

ACTION-THEORETIC FOUNDATIONS FOR EPISTEMOLOGY[†]

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to clearly articulate and defend a novel version of internalist foundationalism grounded in non-doxastic justification. I motivate the view by first posing a problem for Phenomenal Conservatism that concerns how to provide an appropriate account for the basing relation between seemings and corresponding belief states. I argue that the best approach takes into account the way seemings generate intelligent, non-deliberative actions. This discussion yields two general principles concerning the normative evaluation of a certain class of actions and the states that result from those actions. On the basis of these general principles, I then go on to show that we can derive a convincing form of epistemic foundationalism, both at the level of justified doxastic action and at the level of justified belief (at which stage Phenomenal Conservatism is preserved as a derived principle).

In this paper I defend a novel version of internalist foundationalism grounded in non-doxastic justification. I begin by considering Phenomenal Conservatism. PC faces an explanatory dilemma: (1) if seemings are understood merely as the metaphysical or causal grounds for the justification of our beliefs, the principle does not appropriately account for our doxastic agency. But (2) if seemings are understood as basic reasons for belief, the view requires an account of the justificatory relations. I argue that this account of justification cannot be modeled on the way in which beliefs justify other beliefs. To resolve this problem, I propose a new account of non-doxastic justification grounded in our doxastic actions. This theory is not an *ad hoc* fix but is derived from independently motivated general considerations.¹

1. The Problem of Agency

According to Huemer (2001, p. 99) “a single principle of foundational justification can account for all foundational beliefs,” namely, Phenomenal Conservatism (PC): If it seems to x that p , then, in the absence of defeaters, x thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p (Huemer 2007).² But PC does not specify how our beliefs are based on our seemings. On its “primitivist” reading, PC asserts

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¹ Throughout, I will assume a psychologistic theory of reasons: All reasons are non-factive cognitive states.

² Related views have been endorsed by Pryor, Chudnoff, and Bengson, among others. I intend my discussion of PC to function as a stand-in for all of them. The problem I wish to raise is a problem for this family of principles and does not depend on the specific details of the proposal.

that a certain class of beliefs – those co-occurring with a content-identical seeming – possess at least some degree of *sui generis* doxastic justification; that is, they are doxastically justified without being based on any reasons.³

But there is a decisive reason to reject the primitivist reading of PC: It is at odds with our epistemic practices. Specifically, on this view our presentational states will not constitute our basic reasons. Instead, our basic reasons are the foundational beliefs themselves. But suppose that I tell my partner that there is a goldfinch in the garden. She is skeptical: “Why do you think that?” “Because I saw one,” I reply. In this case, I appear to cite my perceptual experience as a regress-stopping reason for my belief.⁴ But if primitivism were correct, my regress-stopping reason should simply be the perceptual belief itself. Thus, on the primitivist reading, citing one’s basic reasons does not provide an acceptable stopping point in the Regress Argument. This is a bizarre and unconvincing account of the epistemic relation between seemings and their corresponding beliefs.

Given this, we might instead try a causalist reading of PC and a corresponding causal theory of reasons. On this view, foundational beliefs are based on seemings insofar as they are caused by them and seemings count as reasons merely in virtue of this causal connection. One advantage of this approach is that it provides an account of how foundational beliefs are justified by things other than beliefs. This matters because the phenomenology of foundational beliefs suggests that they do not have deliberative or antecedents. Our seemings appear to simply “give rise” to the corresponding beliefs.

Nevertheless, because causalism takes reasons to be mere causes that do not and need not figure into deliberative *actions* that justify the corresponding belief, this view decouples the normative evaluation of our beliefs from our agency. But arguably, states of the world can be normatively evaluated only insofar as they connect with agency in appropriate ways.⁵ By eschewing any antecedent deliberative action on the part of the believer, causalism attributes normative properties to our belief states solely on the basis of mere happenings. Coupled with the claim that this principle is foundational, the result divorces the justificatory status of our beliefs from our agency. Responsibility for our beliefs requires more than the occurrence of a relevant perception in that belief’s causal etiology. It requires that the belief be connected to the perception in way that makes the believer responsible for their belief. Put differently, the agency requirement demands that seemings be at least motivating (even if not normative) reasons for belief. And it is this that causalism cannot deliver.

