that Martha is not responsible for failing to help the boy, and accordingly it is not the case that she ought to have helped him.

Consider another example: my belief that I have two hands. I am not responsible for having this belief. Of course, it is not the case that I ought not to have this belief, because 'ought' implies 'can': if I cannot (under any circumstances) change my mind, it is not the case that I ought to do so. But it is not even the case that I ought to have it: the claim that I ought to believe I have hands implies that I have control of any sort over having the belief. It is in virtue of my exercising control that I can be said to fulfill an obligation.
But couldn’t I say that I am, anyway, permitted to have it? No, because that claim too presupposes control over having the belief. This will require more work to make plausible, but I think it can be made plausible.

“What’s wrong with saying I am permitted to believe I have two hands?” you might ask. “After all, I am not violating any moral laws – to take one example of what ‘permission’ might mean.” Well, that’s correct, you’re not violating moral laws. But it is also important to realize that you are not responsible for this particular instance of your failure to violate moral laws. The fact that some act of yours does not violate moral laws does not by itself mean that it makes any sense to say that your act is permitted.

Different examples may help to make this plausible: a man who goes totally insane and, without understanding at all what he is doing, slaughters a busload of people is not properly said to be permitted to slaughter the people, nor is he obligated not to do so. Similarly, if you wake up with an embarrassing twitching leg, it is nonsense to say that you’re permitted to twitch your leg.

It might also be helpful to consider what could be considered a platitude about the meaning of ‘permission’: if I say that you are permitted to do (or to refrain from doing) something, I imply that you have some choice in the matter as to whether you will do it. At best it is idle for me to say that you are permitted to do something that you have no choice either to do or not to do – at best idle, I say, but in fact I think this is simply nonsense. The assertion of permission, whatever else ethicists might opine

67 Cf. Alston, op. cit., p. 120.
about its function, is essentially a claim about how I may exercise my freedom of choice. Correspondingly, to affirm or to deny that a permission to act exists is a claim about whether I may or may not choose to act. If it is not a matter of choice, the question of permission cannot arise.

To return now to the main argument. – From this it follows that talk of permission and duties with regard to an irresistible belief, such as that I have two hands, is nonsense. It is also nonsense to claim, for example, that one ought to believe that sense-perception is reliable, or even that one is permitted to believe this. Such talk presupposes that the belief is the sort of thing that one might be permitted or obligated to have; but one can be thus permitted or obligated only if (and because) one is indeed normatively responsible for having the belief, which is patently not the case at all. One might with just as little sense say that one is morally permitted to breathe, wake up in the morning, or perform any other involuntary bodily functions.

The same can be said for virtually all of the beliefs described as ‘rational’ by my minimal account of rationality and for the belief that the doxastic practices that comprise Reason are reliable.

4. Conclusion: Belief in the reliability of some doxastic practices is nonjustified. Justification is, as has been commonly observed in recent years,\(^{68}\) a deontological concept, i.e., one that concerns duties, obligations, and permissions. To be justified in a belief is (at least) to be epistemically permitted to hold it, or not to have flouted any epistemic duties in holding it; on a variant that is probably too

\(^{68}\) See Ch. 1, Sect. I above, as well as Alston, op. cit., for further discussion of this point.
strong, a justified belief is one we ought (from an epistemic point of view) to have. The permissions, duties, or obligations involved here are epistemic rather than moral; they are, nonetheless, normative properties of (mental) acts.

It follows that it makes little sense, and indeed is a category mistake, to say that we could be justified in believing that the most obviously correct uses of our basic doxastic practices are reliable — that, e.g., the most obviously correct uses of perception do result in true beliefs. This is not to say that we are unjustified in this belief, for that would equally be a category mistake; the category ‘justification’ does not apply to irresistible beliefs.

An analogous category error would be the insistence that a death caused wholly accidentally is either right or wrong (to any degree at all). “Lightning is wrong to strike people dead” contains a similar category error. ‘Wrong’ is not the sort of concept that applies to natural events such as lightning.

Someone (who fails to understand the point) might object that, if there are no particular obligations prescribed for a certain belief, then one is perforce permitted to have it, and it is hence justified. That much could be correct at least in cases that immediately spring to mind. But it is not relevant to the claim I am making now, which is that if there are no particular obligations or permissions (or duties, etc.) with regard to a certain belief (because one is not responsible at all for having the belief), then it is a category mistake to say the belief either is or is not justified. Consider the lightning example: while of course it is in some sense wrong (false, if not out-and-out nonsense) to say that lightning has any “obligations” to strike or not to strike, it does
not follow from that that it is true (or even meaningful) to say lightning is “permitted” to strike.

