

# Perception and Basic Beliefs

*Zombies, Modules, and the Problem  
of the External World*

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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2009

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## External Object Foundationalism

There are, as everyone knows, two kinds of foundationalism. Foundationalism is the view that (a) there is a privileged class of basic beliefs, that is, beliefs whose justification does not depend on inferential or evidential connections to other beliefs, and (b) all nonbasic beliefs, if justified, ultimately derive their justification from evidential relations to these basic beliefs. Foundationalism is thus committed to the existence of basic beliefs, but different versions of foundationalism disagree about the nature of these basic beliefs.

*Mental state foundationalism* (henceforth, MSF) is the more traditional view and is quite restrictive about which beliefs it allows as basic. Beliefs about one's current existence, the contents of one's mind, and certain a priori truths are basic, but this is where it ends. MSF holds that the only epistemologically basic beliefs especially relevant to perception are beliefs about the agent's own current mental states, especially beliefs about one's current sensory experiences. In particular, our perceptual beliefs about external objects are not themselves basic but derive their justification from beliefs about how we are appeared to. *External object foundationalism* (EOF), on the other hand, is an increasingly popular view, and it is far more liberal than MSF. While it accepts all the basic beliefs that MSF does, EOF claims in addition that at least some beliefs about external, physical objects are basic.

As everyone knows, there are more than just two kinds of foundationalism; we already had strong, weak, minimal, modest, modern, classical, neoclassical, Cartesian, doxastic, nondoxastic, formal, substantive, simple, and iterative, just to name a few. I divide the field where I do not because we need any more idiosyncratic jargon but because the distinction between MSF and EOF highlights an issue of

central importance in recent epistemology and the overriding concern of the present work: the issue of which beliefs are basic.

Descartes ([1641] 1985) represents the paradigm mental state foundationalist. As is well known, Descartes held that our knowledge of the external world begins with knowledge of our own mental states; these introspective beliefs are basic, and our beliefs about external objects depend inferentially on them. In this way, he endorsed a kind of egoism about the sources of knowledge: all knowledge of other things depends on knowledge of ourselves. In the context of foundationalism, this egoism leads quite naturally to MSF. What is most distinctive and problematic about Descartes's particular version of MSF is his treatment of nonbasic beliefs. On the standard reading, Descartes thought that (some) beliefs about external objects could be deduced from beliefs about one's current mental states, but only via a circuitous route, involving the existence and goodness of God.<sup>1</sup> Although Descartes took other beliefs to be basic as well, for example, belief in one's own existence and certain a priori metaphysical principles, the basic empirical beliefs involved in perception were taken to be beliefs about one's present experiences. Beliefs about bodies, in particular, were explicitly held to be inferential and thus nonbasic. Locke ([1690] 1975) also endorsed a version of MSF where beliefs about external objects are inferentially supported by the basic beliefs about our sensory experiences—not in accordance with Cartesian deduction, however, but via inference to the best explanation. Beliefs about our sense experiences are basic, and certain facts about them—primarily their stability, coherence, and involuntariness—are best explained by the hypothesis that they are caused by external objects. More recently, Chisholm (e.g., 1966, 1977, 1982b, 1989) claimed that the inference to physical objects from the basic beliefs about how one is appeared to is neither deductive nor abductive, but a special, *sui generis*, kind of direct inference: there are fundamental epistemic principles licensing beliefs about physical objects on the basis of corresponding beliefs about one's own mental states.

Predictably, each of these three major branches of MSF is fairly controversial. Though some kind of abductivist theory currently seems to be the most popular version of MSF (see BonJour 1999, 2001, 2002; Fumerton 1985, 1995, 2001; Alan Goldman 1988), it has certainly had its share of critics (including Hume [1739] 1978; Chisholm 1977; Pollock 1986, 2001; Plantinga 2001).

Descartes seems to have held MSF on the assumption that basic beliefs must be infallible, indubitable, incorrigible, or the like, and beliefs about external objects are obviously none of these. For a long time, this general outlook constituted a kind of orthodoxy: though beliefs about one's own current mental states may be infallible or indubitable, beliefs about external objects are clearly not; thus, only the former beliefs might count as basic. However, most contemporary epistemologists now believe with good reason that (a) there need be no such restriction on basic beliefs (nothing like this follows, after all, from a characterization of basicity in terms of noninferential justification) and (b) if there were such a restriction, even beliefs about one's own current mental states would, most likely, fail to count as basic.

1. Although I am laying out what I think is the standard interpretation of Descartes, I don't necessarily mean to cosign. My aims here are to put the epistemological issues in appropriate context, not to engage in any kind of serious historical scholarship. For these purposes, the (perhaps fictional) Descartes of Intro to Philosophy fame will do.

If fallible, dubitable, and/or defeasible beliefs are allowed into the privileged base, however, the traditional Cartesian obstacle to countenancing basic beliefs about external objects falls away. External object foundationalism would avoid the major problems facing MSF by allowing perceptual beliefs—beliefs about physical objects—to be basic. EOF need not worry about what kind of inference would link beliefs about our mental states to beliefs about mind-independent objects or how to show that such an inference is cogent.

More importantly, EOF would offer a tidy solution to the famous problem of the external world.

## 1. The Problem of the External World

For much of the history of epistemology, a central issue—perhaps *the* central issue—has been the problem of the external world. Perception is, or so we think, a rich source of knowledge and justified belief about the world around us. Were it not for perception, we would probably have very little knowledge of any contingent facts. We believe in a world of external objects—tables, rocks, trees, other people, and so on—but how is it possible for such belief to be justified, for it to be reasonable, for it to count as knowledge?