³ For easy of exposition, I will drop the qualifier “possesses at least some degree of justification” and instead simply use “justified” full stop. There is a certain awkwardness in making the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification in the absence of reasons, but I think this awkwardness can be overlooked.

⁴ Ordinary speakers of the language typically refer to perceptual states like seeing to invoke the kind of states that philosophers might more carefully refer to by technical terms such as “the perceptual experience ...”.

⁵ See §4 below for further discussion.

A third possible reading is a “quasi-deliberative” model. This is tempting because deliberation is a doxastic action that would solve the preceding concerns over agency. This is how Huemer himself understands PC. He writes, “there is an entailment relation between the two apprehensions and that the one [the seeming] causes the other [the belief] by virtue of the logical relation between them” (2001, p. 96). At the same time, Huemer is clear about the differences: “One does not, on this view, infer the proposition in question from the premise that one has a certain sort of intuition; rather, by having an intuition, one is (seemingly) immediately aware of some particular necessary truth, and *in virtue of that, one is non-inferentially justified* in believing the relevant proposition” (2007, 51, emphasis added).

Reconciling these two aspects of Huemer’s position is not trivial. On the one hand, he seems to be offering up a quasi-deliberative model concerning the ontogenesis of foundational beliefs. But unlike deliberation, the relation between the two apprehensions is not one of justificatory support. On the other hand, he provides theory about the epistemic basis or ground for the justification of foundational beliefs such that they are justified in virtue of those seemings.

I believe that Huemer’s basic idea merits careful attention. In the end, I believe that both the ontogenetic and grounding theses of the proposal need substantial revision and doing this will significantly alter our understanding of PC and its role in epistemology. In order to do this, we will first need to jettison the quasi-deliberative model. As noted above, our perceptual beliefs arise in most cases more or less *automatically* out of our perceptual experiences.

In the next section, I begin to develop an alternative model of belief formation. But before turning to that project, I want to articulate three desiderata from the discussion of this section: (1) The cognitive phenomenology of foundational beliefs demands an automaticity of origin; (2) The normativity of foundational beliefs demands agency in the way these beliefs are based on seemings; (3) Our ordinary epistemic practices demand that seemings count as regress-stopping reasons. At face value, these desiderata cannot be simultaneously satisfied. Nevertheless, I believe that they can be. In the remainder of this paper, I will develop a theory of foundational beliefs and their justification that does just this.

2. Non-deliberative Responses

Recent work in action theory suggests that actions can be non-deliberative as well as deliberative (for discussion see Chan 1995; Hursthouse 1999; McDowell 2007; Dreyfuss 2007; Burge 2009; Di Nucci 2011, 2014; Bengson 2016; Jones 2017). Deliberative actions are those based on prior practical reasoning or having the appropriate standing intentional states arrived at through specific antecedent practical reasoning. Non-deliberative actions have no such background. I will not here defend this distinction.

Rather, I will argue that among the non-deliberative actions, some may be understood as possessing reasons that are both motivating and normative (*pace* Dancy 2000).

Consider a familiar example of a non-deliberative action:

1. a. Drumming my fingers absent-mindedly

(1a) intuitively counts as an action I perform. Jones (2017) makes the plausible suggestion that the natural class of actions may be isolated by appeal to the following characteristic property cluster:

- A1. They are produced by agents.
- A2. They are coordinated behaviors.
- A3. They are, at least partially, under our voluntary control.
- A4. We have non-observational access to them.
- A5. We are unsurprised to find that we have so-acted and uniquely surprised when thwarted.
- A6. They have success conditions.

Call this cluster of properties “the action properties”. Whenever some behavior exhibits many of the action properties to at least some degree, we will be inclined to think that it is an action.

