

## NATURALIZED FOUNDATIONALISM

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It seems a peculiarity of some of the recent work on foundationalism that it alludes frequently —perhaps more so than work in other areas of epistemology— to the subjective experience of the knower without making any reference to provision of an adequate scientific account of the knower’s experience. Thus Moser, in criticizing Rorty, notes that the Rortian-Sellarsian line on foundationalism seems to rest on asserting a link between one’s own set of propositions with regard to the assertion that  $X$  is  $F$  and those of the larger social community, but that the way out of this sort of criticism is to claim that

One good reason for accepting the foundationalist strategy of ultimately basing the justification of propositions on non-propositional justifiers is that it provides the most plausible way of terminating a potentially endless regress of justification due to propositions.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, what ultimately justifies a proposition is not another proposition, but the sensory experience that gave rise to the proposition. (Again, as Moser has it, it is “... the subjective contents of a nonconceptual perceptu-

<sup>1</sup> Paul Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 171.

al experience”,<sup>2</sup> although Moser tells us little or nothing about how the account of the experience might be articulated.)

Now what one is immediately inclined to say here, particularly given the current amount of comment on the project of naturalizing epistemology, is that there should be a way to naturalize foundationalism so that the “nonconceptual perceptual experience” can be explained in ways that are consonant with the rest of our psychological evidence but that do not undercut the special status of the experience as justification for some strong epistemic claim.<sup>3</sup> In previous pieces I have argued that the difficulty with attempting to naturalize foundationalism is that evidence on the sensory seems to support our intuitive grasp of the fact that much of the sensory is non-veridical. In other words, the attempt to naturalize foundationalism might well be its undoing. But it would seem important to try to be more specific about what this set of assertions really amounts to. In the next two sections I attempt to try to fill in the blanks on the notion of the naturalization of privileged access.

## I

The original special status of the propositions resting on privileged access had something to do, in many accounts, with their hedged status. Perhaps Austin, in *Sense and Sensibilia*, gives us the clearest account of what this hedging entails:

Again, if I had said only “That looks like a star”, I could have faced with comparative equanimity the revelation that

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> It is remarkable that much of the current literature on the naturalization of epistemology is either covertly or overtly anti-foundationalist.

it isn't a star. And so on. Reflections of this kind apparently give rise to the idea that there is or could be a kind of sentence in the utterance of which I take no chances *at all*, my commitment is absolutely minimal; so that in principle *nothing* could show that I had made a mistake, and my remark would be "incorrigible".<sup>4</sup>

Austin goes on to argue, in a celebrated passage, that there is no such thing as a "type" or "sort" of sentence that is incorrigible, and if there were such a thing as an incorrigible utterance, it would probably have to do with the context of the verbalization, rather than the nature of the utterance itself. More importantly, however, Austin's analysis of "looks" locutions reminds us of the sensory experience upon which the hedged or qualified claim originally rested—an experience that Austin analyzes in terms of the very sense-data claims he is interested in refuting, and which, in the classical formulation, is described as "It looks to me as if I see a silvery speck" or "I am appeared to roundly".<sup>5</sup>

One might proceed naively here, and if one had not already acquainted oneself with the history of the moves from Received View foundationalism to ordinary language philosophy and beyond, one might wonder why the focus has been so much upon the propositions and not upon the experience itself. But Austin implicitly answers this query when he remarks upon the fact that one could be wrong, in some sense, about how one is appeared to. (In other words, the experience that is supposed to provide the resting point or justification for the proposition may in some sense not be the experience that one took oneself to be having.) Austin's well-known passage on the color term

<sup>4</sup> J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1964, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

“magenta” follows immediately after the passage quoted above, and although Austin is still involved with an analysis of the proposition at this point (rather than the experience), it is Austin’s contention that the experience itself may in some sense be less than veridical that is crucial here.<sup>6</sup>

The difficulty, then, with the attempt to naturalize foundationalism is that one sees immediately that giving an account of the perceptual experiences is not only theoretically difficult, but risky in the sense that —insofar as any given experience may itself be in “error”— furthering the account of the experience undercuts the certainty that foundationalism seeks. Thus the moves in foundationalism have always been toward specifying precisely the propositions attached to the experience and the chaining or branching of propositions from that bedrock point. In the next section I intend to analyze contemporary work that might at first blush make the naturalization of foundationalism more practicable, but which might still shed light on why it is theoretically problematic.

