

CHAPTER 8

Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?

Wilfrid Sellars

I have arrived at a stage in my argument which is, at least *prima facie*, out of step with the basic presuppositions of logical atomism. Thus, as long as *looking green* is taken to be the notion to which *being green* is reducible, it could be claimed with considerable plausibility that fundamental concepts pertaining to observable fact have that logical independence of one another which is characteristic of the empiricist tradition. Indeed, at first sight the situation is *quite* disquieting, for if the ability to recognize that *x* looks green presupposes the concept of *being green*, and if this in turn involves knowing in what circumstances to view an object to ascertain its color, then, since one can scarcely determine what the circumstances are without noticing that certain objects have certain perceptible characteristics – including colors – it would seem that one couldn't form the concept of *being green*, and, by parity of reasoning, of the other colors, unless he already had them.

Now, it just won't do to reply that to have the concept of green, to know what it is for something to be green, it is sufficient to respond, when one is *in point of fact* in standard conditions, to green

objects with the vocable "This is green." Not only must the conditions be of a sort that is appropriate for determining the color of an object by looking, the subject must *know* that conditions of this sort *are* appropriate. And while this does not imply that one must have concepts before one has them, it does imply that one can have the concept of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element. It implies that while the process of acquiring the concept green may – indeed does – involve a long history of acquiring *piecemeal* habits of response to various objects in various circumstances, there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all – and, indeed, as we shall see, a great deal more besides.

[...]

One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims – particular and general – about the world. It is important to note that I characterized the knowledge of fact belonging to this stratum as not only noninferential, but as

Originally published in H. Feigl and M. Scriven (eds), *The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. I (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 293–300.

presupposing no knowledge of other matter of fact, whether particular or general. It might be thought that this is a redundancy, that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, as I hope to show, is itself an episode in the Myth.

Now, the idea of such a privileged stratum of fact is a familiar one, though not without its difficulties. Knowledge pertaining to this level is *non-inferential*, yet it is, after all, *knowledge*. It is *ultimate*, yet it has *authority*. The attempt to make a consistent picture of these two requirements has traditionally taken the following form:

Statements pertaining to this level, in order to “express knowledge” must not only be made, but, so to speak, must be worthy of being made, *credible*, that is, in the sense of worthy of credence. Furthermore, and this is a crucial point, they must be made in a way which *involves* this credibility. For where there is no connection between the making of a statement and its authority, the assertion may express *conviction*, but it can scarcely be said to express knowledge.

The authority – the credibility – of statements pertaining to this level cannot exhaustively consist in the fact that they are supported by *other* statements, for in that case all *knowledge* pertaining to this level would have to be inferential, which not only contradicts the hypothesis, but flies in the face of good sense. The conclusion seems inevitable that if some statements pertaining to this level are to express *noninferential* knowledge, they must have a credibility which is not a matter of being supported by other statements. Now there does seem to be a class of statements which fill at least part of this bill, namely such statements as would be said to *report observations*, thus, “This is red.” These statements, candidly made, have authority. Yet they are not expressions of inference. How, then, is this authority to be understood?

Clearly, the argument continues, it springs from the fact that they are made in just the circumstances in which they are made, as is indicated by the fact that they characteristically, though not necessarily or without exception, involve those so-called token-reflexive expressions which, in addition to the tenses of verbs, serve to connect the circumstances in which a statement is made with its sense. (At this point it will be helpful to begin putting the line of

thought I am developing in terms of the *fact-stating* and *observation-reporting* roles of certain sentences). Roughly, two verbal performances which are tokens of a non-token-reflexive sentence can occur in widely different circumstances and yet make the same statement; whereas two tokens of a token-reflexive sentence can make the same statement only if they are uttered in the same circumstances (according to a relevant criterion of sameness). And two tokens of a sentence, whether it contains a token-reflexive expression – over and above a tensed verb – or not, can make the same *report* only if, made in all candor, they express the *presence* – in *some* sense of “presence” – of the state of affairs that is being reported; if, that is, they stand in that relation to the state of affairs, whatever the relation may be, by virtue of which they can be said to formulate observations of it.

It would appear, then, that there are two ways in which a sentence token can have credibility: (1) The authority may accrue to it, so to speak, from above, that is, as being a token of a sentence type *all* the tokens of which, in a certain use, have credibility, e.g. “ $2 + 2 = 4$.” In this case, let us say that token credibility is inherited from type authority. (2) The credibility may accrue to it from the fact that it came to exist in a certain way in a certain set of circumstances, e.g. “This is red.” Here token credibility is not derived from type credibility.

Now, the credibility of *some* sentence types appears to be *intrinsic* – at least in the limited sense that it is *not* derived from other sentences, type or token. This is, or seems to be, the case with certain sentences used to make analytic statements. The credibility of *some* sentence types accrues to them by virtue of their logical relations to other sentence types, thus by virtue of the fact that they are logical consequences of more basic sentences. It would seem obvious, however, that the credibility of empirical sentence types cannot be traced without remainder to the credibility of other sentence types. And since no empirical sentence type appears to have *intrinsic* credibility, this means that credibility must accrue to *some* empirical sentence types by virtue of their logical relations to certain sentence tokens, and, indeed, to sentence tokens the authority of which is not derived, in its turn, from the authority of sentence types.

