WILLIAM P. ALSTON

HAS FOUNDATIONALISM BEEN REFUTED?

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The battle over foundationalism in epistemology has recently been escalated with the publication of two works in which that position is subjected to detailed criticism, Frederick L. Will's *Induction and Justification*[1] and Keith Lehrer's *Knowledge*.[2] However in both cases the attack is directed to features of the position that are by no means essential to foundationalism and that do not appear in its most defensible form, what I shall call 'Minimal Foundationalism'. This paper will be devoted to supporting this claim and to suggesting that if one wishes to dispose of foundationalism he must concentrate his fire on its strongest form.

I. WILL'S CRITICISM

Will formulates foundationalism as follows:

> There is a class of claims, cognitions, that are known in a special direct, certain, incorrigible way; and all epistemic authority resides in these. The philosophical question of the epistemic status of any claim is always a question of the relation of that claim to this class of first cognitions. A claim can be established to be a genuine example of knowledge, or at least a claim worthy of some kind of reasonable adherence, only if it can be disclosed to be, if not a first cognition itself, in some degree authenticated by one or more of such cognitions. It must be possible somehow, beginning with such cognitions, by a finite set of steps in an acceptable procedure to arrive at the claim in question as a conclusion and, by virtue of this, as a justified result. (142)

Elsewhere these 'first cognitions' are characterized as 'infallible' (203), 'indubitable' (172), 'self-justifying' (190), and enjoying 'logical independence from every other possible cognition' (200). Will's objections to the position are focused on the claims of independence and incorrigibility, the latter understood as the impossibility of justified rejection or revision.

> The doctrine advanced concerning these alleged first steps in cognition, like that concerning consequent ones, is that... in discriminating a quality of one's own visual experience (e.g., the redness of the after-image) one is participating in a practice that

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extends, and depends for its success upon conditions which extend, far beyond the subject as an individual human being. (197)

And just because of this, one's supposition that one's sensation is of a certain character, is liable both to error and to revision.

...if knowing any truth about a sensation, if indeed *having* a sensation of the kind that is specified in that truth, involves the employment and sound working of a vast array of equipment and resource extending far beyond any individual and what can be conceived to be private to him, then the possibility that this equipment and resource is not in place and working soundly cannot be discounted in the philosophical understanding of the knowledge of such truth. If the sound discrimination of the sensation of X, in its character *as* X, can be made only by correctly utilizing something further, say, Y, and if, in a case like this, discrimination of a sensation as X can be made while yet, for some reason, Y is not being used correctly, then a discrimination of X need not be a sound discrimination. (203)

Will's attack on incorrigibility and infallibility embodies a salutary emphasis on the possibility and importance of failings other than error.

...there are a variety of ways in which a discrimination may go wrong without being mistaken, without yielding anything sufficiently close to a good performance to be rightly called an error. And there are also a variety of ways in which a discrimination can exhibit its corrigibility other than by going wrong, by yielding somehow an unsuccessful individual performance.... Like every other mode of response, modes of sensory discrimination exhibit their liability to change, improvement, deterioration and obsolescence in the dependence they exhibit at all points upon individual and social needs and the conditions under which these needs are filled. (207)

If I were concerned in this paper with the soundness of Will's criticism there are a number of matters into which I should have to go. For one thing, there is the question of whether he thinks that the dependence of, e.g., sensory discriminations, on social practices, *itself* contradicts a central tenet of foundationalism, or whether he makes this point only as a basis for showing corrigibility. And this of course depends on how he interprets the *independence* he supposes foundationalism to ascribe to first cognitions. Although he is not as explicit about this as one might wish, there are indications that he supposes foundationalism to be committed to the view that the possibility of first cognitions *in no way* depends on the existence of anything outside one's momentary state of mind (e.g., 203); in that case the dependence he (surely correctly) alleges would be itself an argument against the position. Again it is not clear that his vigorous and penetrating attack on incorrigibility really is based on the claim that all cognition depends on social practices. Would not Will's

points about the inherent possibility of any procedure's being misused and about the liability of any conceptual scheme to be scrapped for a better one, apply even to a disembodied mind that is alone in the universe (assuming, contra Wittgenstein and Will, that one can speak intelligibly of a solipsistic mind as using procedures and conceptual schemes). But my concern in this paper is limited to showing that even if we freely grant the force of his arguments a significant brand of foundationalism is left standing.

Let's suppose, then, that Will has shown both that all cognition depends (not just in fact but, as he claims, with a kind of theoretical necessity (198–99)) on social practices, and that no cognitions are incorrigible. Does that dispose of foundationalism? Hardly. Though foundationalists have often taken their foundations to be incorrigible,[3] they need not have done so in order to be distinctive foundationalists. To flesh out this claim I shall formulate a 'Minimal Foundationalism', the weakest, and hence least vulnerable, doctrine that has enough bite (of the right sort) to deserve that title.

