WHAT’S WRONG WITH IMMEDIATE KNOWLEDGE?
William Alston

Introduction, Andrew Latus

In this reading, Alston sets out to defend the notion of immediate knowledge. That is, he is out to defend the idea that a particular belief held by a particular person may count as knowledge for that person without it being the case that the belief is supported by other beliefs that person has. He is, in effect, defending the idea that there are such things as Basic Beliefs. Alston claims that there are some beliefs, such as “no proposition is both true and false,” that a person can know to be true without needing any support from other beliefs. This is an idea that has been challenged by a number of philosophers. Alston attempts to answer them here.

Alston begins by clarifying what he means by claiming that some beliefs count as knowledge without requiring support from other beliefs. He notes in particular that this is not to say that one does not often (perhaps always) need to have other beliefs in order to form individual beliefs. Presumably in order to form the belief that $2 + 3 = 5$, one must already have beliefs about what addition is and about the notion of equality. What Alston is claiming, however, is that, while those beliefs may be part of what is required in order to form the belief that $2 + 3 = 5$, they do not figure in the justification of that belief (and so do not figure in whether the belief is known as opposed to merely believed).

The central argument Alston considers is what he calls the “Level Ascent” argument, an argument he finds in the work of Laurence Bonjour. Bonjour has argued that if a belief is justified for a particular person, it must be the case that the person is aware of some feature the belief possesses such that there is good reason to think the belief is true. If this is so, then a justified belief cannot be basic since its justification depends on other “higher-level” beliefs about the belief. In response, Alston agrees that if a belief is basic there must be a good reason (or reasons) for thinking the belief is true, but denies that the believer must be aware of what that reason is. He accuses Bonjour of confusing the practice of justifying a belief with the state of a belief being justified. Alston thinks it is correct that if a person is in the process of explicitly trying to justify a particular belief he holds, he will have to
cite reasons for thinking the belief is true (and so will have to be aware of those reasons). However, he points out that we have many beliefs we would claim are justified without it being the case that we have explicitly given a justification of all those beliefs. Alston’s claim is that for a belief to be justified, all that is required is that there be a good reason for thinking the belief to be true, not that the believer actually be in possession of the reason.

Bonjour seems to think that there is something irresponsible about forming beliefs in situations in which you are not in possession of good reasons to think the belief is true. He claims that “the idea of being epistemically responsible is the core of the concept of justification,” so that one cannot be justified when one is epistemically irresponsible in this way (i.e., by forming a belief which you do not possess good reason to think true). Alston criticizes this idea that responsibility is at the core of justification by arguing that this sort of picture of justification makes sense only if it is up to us what beliefs we do and do not form. Only then, he says, would it make sense to claim people irresponsibly believe some things. Alston suggests, however, that the idea that it is up to us what we do and do not believe is severely flawed. If a truck is speeding towards us, surely it is not up to us whether we believe there is a truck in front of us or not. As such, Alston suggests that Bonjour is not correct to find the notion of responsibility at the heart of the notion of justification. Alston concludes that we lack a good reason to reject the idea of immediate knowledge.

It is worth noting that even if Alston is right that there is such a thing as immediate knowledge, it does not follow that foundationalism is correct. Foundationalism requires both that there is such a thing as a Basic Belief and that all justified non-basic beliefs somehow depend on Basic Beliefs for their justification. Alston does not consider this second claim here. As such, he does not offer a complete defense of foundationalism.

In this essay I will consider what seem to me the most interesting current arguments for the impossibility of immediate knowledge. I shall conclude that they all fail to foreclose that possibility. I shall not explicitly argue that the possibility is realized, though it will become clear in the course of my argument where I think that obvious examples are to be found.