The picture we get is that of there being two *ultimate* modes of credibility: (1) The intrinsic credibility of analytic sentences, which accrues to

tokens as being tokens of such a type; (2) the credibility of such tokens as “express observations,” a credibility which flows from tokens to types.

Let us explore this picture, which is common to all traditional empiricisms, a bit further. How is the authority of such sentence tokens as “express observational knowledge” to be understood? It has been tempting to suppose that in spite of the obvious differences which exist between “observation reports” and “analytic statements,” there is an essential similarity between the ways in which they come by their authority. Thus, it has been claimed, not without plausibility, that whereas *ordinary* empirical statements can be *correctly* made without being *true*, observation reports resemble analytic statements in that being correctly made is a sufficient as well as necessary condition of their truth. And it has been inferred from this – somewhat hastily, I believe – that “correctly making” the report “This is green” is a matter of “following the rules for the use of ‘this,’ ‘is’ and ‘green.’”

Three comments are immediately necessary:

(1) First a brief remark about the term “report.” In ordinary usage a report is a report made *by* someone *to* someone. To make a report is to *do* something. In the literature of epistemology, however, the word “report” or “*Konstatierung*” has acquired a technical use in which a sentence token can play a reporting role (a) without being an *overt* verbal performance, and (b) without having the character of being “by someone to someone” – even oneself. There is, of course, such a thing as “talking to oneself” – *in foro interno* – but, as I shall be emphasizing in the closing stages of my argument, it is important not to suppose that all “covert” verbal episodes are of this kind.

(2) My second comment is that while *we* shall not assume that because “reports” *in the ordinary sense* are *actions*, “reports” in the sense of *Konstatierungen* are also actions, the line of thought we are considering treats them as such. In other words, it interprets the correctness of *Konstatierungen* as analogous to the rightness of actions. Let me emphasize, however, that not all *ought* is *ought to do*, nor all correctness the correctness of *actions*.

(3) My third comment is that if the expression “following a rule” is taken seriously, and is not

weakened beyond all recognition into the bare notion of exhibiting a uniformity – in which case the lightning, thunder sequence would “follow a rule” – then it is the knowledge or belief that the circumstances are of a certain kind, and not the mere fact that they *are* of this kind, which contributes to bringing about the action.

In the light of these remarks it is clear that *if* observation reports are construed as *actions*, *if* their correctness is interpreted as the correctness of an *action*, and *if* the authority of an observation report is construed as the fact that making it is “following a rule” in the proper sense of this phrase, *then* we are face to face with givenness in its most straightforward form. For these stipulations commit one to the idea that the authority of *Konstatierungen* rests on nonverbal episodes of awareness – awareness *that* something is the case, e.g. *that this is green* – which nonverbal episodes have an intrinsic authority (they are, so to speak, “self-authenticating”) which the *verbal* performances (the *Konstatierungen*) properly performed “express.” One is committed to a stratum of authoritative nonverbal episodes (“awareness”) the authority of which accrues to a superstructure of *verbal actions*, provided that the expressions occurring in these actions are properly *used*. These self-authenticating episodes would constitute the tortoise on which stands the elephant on which rests the edifice of empirical knowledge. The essence of the view is the same whether these intrinsically authoritative episodes are such items as the awareness that a certain sense content is green or such items as the awareness that a certain physical object looks to someone to be green.

But what is the alternative? We might begin by trying something like the following: An overt or covert token of “This is green” in the presence of a green item is a *Konstatierung* and express observational knowledge if and only if it is a manifestation of a tendency to produce overt or covert tokens of “This is green” – given a certain set – if and only if a green object is being looked at in standard conditions. Clearly on this interpretation the occurrence of such tokens of “This is green” would be “following a rule” only in the sense that they are instances of a uniformity, a uniformity differing from the lightning–thunder case in that it is an acquired causal characteristic of the language user. Clearly the above suggestion, which corresponds to the “thermometer

view” criticized by Professor Price, and which we have already rejected elsewhere, won’t do as it stands. Let us see, however, if it can’t be revised to fit the criteria I have been using for “expressing observational knowledge.”

The first hurdle to be jumped concerns the *authority* which, as I have emphasized, a sentence token must have in order that it may be said to express knowledge. Clearly, on this account the only thing that can remotely be supposed to constitute such authority is the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from the fact that someone makes this report. As we have already noticed, the correctness of a report does not have to be construed as the rightness of an *action*. A report can be correct as being an instance of a general mode of behavior which, in a given linguistic community, it is reasonable to sanction and support.

The second hurdle is, however, the decisive one. For we have seen that to be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only *have* authority, this authority must *in some sense* be recognized by the person whose report it is. And this is a steep hurdle indeed. For if the authority of the report “This is green” lies in the fact that the existence of green items appropriately related to the perceiver can be inferred from the occurrence of such reports, it follows that only a person who is able to draw this inference, and therefore who has not only the concept *green*, but also the concept of uttering “This is green” – indeed, the concept of certain conditions of perception, those which would correctly be called “standard conditions” – could be in a position to token “This is green” in recognition of its authority. In other words, for a *Konstatierung* “This is green” to “express observational knowledge,” not only must it be a *symptom* or *sign* of the presence of a green object in standard conditions, but the perceiver must know that tokens of “This is green” are symptoms of the presence of green objects in conditions which are standard for visual perception.