It will be useful to build up to the formulation in several stages. In the most unspecific terms a foundationalist is one who supposes that knowledge forms a structure, most components of which are supported by a certain sub-set of components that are not themselves supported by the former. To make this less metaphorical we have to specify the mode of support involved. Most contemporary formulations (including those of our critics) employ some form of a Justified-True-Belief (JTB) conception of knowledge, in that they take something like S's being justified in truly believing that p as at least a necessary condition for S's knowing that p.[4] In these terms we can specify the relevant mode of support as justification. The rest of knowledge is supported by the foundations and not vice versa, just in that it depends on the foundations for the justification of the beliefs involved, and not vice versa. Two further considerations will enable us to make this formulation more perspicuous.

(1) First a useful bit of terminology. Where what justifies a belief includes[5] the believer's possessing certain other justified beliefs (those that embody his evidence or reasons for the initial belief), we may speak of *mediately* (*indirectly*) justified belief. And where what justifies a belief does not include any such thing (any other justified belief of that person) we may speak of *immediately* (*directly*) justified belief. Correspondingly a

case of knowledge in which the justification requirement is satisfied by mediate justification may be called *mediate* (*indirect*) knowledge; and a case in which the justification requirement is satisfied by immediate justification will be called *immediate* (*direct*) knowledge.

(2) We should make more explicit just how mediate justification is thought to depend on immediately justified belief. The idea is that although the other beliefs that are involved in the justification of a given belief may themselves be mediately justified, if we continue determining at each stage how the beliefs involved are justified, we will arrive, sooner or later, at a set of beliefs each of which is immediately justified. This will not, in general, be a single line of descent; for typically the mediately justified belief with which we start will rest on several beliefs, each of which in turn will rest on several beliefs. So the general picture is that of multiple branching from the original belief.

Taking account of all this, we may formulate Minimal Foundationalism as follows.

(I) Every mediately justified belief stands at the base of a (more or less) multiply branching tree structure at the tip of each branch of which is an immediately justified belief.

Knowledge seems to have been mislaid in the course of our discussion, but it is easily relocated. Foundationalism is thought of as dealing with knowledge just because one thinks of the justified beliefs in question as satisfying the other requirements for knowledge. One can, if he likes, build into (I) an explicit restriction to cases of knowledge.

(II) In every case of mediate knowledge the mediately justified belief involved stands at the base of a (more or less) multiply branching tree structure at the tip of each branch of which is an immediately justified belief that satisfies the other requirements for knowledge.

However the fact remains that the structure definitive of foundationalism comes into the picture via the justification of belief. Hence (I) gives what is essential to the position, and that is what I shall be discussing under the title of 'Minimal Foundationalism'.

There are certain differences between (I) and Will's formulation that are not directly relevant to our present concerns. For example, Will

thinks of foundationalism in terms of how one is to *show* that a non-basic belief is justified, whereas (I) is in terms of what it is for a non-basic belief to *be* justified.[6] But of course it follows from (I) that the way to *show* that a non-basic belief is justified is roughly the way Will specifies. Again, (I) is in terms of 'belief', whereas Will uses terms like 'claim' and 'cognition'. It lies outside the purview of this paper to argue that 'belief' is the term we need, but I am confident it could be successfully argued.

What *is* directly to the point is that the targets of Will's criticism are not to be found in Minimal Foundationalism. What that position requires of a foundation is only that it be immediately justified, justified by something other than the possession of other justified beliefs. And to say that a certain person is immediately justified in holding a certain belief is to say nothing as to whether it could be shown defective by someone else or at some other time.[7] Still less is it to say that it enjoys the absolute independence opposed by Will. A minimal foundation *is* independent of every other cognition in that it derives its justification from none. But that by no means implies that it is nomologically possible for such a belief to occur without a supporting context of social practices. And it is the latter mode of independence that Will rejects.

Will attempts to show that 'absolute' independence and incorrigibility, as well as infallibility, are required if a cognition is to serve as a foundation.

