

FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE REGRESS ARGUMENT

Andrew Cortens
Boise State University

What can reasonably be expected of the famous ‘regress’ argument for epistemic foundationalism? The position for which I’ll be arguing is roughly this (with some qualifications to be introduced later): while the regress argument may suffice to show that a minimal form of foundationalism holds true for human cognizers, it won’t succeed in establishing that any form of foundationalism is *necessarily* true, true of all possible cognitive beings. If we hanker after a necessarily true epistemological doctrine, the closest we can come to foundationalism is a more modest position that I call ‘quasi-foundationalism’. It is hoped that the present discussion will also contribute in a modest way to recent efforts to clarify the exact *nature* of foundationalism. To this end, in the first section of the paper I provide a precise formulation of foundationalism which, in marked contrast to other accounts, in no way relies upon metaphorical talk of ‘pyramids’, ‘trees’, ‘branches’, or what have you.

1. FOUNDATIONALISM STATED

Foundationalism may be construed as a thesis about epistemic justification (‘justification’ for short), as a thesis about knowledge, or as a thesis about what Alvin Plantinga dubs ‘warrant’ — that quantity, whatever it is, enough of which converts true belief into knowledge.¹ Some writers have urged that there really is no single epistemically desirable property or condition that uniquely deserves the title ‘justification’.² If so, then I suppose we should have to distinguish foundationalist theories of justification1, of justification2, etc.. No matter. What I have to say about foundationalism and the regress argument will hold good whatever epistemic *desideratum* is at issue, pro-

¹ Plantinga, (1993).

² Plantinga (1993); Alston (1993).

vided it is a property which can meaningfully be said to be possessed by a given belief, *B*, in virtue of the fact that *B* bears the appropriate relations to other beliefs which possess the same property. For convenience, I'll formulate the issues in terms of 'justification'.

Foundationalism, in the sense I hope to elucidate, is not to be confused with what one might call a *substantive* epistemic theory, i.e., a theory that purports to state, in non-epistemic terms, conditions under which a belief is justified (or conditions for the application of some other epistemic concept). It is, rather, a highly abstract doctrine that constrains the form which substantive theories of this kind may take.³ What, then, does foundationalism say about justification? Following W.P. Alston, I shall approach this question against the backdrop of a distinction between *mediate* and *immediate* justification.⁴ A *mediately* justified belief is a belief that is justified in virtue of the fact that there are justified beliefs to which it is suitably related. This is a pretty standard definition, but let me get a bit more precise about what is involved in the concept of mediate justification. Think of a *mediately* justified belief as one whose positive epistemic status *depends upon*, and *can be explained by* the conjunction of two facts: (i) the fact that it is suitably related to some of the subject's other beliefs and (ii) the fact that these other beliefs are themselves justified. Note, then, that *B*'s being *mediately* justified requires that *both* (i) and (ii) figure in some correct explanation of why *B* is justified.

Now what about this talk of a belief's being 'suitably related' to other beliefs? What does that amount to? On this matter, I wish to make as few commitments as possible. The basic idea, however, is plain enough: a belief *B*₁ is taken to be 'suitably related' to beliefs *B*₂...*B*_{*n*} only when the latter constitute adequate support or grounds for the former, or, at least, when the latter *would* constitute such support *if* they were justified. (Thus, we allow that *B*₁ may be suitably related to *B*₂...*B*_{*n*}, even if *none of B*₁...*B*_{*n*} are justi-

³ In this respect, what I am calling 'foundationalism' resembles what Sosa (1980) calls 'formal foundationalism.' (Sosa's article is reprinted in Sosa 1991. Henceforth, references to Sosa 1980 will cite pages from Sosa 1991.) But there are important differences. (See, for example, n.5, below.) The view I have in mind is actually much closer to what Alston (1976b) calls 'minimal' foundationalism. But whereas Alston's formulation relies to some extent on the metaphor of trees and branches (which is not to say that his characterization is not extremely helpful), my goal, as I have already indicated, is to state the view in entirely non-metaphorical terms.

⁴ The definitions of 'mediate' and 'immediate' justification that follow are essentially the same as those proposed in Alston (1976a) and Alston (1976b). Both of these works are reprinted in Alston (1989); henceforth, references to the former two works will be cited with page numbers from Alston (1989).

fied.) A belief's being suitably related to some supporting beliefs may also require that the former be in some sense 'based on' the latter, i.e., that the believing subject holds the former at least partly *because* of the fact that he holds the latter. But, on these and other important issues connected with the nature of mediate justification, I wish to remain neutral.

