

Taking something for a reason to believe and regress

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Abstract

The rationality of a belief often depends on whether it is rightly connected to other beliefs, or more generally to other mental states —the states capable of providing a reason to holding the belief in question. For instance, some rational beliefs are connected to other beliefs by *being inferred* from them. It is often accepted that the connection implies that the subject in some sense ‘takes the mental states in question to be reason-providing’. But views on how exactly this is to be understood differ widely. They range from interpretations according to which ‘taking a mental state to be reason-providing’ imposes a mere causal sustaining relation between belief and reason-providing state to interpretations according to which one ‘takes a mental state to be reason-providing’ only if one *believes* that the state is reason-providing. The most common worry about the latter view is that it faces a vicious regress. In this paper a different but in some respects similar interpretation of ‘taking something as reason-providing’ is given. It is argued to consist of a disposition to react in certain ways to information that challenges the reason-providing capacity of the allegedly reason-providing state. For instance, that one has inferred A from B partly consists in being disposed to suspend judgment about A if one obtains a reason to believe that B does not render A probable. The account is defended against regress-objections and the suspicion of explanatory circularity.

1 Inferential internalism: For and against

Inference and inferential justification is a good starting point for a discussion of the relation between a belief and the states which provide the reason for holding the belief. For in the case of an inferred belief it is more or less uncontroversial what state(s) provide(s) the reason for which it is held. An inferred belief is held for a reason (or alleged reason)¹ provided by the belief(s) in the premise(s). Indeed, this will here be taken as the defining feature of an inferentially held belief: A belief is inferentially held, if and only if it is held for an (alleged) reason such that the reason-providing (or allegedly reason-providing) states are beliefs.

A very important divide between theories about inferential justification concerns **inferential internalism**. This is the following controversial principle (for a subject S, some premises P and a conclusion C):

inferential internalism: S justifiably infers C from P, only if S justifiably believes that P supports² C.

While something like this principle has been implicitly endorsed by the epistemological tradition (arguably by Hume, Russell and Goodman), it has become very controversial with the advent of epistemological externalism. Externalistically inclined philosophers tend to reject it [e.g. Van Cleve, 1984], while at least some of their internalist opponents endorse it [e.g. Fumerton, 1995, Bonjour, 1998]. The divide between opponents and proponents of inferential internalism roughly coincides with the divide between ‘internalists’ and ‘externalists’ understood as the following contrasting general perspectives on justification: Externalists stress the importance of the cooperation between the environment and the belief-forming mechanisms and are critical towards all requirements on the reasoners ability to assess her grounds. Internalists stress the thinkers own capacity to view her belief in a positive light. For them, there is a connection between the notion of epistemic justification and

¹A belief can be held for a bad (alleged, inadequate) reason or for a good (real, adequate, sufficient) reason. See below on page PAGE, for discussion and terminology.

²For most of the paper it is irrelevant whether “supports” is understood as “makes (objectively) probable” or something more explicitly normatively loaded such as “is a reason for believing”. Wherever the distinction is relevant it will be explicitly taken into account in the text.

that of responsibility that requires a justified subject to have a justified view on her grounds for believing.³

But it is of course possible to argue for or against **inferential internalism** without first adopting one or the other general perspective. Indeed some specific arguments have been put forward. The most prominent sort of argument against inferential internalism develops a worry to the effect that it leads to a vicious regress. Although proponents tend to argue from their general, “responsibilist” perspective, they also sometimes appeal to intuitions about particular cases of justification by inference.

But neither of these two most prominent arguments is in itself very powerful —this at least is what the next section aims to show.

1.1 The intuition in favor of inferential internalism

Here is a quote from Richard Fumerton [1995, 85-86] in which he argues for the initial plausibility of inferential internalism:⁴

[I]t is prima facie plausible to suggest that one’s belief in some proposition E can justify one in believing another proposition P only when one’s belief that E is itself justified and one has justification for thinking that E makes probable P. [. . .] One can make the claim initially plausible simply by looking at the ways in which it seems appropriate to *challenge* someone’s claim to have good (epistemic) reasons for believing something. [. . .] If I am talking to an astrologer who infers from the present alignment of planets that there will be prosperity this year, I am perfectly entitled to challenge the reasonability of the astrologer’s thinking that there is a connection between the two states of affairs. If the astrologer shrugs her shoulders and admits it is just a whimsical hunch that Jupiter’s alignment with Mars might have something to do with economic prosperity here on earth, I

³“internalism” and “externalism” is notoriously also used in other senses in epistemology. A closely related divide is that between proponents of “basic knowledge” and its detractors, [cf. Cohen, 2002]. Also “dogmatists” and “conservatives” oppose each other on related issues (in relation to Moore’s argument for knowledge of the external world); [cf. Pryor, 2000, Wright, 2007].

⁴Appeals to similar cases are also present in Leite [2008], Cohen [2002], Wright [2007]. I think the responses given here on behalf of opponents of inferential internalism could be used against these other appeals too.

can *for that reason* dismiss the astrologer’s claim to have a justified belief about prosperity based on the position of planets relative to one another.⁵

Everyone agrees that in the case described the astrologer is unjustified, and that if he had a justified belief about the connection between the positions of the planets and economic prosperity, then he would not be unjustified. Even an austere reliabilist would agree. For, first, the astrologer’s belief-formation is unreliable and would be disqualified by the reliabilist for that reason. And, second, if the astrologer *did* rely on a belief in the proposition that the positions of the planets indicate economic prosperity (henceforth ‘P supports C’), then he *would* be using a different belief-forming method (a different inference-pattern) that presumably is reliable. So, let us grant Fumerton something more: The fact that the astrologer shrugs his shoulders about *P supports C* but nonetheless holds on to his belief in *C ensures* that in the described case the astrologer is making an epistemic mistake. The mistake is not contingent on whether or not the belief-formation is reliable. Even if his belief-forming method were reliable (or had whatever other externalist good-making feature one favors), the fact that he is neutral or indifferent to the question whether P supports C while holding on to his belief in C ensures that he is not behaving as the epistemic norms require. This is an intuition about the case that many people are willing to share. The problem for the proponent of **inferential internalism** is that even granted that some epistemic norm or principle is violated by the astrologer, it is not all clear that the principle is **inferential internalism** —rather than some considerably weaker principle.

One way in which the principle violated by the astrologer may differ from **inferential internalism** is with respect to the attitude that his shrugging his shoulders expresses. It may be understood as expressing more than a simple lack of belief in *P supports C*. According to inferential internal-

⁵Fumerton’s formulation of his case in favor of **inferential internalism** is slightly misleading: That I can “dismiss the astrologer’s claim to have a justified belief” does not imply that the astrologer does not have a justified belief *that there will be prosperity*. That I can rightly dismiss his claim that he has a justified belief rather indicates (or perhaps implies) that his belief *that he has a justified belief* is unjustified. Unless we furthermore accept a principle which is even more controversial than **inferential internalism**, namely that a belief in *p* can only be justified if one has a justified belief that the belief in *p* is justified, it does not follow that the astrologer’s belief that there will be prosperity this year is unjustified. So, let us rather say that the shared intuition about the astrologer is that in the situation I can dismiss his claim *that there will be prosperity this year* as unjustified.

ism the subject inferring C from P is unjustified, unless she justifiably *believes* that P supports C. But in the situation described the astrologer does not merely not believe that P supports C. He actually consciously suspends judgment about whether P supports C. An it is surely possible not to believe *p* without consciously suspending judgment about the entertained proposition *p*. Thus, the intuition could be taken to support the following principle rather than inferential internalism:⁶

no-suspending-judgment S justifiably infers C from P, only if S is not explicitly suspending judgment about whether P supports C.

This principle is compatible with the claim that a subject can justifiably infer C from P, despite being “neutral” with respect to whether P supports C in the following sense: she need not have an attitude towards the proposition that P supports C.

The principle actually supported by the case may be weaker in another way too. According to inferential internalism the justified belief that P supports C is a necessary condition on justifiably inferring C from P. No matter what the epistemic situation of the subject —i.e. the available evidence, the beliefs already held, etc.— the justified belief that P supports C must be there. Inferential justification is *defeasible* and therefore that which is sufficient in some cases may not be sufficient in others. The minimally required ingredients that in some cases are sufficient for justification and in all cases are necessary are the ingredients of *prima facie* justification. In those cases in which *prima facie* justification is not sufficient it is *defeated*; that is, some aspect of the subject’s epistemic situation cancels the justification. To be justified in such cases, one requires further ingredients over and above the ingredients of *prima facie* justification, namely ingredients to compensate for the cancellation of *prima facie* justification.

