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IS THE SKEPTIC'S REASONING OUR OWN? EPISTEMOLOGICAL REALISM AS AN INTUITIVE DOCTRINE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Is the skeptic's reasoning our own? That is, is the skeptic's reasoning recognizably ordinary, or is it a product, so to speak, of premises and inferential standards peculiar to ***distinctively*** philosophical preoccupations? The question is an important one on two levels. At a general level, it is important to those who, like myself, regard skepticism as a paradigmatic philosophical issue. For, as such, it raises fundamental concerns regarding the status of philosophical reasoning generally. But even at a more particular level, it raises interesting concerns about the status and domain of epistemology. For, if it could be shown that there is something significantly artificial about the skeptic's *global* concerns over the possibility of empirical knowledge, then the more parochial and immanent agendas of naturalistic knowledge theory would seem to acquire validation. This is because the challenge that has been posed by Stroud and others to naturalized epistemology's comprehensiveness *qua* knowledge theory would have been met. Thus, my concern: Is the skeptic's reasoning about knowledge truly our own? Is his negative proclamation a *discovery* about what we can all reflectively recognize as our true epistemic relation to the world, or is it an *artifact* of some perverse obsession that the skeptic has with an idealized epistemological relation of concern only to him? In the space I have available here, I would like to address at least one aspect of this question.

Let's take "naive physics" to be the view that there exist the sorts of ordinary bodies, characterized by the sorts of ordinary properties and relations, that G. E. Moore spent so much time and ink inventorying. (So

understood, I take it, naive physics isn't contradicted by the findings of more sophisticated physical theories so much as it is merely refined by them.) With this locution in place, we can say that "skepticism" is the view that we cannot know that naive physics obtains.

Michael Williams, though a persistent critic of skepticism, has probably done more than anyone else in recent years to understand it, arguing with insight, comprehensiveness, and style that skepticism, though per chance coherent, is fatally implausible. To this end, he employs what he describes as a "diagnostic theoretical" strategy: identify the basic presuppositions that allow skeptical arguments to run, and then critique these presuppositions' plausibility by highlighting their *covertly theoretical* or *less-than-intuitive* status (Williams 1991, pp. xvii). His own "diagnostic theoretical" critique is almost entirely reductive in form. All arguments for skepticism, Williams tells us, ultimately presuppose Epistemological Realism (henceforth ERealism), which he describes as a thin but seminal "contribution to a theory of the concept of knowledge" (Williams 1991, p. 114). A realist claim about the objects of epistemological enquiry, epistemological realism maintains that "there are objective epistemological relations underlying the shifting contexts and standards of everyday justification" (Williams 1991, p. 425). It contends that different kinds of "knowledge" group themselves into distinct epistemic natural kinds (e. g., "experiential" vs. "external worldly"), some of which are just intrinsically epistemically prior to others. Thus, at its deepest level, ERealism is the view that "empirical knowledge", by virtue of its singular and unified objectificatory structure, has "theoretical integrity" as a subject matter, constituting a genuine kind of thing which is properly subject to investigation at the very general level characteristic of traditional epistemological study.

The most significant moral Williams purports to derive from his "diagnostic theoretical" analysis is the following: Skepticism is primarily underwritten by epistemological, not metaphysical, realism (henceforth MRealism). That is, the ascription of "objectivity" most responsible for skepticism is an ascription of objectivity to knowledge itself as a singular and organic subject matter, not an ascription of objectivity to the "external" world which the skeptic despairs of ever knowing. The plausibility of this claim is extremely important to the success of Williams' overall anti-skeptical argument. For, while he seems to find metaphysical realism to be unproblematic, if not downright obvious, he finds Epis-

temological Realism to be "a false - or at least completely unsupported - thesis" (Williams 1991 p. 358).

In this paper I argue against Williams's claim that the type of epistemological realism presupposed by philosophical skepticism is a contentious or theory-laden doctrine. Insofar as the skeptic's assumptions regarding the fundamental nature of knowledge as a phenomenon go, therefore, the skeptic's reasoning is truly our own. Elsewhere, I have argued for another and broader claim than this, that ERealism is not only intuitive, but, in fact, largely a by-product of metaphysical realism itself (Wilburn, 1977). Herein, however, my concern is with only the first and weaker of these two assertions.

II. WILLIAMS' ARGUMENT

Williams' most sustained objection to the idea that MRealism provides the fundamental grounding for skepticism emerges elegantly in his following response to Nagel (Nagel 1986, p. 68).