Once we grasp the notion of mediate justification, we can easily explain immediate justification in terms of it: an *immediately* justified belief is *a justified belief which isn't mediately justified*. Notice that on this construal, it is by no means obvious that immediately justified beliefs must be infallible, incorrigible, indubitable, or what have you. An argument would be required to show that this is the case. Like many other epistemologists today, I am skeptical about the prospects of such an argument. For reasons quite unconnected with the regress argument, I don't doubt that some beliefs do enjoy such epistemic immunities. But the regress argument itself, on my understanding, is *completely* silent on the matter. In any case, all questions about the degree of 'firmness' which might (or must) be exhibited by the foundationalist's foundations are entirely peripheral to my concerns.

With the above definitions in place, we might take a stab at formulating the central commitments of foundationalism as follows:

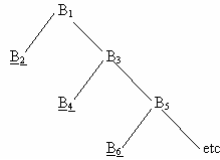
- F1: For any justified belief, B, either B is immediately justified or B is justified by virtue of being suitably related to beliefs which are immediately justified.
- F2: There are some immediately justified beliefs.

This formulation, however, has two drawbacks. Clearly, foundationalism should not be understood as restricting the pool of mediately justified beliefs to those deriving their justification 'directly' from immediately justified beliefs. We also want to allow for the possibility of a mediately justified belief whose most direct 'justification-givers' consist exclusively of *other* mediately justified beliefs. The foundationalist's idea, crudely put, is that we must *eventually* come back to immediately justified beliefs when we trace back the source of justification for any given mediately justified belief. F1 *may* capture this idea, but if we think it does, we are tacitly assuming that the relation signified by 'x is justified partly by virtue of being suitably related to y' is *transitive*, i.e., that:

For all x, y and z, if x is justified partly by virtue of the fact that x is suitably related to y, and y is justified partly by virtue of the fact that y is suitably related to z, then x is justified partly by virtue of the fact that x is suitably related to z.

I am inclined to think that this assumption is true, and later on, I will tentatively propose some metaphysical principles from which it can be derived. Nonetheless, it would be preferable to formulate foundationalism in way that doesn't require us to make this assumption at the outset.

A second and perhaps more serious difficulty with the above formulation is this: initial appearances to the contrary, it doesn't rule out 'infinitely regressive' chains of justified belief. Here is why. Consider a hypothetical system of justified beliefs structured in the way exhibited by the following diagram:

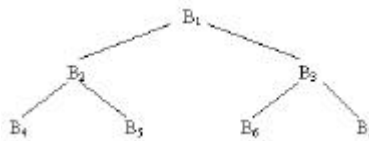


This belief-system contains infinitely many beliefs, each one of which has been assigned a natural number (or so we shall pretend). All and only the even-numbered beliefs in the system are immediately justified. Each odd-numbered belief B_n is mediately justified, where what directly serves to justify it are two beliefs, B_{n+1} (an even-numbered, and thus immediately justified belief), and B_{n+2} (an odd-numbered, and thus mediately justified belief). Given the transitivity assumption mentioned earlier, every mediately justified belief in the above structure is indeed justified by virtue of being suitably related to beliefs which are immediately justified, thus satisfying the condition laid down by F1. And since there are immediately justified beliefs in this structure, it is also consistent with F2. So while our initial formulation may rule out *some* hypothetical belief systems which exhibit an infinite regress of justification, it does not rule out one such as this, as an adequate formulation of foundationalism should.⁵

To arrive at a more satisfactory formulation, it will be handy to have some new terminology. Suppose that B_1 is a mediately justified belief, justified by virtue of being suitably related to justified beliefs B_2 and B_3 . B_2 is justified by virtue of being suitably related to B_4 and B_5 , while B_3 is justified by virtue of being suitably related to B_6 and B_7 . As for B_4 - B_7 , we'll

⁵ At least, it seems to me that it should. Sosa apparently sees things differently. As he himself points out (1991, p. 155), 'formal foundationalism', as he defines it, is consistent with the admission of infinite justificatory chains. For my part, I find this way of using the term 'foundationalism' rather odd, whatever interest may attach to the position so defined.