Now it might be thought that there is something obviously absurd in the idea that before a token uttered by, say, Jones could be the expression of observational knowledge, Jones would have to know that overt verbal episodes of this kind are reliable indicators of the existence, suitably related to the speaker, of green objects. I do not think that it is. Indeed, I think that something

very like it is true. The point I wish to make now, however, is that if it *is* true, then it follows, as a matter of simple logic, that one couldn’t have observational knowledge of *any* fact unless one knew many *other* things as well. And let me emphasize that the point is not taken care of by distinguishing between *knowing how* and *knowing that*, and admitting that observational knowledge requires a lot of “know how.” For the point is specifically that observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g. that this is green, presupposes that one knows general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*. And to admit this requires an abandonment of the traditional empiricist idea that observational knowledge “stands on its own feet.” Indeed, the suggestion would be anathema to traditional empiricists for the obvious reason that by making observational knowledge *presuppose* knowledge of general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, it runs counter to the idea that we come to know general facts of this form only *after* we have come to know by observation a number of particular facts which support the hypothesis that X is a symptom of Y.

And it might be thought that there is an obvious regress in the view we are examining. Does it not tell us that observational knowledge at time *t* presupposes knowledge of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, which presupposes *prior* observational knowledge, which presupposes *other* knowledge of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, which presupposes still other, and *prior* observational knowledge, and so on? This charge, however, rests on too simple, indeed a radically mistaken, conception of what one is saying of Jones when one says that he *knows* that *p*. It is not just that the objection supposes that knowing is an *episode*; for clearly there are episodes which we can correctly characterize as knowings, in particular, *observings*. The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.

Thus, all that the view I am defending requires is that no tokening by *S now* of “This is green” is to count as “expressing observational knowledge” unless it is also correct to say of *S* that he *now* knows the appropriate fact of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, namely that (and again I

oversimplify) utterances of “This is green” are reliable indicators of the presence of green objects in standard conditions of perception. And while the correctness of this statement about Jones requires that Jones could *now* cite prior particular facts as evidence for the idea that these utterances *are* reliable indicators, it requires only that it is correct to say that Jones *now* knows, thus remembers, that these particular facts *did* obtain. It does not require that it be correct to say that at the time these facts did obtain he *then knew* them to obtain. And the regress disappears.

Thus, while Jones’ ability to give inductive reasons *today* is built on a long history of acquiring and manifesting verbal habits in perceptual situations, and, in particular, the occurrence of verbal episodes, e.g. “This is green,” which is superficially like those which are later properly said to express observational knowledge, it does not require that any episode in this prior time be characterizable as expressing knowledge. (At this point, the reader should reread the opening section of this chapter.)

The idea that observation “strictly and properly so-called” is constituted by certain self-authenticating nonverbal episodes, the authority of which is transmitted to verbal and quasi-verbal performances when these performances are made “in conformity with the semantical rules of the language,” is, of course, the heart of the Myth of the Given. For the *given*, in epistemological tradition, is what is *taken* by these self-authenticating episodes. These “takings” are, so to speak, the unmoved movers of empirical knowledge, the

“knowings in presence” which are presupposed by all other knowledge, both the knowledge of general truths and the knowledge “in absence” of other particular matters of fact. Such is the framework in which traditional empiricism makes its characteristic claim that the perceptually given is the foundation of empirical knowledge.

If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has *no* foundation. For to put it this way is to suggest that it is really “empirical knowledge so-called,” and to put it in a box with rumors and hoaxes. There is clearly *some* point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions – observation reports – which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of “foundation” is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.

Above all, the picture is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once.

CHAPTER 9

Epistemic Principles

Wilfrid Sellars

I

The explication of knowledge as “justified true belief”, though it involves many pitfalls to which attention has been called in recent years, remains the orthodox or classical account and is, I believe, essentially sound. Thus, in the present lecture I shall assume that it can be formulated in such a way as to be immune from the type of counterexamples with which it has been bombarded since Gettier’s pioneering paper in *Analysis* and turn my attention to another problem which has dogged its footsteps since the very beginning. This problem can be put in the form of two questions: If knowledge is justified true belief, how can there be such a thing as self-evident knowledge? And if there is no such thing as self-evident knowledge, how can *any* true belief be, in the relevant sense, justified?

But first let us beat about in the neighboring fields, perhaps to scare up some game, but, in any case, to refamiliarize ourselves with the terrain. Thus, are there not occasions on which a person can be said to be justified in believing something which he would not appropriately be said to know? Presumably, to be justified in believing something is to have good reasons for believing it,

as contrasted with its contradictory. But *how* good? Adequate? Conclusive? If adequate, adequate for what? If conclusive, the conclusion of what is at stake?

