

From: An Introduction to Epistemology

purple thus satisfies the conditions for a basic belief. Of course, this justification can be overridden, and that is the point of calling the belief *prima facie* justified.

You might wonder why Audi's view—and views like it—is not a version of reliabilism. Clearly, Audi counts perceptual beliefs as likely to be true. But Audi thinks that the epistemic basis of a perceptual belief is in principle accessible to the agent. Note that in the preceding principle, the agent must *attentively* believe *on the basis of* a perceptual experience. Audi thus holds that the accessibility of one's reasons is a necessary condition for the justification of belief. This is sufficient to distinguish Audi's view from reliabilism, although Audi is clearly committed to the reliability or likely truth of perceptual beliefs.

Audi is typical of modest foundationalists in that he holds that perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, introspective beliefs, and *a priori* beliefs all are types of basic belief. Although we have presented only the principle of direct justification for perceptual beliefs, Audi also presents similar principles for memory, introspective, and *a priori* beliefs.¹⁷

OBJECTIONS TO FOUNDATIONALISM

Most theorists are willing to concede that beliefs either deductively or inductively derived from justified beliefs are themselves justified.¹⁸ Predictably, then, challenges to foundationalist projects occur with respect to the notion of basic beliefs. Critics of foundationalism want to know why there should be thought to be self-justified beliefs. Put simply, are there basic beliefs? This question can arise in two different ways. First, with respect to the notion of infallibility, are there *infallibly* justified beliefs? Second, and more generally, are there indeed beliefs that are justified, whether fallibly or infallibly, but that nonetheless are *epistemically independent* of other beliefs? We begin this section by looking at the notion of infallible justification. We then consider why the notion of epistemic independence has seemed troubling and how the foundationalists have responded.

Strong Foundationalism and Basic Beliefs

A standard claim of the strong foundationalist is that we have infallible access to the contents of our own mind. This means that one cannot be mistaken about what one is thinking about, sensing, desiring, wishing, and so on. If you ask me, for example, what I am thinking about, and I tell you I am thinking I need more coffee, we typically accept—assuming I am not lying or impaired—that, of course, that is what I am thinking about. Indeed, what better evidence could there be than the typical deliverances of introspection?

— Jack Crumley 1977
Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co.

How could I possibly be wrong? And if I could not possibly be wrong, then this is precisely what we mean by an infallibly justified belief. Thus, beliefs about the contents of my own mind are infallibly justified. The feature that accounts for the infallibility of these beliefs is simply that they are the result of introspection. But do we have reason to hold that beliefs arrived at via introspection are likely to be not just true, but infallibly true? Two different kinds of reason for thinking that this is not so have been suggested.

First, for any belief we might have as a result of introspection, we might also have arrived at the belief by means of an inference. Now, if such beliefs are arrived at via inference, then the inference may be based on mistaken or false premises or, indeed, be merely a faulty inference. This type of objection is illustrated by the following example from Keith Lehrer.¹⁹

Suppose I am thinking that Francis Bacon is the author of *Hamlet*. Further, suppose I falsely think that, if most scholars are to be believed, Bacon is Shakespeare. This false belief that Bacon is Shakespeare is not current; I am not thinking of it at the moment. But when you ask me what I am thinking, I reply that I am thinking that Shakespeare is the author of *Hamlet*. Now, am I correct in believing that this is what I think? Lehrer argues that I would not be correct. Notice that there are a number of things that are true of the former content that are not true of the latter, even if we allow that I do have the mistaken belief about the identity of Shakespeare.

This is undoubtedly a controversial example. First, note why Lehrer thinks I would have *misidentified* the content of my belief. That Shakespeare is the author of *Hamlet* is true. However, if I had told you that I was thinking that Bacon was the author of *Hamlet*, you would have worried that the old guy (me) was not just old but a bit senile as well. A second point is more important for our purposes. Lehrer might be understood as pointing out that we can be mistaken about whether introspection is a *direct* process. Introspection may, on the surface, seem to us to be direct: that is, there are no intervening inferences—we simply “look inside” and “see” what we are thinking. But suppose introspection is not like this. Suppose that on at least some occasions, what goes on is something like an inference, an inference that is hidden from us. Such unconscious inferences do occur. The troublesome point for the infallibilist is that it seems possible for these two cases to go undistinguished. That is, it is possible that we may not be able to tell when introspection is direct or when it is the result of inference. This possibility, in turn, opens up the possibility that introspection may *not* be an infallible process.