leave it open whether each is justified mediately or immediately, and indeed whether each is justified at all. So we have a situation which can be represented by means of the following upside-down tree-like structure:



Let us use the term ‘J-chain’ to denote a sequence of beliefs corresponding to a completed branch in a tree-like structure of this sort. More precisely, a J-chain is a sequence (i.e., an ordered n-tuple) of beliefs, S , such that

- (i) the first member of S is a justified belief,
- (ii) for any $n > 0$, and any belief, B , if B is the n th member of S then
 - (a) S has an $n+1$ th member if and only if B is justified and B owes its justification (at least partly) to the fact that it is suitably related to other beliefs, and
 - (b) if S has an $n+1$ th member, the latter must be among those beliefs to which B is suitably related and which (by virtue of this) cooperate to render B justified.

Thus, we won’t count a sequence as a J-chain if its last member is yet another mediately justified belief. (So, to return to the previous diagram, if B_7 is mediately justified, then the sequence $\langle B_1, B_3, B_7 \rangle$ is not a J-chain, but is only a part of one or more complete J-chains.)

It is tempting to conclude that only an immediately justified belief could serve as the final member of a J-chain. Perhaps this is correct, but it isn’t a purely *logical* consequence of the definitions we have adopted. To see why not, notice that as far as our definitions of mediate and immediate justification are concerned, there might be a belief that is justified by virtue of the fact that it is suitably related to other beliefs *none of which are themselves justified*. Suppose there were such a belief — call it ‘ B ’. Is B justified mediately or immediately? B satisfies our definition of a mediately justified belief only if its positive epistemic status stems from the conjunction of *two* facts: the fact that it is suitably related to some of the subject’s other beliefs and the fact that these other beliefs are themselves justified. While a fact of the first

kind will be involved in the explanation for B's positive epistemic status, no fact of the second will figure in that explanation, since (by hypotheses) B's "supporting" beliefs (if one may call them that) are not themselves justified. So B must be immediately rather than mediately justified. (Recall that an immediately justified belief was defined simply as a justified belief that isn't mediately justified). Now B, although immediately justified, could not serve as the final member of a J-chain. For B's justification, by hypothesis, stems at least partly from the fact that is suitably related to other beliefs, and clause (ii)(a) in the definition of a J-chain ensures that a belief of this sort will always be succeeded by another belief in any J-chain in which it occurs. But B could, and, indeed, *must* serve as the *second last* member of any J-chain to which it belongs. For — and, again, we appeal here to condition (ii)(a) —, any belief that immediately follows B in a J-chain will have a successor only if it is itself justified. But given our hypothesis that none of B's "supporting" beliefs are themselves justified, it follows that B's immediate successor in a J-chain will always be an unjustified belief. Thus, in any J-chain to which B belongs, B's immediate successor will be the final member, and yet that final member will not itself be immediately justified (indeed, it won't be justified at all). A funny case not worth bothering about? Perhaps. But it is instructive to learn that neither our definitions nor the minimal form of foundationalism that is the focus of this paper exclude such a case. I have often encountered versions of the regress argument which employ a premise designed to exclude just this sort of case, e.g., a premise to the effect that if a belief contributes to the justification of another belief, then the former must itself be justified. On my construal of foundationalism, however, such premises are utterly gratuitous. I might add, parenthetically, that given a reliabilist account of justification (which as I see it, is consistent with foundationalism), it seems unlikely that we can rule out *a priori* the possibility of an unjustified belief which contributes to the justification of another belief.

Our newly defined notion of a J-chain gives us an elegant way to express foundationalism. Leave F2 unchanged, but rewrite F1 as follows: *Every J-chain has a final member*. At the outset, I made it sound as though I would be concerned with the modal status of foundationalism. But that was misleading. It is really F1's modal status that interests me. Here, I think, there is considerable temptation to say that we have a necessary truth on our hands. There is no similar pull toward classifying F2 as a necessary truth, even if its truth is conceded. On the contrary, one is inclined to insist that since it is

possible that there be no believers at all, it is possible, *a fortiori*, that there be no immediately justified beliefs.⁶

There is another respect in which I misled you at the outset. The regress argument, as I construe it, isn't really an argument for foundationalism at all. It's an argument for F1. Of course, given F1, it's easy to see the appeal of F2: if there are to be any justified beliefs at all, then the truth of F1 demands that there be some immediately justified beliefs. So the situation, as I see it, is this: the regress argument gives you F1. F1 plus anti-skepticism gives you F2. Presto! Foundationalism is established.