Attacks on immediate knowledge are nothing new. They were a staple of nineteenth-century absolute idealism and were prominent also in its American offshoot, pragmatism. But after a hiatus from roughly 1920 to 1950, these attacks have been resumed in English-speaking philosophy, with the revival of pragmatist and holistic ways of thinking in such philosophers as Quine, Sellars, Rorty, and Davidson. I feel that the time is ripe for a critical review of these arguments in their most recent guises. Before starting on that I should make it explicit that my rejection of these arguments does not imply that I consider everything in recent pragmatism, holism, and coherence theories to be unsound.

Let me specify at the outset in what sense I will be defending the possibility of immediate knowledge, since the term is by no means unambiguous. The rough idea is that whereas mediate knowledge depends for its status as knowledge on other knowledge, immediate knowledge does not. Mediate knowledge is, immediate knowledge is not, mediated by other knowledge. To make this more precise we will have to dig down into the concept of knowledge, and that takes us into highly controversial territory. If we could suppose that knowledge is true justified belief, plus some fourth requirement to avoid Gettier-type counterexamples, we could make the distinction between mediate and immediate knowledge hang on the distinction between mediate and immediate justification, which could then be explained as follows.

(I) S is mediate justified in believing that \( p \) — S is justified in believing \( p \) by virtue of some relation this belief has to some other justified belief(s) of S.

(II) S is immediately justified in believing that \( p \) — S is justified in believing that \( p \) by virtue of something other than some relation this belief has to some other justified belief(s) of S.

However, some contemporary epistemologists think that what converts true belief into knowledge is reliability rather than justification, where a “reliable” true belief is one that has originated, and/or is sustained, in a way that is generally reliable, that will generally produce true rather than false beliefs. To further compound the confusion, some reliability theorists take reliability to be, or to be an adequate criterion for, justification. In this essay I want to avoid these controversies so as to focus on the issues raised by the arguments I will be examining. I can do this by leaving open just exactly what it is that plays the role in the concepts of knowledge that many contemporary theorists assign to justification. I shall coin a neutral term, ‘epistemization’, for the function performed by whatever fills this role. That is, an “epistemizer” will
be what converts true belief into knowledge, perhaps subject to some further condition for avoiding Gettier counterexamples. Justification and reliability will be two leading candidates for the role of epistemizer (or the same candidate, depending on how ‘justification’ is explained). We can then distinguish between mediate and immediate epistemization in the same terms we used above for distinguishing mediate and immediate justification.

(III) S’s belief that \( p \) is *mediate*ly epistemized—S’s belief that \( p \) is epistemized by some relation this belief has to some other epistemized belief(s) of S.

(IV) S’s belief that \( p \) is *immediately* epistemized—S’s belief that \( p \) is epistemized by something other than some relation this belief has to some other epistemized belief(s) of S.

Putative mediate epistemizers include (a) having adequate evidence for the belief in question and (b) the belief in question having been arrived at by inference in a way that will generally produce true beliefs. Immediate epistemization is a wastebasket category. It embraces any form of epistemization that does not involve relations to other epistemized beliefs of the same subject. Hence the range of conceivable immediate epistemizers is much wider. Popular candidates include (a) immediate experience of what the belief is about, (b) for certain special cases, simply the truth of the belief, or the fact that it is believed or understood, (c) facts about the origin of the belief, for instance, the fact that a certain perceptual belief arose from normal perceptual processes.

Plausible candidates for immediate knowledge include one’s knowledge of the simplest logical and mathematical truths: ‘No proposition is both true and false’, ‘\( 2 + 3 = 5 \)’—and one’s knowledge of one’s own current states of consciousness: ‘I feel relieved’, ‘I am thinking about next summer’s vacation’. In both sorts of cases it seems implausible to suppose that one knows the item in question only by virtue of knowing or being justified in believing something else, on which the first knowledge is based. Requests for evidence or reasons for one’s first-person current conscious state attributions are clearly out of place. “What do you mean, what reason do I have for supposing that I feel relieved? I just do, that’s all.” Again, although ‘\( 2 + 3 = 5 \)’ can be derived from other propositions (as can ‘I feel relieved’, for that matter), one normally feels no need to do so or to be able to do so, in order to know it to be the case. It seems that we can see that \( 2 + 3 = 5 \), just by considering that proposition itself. A simple perceptual belief, for example, that there is a tree in front of me, or if you prefer, that I see a tree in front of me,
is a more controversial case. A normal adult could provide a reason if pressed: “It looks like a tree” or “I am having the kind of experience I would have if I were seeing a tree”. But it seems that a being too unsophisticated to come up with any such reasons could still have perceptual knowledge that there is a tree in front of him just by virtue of forming that belief by normal perceptual processes in normal circumstances.