> It is not easy to see how realism alone could generate skeptical problems. At the heart of realism lies the thought that truth is a radically non-epistemic notion, the thought that what is true of the world is independent of what we think is true. If truth is a non-epistemic notion, it seems that a proposition can be false, no matter how strong the evidence for it. But there is no obvious route from fallibilism, the thought that we can always get things wrong, to skepticism, the thesis that we never have the slightest reason to suppose that we have got them right (Williams 1988, p. 435).

Before dissecting this passage, let's highlight two features of it. *First*, notice that the "realism" invoked here can simply be understood in terms of a logical independence between whatever the skeptic might count as evidence for our worldly claims and our worldly claims themselves. Being logically independent, Williams' realist claims, these two classes need not systematically covary. *Second*, note that all the talk of big T "Truth" in the preceding passage is dispensable. In particular, the passage's reference to non-epistemic "truth" can be non-problematically replaced by reference to non-epistemic "truths" about the world. This is important because it allows us to simply by-pass Williams' extended discussion of what role, if any, is played in skeptical arguments by semantic realism concerning the existence of a single, uni-

vocal truth relation (Williams 1991 pp. 242-243; 1986). Nothing in the passage above commits us to any particular or substantive construal of "truth". The claim that truth is radically non-epistemic thus effectively amounts to nothing more than the assertion of MRealism, that is, to the assertion of the mind-independence of the world.

So understood, we can take Williams in the passage above to evaluate the two-step inference from (a) MRealism to (b) the fallibility of our beliefs, and finally to (c) global ignorance. Williams accepts the inference from (a) to (b). A world which is independent of our beliefs about it may, he grants, be at variance with these beliefs. That is, it is certainly possible that one or more of these beliefs are false. Williams rejects, on the other hand, the inference from (b), which he sees as an obvious banality, to (c), which he regards as a counterintuitive monstrosity. For, ordinarily we see nothing wrong with the idea that a belief may be fallible while yet strongly supported by evidence. So why, Williams asks, should we regard all our ordinary positive convictions about supporting evidence to be automatically outweighed by the *mere possibility* of error? Why should we conclude from the possibility of error alone that we lack even the "slightest reason" to suppose a well-supported belief true? This inference, he assures us, could only be made to seem plausible by assumptions about the legitimacy of global (all-at-once) doubt which are themselves underwritten by an implicit ERealism hard at work in the shadows of Nagel's reasoning. This evaluation emerges more clearly as we note Williams' reaction to Nagel's suggestion that in attempting to understand how our own constitution contributes to our appearances of the world, we are led to recognize that any story we may try to tell about the character and extent of our contributions to our world theory must itself be treated as questionable. Williams writes:

> The real work is done by Nagel's determination to treat any views we form about our interactions with the world as further elements in a web of belief whose relation to reality is thought to be problematic ... the connection revealed is not between skepticism and objectivity as such but between skepticism and the demand that we "explain", in the sense of "validate", our knowledge of the world as a whole. In the context of this project, it is extremely tempting to suppose that realism demands we treat all our beliefs as "appearances" to be set against "reality". (Williams 1991, p. 249)

Nagel only frets so over the mere fallibility of our worldly beliefs, Williams tells us, because he is determined from the outset to question all our worldly knowledge claims at once. Furthermore, he is only determined to do this, Williams explains, because he assumes that our "worldly knowledge" as a whole is distinct from some other sort of knowledge (i.e., knowledge regarding how we believe the world to be or how it appears to us to be). Thus, Williams' remark that "the connection is not between skepticism and objectivity as such". The connection, he thinks, is really between skepticism and ERealism, albeit mediated by the supposition that we can raise *global* questions about all of our external world knowledge at once. Thus, Williams maintains, Nagel's argument fails for the reason that most all skeptical arguments fail. It is, in fact, virtually identical to "more familiar skeptical arguments" that contrast claims regarding "first-personal sensory experience" with assertions concerning "the external world".

> As we suspected, [Nagel's argument] turns out to differ from more familiar skeptical arguments only in invoking a generalized notion of experiential knowledge, in which everything we believe, rather than just sensory experience, falls under the heading of "appearances"... . Without this tacit foundationalism, there is no argument for skepticism (Williams 1981, p. 249-50, italics mine).

Thus, Williams' chief objection to Nagel's argument that the legitimacy of global doubt regarding external world knowledge as a whole emerges from MRealism is that this argument quickly degenerates into a familiar pattern of reasoning in which a hidden foundationalism directs all the action from offstage. In what follows, I will make recurrent reference to the above critique that Williams offers of Nagel's defense of the credibility of skepticism.