For the case at hand, one may argue that the astrologer does not find himself in a situation in which *prima facie* justification is sufficient. In particular the astrologer is confronted with an explicit challenge to provide a reason for believing that P supports C. And it may be argued that such a challenge relevantly alters the subject’s epistemic situation as compared with her situation before the challenge was raised. In particular, it may be argued that the challenge *defeats* any *prima facie* justification that the subject might otherwise have. But then the inferential internalist’s ingredient, the justified belief that P supports C,

⁶I take this point from Jim Pryor who made it during discussion of Leite [2008].

is not required for *prima facie* justification but only as an additional ingredient to cancel the defeater.

Let us consider a case of which the inferential internalism’s opponent would say that the subject has *prima facie* justification. For instance take a case of an inductive generalization from P to C. Suppose that at first all the conditions for inductive justification are fulfilled —and suppose with the opponent of inferential internalism that it is not one of these conditions to have a justified belief about the support-relation between premises and conclusion. Suppose now that I acquire a reason to believe that my observations were taken on an inductively defective sample —so that it is not true that if P, then probably C. Under this circumstance my inductive generalization is defeated. Similarly, it might be argued, if someone whom I believe to be rational and similarly informed than I am, challenges one of my inferences by requesting a reason for believing that P supports C, then my inference remains for the time being defeated —until I can come up with such a reason or until I can in another way dismiss the undermining evidence (e.g. by justifiably believing that my interlocutor is unreasonable). Thus, the intuition might be explainable by no more than the widely acceptable following principle:

no-defeater: S justifiably infers C from P, only if the subject does not possess an (undefeated) reason to disbelieve that P supports C.⁷

Still the described case elicits a relevant intuition which at least supports *some* principle about the subject’s view on the question whether P supports C. Let us endorse this intuition and express it in the form of the following vague principle:

anti-indifference: S justifiably infers C from P, only if S is not indifferent to the question whether P supports C (but instead in some sense ‘accepts’ that P supports C).

The principles *no-defeater* and *no-suspending-judgment* allow to say something more explicit about the sort of ‘acceptance’ minimally required by *anti-indifference*: The sort of ‘acceptance’ is incompatible with explicitly suspending judgment about whether P supports C. (It is also incompatible with disbelieving that P supports C. That can be shown be

⁷Bergmann [2005] appeals to such principles in order to generally explain away intuitions in favor of higher-order requirements on justification.

slightly modifying the case invoked by Fumerton.) And it is incompatible with the subject's having reasons to disbelieve that P supports C. (It is arguably also incompatible with the subject's having reasons to explicitly suspend judgment about whether P supports C. It is plausible that such a reason would act as a defeater too. This intuition can be elicited by modifying the example involving an inductive generalization from above.)

How to develop anti-indifference into a precise principle is the subject of the main part of the paper. The important point here is that even granting to the proponent of inferential internalism the relevant intuition, there is no compulsion to accept inferential internalism rather than something considerably weaker.

1.2 The regress-argument against inferential internalism

But similarly, the prominent regress argument⁸ against inferential internalism does not compel one to reject inferential internalism rather than something considerably stronger.⁹

Boghossian closes his first (published) development of the regress-objection against inferential internalism as follows:

[...] at some point it must be possible to use a rule in reasoning [from P to C] in order to arrive at a justified conclusion, without this use needing to be supported by some knowledge about the rule that one is relying on [or about the support-relation from P to C—see below in the text]. It must be possible simply to *move* between thoughts in a way that generates justified belief, without this movement being grounded in the thinker's justified belief about the rule used in the reasoning. [Boghossian, 2001, 37]

In this passage Boghossian opposes a certain model of inference and inferential justification. He conceives of reasoning from P to C as a *use of a rule* in reasoning. Boghossian assumes that reasoning distinguishes

⁸In fact there are two quite distinct regress arguments against inferential internalism, see below section 3.2

⁹This evaluation of the regress-objection has profited from the much more detailed discussion in Leite [2008].

itself from random moves in thought at least by being rule-guided, being “a use of a rule in reasoning”. According to the view rejected in this passage, each justified¹⁰ use of a rule in reasoning “is supported by some knowledge [or justified belief] about the rule”. Boghossian does not explain what he means by “support” here. But from his development of the argument, one can gather that the criticized idea is the following: Only given the further knowledge (or justified belief)¹¹ about the rule *is there a reason or justification* for the thinker to move to the conclusion of the inference. In other words, the idea is that the knowledge about the rule is reason-providing. (Much more on “support” will be said in section 2) As becomes clear from the second sentence, according to the criticized view the use of the rule is not only supported (in this sense) by such further knowledge about the rule. Rather such knowledge *intervenes* as a “ground of the movement” between P and C and *mediates* between these contents—as opposed to allowing for a “simple move” between P and C. Thus, the criticized view seems to propose the following model of inference and inferential justification:

Every justified instance of using a rule in reasoning from P to C is a process in which some knowledge or justified belief about the rule—knowledge that supports, i.e. is a reason for, the move from P to C—is applied to the belief in P in order to move to C.

The problem Boghossian rightly sees with this view is that applying knowledge about the rule can itself only be understood as an instance of reasoning, namely reasoning from the believed proposition P *and* the known proposition about the rule to the conclusion C.¹² The steps of such a reasoning could be something like the following: P & Moving from P to C preserves truth & Therefore, C. But in that case, since the model is to be applied to every instance of reasoning, a further piece of knowledge has to mediate between the knowledge about the rule (e.g. knowledge that moving from P to C preserves truth) and its

¹⁰If a use of a rule in reasoning yields a justified belief, then the use of the rule is justified.

¹¹From now on only either ‘knowledge about the rule’ and ‘justified belief about the rule’ will be used. The difference is not relevant for the regress objection.

¹²Bonjour [2005] tries to avoid this objection by conceiving of the knowledge about the rule (or the support-relation, see below in the text) as a kind of a non-propositional, intuitive knowledge. Such a quasi-perceptual knowledge-state does not combine in the characteristic inferential way with other believed or known propositions. I discuss this reaction to the regress-objection elsewhere.

application to P and C. But the application of this further mediating knowledge is again an instance of reasoning, thus requiring more mediating and supporting knowledge, and so on. Thus the regress develops.¹³

But is the criticized view *inferential internalism*? The (justified) belief that P supports C required according to *inferential internalism* may be understood as a belief “about a rule allowing the move from P to C”. Let us assume with Boghossian that knowledge about the epistemically relevant support-relations between propositions is a sort of knowledge of (epistemic) rules. True, knowledge of a rule is general in a way that knowledge of a support-relation between particular propositions (as opposed to proposition-schemata) need not be. This generality plays some role in Boghossian’s development of the regress-objection, but the core of the objection does not depend on it. In order to ease the transition to talk about the belief that P supports C, we could rephrase “using a rule in reasoning” as “relying on a (real or alleged) support-relation in reasoning”. In this manner the criticized view can be formulated in the same terminology used in characterizing *inferential internalism* as follows:

support-and-mediation: In order to justifiably rely on a support-relation in reasoning from P to C the move from P to C must be *supported* by a justified belief that P supports C, and the justified belief that P supports C must *be applied* to the belief in P in order to move to C (and thus it must *mediate* between P and C).

Boghossian’s problem is still (or even better) recognizable in this formulation: the application of the justified belief that P supports C to the belief in P in order to move to C is an instance of reasoning. Hence the model must be applied once more. That is, in order to move to C, a justified belief in the support from P and *P supports C* to C must be applied. And so on.

However, *inferential internalism* does not make any claim about the role played by the justified belief in P supports C. In particular, it neither states that the inference is “supported” by the justified belief in P supports C, nor that the further justified belief in P supports C must be

¹³I discuss that and other regress-objections in more detail elsewhere; where I also defend it, at least to some extent, against Leite [2008]. The brief summary given here focuses on the criticized view’s claim that knowledge about the rule *mediates* between belief in P and the belief in C. But the criticized view’s claim that the move from P to C needs to be *supported* by knowledge about the rule is also problematic and quickly leads to a vicious regress.