It might seem that non-deliberative actions must be primitive and, therefore, cannot be based on reasons. This is a mistake. To motivate this idea, consider a second example:

1. b. Ducking upon seeing a projectile directed toward my head

In (1b) my ducking depends essentially on an antecedent perceptual stimulus. Yet this action, too, is non-deliberative. Plausibly, therefore, we can distinguish between:

Primitive Non-deliberative Actions (PNDAs): Actions of an agent that are not based on any antecedent deliberation or specific intentions and that do not occur as a response to any antecedent experience that is the subject of the agent’s immediate attention.⁶

⁶ Obviously, primitive non-deliberative actions may occur in response to “ambient” stimuli of various sorts.

Non-deliberative Responses (NDRs): Actions of an agent that are not based on any antecedent deliberation or specific intentions but which are performed in response to some antecedent experience that is the subject of the agent's immediate attention.

At least part of the difference between PNDAs and NDRs is reflected in whether or not they have success conditions. My absent-mindedly drumming my fingers cannot be evaluated as being successful or not. By contrast, my ducking in response to seeing a projectile can be. Similarly, NDRs (unlike PNDAs) can be fitting or not. Ducking seems like a fitting response to a projectile; singing, does not.

These differences between NDRS and PNDAs can help us to understand a more fundamental difference. NDRs are a class of *Intelligent* actions.⁷

3. NDRs, Intelligent Action, and Seemings as Reasons

Why are NDRs Intelligent? Answering this helps lay the groundwork for a central thesis of the paper, namely, that seemings – in their capacity as precipitating experiences of NDRs – are both motivating and normative reasons for those actions.

Ryle noted that some actions display qualities of mind: they are clever or stupid, sensitive or crass. Such actions are Intelligent actions.⁸ What seems to be required for an action to be Intelligent is minimally that an agent perform it *for the sake of* some goal. It is not enough that the action satisfies or advances that goal. Rather, an Intelligent action is something *I* do in order to further my goals. If the action succeeds in furthering my goals, then it might be considered clever or intelligent; if it thwarts those

⁷ Where “Intelligent” here contrasts with “Stupid” to indicate a lack of mental qualities (as reflected in the saying “It’s just a stupid machine”). I follow Bengson & Moffett (2011) here in using “Intelligent” with a capital I to indicate the general class of actions that include intelligent (clever smart, witty, etc.) and stupid (dumb, crass, etc.) actions.

Bengson (2016, 29) suggests that a case he dubs “Flinch” which is similar to the case of ducking does not count as an Intelligent action, though nothing he says commits him to the claim that it is not an action.

Flinch: Your son, intending to tease you, taps you on the shoulder. You look up and see something (your son’s hand) heading towards your face. Although it comes to a stop before making contact, you flinch. The nominal characterization of the response in question (“flinching” vs. “ducking”) may make a difference to our judgments here. Nevertheless, Bengson does concede that such cases may be “evaluable in some respects.” I agree and, consequently, I am inclined to think Bengson’s claim is incorrect. Nevertheless, even with disagreement on borderline cases, the proposal on offer in this paper fits comfortably with Bengson’s overall view.

⁸ I take it that the possession of an Intelligence (i.e., possessing *at least some degree* of rational functioning) is a necessary condition for Intelligent action. The strength of this claim should not be overblown. Much current work in cognitive ethology, for example, suggests that a wide range of organisms display Intelligence. Both crows and octopi, for example, are plausibly *clever* problem solvers. It is possible, of course, that such behaviors are not genuinely Intelligent, but that position does not seem to be well-supported by the current evidence.

goals, it might be stupid.⁹ Ducking in response to projectiles is (defeasibly) the *smart* thing to do, because it is a fitting response. We might think of such cases as cases of “built-in” or “ground floor” Intelligent actions (c.f., Dreyfus (2002) and McDowell (1996)). The explanation for why NDRs count as Intelligent is, I maintain, that they share a structural similarity with deliberative actions, namely, the presence of reasons. Many NDRs are responses to perceptual seemings. Such seemings, should be understood as both motivational and normative reasons, as I will now argue.