We are all familiar with Austin’s point concerning the performative character of “I know”. We are also familiar with the fact that, whereas to say “I promise to do A” is, other things being equal, to promise to do A, to say “I know that-*p*” is not, other things being equal, to know that-*p*. Chisholm’s distinction between the *strict* and the *extended* sense of “performative utterance” is helpful in this connection. According to Chisholm,

An utterance beginning with “I want” is not performative in [the] strict sense, for it cannot be said to be an “act” of wanting. But “I want” is often used to accomplish what one might accomplish by means of the strict performative “I request”. Let us say, then, that “I want” may be a “performative utterance” in an *extended sense* of the latter expression.¹

He asks in which, if either, of these senses an utterance of “I know” may be performative. After reminding us that “I know” is not performative in the strict sense of the term, he allows that “[it] is often used to accomplish what one may accomplish by the strict performative ‘I guarantee’ or ‘I give you my word’” and “hence may be performative in an extended sense of the term”.²

Originally published in H. Castaneda (ed.), *Action, Knowledge, and Reality* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 332–49.

He argues, however, that "I know" is not always a substitute for "I guarantee", pointing out that:

Just as an utterance of "I want" may serve *both* to say something about me and to get you to do something, an utterance of "I know" may serve both to say something about me and to provide you with guarantees. To suppose that the performance of the nondescriptive function is inconsistent with the simultaneous performance of the descriptive function might be called, therefore, an example of the *performative fallacy*.³

I think that Chisholm is quite right about this. On the other hand, it seems to me that he overlooks the possibility of a connection between "I know" and "I guarantee" other than the one he considers. "I know that-*p*" might be related to "I guarantee that-*p*" not just as an autobiographical description which on occasion performs the same role as the latter but as one which contains a reference to guaranteeing in its very meaning. Is it not possible to construe "I know that-*p*" as essentially equivalent to "*p*, and I have reasons good enough to support a guarantee" (i.e., to say "I guarantee" or "You can rely on my statement")? Such an account would enable us to recognize a performative element in the very meaning of the verb "to know" without construing "I know" as a performative in the strict sense. It would also preserve the symmetry between first person and other person uses of the verb "to know" which seems to be a pre-analytic datum. Thus, "He knows that-*p*" would entail "He has reasons good enough to support a guarantee that-*p*".⁴

Furthermore, this account would enable us to appreciate the *context dependence* of the adequacy involved. Reasons which might be adequately good to justify a guarantee on one occasion might not be adequate to justify a guarantee on another. Again, the presence of such a performative element in the very meaning of the verb "to know" would account for the fact (if it is a fact) that we rarely think in terms of "I know" in purely self-directed thinkings; that we rarely have thoughts of the form "I know that-*p*" unless the question of a possible guarantee to someone other than ourselves has arisen. Of course, we *can* "tell ourselves" that we know something, but, then, so can we be said to make promises to ourselves.

II

Yet even after justice has been done, perhaps along the above lines, to the performative element in the meaning of the verb "to know", it seems to me that we must recognize a closely related use of this expression which, though it may have implications concerning action, is not in any of the above senses performative. For once the *ethical* issue of how good one's reasons for a belief must be in order to justify *giving a guarantee* is solved, there remains the problem of how good reasons must be to justify believing that-*p*, where to believe that-*p* is obviously not an *action*, let alone a performatory action in either the strict or the extended sense.

Confronted by this question, we are tempted to set apart a class of cases in which the reasons are not only good enough to justify believing that-*p* but good enough to make it absurd *not* to believe that-*p* (or, perhaps, to believe its contradictory). It is perhaps, some such concept as this which is (in addition to the truth condition) the non-performative core of the meaning of the verb "to know".

I think the above discussion has served its primary purpose by highlighting the concept of having good reasons for believing that-*p*. For the solution of the problem which was posed in my opening remarks hinges ultimately on a distinction between two ways in which there can be, and one can have, good reasons for believing that-*p*.⁵

Now one pattern for justifying a belief in terms of good reasons can be called *inferential*. Consider the schema:

p;
So, I have good reasons, all things considered,
for believing *q*.

On reflection, this schema tends to expand into:

I have good reasons, all things considered, for believing *p*;
So, *p*;
So, I have good reasons, all things considered,
for believing *q*.

Further reflection suggests that arguments conforming to this schema have a suppressed

premise. What might it be? Consider the following expanded schema:

I have, all things considered, good reasons for believing p ;
 So, p ;
 p logically implies q ;
 So, I have, all things considered, good reasons for believing q .

The line of thought thus schematically represented would seem to involve the principle,

Logical implication transmits reasonableness.

In cases of this type, we are tempted to say, we have *derivative* good reasons, all things considered, for believing q . We say, in other words, that the reasonableness of believing q is “inferential”.

Notice that the above line of thought is obviously an oversimplification, undoubtedly in several respects. In particular, it is important to note that if I have independent grounds for believing *not- q* , I may decide that I do *not* have good reasons, all things considered, for believing that- p . After all, if p implies q , *not- q* equally implies *not- p* . Yet in spite of its oversimplifications, the above train of thought takes us nearer to the distinctions necessary to solve our problem.

I have been considering the case where one proposition, p , logically implies another, q , and have claimed, with the above qualifications, that logical implication transmits reasonableness. Perhaps we can also take into account, with trepidation, “probabilistic” implication, which would give us the following schema:

It is reasonable, all things considered, to believe p ;
 So, p ;
 p probabilistically implies q to a high degree;
 So, all things considered, it is reasonable to believe q .