> ... the crucial aspect of the alleged first cognitions that are taken to be expressed in basic empirical propositions is their logical independence from every other possible cognition. This character of epistemic atoms is essential to them, essential to their role as self-justifying grounds for other claims. If they are not logically independent, other cognitions may serve as grounds for them; and this is incompatible with their role as members of the justification sequence with which the sequence of questions must stop, because no more can possibly be asked. From this independence follows their incorrigibility, and given this incorrigibility... they will have to be certain in a very strong sense that implies infallibility. (200–01)

Ten pages earlier there is a similar line of argument, starting from the basic demand for a foundation that it "can be established in utter independence from other claims" (190), which I take to be roughly equivalent to being "members of the justification sequence with which the sequence of questions must stop." Thus we have a chain of alleged implications that runs – *can be established without dependence on other claims→independence from every other cognition→incorrigibility→infallibility.*

As against this I would suggest that neither the starting point nor any of the succeeding links in the chain have been shown to be required by foundationalism.

It may look as if "can be established in utter independence from other claims" is just precisely what we have said Minimal Foundationalism requires of its foundations. However there is a subtle but highly significant difference between '*is justified* without dependence on other claims' and 'can be *established* without dependence on other claims'. I might well *be* immediately justified in believing, e.g., that I feel depressed, without being able to 'establish' this (i.e., *show* that it is true), either with or without dependence on other 'claims'. In fact it is not at all clear what would count as such a showing; perhaps the strongest candidate would be my showing that I am justified in believing that I feel depressed. But of course to do that requires far more conceptual and dialectical sophistication than would normally be possessed by those who *are* justified in holding such beliefs. In view of that it is fortunate that Minimal Foundationalism does not require one to be able to *show* that his foundations have the required status, but only that they *do* have them.[8]

In the quotation above 'logical independence' is said to be entailed by the capability of being established without reliance on other claims. Perhaps it is, but only in the sense in which a contradiction entails everything. I don't see what sense can be attached to showing or establishing p without adducing some grounds q, not identical with p. If when asked to show that p I simply reiterate my assertion that p I have clearly not *shown* that p; this follows just from the concept of showing. Even if my belief is self-justifying, so that nothing outside the belief is required to justify me in holding it, what follows from that, if anything follows concerning showing, is that there is no need for me to show that p is true; it certainly does not follow that I *can* show that p just by asserting that p. So the requirement that it be possible to establish that p without dependence on other cognitions is a self-contradictory one. And the more sensible requirement that we have seen to be intrinsic to foundationalism, that the claim *be justified* otherwise than by relation to other cognitions, does *not* entail that the claim is "logically independent of all other possible cognitions." Indeed it is not at all clear what is meant by the latter, but let's take its denial to involve what Will says it involves, viz., that other cognitions may serve as grounds. Does this prevent the

putative foundation from being immediately justified? Will thinks so. "Claims are said to be self-justifying ones only when they alone, and no other claims whatever, may be advanced in their support."[9] (201) But I see no merit in this. To say that a belief is immediately justified is just to say that there are conditions *sufficient* for its justification that do not involve any other justified beliefs of that believer. This condition could be satisfied even if the believer has other justified beliefs that could serve as grounds. Overdetermination is an epistemic as well as a causal phenomenon. What fits a belief to serve as a foundation is simply that it doesn't *need* other justified beliefs in order to be justified itself. It can be accepted *whether or not* there are grounds. Clearly the existence of grounds does not prevent its having that status.

As for the next link in the chain, I suppose that if foundations were 'logically independent' of other claims in such a way as to render them insusceptible of mediate justification, it would follow by the same token that they could not be shown mistaken on the basis of other claims. But since we have seen no reason to attribute the former to foundations, we are left with no basis for the attribution of incorrigibility. Will elsewhere gives other arguments for incorrigibility, but they also involve features that go beyond Minimal Foundationalism. For example, "incorrigibility derives from the assignment of certain claims to the position of fixed and absolute beginnings in the justification process." (191)[10] And if we require maximal stability for the structure of justification we shall indeed have to rule out the possibility that any foundation loses its credentials. But all that is required by Minimal Foundationalism is that the mediately justified beliefs a person has at any moment rest (at that moment) on certain immediately justified beliefs. This in no way implies that the set of immediately justified beliefs change from moment to moment *only* by adding new members. Items can also drop out, whether by refutation or otherwise. That will only mean that mediately justified beliefs that essentially depended on those delinquents will drop out as well.

Although it is not directly germane to Will's critique of foundationalism we may, finally, note that the derivation of infallibility from incorrigibility fares no better.