To my mind, the most suspicious feature of this critique emerges clearly in the last-quoted passage above: Williams' suggestion that Nagel's distinction between "the world" and "our beliefs about the world" is simply a generalized variant of the "more familiar" skeptical distinction between "the world" and our "first-person sensory experience". This suggestion strikes me as suspicious because most of Williams' critical arguments are directed against the latter and more familiar skeptical distinction. Indeed, Williams often seems to simply assume that whatever problems arise with this latter distinction (between "the world" and "first-person experience") apply automatically against the former dis-

tinction (between "the world" and "our beliefs about the world"), at least insofar as this former distinction is invoked by Nagel *qua* skeptic. But, now consider: On first blush, it is far from obvious that "foundationalism" informatively labels anything at all if it is taken to range so broadly over two such different doctrines. That is, it is far from obvious that Williams' "foundationalism", as a type of knowledge theory, arises from anything more than false reification. This fact should prove particularly troubling to Williams, given that his overall critique of skepticism relies so much on his own anti-essentialist hesitations. This, then, is the first question we need to investigate: Do Williams' arguments for the counter-intuitiveness, theory-ladeness, and lack of connection with MRealism of the latter and more familiar of these two distinctions cut also against the former distinction? To address this question, let's consider Williams' arguments against the archetypal ERealist assumption of "the more familiar foundationalist skeptical arguments" contrasting the epistemic status of "first-person experience" with the epistemic status of "the world". (We'll henceforth call the "foundationalism" invoked here "Experience-Foundationalism", or ExF). Examining these arguments, we can better see why Williams finds the latter sort of foundationalist distinction to be so implausible and thoroughly independent of MRealism. We need to ask if Williams' reasoning is convincing here. Then, we need to ask if this reasoning is transferable to whatever alleged 'variant of foundationalism' purports to distinguish our "beliefs about the world" from "facts about the world" itself. For, once again, it is only this version of foundationalism (subject to a qualification I will take up later) that is explicitly employed by the skeptic. (We'll henceforth call the "foundationalism" invoked here Belief-Foundationalism, or BeF.)

The dubious ExF assumption of "the more familiar" skeptical arguments is that one's first-personal experience reports are epistemically prior to one's claims about the "physical world", even those best-case claims regarding that portion of the "physical world" which is allegedly in one's immediate perceptual environment. Against this specific form of the ERealist thesis Williams has much to say. Specifically, he argues that the supposed priority of experience is, in all probability, the result of a tempting conflation between ERealism and another obviously true, but much weaker, thesis regarding the mere "neutrality" of experience. Experience's neutrality, on Williams' account, consists in the mere fact of a "logical gap" between statements about experiences and statements

about reality (Williams 1991, p. 73). It consists in the fact that experience is evidentially neutral with respect to our worldly beliefs, that our experience could remain exactly as it is even if all our worldly beliefs were false. The neutrality of experience is mistaken for the epistemic priority of experience, Williams tells us, only when we fail to appreciate that this conceptual gap, in itself, is unable to generate an epistemological asymmetry. "Highlighting a conceptual gap", he writes, "does not establish a standing invitation to traverse it in a particular direction". (Williams 1991, p. 75) That is, neutrality alone does nothing to put us specifically on the experience side of this conceptual gap. To make this additional move, we need to invoke additional assumptions. Perhaps, Williams suggests, these additional assumptions stem from an underlying confusion between the notions of "experience-as-cause" and "experience-as-ground" for our worldly beliefs (Williams 1991, p. 70). We can easily grant, he tells us, that the senses "play a crucial causal role in the genesis of our beliefs" without granting that they "serve as a source or channel of knowledge". (Williams 1991, p. 71) And moreover, even if we were to grant that experiential knowledge does always serve as a source or channel of knowledge (to the extent that experiential knowledge always proves indispensable to worldly knowledge), this alone would still not imply the ultimate and uniform epistemological priority of the former with respect to the latter. For it might still be the case that any given piece of experiential knowledge could only serve its epistemological role within the context of collateral non-experiential information (Williams 1991, p. 71).

What Williams purports to offer us, then, is a diagnostic account of how ExF can seem to us both intuitive and theory-free when, in fact, it is neither. On this account, we mistakenly take the relative evidential neutrality of experiential "knowledge" to imply its epistemic priority only because we confuse causal for justificatory relations, and, correlatively, ignore the collaborative role played in these judgments by collateral non-experiential information.