2. THE REGRESS ARGUMENT STATED

We are finally ready to look at the regress argument itself. The first premise runs as follows:

- (1) Any J-chain having no final member will either be (a) circular or (b) non-circular but infinite.

Comment: By an infinite J-chain I simply mean *one which has no final member*; i.e., for every $n > 0$, if it has an n th member, then it also has $n+1$ th member. A 'circular' J-chain, on the other hand, is *one in which some belief occurs more than once in the series*, i.e., for some B , some n and some m , B is both the n th member and the m th member and $m \neq n$. A non-circular infinite J-chain must therefore contain infinitely many distinct beliefs. A circular J-chain, on the other hand, certainly *could* be infinite in the sense explained earlier — assuming that such a chain is possible at all, that is. But even if it were infinite, it would not have to contain infinitely many distinct members. A circular infinite J-chain might look like this: $\langle B_1, B_2, B_3, B_1, B_2, B_3, B_1, B_2, B_3, \dots \rangle$, or even like this: $\langle B_1 B_1 B_1 B_1 \dots \rangle$; but again, I'm not saying that such chains are really possible.

Now for the rest of the argument:

- (2) No J-chain is circular.
 - (3) No non-circular J-chain is infinite.
- Therefore, every J-chain has a final member.

The defender of F1 has reached the desired conclusion, but of course her work has only just begun. Premise 1 looks plausible enough. Indeed, it is a

⁶ I am pretending, for the moment, that there are no necessarily existing cognizers. F2 will of course be necessarily true if in fact God exists and has immediately justified beliefs in every possible world.

logical truth. But (2) and (3) look suspiciously like a restatement of the conclusion. How can she defend them without begging the question? And (to return to my main concern) can it plausibly be claimed that (2) and (3) are necessarily true?

As far as (2) goes, the foundationalist has some grounds for optimism. She might defend (2) by appealing to the following plausible metaphysical principles:

Trans: Where x , y , and z are any states of affairs, if x obtains at least partly in virtue of the fact that y obtains, and if y obtains partly in virtue of the fact that z obtains, then x obtains partly in virtue of the fact that z obtains.

Irreflex: For any state of affairs, x , it is not the case that x obtains either wholly or partly in virtue of the fact x obtains.

Taken together, these principles of course imply a further principle:

Asymm: For all x and y , if x obtains (at least partly) in virtue of the fact that y obtains, then it is not the case that y obtains (even just partly) in virtue of the fact that x obtains.

This last principle is surely what underlies our confidence that it can't both be true that certain actions are wrong because God forbids them and that those actions which God forbids, He forbids because they are wrong. Here's another example drawn from metaphysics: a philosopher may hold the view that for any two material objects x and y , x and y are distinct by virtue of the fact that they are capable of simultaneously occupying different places. Or he may hold that for any two material objects, x and y , x and y are capable of simultaneously occupying different places in virtue of the fact that x and y are distinct things. But he cannot sensibly hold both of these positions simultaneously. Perhaps it has occurred to you that some metaphysicians speak of beings whose existence is 'self-explanatory'. Now maybe all they mean by this is 'necessarily existent'. If so, that's fine. But I can attach no sense at all to the idea of a being which exists in virtue of the fact that it exists, a being whose existence is to be explained (even in part) by the fact that it exists. Or rather, I *can* attach sense to this idea, but no sooner have I done so than I see clearly that such a thing is impossible.⁷

⁷ While *Irreflex* is a plausible metaphysical principle, it is not incontestable. In conversation, Frances Howard Snyder suggested two apparent counter-examples: (1) An archway constructed of bricks which stand in relations of mutual support. Brick A remains in position partly in virtue of the fact that its neighbour, brick B remains

It is evident that the above metaphysical principles suffice to rule out circular J-chains. *Trans* ensures that if there are J-chains in which the same belief occurs more than once, then some belief is justified partly by virtue of the fact that it is justified. *Irreflex* implies that no belief is justified (even just partly) by virtue of the fact that it is justified. So there can be no circular J-chains.

Like all good metaphysical principles, ours have the ring of necessity. So far, then, we have a valid argument whose first two premises are plausibly regarded as necessarily true. If the necessity of the third premise can be sustained then the foundationalist will have succeeded in showing that F1 is not merely true but necessarily true. But first: is (3) simply true?