The question of the possibility of immediate knowledge is frequently assimilated to the question of the viability of foundationalism, but the questions are distinct. Foundationalism is a theory of the structure of knowledge. It holds, to put it briefly, that all mediate epistemization ultimately rests on immediately epistemized beliefs. Trace back a chain of mediate epistemization and you will eventually reach all immediately epistemized belief. Clearly foundationalism entails the possibility of immediate epistemization, but not vice versa. One could recognize that some beliefs are immediately epistemized but deny that mediate epistemization always rests on such beliefs, as foundationalism maintains. I will not be discussing the contentions of one or another version of foundationalism, other than the possibility of immediate epistemization.

II

As a preliminary to examining the arguments I take most seriously, I shall dispose of some tempting but misdirected arguments that turn out to hit some other target instead.

(1) First I will briefly note that some theorists seem to suppose that the beliefs involved in immediate knowledge must be infallible, incorrigible, or indubitable, and hence that by showing that none of our beliefs enjoy those immunities, one will have shown that there can be no immediate knowledge. At least opponents of “foundational” or “basic” beliefs, which must be immediately epistemized to fill that role, have often supposed that such beliefs must enjoy such immunities. But a moment’s reflection will assure us that there is nothing in the concept of immediate epistemization, any more than in the concept of mediate epistemization, that limits its application to beliefs that cannot (in some significant sense) be mistaken, refuted, or reasonably doubted.

(2) I have a sense that it is a rather widely shared view that a belief can be immediately epistemized only if it in no way depends on other knowledge of the same subject, only if it could be held without the subject’s knowing anything else; though I must confess to some difficulty in finding this explic-
itly affirmed in print. In any event, if that were a condition of immediate knowledge, it would be a serious liability, for there are powerful reasons for denying the possibility of knowledge that is isolated to that extent. Speaking with absolute generality, it is plausible to hold that I can’t know something of the form ‘x is P’ without having general knowledge as to what it is for something to be P. And getting down to standard putative cases of immediate knowledge, it is a widely held view that I can’t have knowledge only of my own conscious states. Such knowledge, and hence any particular instance of such knowledge, presupposes that I know something about the ways in which states of consciousness are manifested in publicly observable behavior and demeanor. And as for ‘2 + 3 = 5’ and the like, it is very plausible to hold that one could not have knowledge of a particular arithmetical truth without knowing at least some significant part of a larger arithmetical system. If one tried to teach a child that 2 + 3 = 5 while keeping him ignorant of, for instance, ‘1 + 1 = 2’, he would fail miserably. Of course, these contentions can be, and have been, controverted. But since I will be arguing that they are, in any event, irrelevant to the issue of immediate knowledge, I need not defend them. It is enough that they have been held with some show of reason.