As Montaigne and Descartes pointed out, it is possible to have a dream so vivid and coherent as to be indistinguishable from waking reality. A truly convincing dream, however, would be one where I believed more or less as I do now: that I am sitting at my desk, that there is a coffee cup to my left, and so forth. And, it seems, I would believe these things for more or less the same reasons as I do now: I'm having such-and-such visual, tactile, and other sensory experiences. But if such kinds of experience are compatible with my having a vivid dream, then I need some reason for thinking that these particular experiences are veridical, that they are caused from without rather than from within. And the difficulty is that I seem to have no non-question-begging reason to think that they are thus caused. I couldn't produce an a priori argument against the possibility of dreaming, since dreaming is clearly possible. And all a posteriori arguments have to take for granted the reliability of sense-perception, which is exactly what is currently in question. If all this is so, then my sensory experience as of a cup in front of me seems to offer me no adequate reason for believing that there really is a cup in front of me. A pervasive kind of skepticism seems to result. Thus the problem of the external world.

The problem in its modern formulation is due mainly to Descartes, and of course his own solution was to offer an a priori argument for the existence of God and deduce from God's goodness that a certain subset of sense perception was veridical. However, his arguments, both for the existence of God and for the claim that God's existence validates sense perception, have been notoriously unconvincing.<sup>2</sup>

2. These failures of the Cartesian project are quite independent of the infamous Cartesian circle, the charge being that Descartes illicitly helped himself to an assumption in favor of the legitimacy of reason in constructing his first argument for the existence of God, from which he inferred the legitimacy of reason. The complaint noted here is that even ignoring that circularity, his more modest project of securing the legitimacy of sense perception on the assumption of the legitimacy of reason still fails.

For more than half of the intervening history between Descartes and the present, the dominant solution to the problem of the external world was to endorse some kind of idealism or phenomenalism, the basic idea of which was to solve the problem of the external world by reducing the putatively external world to an essentially internal one. Berkeley ([1710] 1975) claimed that if tables and chairs and the like really are just collections of ideas, rather than mind-independent objects, the problem posed by representative realism would not even arise. Representative realism, typified by Descartes, is the view that perception (i.e., veridical perception) involves three elements: a mind; an external object; and a mental representation of the external object, that is, an idea, sensation, or experiential state. The mind has direct access to the mental representation but only indirect access to the external object. Because the mental representation is logically distinct from the external object, knowledge of the former does not guarantee knowledge of the latter, and this is what generates the problem of the external world.

Idealism and phenomenalism failed, in that they simply could not provide an adequate metaphysics or semantics. Furthermore, it was, or should have been, clear all along that a metaphysical theory was going to be at best a *part* of the solution to the problem. Skepticism concerning the external world is an epistemological problem, and it is highly unlikely that anything short of an epistemological solution was going to suffice. For instance, although Berkeley and his successors claimed that trees and rocks were mind-dependent, they still needed to insist that not all appearances were veridical. Though Berkeley may have had a different theory of hallucination and illusion than the realist, he insisted along with the realist, and took pains to make sense of the fact, that things are not always as they seem. Due to the uncontested fact that there is a distinction between appearance and reality, however, the claim that reality is itself mind-dependent does little to allay the central epistemological worries. My having a certain rocklike visual experience does not entail that there is a rock, for a rock is something more than a particular fleeting sensation. For there to be a rock in front of me is not merely for me to have a certain visual experience; it is also, minimally, for certain counterfactuals to be true, counterfactuals about what additional experiences I would have under certain conditions.

But now I am back in what is essentially the Cartesian predicament: I know I'm having a certain sensation right now, but I need some non-question-begging reason for thinking this sensation indicates the existence of a real object. Though the sensation might be, loosely speaking, a part of the rock, it is nonetheless possible for me to have a qualitatively identical sensation without there being a real rock (i.e., without the relevant counterfactuals being true). Because the sensation is logically distinct from the rock, knowledge of the former does not guarantee knowledge of the latter. Even idealists dream, and I might be dreaming right now, even on the assumption that idealism is true. If so, I am not perceiving a real rock after all. According to Descartes's *epistemological* principles, for me to be justified in believing that this is a real rock, I would need to have some reason to think I am not dreaming. The rest of the argument follows the familiar Cartesian pattern.

An idealist metaphysics would perhaps have the result that objects like rocks and chairs, as collections of mental states, are not utterly foreign to the mind. This may have epistemological consequences, but it is nowhere close to providing a solution to the central skeptical problems. For that, we will need a specification of conditions that are



sufficient for justification and knowledge. Once that epistemological theory is in place, it is far from clear how much the independently inadequate idealist metaphysics really had to contribute. Epistemological problems, it seems, require epistemological solutions.

Since an epistemological solution is going to be needed anyhow, a more promising approach to the problem of the external world has been to grant that there really are external, mind-independent objects and to focus on constructing an epistemology that can explain how justified perceptual belief might be possible. The idea is not to refute the skeptic but merely to undermine the skeptical arguments. Descartes's problem hinges on the claim that we are justified in our external object beliefs only if we are justified in thinking that our sensory experiences are reliable indicators of the truth. This is an epistemological claim and it, or something like it, is an essential premise in most arguments for skepticism about the external world. A plausible epistemology that refutes this claim, or is at least compatible with its denial, provides one important way of avoiding the skeptical conclusion, even if not a way of proving the antiskeptical conclusion.

This is where external object foundationalism comes in. The problem of the external world, at least in its traditional guise, is precisely the problem of explaining whether and how we can legitimately infer beliefs about the external world from beliefs about our own minds. If no adequate such inference is available, skepticism about the external world is apparently inevitable. EOF can sidestep this entire problem, however, by denying that any such inference is even necessary. If it is plausible to think that (some) beliefs about physical objects are basic, then it simply does not matter that we can't draw such beliefs as conclusions from beliefs about perceptual experiences.