“applied” to P in order to move to C. *Inferential internalism* just states that it is a necessary condition on justified inference that the subject has such a justified belief in P supports C. At best the argument raises a challenge for proponents of *inferential internalism* to specify the way the further acceptance is supposed to contribute to the fact that the belief in the conclusion is justified.

Much more is to be said —and will be said shortly— about the idea of the inference “being supported” by a belief about the support-relation. And much more is to be said about the move’s being “mediated” by some such belief. But the present brief presentation suffices to show that *inferential internalism* as such is not directly threatened by the prominent regress argument. Rather *inferential internalism* must be strengthened in some way, in order to be prone to the objection.

Because neither the intuition for, nor the most prominent objection against *inferential internalism*, directly support or undermine that principle, it is here proposed to lead that discussion in terms of *anti-indifference* rather than *inferential internalism*. The formulation of *anti-indifference* given above is very vague. There are many issues left open: What kind of attitude is the required ‘acceptance’ —a belief or something else? Must the attitude have a positive normative status? And if yes, what are the conditions under which it has such a positive status? How is the *anti-indifference*-attitude related to the fact that the inference is justified? Is it merely a necessary condition? Does it *mediate* between premise and conclusion? Does it *explain why* the inference is justified?

2 An account of believing for a reason

How should the principle of *anti-indifference* be made more precise? One way to approach this question is to look for the underlying motivation to accept *anti-indifference*. For instance, one could examine in more detail the connection between responsibility and justification and deduce from claims about that connection claims about the nature (and involvement) of the further ‘acceptance’. Another way to approach the question would be to examine the regress-objections in detail and extract the strongest version of *anti-indifference* that avoids these objections. The course chosen here is to turn to the underlying motivation first and address the regress objections afterwards. The motivation for *anti-indifference* will by itself only support a certain version of it —which one can submit

to the test of the regress-objection. However the grounds for adopting anti-indifference advanced here do not depend on a certain view on the interrelation between responsibility and justification. It will be compatible with a view that holds that the concept of responsibility is not properly applicable in the epistemic domain. The motivation will therefore neither derive from, nor support an “internalist” perspective on epistemic justification.

2.1 Reasons condition and basing condition

The model of inferential justification targeted by Boghossian attributes two distinct roles, “support” and “mediation”, to the further acceptance required by inferential internalism and anti-indifference. The acceptance is supposed to ‘support’ the inference and also to ‘mediate’ between premise and conclusion. Indeed, one may be tempted to appeal to the further acceptance in response to two distinct questions. The first question is “Why is it right for the subject to move to the conclusion?”. The answer Boghossian imagines inferential internalists to give is “Because the move is supported by a justified belief or knowledge about the support-relation between premises and conclusion.” The second question is “Why does the subject move to the conclusion?”. And the answer is supposed to contribute to a rationalizing explanation of the move. The subject might move to the conclusion as a result of some mental illness or due to some momentary disturbance of the relevant brain-circuits. But a justified inference is not supposed to be like this: the subject’s move is an *inference*, i.e. a move from beliefs in premises to a belief in a conclusion where the beliefs in the premises contribute to a rationalizing explanation as opposed to just any sort of causal explanation. Not any purely causal sort of relation between premise-beliefs and conclusion belief explains in a rationalizing fashion. So what else is needed? Boghossian thinks that the move must be rule-guided. And he expects the inferential internalist to explain this in terms of the acceptance’ mediating between premise and conclusion.¹⁴

This distinction may easily be overlooked. Especially since usage of the terms ‘rational’ and ‘justified’ with which ‘support’ and ‘rationalizing

¹⁴While Boghossian is not explicit about that distinction in the earlier papers, in a recent paper [Boghossian, forthcoming] he explicitly discusses only the problem of mediation—in the guise of a discussion of epistemic rule-following. Boghossian’s argument is inspired from the famous paper by Carroll [1895] and in some discussions of that paper the distinction is explicitly made: Stroud [1979], Engel [2005].

explanation’ are to be associated is not uniform.¹⁵

It is best to introduce the distinction by way of an example. Consider, first, the case of Sarah. She has a sufficient reason for believing C—let us say that C is the proposition *The roads are wet now*.. Suppose that her sufficient reason is provided by¹⁶ her justified belief in P—where P is the conjunction of the propositions *It has been raining heavily for several hours now* and *If it has been raining heavily for several hours, then the roads are now wet*.. There are other conditions than justifiably believing P for it to be the case that Sarah has a sufficient reason to believe C. For instance, she plausibly should not have justified beliefs that provide a very strong reason for her to disbelieve C. But let us simply assume that the relevant further conditions, whatever they are, are fulfilled. In that case Sarah’s justified belief in P supports believing C (although she does not believe it, perhaps because the question whether C has not arisen).

Sally has the same epistemic reason for believing C as Sarah—thus, provided by a justified belief in P. But in addition Sally believes C for that sufficient epistemic reason. This implies that her belief in P contributes (in some precise manner) to the rationalizing explanation of her belief in C. In particular the relation between the belief in P and the belief in C is such that the latter is inferred from the former. Her belief in C is rational and (doxastically)¹⁷ justified.

Samantha also believes P, but her belief in P is unjustified. She therefore doesn’t have sufficient epistemic reason to believe C. Still her belief in

¹⁵Sometimes a belief is said to be ‘rational’ when its explanation is rationalizing. And sometimes ‘rational’ is applied to beliefs held for a sufficient reason, thus synonymously with ‘justified’. To make things more confusing, ‘justified’ can be used to evaluate the epistemic position towards a *proposition*, meaning that the proposition is supported for the subject or, equivalently, that the subject has a sufficient reason for believing the proposition. At other times ‘justified’ is used to evaluate the subject’s *state of believing* a given proposition. To make the first sense explicit one usually talks of *propositional justification*. When the second sense is intended one can talk of *doxastic justification*. Here ‘rational’ is used to designate the more restricted notion meaning that the belief has a rationalizing explanation. (See below in the text for a discussion of how the distinction made here relates to the distinction between “reason” and “rational requirements” in meta-ethics.) Thus ‘having a rationalizing explanation’ is not the same as ‘being (doxastically) justified’.

¹⁶Saying that the reasons “are provided by” certain mental states is intended to be neutral with respect to the question of what constitutes the reason: the mental state of belief, the mental state of knowledge, their content, the facts they represent. This is a very controversial issue which is irrelevant to the distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘justified’.

¹⁷See footnote 15.

P contributes (in some precise manner) to the rationalizing explanation of her belief in C. As in Sally's case, her belief in C is inferred from her belief in P. Her belief in C is rational but not justified.

Sue believes Q, the belief in Q is justified. Q is the proposition *The moon shines brightly tonight*. Q is not related to C in such a way that the belief in Q can provide (by itself)¹⁸ a sufficient reason for believing C. However suppose Sue infers C from Q. As Samantha's, Sue's belief in C is rational —for by assumption she has inferred it from Q— but not justified.

Sally, Samantha and Sue all have a belief in C that is rationalized in virtue of some relation between the beliefs in P or Q and the belief in C. These beliefs are thereby rational.¹⁹ The connection between the beliefs is the basing-relation. My inferring C from P, or my (inferentially)²⁰ basing the belief in C on my belief in P implies that my belief in C is not an *idée fixe* or a belief I might have due to some mental illness. That the belief in C is based on the belief in P will here be expressed by saying that the belief in C *is held for a reason* (good or bad) provided by the belief in P.

(A note on terminology: this way of talking implies a distinction between good and bad, or real and alleged, reasons. But the locution “having a reason to ϕ ” is often used such as to imply that the reason is good, while the locution “ ϕ -ing for reason R” is not. The reason for this difference is that one is very seldom interested in the question whether a subject merely has a bad reason as opposed to the question whether she acts/believes for a bad reason. It will almost always be the case that a given subject is in some mental state or other such that she could believe for a bad reason provided by that state; one therefore more or less always has some bad reason to ϕ . By contrast one luckily does not

¹⁸But together with some other belief it could. For instance together with a justified belief in the proposition *When the moon shines brightly the roads are flooded and therefore wet*.

¹⁹Many people would like to use ‘rational’ in such a way that rational beliefs satisfy consistency-constraints. For instance, they might say, one cannot believe p and $\neg p$ rationally. But then, one may wonder whether believing p and $\neg p$ is not compatible with there being a rationalizing explanation for both beliefs. This might suggest that one needs three notions: ‘justified’, ‘rational’ in the sense of ‘consistent’, and ‘rational’ in the sense of ‘has a rationalizing explanation’. This issue is addressed later in the text, see 12.