I want to deny that the cases of dependence just cited are incompatible with the existence of immediate knowledge. How can this be? Well, it all depends on the sort of dependence involved. Immediate knowledge requires independence of other knowledge, so far as the epistemization of belief is concerned. Immediate knowledge is knowledge in which the belief involved is not epistemized by a relation to other knowledge or epistemized belief of the same subject. But in the above cases what is alleged is that the very existence of the belief depends on other knowledge. Unless I know what it is to be P, I can’t so much as form the belief that x is P, for I lack the concept of P. Unless I know something about outward criteria of conscious states, I cannot so much as form the belief that I feel tired, for I lack the concept of feeling tired. Unless I know something about the rest of the number system, I cannot so much as form the belief that 2 + 3 = 5, for I lack the requisite concepts. But all this says nothing as to what epistemizes the belief, once formed, and it is on this that the classification into immediate or mediate depends. The question of what epistemizes a belief only arises once the belief is formed. The question presupposes the existence of the belief and hence presupposes any necessary conditions of that existence. It is then a further question whether the belief is epistemized and, if so, by what. Hence it is a further question whether that epistemization is mediate or immediate. To suppose
that the conditions for forming the belief are themselves conditions of epistemization, and hence determinative of the choice between mediate and immediate, is to confuse levels of questioning. It would be like arguing that since a necessary condition of my making a request (orally) is that I have vocal chords, part of what justifies me in making that request is that I have vocal chords. The existence of immediate knowledge is quite compatible with a thoroughgoing coherence theory of concepts, according to which one could not have a single concept without having a whole system of concepts, and even with the further view that the possession of a system of concepts requires having various pieces of knowledge involving those concepts.\(^7\)

(3) It is very plausible to suppose that any belief, however it arose, can be evaluated for truth, justification, or rationality by reference to reasons or evidence. However I came to believe that \(2 + 3 = 5\) or that there is a tree in front of me, or even that I feel tired, it is possible, for me or for someone else, to look for reasons for supposing that it is true or false. And sometimes such reasons can be found. There is even some plausibility in holding that it is always, in principle, possible to find such reasons. But whether or not the latter claim is correct, it will at least follow that any belief is subject to assessment in terms of reasons or evidence. And it has been thought that this is incompatible with supposing that any belief is immediately epistemized. But again this is just a confusion. To say that a belief is immediately epistemized is not to imply that it could not also be mediatetly epistemized, even at the same time. It is only to say that there is an epistemization, not involving other knowledge or epistemized belief of the same subject, that is sufficient for knowledge. Epistemic overdetermination is just as possible as the causal variety. Just as the existence of one set of causally sufficient conditions does not rule out the possibility of another set, so the existence of one (mediate) epistemization is quite compatible with the existence of another (immediate) one.

III

Now I turn to the criticisms I will take more seriously. They all involve what we may call the “Level Ascent” argument. According to this argument, when we consider any putative bit of immediate knowledge, we find that the belief involved really depends for its epistemization on some higher level reasons that have to do with its epistemic status, with the reliability of its mode of formation, or with what it is that is supposed to epistemize the belief.
In his essay “Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?” Laurence Bonjour mounts an argument against immediate knowledge. Bonjour is concerned to show the impossibility of “basic beliefs”, beliefs that are justified otherwise than by other justified beliefs, what we have been calling “immediately justified beliefs”. The central argument runs as follows.

If basic beliefs are to provide a secure foundation for empirical knowledge, if inference from them is to be the sole basis for the justification of other empirical beliefs, then that feature, whatever it may be, in virtue of which a belief qualifies as basic must also constitute a good reason for thinking that the belief is true. If we let ‘Ø’ represent this feature, then for a belief $B$ to qualify as basic in an acceptable foundationist account, the premises of the following argument must themselves be at least justified:

(i) Belief $B$ has feature $Ø$.
(ii) Beliefs having feature $Ø$ are highly likely to be true.

Therefore, $B$ is highly likely to be true.

... And if we now assume, reasonably enough, that for $B$ to be justified for a particular person (at a particular time) it is necessary not merely that a justification for $B$ exist in the abstract, but that the person in question be in cognitive possession of the justification, we get the result that $B$ is not basic after all since its justification depends on that of at least one other empirical belief. (pp. 5–6)

It is clear that this argument passes my test for a general argument against immediate knowledge. The argument is quite indifferent as to what the feature $Ø$ is. It could be “formulating the content of an immediate awareness” or “being a true self-presenting proposition” or “being formed by a reliable perceptual process” or what-you-will, and the argument will be just as strong, or just as weak.