It is thus easy to see why EOF of some sort or other has garnered so many adherents in recent years, perhaps even becoming the dominant view in current epistemology. EOF, or something very much like it, has been held by a number of recent authors with otherwise very different theoretical commitments, some calling themselves foundationalists, some direct realists, evidentialists, or even foundherentists, but all of whom agree that perceptual beliefs about physical objects are epistemologically basic. Such a view has been held by the likes of Robert Audi (1998), Bill Brewer (1999), Michael Huemer (2001), John Pollock (1986), James Pryor (2000), Anthony Quinton (1966), Steven Reynolds (1991), and Matthias Steup (2000).<sup>3</sup> Most externalist theories (e.g., Alston 1988; Goldman 1979; Plantinga 1993, 2001) also count as versions of EOF, as I explain in chapter 5. It is largely this rise to prominence of EOF that has debunked the much-rumored death of foundationalism and led to a renewed debate about the more traditional MSF. There has consequently been a "resurrection" (DePaul 2001) of foundationalism both old and new, of MSF and EOF.

Much recent discussion of MSF and EOF has taken place under the rubric of 'direct realism', a rather unfortunate term. There are three main reasons for framing the present discussion in terms of MSF and EOF, rather than direct and indirect realism. First, 'direct realism' is most often used to denote a combined set of metaphysical and epistemological commitments. Because I don't accept this whole package,

3. Some of these authors defend only the claim that there are epistemologically basic beliefs about physical objects without being full-blown foundationalists. The only defender of EOF that I am aware of prior to the last century is Thomas Reid ([1785] 1967, [1764] 1997).

it is important to separate the metaphysical and epistemological views. The very term strongly suggests the metaphysical view rather than the epistemological one. *Metaphysical direct realism* is a claim about the metaphysics of perception, rather than the epistemology of perceptual belief; it is a theory that is opposed to the idealism and representative realism discussed earlier. The epistemological implications of this metaphysical view are not straightforward, as anyone familiar with Hume's *no 'ought' from 'is'* dictum would expect, and as I argue in more detail shortly.

Second, even understood as an epistemological view about the basic status of perceptual beliefs, *epistemological direct realism* does not imply EOF, for it need not be committed to the rest of what distinguishes foundationalism from its rivals.<sup>4</sup> Epistemological direct realism, as I understand it, is simply the claim that some beliefs about external objects are basic. This does not require, as foundationalism does, that *all* justified beliefs ultimately owe their justification to a set of basic beliefs. It is hard to see why someone would deny this foundationalist claim while admitting that there are basic beliefs, indeed, so many of them. Strictly speaking, epistemological direct realism does not imply EOF, although I think—and I argue in chapter 2—that the plausible versions do. This is one reason why I focus on EOF rather than a more general epistemological direct realism.

Although epistemological direct realism does not imply EOF, EOF does imply epistemological direct realism. However, it must be stressed that EOF does not imply the view that is typically *called* 'direct realism.' Most epistemologists who embrace the name hold not only that there are basic beliefs about physical objects but also that these beliefs are based on and justified by nondoxastic experiential states, states of seeming or being appeared to.<sup>5</sup> This is a view that I dub 'experientialism' in chapter 2. It is a common enough version of epistemological direct realism that one might be tempted to equate the two, but there are other, important, versions of EOF that are not experientialist theories. In fact, the version of EOF that I prefer is one such.

This brings us to a final point regarding the term 'direct realism', which is that there is an important sense in which standard (i.e., experientialist) versions of direct realism are not—for my taste, at least—quite direct enough. The reliabilist foundationalism I eventually endorse has the justification of basic beliefs being more direct than standard direct realism does. Whereas standard, experientialist, epistemological direct realism holds that the basic beliefs are based on nondoxastic experiential states, the version of EOF that I endorse allows the basic beliefs to be justified without being based on anything at all.

## 2. Metaphysical and Epistemological Direct Realisms

I have mentioned that the epistemological implications of metaphysical direct realism are far from clear. In fact, I tend to think that the epistemological and metaphysical

4. I return to this in chapter 3. See also the preceding note.

5. A basic belief, again, is one whose justification does not depend on inferential or evidential connections to other *beliefs*, though its basicity is compatible with its justification depending on connections to other mental states, provided that these latter mental states are nondoxastic.

issues are more or less orthogonal. Epistemological direct realism, the view that perceptual beliefs about tables and rocks and the like are epistemologically basic, has little directly to do with the metaphysics of tables and rocks, or—more important for the present purposes—the metaphysics of perception. This is a good time to explain why a book with ‘perception’ in the title contains hardly a mention of sense-data.

Just as Descartes is the founding father of contemporary MSF, Thomas Reid ([1785] 1967, [1764] 1997) is the progenitor of EOF. Reid was the first major philosopher to respond to the problem of the external world, at least in its Cartesian formulation, by endorsing direct realism. However, he conflated the two types of direct realism, and it is essential to keep these separate. The epistemology I will be endorsing is in an important sense a Reidian epistemology, and I view his defense of epistemological direct realism as an insightful step forward. On the other hand, I want to strongly distance myself from his attack on the “ideal theory,” for I see his defense of metaphysical direct realism as an embarrassing slide backward. The best and the worst of Reid’s philosophy are tangled together right here, and it is unfortunate that Reid didn’t seem to notice the difference between the two.

Cartesian-style skeptical arguments against the possibility of perceptual knowledge and justification begin with the claim that nothing is directly present to the mind but its own ideas, or that sensations are the immediate objects of perception, or some similar claim. This is the main point of Descartes’s dream and demon hypotheses, as well as Hume’s eye-pressing experiment.<sup>6</sup> My sensory experiences are distinct from tables and rocks and such, and my access to the latter is apparently mediated by my access to the former. In some sense that is difficult to articulate clearly, the central idea—call it the “primacy of experience thesis”—is that what is directly before the mind in perception is a perceptual experience. The skeptical problem results from the claim that tables and rocks and such are only indirectly present to the mind, and some conspicuously absent argument is needed to get from what is directly present to what is indirectly present. Here is one possible reconstruction of the skeptical argument:

1. The immediate objects of perception are sensations, rather than external objects.
2. We have no non-question-begging reason to think these sensations indicate or render probable the existence of real external objects.
3. To be justified in believing  $p$  on the basis of  $q$ , one must be justified in believing that  $q$  indicates or renders probable  $p$ .
4. Therefore, our perceptual beliefs about external objects are unjustified.