## II

A great deal of work in perception, visualization and the imagery debate itself helps us to fill in the blanks on what takes place during human visual processing. I can do no more than merely allude to some of the work here, but the crux of the matter from the standpoint of work in foundationalism has to do with what sort of inferences we can make about the status of the visual percept itself on the basis of what we now know about the process.

The descriptivist controversy within the imagery debate brings home to us some of the difficulties involved in coming to grips with the notions of visualization. It is

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 112–113.

not the internal *qualia* that are problematic here; it is the theoretical account of them that is brought to bear within any given philosophical context. As Tye remarks of the battle between the descriptionists and their opponents,

Why does it matter whether image transformation processes are cognitively penetrable? Well, if the mode of operation of such processes can be influenced by people's beliefs and knowledge, then the processes cannot be basic, fixed parts of the cognitive architecture, as [the pro-pictorialist] seems to suppose, and there is no longer any reason to assert that imagery involves operations different from those that manipulate the representations underlying knowledge in general [...]<sup>7</sup>

Tye later goes on to cite evidence that is anti-pictorialist, in other words, evidence that undercuts the notion that images are like inner pictures that reproduce the snapshot-like nature of perception.<sup>8</sup> Tye's point that the cognitive penetrability of imaging is important for this particular dispute in philosophy of mind is obvious. What may not be so obvious is that it also has important ramifications for epistemology. For if the anti-pictorialist stance, or some version of it, is correct, then the notion that an adequate account of the bedrock *qualia* upon which the foundationalist chain of propositions was supposed to rest can be given is also severely undermined. And, as we have seen, the heart of foundationalism is the contention that the chain or pyramid of claims must be traceable back to the fundamental visual experience or percept involved.

Our intuitive sense that much that happens visually—and it is sight that is the sense generally relied upon in

<sup>7</sup> Michael Tye, *The Imagery Debate*, Bradford of MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991, pp. 68, 69–70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

foundationalist schema— is subject to the Austinian criticisms alluded to above is not only bolstered and buttressed by the material cited by Tye, but by some of the recent research on PDP models and visual ocularity. The plasticity (modifiability and changeability) of visual neuronal groups is strong: much new research seems to indicate that it is perhaps stronger than might have been previously thought. Changes in ocular dominance, for example, are easily induced. When we remember that any one of a number of accidental features of the environment might be related to such changes, even in older persons, the solidity of visual *qualia* as foundational constructs is put severely under attack. P.W. Munro, writing in Rumelhart and McClelland, notes:

Several results can be interpreted in terms of an age-defined critical period [. . .] [Researchers] found that MD [monocular deprivation] drives all neurons to strongly prefer the open eye [. . .] Because it is such a striking effect, requiring only 24 hours or less during the height of the critical period [for young animals], the ocular dominance shift under monocular deprivation is often used as a test for assessing cortical plasticity.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, evidence such as the above does damage to our desire to make the visual foundational in two sorts of ways: (1) it reinforces the notion that, as Austin and others have argued, we can always make the claim that what we took to be our initial *qualia* were not in fact our initial *qualia* (in other words, our account of them is always subject to modification); and (2) a host of factors influencing

<sup>9</sup> P.W. Munro, “State Dependent Factors Influencing Neural Plasticity: a Partial Account of the Critical Period”, in *Parallel Distributed Processing: Explorations in the Microstructure of Cognition*, vol. 2, Bradford of MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1986, pp. 474–475.

our vision, some of which are actually related to the physiology of the eye and some of which —traditional factors such as lighting and so forth— are external to it, make it highly unlikely that sufficient similarity of *qualia* could persist over time to employ the *qualia* as foundational.