²⁰There may be basing-relations between other kinds of mental states too. For instance a belief may be based on a perceptual seeming. But when a belief is based on one or more other beliefs, then it is inferentially based.

always believe for a bad reason, nor unluckily always believe for a good reason.)

To sum up, given a movement in thought from the belief in P to the belief in C, the subject believes C for a sufficient epistemic reason provided by her belief in P if and only if the following two conditions obtain:

basing condition: The belief in P figures (in the right way) in a rationalizing explanation of the belief in C; or in equivalent formulations: the belief in C is based on the belief in P; the movement from P to C is an instance of reasoning; the belief in C is held for a (good or bad) reason provided by the belief in P

reasons condition: The subject has a sufficient reason for believing C provided by her belief in P. Or equivalently: her justified belief in P provides inferential support for believing C.

The basing condition ensures that the movement in thought is a rational process as opposed to pathological or otherwise irrational ones. Nothing counts as an inference or a piece of reasoning unless this condition is fulfilled. A minimal ingredient seems to be some causal relation between the two beliefs —perhaps some sort of causal sustenance relation such that were the subject to give up belief in P, she would also give up her belief in C. (But the nature of the relation will be discussed at length in what follows.)

The reasons condition ensures that if the belief in C is based on P, then it will be justified. This very plausibly implies that the belief in P is justified. In addition it plausibly requires that the propositions P and C are appropriately related, for instance as two propositions such that the first obviously entails the second.

Let us now suppose, at least for the moment, that the role taken on by the further acceptance is to partially explain why either the reasons-condition or the basing-condition obtains. That is, we assume that the relation between the acceptance and the fact that the belief in the inferred conclusion is justified is not merely the implication stated by the principle of *inferential internalism*. The further acceptance is supposed to be explanatory. The following two *explanatory* versions of *anti-indifference* can then be given:

explanatory reasons-anti-indifference: S' justified belief in P provides a sufficient reason for believing C, partially because (explanatory because) S (justifiably) ‘accepts’ that P supports C.

explanatory basing-anti-indifference S' move from P to C is an instance of reasoning, partially because S 'accepts' that P supports C.

Neither principle states the full explanans on the right-hand side. Some story has to complete the explanation. The suspicion implicit in Boghossian's argument is that the only way one could fill the gaps of the alleged explanation would result in a circular explanation. The explanatory anti-indifference-principles above seem to make sense only if the implicitly put forward the two following models:

model of inferential support: S' justified belief in P provides inferential support for believing C,
because
S' (justified) 'acceptance' that P supports C and her (justified) belief in P together support C.

model for inferential belief-formation: S' move from P to C is an inferential belief-formation,
because
it is a process in which the content of a belief in *P supports C* is applied to the content P of another belief in such a way that together they result in a belief in C.

Neither model mentions exactly the same phenomenon in the explanans as in the explanandum. The model for *inferential* support (between P and C) appeals to the phenomenon of support *in general* (between P, *P supports C* and C) on. However, it is a sensible assumption that inferential support is one of the *basic kinds* of support —alongside such things as perceptual support. There does not seem to be a more basic kind of support in terms of which inferential support could be explained. Therefore, and this seems to be the objection Boghossian has in mind, the model does not allow for a non-circular and non-regressive explanation of the phenomenon of inferential support.²¹ Take as a test-case one in which P obviously entails C. Suppose to the question “Why (given I justifiably believe P) is it right for her to move to C?” the answer “Because she also justifiably believes/accepts that P entails C.” is given. This is not a good explanation. For neither is the entailment between

²¹The regress results when one attempts to explain an instance of the phenomenon by transforming it into another instance of the phenomenon ad infinitum. The fundamental mistake of such an explanation is explanatory circularity.

the enhanced set of believed and accepted propositions and the conclusion in any sense “logically stronger” (still “only” entailment), nor is it more obvious than that between the smaller set consisting of P and the conclusion C.²²

Similarly, suppose we are interested in understanding why someone moves from P to an obviously entailed C. Something is to explain the phenomenon of how the subject brings the contents P and C together in rationally drawing the conclusion C. It is obvious that bringing the contents P, C and *P supports C* together in rationally drawing the conclusion C is just the same phenomenon again. It is not the case that bringing these contents together is something more explanatorily fundamental than bringing just P and C together. (It does not matter whether the 'acceptance' is another sort of state, for instance something more intrinsically motivating or intention-like than belief. Nor does it help to suggest that the involvement of the proposition *P supports C* is at a sub-personal level. The phenomenon to be explained remains: contents are brought together in such a way that it results in reasoning. Furthermore, rationalizing explanation operates at the level of personal, not sub-personal, states. By appealing to sub-personal states one seems rather to change the subject than to elucidate cognitive behavior on the level of rationalizing explanations.)²³

2.2 Anti-indifference on the basing condition

Despite the regress argument against explanatory basing-anti-indifference, it is this, or a very similar, version of anti-indifference that will be defended here. The task, then, is to provide an account of the inferential basing-relation that does not appeal to the model of inferential belief-formation above. The further acceptance must mediate between P and C in a way that does not require that the thinker is engaged in reasoning involving P, *P supports C* and C. As a consequence of the proposed account a certain version of the anti-indifference-principle will be motivated. It will be granted that this commits to an explanatory claim about the acceptance. But it will be argued that this does not result in

²²In fact it is rather less obvious, since the propositions are slightly more complex in the enhanced set.

²³Well developed versions of this argument and some indications for possible resolutions of the problem can be found in Stroud [1979] and Engel [2005]. As mentioned, the argument is also developed in Boghossian [forthcoming].

an explanatory regress.²⁴

There is an initial consideration speaking in favor of motivating anti-indifference by appeal to conditions on basing rather than by appeal to conditions for having a reason. Consider the two following (non-explanatory) anti-indifference-principles:

anti-indifference requirement on the reason-condition: My justified belief in Q provides a sufficient reason for believing P, only if I am not indifferent towards the question whether P supports C.

anti-indifference requirement on the basing-condition: I believe C for the reason provided by my belief in P, only if I am not indifferent towards the question whether P supports C.

The first principle is prima facie at odds with the view of epistemic reasons as objective. The principle connects the question of whether something is a good reason for a given person with the question whether the person *takes* it to be a good reason. But this is a very controversial connection and to many it seems that epistemic reasons are not in that way mind-dependent. So, one reason (besides regress-worries) for not taking there to be a connection is that it comes rather close to an unwanted relativism. Whether I have a good reason to believe *p* would depend on whether I take something to be a good reason, and the whether you have a good reason depends on whether you take something to be a good reason. Thus, if we are otherwise epistemically alike, a difference in epistemic situation arises out of a mere difference in what we accept as reasons. This is worrying, to say the least. (This argument from anti-indifference on the reason-condition to relativism is a bit quick here. For it depends on the issue of whether the anti-indifference-attitude has a normative status on its own. If a *justified* attitude towards the proposition that P supports C is required, then it may be that two subjects cannot disagree on what is a reason for what without the one or the other being unjustified. And if they cannot disagree without the one or the other being unjustified, no difference in epistemic situation can

²⁴Leite [2008] motivates inferential internalism by appeal to considerations pertaining to the reasons-condition too. But for him it is only one among several other motivations. In particular it is a motivation that he takes to be alongside (or perhaps connected) to considerations about epistemic responsibility. The course chosen here is to motivate something like inferential internalism by appeal to an account of the basing-condition *in place of* an appeal to considerations pertaining to responsibility.

arise from a difference in attitudes towards support-relations. But (as is rather obvious) issues concerning a regress — a regress of another sort than those mentioned— arise for such a view: The justified attitude towards the support-relation is (plausibly) itself supported by a reason and therefore dependent on further attitudes towards support-relations —see below in section 3.2.)

The requirement on the basing-condition, by contrast, does not threaten objectivity and mind-independence. For there is no temptation in the first place to say that it should be an objective, mind-independent matter whether I believe something for a certain (good or bad) reason or for another or for none. On which reason my belief is based figures in the rationalizing explanation of my belief-formation. It does not threaten the objectivity of epistemic reasons, if this depends on what I take to be reasons for what.