Although Lehrer's case may seem a bit odd, it is worth bearing in mind that the reliability of introspection, much less its infallibility, is a subject of much empirical investigation. Even some of the introspectionist psychologists of the early twentieth century held that not just anyone is a “reliable introspector.” Rather, the ability to introspect required some practice and

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learning. More recently, studies indicate that only under certain conditions can the deliverances of introspection be held to be reliable or, even more problematic, infallible.²⁰ This should not be surprising. We know, for example, that the mechanisms that underlie our visual capabilities occasionally break down. This is part of the source of the fallibility of perception. But if we analogously think of introspection as a mechanism, then we might also think that it, too, could break down. But imperfect mechanisms are unlikely to underwrite infallibility.

However compelling these objections to the infallibility of introspection may be, there is still the strong temptation to think that I simply cannot be mistaken about what I am thinking. If I am thinking about a red balloon, then that's all there is to it—I'm thinking about a red balloon. It is worth looking at this idea in a bit more detail. Suppose I have the introspective belief that I am having the sensation of purple. Now, it seems possible to have a sensation and yet to have the wrong belief about the current sense impression. Suppose, for example, that I mistakenly believe that indigo is a type of purple, and I come to have the belief that I am having the sensation of indigo. But I am not; I am having the sensation of purple.

A standard response to this objection is to claim that I am not mistaken about the nature of my sensation; I have only misdescribed it. The assumption that underlies this response is that there is a difference between *recognizing* that I have a certain sensation and *describing* it, or characterizing it as being of a certain type. The recognition is held to be infallible; my description has simply been in error. My mistake has occurred in applying the wrong concept. In this way, at least, introspection is still infallible.

One might object on the ground that no clear-cut line separates recognition from description. Even with very low-grade forms of recognition—for example, recognizing something as familiar as purple—one might object that I must have some beliefs about the nature of the sensation. I must be able to characterize or describe the sensation in at least some ways, and here the possibility of error arises.²¹ For me to characterize the sensation as being of a certain type requires that I have discriminating beliefs about what qualifies as an instance of being of a certain type. The greater this descriptive component in recognition, the greater is the chance of error.

There is a related reason for thinking that the line between recognition and description may not be as clear-cut as the strong foundationalist requires. Introspection is putatively a source of beliefs. More specifically, it is a source of beliefs about the contents of our own minds. This, after all, is part of the aim of strong foundationalism—to identify *beliefs* that are infallibly justified. Now, whatever else beliefs may be or involve, having a belief about something seems to require not only having concepts but also applying those concepts. Suppose we think of applying concepts to sensations as

a type of description. If we adopt this line, then having a belief involves a descriptive component, because having beliefs involves applying concepts. But this line of thought tends to blur the distinction between recognizing and describing sensations. If recognizing a sensation is a belief, then recognizing involves describing or applying concepts. In this view, having a belief ineluctably involves this descriptive or identifying component. If introspection is a source of belief, and if having a belief requires the use of concepts, and if using concepts involves a risk of misusing or misapplying concepts, then introspection is not an infallible source of belief about the contents of our own minds.

A last defense of infallibility is to claim something like the following: I cannot be mistaken about the fact that I am thinking *this*, where we are to understand the force of the "this" as a kind of mental pointing. Critics counter that this line of thought sacrifices much of the content of these basic beliefs. With this sort of specification of the content of an introspective belief, the belief might be thought to contain very little content; the belief doesn't say very much. One might then be somewhat dubious that the strong foundationalist can hope to use these sorts of belief as the *foundation* for our more customary beliefs about glasses, red balloons, and all the familiar objects of our world.²²

Although the preceding seems to cast some doubt on the possibility of infallible beliefs, there remain defenders of infallible belief. Evan Fales, for example, argues in support of infallible beliefs, and in particular, introspective beliefs.²³ Fales contends that it is a mistake to understand infallibility as the *logical* impossibility of mistake. Rather, he construes infallibility as a kind of self-evidence. We have access to the contents of certain mental states, access that guarantees we cannot be mistaken about those contents. Fales designates this sort of access as *cognitive transparency*. Unfortunately, the richness of Fales's argument precludes a detailed consideration of his perception. But we might make a suggestion about the future direction of this argument.

Evidently, much of the argument between advocates and critics of infallibility turns on the nature of introspection itself. Advocates, such as Fales, argue that introspection is the sort of process or mechanism that guarantees the requisite type of access for infallibility. This is, it should be noted, an empirical claim. It is not self-contradictory to assert that the deliverances of introspection might sometimes be mistaken. Consequently, we might profitably turn to cognitive psychology for data that might suggest whether introspection does provide the requisite sort of access. Indeed, William Lyons attempts to construct a model of introspection that takes account of research in cognitive psychology. Now, this is not to claim that Lyons's model of introspection is preferable to Fales's. Lyons is aware that the research is not conclusive. Rather, the suggestion here is that certain empirical results