Since incorrigibility without truth is a dubious merit for any set of truth claims to have, since incorrigible error is of the worst kind, and since the aspiration to truth of

any item in the corpus of human knowledge is taken to depend upon these alleged incorrigible claims, they must, in their splendid isolation, be incorrigibly true. Infallibility as a requirement derives in the theory from incorrigibility. (190)

This may indicate why infallibility is attractive to foundationalists (or any other seeker after truth), but it does nothing to show that a claim *cannot* be incorrigible without being infallible; indeed by acknowledging the conceivability of incorrigible error Will acquieses in the denial of that.[11] Nor does it do anything to show that only infallible claims can play the foundational role. No doubt, in order to be a foundation a belief must carry a strong presumption of truth; this it enjoys just by virtue of being justified. But that is quite different from *impossibility* of falsity.[12]

II. LEHRER'S CRITICISM

Lehrer's formulation of foundationalism runs as follows:

It is possible to give a more precise characterization of foundation theories by specifying the conditions that must be met for a belief to be basic. The first is that a basic statement must be self-justified and must not be justified by any non-basic belief. Second, a basic belief must either be irrefutable, or, if refutable at all, it must only be refutable by other basic beliefs. Third, beliefs must be such that all other beliefs that are justified or refuted are justified or refuted by basic beliefs. A theory of justification having these features is one in which there are basic beliefs which are self-justified and neither refutable nor justifiable by non-basic beliefs and which justify and refute all non-basic beliefs that are justified or refuted. These basic beliefs constitute the foundation of all justification. (76–77)

This, like Minimal Foundationalism, is (appears to be) in terms of what it is to *be* justified, rather than what it takes to *show* justification; but, like Will, Lehrer tacks on a requirement of incorrigibility (here interpreted as impossibility of error). As noted in footnotes 10 and 11, Lehrer claims, like Will, that incorrigibility and infallibility are required for foundations, and devotes a longish chapter (Chapter 4) to arguing that there are not nearly enough incorrigible beliefs to serve as foundations for others. In spite of that he goes on in the following chapter to acknowledge the conceivability of a theory built on corrigible foundations. Our task here will be to determine whether his objections against this latter form of the theory tell against Minimal Foundationalism.

Lehrer attacks the theory both on the basic and the non-basic level. As for the former, he considers whether the beliefs that we need for

foundations are 'self-justified'. After arguing that 'independent information' is required for the justification of perceptual beliefs, Lehrer admits that for the justification of some beliefs, e.g., those concerning one's own current states of consciousness, no 'information' is required over and above 'semantic information' that is needed for understanding the meaning of the statement, and hence that they may be self-justified. (111) But *how* is this possible? In particular, "What defence can be given of this epistemological principle telling us that beliefs of this sort are self-justified?" (112) There is a lengthy and, to my mind, persuasive argument against the common position that such principles are true by virtue of the meanings of terms. (112–19) The other alternatives he considers are that "the belief that the principle is true is basic" (121), and that by taking such beliefs to be self-justified we will be able to explain how other beliefs are justified. (121) The objection to the first of these alternatives is that: "This manoeuvre, though logically consistent, opens the door to the most rampant forms of speculation. Anyone wishing to argue that he knows anything whatever can then claim that what he knowns is a basic belief. When asked to defend this claim, he can again retort that it is a basic belief that this belief is basic, and so on." (152) The second alternative is rejected on the basis of the argument considered below, which seeks to show that foundationalism cannot account for the justification of non-basic empirical beliefs.

How damaging is this criticism to Minimal Foundationalism? Taking it *à pied de la lettre*, not at all. Minimal Foundationalism does not require that any belief be self-justified, but only that some beliefs be immediately justified; and the former is only one possible form of the latter. A belief is *self*-justified, in a literal sense, if it is justified just by virtue of being held, just by virtue of being the sort of belief it is (e.g., a belief by a person that he is currently thinking so-and-so). But that is by no means the only kind of immediate justification. The following also constitute live possibilities for the justification of, e.g., a belief by a person that he currently feels depressed.

(1) Justified by its truth, in other words by the fact that makes it true, the fact that he does now feel depressed.[13]

(2) Justified by the believer's awareness of his feeling depressed, where this is a non-propositional kind of awareness that

does not necessarily involve any belief or judgement, justified or otherwise.[14]

(3) Justified by being formed, or being held, in certain kinds of circumstances, e.g., being wide awake, alert, in full possession of one's faculties.

If what it takes to justify my belief that I am feeling depressed is what is specified by (1), (2) or (3), then more is required than the mere existence of the belief.[15]

But although it is an extremely important point that immediate justification is not confined to self-justification, this is too easy a way with Lehrer's argument. For whatever mode of immediate justification we think attaches to beliefs about one's current states of consciousness, the question can still be raised as to what defence can be given of the epistemological principle that beliefs of this sort are justified under these conditions. This is a profound and difficult problem that must certainly be faced by foundationalism, and I cannot hope to go into it properly here. I shall have to content myself with arguing that Lehrer has not shown this to be a fatal difficulty for Minimal Foundationalism.