So, the anti-indifference-requirement on basing is less prima facie implausible than the anti-indifference-requirement on the reason condition. But is it plausible? Consider the following case. Someone, call him Vincent, has a disposition to form beliefs according to the following pattern:

(A) Yesterday was a sad day.

(B) Today is a sad day.

Consider a given manifestation of that disposition. Now, one of the two following things will be the case: Either Vincent believes the (B)-type proposition for the (presumably bad) reason provided by his belief in the (A)-type proposition, or he manifests a dispositional irrationality. In other words, he is either irrational due perhaps to his morose character, or he does (presumably) get the objective reasons wrong but is in our sense rational, i.e. he does believe for a reason. This is the question whether a rationalizing explanation applies to Vincent's belief or not.

This very same question can be asked in the practical case. Given some behavior, it must be settled —before it can be judged to be justified or unjustified— whether it is an act done for a reason or not, whether it is rational or irrational (or arational). Consider the notorious example of Joe, say, drinking a glass of petrol. Assume that Joe does not like drinking petrol and has no other good reason to drink petrol. Still the description of the situation is compatible with two cases. In one case Joe believes that the liquid in the glass is gin, and it is for the reason

provided by that belief and his thirst for gin that he drinks it. He still does not have an objective, good reason to drink the liquid in the glass. But his behavior is rational, given his mistaken belief that he has got a glass of gin. He acts for a (motivating, subjective) reason. In the other case Joe suffers from some irrationality, for instance a form of compulsion neurosis. Even though he knows that it is petrol and even though he takes himself to have no reason at all to drink petrol—he even takes himself to have every reason not to drink it—he cannot help but drink it. In that case he does not drink it for a reason at all, not even a bad one. So, there is the same question to be asked about Joe as the one about Vincent: Does a rationalizing explanation apply to his behavior, resp. belief-forming behavior?

It is plausible that, if Vincent is indifferent towards the question *whether the fact that yesterday was a sad day makes it likely that today will be a sad day*, then the rationalizing explanation does not apply. Suppose, for instance, that immediately after Vincent has formed his belief that today is a sad day, he is convinced by a reliable friend that more often than not a sad day is followed by a happy day. But suppose that this has no effect on Vincent’s belief at all. He does not therefore revise his belief that today is a sad day. Similarly, suppose he is convinced by the friend *before* he forms his belief that today is a sad day, but it does not have any preventing effect on his belief-formation. In such cases we are not inclined to say that Vincent believes that today is a sad day for the reason provided by his belief that yesterday was a sad day. In other words, Vincent’s belief is not inferred from his belief that yesterday is a sad day. It is merely triggered by that belief.

So, if Vincent is indifferent whether (A) supports (B) or not in the sense of not being disposed to adjust his attitude towards (B) to information about that support-relation, it provides a good criterion for determining whether Vincent believes (B) for the inferential reason provided by (A). If he is in this sense ‘indifferent’ to the question, then we can safely say that he doesn’t base his belief in (B) on that reason.

2.3 The ‘accepting*’—attitude

The relevant sense of ‘not being indifferent’ or ‘accepting’ can be spelled out as follows. The attitude is called “acceptance*”:

acceptance*: A subject accepts* that P supports C in believing C, iff she is disposed to abandon her belief in C when she obtains

a reason for disbelieving that P supports C (in short: if she is sensitive to reasons against P supports C).

There is a robust intuition that if Vincent does not bear the acceptance*–attitude towards (A) supports (B), then he does not base his belief in (B) on his belief in (A). And provided there is nothing else on which he bases it, his belief in (B) is in that case a manifestation of irrationality.

It is important to note that acceptance* is an attitude²⁵ towards C, and not simply an attitude towards *P supports C*. This can be made clearer by comparing it to the *belief* that P supports C. If someone who believes that P supports C acquires a sufficient reason to disbelieve that P supports C, then he will normally revise his belief. He will at least suspend judgment, or—if the reason against is much stronger than the reason in favor—he will come to disbelieve that P supports C). If his belief that P supports C is not an *idée fixe*, his reasons against *P supports C* will lead him to revise *his belief that P supports C*. But this does not have as a guaranteed consequence that any *other* belief is revised. In particular, believing that P supports C and being rational, does not guarantee that reasons against *P supports C* have any effect on a belief in C (if present). The acceptance*–attitude, by contrast, connects reasons against a proposition with a belief in some other, distinct proposition. In particular the acceptance* guarantees that reasons against *P supports C* have an effect on the belief in C. The two beliefs in P and in C and the acceptance* are more tightly connected than the three beliefs in C, in P and in *P supports C*. Therefore the acceptance* can be described as an ‘accepting something in believing something else’. In the case at hand, it is ‘accepted that P supports C in believing C’.

But there is a question whether acceptance* can properly be called a propositional attitude. We now work under the hypothesis that humans do accept* certain propositions. The functional role characterizing acceptance* (of a proposition) is different from the one associated with belief (towards the same proposition). As said, in the case of acceptance* the role involves guaranteed effects on the attitude towards other propositions than the one towards which the attitude is held. But in some respects the acceptance* towards *P supports C* might be something more “light-weight” than the belief in *P supports C*. Neither a believed nor an accepted* proposition need of course be consciously entertained in the affirmative mode. There are many propositions I now believe

²⁵For the question whether accepting* is really a propositional attitude see below in the text.

without now entertaining them in the affirmative mode. However, these propositions are more readily entertained in the affirmative mode than propositions I do not now believe. A believed proposition Q plausibly is immediately consciously entertained whenever the question whether Q comes up in conscious deliberation. This happens “immediately” in the sense that a normal subject does not “think again” about whether Q—or in other words: the normal subject does not draw upon available reasons in favor of Q before entertaining Q in the affirmative mode when she already dispositionally believes Q. No similar claim about acceptance* follows from the way in which and the theoretical purpose for which that mental state has been introduced. Perhaps and by contrast to belief, a proposition that is accepted* is not used so immediately by normal subjects in conscious deliberation. Perhaps, a normal subject draws upon reasons in favor of Q before entertaining Q in the affirmative mode, even though she already has accepted* Q in believing some other proposition. That Q is a proposition she accepts* only implies that her beliefs are sensitive to reasons against Q—not that she does not consider reasons in its favor in order to entertain Q in the affirmative mode.

Such difference in functional role between the hypothesized state of acceptance* and that of belief perhaps warrants denying acceptance* the status of propositional attitude. But more important than the question whether accepted* propositions *are used* immediately in deliberation is the question whether *it would be right* from an epistemological point of view to use accepted* propositions in this way. In general, the important question behind the question whether acceptance* is a propositional attitude is not so much whether the psychological functional role is sufficiently similar to belief, but rather whether acceptance* has a normative status on its own. At least this is the most important question for epistemological purposes. This question will be addressed in section 3.2, once it has become clearer what the theoretical purpose of the state of acceptance* is.

2.4 Acceptance* as reductively explanatory of basing

So far it has only been said that if Vincent is not in the acceptance*-state, then *we might reasonably say* that his belief that today is a sad day is not inferred from his belief that yesterday was a sad day. Here a

stronger thesis is endorsed: That Vincent accepts* (A) *supports* (B) in believing (B) at least partially *reductively explains* the fact that Vincent believes (B) for the reason provided by (A). By a “reductive explanation” are meant two things: First, the phenomenon of believing for a reason or basing can be explained in terms of the notion of acceptance*. This means that a better understanding of the phenomenon of basing can be achieved by appeal to the notion of acceptance*. Second, states of acceptance* partially constitute the facts about basing. That is, there is an ontological reduction of the basing-relation to states of acceptance*. For inference from a premise P to a conclusion C in general:

reductive anti-indifference: That the subject bases her belief in C on her belief in P, is partially reductively explained by the fact that she accepts* that P supports C in believing C.

Acceptance* of *P supports C* in believing C only partially reductively explains the basing-condition. This is because some other propositions play a similar role. Suppose that ‘P supports C’ means that P renders C objectively probable. According to what has been said a subject who believes C for the reason provided by her belief in P must accept that P renders C objectively probable. But take now another meaning of ‘P supports C’, namely *The belief in P provides a sufficient reason for believing C*. Drawing on exactly the same intuitions as in the discussion of Vincent’s case, it is clear that the subject—at least if she possesses the higher-order concepts *belief* and *sufficient reason*—must accept* the reflective proposition *My belief in P provides a sufficient reason for believing C* too. (This is the reason why in this paper the difference between the two meanings of ‘P supports C’ does not matter.) Similarly the subject must not be indifferent towards whether P itself in believing C: Reasons against P should lead to suspending judgement about whether C. In general, the class of propositions which the subject has to accept* in order to base belief in C on belief in P consists of all and only the negations of the *defeaters* of S’ reason for believing C provided by her belief in P. Every sufficient good reason that undermines the reason providing-role of S’ belief in P is such a *defeater*. Thus such propositions as *My belief in P is unjustified* or *I am too tired to draw correct inferences* are also defeaters the negations of which S must accept*.