This is a fairly common even if problematic formulation of the argument. I have intentionally left a good deal of “straw” in the first premise for metaphysical direct realism to attack. If this premise, the primacy of experience thesis, is flawed, then the whole argument is undermined, and many direct realists have seized on the

6. In the *Treatise*, Hume invites the reader to press one eye and observe as the visual world doubles. Since the external world presumably did not double, the visual world and the external world are two different things.

unclearly of (1) in an attempt to avoid skepticism. As early as Reid and as recently as Michael Huemer (2001), authors have pointed out that, since we aren't properly said to perceive our experiences, these are not, contra (1), the objects of perception. These experiences are at best the *vehicles* of perception; it is tables and rocks that are the *objects* (Huemer 2001, p. 81).

This is an adequate objection to the letter of (1), but it completely misses the spirit. Representative realists (e.g., Locke [1690] 1975) often say things like (1), and some of them might even mean it, but (1) is a very poorly articulated statement of the primacy of experience thesis. The point is not that we actually perceive our experiences, in anything like the sense of 'perceive' in which we perceive physical objects; in fact, the central claim of representative realism is that our access to mental states is fundamentally different from our access to external objects. If the representative realist refers to sensory experiences as objects of perception, then 'objects of perception' is obviously being used as a term of art.

Perhaps (1) is a misleading way to formulate the primacy of experience thesis. An alternative formulation is this:

- 1'. Nothing is directly present to the mind in perception but sensory experiences.

It is statements like this that have led many to think that rejecting representative realism would provide a solution to the problem of the external world. Representative realism, again, claims that there are three things involved in normal (veridical) perception: (a) the mind, (b) a sensory experience or other representational state, and (c) the external object being represented, with (c) being present to the mind only insofar as (b) is in the mind. Just as the idealist hoped to avoid skepticism by paring this group down to two elements,<sup>7</sup> the naive, or direct, realist makes a similar move but does so by denying the intermediate, (b), rather than the external object.

Reid quite explicitly insisted that there are only two things involved in perception: the mind and the object:

if by ideas are meant only the acts or operations of our minds in perceiving, remembering, or imagining objects, I am far from calling into question the existence of those acts....Nor do I dispute the existence of what the vulgar call the objects of perception....But philosophers maintain that, besides these there are immediate objects of perception in the mind itself: that, for instance, we do not see the sun immediately, but an idea; or, as Mr Hume calls it, an impression in our own minds. This idea is said to be the image, the resemblance, the representative of the sun, if there be a sun. ([1785] 1967, p. 298)

By denying this basic picture, Reid hopes to avoid the skepticism that he sees as being the inevitable result.

There are several ways one might go about denying the existence of mental intermediates. One is to endorse an extreme and probably incoherent kind of

7. However, as we have seen, it turns out on further examination that there are three elements after all, for objects, even if not external, are not (fully) directly present on a reasonably sophisticated idealist view either.

eliminativism: one that admits the existence of minds, (a), but denies the existence of sensory experiences or other representational states, (b). Reid is careful to point out that this is not his approach. It is less clear exactly what he is denying.

Sometimes it sounds as if Reid is denying that sensations are properly classified as *things*: in the language of his day, Reid is claiming that sensations are modes rather than substances. Anticipating more contemporary terms, he frequently insists that sensations are acts rather than objects. These are important and plausible claims, but their bearing on the problem of the external world is far from obvious. Descartes, whose *Meditations* serve as the defining source of both representative realism and the problem of the external world, was very clear about taking experiences as modes rather than substances. Hume does claim that ideas are substances, but he means it more as a *reductio* of the notion of substance than as a positive view about mental states. However, even supposing that (1') tacitly asserts that experiences are genuinely things, it is hard to see how dropping this supposition would make any difference. It is clear that the skeptical arguments can be formulated in a threatening manner without supposing that experiences are substances, since this is precisely what the *Meditations* does.

Nor is it at all apparent that it makes any difference whether experiences are given a sense-datum or an adverbialist treatment. It is perhaps easier to state the skeptical arguments in language that reifies experiences into sense-data than to state them in adverbialist language, but this is probably just because virtually anything is easier to state in sense-datum than adverbialist language. Still, I know that I'm being appeared to redly, but I also know that (it is possible that) in dreams I'm appeared to redly, even when there is nothing red nearby. So, following the basic Cartesian logic, to know that there is something red nearby right now, I would need some non-question-begging reason to think that my presently being appeared to redly really does indicate something red, and for this I would need some reason to think I'm not dreaming. The language of the argument may be slightly different than the standard formulations, but the spirit is the same. And there is good reason for this. Nothing in Descartes's theory of mind commits him to a sense-datum theory.

Whether experiences are modes or substances, sense-data or states of being appeared to, what matters is their status as intermediaries. Representative realism, as I construe it, is the metaphysical doctrine that external objects are perceived, or even thought about, only insofar as a (certain kind of) mental state representative of them is tokened. Representative realism is thus a species of representationalism more generally.<sup>8</sup> Berkeley was a representationalist in that he held that to think about something was to have (i.e., token) an idea of it, though he was certainly not a realist in any ordinary sense. Representationalism is neutral with respect to both the mode–substance debate and the sense-datum–adverbialism debate.<sup>9</sup> Reid also denied representationalism thus construed, and this is the part of Reid I am most concerned to disavow. While

8. "Representationalism" obviously means different things in different contexts; here I mean it as a view about cognition, not as a view about the nature of all mental phenomena, including, e.g., qualia.