Admittedly, however, my conclusion, whatever the merits of the argument supporting it, seems extremely counterintuitive. For, if the conclusion applies to certain second-order beliefs about the reliability of doxastic practices, then perforce it would apply to beliefs that should be considered justified if any beliefs are at all. For example, on my account, it would appear that G.E. Moore’s belief that he has a hand turned out not to be justified at all; nor was it unjustified. Ditto countless other irresistible beliefs that on most accounts would be considered not merely justified but absolutely certain.

Some points must be stressed forcefully if I am to remove at least some of the counterintuitiveness of the conclusion. In saying that (at least some) irresistible beliefs are neither justified nor unjustified, I am not saying that their justificatory status is neutral or evenly weighted between positive and negative; rather, I am saying that it is a mistake to say that such beliefs have any justificatory status, properly speaking, at all. That is because justification is a deontological notion and hence does not apply to (at least some) irresistible beliefs.

Nor am I saying that these irresistible beliefs possess no epistemic status whatsoever, which would of course be absurd. Indeed, I think (as I have explained at length) at least some such beliefs are rational to hold.

While these points of clarification may make the conclusion less counterintuitive, they do little to counteract the appearance that the claim is radical. If, as according to the analysis of ‘S knows that p’ that was popular for the bulk of the
twentieth century, a belief must be justified in order to be a candidate for knowledge, then all of the irresistible beliefs that I say are nonjustified are also not known, either. That seems absurd. So perhaps the claim is radical enough to be dismissed out of hand. Three further points should make it clear that that would be a mistake.

First, I am aware of no good reason for thinking that the epistemic concept that informs the analysis of 'knowledge' should be justification, as opposed to any number of other related epistemic concepts. Plantinga and Alston (among others) have suggested, for good reasons, that justification should be dethroned from its central and privileged position in contemporary epistemology, to be supplemented by concepts described using other terms or phrases, such as 'warrant' and 'rationality'. Hence, even if it should turn out to be a mistake to say that I am justified in believing I have hands, it would not follow from that that I do not know, with certainty, that I have hands.

Second, even if I did decide to bite the bullet, I would not be the first (nonskeptical) philosopher to suggest that irresistible, fundamental beliefs of the sort described are not known. It is Wittgenstein again who in On Certainty opines, "We just do not see how very specialized the use of 'I know' is." Later in the text he explains (in characteristically oracular fashion):

Must I not begin to trust somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable:


71 Op. cit., p. 3e.
it is part of judging. ... I should like to say: Moore does not know what he asserts he knows [e.g., that he has two hands], but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our method of doubt and enquiry. 72

I would like to reserve the expression "I know" for the cases in which it is used in normal linguistic exchange. 73

I think Wittgenstein’s views differ from mine in key aspects, but he is willing, as I might be (after further argument), to say that ‘knowledge’ might not properly apply to beliefs that are the most certain. I am willing at least to make a similar claim with regard to justification.

Third, another very Wittgensteinian point may be urged in defense of my conclusion. Namely, it coheres perfectly well with how ‘justified’ is actually used in language. Except in philosophical contexts, one virtually never speaks of justification (or, for that matter, knowledge) with regard to the most obvious of beliefs, the sorts of beliefs that we all have no choice but to have. In ordinary use, the term appears to be reserved for beliefs for which one actually possesses some justification that one might recite (i.e., reasons, arguments); or, at the very least, for beliefs about which one typically has some choice to have.

To the non-philosopher it sounds bizarre to say, for example, “I am very well justified in my belief that I have hands.” By contrast, consider: “My belief that I have hands is perfectly rational.” That too would be unusual (it might be uttered in the context of a discussion about sanity), but (I think) it does not have the strange ring to


73 Op. cit., p. 34e.
it the claim about justification has. This is, I speculate, just because it is straightforwardly true in the (perfectly ordinary) sense that the belief is indicative of a properly functioning, rational mind— even if having it is out of my control. (That beliefs might be out of our control and rational nonetheless, it is worth mentioning, is a view I share with Richard Foley. 74)

VII. A Solution to the PMJ and a Refutation of Meta-Skepticism.

While justifiably held justification standards ultimately receive epistemic support from beliefs that are themselves not justified, this does not entail that no belief in a j-standard is epistemically justified. More briefly: the view that j-standards are ultimately supported only by nonjustified beliefs does not entail meta-skepticism. Even more briefly: (C) does not, given the work of sections II-VI above, entail (MSK). This is the conclusion I will attempt to establish in the present section.

Essential to the meta-skeptical case is the assumption expressed in Section I above as

(2) If S is justified in the (nonbasic) belief that \( p \), then S has some other justified belief (or beliefs) \( q \) that supports the belief that \( p \).