First let us note that this is a problem for any epistemology, foundationalist or otherwise, that employs the concept of epistemic justification. It is incumbent on any such epistemology to specify the grounds for principles that lay down conditions for beliefs of a certain sort to count as justified. I believe that a sober assessment of the situation would reveal that no epistemology has been conspicuously successful at this job. Before using this demand as a weapon against foundationalism the critic should show us that the position he favors does a better job.[16]

Rather than spend more time on these legalistic 'burden of proof' considerations, I should like to turn to a point that is more directly relevant to my interest in revealing gratuitous accretions to Minimal Foundationalism. My own view as to how foundationalism (or any other epistemology) should test a princple of justification is that it should use empirical evidence to determine whether beliefs approved by the principle are reliable, i.e. can be depended on to be (at least usually) correct. I suspect that Lehrer, along with most of my readers, would react to this by saying that whatever the merits of this suggestion for other epistemologies, it is obviously unavailable for foundationalism. Since it is def-

initive of that position to insist that a foundation does not depend on any other belief for its justification, how can a foundationalist countenance the deployment of empirical evidence to validate the foundations? Well, to see how this is possible we have to uncover a distinction closely analogous to the one mentioned earlier between a basic belief's *being justified* and *being established* (or shown to be justified). The distinction in question is that between (a) knowing (being justified in believing) that I am depressed (when that is a basic belief), and (b) knowing (being justified in believing) that I immediately know (am justified in believing) that I feel depressed. Clearly it is definitive of foundationalism to hold that (a) does not depend on any other beliefs' being justified, but it is in no way essential to foundationalism to deny that (b) is so dependent. Minimal Foundationalism would be committed to the latter denial only if one could not be immediately justified in believing that *p* without also being immediately justified in believing that he is immediately justified in believing that *p*. But why suppose that? Even if justification on the lower level necessarily carries with it justification of the belief that one is so justified, it would not follow that the justification of the higher level belief is *immediate*. It could be, rather, that being justified in believing that *p* automatically puts one in possession of the evidence he needs for being *mediately* justified in believing that he is immediately justified in believing that *p*. And in any event, why suppose that being justified in believing that *p* necessarily carries with it being justified in believing that one is so justified? It would seem that those who have not attained the level of epistemological reflection have no justification for believing anything about their being epistemically justified. And when one does come to be justified in accepting some higher level epistemic belief, is this not typically on the basis of rationcination? In particular it may be, as Lehrer in effect suggests, that I will have to formulate some general principle of justification and find adequate reasons for accepting it before I can become justified in believing that I am immediately justified in believing that *p*. And in that case perhaps empirical evidence for the reliability of beliefs that satisfy this principle will be the crucial reason in support of the principle.[17]

Let's return to Lehrer's argument that foundationalism can provide no adequate reason for accepting a principle that declares beliefs concerning one's own current conscious states to be immediately justified

in some way, e.g., to be self-justified. The burden of the last paragraph is that this argument will work only if Lehrer can exclude the possibility of a foundationalist's providing adequate empirical support for such principles. And he can do this only by saddling foundationalism with the gratuitous demand that in addition to basic beliefs' *being* immediately justified, one must be immediately justified in taking them to be immediately justified. Once again the argument tells only against a position that makes claims it need not make in order to be a foundationalism.

On the level of non-basic beliefs Lehrer's argument proceeds from what he terms "the fundamental doctrine of foundation theories", viz., that "justification, whether it is the self-justification of basic beliefs, or the derivative justification of non-basic beliefs, guarantees truth". (78–9) When we consider the justification of non-basic beliefs by evidence, "The consequence which follows is that evidence never *completely* justifies a belief in such a way as to guarantee the truth of the belief unless the probability of the statement on the basis of the evidence is equal to one". (149) Indeed, we can apply the same considerations to basic beliefs. "If we now consider the question of how probable a belief must be in order to be self-justified, an analogous argument shows that the belief must have an initial probability of one." (150) And this implies that practically no contingent beliefs could be justified. "For any strictly coherent probability function, no statement has an initial probability of one unless it is a logical truth, and in infinite languages no non-general statement has an initial probability of one unless it is a logical truth. Hence, with the exception of certain general statements in infinite languages, completely justified basic beliefs would have to be restricted to logical truths, and completely justified non-basic beliefs would have to be restricted to logical consequences of completely justified basic beliefs.... We would be locked out of the realm of the contingent, and skepticism would reign supreme there". (151)

I will not have time to go into the way Lehrer derives these conclusions from the 'fundamental doctrine.' Again I shall have to restrict myself to considering whether the argument, if valid, is damaging to Minimal Foundationalism. And here that reduces to the question whether Minimal Foundationaism holds that 'justification guarantees truth'.