Probabilistic justification of beliefs in accordance with this pattern would, presumably, be illustrated by inductive arguments and theoretical explanations. In each case, we move from a premise of the form:

It is reasonable, all things considered, to believe E ,

where “ E ” formulates the evidence, to a conclusion of the form:

It is reasonable, all things considered, to believe H ,

where “ H ” formulates in the first case a law-like statement and in the second case a body of theoretical assumptions.

III

As has been pointed out since time immemorial, it is most implausible to suppose that all epistemic justification is inferential, at least in the sense of conforming to the patterns described above. Surely, it has been argued, there must be beliefs which we are justified in holding on grounds other than that they can be correctly inferred, inductively or deductively, from other beliefs which we are justified in holding. In traditional terms, if there is to be *inferential* knowledge, must there not be *non-inferential* knowledge – beliefs, that is, the reasonableness of which does not rest on the reasonableness of beliefs which logically or probabilistically imply them?

We are clearly in the neighborhood of what has been called the “self-evident”, the “self-certifying”, in short, of “intuitive knowledge”. It is in this neighborhood that we find what has come to be called the *foundational* picture of human knowledge. According to this picture, beliefs which have inferential reasonableness ultimately rely for their authority on a stratum of beliefs which are, in some sense, self-certifying. The reasonableness of moves from the level of the self-evident to higher levels would involve the principles of logic (deductive and inductive) and, perhaps, certain additional principles which are *sui generis*. They would have in common the character of transmitting authoritativeness from lower-level beliefs to higher-level beliefs.

IV

Let us reflect on the concept of such a foundational level of knowledge. It involves the concept of beliefs which are *reasonable*, which have *epistemic authority* or *correctness*, but which are not

reasonable or authoritative by virtue of the fact that they are beliefs in propositions which are implied by other propositions which it is reasonable to believe. Let us label them, for the moment, “non-inferentially reasonable beliefs”.

How can there be such beliefs? For the concept of a *reason* seems so clearly tied to that of an *inference* or *argument* that the concept of non-inferential reasonableness seems to be a *contradictio in adjecto*. Surely, we are inclined to say, for a belief (or believing) to be reasonable, there must be a reason for the belief (or believing). And must not this reason be something other than the belief or believing for which it is the reason? And surely, we are inclined to say, to believe something *because* it is reasonable (to believe it) involves not only that there *be* a reason but that, in a relevant sense, one *has* or is *in possession of* the reason. Notice that I have deliberately formulated these expostulations in such a way as to highlight the ambiguities involved when one speaks of reasonable beliefs.

In attempting to cope with these challenges, I shall leave aside problems pertaining to inferential and non-inferential reasonableness in logic and mathematics and concentrate on the apparent need for “self evidence” in the sphere of empirical matters of fact.

How might a self-justifying belief be construed? One suggestion, modified from Chisholm’s *Theory of Knowledge*,⁶ is to the effect that the justification of such beliefs has the form,

What justifies me in claiming that my belief that *a* is *F* is reasonable is simply the fact that *a* is *F*.

But this seems to point to the existence of inferences of the form,

It is a fact that *a* is *F*;
So, it is reasonable to believe that *a* is *F*,

and one might begin to wonder what principle authorizes this inference.

Something, clearly, has gone wrong. In order for any such argument to do the job, its premise would have to have authority; it would have to be something which it is reasonable to believe. But if we modify the schema to take this into account, it becomes:

It is reasonable to believe it to be a fact that *a* is *F*;
So, it is reasonable to believe that *a* is *F*,

which, in virtue of the equivalence of

believing *a* to be *F*

with

believing it to be a fact that *a* is *F*,

is obviously unilluminating.

V

Now many philosophers who have endorsed a concept of intuitive knowledge are clearly committed to the position that there is a level of *cognition* more basic than *believing*. This more basic level would consist of a sub-conceptual⁷ awareness of certain facts. In terms of the framework that I have sketched elsewhere, there would be a level of cognition more basic than *thinkings* or tokenings of sentences in Mentalese – more basic, in fact, than symbolic activity, literal or analogical. It would be a level of cognition unmediated by concepts; indeed it would be the very *source* of concepts in some such way as described by traditional theories of abstraction. It would be “direct apprehension” of facts; their “direct presence” to the mind.⁸

Schematically we would have,

It is a fact (which I directly apprehend) that *a* is *F*;
So, it is reasonable to have the *conceptual belief* that *a* is *F*.

This multiplication of distinctions raises two serious problems: (1) What sort of entities are *facts*? Do they belong to the real (extra-conceptual) order? That “fact” is roughly a synonym for “truth”, and “true” is appropriately predicated of conceptual items (in overt speech or Mentalese) should give pause for thought.

Then there is also the question: (2) How is “direct apprehension” to be understood? If the apprehending is distinguishable from the

apprehended, is it not also “separable”? Might not apprehending occur without any *fact* being apprehended? If so, an “apprehending that-*p*” might not be an apprehending of the fact that-*p*. Hitting, in baseball, implies that something is hit. “Swinging” does not. To *hit* is to *swing successfully*. Of course, “apprehend”, like “see”, is, *in its ordinary sense*, an achievement word. But does this not mean that, as in the case of “see”, there is a place for “*ostensibly* apprehending”, i.e., *seeming to apprehend*, a concept which does not imply achievement?