III. VARIETIES OF FOUNDATIONALISM

Let's probe the above diagnosis more deeply by addressing the two tasks alluded to three paragraphs back. *First*, is the diagnosis plausible as a critique of ExF? *Second*, even if it is plausible as a diagnosis of ExF, does it further manage to cut against BeF as it stands, or at least translate into some closely related diagnosis that does?

Directed against ExF, the central assertion of Williams' critique is a philosophical commonplace these days. This is the assertion that ExF confuses experience's explanatory role for a justificatory role, that it conflates, as suggested above, the notion of "experience-as-cause" with the notion of "experience-as-ground". For, what the diagnosis effectively eschews is the familiar white-haired incorrigibility thesis to which Williams takes recurrent exception in *Groundless Belief* (written approximately a decade and a half before *Unnatural Doubts*), where he lengthily denies the positive account of "pre-linguistic awareness" underlying it. Critiquing the distinction between such "pre-linguistic awareness", or "knowledge by acquaintance", and "knowledge by description", Williams criticizes Russell for failing to recognize the full consequence of the fact that experiences are not bearers of truth-values. To count as knowledge, Williams reminds us, "knowledge by acquaintance" must be ultimately mediated by knowledge by description. For, knowledge is essentially propositional. And propositions can only be assembled through the operation of some fallible faculty of judgment or conceptualization. Thus, no process of "pre-linguistic", "non-inferential" or "conceptually unmediated" experiential access could ever offer us anything possessing the requisite form of knowledge, let alone "incorrigible" or otherwise epistemically privileged knowledge (Williams 1977, p. 74). Consequently, even though there may in fact be a pre-conceptualized element in perception that we process into experience, this element can be at most *causally* prior to our worldly beliefs. It cannot be logically prior to these beliefs because it simply isn't the sort of thing that can enter into logical or inferential relationships. On this account, then, the experiential "given" helps explain, not justify, our worldly beliefs. When depicted as a cause, rather than the ground, of these beliefs, experience plays a direct and obvious role. The occurrence of our experience clearly serves as a causal precondition for the formation of our worldly beliefs. Thus, Williams is perfectly willing to concede, for instance, "that no one who is blind and deaf (etc.) can (reasonably) form beliefs about material things" (Williams 1991, p. 70). But this truism, he notes, hardly entitles us to conclude "that our beliefs about how things are fail to count as knowledge unless they can be derived from, or justified on the basis of, our "experiential data" (Williams 1991, p. 70). We can easily grant, *a la* Wittgenstein, that even though one's belief that one has hands, for example, is causally mediated by one's experience, this belief itself (about one's hands) need be no less certain (in normal circumstances) than the rele-

vant experiential episode(s) (Williams 1991, p. 70). For the purposes of argument, let's grant all this, yielding an answer to our first question about Williams' diagnosis: As a critique of ExF, this diagnosis is indeed successful.

What, however, about our second critical task: Does Williams' diagnostic critique of ExF, either as it stands or else as amended, militate also against BeF? Let's move carefully here, taking care to distinguish BeF from yet one more epistemic privilege thesis with which it may be readily confused, a thesis we may call Belief-About-Experience Foundationalism (henceforth, "BaExF"). Williams' best exposition of this thesis occurs, once again, in *Groundless Belief*, where he critiques phenomenalists who treat as foundational their own beliefs about how they are experientially appeared to (Williams 1977, p. 75). Such foundationalists, Williams argues, ascribe priority to beliefs about experiences only because they seek observational candidates whose characters promise to be completely graspable within the "confines of a single perceptual act" (Williams 1977, p. 75). But, the point of such a search, he suggests, could only be to show that our "physical object" beliefs are, by contrast, never intrinsically credible, a conclusion which itself could only be telling if we assumed in advance that "intrinsic credibility" is somewhere to be found. But this assumption, Williams suggests, immediately returns us to the lap of ExF, as it could itself only be fueled by the presupposition that there is something about experience as a subject matter that makes it a peculiarly amenable object of incorrigible or otherwise privileged belief [Williams 1977, pp. 75-76]. And what could be seen as explaining such alleged privilege, Williams asks, if not experience's supposed immediacy or "giveness" to awareness? Having already conceded that ExF unavoidably falls before the by-now trite observation that the mechanism of "immediate awareness" not only fails to provide epistemically privileged knowledge, but fails to provide knowledge at all, we can now also concede that BaExF founders on related, if not identical, grounds. For, in ascribing special epistemic priority particularly and solely to those of our beliefs concerning experience, BaExF does indeed seem to be fueled by an intuition similar to that underlying ExF: the intuition that experience, as a subject matter of belief, admits of a distinctive observational transparency. Thus, while BaExF is not structurally unsound in quite the manner of ExF, it does suffer for a less direct association with the myth of the given.