Unfortunately it is not at all clear what this is supposed to mean. A

natural interpretation would be that justification necessitates truth; that it is impossible for a justified belief to be false. And that seems to be what Lehrer means initially. In the paragraph in which he introduces the 'fundamental doctrine', he says, "Basic beliefs are basic because they cannot be false; their truth is guaranteed." But when in the next chapter he comes to recognize the possibility of basic beliefs that are corrigible, he analogizes the epistemic guarantee of truth to a manufacturer's guarantee of soundness, and points out that in neither case is the existence of the guarantee incompatible with the absence of what is guaranteed. (102) But then hasn't the 'fundamental doctrine' become vacuous? On *any* (sensible) conception of justification it carries at least a strong presumption of truth. And isn't that as much of a guarantee as a manufacturer's guarantee? It looks at this point as if 'guarantee of truth' has become indistinguishable from 'justification'. But then in Chapter 6, where the argument currently under consideration occurs, Lehrer seems to have drifted into a conception midway between 'necessitates truth' and 'carries a strong presumption of truth', but without telling us just what this is. Indeed the only real clue we have is the claim quoted above, that a belief must have a probability of one if its justification is to guarantee its truth. Perhaps it is something like this: to say that the justification of a belief *guarantees* its truth is to say that it comes as close as possible to necessitating the truth of the belief. But whether or not that is just the way to put it, it is clear that so long as 'justification guarantees truth' has the consequence for both basic and non-basic beliefs alleged by Lehrer in the present argument, that doctrine is no part of Minimal Foundationalism. It is quite possible for some beliefs to be immediately justified and for other beliefs to be mediately justified on the basis of the former, without any of them receiving a probability of one. At least there is nothing in the general notions of immediate and mediate justification to support any such requirement. No doubt, the higher the probability the stronger the justification, but why should a foundationalist have to insist on a maximally strong justification? What is there about *foundationalism*, as contrasted with rival orientations, that necessitates such a demand? The distinctive thing about foundationalism is the *structure* of justification it asserts; and this structure can be imposed on justifications of varying degrees of strength. Once more a band of camp followers has been mistaken for the main garrison.

III. THE STATUS OF MINIMAL FOUNDATIONALISM

One may grant that Minimal Foundationalism is untouched by the criticisms we have been discussing and yet feel that this is of little import, just because that position is so minimal as to have lost the features that give foundationalism its distinctive contours. My answer to that is simply to point out that when we formulate the main argument for foundationalism, the regress argument, in the only form in which it gives any support to that position, the version that emerges is precisely what I have been calling Minimal Foundationalism. The regress argument may be formulated as follows.

> Suppose we are trying to determine whether S is mediately justified in believing that p. To be so justified he has to be justified in believing certain other propositions, $q, r, \ldots$, that are suitably related to p (so as to constitute adequate grounds for p). Let's say we have identified a set of such propositions each of which S believes. Then he is justified in believing that p only if he is justified in believing each of these propositions. And for each of these propositions, $q, r, \ldots$ that he is not immediately justified in believing, he is justified in believing it only if he is justified in believing some other propositions that are suitably related to it. And for each of these latter propositions....
>
> Thus in attempting to give a definitive answer to the original question we are led to construct a more or less extensive tree structure, in which the original belief and every other putatively mediately justified belief forms a node from which one or more branches issue, in such a way that every branch is a part of some branch that issues from the original belief. Now the question is: what form must be assumed by the structure in order that S be mediately justified in believing that p? There are the following conceivable forms for a given branch.
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> (A) It terminates in an immediately justified belief.
> (B) It terminates in an unjustified belief.
> (C) The belief that p occurs at some point (past the origin), so that the branch forms a loop.
> (D) The branch continues infinitely.
>
> Of course some branches might assume one form and others another.
>
> The argument is that the original belief will be mediately justified only if every branch assumes form (A). Positively it is argued that on this condition the relevant necessary condition for the original belief's being mediately justified is satisfied, and negatively it is argued that if any branch assumes any other form it is not.
>
> (A) Where every branch has form A., this necessary condition is satisfied for every belief in the structure. Since each branch terminates in an immediately justified belief that is justified without the necessity for further justified beliefs, the regress is ended along each branch. Hence justification is transferred along each branch right back to the original belief.
> (B) For any branch which exhibits form B. no element, including the origin, is justified, at least by this structure. Since the terminus is not justified,

the prior element, which is justified only if the terminus is, is not justified. And since it is not justified, its predecessor, which is justified only if it is, is not justified either. And so on, right back to the origin, which therefore itself fails to be justified.