The idea can be extended to cover the non-inferential case too. Suppose that perceptually justified beliefs are not held for a reason provided by a belief—in other words (in line with how ‘inferential’ has been introduced above): suppose perceptual reasons are non-inferential. Suppose

that the reason is provided by a given perceptual seeming S instead. According to the account of basing suggested here the fact that one believes Q for the perceptual reason provided by S is constituted by the subject's accepting* certain propositions in believing Q. For example, I believe for my current perceptual reason that there is a tower over there because (explanatory "because") I would suspend judgment were I to learn that holograms of towers abound in the circumstance. The general claim about basing put forward here is the following:

general constitutive anti-indifference: What propositions the subject accepts* in believing something determines for what (good or bad) reason she holds her belief.

Suppose I believe C and I also believe P which obviously entails C, in addition I also have a perceptual seeming with content C. Whether I accept* the proposition *P supports C* or the proposition *I am not hallucinating content C* or both determines whether my belief in C is based on the belief in P, the perceptual seeming that C, or on both.

Given the propositions the subject accepts* are the negations of the defeaters of a reason for believing C provided by a belief in P, it is possible now to say more on the relation between the basing-condition and what is sometimes called a 'rational requirement'.²⁶

Rational requirements are commitments that do not coincide with the commitments one incurs in virtue of the (objective) reasons one has. For example, suppose I do not have a sufficient reason to believe the proposition *I have a sufficient reason to believe C*. Suppose I do (unjustifiably) believe that proposition all the same. Now, given the belief is not justified, it cannot provide a sufficient reason for believing anything else. But still, given I do believe *I have a sufficient reason to believe C*, I am under some sort of commitment to believe C. Interestingly this commitment obtains even if I do not have a sufficient reason for believing C. And my unjustified belief in *I have a sufficient reason to believe C* does not provide such a sufficient reason to believe C. So, I have a commitment to believe C despite lacking a sufficient reason to believe C! This sort of 'commitment' is what is called a 'rational requirement'.

It is difficult to precisely characterize the logical form of such commitments or to explain their precise normative force (or how exactly they

²⁶The distinction between 'reason' and 'rational requirement', the relation between the two and the logical form of the latter is extensively discussed in meta-ethics: e.g. by Broome [1997, 2000], Kolodny [2005].

relate to objective reasons). But what is interesting in the present context is that commitments that are independent of objective reasons also follow from the present account of basing. As said, what negations of defeaters I accept* determines for what reason I believe. But some defeaters for reasons for believing C are defeaters for any reason for believing C. Some defeaters are independent of whether your belief is based on a perception or an inference or anything else. Presumably $\neg C$ is one such "general" defeater of any justification for believing C. If my belief in C is held for a reason at all, then I accept* the negation of $\neg C$ in believing C. That is, I suspend judgment about C when I acquire a sufficient (hence undefeated) reason for believing $\neg C$. Similarly if my belief in C is in our sense rational, then I accept* the negation of *I do not have sufficient reason to believe C*. Thus you will be irrational if you believe C but do not accept* the negations of such general defeaters. Thus having sufficient reasons for believing these defeating propositions is incompatible with basing and thus incompatible with a rationalizing explanation of these beliefs. This automatically disqualifies combinations of obviously inconsistent beliefs. In parallel, there are rational requirements to avoid inconsistencies. This suggests that 'rational' in our sense as 'held for a reason' and 'rational' in the sense of 'does not violate a rational requirement' are coextensive—or even the same. This cannot be argued here, since that would require an extensive discussion of the (competing) views on rational requirements. Although there is much more to be said about these issues, it is tempting, once one adopts the suggested account of basing, to associate 'rational requirements' in this way to the basing-condition.²⁷

²⁷The (unsupported) claim here is that rational requirements such as the rational requirement to believe C one incurs when one believes *I have sufficient reason to believe C* follow from the proposed account of basing. The derivation of that particular requirement goes as follows:

$\neg C$ is plausibly a defeater for any justification for believing *I have sufficient reason to believe C*. I therefore need to accept* its negation, i.e. C, in order to believe *I have sufficient reason to believe C* for a reason. Now accepting* C is incompatible with disbelieving C or with consciously suspending judgment about C ('incompatible' here means that it is impossible to be in the state of accepting* and in one of the other states too. It follows from the nature of acceptance* as introduced above). Thus the only options compatible with believing *I have sufficient reason to believe C* for a reason are either to believe C or to have no attitude towards C, that is, neither believing C, nor disbelieving C, nor suspending judgment about C. Thus given I believe *I have sufficient reason to believe C* I am under some sort of requirement to believe C, namely to take as my attitude towards C (if any at all) the belief-attitude. If I fail to satisfy that requirement I am irrational in the sense that my belief in *I have sufficient reason to believe C* is not held for a (good or bad) reason.

However, as it stands that account of believing for a reason is not very convincing. There is an immediate threat of a regress (or circularity) of explanation. Discussion of this threat will lead to an important revision of the account in the next section.

3 Regresses again

3.1 An explanatory regress

The most immediate threat to the proposed account of the basing-condition is posed by an explanatory regress argument. For the following objection must be raised:

Suppose, in line with the proposed account, that Vincent accepts* (*A*) supports (*B*) in believing (*B*). That is, Vincent is disposed to suspend judgment with respect to (*B*) if he has a reason against (*A*) supports (*B*). But Vincent could be so disposed towards such reasons in the wrong way. Suppose mental state *M* provides a sufficient reason *R* against (*A*) supports (*B*). Now, *M* could explain why Vincent suspends belief in (*B*) as a mere triggering cause—that is without rationalizing his suspending belief in (*B*). Vincent could have complex irrational dispositions that mimic the behavior of someone who is rational. Suppose for instance that Vincent has the irrational disposition to suspend belief in a proposition *p* whenever he acquires a reason against a proposition of the form [*x* supports *p*], where ‘*x*’ stands for any proposition whatsoever.

But in that case Vincent does not believe (*B*) for the reason provided by his belief in (*A*).

This objection shows that basing cannot be reductively explained by a dispositional connection between the mental state *M* that provides a reason *R* for disbelieving that (*A*) supports (*B*) and Vincent’s suspending belief in (*B*). Acceptance* cannot account for basing, for the

It is clear that the question whether the so deduced requirement corresponds to the requirement people have in mind when discussing rational requirements depends on difficult and controversial questions about the normative force and the form of the rational requirement at issue in the example.

mere disposition to suspend judgment triggered by some mental state *M* that happens to provide defeating reasons *R* is not sufficient. The mental state *M* must *rationalize* suspending judgment. In other words, the subject must suspend judgment *for reason R*.

Let us introduce ‘acceptance**’ as the disposition to suspend belief *for* reason *R*, as opposed to ‘acceptance*’ which is merely the disposition to suspend judgment as a (non-rationalizing) reaction to reason *R*:

acceptance:** A subject accepts** that *P* supports *C* in believing *C*, iff she is disposed to suspend belief in *C* *for* any sufficient reason *R* for disbelieving that *P* supports *C*.

Acceptance** has a main drawback—at least apparently—that acceptance* lacks. The problem is that acceptance** (as before acceptance*) is supposed to account for what it is to *believe something for a reason*. But if acceptance** is characterized in terms of *suspending judgment for a reason*, we remain in the same category of phenomena. It does not seem to be very informative to be told that basing a belief on something is constituted by a disposition to base a suspension of judgment on certain things. It seems that Boghossian’s challenge, namely to provide an explanation of the phenomenon of inference (of the inferential basing-relation) that is not implicitly circular has not been met. By contrast, acceptance*, if it had been sufficient, could have given us a non-circular and non-regressive explanation. For it does not need to be characterized in terms of the phenomenon to be explained.