Bear in mind that we have examined ExF and BaExF in the preceding two paragraphs solely for purposes of contrast. For, again, neither doctrine is one that the skeptic is obliged to accept. The point of this contrast is to show that Belief Foundationalism (again, BeF), whatever its flaws, does not suffer from the sort of formal difficulty described above. Skepticism, we must remember, contrasts "the way the world actually is" with "our belief that Prosaic Physics obtains". Thus it differs from both its ExF and BaExF variants. Our question now must be: Does it vary enough, and in the right ways, to escape the pattern of objection to which these two more familiar foundationalist creeds are subject? Williams clearly thinks not. As we have seen in the above response to Nagel, Williams insists that BeF differs from such alternatives only by invoking a more "generalized notion of experiential knowledge", more generalized because it labels as "epistemically privileged" beliefs we hold about our beliefs rather than any belief or acquaintance relations we may take ourselves to stand in with respect to our experiences themselves. Thus, even where BeF successfully avoids the bankrupt assumption that experience makes for privileged belief through some special transparency uniquely its own, it might seem to do so merely by attributing this transparency to (at least some of) our beliefs instead. Never mind that the beliefs in question are not chosen for any special content, and thus might as well include our commonplace and familiar confidence in Prosaic Physics rather than some arguably more esoteric and less intuitive conviction about "immediate experience". It is still the case, Williams maintains, that we could only view beliefs as a kind to be peculiarly warrant-conferring if we presumed them to constitute a special and privileged epistemic class. But this, Williams claims, is just ERealism. More pointedly, it is just another variant of foundationalism, albeit with a different focus: on the intentional, rather than the phenomenal, episodes of our mental lives. Thus, Williams asserts, BaExF relies no less upon the essential presupposition that we enjoy "a firmer grasp of what is in the mind than of what is outside it" (Williams 1991, p. 106). In short, then, Williams thinks that ExF, BaExF, and BeF all stem from similar efforts to scan our mental lives for foundational checkpoints on our knowledge. And this fact, he thinks, constitutes a greater similarity between these doctrines than any topical dissimilarities between them could ever counteract.

It is precisely here, however, that I think Williams is mistaken. BeF clearly differs from both ExF and BaExF. More pointedly, it differs from them enough and in the right kinds of ways to escape the pattern of objection to which both these latter two views are subject. The contrast between our knowledge of facts about the world and our knowledge of our own beliefs allows us perfect grounds for a foundationalism of sorts, fully adequate to the task of sponsoring the skeptic's argument. (Solely for ease of exposition, I am somewhat misrepresenting here the kind of notional knowledge for which I am claiming privilege. Later, I will, more accurately, speak of knowledge of the content of our propositional attitudes of which our beliefs about our beliefs is merely one species. We will encounter this qualification in due course.) To see why, let's consider the archetypal example of mistake-making that most often arises in philosophical discussions of belief-fallibility: self-deception. Specifically, let's consider an imagined generic case of self-deception in which "one hides certain beliefs from oneself while simultaneously attributing to oneself certain beliefs one does not possess". The example, with minor revisions, is William Alston's:

> Consider the classic overprotective mother, who is preventing her daughter from going out in society in order to prevent her from developing into a feared rival. This mother stoutly and sincerely denies wanting to prevent her daughter's development and believing that her policy is likely to lead to any such result. Instead, she says, she is motivated solely by a desire to protect her daughter from harm. It certainly does seem at least possible that there are such cases in which the person both has desires and beliefs without knowing that he has them and attributes to himself desires and beliefs he does not have (at least not to the extent that he supposes). Moreover, in such cases other people will have substantial grounds for doubting what the woman says about the desires and beliefs in question, and it even seems possible that others may sometimes be in a position to show (using realistic standards for this) that she is mistaken; so that not even indubitability or incorrigibility hold for beliefs or desires". (Alston 1971, p. 391)