The best theories of the nature of seemings currently on offer are presentational theories (e.g., Bealer 1992, Huemer 2001, Bengson 2015; Chudnoff 2013; Moffett 2022, Pust 2000). Presentational states differ from merely representational states in virtue of the fact that they present their contents as true. I take it that the crucial feature of such states is that they are *reveatory* in the sense that they seem to *reveal how things in fact are*. When I have a perceptual experience that there is a projectile headed toward me, this *de se* experience seems to reveal to me how I am oriented with respect to the world. In response, I duck. It seems clear that in such cases what motivates me to duck is the experience. But such responses are typically not preceded by any deliberation; we just respond. Call such presentational states *non-deliberative motivating reasons*.

Moreover, non-deliberative responses can be evaluated in terms of their goodness or badness as responses to their precipitating experiences. Conversely, a given presentational state is a good reason for my action to the extent that my action is a fitting response to what the state appears to reveal about the world (see Howard 2018, fn. 2).¹⁰ The presentational state makes my action reasonable or rational.¹¹

I will here take the concept of fittingness as basic. As a rough characterization, however, a response to a presentational state is fitting modulo my goals only if that response is likely to further my goals, assuming the veracity of the presentational state. The caveat is needed in order to capture the intuition that the same actions “make sense” in response to the same presentational states irrespective of the veridicality of those states.

Generalizing the connection between presentational states and NDRs the following principle is

⁹ “Might” because sometimes the smart action fails and the stupid one succeeds. I take it that not every Intelligent action, so-characterized, is normatively valenced with respect to the little “i” intelligence epithets. If I am walking along and suddenly desire to perform a jumping jack, then my action is Intelligent. But it seems perverse to characterize it as clever or stupid (regardless of whether it is performed well or badly).

¹⁰ Howard notes that the concept of fittingness with which he and others are concerned pertains to attitudes and not actions. I find this focus awkward. It seems to me that a notion of the fittingness of actions and events is far broader and more natural. The notion of the fittingness of an attitude can be recovered via the fittingness of the act of taking that attitude. (I include events here to accommodate cases like this: The January 6th, 2021 Capital riots were a fitting end to the Trump presidency. I disagree with Howard’s contention in fn. 3 that this notion is not concerned with merit or worthiness.)

¹¹ Some responses need not be considered either fitting or unfitting, but are instead normatively neutral. For example, upon seeing a snowflake I might (non-deliberatively) stick out my hand to try to catch it. Such an action need not be fitting or unfitting.

well-motivated:

Presentational States are Reasons: Given the revelatory nature of presentational states, if x is in a presentational state, ϕ , then x thereby has at least some *good non-deliberative normative reason* (namely, ϕ) to act in ways that are fitting modulo some set of x 's goals.

Assuming that having good reasons to act entails (absent defeaters) having at least some degree of justification for so-acting, we can derive the following:

Basic Justified Action (BJA): Given the revelatory nature of presentational states, if x is in a presentational state, ϕ , then, absent defeaters, x thereby has at least some degree of justification to act in ways that are fitting *modulo* some set of x 's goals.

BJA provides a general account of how presentational states can confer a kind of justification on at least some of our actions and serve as something recognizable as reasons for action. In the next section, I will argue that BJA provides an adequate basis for Epistemic Foundationalism.

4. State-Level Justification and Generalized Phenomenal Conservatism

I have been focused on actions and their justification. But it is clear that we have a robust concept of justification as it applies to states. Moreover, in this case, we regularly explain why a state-of-affairs is justified, at least in part, by invoking the justification for the behaviors that gave rise to it.¹² For example, the following question makes perfectly good sense:

- a. Is the current wealth gap in the U.S. justified?