74 Thus Foley: "[D]oes saying that from an epistemic point of view it is epistemically rational for a person S to believe the conclusions of arguments that are uncontroversial for him presuppose that S either now has or did have some kind of control over what he believes? I will argue in chapter 5 that although people ordinarily do have at least some kind of indirect control over what they believe, the answer to this question nonetheless is no. It can be epistemically rational for a person S to believe even that which, given his circumstances or given his limitations as a believer, he cannot believe. It also can be epistemically rational for S to believe that which, given his circumstances, or given his limitations as a believer, he cannot help but believe. Of course, in such cases S should not be blamed or praised for believing what he does" (Theory of Epistemic Rationality, op. cit., pp. 12-3).
My strategy, expressed at the beginning of Section II above, was to propose that the supporting beliefs might be merely rational rather than justified. First, I will develop this proposal further and, second, apply it to the case of the Problem of Meta-Justification.

Premise (2) derives its plausibility primarily, though not only, from an unexpressed assumption: a nonbasic belief that $p$ that is not supported by justified beliefs lacks epistemic support. But if $p$ is supported by rational beliefs, in the sense of 'rational' developed above, and these rational beliefs are nonjustified and irresistible, then $p$ does have some epistemic support, and it is no longer obvious that $p$ lacks, specifically, what epistemic support it would need to be justified. So, that $p$ could have adequate epistemic support for its justification can be made plausible, as follows.

Suppose that $q$ is offered in support of $p$, and $q$ is rationally held; say $q$ is one of the paradigm-case rational beliefs such as Moore's belief that he has hands. Rationality in the sense in question is truth-linked due to the Principle of Rationality. So, since $q$ is rational, it is probably (and, depending on how the theory of rationality might be further developed, we could say very probably) true. But $q$ is nonjustified, we will say, because it is a paradigm-case irresistible belief. So $q$'s lack of justification is explained not by its having a negative epistemic status but by the fact that it is wrong, nonsense, etc., to claim that there are any obligations or permissions associated with it. In that case, it seems $q$ is a very plausible candidate for a belief that provides justificatory support for $p$, despite $q$'s not being justified itself.
This is, admittedly, not a *proof* that \( q \) could provide justificatory support for \( p \). I can appeal to the plausibility of this line of argument in ordinary cases, given what I have argued in this chapter. Even if the most certain, paradigmatically rational of our beliefs are nonjustified, because they are irresistible, surely (it appears) they can nonetheless constitute adequate supporting evidence for nonbasic beliefs.

But consider what makes the obvious sort of case plausible: rationality, on account of the PoR, is a truth-linked property of beliefs. These are the most clearly rational of beliefs, and to say that a premise is rationally held is to imply that it is probably true. It is that sort of guarantee that is minimally needed for the premise to be able to give justificatory support to the conclusion.

Moreover, I wonder what sort of case a meta-skeptic could possibly make for insisting that nonbasic justified beliefs must be supported by other justified beliefs, after another compelling possibility has been spelled out clearly. On this point—though I do not claim this, either, to be an argument—I cannot, on behalf of the meta-skeptic, think of so much as a straw man to knock down.

Now let’s apply these insights to the Problem of Meta-Justification—the problem of how, in general, to justify standards of justification that, after all, appear to be employed in their own justification. As we saw in our in-depth exploration of the meta-regress argument, the core of the problem rests in the fact that standards license the premises (and inference step) of arguments for standards; such arguments are epistemically circular. The difficulty is that this circularity appears unavoidable. So it appears we must take some standards for granted, and in doing so, it also appears we are giving up on the PMJ and embracing meta-skepticism.
But suppose that what licenses our most fundamental arguments for j-standards are standards of rationality, and that the premises, while not justified, are rationally held. It is these standards that we take for granted; or, perhaps, we give very brief, uncontroversial arguments for them on the basis of assumptions that associated basic doxastic practices are reliable. I contend that this suggestion offers the best promise for giving a solution, of sorts, to the PMJ and a reply to meta-skepticism. I don’t propose to defend any particular j-standard; rather, I wish to make a few relatively modest points (in addition to the above) that explain why, given the work of the present chapter, one can pursue the project of meta-justification unmolested by fears of circularity.

An argument is epistemically circular (as we learned in Chapter 1) when the supposition that one is justified in believing one of the premises, or that the premises support the conclusion, implies that the conclusion is true. In paradigm-case circular arguments, it is the conclusion that best explains why one is justified in believing one of the premises (or the inference step): as Van Cleve’s account had it, it is as though one must already know the conclusion, in order to gain knowledge of it using this argument.

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75 Here one may observe that I am suggesting we can give unproblematic arguments for j-standards after all; and then haven’t we avoided epistemic circularity? Perhaps, but only to encounter it again: one may, after all, restate the problem of epistemic circularity in terms of reliability rather than justification. Suppose the conclusion is something to the effect that certain sorts of memories are reliable, and that the premises advert to those sorts of memory: the argument is circular despite not having a conclusion in the form of a j-standard. We can avoid this sort of circularity, however, by acknowledging that forming beliefs on the basis of certain kinds of memory experiences is just (part of) being rational, and resigning ourselves to assuming what we thought we should have proven.