(C) Where we have a branch that forms a closed loop, again nothing on that branch, including the origin, is justified, so far as its justification depends on this tree structure. For what the branch "says" is that the belief that *p* is justified only if the belief that *r* is justified, and that belief is justified only if..., and the belief just before the looping back is justified only if the belief that *p* is justified. So what this chain of necessary conditions tells us is that the belief that *p* is justified only if the belief that *p* is justified. True enough, but that still leaves it open whether the belief that *p is* justified.

(D) If there is a branch with no terminus, that means that no matter how far we extend the branch, the last element is still a belief that is mediately justified if at all. Thus as far as this structure goes, wherever we stop adding elements we still have not shown that the relevant necessary condition for the mediate justification of the original belief is satisfied. Thus the structure does not exhibit the original belief as mediately justified.

Hence the original belief is mediately justified only if every branch in the tree structure terminates in an immediately justified belief. Hence every mediately justified belief stands at the base of a (more or less) multiply branching tree structure at the tip of each branch of which is an immediately justified belief.

I do not claim that this argument is conclusive; I believe it to be open to objection in ways I will not be able to go into here. But I do feel that it gives stronger support to foundationalism than any other regress argument. And clearly it yields, at most, Minimal Foundationalism. All that it takes to avoid the three alternatives deemed unacceptable by this argument is a belief at the tip of each branch that is in fact immediately justified. These beliefs do not have to be incorrigible, infallible, or indubitable to perform this function. Their justification does not have to 'guarantee' their truth in any sense in which that goes beyond just being justified. They do not have to be incapable of mediate justification. They do not even have to be true, though if they were generally false the structure they support would be of little interest. Their *occurrence* can depend on various external conditions. They do not have to be self-justified, in a strict sense, as contrasted with other modes of direct justification. Nor is it necessary that the believer can show them to be immediately justified; still less is it necessary that he *immediately* know that they are immediately justified. All that is needed to satify the demands of the argument is that a belief that *is* immediately justified in some way or other terminate each chain

of mediate justification. Since Minimal Foundationalism does guarantee this, it can hardly be maintained that it lacks the distinctive epistemological force characteristic of foundationalism.

Within the confines of this paper I cannot properly support my claim that the above is the only version of the regress argument that supports any form of foundationalism; to do so would involve examining them all. However I will say a word about a version that one frequently encounters in both friend and foe, including Will and Lehrer. This is the version that, ignoring the fine print, differs from the above version only in being concerned with *showing justification* rather than with *being justified.*[18] In this second version the argument is that if we start with a mediately justified belief and proceed to show it to be justified by citing its grounds, and then showing them to be justified, and..., then again the only alternative to circularity, infinite regress or ending in something not shown to be justified, is to arrive, along each strand of justification, at some belief that can be *shown* to be justified in some way that does not involve adducing other beliefs. This form of the argument does indeed have a conclusion markedly stronger than Minimal Foundationalism, but unfortunately, as pointed out above in another connection, (p. 21), this conclusion is logically incoherent. It is conceptually impossible to *show* that a belief is justified, or show that anything else, without citing propositions we take ourselves to be justified in believing. Hence this form of the argument does not support any form of foundationalism, or any other position.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is no part of my purpose in this paper to advocate Minimal Foundationalism. In fact I believe there to be strong objections to any form of foundationalism, and I feel that some kind of coherence or contextualist theory will provide a more adequate general orientation in epistemology. Will and Lehrer are to be commended for providing, in their different ways, important insights into some possible ways of developing a non-foundationalist epistemology. Nevertheless if foundationalism is to be successfully disposed of it must be attacked in its most defensible, not in its most vulnerable, form. Although Will and Lehrer reveal weaknesses in historically important forms of foundationalism, it has been my aim in this paper to show that their arguments leave untouched the more modest

and less vulnerable form I have called 'Minimal Foundationalism', a form approximated to by the most prominent contemporary versions of the position.[19] It is to be hoped that those who are interested in clearing the decks for an epistemology without foundations will turn their critical weapons against such modest and careful foundationalists as Chisholm, Danto, and Quinton.