As already indicated, I am not at all disposed to quarrel with the claim that premises (i) and (ii) must be true whenever $B$ is immediately (or meditately) justified (and hence that the conclusion must be true as well since it is a valid argument). To admit so much is no more than to agree that any justifying feature must be “truth-conducive”. But this is perfectly compatible with the existence of immediate knowledge. The premise “$B$ is justified by virtue of having feature $Ø$, which is truth-conducive” has no tendency to support “$B$ is justified by the fact that the subject has adequate reasons for
It is the further requirement that is the clinker: “For B to be justified for a particular person (at a particular time) it is necessary, not merely that a justification for B exist in the abstract, but that the person in question be in cognitive possession of it.” In other words, in order that I be justified in accepting B, I must know, or be justified in believing, the premises of the above argument. And why should we suppose that? Again, unless some significant grounds are adduced, our opponent of immediate knowledge has done nothing more impressive than to affirm the contradictory.

Now Bonjour roundly affirms that justification, in general, requires possession of adequate reasons by the subject (pp. 5–7). And so, when confronted with a putatively basic belief, we are driven to higher level reasons. But, again, this by itself is to repeat the position rather than to defend it. In Bonjour’s article there is ground for suspecting a confusion between justifying a belief and being justified in a belief. After enunciating “the traditional conception of knowledge as adequately justified true belief” he writes: “Now the most natural way to justify a belief is by producing a justificatory argument. . . . The obvious suggestion is that “justified” in the conditions for knowledge means “having been the target of a successful activity of justifying”, rather than, for instance, “it’s being all right for the subject to hold it.” He backs out of this in the next paragraph when he writes, “a person for whom a belief is inferentially justified need not have explicitly rehearsed the justificatory argument in question to others or even to himself”, but he feels he is still left with the requirement that “the inference be available to him if the belief is called into question by others or by himself . . . and that the availability of inference be, in the final analysis, his reason for holding the belief” (p. 2). And three pages later, after opining that “the very idea of an epistemically basic empirical belief is extremely paradoxical”, he supports the opinion by writing: “For on what basis is such a belief to be justified, once appeal to further empirical beliefs is ruled out?” (p. 5; emphasis mine; see also the first paragraph of p. 8).

However, Bonjour also has a way of defending the demand for reasons that is different from anything in Sellars, and we ought to consider that. In spelling out the concept of justification that is involved in his argument he writes:

Knowledge requires epistemic justification and the distinguishing characteristic of this particular species of justification is, I submit, its essential or internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth. Cognitive doings are epistemically justified, on this conception, only if and to the
extent that they are aimed at this goal—which means roughly that one accepts all and only beliefs which one has good reason to think are true. To accept a belief in the absence of such a reason, however appealing or even mandatory such acceptance might be from other standpoints, is to neglect the pursuit of truth; such acceptance is, one might say, epistemically irresponsible. My contention is that the idea of being epistemically responsible is the core of the concept of epistemic justification.

(p. 5)

Some of the transitions in this line of thought are unconvincing as they stand. Accepting “all and only beliefs which one has good reason to think are true” is by no means the same thing as aiming at the goal of truth, even if we modify the former to “accepting all and only beliefs that one takes oneself to have good reasons to think are true”. To suppose it is obvious that they come to the same thing is to assume the anti-immediacy thesis that is at issue. But what I want to focus on at the moment is the support given this transition by what follows—the conception of justification as epistemic responsibility.

To think of epistemic justification as amounting to epistemic responsibility is to treat the former as a normative concept, one that belongs to a circle of concepts that includes duty, obligation, blame, reproach, right, and wrong. Bonjour is thinking of being justified in believing that \( p \) as either having done one’s epistemic duty in so believing, or as not having violated any epistemic duty in so believing. If we want to keep epistemic justification in line with other species of the genus, we will have to opt for the latter. What I am justified in doing is not always something I have an obligation to do, but it is always something that I am permitted to do, something the doing of which does not violate any obligations. To say that I am justified in taking a taxi to the airport (and charging it to my expense account) is not to imply that I have a duty to take a taxi, rather than a bus; it is only to imply that I am allowed to do so, that doing so does not violate any regulations. So let’s say that, on a normative construal, S’s being justified in believing that \( p \) amounts to S’s not violating any epistemic obligation in believing that \( p \).