At least one reasonable way of at least, partially addressing answer this question is to try to determine whether or not the behaviors of individual agents that gave rise to this state were justified. So, for example, on Nozick's (1974) entitlement approach to distributive justice, we are asked to consider a given distribution of resources as adequately justified if it arose by way of legitimate mechanisms of initial

¹² This is not to say it is the only way of understanding the justificatory status of states. A second possibility is teleological. For example, a state might be justified because of the good consequences that follow from this state. This kind of teleological justification is, in my view, an overlooked consideration in epistemology.

acquisition and *transfer*. Since these are actions of persons, Nozick's view entails that questions concerning the justification of states-of-affairs can be answered by appealing to the legitimacy of the actions that produce them.

I will call this kind of justificatory relation "resultative justification".

Resultative Justification: If a state-of-affairs, χ , results from an action or set of actions that have some degree of justification, then χ is justified to that degree.¹³

Resultative justification is most naturally understood as a kind of grounding thesis positing a tie between justification at the level of actions and justification at the level of states. An explanation for the acceptability of this principle is not hard to find. Our actions affect the world, and thereby shift it from one state to another. If an action that causes the shift is justified, this is something to be said in favor of the resulting states.

From the combination of BJA and resultative justification, we can derive the following generalized form of phenomenal conservatism:

Generalized Phenomenal Conservatism (GPC): Given the revelatory nature of presentational states, if x performs an action, A , such that A is a fitting NDR to one of x 's presentational states, φ , and if χ is a state of affairs that results from A , then there is at least some degree of justification for χ .¹⁴

As with BJA, GPC provides a general account of how presentational states can confer a kind of justification on at least some of states-of-affairs and how they can serve as something recognizable as reasons for those states-of-affairs.¹⁵

BJA and GPC provide us with a framework for understanding how the perspective of agents

¹³ In the case of states-of-affairs (like the wealth gap) that result from multiple individual actions, it is plausible that only some weighted number of those actions need be justified. This is not a caveat I will consider further.

A fully adequate principle of resultative justification would seem require other caveats as well. One important one depends on the metaphysics of states-of-affairs, specifically, whether or not they are course-grained or fine-grained. I am inclined to a fine-grained theory and this might require restrictions on the scope of the resulting states-of-affairs that inherit the justification, possibly in terms of the epistemic background of the agent. Nevertheless, the principle has, I believe, a high degree of face-value plausibility and trying to settle these nuances here would take us too far afield from the main line of reasoning of this paper.

¹⁴ GPC should be read so that φ is the agent's determining reason for A-ing.

¹⁵ This latter point about reasons relies on a kind of inheritance principle similar to resultative justification: Reasons for action are also reasons for the states those actions produce.

GPC articulates in generalized form the kind of justification epistemologists dub "doxastic justification". Moreover, in this setting, there is a straightforward way of understanding the basing relation. Roughly: χ is based on φ just in case there is an A such that A is an NDR to φ and χ results from A .

grounds the evaluation of their actions and the states that arise from them. In the final section, I spell out the application of these principles to epistemology.

5. Non-Deliberative Doxastic Actions and Epistemic Foundationalism

There is a significant philosophical debate over the possibility of “doxastic agency”. Central to this paper is the issue of doxastic voluntarism and how it bears on the question of the status of judgments as actions. It is clear, of course, that we cannot judge a proposition to be true “at will” and this is sometimes understood to indicate that we lack adequate voluntary control over our judgments for them to count as actions. But such considerations are not compelling. Many uncontroversial acts exhibit similar behavior. Consider, for example, the class of actions I’ll call *givings-in*. If I give in to the seductive overtures of my neighbor, I am performing an action. But I plainly cannot give in to seductions at will; doing so requires a seducer. To give in to something or someone suggests the removal of a kind of resistance or inertia to whatever outcome is being pressed upon us.

This is a better model for judgment: judgments should be understood as acceptances. I cannot accept any proposition at will for the simple reason that I don’t have reasons “pressuring” me to accept every proposition.¹⁶ Given this, I will assume that judgment is a doxastic action.