Now the difficulty we encounter here is that one line of argument wants to remind us of the fact that it was the visual experiences themselves that we desired to take as foundational, and not our account of them. But even if we attempt to divorce the experiences from the propositions that might result or arise from them, the experiences cannot serve as foundational without some account being given of them —otherwise we have no foundation. Everything that we know about vision serves to make the giving of this account somewhat problematic. Furthermore, the notion that there is little or no variance of *qualia*, traditionally attached to foundationalism, is more important than might be imagined. When Russell originally noted that they can be kept going for “two or three minutes”, he did not have access to the physiological information we now possess. It would be difficult to provide an accurate time limit given what we currently know, but one suspects that it would be seconds (or microseconds) at best. A combination of the traditional arguments against the employment of propositions based on putatively fundamental visual *qualia* as foundational combined with more recent research on vision does nothing to shore up the status of the *qualia* of sight as fundamental.

### III

I have argued so far that even a cursory look at contemporary data on the process of visualization does nothing to encourage a move toward the naturalization of foundationalism, since such naturalization seems to subvert the special

status of visual *qualia*. But one might be inclined at this point to return to foundationalism's old home, the proposition of privileged access, in the hope that the merger of such a proposition with some at least slight naturalization might yield a more trustworthy foundationalism than has been previously concocted.

As I have indicated in the preceding sections, the special status of propositions of privileged access has always been at the heart of foundationalism, and indeed is related to the positivist attempts to ground theoretical sentences on observation sentences in the Received View.<sup>10</sup> But the privileged access claims were supposed to have a special status not so much because they reported (almost always) visual *qualia*, but because their reports were hedged. This is part and parcel of Austin's account, and is found throughout the older literature.<sup>11</sup> As Austin indicates, if one makes a claim along the lines of "I seem to see. . ." or "It appears to me. . .", one has made no great claim at all, and attempts to refute the claim leave the utterer more or less unshaken.

An accurate account of the foundationalist chain or pyramid, then, is that it consisted of a number of claims—those at the "top" being, presumably, less hedged and more straightforward—each one of which led back to the base claim which is, generally, hedged. Now here one would like to be able to refer to the general reliability of visual mechanisms, the previous experience of the viewer, our knowledge of the English language, and so forth, to indicate that one's "seeming to see" usually is linked to a veridical visual experience. But the key word here is "usually". Most versions of reliabilism fail to give us a statistical account

<sup>10</sup> See Frederick Suppe, *The Structure of Scientific Theories*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana-Champaign, IL, 1977, for a detailed account of this relationship.

<sup>11</sup> Austin is, of course, drawing on Ayer.



of their reliability.<sup>12</sup> There is no indication of what phrases such as “generally reliable” amount to, and still worse, little indication of how one is to distinguish the reliable from the nonreliable. So the difficulty with allusion to the fundamental proposition in an attempt to see whether or not foundationalism can be naturalized is that one sees how closely the nature of the proposition is related to the visual datum itself. And the status of the visual datum —its duration, its veridicality, its cognitive penetrability and so forth— is precisely what we have just noted as being up for grabs.

Moreover, the standard counterarguments to the hedged propositions seem to stand up. It would be a rare occurrence, no doubt, that a proposition such as “It seems to me that I am seeing a magenta dot. . .” could be retracted almost immediately upon its utterance, but one possible ground for such retraction is misuse of language or of color concepts. One could also imagine that if one took certain visual experiences to be meaningfully had only when the source of the stimulation was something other than, for example, stimulation by an electrode during a scientific experiment, one could be in a position to retract such a statement very quickly if one had reason to question the origin of the magenta qualium.

I have now undertaken an analysis of the possibility of naturalizing foundationalism from two vantage points, the first being the more obvious place of departure of the visual data themselves, and the second being another go-round on the many arguments against the existence of propositions of incorrigibly privileged access. Both of these vantages

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, John Heil, “Reliability and Epistemic Merit”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 62, no. 4, December 1984; James Van Cleve, “Reliability, Justification and the Problem of Induction”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, IX, 1984.

seem to yield a negative on the question of whether foundationalism can significantly be naturalized. But it might be argued that some of the less stringent varieties of foundationalism are vulnerable to naturalization.<sup>13</sup> I intend to address this contention in the next section.