76 But this generalization does not appear to apply to Schumm’s example of an epistemically circular argument.
What is needed, then, is an argument such that the justification (or, as we will say, rationality) of the belief in its premises is best explained by some standard that is more fundamental than the standard (or claim about reliability) expressed in the conclusion. That's precisely what the work of the present chapter places at our disposal: while j-standards do not explain the justification of the premises of our arguments for the most fundamental of j-standards, r-standards will do the job. So we also say that belief in the premises is rational, but nonjustified, and the rationality of that belief is explained by r-standards. Properly basic r-standards, those described above (in admittedly general terms), are assumed to specify the conditions under which our beliefs are probably true; hence the rationality of belief in the premises is (by assumption) a truth-linked quality and therefore, it appears, qualified for the job of supporting (more derivative\textsuperscript{77}) j-standards.

Here is an obvious objection to this approach. It appears that all I propose to do is to justify the most fundamental of j-standards with even more fundamental r-standards. Isn't there a problem about showing r-standards to be rationally held, though, and hence an equivalent problem of epistemic circularity that will plague demonstrations of the rationality of belief in r-standards? Surely I shall not want to propose next, for example, standards of warrant to support the r-standards, for fear of being accused of meta-meta-regressism.

There are two relevant differences between j-standards and r-standards, which are also two reasons why r-standards can be the epistemic starting-points that

\textsuperscript{77} In any case we certainly want to avoid arguing for a j-standard that is nothing but a restatement in terms of justification of an r-standard that licenses belief in the premises. See just below.
j-standards are not. First, r-standards specify the conditions under which beliefs are rational, and beliefs can be rational despite being irresistible and hence not candidates for justification. Second, the combination of my doxastic practice theory of rationality and the PoR has it that some beliefs are probably true simply because they are the results of properly basic doxastic practices. This is not, as I have urged at length, something for which I am under any dialectical obligation to argue. So premises rationally held can, in some cases anyway, be rational without supporting reasons; whereas premises that are justifiably believed must have some manner of justifiers.

These two points have as consequences that there is a body of irresistible, nonjustified, rational beliefs that are assumed, without argument, to be true, and correspondingly a body of r-standards such that the variety of rationality mentioned in their consequents is assumed to be truth-linked. In a very loose sense, all this prodigious assuming allows one to combine the particularist and methodist approaches to the PMJ, and to bootstrap one’s way to more precisified and specialized r-standards and j-standards.

In this connection it is important to distinguish, at least in principle, between the act of justifying an r-standard – an r-standard that has already been specified – and the process of formulating a plausible candidate for justification. We have already introduced this issue in Section IV above.

Experience in the field of epistemology shows that much hard work must be devoted to the task of getting quite clear on exactly how a j-standard of some type
(e.g., foundationalist or reliabilist) should be formulated. There is no reason to think it would be any different for precisely-formulated r-standards.

But this raises a problem. Once a precisely-formulated r-standard is arrived at, we then might (if we are confused) find ourselves in the curious position of wanting to say that it is this r-standard, rather than another, that is properly basic, while the very claim that it is properly basic militates against our offering an argument for the standard. Nonetheless, claims advanced in the process of arriving at the standard can be arranged as an argument to the best explanation; we have a body of data (assumptions about rational belief) that our theory, an r-standard, is intended to explain better than other theories. But in that case, our proposed, precisely-stated r-standard does receive some support and the argument in its favor would seem to be licensed by some sort of standard governing the rationality (or justification) of beliefs formed via inductive or abductive inference.

So an r-standard— which we want to claim is a very precisely formulated, reasonably strong version of an r-standard governing, for example, sense-perception— would not be basic after all, regardless of what we would like to claim for it. I believe this problem forces us to regard the above-described “body of irresistible, nonjustified, rational beliefs that are assumed, without argument, to be true, and correspondingly a body of r-standards” as being, at best, very modest and hedged beliefs, and at worst, imprecise, rough-and-ready beliefs. For the latter sort of belief, the PoR’s assumption on its behalf would not be that it is certainly correct but just that it is probably true. In any event, in the actual processes both of formulating and
arguing for any very strong or precise r-standard, we will not, initially, be taking any very strong or precise beliefs for granted.

It is gratifying to note that this claim coheres with experience of twentieth-century epistemologists. When we have engaged in formulating and arguing for precisified versions of j-standards, we have often taken many prosy, imprecise claims for granted. The same would apply for a process of arriving at precisified versions of r-standards. In such a process, no doubt, too, we will also be taking a properly basic r-standard for granted — namely, one about the rationality of beliefs formed based on arguments to the best explanation.