Many who use the metaphor “to see” in intellectual contexts overlook the fact that in its literal sense “seeing” is a term for a *successful* conceptual activity which contrasts with “seeming to see”. No piling on of additional metaphors (e.g., “grasping”, which implies an object grasped) can blunt this fact. Now the distinction between *seeing* and merely *seeming to see* implies a criterion. To rely on the metaphors of “apprehending” or “presence of the object” is to obscure the need of criteria for distinguishing between “knowing” and “seeming to know”, which ultimately define what it means to speak of knowledge as a *correct* or well-founded *thinking* that something is the case.

If so, to know that we have apprehended a fact, we would have to know that the criteria which distinguish *apprehending* from *seeming to apprehend* were satisfied. In short, I suspect that the notion of a non-conceptual “direct apprehension” of a “fact” provides a merely verbal solution to our problem. The regress is stopped by an *ad hoc* regress-stopper. Indeed, the very metaphors which promised the sought-for foundation contain within themselves a dialectical moment which takes us beyond them.

VI

What is the alternative? I suggest that the key to our problem is provided by the Verbal Behaviorist model, developed elsewhere. It is, we have seen, a simple, indeed radically over-simplified, model, but it will provide us, I believe, with the outline of a strategy for getting out of the classical labyrinth.

According to this model, it will be remembered, the primary sense of

The thought occurred to Jones that snow is white

is

Jones said “snow is white”,

where the verb “to say” was stripped of some of its ordinary implications and roughly equated with “to utter words candidly as one who knows the language”. In particular, it was purged of the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces which Austin and Grice find so central to their theory of meaning. “To say”, in this sense, was also equated with “thinking-out-loud”.

According to the *VB*, as I describe him, we must also introduce, in order to take account of those cases where one thinks silently, a *secondary* sense of

The thought occurred to Jones that snow is white,

in which it refers to a short-term proximate propensity to think-out-loud that snow is white. When this propensity is “uninhibited”, *one thinks-out-loud*, i.e., thinks in the primary sense of this term (as construed by *VB*). There can be many reasons why, on a particular occasion, this propensity is inhibited. But, for our purposes, the most important is the general inhibition acquired in childhood when, after being taught to think-out-loud, one is trained not to be a “babbling”. One might use the model of an on-off switch which gets into the wiring diagram when the child learns to keep his thoughts to himself.

I have argued elsewhere that yet another concept of “having the thought occur to one that-*p*” can be introduced which stands to the second as the theoretical concept of electronic processes stands to the acquisition (and loss) of the power to attract iron filings (or a bell clapper) by a piece of soft iron in a coil of wire attached to an electric circuit. I argued that the classical concept of thought-episodes can be construed as part of a theoretical framework designed to explain the acquisition and loss of verbal propensities to think-out-loud. In approaching the problem of the status of non-inferential knowledge, however, I shall return to the *VB* model and concentrate, indeed, on the primary sense of

having the thought occur to one that-*p*, i.e., think-out-loud that-*p*.

I have argued elsewhere that perceptual experience involves a sensory element which is in no way a form of thinking, however intimately it may be connected with thinking. This element consists of what I have variously called “sense impressions”, “sensations”, or “sensa”. I argued that these items, properly construed, belong in a theoretical framework designed to explain:

- (a) the difference between merely thinking of (believing in the existence of) a perceptible state of affairs and *seeing* (or seeming to see) that such a state of affairs exists;
- (b) how it can seem to a person that there is a pink ice cube in front of him when there isn't one – either because there is something there which is either not pink or not cubical, or because there is nothing there and he is having a realistic hallucination.

I've explored problems pertaining to the nature and status of this sensory element on many occasions,⁹ but further exploration of this theme would leave no time for the problem at hand.

What is important for our purposes is that perceptual experience also involves a conceptual or propositional component – a “thinking” in a suitably broad sense of this accordion term. In perception, the thought is caused to occur to one that, for example, there is a pink ice cube in front of one. It is misleading to call such a thought a “perceptual judgment” – for this implies question-answering activity of estimating, for example, the size of an object. (I judge that the room is ten feet tall.) Perhaps the best term is “taking something to be the case”. Thus, on the occasion of sensing a certain color configuration, one takes there to be an object or situation of a certain description in one's physical environment.

Let us consider the case where

Jones sees there to be a red apple in front of him.

Given that Jones has learned how to use the relevant words in perceptual situations, he is justified in reasoning as follows:

I just thought-out-loud “Lo! Here is a red apple” (no countervailing conditions obtain); So, there is good reason to believe that there is a red apple in front of me.

Of course, the conclusion of this reasoning is not the *thinking* involved in his original perceptual experience. Like all justification arguments, it is a higher-order thinking. He did not originally *infer* that there is a red apple in front of him. Now, however, he is inferring from the character and context of his experience that it is veridical and that there is good reason to believe that there is indeed a red apple in front of him.

Notice that although the justification of the belief that there is a red apple in front of (Jones) is an inferential justification, it has the peculiar character that its essential premise asserts the occurrence of the very same belief in a specific context.¹⁰ It is this fact which gives the appearance that such beliefs are *self-justifying* and hence gives the justification the appearance of being *non-inferential*.