9. Chisholm's original formulation of adverbialism (1957) was designed specifically to be ontologically neutral, a fortiori it was neutral with respect to the antirepresentationalist claim that thought and perception are unanalyzable, that, e.g., there's nothing internal to the states themselves that my belief that grass is green has in common with my belief that cows eat grass.

he now does have a genuine opponent, it is far from clear that he has a substantive view to offer in place of representationalism. If thinking about a horse is not a matter of tokening a mental representation of a horse, what is it? Representationalism is the only theory we have of what thinking and perceiving are, of what belief is, of why thought and inference exhibit productivity and systematicity and why they exhibit the particular systematicities they do.<sup>10</sup> Infighting among contemporary representationalists often concerns the existence of certain kinds of systematicity that the other group's preferred representational scheme cannot explain (Fodor and Pylyshyn 1988; Fodor and McLaughlin 1990; Cummins et al. 2001). Nonrepresentationalist theories (if 'theory' isn't too strong a word) cannot explain *any* of the systematicities. Though terms like 'systematicity' are fairly recent, the idea is quite old. A favorite argument of the British empiricists was that their view explained an alleged systematicity between past experience and conceptual capacity; it did so by positing a conceptual representational scheme with a combinatorial syntax and semantics and that derived its primitive semantic constituents from experiential representations.

Representationalism as here construed is the dominant view in contemporary philosophy of mind and in empirical cognitive science, and I think it is true. I won't argue this, however, for two reasons. The first is simply that it would take us too far afield. The second is that this metaphysical view is actually irrelevant to the epistemological problem at hand, the problem of the external world. If the primacy of experience thesis is read as a statement of representationalism, then the first premise is, as I say, fairly secure, but the resulting argument is invalid. Representative realism is the claim that experiences are metaphysical intermediaries, but the first premise of the skeptical argument must be the claim that experiences are epistemic intermediaries. The spatial metaphor of experiences being directly before the mind or directly present to it is innocuous if it is merely intended to convey the claim that thinking and perceiving involve the tokening of representations in virtue of which the thought or perception can be said to be *of* some particular object. Rather, the metaphor is intended to convey the claim that our perceptual beliefs depend *for their justification* on our perceptual experiences, or our beliefs about these experiences.

The primacy of experience thesis—the thesis that is relevant to the present epistemological concerns about skepticism and justified perceptual belief—is the thesis that experiences are *epistemically* prior to perceptual beliefs. This is not something that Descartes actually argues for. The purpose of the demon hypothesis, like that of Hume's eye-pressing experiment, is just to focus our attention on the inner experiential states instead of the external objects that we normally attend to. Having done this, it is simply assumed as self-evident that these experiential states are epistemically

10. A representational system is said to be productive if it has unbounded representational capacities. Thought is generally taken to be productive in the sense that we are capable of thinking indefinitely many different thoughts, and this is attributed to the productivity of the underlying representational system. Systematicity is a matter of certain cognitive capacities coming in clusters. Anyone who is capable of entertaining the thought that John loves Mary is capable of entertaining the thought that Mary loves John. The standard explanation for this is that thought involves a representational system that contains elements, 'John', 'Mary', 'loves', which can be rearranged.

prior to perceptual beliefs. The argument behind the problem of the external world needs to be written somewhat as follows.

- 1". Our perceptual beliefs about external objects are justified, if at all, by appeal to our having certain sensory experiences.
2. We have no non-question-begging reason to think these sensations indicate or render probable the existence of real external objects.
3. To be justified in believing  $p$  on the basis of  $q$ , one must be justified in believing that  $q$  indicates or renders probable  $p$ .
4. Therefore, our perceptual beliefs about external objects are unjustified.

If skepticism is false, then the present argument is unsound, but it is certainly an improvement over the earlier versions. Each of the three premises makes an epistemological claim; there is no attempt to derive an 'ought' from an 'is' here. Though each premise is controversial (each has been denied), each premise has some initial plausibility. And the argument, as thus formulated, makes no assumptions about the metaphysics of perception, so it cannot be deflected by endorsing a different metaphysics of perception. Whatever the metaphysics of perception, if perceptual belief depends epistemically on inferential support from our having such-and-such sensory experiences, the Cartesian problem will remain in need of a solution.

Reid's misguided attack on representationalism obscured his genuinely important contribution: the defense of EOF. Seeing where he went wrong, however, illustrates more distinctly where he went right. Once we see clearly that the notion of direct presence has to be an epistemological notion, we see that the crucial premise, the primacy of experience thesis, is a claim *for which no argument has been given*.

There are, of course, three different premises one might deny in responding to the present skeptical argument. Standard versions of MSF deny premise (2); the Cartesian claims that we have deductive reasons, the Lockean that we have abductive reasons. EOF, however, has two alternative options, and Reid himself is not clear which remaining premise he rejects.

Though I have been leading up to the rejection of (1"), most proponents of EOF actually reject (3) instead. I have left an intentional ambiguity in (1"). The claim could be either that our perceptual beliefs are based on beliefs about experiential states (a doxastic primacy of experience thesis) or that they are based directly on the experiential states themselves (a nondoxastic primacy of experience thesis). The typical defender of epistemological direct realism denies the former but accepts the latter. That is, she accepts *a* primacy of experience thesis, though perhaps not the traditional one. Thus, while the metaphysical direct realist attacks premise (1) or (1'), the epistemological direct realist typically actually *accepts* premise (1"), at least under one disambiguation. The fact that most proponents of epistemological direct realism accept the only premise to which metaphysical direct realism even speaks serves to reemphasize the important difference between these two views. On a standard direct realist epistemology (e.g., Pollock 1986; Audi 1998; Huemer 2001), my being appeared to redly is by itself sufficient for the prima facie justification of my belief that there's something red in front of me; I need not have any specific evidence for thinking that the nondoxastic state renders the belief probable.