3. DEFENDING THE CLAIM THAT PREMISE (3) IS SIMPLY TRUE

Let's begin at the very top of the hierarchy of cognitive beings. God, as traditionally conceived, knows whatever He knows immediately. I take this to imply that whatever He is justified in believing, He is immediately justified in believing. God's belief system therefore contains no J-chains having more than a single member. All His J-chains are 1-tuples! So God's belief system poses no threat to (3). What about the rest of us? We have good reason to suppose (I think) that aside from God, there are no beings having infinite cognitive capacities. There may be infinitely many beliefs which any given person is capable of holding, but no (non-divine) person is capable of holding infinitely many beliefs. Of course, for any given proposition I believe, there are infinitely many propositions entailed by that proposition. But the set of things any given person believes isn't closed under entailment. Perhaps it will be objected that I believe not only that you are presently situated more than 1 foot away from me, but also that you are more than 1/2 of a foot away, that you are 1/4 of a foot away, that you are more than 1/8 of

in position, and likewise, B remains where it is partly in virtue of the fact that A remains where it is. (2) A completed crossword puzzle in which the correctness of a particular answer to 1 across depends upon the correctness of a particular answer to 1 down, and *vice versa*. The crossword puzzle example has in fact been employed by Susan Haack (1993a, 1993b) in support of the claim that one's *justification* for a particular answer can depend on one's justification for another and vice versa. I am inclined to think that neither the brick example nor the crossword example decisively refute *Irreflex*. But I won't pursue the matter here, as my main purpose is not to defend the regress argument, but to clarify it and to identify its limitations. But for an interesting response to Haack's use of the crossword example, see McGrew (1999).

a foot away, and so on. Nonsense! There is no ‘and so on’ about it. Consider a number whose shortest expression in any mathematical language known to man would take, say, a million years to write down. Pretend that ‘*X*’ is the great big expression that does the job. Do I believe that you are more than $1/X$ feet away? No. I can’t so much as consider the proposition that I have just pretended to single out. At some point in the sequence envisioned by the objector, the denominators just get too big, and I am no longer able to grasp the relevant propositions, much less believe them.

Even if I am wrong in maintaining that no mere mortal has infinitely many beliefs, the thesis that no mere mortal instantiates an infinite J-chain possesses independent plausibility. It’s a little bit hard to be confident here, especially without presupposing anything about what being ‘suitably related’ consists in. I don’t think we can assume, for example, that the justifying beliefs must temporally precede the *justificandum* belief. Still, whatever exactly might be involved in instantiating an infinite J-chain, it seems like it would require a great deal more cognitive complexity than is to be found even in, say, someone with a Ph.D. in Philosophy.

“But what about fantastic beings which may, for all you know, inhabit other galaxies?” Well, for all I know, a black hole somewhere in the universe recently spat out an exact replica of my television set. I still say that it is reasonable for me to believe that these phenomena are nowhere to be found in the universe. Even if I am wrong about this, we can safely say this much: (3) holds good when restricted to the justified beliefs of *humans*. The regress argument, I conclude, at the very least provides us with reason to uphold a version of F1 that is restricted to *human* belief. But can we do better?

4. A FAULTY, BUT NONETHELESS INSTRUCTIVE, ARGUMENT FOR THE NECESSITY OF (3)

Don’t we feel strongly pulled to affirm, not only that we humans don’t in fact have any beliefs which are justified by other beliefs, which in turn are justified by still more beliefs, and so on *ad infinitum*, but also that no being could possibly get its beliefs justified in that way? Let me emphasize that the intuition here is *not* that there can’t be a being of sufficient cognitive complexity to exemplify an infinite and non-circular series of beliefs, each of which was suitably related to a set of beliefs which included the immediately following member of the series. Let it be granted that such a being is possible. But let us recall that ‘being suitably related’ was defined as a relation that can exist between *unjustified* beliefs. A belief is suitably related to some others provided that the former would be justified *if* the latter beliefs were.

Thus, all that is secured by a series of the type we are envisioning is a sort of *conditional* justification: each belief in such a series would be justified, *provided that* the succeeding member was also justified,⁸ And this doesn't give you an infinite J-chain, since it is quite consistent with *none* of them being justified. (Recall that in order for a series to qualify as a J-chain, its first member and any member other than its last — if it has a last — must be justified.)