What is needed is an independent characterization of acceptance**. The idea pursued here is to account for acceptance** in terms of a regress of mere dispositions to react to certain reasons, i.o.w. in terms of acceptances*. What accounts for *believing for a certain reason*? A disposition to suspend judgment for certain reasons. What accounts for the *disposition to suspend judgment for certain reasons*? A disposition—accompanying the disposition to suspend judgment—to *suspend suspending judgment for certain reasons* (scope: to suspend {suspending judgment} for certain reasons). What accounts for *suspending suspending judgment for certain reasons*? Obviously we can appeal to ever more dispositions to suspend suspending suspending . . . judgment for certain reasons. In this way we get an “explanation” in infinitely many steps of the phenomenon of believing for a certain reason. The final element of the “explanation” is the infinitely complex disposition to suspend suspending . . . (ad infinitum) judgment for certain reasons. The regress is

an “account” of sorts of the initial believing for a certain reason. It is an “account” in the sense that the initial phenomenon of believing for a certain reason is explained in terms of another phenomenon, namely the infinitely complex disposition to suspend suspending . . . judgment for certain reasons. But it is obviously not an account of the general phenomenon of doing something (believing, suspending judgment) for a reason. Suppose now that we replace the final element of the “explanation” by the mere disposition to suspend suspending . . . judgment *triggered* by certain reason-providing states. In this way we eliminate the phenomenon of doing (believing, suspending) something for a reason from the explanation and we *do* obtain an explanation of the general phenomenon in terms of a phenomenon of which we have a better antecedent grasp: a causal disposition to react to certain mental states.

Let us introduce a regress of reasons R, R_1, R_2, \dots of the following form:

- R is a reason for S to disbelieve that P supports C
- R_1 is a reason for S to disbelieve that R supports \neg (P supports C)
- R_2 is a reason for S to disbelieve that R_1 supports \neg (R supports \neg (P supports C)) . . .

Now, acceptance** that P supports C in believing C can be characterized as the state(s) rendering the following infinite set of counterfactuals true:²⁸

- If S were to obtain R but not R_1 , she would suspend judgment about C
- If S were to obtain R and R_1 but not R_2 , she would not suspend judgment about C (and thus continue to believe C)
- If S were to obtain R and R_1 and R_2 but not R_3 , she would suspend judgment about C .
- If S were to obtain R and R_1 and R_2 and R_3 but not R_4 , she would not suspend judgment about C (and thus continue to believe C).
- . . .

²⁸Thanks to Philipp Keller and Stephan Leuenberger for helping me to clarify the main idea in this way.

None of the counterfactuals involves an acceptance** or a suspension of judgments for a reason.

With that account of acceptance**, the following account of the basing-condition is no longer circular:

basing: S bases her belief in C on the reason provided by her belief in P , partially because S accepts** in believing C that P supports C .

Since this account is explicitly regressive, the most urgent question is whether the regress is vicious or not. Let us say that a regress of conditions is *unsatisfiable* if humans cannot fulfill the infinity of conditions. If the regress is unsatisfiable, then it is vicious. First, we can note that the regress of counterfactuals above does not require a temporally ordered infinity of brain-states. Thus human mortality is not a problem (here!). Second, the increasing complexity of the counterfactuals is due only to the antecedent. The consequent is always either to believe C or to suspend judgment about C . It is not impossible or even unlikely that a materially finite machine such as the brain renders such an infinite sequence of counterfactuals true. Third, a point could be made that most of the counterfactuals in the sequence are trivially true. That is, most of the counterfactuals could be true not in virtue of one or several specific brain-state(s), but instead in virtue of human limitations. Consider the series of reasons R, R_1, R_2, \dots . The propositions for which each of them is a reason become ever more complex. But it is not humanly possible to grasp infinitely complex propositions. It is therefore arguably not possible for subjects to acquire reasons for believing such propositions. Therefore, it is not humanly possible for most of the antecedents to obtain. But since human possibility constrains the domain of possible worlds on which these counterfactuals are to be evaluated, most of them have a necessarily false antecedent. And such counterfactuals, at least according to Lewis’ semantics for counterfactuals, are true. If this argument is correct then the counterfactuals the truth of which depends on specific brain-states are of a finite number. Thus human limitations are not really in the way of the existence of truth-makers for the infinite sequence of counterfactuals, on the contrary they rather partially constitute them.²⁹

But a regress can be vicious even if it is satisfiable. In particular a regress may be a sign of implicit explanatory circularity, as has been pointed

²⁹If I did not misunderstand him, something like this idea was put forward by Josh Schechter during a presentation of an earlier version of this paper.

out earlier. But the regressive account of acceptance** was introduced precisely in order to break out of a circle of explanations. The important point to note here is that the idea is not to explain basing in terms of dispositions to base, itself again explained in terms of a dispositions to base, and so on. The idea is rather to explain basing in terms of an infinity of dispositions (or better: in terms of truth-makers for infinitely many counterfactuals), themselves not characterized in terms of basing. The account provides a *reductive* explanation of basing.

It must be admitted that opinions about whether the explanation is a good explanation will diverge. For some people it will be more or less trivial that the explanation does not succeed. They will point out that however complex the disposition of the subject, it will never be possible to explain rationalization in terms of it. They will perhaps appeal to an intuition to the effect that even a subject who is such that the regress of counterfactuals is true about her could be irrational, i.e. could be so disposed in the wrong way. (This intuition is briefly discussed in section 3.2 in relation to a responsibilist version of the view proposed here.) These people will want to take the notion of *rationally responding to a reason* as undefined and irreducible. Perhaps they are right. But it still seems to be the case that pointing towards the complex dispositions to respond to defeaters explains to some extent what sort of phenomenon rationalizing is. Even if it does perhaps not explain the phenomenon by giving all the constitutive facts, it may explain it by giving the consequences the undefinable relation should have. But it is not clear that so much needs to be conceded to these critics. For note that if the regress is infinite, then there will be no connection between one of the reasons R in the series and the corresponding suspension of judgment or suspension of suspension such that it is easy to argue that it could be of the wrong kind. That is, it is not possible to raise the objection raised against the account in terms of acceptance* at the beginning of this section, namely that the dispositional connection could be of the wrong kind, about any one connection between some R_x in the series and corresponding suspension in the series. For on the proposed account any such connection is embedded in the subject's psychology in such a way that the infinite series of counterfactuals are true. So intuitions about particular relations between mental states do not speak against the proposal. The objection needs to invoke some general argument and thesis about rationalization. And it is not clear what provides such an argument.

Thus it should be clear that the proposed account avoids Boghossian's worry as explained above: The proposed account of the basing-condition and incidentally the account of what it is to infer C from P does not rely on an antecedently understood explanation of what it is to infer C from P and *P supports C*. There is no appeal to the acceptance** of *P supports C* as something on which C is based (or as something from which C is inferred) in the ultimate account.

A much more general objection against the account might come to mind. Is this not an attempt at naturalizing normativity? And do we not know that such attempts are bound to fail? But the answer to the first question is: No. Rationality in the sense captured by the basing-condition does not exhaust the normative. Indeed, it is not clear that it is a normative condition at all. What *is* a clearly normative condition is the reasons-condition. The fact that I have certain (objective) reasons renders it true that I ought to do certain things (or that I am permitted and forbidden certain things). But the fact that I take something to be a reason in the sense of the basing-condition might just be a psychological fact about me. It is true that, if the account of basing given here is roughly correct, it is not possible to account for basing without recourse to the normative notion of an (objective) reason. For basing is explained in terms of a certain sort of complex responsiveness to certain objective reasons (e.g. reason R for disbelieving that P supports C). But this does not mean that facts about basing give rise to 'oughts' and 'shoulds'. Of course, some conditions must be fulfilled in order for facts about basing to obtain. And it has been suggested that the fulfillment of these conditions guarantees the fulfillment of a basic level of rationality—the one associated with rational requirements.³⁰

3.2 A regress on the normative status of acceptances**

From the proposed account of believing for a reason follows an anti-indifference-principle: A move from P to C, or a dependence of the

³⁰This is a major difference between the account of basing given here and the one defended by Leite [2004]. He takes the basing-relation to give rise to certain commitments. On the account proposed here satisfaction of the basing-condition ensures that the basic level of evaluation as 'rational' is fulfilled. It is not possible to be irrational in not behaving according to the commitments taken on by basing one's belief on a certain (good or bad) reason. See the discussion of the relation between the basing-condition and rational requirements on page 12.

belief in *C* on the belief in *P*, is an inference, or inferential basing-relation, only if the subject accepts** in believing *C* that *P* supports *C*. This way of speaking suggests that it is a propositional attitude and that consequently it is subject to normative constraints. But it is not clear yet whether the acceptance** has a normative status on its own. From the psychological point of view it is a mere disposition. Does it need to be backed up by reasons in favor of *P supports C*? Or is it more like an assuming that *P* supports *C* on the basis of nothing, but which is O.K. under certain conditions? Or is it something outside the “realm of reasons”, so to speak; something which does not have a normative status, not even that of rightly assuming on no reason? That is, it is not clear yet whether the anti-indifference-principle that follows from the account of inferring looks more like the first or the second of the following:

moderate anti-indifference: *S* justifiably infers *C* from *P*, only if she accepts** that *P* supports *C* in believing *C*.

immoderate anti-indifference: *S* justifiably infers *C* from *P*, only if she *justifiably (rightly, virtuously, etc.)* accepts** that *P* supports *C* in believing *C*.