Thus far the discussion in this section has been merely suggestive and programmatic. One might well expect, however, at least an example of how we might derive a sample j-standard using the resources of the above-described theory — short of writing another dissertation and working out all the issues involved in these suggestions. Such an example would be particularly helpful to the sort of anti-foundationalist who relies on the Epistemic Ascent Argument. The anti-foundationalist would surely be reasonable to expect an example, even in a programmatic discussion of this sort. This would at least make clear what issues would need to be dealt with more fully in a non-programmatic discussion; some of the issues brought up in discussion of a sample argument for a j-standard might turn out to be extremely important.

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78 An argument due to Wilfred Sellars and Laurence Bonjour. As Louis P. Pojman presents it in *What Can We Know? An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), p. 97, the argument is intended to show that whatever features might be used to identify a given belief as
Perhaps the most important premise in any sample argument will be a bridge principle. The principle's consequent would contain 'justification' as a predicate, or an entire justification standard, while its antecedent would either not include 'justification' at all or would refer only to instances of justification.

Exactly how this principle will be formulated will depend on the argument's conclusion — or, conversely, we might wish to say that what the conclusion will be will depend on what bridge principle we wish to employ. But another constraint on the principle's formulation is quite independent of what the conclusion is, viz., it must be such that its rationality would not have to be established by means of argument. For, if the bridge principle's rationality had to be established by means of argument, the argument would need some further bridge principle to arrive at the first bridge principle, and so on; in this way, a Meta-Epistemic Ascent Argument would rear its ugly head.

But nothing in the theory of rationality offered in this chapter decides the issue as to when, if ever, a belief must be established by means of argument in order to be rational, and this issue will have to be left undecided here. Nonetheless, again, in order to supply a sample argument, a bridge principle will also have to be supplied; for the coherence of the example it is simply to be hoped that the bridge principle we select for our sample argument will wear its rationality on its sleeve, as it were. This might seem to be a difficult problem simply because it might appear that there is very basic can be used to show that the belief is not basic after all; hence, no belief is basic. Hence foundationalism, which has it that there are basic beliefs, must be rejected.

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little that one can say about justification that fails to require argument in order to be rationally believed.\textsuperscript{79}

There is a way to formulate a bridge principle without saying anything terribly controversial about justification, however: simply make it an instantiation of an uncontroversial inductive rule. So we might use something like this:

If for a wide variety of (given) persons who have a wide variety of (given) beliefs, (1) all such beliefs occur in circumstances \( c \), (2) every such belief is a justified belief, and (3) no known belief that occurs in circumstances \( c \) is unjustified, then a \( j \)-standard, to the effect that \( \text{if } S \text{ believes that } p \text{ in circumstances } c, \text{ then } S \text{ is justified in believing that } p, \) has some weak presumption in its favor.

Given some such bridge principle, the sample argument would look something like this:

(1a) \( S_1 \) has the belief that \( p_1 \) in circumstances \( c \).

(1b) \( S_1 \) is justified in believing that \( p_1 \).

(2a) \( S_2 \) has the belief that \( p_2 \) in circumstances \( c \).

(2b) \( S_2 \) is justified in believing that \( p_2 \).

(3a) \( S_n \) has the belief that \( p_n \) in circumstances \( c \).

(3b) \( S_n \) is justified in believing that \( p_n \).

(4) No known belief that occurs in circumstances \( c \) is unjustified.

(5) If for a wide variety of persons who have a wide variety of beliefs, all such beliefs occur in circumstances \( c \), every such belief is clearly a justified belief, and no known belief that occurs in circumstances \( c \) is unjustified, then the \( j \)-standard to the effect that \( \text{if } S \text{ believes that } p \text{ in circumstances } c, \text{ then } S \text{ is justified in believing that } p, \) has some weak presumption in its favor.

\textsuperscript{79} But the supports constraint from Chapter 2, Section VII is, perhaps, one example of a proposition that one could rationally believe about justification without argument.
(6) Therefore, the j-standard to the effect that if $S$ believes that $p$ in circumstances $c$, then $S$ is justified in believing that $p$, has some weak presumption in its favor.

One might use (6) in a further (inductive) argument that would have as its conclusion, if $S$ believes that $p$ in circumstances $c$, then $S$ is justified in believing that $p$. Alternatively, one might simply substitute the latter conclusion for (6), and claim on its behalf that, given the argument, there is some weak presumption in its favor; in that case, though, the bridge principle (5) would have to be suitably modified:

(5') If for a wide variety of persons who have a wide variety of beliefs, all such beliefs occur in circumstances $c$, every such belief is clearly a justified belief, and no known belief that occurs in circumstances $c$ is unjustified, then: if $S$ believes that $p$ in circumstances $c$, then $S$ is justified in believing that $p$.

To procure a fully-operational sample, obviously, some plausible “circumstances $c$” will have to be proposed. Here I might suggest some suitably modified version of (BSP) from Section III above. The trouble with that, however, is that a belief formed in such circumstances is rather likely to be irresistible and hence not a candidate for justification; but just for purposes of providing an example, perhaps this defect can be overlooked.