Let's see whether we can flesh out this line of thought with the help of a fanciful example. Suppose that Phil, an infinite being, believes that he once saw a real elephant. He believes this on the basis of his belief that Tom1 said that Phil has never seen an elephant and his additional belief that Tom1 always lies. Let's allow that the first of these two 'supporting' beliefs is justified, for whatever reason. As for the second (his belief that Tom1 always lies), it rests on his belief that Tom2 said that Tom1 always lies (let's allow that this one is justified) and his belief that Tom2 always tells the truth. Phil's belief that Tom2 always tells the truth rests on his (justified) belief that Tom3 said that Tom 2 doesn't always tell the truth and his further belief that Tom3 always lies... and so on. (Apparently, Phil knows infinitely many people named 'Tom'!) Now one thing which seems clear about this little fantasy is this: it is consistent with the claim that Phil is *not* justified in believing that he has seen a real elephant. Indeed, it is consistent with the claim that *none* of the members of this infinite series of beliefs are justified. And this is so, in spite of the fact that for each member in that series, there are further beliefs to which it is suitably related. So far so good. But does

⁸ See Alston (1976a) and Alston (1976b) for a similar line of thought. Alston's presentation, however, skirts dangerously close to confusing the question of whether the conditions for justification have been satisfied with the question of whether one has successfully *shown* that those conditions are satisfied. He writes: "If there is a branch [of the tree-like structure whose origin is a putatively mediately justified belief] with no terminus, that means that no matter how far we extend the branch, the last element is mediately justified if at all. Thus, as far as this structure goes, whenever 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." (1989, p. 27, my italics.) I suspect that it is possible to interpret this passage in a way that clears Alston of the charge of fudging the being/showing distinction. A charitable reading of this sort would seem to be mandated by Alston's frequent condemnations of those who ignore this distinction, and, in particular, by what Alston says in the footnote which immediately follows this passage. There, Alston himself complains that attempts to rule out infinite J-chains often confuse *being* justified with 'exhibiting one's justification.' (1989, p. 27, n.10)

this provide any support for the claim that there can't possibly be an infinite J-chain? Arguably, all we have shown is that there could be something which was *very much like* an infinite J-chain, but which really isn't a J-chain at all (because none of its members are justified). The defender of the infinite J-chain can happily concede that no belief is justified *merely* by virtue of belonging to an infinite series, each member of which would be justified *if* the next were. For, as we have just seen, a series like that might be one in which *none* are justified. But why can't she simply say, "I didn't have in mind a series like that. I had in mind one which all of the members *were* justified. Absolutely nothing has been done to rule out that possibility."

There is an interesting line of reply to this. It won't work to establish the necessity of premise (3) in the end, but it does suggest an important lesson, as we'll see in a moment. The reply runs as follows: "My opponent (the person who defends the possibility of infinite J-chains) has conceded herself into a rather awkward position. On her account, it appears that we could have two beings, both believing all the same things, with each having a belief system that has an infinitely regressive structure, with the same beliefs arranged in the same order in each case, and yet one's beliefs are justified while the other's are not. This, by itself, is a lot to swallow. But I'm prepared to concede this much. Let's call the one with justified beliefs 'Gene', the other one 'Dean'. Now here's the clincher: *What fact about the world makes it true that Gene's beliefs are all justified while Dean's are not?* Well, whatever the answer is, it clearly doesn't lie in anything 'internal' to Gene's belief system. For, by hypothesis, the internal features of Gene's and Dean's belief systems are exactly the same. The only sort of fact that could make Gene's beliefs justified, then, is a fact about something *other* than his belief system, a fact, say, about how his belief system is related to things besides his other beliefs. This, however, is tantamount to recognizing that justification must ultimately spring from sources that are non-doxastic, sources other than beliefs. And this, of course, was the foundationalist's point all along."