This example (questions of possible unintended sexist connotations aside) clearly exhibits the central features of self-deception. And in the course of this, it also illustrates the idiosyncrasies of the model in terms of which the underlying mechanism typically fueling first-personal belief fallibility is most intuitively described and understood. In particular, we can see how this model crucially differs from the one we have seen blunt

the aspirations of both ExF and BaExF. As we have noted, the model underlying both these two earlier accounts is one on which the epistemic privilege being postulated accrues as a function of the peculiar accessibility or transparency of a particular subject matter (i.e., first-personal experience). The model underlying Alston's description of self-deception, on the other hand, differs fundamentally from this. On Alston's picture, we can be mistaken about our sincere beliefs because we can manufacture *contrary* beliefs through which we can, as it were, block these more sincere beliefs from view. The entire focus of this model of mistake-making differs from the earlier model detailed in our discussion of ExF and BaExF. This earlier model is one on which mistakes arise as we inaccurately report occurrences whose natures we invariably distort in the very process of introspecting them. But Alston's alternative model of mistake making through self-deception is one on which the notion of faulty introspection plays no such role. Indeed, this latter model appears to be one that explicitly treats self-ascriptions of conscious belief as peculiarly secure. Why? For self-deception to transpire, the model tells us, our genuine beliefs must be driven below awareness by being blocked from view, as it were, by self-serving appearances of sincere belief to which, it is presupposed, we enjoy relatively superior epistemic access. In retrospect, of course, this shouldn't be at all surprising: The special alleged transparency of experience upon which ExF directly (and BaExF indirectly) depends ultimately fails to deliver its promised epistemic priority precisely because we can utilize it for epistemic purposes only through mediating beliefs. We cannot enjoy direct access to experience, we are told, because such access must always be mediated by intervening and fallible beliefs.

It is this difference between the terms in which we cast our understanding of BeF vis-a-vis its ERealist alternatives (ExF and BaExF) that makes Williams' general category of "foundationalism" itself a little suspect. For, one of the most recurrent themes of *Unnatural Doubts* is his expansive anti-essentialism. Neither knowledge nor truth, he tells us, are things to which we need ascribe general natures. But, given the differences described above between ExF's (and BaExF's) and BeF's respective models of error, Williams should certainly be wary of treating ExF, BaExF and BeF as *of a kind*. It begins to look like a distorting generalization to view claims regarding the alleged epistemic priorities of experience and belief as effectively identical merely because they both alleg-

edly involve distinctions between "knowledge of external things" and "knowledge of what is in the mind" (Williams 1991, p. 106). Indeed, Williams' very phrasing of the distinction(s) here seems intended to cast BeF as much more theory-laden than it actually is. This phrasing suggests that in accepting the model of mistake-making underlying BeF we automatically commit ourselves to some or other substantive and particular "theory of the mind". But this suggestion is arguably misdirected. It is better targeted at ExF and BaExF, and only for reasons that effectively serve to highlight the respect in which these two epistemic priority theses significantly differ from BeF. The former accounts take epistemic priority to accrue from an especially perspicacious mentalistic subject matter (i.e., experience) to which we are obliged to describe the nature of our special access. *BeF on the other hand, results directly from the realization that this sort of account takes us nowhere.* It results from the recognition that all our access to reality must ultimately proceed through mediating beliefs rather than through "direct confrontation" with experience or, for that matter, with anything else (e.g., tables and chairs).

At this point, however, one can easily imagine Williams' impatient response. Granted, he might say, our beliefs mediate our apprehension of the world. But, once again, why is this anything more than an truistic causal point or "logical gap"? How does it translate into an epistemic asymmetry? Why, in short, does BeF constitute any better grounds for a genuine foundationalism than ExF? How does the causal mediation described on the above account translate into a relation of relative epistemic priority?

Let's consider this question closely. *First*, I will give a tentative account of the mechanics of BeF. *Second*, I will then qualify this account in the following paragraph. The reason for this qualification will be to show that even the mechanics of certainty, as Alston envisions them, are more problematic than any we need suppose in our efforts to offset Williams' critique of epistemic priority. We will still end up with a version of BeF that is good enough for our purposes. But, it will presuppose even less than Alston would have us think. BeF is even less of a theory-laden doctrine than it is on Alston's characterization.

On Alston's formulation of BeF, epistemic privilege accrues to what might be called our *second-order* beliefs: conscious beliefs we hold about the content of various other first-person beliefs. Granted, second-