There is another way out of the problem of the external world, and that is to reject (1"), the epistemological primacy of experience thesis, in both its doxastic and nondoxastic varieties. This is the route that I take, and it is the route that I see classic versions of reliabilism (e.g., Goldman 1979, 1986) as having taken. On this latter view, experience is irrelevant; it is process reliability that justifies our perceptual beliefs. One can accept premises (2) and (3) and still deny the skeptical conclusion (in chapter 7, I endorse something fairly close to, though not quite identical with, (3)).

Again, my strategy is to endorse an epistemological direct realism without taking on the difficult side project of defending a metaphysical direct realism. Partly because I am not sure how authors usually intend their talk about "direct presence" and the like, I'm not sure whether currently standard versions of metaphysical direct realism are at odds with representationalism in the philosophy of mind. If so, I will be assuming that metaphysical direct realism is false. I assume that our best science embodies our best guess as to how things are, and in particular, our successful cognitive scientific theories draw—to the best of our current knowledge—a fairly accurate picture of the nature of the mind. Our best cognitive science presupposes that cognition is a matter of standing in the appropriate relations to mental representations. And so will I.

### 3. Basic Beliefs

Although EOF is a promising and important theory, it forces us to examine more closely the notion of basic beliefs. The most traditional versions of MSF held that basic beliefs, being largely restricted to beliefs about one's present mental states and simple a priori truths, were infallible, incorrigible, and/or possessed of the highest possible degree of justification. These are strong claims even for MSF and certainly too strong to be endorsed by EOF. Perceptual beliefs about external objects can be mistaken, and thus can in principle be shown to be mistaken, so they are not incorrigible. It is also possible for an agent to persist in such beliefs even after they have been shown to be mistaken, in which case the beliefs are not justified at all, let alone possessed of the highest degree of justification.

These same considerations apply to MSF as well, since it seems that we are quite capable of having false, even unjustified, beliefs about our current mental states. (I may believe that I am appeared to redly simply because my psychic told me so.) But it is far more obvious in the case of EOF, and if we are not to foreclose the possibility of EOF *ab initio*, we will have to construe basic beliefs in terms of prima facie justification rather than justification full stop. To say that a belief is prima facie justified for *S* is to say that *S* is justified (i.e., ultima facie justified) in that belief, *provided* that there is no (epistemic) reason for *S* not to hold that belief. A prima facie justified belief has whatever positive epistemic support is necessary for justification, but it may fail to be justified if the agent also possesses contrary or undermining evidence. A basic belief, therefore, must be defined as one whose prima facie justification does not depend on evidential connections to other beliefs, though the ultima facie justification of the belief may very well depend on connections to other beliefs, at least in a negative way.<sup>11</sup> That is, basic beliefs

11. I will mean by this that the belief does not require evidential connections to other beliefs to have enough justification to meet whatever the threshold is for a belief to count as justified. One can endorse weaker claims on behalf of basic beliefs, though I don't feel that this one is in danger of being too strong.



can be defeasible. Nor is there any good reason to think that if a belief is basic, that belief cannot have its justification bolstered by additional, inferential evidence. Perhaps some enthusiasts have made such claims on behalf of basic beliefs, but I will not.

It is generally recognized that, because of defeasibility, it is possible for a belief to be basic but not (*ultima facie*) justified. However, it is frequently assumed that a basic belief must therefore be at least *prima facie* justified. This does not follow from the current definition of basic beliefs, and it is not something I will assume. A basic belief is one whose *prima facie* justification does not depend on evidential connections to other beliefs. To say that a belief is basic is to say merely that evidential support from other beliefs is not necessary for the justification of that belief; it is not to deny that something else is necessary. On the theory I will endorse, the factors that make a belief basic are quite different from and not sufficient for those that make a belief justified. I will argue that what makes a belief basic is the belief's having a certain psychological etiology and that what makes it justified is its being the result of a reliable process. The distinction between what makes a belief basic and what makes a (basic) belief justified will receive more attention later in this section; I mention it now only to avoid some possible misunderstandings.

External object foundationalism raises some even more pressing questions about the contents of the basic beliefs. EOF holds that some beliefs about external objects are basic. But which ones? Alternatively, which propositions are such that it is possible for an agent to have a justified basic belief with that content? Back when MSF was the only game in town, the answer to such questions looked easy: only beliefs about one's own current mental states (and perhaps all of these) are basic.<sup>12</sup> So, for example, my belief that I'm appeared to redly may be basic, though my belief that there's something red in front of me, according to MSF, would not be.

EOF makes this question of which beliefs are basic much harder to answer. Suppose that some beliefs about physical objects are basic. Then my belief that there's something red in front of me might be basic, as well as my belief (if I have such a belief) that there's a face with such-and-such properties in front of me. But what about my beliefs that Mark is here in front of me, or that my sister's second husband is here in front of me? Are any of these basic, or are they all inferential? When I look at a clock, which of the following beliefs are basic: that there's a white round thing in front of me with black markings and two black rectangular bars forming an obtuse angle, that there's a clock in front of me, that it's currently 3:55 (P.M.)?

A closely related problem involves the long-standing question of where we should (and whether we can) draw the line between perception and inference, or observation and theory.<sup>13</sup> The perception-inference distinction is typically framed in terms of such factive states as seeing *F* or seeing that *p*, but I want to focus on the nonfactive state of having the perceptual belief that *p*. One can have the false perceptual belief that there's a cat in the room, though one cannot falsely *see* that

12. So long as we restrict our attention to the beliefs involved in perception. The MSFist will typically also embrace basic beliefs about one's own current existence, a very hard-to-specify class of necessary truths, and perhaps some contingent a priori truths of an equally hard-to-specify nature.

13. The terminology of 'perception and inference' is more common in epistemology, 'theory and observation' in the philosophy of science. These aren't exactly the same issues, those in the philosophy of science traditionally being tied up with semantics in a way that those in epistemology are not.

there's a cat in the room. Taking the target to be perceptual belief rather than perception allows us to focus on the perceptuality, so to speak, rather than the factivity.