This example can help us to formulate a number of objections that a fully worked-out meta-epistemology would face. I will offer some provisional replies.

*First objection.* If you claim that the j-standard in (6) is justifiably believed by the epistemologist offering the argument, and it is the beliefs in each of (1)-(5) that supply the justification for (6), then we have the right to ask: “What is it in virtue of which (1)-(5) are justifiably believed?” If you supply a further j-standard, then of course, by your own lights, you will need an argument for it.
Reply. It is to be hoped that it will be plausible to assert, of the premises of a fully fleshed-out argument, that they are believed rationally according to the theory of rationality presented earlier in this chapter. Hence, what is needed is a licensing r-standard, not a j-standard.

Second objection. But unless the beliefs in each of the premises (1)-(5) are held justifiably, then, according to all accounts hitherto of how to get justified beliefs from beliefs about the premises of arguments, one cannot get a justified belief in (6) from beliefs in those premises.

Reply. This objection correctly identifies one requirement of a more fully-developed account: we must restate the conditions under which we can get a justified belief from an argument in such a way that justified beliefs in the premises are not necessary and in such a way that rational beliefs will provide adequate support.

An applicable point was insisted upon above, at length: there is no good reason to think that a belief that supplies justificatory support needs to be justified in order to supply such support. No doubt any supporting belief must have positive epistemic status of some sort that is truth-linked. Moreover, clearly, it remains an important but as yet unanswered question exactly what conditions they will be under which some variety of positive epistemic status, such as rationality in our sense, will provide the needed support. But by my lights it is sensible enough to think that such an account is forthcoming, because, after all, among the irresistible rational beliefs are some that are at least as certain as any justified belief.
The latter defense can be further bolstered by the following consideration.

For purposes of supplying justificatory support, on deontological accounts of justification, what merely rational beliefs lack that justified beliefs have is a sort of built-in deontological component. That is, one can say that a belief justifiably held is (for instance) permissibly held, while one cannot say this of a merely rational belief. Admittedly, for purposes of supplying justificatory support, perhaps there is something more that justification supplies that rationality does not. But if not, then the only reason justification could be thought to be required, in order to give adequate justificatory support via argument, is that deontological component. And in that case, why insist that rational beliefs cannot supply the needed support? Why couldn’t it be the case that what “permits” us to have justified beliefs are rational beliefs, about which it makes no sense to say that we are “permitted” to have them? Why should it make any difference whether the supporting beliefs are themselves permitted?

Third objection. The argument works only if each of the premises, including claims that various beliefs are justifiably believed, are rationally held according to the sense we have advanced. But how plausible is it to say that claims about when beliefs are justified are rationally held?

Reply. This is admittedly a difficult objection, but we can urge one point in reply: in the field of epistemology, we all do, after all, depend on unsupported “intuitions” about when beliefs are justified or not. For arguments for our initial, weak j-standards, we will want to employ only the most obviously justified beliefs. It is not implausible to suppose that one could be rational, in our sense, in believing that those beliefs are justified.
So much for the process of arriving at our initial j-standards with the help of r-standards. Again, the above is only a sketch of how the argument might go.

I propose, in addition, that derivative, specialized, narrowly-focused r-standards and j-standards could be, and in a loose sense have been, developed and justified through a method of wide reflective equilibrium that begins with properly basic r-standards. 80

The above-mentioned body of prosy, imprecise beliefs (against which initial r-standards are to be tested) again plays a prominent role. But how the more specialized standards are tested varies considerably depending on the field of inquiry. By way of broad generalization, one may say that new refinements to modest, generally-applicable standards are proposed, and those refinements are tested according to consistency with other established standards and rational background beliefs.

A helpful, realistic description of such a refinement procedure would involve researching the actual historical development of scientific, professional, and academic methods of various sorts, via a thorough study of intellectual history. There’s little point to speculation about how the arrival at modern standards is to be reconstructed, and thence (presumably) justified, when many relevant facts are to be learned in a study of intellectual history, e.g., the history of science.

For example, if one wished to reconstruct the path — no doubt a path that resembles the give-and-take Method of Reflective Equilibrium — whereby we arrived

80 For further suggestions on how this procedure might go, I refer the reader to Max Black and to the meta-coherentists, discussed in Chs. 2 and 3.
at the exceedingly fastidious standards according to which contemporary
philosophers interpret the history of philosophy, the place to begin would be via some
very simple, prosy standards about testimony, as well as some texts in which
historians of philosophy began taking each other to task for their clumsy
misinterpretations of dead philosophers. The simple, prosy standards about testimony
(e.g., a principle of charity: “Interpret someone so that he says something true, if
possible”) informed the development of modern standards. When it became clear
(particularly in the early twentieth century) that certain easy (and misleading)
formulations of historical positions would not wash, new standards had essentially
been put in place: among other things, it became necessary to consult the texts
themselves. The more enlightened historical interpreters could always point out to
their more negligent peers that if we have no historical text in which so-and-so
actually held that \( p \), then the claim that so-and-so held that \( p \) requires some argument.
Such a change in attitude could be described as a step in the Method of Reflective
Equilibrium.