That's the end of the reply. Now here is why it fails. It tries to make it look as though the person who defends the possibility of infinite J-chains is caught on the horns of a terrible dilemma: either she endorses the fantastic view that it is simply a brute fact that Gene's beliefs are justified while Dean's aren't, or she admits that the justification inhering in Gene's belief-system must be chalked up to factors that operate outside of that belief system, thus caving in to foundationalism. But in fact, grabbing the second horn involves no caving in to foundationalism at all. Let it be admitted that Gene's and Dean's belief systems can differ epistemically only if Gene's belief system bears a certain relation to the world or to his experience, a

relation which fails to hold between Dean's belief-system and the world or his experience. Let it also be admitted that Gene's beliefs are justified at least partly by virtue of this fact. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the story of Gene represents what looks for all the world to be the possibility of a non-circular, infinite J-chain. And if this is indeed so, the third premise of the regress argument — and its conclusion — is merely contingently true.

Nevertheless, something important is to be gained by reflecting on the 'Gene and Dean' case. If the 'brute fact' line is ruled out (as I think it ought to be), we may conclude that *something* like foundationalism is true. I call that something 'quasi-foundationalism'. According to quasi-foundationalism, for any given justified belief, that belief is justified at least partly by virtue of facts about how it, or the belief system in which it figures, is related to things outside of the belief system in which it figures. This claims in effect that every justified belief owes its epistemic status *at least partly* to facts about its relationship to non-doxastic states of affairs.⁹ This is far from being a trivial doctrine. It effectively rules out "pure" coherence theories according to which the epistemic status of any given belief is determined solely by facts about the internal features of the belief system to which it belongs.¹⁰ But note: quasi-foundationalism, unlike foundationalism, is logically compatible with maintaining that there are justified beliefs but no immediately justified ones. The necessity of the former, unlike the necessity of the latter makes room for the possibility of a Gene, each of whose justified beliefs may be said to owe its justification to the fact that it is suitably related to another one of his justified beliefs.

⁹ Quasi-foundationalism, thus understood, may be viewed as a version of the doctrine of epistemic supervenience (ES), the view (roughly) that it is impossible for two beliefs to differ epistemically without differing in their non-epistemic properties. But quasi-foundationalism is a stronger doctrine. It adds two things to epistemic supervenience: (1) a thesis of explanatory priority — epistemic properties are possessed partly *in virtue* of non-epistemic ones —, and (2) a requirement that at least *some* of the properties that serve to explain the distribution of epistemic properties have a *non-doxastic* aspect — that is, some of the properties in question will have to do with how a belief is related to things *other than* beliefs. ES, in contrast, says nothing about what sorts of non-epistemic properties are to be found in the supervenience base. Thus, unlike quasi foundationalism, ES is consistent with the claim that the non-epistemic properties on which justification supervenes are all thoroughly doxastic in character.

¹⁰ In this respect, incidentally, quasi-foundationalism is actually a *stronger* doctrine than foundationalism. See Plantinga (1993, pp. 78-80) for proof that a pure coherence theory is consistent with foundationalism and is, indeed, a *special case* of foundationalism.

The situation here has an interesting parallel in the field of natural theology. One kind of cosmological argument tries to establish the existence of a wholly independent being by relying on the premise that an infinite series of dependent beings, each owing its existence to a previous member of the series, is not possible (or at least, not actual). But Clarke, Leibniz and others recognized that a successful cosmological argument need not rely on such a premise. For even if the series of all dependent beings (past and present) were infinite in this way, the fact that there were any dependent beings at all would still demand an explanation, and this demand (they argued) can be satisfied only by positing a being outside the series. Analogously, as the Gene-Dean scenario illustrates, a successful argument for the conclusion that justification ultimately depends (at least in part) upon non-doxastic factors need not assume that there can't be any infinite J-chains, contrary to what one might have thought.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested that we have good reason to accept foundationalism, or more specifically, F1, on the grounds that we have good reason to believe that each premise of the regress argument is true. But as far as we can tell, the premise that denies the existence of (non-circular) infinite J-chains is merely a contingent truth; it hasn't been *shown* to be a necessary truth, at any rate. Furthermore, it is difficult to conceive of a way of establishing the necessity of F1 that does *not* rely on the claim that such J-chains are impossible. I conclude that we have no good grounds for thinking that F1 is a necessary truth. For all we know, it is contingent. When it comes to quasi-foundationalism, on the other hand, our situation is rather different. Our reflections on such super-cognizers as Gene and Dean seem to point in the direction of its necessity. The task of developing these reflections into a full-blown argument for the necessity of quasi-foundationalism, however, is one I leave for another occasion.¹¹

Andrew Cortens
Department of Philosophy
Boise State University
Boise, ID 83725-1550, USA
acorten@boisestate.edu

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