Douglass College
Rutgers University

NOTES

[1] Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974.
[2] Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
[3] The case of independence is more complicated. See below for some discussion of this.
[4] It often goes unnoticed that the seventeenth century foundationalists often taken as paradigmatic, Descartes and Locke, were *not* working with any such conception of knowledge, and hence that they did *not* envisage the structure of knowledge as a structure of justification of belief.
[5] Only 'includes' because other requirements are also commonly imposed in these cases, e.g., that the first belief be 'based' on the others, and, sometimes, that the believer realize that these other beliefs do constitute adequate grounds for the first.
[6] Talk of a belief 'being justified' or the 'justification' of a belief is ambiguous. The justification of a belief might be the process of showing it to be justified, or it might be the status that it is thereby shown to have. Likewise 'his belief is justified' might mean that it has been shown to have the status in question, or it might just mean that it does have that status. This ambiguity typically makes it difficult to interpret discussions of epistemic justification. In this paper I shall restrict '... is justified' to the latter meaning – *having* the epistemically desirable status. I shall use '... is shown to be justified' to express the other concept.
[7] Will also argues, in essentially the same way, against the supposition that derived claims can be incorrigible. I take it to be even more obvious that foundationalism need not attribute incorrigibility to non-basic beliefs, even if it should require basic beliefs to be incorrigible. For the principles of mediate justification might countenance logical connections (e.g., of an inductive sort) that do not transfer incorrigibility.
[8] Will's adherence to the stronger requirement is no doubt connected with the fact that he, along with many foundationalists, construes the regress argument in terms of a regress of *showing* justification rather than a regress of *being* justified. See below, p. 302.
[9] Another difficulty with the argument under consideration is the incorrect identification of 'immediately justified' (not by relation to other cognitions) and 'self-justified'. We shall let that pass for now, returning to it in connection with Lehrer where it plays a larger role in the argument.
[10] Cf. Lehrer. "If basic beliefs were refutable by non-basic ones, then all that was justified by basic beliefs might be undone if those basic beliefs themselves were refuted.

In this case, we would be lacking a foundation for justification." (79) Lehrer cannot be whole-hearted in his advocacy of this argument, for he later acknowledges the possibility of corrigible foundations.

[11] Lehrer argues that incorrigibility does ential infallibility; more specifically he argues for the contrapositive. "... if the justification of basic beliefs did not guarantee their truth, then such beliefs would be open to refutation on the grounds that, though they are self-justified, they are in fact false." (79). However it remains to be shown that the mere possibility of being false necessarily carries with it the possibility tnat we should be able to show that it is false.

[12] Elsewhere Will appeals to Chisholm's notion that what renders a foundation justified is simply the fact that makes it true. (p. 201, fn. 5). Where a belief is justified in this way it cannot be justified without being true. But that is not to say that no such belief can be false. And in any event that is only one possible form of immediate justification. (See below, pp. 296–297.)

For an illuminating critique of other arguments designed to show that foundations must be incorrigible or infallible, see A. M. Quinton, *The Nature of Things*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1973, Ch. 6.

[13] See Sydney Shoemaker, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963) p. 216; and R. M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 26–7.

[14] See B. Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 77; and G. E. Moore, 'The Refutation of Idealism', in *Philosophical Studies* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1922), pp. 24–5, and 'The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perception', in *ibid.*, pp. 70–1.

[15] Self-justified' is often used in an undiscriminating way, to range over more or less of the terrain of immediate justification. Lehrer himself, just after stressing the requirement tha basic beliefs be 'self-justified', says that 'Empiricists think that experience can guarantee the truth of basic beliefs' (78). That sounds more like (2).

[16] No doubt Lehrer takes himself to have shown this in the exposition of his own position in Chapter 8. I cannot discuss that in this paper.

[17] In my paper, 'Two Types of Foundationalism' I explore the differences between Minimal Foundationalism and a kind that requires, for each basic belief, that one also be immediately justified in believing that one is immediately justified in believing it.

It is very common in discussions of foundationalism to state the position so as only to require immediate justification or knowledge at the first level, but then to glide into the stronger requirement. Will's formulation of the position quoted above embodies no requirement that one have immediate knowledge *of* the epistemic status of 'first cognitions'. But still we find him saying things like "beginning items of knowledge... whose philosophical validation as knowledge must be capable of being made out in complete independence of the institution and the instruments of criticism and evaluation that the institution provides" (160) and "... a level of foundational items in knowledge, items the status of which as knowledge is in a special way not subject to cgallenge" (175). In these latter passages he is representing foundationalism as requiring that the *epistemic status* of the foundations be knowable without dependence on other cognitions.

[18] Because of the ambiguity pointed out in fn. 6, it is often unclear which version is being expounded. But our two authors are unmistakably dealing with the second version. Will, indeed, explicitly distinguishes these versions on p. 178, and his criticisms on

pp. 183–4 are clearly directed against the second version. For Lehrer's discussion see pp. 15–6 and pp. 155–57.

[19] The closest approximation is found in the work by Quinton previously referred to. The versions of Chisholm (*op. cit.*) and Arthur Danto (*Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) are also much closer to Minimal Foundationalism than to the positions attacked by Will and Lehrer.