It is, as I see it, precisely this feature of the unique pattern of justification in question which, misinterpreted, leads Chisholm to formulate as his principle for the “directly evident”;

What justifies me in counting it as evident that *a* is *F* is simply the fact that *a* is *F*.¹¹

To be sure, Chisholm's examples of the “directly evident” are not taken from the domain of *perceptual* beliefs, but rather, in true Cartesian spirit, from one's knowledge about what is going on in one's mind at the present moment. Indeed, he rejects the idea that particular perceptual beliefs of the kind which I illustrated by my example of the red apple are ever directly evident.

On the other hand, though he does think that particular perceptual beliefs of this type can at best be *indirectly evident*, he does think that they can be *reasonable*. Should we say “*directly* reasonable”? I, of course, would answer in the affirmative. Yet it is not clear to me that Chisholm would be happy with this suggestion. If (as he should) he has at the back of his mind the reasoning;

There (visually) appears to me to be a red apple here;

So, it is reasonable for me (to believe) that there is a red apple here,

then he should not object to speaking of the reasonableness in question as “direct”, for the premise does not contain a predicate of epistemic evaluation. If, on the other hand (as he should not), he has at the back of his mind the following reasoning,

It is *evident* to me that there (visually) appears to me to be a red apple here;
So, it is *reasonable* for me (to believe) that there is a red apple here,

we could expect him to object to speaking of his reasonableness as “direct”.

This tension sets the stage for a corresponding comment on Chisholm’s third epistemic principle, which concerns the case where what we visually take to be the case is the presence of something having a “sensible characteristic *F*” (where “*F*” ranges over the familiar Aristotelian list of proper and common sensibles). The principle reads as follows:

- (C) If there is a certain sensible characteristic *F* such that *S* believes that he perceives something to be *F*, then it is *evident* to *S* that he is perceiving something to have that characteristic *F*, and also *evident* that there is something that is *F*.

I shall not pause to quibble over such matters as whether, in the light of Chisholm’s definition of “evident”, it can ever be evident to me that I am perceiving something to be pink or that something in front of me is pink – even if the claim is limited to the facing side. A high degree of reasonableness will do. The point which I wish to stress is that once again the question arises, does Chisholm think of the evidence involved in the principles as “direct” or “indirect”? This time it is clear that he thinks of it as *indirect*. As I see it, then, he has at the back of his mind the following reasoning:

It is *evident* to me that there appears to me to be a pink object here;
So, it is *evident* to me that I perceive a pink object to be here and *evident* to me that there is a pink object here.

The contrasting reasoning would be:

There appears to me to be a pink object here;
So, it is *evident* to me that I perceive a pink object to be here and *evident* to me that there is a pink object here.

Now I suspect that what has misled Chisholm is the fact that if I were to argue,

There appears to me to be a pink cube here;
So, it is highly reasonable for me (to believe) that there is a pink object here,

a skeptic could be expected to challenge me by asking “What right have you to accept your conclusion, unless you have a right to accept the premise? Are you not implying that *you know* that there appears to you to be a pink object here; and must not this claim be a tacit *premise* in your argument?” But, surely, the skeptic would just be mistaken – not, indeed, in asserting that in some sense I *imply* that I know that there appears to me to be a pink object here, but in asserting that this implication must be taken to be a premise in my reasoning, if it is to be *valid*, and, hence, if the corresponding epistemic principle is to be *true*. But in that case, the latter principle would be *not* Chisholm’s (C), but rather:

- (C’) *If it is evident to S that there is a certain sensible characteristic F ...*

The larger import of the above reply to the skeptic will be sketched in my concluding remarks. For the moment, let me say that from my point of view something very like Chisholm’s principle (C) is sound but concerns the *direct* evidence (or, better, *direct* high degree of reasonableness) of certain perceptual beliefs. Let me formulate it as follows:

- (S) If there is a certain sensible characteristic *F* such that *S* believes that he perceives something to be *F*, then it is *evident* to *S* that there is something that is *F* and, hence, that he is perceiving something to be *F*.

Notice that I have reversed the relative position of the two clauses in the consequent as they

appear in Chisholm's principle. This is because, on my interpretation, the *core* of the principle is

- (S1) If I ostensibly see there to be an *F* object here, then it is highly reasonable for me (to believe) that there is an *F* object here.

And the move to

- (S2) If I ostensibly see there to be an *F* object here, then it is highly reasonable for me (to believe) *that I see* there to be an *F* object here

is justified by the conceptual tie between "ostensibly see", "see", and truth.

VII

Chisholm's principle (C) and his other epistemic principles pertaining to perception and memory are themselves justified, as he sees it, by the fact that unless they, or something like them, are true, then there could be no such thing as perceptual knowledge to the effect, to use his example, that there is a cat on the roof. We have here a justification of the "this or nothing" kind familiar to the Kantian tradition. The principles also seem, on occasion, to be treated as candidates for the status of synthetic *a priori* (and even, one suspects, self-evident) truth.