Similarly, a study of the history of logic makes fairly plain that the path that
led to (the various) contemporary standards of deductive inference is one in which
various refinements were made to relatively crude, but initially quite plausible rules,
initially stated by Aristotle. Along the way, refinements were tested according to the
simplest and least controversial sorts of principles: if one can find an instance of an
argument form where the premises are all true and the conclusion is false, the argument form is not valid.\textsuperscript{81}

One might object to all this that we are interested not in how, historically, we arrived at the j-standards that we now employ but in how we might show that those standards are in fact justified, or how exactly those standards should now be formulated. Again, if I wish to say that I have solved the problem of induction (as well as a bunch of similarly-structured epistemic problems), it will not do simply to say that some standard or other of induction describes rational belief-formation. I should produce the exact standard or standards.

But the above discussion is intended as a response to this very objection: in order to arrive at a formulation of "the exact standard" for any field of inquiry, surely an in-depth study of actual standards and probably actual procedures of refinement will be required. In any case, it is not encumbent upon me, in the present discussion, to produce such a study in order to defend my line of argument: I think it is adequate to point the way to a solution and then as much as needs to be done, as far as describing refinement procedures for j-standards, has been done. If this means I have failed to defend a complete solution to the PMJ, then so be it. What I have done, I maintain, is to show the way to a solution.

If a solution to the PMJ is indeed permitted by this chapter's work, it is clear that an answer to meta-skepticism is in the offing. The relevant question is whether the following claim entails meta-skepticism:

\textsuperscript{81} Perhaps the latter principle itself is sophisticated enough to have been derived, historically, from an even simpler principle.

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(C) For any given justification standard, \( J \), acceptance of it is either not justified, or ultimately receives support only from beliefs that are themselves not justified (regardless of how many intervening beliefs there might be between the ultimately supporting beliefs and the standard).

If the process of supporting \( j \)-standards begins with \( r \)-standards and basic beliefs that are nonjustified, the right disjunct of this claim is satisfied: \( j \)-standards ultimately receive support from “beliefs that are themselves not justified.” But such support can be sufficient for us to be able to say that those standards are justifiably believed. Hence (C) does not entail meta-skepticism.

VIII. Conclusion.

To gain some perspective, it will be interesting to compare and contrast the solution to the PMJ developed above to what Alston says in the last chapter of *The Reliability of Sense Perception* about what is essentially the same problem. Some of Alston’s conclusions are very similar to my own, but the differences are worth noting.

Alston comments on a position similar to the one advanced in this chapter:

[A “naturalized” epistemologist] might hold that the reliability of our familiar basic doxastic practices is just a rock-bottom commitment from which there is no appeal. It is impossible to find anything more basic on the basis of which this commitment could be evaluated. I find this claim quite appealing, and it will play a major role in the response I shall shortly be advocating, although it is set there in a larger context that involves a kind of justification of it, as well as suggestions of how this commitment can be tested to a certain extent. But a totally uncritical acceptance of our customary practices, without any provision for rational rejection or modification, I find quite indefensible, provided, as I shall be arguing shortly, there is a possibility of rational criticism.\(^2\)

Of course, in the present chapter I have not argued for a "totally uncritical acceptance of our customary practices," but for the acceptance of our most basic practices, those without which further investigation of other practices would be impossible. More derivative doxastic practices — specialized practices used in the various professions, sciences, etc. — should not, of course, be accepted uncritically (in some circumstances, anyway). There is no particular reason (considered in this dissertation, anyway) for being very conservative about any established derivative doxastic practices. If they are subject to noncircular confirmation or disconfirmation, then from an epistemologist's point of view, the fact that they are in common use might only bespeak some presumption in their favor.

So while Alston's remarks do not address the precise position I have developed, in fact I happily find myself in agreement with his general approach, one of "taking it to be rational and proper to engage in our customary doxastic practices [or a small subset of them, anyway] without having, or even being able to have, any positive noncircular reasons for supposing them to be reliable." Where we differ is on the question of what makes (what I call) basic doxastic practices rational. My claim, following the likes of Reid and Strawson, is that they constitute rationality itself. Alston has a fine discussion of Reid's views but does not adopt a specifically Reidian view of rationality.