order beliefs are no less "appearances" or representations of beliefs than cognitively processed experiences are "appearances" or representations of pre-conceptualized input. To this extent, second-order beliefs and experiences may both be rather innocuously said to be "in the mind". But here their similarity ends. To believe that one believes that P one must automatically entertain proposition P itself, whereas to think that one experiences Qly, one need have no Qish experiential episodes. ExF fails because of the manner in which experiences and beliefs differ in kind. Where having the belief that one experiences Qly fails to imply that one experiences anything with phenomenal content Q, having the thought that one believes P does guarantee the occurrence of a thought with propositional content P. On their most intuitive construal, beliefs about beliefs, as opposed to beliefs about experiences, are what we might call *Content Redundant*: They recapitulate their putative or apparent subject matters, even as they potentially distort their actual subject matters. Consider again the unfortunate case envisioned by Alston. The mother's beliefs prove quite shaky regarding her "actual" beliefs and motives when we take her "actual" beliefs and motives to be those that ultimately best explain her "overprotective" behavior. However, the mother's beliefs prove to be quite secure regarding the content of her "apparent" beliefs. In believing (second-order) that she believes (first-order) herself to be driven by a desire to protect her daughter from harm and the accompanying recognition that she can best achieve this end by isolating the child from society, the mother guarantees that she does, in fact, have such a first-order apparent belief. Again, this is because her second-order belief is content-redundant with respect to her first-order (apparent) belief in a way that beliefs about experiences are not. Qualitative misdescription is easily imaginable in the latter sort of case (e.g., I think "red" when I should think "orange"), but once again, only on a model of mistake-making according to which distorting beliefs interpose themselves, as it were, between experiencers and their expe-riences. In believing that she believes that P, the mother in Alston's story automatically entertains the belief that P. What one may prove to be mistaken about is *not* the content of such a belief, but merely the role that this belief plays in the generation of one's own behavior. This is the only thing that Alston's and similar examples show.

Now, let me explicate the qualification that I have recurrently anticipated in the preceding few pages, and have ignored up to now for ease

of exposition. The version of BeF, insured by content redundancy, which we require to offset Williams' antiskeptical critique is even weaker and less committal than that described in the Alston case. We need not assume, as Alston does, that our special epistemic access extends from the content of our propositional attitudes to the specifics of their relational characters. For, what content redundancy alone entails is *only* that one has special epistemic access to the content of her propositional attitudes, not to the exact nature of these attitudes themselves. We might call this doctrine *Content-Foundationalism*. Consider, again, Alston's example. In believing that she believes that she is trying to protect her daughter from harm, what the overprotective mother strictly knows with special privilege is that she bears some relation (e.g., belief, desire, hope, etc.) to the proposition that she wants to keep her daughter from harm. In construing BeF as saying only this, we render it less problematic while in no way undermining its response potential to Williams. Belief is a species of propositional attitude. Thus, in enjoying special epistemic privilege toward our propositional attitudes, we automatically enjoy special epistemic privilege toward our conscious first-order beliefs, to the extent that we know that any such beliefs must be included within the range of propositional attitudes to whose content we have special access. We may not know with any distinctive certainty that a given propositional content is one to which we stand in a relation of belief. But, this is hardly necessary for the ERealism thesis I have been promoting. Our generic encompassing belief about our conscious beliefs is that their contents are a subset of the contents to which we enjoy special access. With this qualification understood, I will continue to speak of BeF, regarded, as it were, as a mere special case of Content-Foundationalism. The value of doing this is that it allows me to highlight the similarities of my position to the position of Nagel's to which Williams takes explicit exception.

To skirt confusion, it pays once again to note clearly both what BeF is not as well as what it is. Although BeF is an infallibility thesis of sorts, it is not an omniscience thesis. It specifically regards the epistemic status of peoples' conscious beliefs about the contents of their own propositional attitudes. It does not claim that one is never ignorant of her own beliefs, that one has access to every belief one holds about the world (or for that matter, about one's own beliefs). BeF fully allows for the possibility that one may have any number of beliefs about which one is igno-

rant or self-deceived. It allows us, for instance, to say that we continue to believe things when we are asleep or otherwise not thinking about them. Similarly, it allows us to say that we have always believed propositions we have never previously considered and yet readily assent to if prompted (e.g., "My grandmother is not an Albanian spy".) Neither is BeF a self-warrant thesis: It does not fundamentally hinge upon any requirement that any of our mental states nakedly glow, as it were, with self-revelatory light. This is an easily-ridiculed feature that defenders of the given have commonly taken the phenomenal to possess, as when Schlick describes our protocol reports as claims whose truth is guaranteed by their very meaningfulness (Schlick 1934, p. 430). But no substantial theory of self-warrant is a precondition of BeF. For, once again, BeF is much more a consequence of a mere negative injunction against knowledge by acquaintance than it is a consequence of any positive theory of self-justification.