#### IV

Pastin, among others, in his “Modest Foundationalism and Self-Warrant”, has tried to address the notion of constructing a foundationalism that, by virtue of its reliance on a concept weaker than incorrigibility, succeeds in attaining its goals.<sup>14</sup> This particular project might initially look more promising from the standpoint of naturalization, since as I have just argued, part of what is at stake in the problematic of naturalizing foundationalism is the uncertainty and short-livedness of the visual *qualia*. If one were aiming at something less than incorrigibility, presumably these difficulties would not appear to be so insurmountable.

Pastin claims to be aiming at the notion of “self-warrant”. Some of those foundationalists who have been moved to establish bases other than incorrigibility have spoken of “self-justification”,<sup>15</sup> but this notion is also an epistemically strong one. Pastin’s move looks promising precisely because the notion of self-warrant, as initially spelled out by Pastin, appears to be comparatively weak:

Proposition *P* is self-warranted for person *S* at time *t*: (i) *P* is

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the version presented in Mark Pastin, “Modest Foundationalism and Self-Warrant” in George S. Pappas and Marshall Swain (eds.), *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1978.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, passim.

<sup>15</sup> See Chisholm.

warranted for  $S$  at  $t$ , and (ii) not necessarily if  $P$  is warranted for  $S$  at  $t$ , then  $S$  has inductive evidential support for  $P$ .<sup>16</sup>

Pastin goes on to counterexample his own definition several times, finally arriving at an emended version. The technicalities of Pastin's work do not concern us here, but what is important is that the notion of warrant is vague enough that it translates to something like "more believable than not".<sup>17</sup> Surely, one is inclined to say, some propositions (to return to that notion) are formulated in such a way that they provide their own evidence, and that evidence is credible enough that it is more believable than not —and that notion can be naturalized. But the idea that a proposition is more credible than not simply because it is undergirded by a sensory (visual) experience accessible to me is, at base, another form of reliabilism. One of the difficulties with reliabilism, as I have noted, is that degree of reliability is never spelled out, and this notion could reduce to a simple statistical measure of something like odds over 50%. Given a base this weak, some sort of foundationalism probably could be constructed and naturalized; after all, there is no reason to believe that anywhere near 50% of our visual experiences are non-veridical.

But surely that points at the very problem. A naturalized foundationalism of self-warrant, where part of what is meant by "warrant" is simply "does not rely on inductive evidential support", probably can be provided, because no account of visual plasticity or word usage undercuts the visual *qualia* to that extent. But this sort of foundationalism would constitute, so to speak, no foundationalism at all. It does not have enough power to serve as a justification

<sup>16</sup> Pastin 1978, p. 282.

<sup>17</sup> Pastin, *passim*.

for most epistemic claims, and it is more susceptible to naturalization precisely because it is so imprecise.

## V

I have gone at the concept of naturalizing foundationalism in this paper from more than one point of departure. Employing material taken from the imagery debate, accounts of neural plasticity and less-than-incorrigible foundationalism, I have concluded that the project of attempting to naturalize foundationalism is not propitious, and that naturalistic tendencies in epistemology in general, and epistemic justification theory in particular, all point in the direction of some other kind of model of justification.

Part of the difficulty with foundationalism is not just its historical tie-in to now outmoded views such as strong positivism, but its reliance on a relatively unexamined notion of *qualia*. The more we come to know about ourselves neurologically, the less the crude and unsophisticated take on a visual datum of a certain given duration seems to stand up. Foundationalism requires that some set of data be taken as fundamental, that they have some duration and some criteria of recognizability. Most of what we now know about visual processes undercuts these notions, and surely no sense can serve in the manner required other than vision. I conclude that the future of naturalized foundationalism is not a happy one.

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## RESUMEN

Los intentos por naturalizar la epistemología o la teoría de la justificación frecuentemente han pasado por alto el fundacionismo clásico, con su supuesta confianza en la fuerza epistémica de algunas proposiciones o algunos datos. En el presente artículo examino la posibilidad de naturalizar el fundacionismo, y concluyo que hay argumentos firmes en contra de esta posibilidad. Son aludidos y analizados materiales tomados de la controversia sobre imágenes, novedades en plasticidad neural y fundacionismos menos rígidos.

[Traducción: Claudia Chávez A.]