83 Ibid., p. 124.
84 Ibid., pp. 126-9.
Alston says that Reid takes “all of our established doxastic practices to be acceptable as such, as innocent until proven guilty,” but Alston qualifies the term “established” as meaning “firmly rooted in our lives, practices which we could abandon or replace only with extreme difficulty if at all.” Established doxastic practices are hence, he says, “practically rational.” Alston does not actually supply us with a separate account of ‘practical rationality’. The context makes it clear that he does not simply identify practical rationality with established doxastic practices: after all, he conceives of his Section ii in his final chapter as providing us with “A Practical Argument for the Rationality of SP [Sense Perceptual Practice].”

Then Alston examines the relationship between practical rationality and reliability. Alston claims that the practical rationality of a practice does not constitute evidence for its reliability, but rather, “I believe that in showing it to be rational to engage in SP, I have thereby, not shown SP to be reliable, but shown it to be rational to suppose SP to be reliable.” But Alston makes it clear that the sense of ‘rational’ in which he thinks he has shown it to be rational to believe that SP is reliable is, again, practical rationality – which, again, seems to amount to saying that such a belief is “firmly rooted in our lives” and difficult to change.

By contrast, my own view on the rationality of assuming SP and other basic doxastic practices to be reliable is expressed plainly in my discussion, above, of the

85 Ibid., p. 129.
86 Ibid., p. 125.
87 Ibid., pp. 130-33.
88 Ibid., p. 131.
PoR. Since I say I assume that properly basic doxastic practices, which constitute minimal rationality, are reliable, I would be uncomfortable if one were to say that I argue, “SP is rational; therefore, it is reliable.” If anything the argument goes in the opposite direction.

But what strikes me as most plausible is that, in point of conceptual and semantic fact, ‘rationality’ and ‘Reason’ in one sense denote a set of basic doxastic practices; and it so happens that we cannot resist believing that those practices are reliable, which belief is expressed in the PoR. This is one, but only one, reason I gave for thinking that it is defensible, within the context of work in epistemology, to advance something like the PoR without argument. This is not to claim that belief in the principle is rational. Surely it is rational, but to defend that view that I think I would need an account of ‘rationality’ that would apply to such matters. The account I have supplied does not, I think, apply to the principle: acceptance of the principle surely does not issue from a properly basic doxastic practice.

Whatever the differences, the similarities between my proposed solution to the PMJ and Alston’s are striking. Still, if the work of this chapter lacks originality to some degree it is not because it borrows from Alston, but because it borrows much from Reid. Indeed, I regard this chapter (and several individual points from Chapters 1-3) as applying and developing some of the fundamental doctrines of Reidian epistemology to a modern formulation of a very old problem. I am hoping that this will be welcome, anyway. Many contemporary epistemologists — if not other

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89 In Reliability, op. cit., at least. As we saw in Ch. 2, Alston has since changed his view; he now believes that epistemic circularity is not vicious.
specialists—have fortunately unlearned that old, uninformed prejudice, that Reid’s philosophy of common sense is unsophisticated and not worth study.

I have not explored the consequences of many points that I have been brought out, because doing so would have taken us far too far afield from the topic of how one might accept (C) without embracing meta-skepticism. I invite the reader to consider again the contentions advanced in this chapter:

For any given justification standard, \( J \), acceptance of it is either not justified, or ultimately receives support only from beliefs that are themselves not justified (regardless of how many intervening beliefs there might be between the ultimately supporting beliefs and the standard).

There is a useful sense of ‘rationality’ according to which certain basic doxastic practices constitute rationality; beliefs might be rational because they result from such practices.

Such doxastic practices are ‘basic’ in the sense that their reliability cannot be defended using any combination of any other practices, and ‘properly’ basic in the sense that they result in beliefs that are as obviously true as any that we possess.

This theory of rationality essentially endorses and expands Strawson’s solution to the problem of induction.

According to the Principle of Rationality, beliefs formed in accordance with those practices that constitute minimal rationality are probably true.

The latter principle may be advanced without argument—which is a move that deserves to be taken seriously.

There is a category of belief to which it is a category mistake to apply the terms ‘justified’ and ‘unjustified’; they are nonjustified beliefs. Such beliefs are irresistible, and hence not candidates for the permissions and obligations that are part and parcel of the concept of justification. They can, however, be rational and indeed absolutely certain.

Justification standards may be argued for using noncircular arguments that are licensed by standards of rationality, on the basis of beliefs that are rational but nonjustified; hence the results of Chapters 1-3 need not be construed as supporting meta-skepticism.
Less basic practices, including the highly specialized doxastic practices that constitute the modern, complex, scientific conception of rationality may be defended on the basis of the basic ones, in a bootstrapping fashion similar to that advocated by Max Black and the meta-coherentists.

Taken together, these conclusions have a variety of important consequences worth investigating; but I could not reasonably claim to have firmly established many of these conclusions. Still, at least they appear to constitute a coherent, broad, powerful meta-epistemological theory that might stand further, long-term exploration.


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