In short, foundationalism, in the form of BeF, understood as a type of ERealism, is correct.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

If this defense of BeF is cogent, then it is also significant. I think it is both. I think it cogent because it depends little, if at all, upon the kinds of positive, "contentious epistemological doctrines" that Williams criticizes. Indeed, it relies primarily upon the consequences of denying a problematic epistemological doctrine (i.e., "knowledge by acquaintance with the sensory given"), as well as an accompanying account of the content-redundancy of second order belief which is itself derived from a quite common sensible examination of the mechanics of self-deception. Moreover, I think this defense of BeF significant because it offers us an adequate epistemic priority thesis in spite of its said relative lack of commitment to contentious epistemological doctrine. For, once again, Williams may be perfectly correct to claim that skepticism requires some sort of epistemic class distinction between "worldly" and "non-worldly" beliefs. Williams is mistaken, however, in his assumption that any such distinction need be deeply contentious or counter-intuitive. The claim that second-order beliefs enjoy general epistemic privilege is, once again, a consequence of (1) the content-redundancy of second-order belief and (2) the idea that beliefs mediate our access to the world. I have defended (1) as a quasi-logical upshot of a thoroughly common

sensible examination of the mechanics of self-deception. I have defended (2) for the role it plays as an essential motivater for rejecting the "giveness" of experience in the first place. If these defenses are adequate, then BeF is best described, not as a "contentious epistemological theory", but as an indispensable guiding assumption fueling any remotely intuitive potential theory of the mind-world relation that embraces MRealism while eschewing the giveness of experience. Thus, to the extent that skepticism does rely on ERealism, this fact does not compromise the intuitiveness of the skeptic's reasoning.

Of course, many more questions need to be addressed than I have opportunity to even pose here. Let me end by making two points regarding the account I have offered in this paper. The *first* point regards Williams' diagnosis of Nagel's skepticism, a diagnosis that I have effectively been taking for granted. It is motivated by the following question: Why should ERealism be enough, *in itself*, to motivate skepticism? After all, the fact that our knowledge of tautologies may be peculiarly secure does nothing, in itself, to engender doubt regarding worldly claims. Why should the fact that our knowledge of our propositional contents is peculiarly secure have any greater skeptical effect? More is clearly called for. Here, we need to emphasize a second major theme of traditional foundationalism (as Williams himself does elsewhere): the idea that there is a type of knowledge which is not *only* more secure than worldly knowledge, but also an essential intermediary to it, that is, a type of knowledge from which genuine worldly knowledge must be, in some sense, derived.

But this condition is, I think, clearly satisfied by BeF. Traditional foundationalism was based on the premise that worldly knowledge must be derived somehow from knowledge of experience. Thus, ExF. But ExF, I have conceded, goes the way of the dodo and the dinosaur once we acknowledge the demise of the myth of the given. However, what the critique of giveness does, in effect, is to show that any genuine knowledge of experience we may possess is itself mediated by our knowledge of our propositional contents, including those contents to which we stand in relations of belief, (in particular, beliefs about our experience). This is Alston's point understood as a specific application of content-foundationalism. Given our defense of the plausibility of BeF, we are left with a privileged variety of knowledge from which, via transitivity, our worldly knowledge can be seen as ultimately depending.

The *second* and final point I would like to make regards the status I attribute to the skeptical problem. I have no concern to argue that the skeptical problem is an intractable aspect of the human epistemic condition. I have not argued that skepticism is an *eternal* argument-stopper. It may in fact be so. However, nothing said here commits us to any such view. I have endeavored only to tie skeptical conclusions to prosaic intuitions about the seeming hierarchy of epistemic privilege. I have not argued for the incorrigibility of these intuitions themselves. Thus, the skeptical problematic might indeed someday evaporate if the widely proclaimed death of folk psychology is ever conclusively demonstrated and consequently internalized by "common sense". Suppose, for instance, that Denett, Stitch, the Churchlands and others prove correct in their diagnosis of beliefs as out-and-out fictions. If this were to happen, then surely the lynchpin role of BeF would be compromised in the argument I have presented above. Similar consequences would follow from a less drastic, non-eliminativist but functionalistic reconstrual of beliefs, *a la* Fodor. For, although beliefs, on such an account, might yet continue to exist, it would become impossible to characterize second-order beliefs in the way I have above. Consider again my suggested analysis of Alston's self-deceived mother example. What she might prove to be mistaken about, I suggested, is not the content of her belief, "but merely the role that this belief might play in the generation of her behavior". But on a functional analysis, of course, this would be a distinction without a difference, since such causal role characterizations would figure directly into one's specification of belief content. I personally would welcome *this* kind of anti-skeptical development.

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