Now, consider the process of forming a perceptual belief. These beliefs arise as a consequence of our judgments concerning the truth of their propositional contents. As we saw in section 1, foundational beliefs do not have deliberative antecedents. It follows that our perceptual judgments must be non-deliberative as well. While primitive, non-deliberative cognitive actions are possible, they do not seem to be an adequate model for perceptual judgments. Rather, such actions occur as focused (non-deliberative) responses to antecedent perceptual experiences. The relationship between perceptual experience and perceptual judgment is, thus, covered by the principle BJA. Our perceptual experiences constitute good non-deliberative reasons for our perceptual judgments if those judgments are fitting in light of our goals.

Plausibly, however, one of our most important standing goals is the acquisition of true beliefs. Indeed, I take it that a standing goal of any rational agent is true belief.¹⁷ When we evaluate our doxastic actions with respect to this alethic goal, we can think of those actions as being *epistemically* fitting or not. Specifically, to the extent that our doxastic actions would be likely to further our alethic goals assuming the

¹⁶ Moreover, the “pressure” exerted by reasons is directional. If I am confronted with reasons that suggest p, I cannot “give in” to the proposition that not p (for there is no pressure in that direction).

¹⁷ Zagzebski (2004) argues that if we care about anything, we must care about truths concerning that thing. But if we have a goal of truth concerning a given domain, we must have a more general concern for truth – since it is only in light of a generally correct picture of the world that we can hope of having true beliefs about specific parts of that world. On the assumption that caring about some things is not optional, it seems that in a strong sense we *must* have truth (i.e., true belief) as a quite general standing goal.

veracity of the corresponding presentational state, those actions are epistemically fitting. This means that assuming the world is as it is presented to me, forming beliefs based on my presentational states will be epistemically fitting. Thus, we arrive at the following epistemically restricted instance of BJA:

(Basic) Epistemically Justified Action (EJA): Given the revelatory nature of presentational states, if x is in a presentational state, ϕ -that p , then, absent defeaters, x thereby has at least some degree of epistemic justification to judge that p .¹⁸

Moreover, just as in the general case, EJA coupled with resultative justification will entail an epistemically restricted version of GPC, namely,:

Epistemic (Generalized) Phenomenal Conservatism (EPC): Given the revelatory nature of presentational states, if x judges that p and this judgment is an epistemically fitting NDR to one of x 's presentational states, ϕ , then there is at least some degree of justification for x 's belief that p .¹⁹

Nuances aside, EPC is similar to Huemer's original phenomenal conservatism and to related epistemic principles advocated by others. It differs from those principles, however, by explicitly articulating the way in which the justification of foundational beliefs is based in non-deliberative doxastic actions.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have motivated a general theory of the foundations of rational action based on non-deliberative responses to presentational states. That theory was driven by considerations as to how the revelatory nature of our presentational states generate intelligent, non-deliberative responses and why such responses are subject to normative evaluation. From those general principles, I have shown that we can derive a convincing form of epistemic foundationalism, both at the level of justified doxastic action (EJA) and at the level of justified belief (EPC).

In closing, I would like to return to the desiderata with which we finished the opening section. Those were:

¹⁸ EJA is in a sense the weakest principle available because it merely guarantees justifications for judgments whose content is the same as the presentational content. I see no reason, however, why this restriction should be so stringent, particularly in cases such as expert perception. I am doubtful, however, that any general criteria can be articulated to account for this phenomenon.

¹⁹ There is no need to specify the resulting belief state in the antecedent since this is entailed by the judgment that p .

- (1) The cognitive phenomenology of foundational beliefs demands a kind of automaticity of origin
- (2) The normativity of foundational beliefs demands agency in the way these beliefs are based on seemings, and
- (3) Our ordinary epistemic practices demand that seemings count as regress-stopping reasons for our foundational beliefs.

Each of these desiderata is met by EPC: Foundational beliefs are justified because they arise from (1) non-deliberative (2) fitting, judgments based on (3) antecedent presentational states.

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