This pushes the question back to “Why should we suppose that one who believes that \( p \) without having adequate reason for supposing \( p \) to be true is violating any intellectual obligation?” If I have acquired a propensity to form perceptual beliefs in circumstances favorable to their truth, why suppose that I am violating some epistemic obligation by manifesting that propensity, where I don’t have any good reason for supposing that the circumstances are propitious? Why wouldn’t an acceptable set of epistemic norms permit me to
form beliefs in that way? So far as I can see, Bonjour would have to reply as follows.

To be responsible in my doxastic decisions I have to make them in the light of the reasons available to me, for that is all I have to go on. Therefore what is required of me as a seeker after truth, as a cognitive subject, is that I decide between believing that \( p \) and refraining from that belief on the basis of whatever relevant reasons are available to me. To make the decision on any other basis or in any other way would be to flout my intellectual obligations. It would be “epistemically irresponsible”.10

If this is the way the wind blows, then it shows, first of all, that Bonjour is assuming that obligations and the like attach directly to believing and refraining from believing, and hence that he is assuming believing and the reverse to be under voluntary control. “Ought implies can.” He is assuming that, with respect to each candidate for belief, the subject has a choice as to whether or not to believe it. This voluntaristic version of a normative conception of justification can be contrasted with an nonvoluntaristic version according to which belief is not, either in general or ever, under voluntary control, and intellectual obligations attach rather to the various things people can do (voluntarily) to affect their belief-forming process. Second, even granted the voluntarism, Bonjour’s demand for reasons would not be supported by a severely objectivist version, on which a believing’s being in accord with my obligations is simply a matter of whether that believing is in fact in violation of any obligation, whatever I believe, know, or justifiably believe about the matter. If one of my obligations is to refrain from a perceptive belief if the conditions of perception are abnormal, then whether I violated that obligation in believing that \( p \) would be a matter of whether, in fact, the conditions were abnormal, not on whether I believed, knew, or justifiably believed that the conditions are abnormal. On that version justification hangs on the way things are, rather than on what reasons I have that bear on the question. To squeeze a universal demand for reasons out of the concept of justification, Bonjour will have to be using a more subjective version of a voluntaristic normative conception, according to which one has satisfied one’s obligations in a belief if one knows or is justified in believing that the objective requirements have been satisfied. On that reading it will be the case that one is proceeding as one ought in believing that \( p \) only if one has adequate reason for supposing that \( q \), where \( q \) amounts to whatever is required by the relevant (objective) epistemic obligations.
Thus we have found one not disreputable ground for the universal demand for reasons. But however respectable, the subjective-voluntaristic-normative conception of justification is not immune from criticism, especially as regards the claim that justification in this sense is a necessary condition of knowledge. I myself am disinclined to allow that justification on any normative conception is necessary for knowledge. The reason for this is as follows. Normative conceptions like obligation and reproach apply only to beings that are capable of governing their conduct in accordance with norms, principles, or rules. It is for lack of this capacity that we refrain from using such concepts in application to very small children and lower animals. But surely these creatures are not devoid of knowledge. Both infants and dogs acquire knowledge about their immediate physical environment through perception. If Bonjour denies this last claim we have an opposition quite similar to the earlier opposition between Sellars and myself as to whether subjects should be credited with knowledge only to the extent that they are capable of critical reflection on the epistemic status of their beliefs.