Looking around the room, I form a number of beliefs: my coffee cup is to the left of a pile of CDs; the light on the printer is on, and it is green; the dog is asleep (she is at least lying down with her eyes closed), and the carpet needs to be vacuumed. I smell a familiar odor and realize that I'm probably burning tonight's dinner. Which of these beliefs are perceptual beliefs, and which are inferential? From what beliefs are the inferential beliefs inferred? Descartes ([1641] 1985) claimed that when I look out a window and claim to see people on the street beneath me, all I genuinely *see* are coats and hats and *infer* from this that there are people inside them. Similarly, Berkeley ([1713] 1975) claimed that one does not actually *hear* the coach driving past but only hears a sound that leads one to infer the existence of the coach.<sup>14</sup> Reid ([1785] 1967, p. 184), on the other hand, claims that there is a sense of 'perception' (viz., acquired perception) according to which we really do perceive these sorts of things (in fact, Reid explicitly mentions Berkeley's coach example).

This general sort of debate has carried on into more recent philosophy. Churchland (1979, 1985) thinks that we (at least some of us) can taste the chemical composition of wine and see wavelength distributions. Brandom (1994) goes so far as to claim that a scientist can observe a mu meson moving through a cloud chamber. We do not (or do not merely) infer these things from what we perceive, but we actually perceive them. Presumably, these authors mean not only, for example, that we can perceive a meson moving but also that we can perceive *that* a meson is moving (the latter being opaque to substitution in a way that the former is not), and consequently that the scientist has the justified perceptual belief that a meson is moving, and so forth.<sup>15</sup> Other recent philosophers are somewhat less explicit but seem to have a far more restricted understanding of what we perceive, and they correspondingly assign more credit to inference. Consider, for example, the following discussion of Chisholm's:

In reply to the question, "What is your justification for counting it as evident that it is Mr. *Smith* whom you see?" a reasonable man . . . would say . . . something like this: "(It is evident that:) Mr. Smith is a tall man with dark glasses; I see such a man; no one else satisfying that description would be in *this* room now . . . etc." (1982a, p. 81; italics and last ellipsis in original)

This is a challenging passage. Chisholm does not explicitly deny that the "reasonable man's" belief that he's seeing Smith (or that Smith is nearby) is a perceptual belief, but the description of the case certainly makes it sound as if the belief that Smith is nearby is not a perceptual belief. Chisholm does explicitly deny that beliefs about Smith are basic.

14. There are, to be sure, differences between the Cartesian and Berkeleyan claims, and not just in virtue of the fact that one is about seeing and the other is about hearing. Descartes is here just defending a traditionally narrow view of perception in the context of a commonsense metaphysics. Berkeley, however, thinks that the visible coach and the audible coach are actually different things, whose frequent conjunction must be inferred on the basis of experience. Similarly, the coach is a bundle of properties, of which the sound heard is only one.

15. Churchland, of course, would not himself put it this way, given his well-known eliminativism concerning the propositional attitudes, a view, however, that is independent of the one currently under discussion.

This raises an important question: what is the relation between perceptual beliefs and basic beliefs? The perception-inference distinction looks to be a mixed psychological-epistemic distinction: a perceptual belief is one that has a certain epistemic status and a certain psychological status. It is plausible to think, from the standpoint of EOF, that what is *epistemologically* distinctive about perceptual beliefs is that they are basic. For EOF, at least, there is a very close relation between the question of which beliefs are basic and the question of which beliefs are perceptual. MSF presumably won't see quite so tight a connection, since MSF may want to allow some beliefs about external objects to count as perceptual beliefs, while denying that any of these are basic. This points to another virtue of EOF over MSF: in giving an account of basicity, EOF will have partially solved the problem of which beliefs are perceptual beliefs; MSF will not have even begun. Similarly, it might be possible to get a handle on the problem of which beliefs are basic by first tackling the question of which beliefs are perceptual beliefs and generalizing from there.

Specifying which beliefs are basic will contribute to more than just our theories of perception. For example, not all a priori beliefs are basic; a complete epistemology needs to say which ones are and which ones aren't. The recent "reformed epistemology" movement (Alston 1991; Plantinga 1983, 2000) has raised the question of whether belief in God might be basic. Such questions are perhaps best answered by developing a general theory of basicity and seeing what implications it has for religious belief.

The problem of specifying which beliefs are basic is an important problem, one that needs to be solved for any kind of foundationalism that is to be taken very seriously. I have focused on this problem as it arises for EOF, in part because the problem is most vividly brought out in the context of EOF. In fact, however, the problem of which beliefs are basic arises for MSF as well. MSF claims that the basic beliefs involved in perception are first-person beliefs about one's own mental states. Let us say that an *appearance belief* is a belief about how one is appeared to, while a *perceptual belief* is a belief about external, physical objects. MSF thus claims that appearance beliefs are sometimes basic; perceptual beliefs never are. Even then, however, *which* appearance beliefs are basic? Is my belief that I'm appeared to my-sister's-second-husband-ly basic? Presumably not. However, we need some account of why not. Consider a more common and more difficult case. What should MSF say about the status of my belief that I'm appeared to table-ly? Is it basic, or does its justification depend on a more basic belief about being appeared to as if there is an object of a certain shape in front of me? And does this latter belief in turn depend on beliefs about patches of color having a certain arrangement in the visual field?

One might attempt to answer such questions by claiming that the basic beliefs are justified by the corresponding appearance states, and since it is impossible to be appeared to my-sister's-second-husband-ly, neither my belief that my sister's second husband is nearby nor my belief that I'm appeared to my-sister's-second-husband-ly can be basic. But even if this much is granted, it is far less clear whether I can be appeared to table-ly or whether I can be appeared to as if I am looking at so-and-so's face. Any claims one way or the other here are going to be in need of defense. Some appearance beliefs, like 'I'm appeared to my-sister's-second-husband-ly', are likely too "high level" to be basic, but is there any reason to think that only very low-level appearance beliefs, about arrays of color patches, shapes, and the like, are basic? Is 'I'm appeared to table-ly' already too high level?