The question whether moderate or immoderate anti-indifference is correct will be the most important question for proponents and opponents of inferential internalism. In particular, so far opponents of inferential internalism need not worry too much about the proposed account of basing. If acceptances** do not have a normative status on their own, then they do not have the epistemological implications associated with propositional attitudes. In particular, these are then not states supported by reasons.

Opponents to inferential internalism do not only worry that the belief in *P supports C* plays an inferential role in rendering the belief in *C* justified. This was the worry discussed in the preceding section. The proposed account of basing answers that worry by appealing to the psychologically special state of acceptance** instead of the state of belief. But opponents of inferential internalism are also uncomfortable about the way in which the belief in *P supports C* is itself justified.³¹ If it is always inferentially justified, then a regress of reasons immediately

³¹See among many others Fumerton [1995], Boghossian [2003]. The worry about the justification of beliefs about how the truth of the premises render the conclusion likely to be true is of course the essential ingredient in Hume’s sceptical problem

arises. But the other option, namely that it is non-inferentially justified, presumably by some a priori insight, also gives raise to considerable discomfort —especially if one understands “supports” as “probabilizes”. That *C* is objectively likely given *P* just does not seem to be something one could always know a priori. No one so far has been able to convincingly argue that it is knowable a priori that inductive premises probabilize the inductive conclusion. Thus an infinite regress of reasons or a circle of reasons threatens, for such propositions can themselves only be inductively supported needing further inferential support.

This classic worry arises in the context of the current proposal about basing too. If the acceptances** must be based on adequate reasons (whether the basing involved is inferential or not does not make much difference), then the following infinite regress obtains: For the acceptance** to be in good standing it cannot be sufficient that there is a supporting reason. The acceptance** must be based on that reason. This introduces infinitely many further acceptances**. This is regress is independent of the fact whether the supporting reason is inductive or not. Even if the acceptance** is based on an a priori insight, the basing-relation itself requires further acceptances**. And each further acceptance** needs the support by further reason-providing state and further acceptances** that constitute the basing-relation between acceptance** and reason-providing state. This prospect is prima facie worrying —more worrying than the truth of the infinity of counterfactuals implied by the acceptance**-states constituting one particular basing-relation.

There is at least the following choice of answers to the question of what renders the anti-indifference attitude justified. The first, the deflationary answer, is given by a proponent of moderate anti-indifference:

The deflationary answer: Acceptances** do not have a normative status.

The regressive answer: Acceptances** are held for a reason.

The externalist answer: Acceptances** must have the right causal history: they are mere causal responses (vs. rational reactions) to the presence of reasons for the relevant propositions.

about inductive justification. For the principle of the Uniformity of Nature is nothing else than the claim that the truth of the generalization of an enumerative induction is objectively likely given the truth of the premises.

If one gives the regressive answer one will have to argue that the regress of acceptances** and reasons mentioned in the preceding paragraph is not vicious. If one gives the externalist answer one avoids the regress by denying that the acceptance** is *based* on the states providing the reason in favor of the accepted** proposition. While nothing speaks against the latter answer, it is not clear why one should favor it over the deflationary answer. For as externalist as it is, that kind of support cannot render the acceptance** more responsible. Thus, classic internalist considerations about responsibility do not speak in favor of the externalist answer.

Much speaks in favor of the deflationary answer, if anti-indifference is exclusively motivated by concerns about the basing-relation. For the traditional understanding of the division of labor between the basing-condition and the reasons-condition is that the basing-condition is a purely psychological matter while everything of normative relevance is in the reasons-condition. This is reflected in everyday “reasons” talk. The subject already “has a reason for believing C”, namely the reason provided by P. He does not need an additional “reason to believe for that reason”.

For illustration here is a possible situation in everyday justificatory practice: Suppose I am asked “What is your reason for believing C?” and the response is “P”. Does it make sense to ask “Now that you have given me the reason for which you believe C, and I agree that it is a good reason and that you do believe for that reason, please tell me what is your reason for believing for that reason, so that we can settle whether you are really justified in believing C” ? This seems odd. It is natural to say that one is justified in believing C, when the reason for which one believes is good.

It might be that there is some extra motivation, one outside concerns about the basing-relation, for requiring that the acceptances** are supported by further reasons. For instance, a concern about epistemic responsibility might be invoked. Is not a subject who accepts** the relevant propositions about support in believing C on no reason at all behaving irresponsibly? And does not a subject who by some accident happens to have whatever renders the infinitely many counterfactuals true lack epistemic responsibility or epistemic virtue?³²

It is not possible to discuss this extra motivation in detail here, for epistemic responsibility is a very difficult and large topic on its own. But

³²This question was put to me by Martine Nida-Rümelin about a similar account of basing I defended in my PhD Thesis.

the general thrust of this paper has been to motivate anti-indifference and to explain the intuition in its favor by concerns about basing *in place of* concerns about epistemic responsibility. And in line with this it makes most sense to resist these concerns again. Furthermore there is a way in which the concerns about someone who just happens by lucky accident to have the sensitivity to all the relevant defeaters can be addressed without stepping outside the scope given by the deflationary answer.

It has been argued that in order to infer C from P, the subject must accept** *P supports C* in believing C. But it has been said that she must accept** other propositions too. In particular, a subject who is sufficiently conceptually sophisticated should accept** *reflective* propositions such as *the belief in P provides a good reason for believing C*. And it is very plausible that one should also accept** very general reflective propositions such as *I am in general capable of believing for adequate reasons*. Now, in line with the deflationary answer, acceptance** of these reflective propositions need not be backed up by reasons in favor of them. Still the mere fact that the subject is sensitive to reasons against them guarantees in some sense that the whole class of acceptances** required for basing is sufficiently integrated within the subject’s belief-system. It guarantees a level of reflectivity sufficient to deflect worries about a pure-luck disposition and accompanying lack of epistemic virtue or responsibility. Thus, if I just happen by sheer luck to have on an occasion the right sensitivity towards all the right propositions at all levels reflective —and non-reflective—, then my being sensitive to all the relevant defeating reasons at all levels just seems sufficient. For it is not a matter of luck that I maintain my belief in C. I maintain it because there are no defeating reasons against my adequate reason provided by the belief in P. The acceptances** guarantee that otherwise I would not. Thus the often invoked requirement of reflectivity and cognitive integration on epistemic virtue is in fact satisfied by the proposed account of basing.

This paper proposes an account of inferring C from P and more generally of believing for a reason. It captures the intuitive idea that this requires *taking P (or the state with content P) to provide a reason for believing C*. This has then been interpreted in terms of a special mental state, namely the state of acceptance**, thereby avoiding the traditional worry that any further attitude (besides the beliefs in P and in C) involved in the inference will lead to a psychological and explanatory regress. It had to be conceded that acceptance** is a mental state that renders and infinity of counterfactuals true. But it has been argued that it is on the one hand psychologically possible for humans to be in such a state and

that the ensuing explanation of believing for a reason or inferring is not circular. While a non-vicious regress has thus been countenanced it has been denied that a justificatory regress ensues. For acceptances** are not the sort of mental states that are supported by further reasons and based on further reason-providing states. This account of believing for a reason allows to capture the intuitive appeal of traditional internalist principles about inferential justification such as inferential internalism, while it at the same time avoids relying on the controversial notion of epistemic responsibility.

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