But even if we employ some sort of normative conception of justification, there are strong objections to a voluntaristic version thereof. It seems clear that belief is not, in general, under direct voluntary control. When I seem to myself to see a truck coming down the street, or which I am in any of the innumerable situations, perceptual and otherwise, where it seems obvious to me that something is or is not the case, I do not have the capacity to believe or refrain from believing at will, as I choose. If in the above situation I were to set myself to refrain from believing that a truck is coming down the street, perhaps in order to prove to myself that I can, I wouldn’t know how to begin. I wouldn’t know what button to push. (Of course, I can undertake a regimen that is designed to gradually wean myself away from reliance on the senses; but even if I should succeed in this, that is a different story. There are many things not themselves under direct voluntary control that I can affect by what I do, e.g., my health and my wealth.) Whether I can ever believe at will is a matter I will not go into. However that question is resolved, it is clear that belief is not always, or even generally, a matter of choice. Hence a conception of justification that presupposes voluntary control of belief cannot be applied to belief in general. On that construal, justification cannot be a general requirement for knowledge.

Thus in Bonjour, the contention that putatively immediate knowledge really rests on higher level reasons itself rests on a foundation of sand.\textsuperscript{11, 12}
ENDNOTES


5 I will continue to use the term ‘justification’ when discussing epistemologists who think of knowledge in those terms. I shall use ‘epistemization’ when I am striving for maximum generality.

6 The inappropriateness of the request for reasons here has moved some to deny that this is a case of knowledge. That move, I believe, would have to be defended with the same arguments we shall be criticizing in the body of the paper. Since these arguments are directed against the possibility of immediate knowledge, they can be used either to discard the immediacy and keep the knowledge, or to discard the knowledge and keep the immediacy.

7 See Firth, “Coherence, Certainty, and Epistemic Priority.”


9 Bonjour supports this claim, cogently in my opinion as follows. “. . . knowledge requires epistemic justification, and the distinguishing characteristic of this particular species of justification is, I submit, its essential or internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth. . . . A corollary of this conception of epistemic justification is that a satisfactory defense of a particular standard of epistemic justification must consist in showing it to be truth-conducive, i.e., in showing that accepting beliefs in accordance with its dictates is likely to lead to truth (and more likely than any proposed alternative)” (p. 5).

10 In considering the reliabilist position that S knows that p provided S has a true belief that p that was formed in a reliable manner (whether or not S knows it to be reliable), Bonjour writes: “But P himself has no reason at all for thinking that B is likely to be true. From his perspective, it is an accident that the belief is
true. And thus his acceptance of \( B \) is no more rational or responsible from an epistemic standpoint than would be the acceptance of a subjectively similar belief for which the external relation in question failed to obtain” (p. 8).

11 The considerations of Sections III and IV can also be used against the position Michael Williams takes in his book *Groundless Belief* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). I have not explicitly discussed his arguments in the body of the paper, for he does not squarely oppose the possibility of any immediate knowledge as does Sellars and Bonjour. He recognizes the possibility that, e.g., perceptual beliefs might be justified just by virtue of having been reliably formed, even if the subject knows nothing about that (p. 69). But he holds that if that is the whole story, such beliefs do not meet the foundationalist’s requirements since a “potential infinite regress of justification” has not been closed off (p. 69). This is because empirical facts will have to be produced to justify the supposition that the perceptual beliefs in question were reliably produced. “To say that there is an empirical presumption in favor of beliefs of a certain kind being true is to trace the prima-facie credibility of these beliefs to further general facts and thus to lead ourselves back into the very regress for which intrinsically credible beliefs are supposed to liberate us” (p. 76; see also pp. 158–61). Of course, if someone makes the higher level statement that certain perceptual beliefs are reliably produced and therefore credible, he will need reasons for that statement and he will not be at the terminus of a regress of justification. But that does not imply that the perceptual believer in question needs reasons to be justified in holding his first-level perceptual beliefs, and hence it doesn’t imply that he is not at the terminus of a regress of justification. (See Essay 1) Williams does nothing to support that claim, and if he were to support it with considerations of the sort deployed by Sellars and Bonjour, the same responses would be in order.

12 This paper has profited greatly from comments by Robert Audi and Jonathan Bennett.