What one says about the content of the basic beliefs will constrain and be constrained by what one says about how basic beliefs are justified. In fact, one reason EOF was so long in coming was that it was assumed that basic beliefs must be self-justifying. This concept is actually quite a bit more difficult than the familiarity of the term would suggest (as we will see in chapter 2), but it is natural to suppose at least that if belief *B* is self-justifying, then any belief token with the same content as *B* is (prima facie) justified. If so, then EOF cannot require basic beliefs to be self-justifying, for obviously it is possible to be completely unjustified in believing, say, that there is a rock in my hand. But if the basic beliefs are not self-justifying, what does justify them? It obviously can't be other beliefs, since this would contradict the definition of basicity. One popular answer is that what justifies a basic belief is a corresponding experiential state; another popular answer is that what justifies a basic belief is the reliability of the process that produced it. For EOF to be taken seriously, we will need some reason to think that one of these answers is plausible, and it would be good to know which one.

So we have at least two connected problems that must be faced by any theory committed to the existence of basic beliefs:

*The Source Problem:* Basic beliefs by definition don't receive their justification from evidential relations to other beliefs, so where do they get their justification? Reliability, experiential states, self-justification, etc.?

*The Delineation Problem:* Which beliefs are basic? The MSF-EOF distinction only marks off two very broad categories of responses to this question, and there are many more determinate choices that need to be made within these broad categories.

Thus, as mentioned before, the problem of what makes a belief basic is distinct from the problem of what makes a basic belief justified, though again, answers to these problems are mutually constraining.

I have been concentrating on the delineation problem because, of the problems raised in this section, it is the one that has received the least attention in the literature and will receive the most attention in what follows. We need an account of which beliefs are basic and which are nonbasic. In a sense, of course, we already have one in the definition of basic beliefs as those whose prima facie justification doesn't depend on inferential/evidential support from other beliefs. So a basic belief is one that can be justified even if it doesn't enjoy such evidential support. However, we need more than that. We need a theory that will tell us (at least in principle) which beliefs, specified nonepistemically, are basic and which are nonbasic. Although I will want the theory to do so without invoking any evaluative terms, even a committed nonnaturalist should require that we be in principle able to figure out, for any given belief, whether it is basic, without first knowing the epistemic status of *that belief*.

This is a question that most foundationalists haven't really tackled head-on. The usual approach is to offer a few sufficient conditions for a belief's being basic and leave it at that. I want to remedy that here. The theory I will eventually endorse is an externalist one in that it denies that an agent can tell on the basis of mere reflection whether a given belief is basic. It is externalist in another sense also, in that it is a kind of reliabilist EOF.

I will be adopting the aforementioned strategy of working out a theory of perceptual beliefs according to which such beliefs are basic and generalizing from there to get a full

solution to the delineation problem. I endorse a position that I take to be so *prima facie* plausible as to sound nearly trivial: a perceptual belief is a belief that is the output of a perceptual system. If our perceptual systems deliver beliefs about tables as outputs, then these beliefs about tables count as both perceptual (rather than inferential) and basic. If these systems deliver beliefs about what time it is or who is nearby as outputs, then such beliefs are basic, perceptual beliefs. Such a theory generalizes to the view that whether a belief is basic is determined by the nature of the cognitive system that produced it. Very (*very*) roughly, the features of perceptual systems in virtue of which the beliefs they produce are basic include those properties that are characteristic of modular cognitive systems (Fodor 1983), so the basic beliefs are the ones that are produced by modular systems.<sup>16</sup>

Such an account can then be applied in principle to determine whether any given belief is basic, by looking at the nature of the system that produced it. This will make it possible to answer questions of the sort posed here. We can determine which of the beliefs that result from sensory processes count as epistemologically perceptual by determining which of them are outputs of the perceptual system itself. And we can (in principle) answer controversial questions about basic nonperceptual beliefs, such as belief in God.

As plausible as the theory of perceptual belief just sketched may be, it is at odds with a view that, though seldom explicitly articulated, seems to me to constitute a sort of orthodoxy. This is the view that perceptual beliefs are those that are accompanied by a corresponding sense experience. On this view, perception is essentially experiential; on my view it is not. The orthodox view is not merely an isolated claim about perceptual belief but is integrated into a—perhaps *the*—dominant view in epistemology, according to which the basic beliefs are justified by the corresponding experiential state.<sup>17</sup> I think that there are deep troubles for both this view of perception and its accompanying theory of the source of justification of the basic beliefs.

The theory of basicity I propose (my solution to the delineation problem) will be wedded to a more general reliabilist epistemology (an answer to the source problem). In fact, my theory of basicity is intended in no small measure to help solve certain recurring problems for existing versions of reliabilism. Again, however, such a view is incompatible with the experientialist orthodoxy; if being the reliably caused output of a certain kind of cognitive system is sufficient for *prima facie* justification, then having the appropriate experiential state is not necessary. Thus, to make room for the view I endorse, I will have to argue at length against the orthodox view.

Hence, I want to approach the delineation problem indirectly. I will start with the source problem and argue that only an externalist account of the source of justification of basic beliefs is plausible. This will narrow the field of possible answers to the delineation problem and make it easier to defend the one I prefer.

16. It is not merely the obviousness of the present proposal that makes it sound trivial. There is an appearance of circularity in the claim that perceptual beliefs are those that are the outputs of perceptual systems. To avoid circularity, we will need to be able to specify perceptual systems independently of their outputting perceptual beliefs. This is a difficult matter, one that I address in detail in chapter 4.

17. This claim is intended as an answer to the source problem, not the delineation problem. Absent an account of what the “corresponding” experiential states are—a significant problem on some popular theories of experience—and an account of what sorts of experiential states are possible, the delineation problem has barely been addressed.