As I see it, on the other hand, these epistemic principles can be placed in a naturalistic setting and their authority construed in terms of the nature of concept formation and of the acquisition of relevant linguistic skills. The model which I have been using is, indeed, a very simple one, and I have largely limited my use of it to the epistemic authority of perceptual beliefs. But if the strategy which I have suggested is successful, it is a relatively simple matter to extend it to memory beliefs. I have discussed the case of non-inferential knowledge of our own mental states in some detail, using this same general strategy, on a number of occasions.¹²

But, surely, it will be urged, facts about learning languages and acquiring linguistic skills are themselves empirical *facts*; and to know these facts involves perception, memory, indeed, all the epistemic activities the justification of which

is at stake. Must we not conclude that any such account as I give of the principle that perceptual beliefs occurring in perceptual contexts are *likely to be true* is circular? It must, indeed, be granted that principles pertaining to the epistemic authority of perceptual and memory beliefs are not the sort of thing which *could* be arrived at by inductive reasoning from perceptual belief. But the best way to make this point is positive. *We have to be in this framework to be thinking and perceiving beings at all.* I suspect that it is this plain truth which is the real underpinning of the idea that the authority of epistemic principles rests on the fact that unless they were true we could not see that a cat is on the roof.

I pointed out a moment ago that we have to be in the framework of these (and other) principles to be thinking, perceiving, and, I now add, acting beings at all. But surely this makes it clear that the exploration of these principles is but part and parcel of the task of explicating the concept of a rational animal or, in *VB* terms, of a language-using organism whose language is *about* the world in which it is *used*. It is only in the light of this larger task that the problem of the status of epistemic principles reveals its true meaning.

From the perspective of this larger task, the metaphor of "foundation and superstructure" is seen to be a false extrapolation, to use a Deweyan turn of phrase, from specific "problematic situations" with respect to which it *is* appropriate. And when we concern ourselves, as Philosophy ultimately demands, with *how it is* with man and his world, as contrasted with the catch-as-catch-can procedures which generate man's awareness of himself and his world, surely we can say, as I wrote some fifteen years ago in an earlier essay on this topic,

There is clearly *some* point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions – observation reports – which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of "foundation" is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.

Above all, the picture is misleading because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where did it

begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once.¹³

Notes

- 1 R. M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 16–17.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 4 Notice that the above account of the relation of “I know” to a performative is not quite the same as Urmson’s. According to the latter, as represented by Chisholm, to say that Mr Jones *knew* some proposition to be true is to say that Mr Jones was “in a position in which he was entitled to say ‘I know’”. This account, as Chisholm points out, brings us back to the original problem of how the first person use of the verb is to be construed.
- 5 I have called attention elsewhere to the importance of distinguishing between questions concerning the reasonableness of believing that-*p* from questions concerning the reasonableness of “acting on the proposition that-*p*”, including guaranteeing that-*p*. The concept of acting on a proposition is clear only in simple cases, as when, for example, the proposition occurs as a premise in the agent’s practical reasoning. When the agent takes probabilities into account, a far more complicated story is necessary to clarify the sense in which a person can be said to have acted on a given proposition. For a discussion of these problems, see my “Induction as Vindication”, *Philosophy of Science* 31 (1964), pp. 197–232.
- 6 Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 28. Chisholm’s principle concerns “what justifies us in counting it as evident that *a* is *F*”. But the “evident” is defined on p. 22 as a special case of the “reasonable”.
- 7 Where “sub-conceptual” is far from being used as a pejorative term.
- 8 It is clearly some such position which is envisaged by many who explicitly reject the equation of knowledge with justified true belief.
- 9 That it is *implicit* in Chisholm’s position becomes clear not only when we reflect (as above) on what his principle concerning the directly evident might mean, but when we take into account his use of such phrases as “state of affairs” that “presents itself to him” or that “is apprehended through itself” (Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 28) and his general commitment to a fact ontology (*ibid.*, chap. 7, *passim*), a “fact”, in the relevant sense, being a “state of affairs which exists” (*ibid.*, p. 104). “Exists” in this context should not be confused with the “existential quantifier” but should be considered as a synonym for “obtains”. It is obviously not self-contradictory to say that some states of affairs do not obtain.
- 9 Most recently in my *Science and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), ch. 1, and in “Science, Sense Impressions, and Sensa: A Reply to Cornman”, *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1971), which is a reply to Cornman’s “Sellars, Scientific Realism, and Sensa”, *Review of Metaphysics* 24 (1970).
- 10 I called attention to this feature of the justification involved in “non-inferential” knowledge in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, and New York: Humanities Press, 1963), chap. 3. Thus, I wrote “... one only knows what one has a right to think to be the case. Thus, to say that one directly knows that-*p* is to say that his right to the conviction that-*p* essentially involves the fact that the idea that-*p* occurred to the knower in a specific way” (*ibid.*, p. 88). I suggested that this “kind of credibility” be called “trans-level credibility”, and the pattern of inference involved in the reasoning which mobilizes this credibility, “trans-level inference”. A similar point was less clearly made in Sections 32–9 of my “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”,

- in Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (eds), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* vol. I (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956). Reprinted as chapter 5 of my *Science, Perception and Reality*.
- 11 Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 28.
- 12 Most recently in my *Science and Metaphysics*, esp. pp. 71 ff., 151 ff.
- 13 "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", sec. 38; quoted from *Science, Perception and Reality*, p. 170.