

In Defense of Radical Empiricism

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Philosophy.

Chapel Hill  
2006

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## ABSTRACT

Joseph Benjamin Riegel: In Defense of Radical Empiricism  
(Under the direction of Ram Neta)

In this paper I evaluate arguments presented by Lawrence Bonjour, Christopher Peacocke, and George Bealer which purport to show that there is an indispensable theoretical need for *a priori* knowledge. Bonjour and Peacocke argue that views that deny *a priori* knowledge – which I call Radical Empiricist views – ultimately lead to radical forms of skepticism. Bealer argues that Radical Empiricism is incoherent in the sense that it is internally inconsistent. In this paper, I evaluate each of these arguments against Radical Empiricism and I attempt to show that each is unconvincing. The upshot of my discussion is that we have no compelling reason to posit *a priori* knowledge.

## DEDICATION

To my parents, Joe and Joan Riegel, for their constant love and support.

And to Autumn, for helping me maintain my sanity during the writing process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Ram Neta for enlightening discussion and for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Discussions of the *a priori* often take for granted the thesis that certain classes of propositions – such as those about ethical norms or those that express necessary truths – cannot be known solely on the basis of experience. Experience, it is generally assumed, can only teach us what *is* the case, not what *must* be or what *ought* to be the case. Our knowledge of normative and necessary truths, if we do in fact have such knowledge, must ultimately derive from some other source.

Given this felt need to accommodate *a priori* knowledge, epistemologists have presented many different accounts of how exactly one might come to know a proposition independently of experience. On the one hand, rationalists have argued that one might come to know normative or necessary truths on the basis of pure reason. These accounts of *a priori* knowledge often posit a distinct faculty of intuition through which we gain insight into moral or modal features of reality. On the other hand, empiricists, wary of positing seemingly mysterious faculties, have either embraced skepticism about the problematic domains or have attempted to account for limited *a priori* knowledge by appealing to the notion of an analytic truth. This latter approach, endorsed by positivists such as A. J. Ayer, suggests that all necessary truths are analytic – that is, true in virtue of meaning alone. Contrary to what they seem to be about, such statements do not actually make factual claims about the world but instead merely “record our determination” to use words in

conventionally established ways.<sup>1</sup> If this account of necessary truths is correct, then we might be able to account for our knowledge of these propositions without abandoning the traditional empiricist thesis that all of our *factual* knowledge ultimately derives from experience. Well-known Quinean attacks have convinced many philosophers that the positivists' account of necessary truths is incorrect, however. In his papers "Truth by Convention" (1936) and "Carnap and Logical Truth" (1960), Quine argues forcefully that the perceived necessity of logical truths cannot derive from their purported status as analytic truths or tautologies. Moreover, in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951), Quine argues that the notion of analyticity cannot be given the theoretical precision that is required if it is to do the work that positivists want it to.

My goal in this paper is not to defend the positivists' account of *a priori* knowledge or to argue against rationalist alternatives. Rather, I wish to challenge the claim, which is presupposed by rationalists and most empiricists, that our knowledge of normative and necessary truths, if possible at all, must be *a priori*. I will attempt to show that we have no compelling reason to reject the contrary view according to which *all* of our knowledge – including that of normative and necessary truths – is *a posteriori*. I shall call this latter view "Radical Empiricism" since it maintains, as other versions of empiricism do, that all of our factual knowledge derives from experience but denies, unlike logical empiricism, that certain other propositions can be known *a priori*. My goal in this paper is not to show that Radical Empiricism is true; rather, I will argue that philosophers have not yet provided a convincing reason to believe that the thesis is false.

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<sup>1</sup> Ayer (1952), 79

As suggested above, a common objection raised against Radical Empiricism is that it leads to radical and unacceptable forms of skepticism. This view is held by Christopher Peacocke, who has argued that the denial of *a priori* warrants leads to a vicious regress that undermines all warrants. If he is correct, then Radical Empiricism leads to skepticism about *all* classes of propositions, not merely skepticism about certain theoretical domains.

Lawrence Bonjour also believes that Radical Empiricism leads to absurd consequences. He has argued that “the repudiation of all *a priori* justification is apparently tantamount to the repudiation of argument or reasoning generally, thus amounting in effect to intellectual suicide.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to these concerns about skepticism and intellectual suicide, George Bealer has argued that Radical Empiricism is simply incoherent. In his view, any form of empiricism that denies *a priori* intuition is internally inconsistent. In this paper I will analyze the arguments presented by Bonjour, Peacocke, and Bealer, and I will attempt to show that each of them fails. In my view, Bonjour and Peacocke have not succeeded in demonstrating that we must posit *a priori* knowledge in order to avoid skepticism, nor has Bealer succeeded in showing that Radical Empiricism is incoherent.

Before examining the arguments presented by Bonjour, Peacocke, and Bealer, I would first like to make a couple comments about how we should understand Radical Empiricism. I characterized it above as a thesis about *knowledge* – that is, the view that all knowledge is *a posteriori* (or equivalently, the view that there is no *a priori* knowledge). Nevertheless, it is possible to formulate versions of Radical Empiricism using other normative epistemological concepts, such as justification or warrant. Indeed, Bonjour and Peacocke argue against versions of the thesis that incorporate these very notions. For this

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<sup>2</sup> Bonjour (1998), 5



reason, I believe that Radical Empiricism is best characterized in a somewhat schematic way, and term ‘knowledge,’ as I have used it above, should be understood merely as a convenient place-holder for whatever notion best describes the nature of rationally-held belief. We should also note, however, that differences among various formulations of Radical Empiricism may be more than just terminological. As we shall see, Bonjour, Peacocke, and Bealer each argue against a version of the thesis that is theoretically, as well as terminologically, distinct. Each version denies that there is *a priori* knowledge (or justification, or warrant, etc.), but each understands the nature of this normative status in slightly different ways. For this reason, I believe that Radical Empiricism is best understood as a family of views rather than as a single thesis. In light of this fact, it is important to clarify the main goal of this paper. In the sections that follow, I will analyze the arguments presented by Bonjour, Peacocke, and Bealer, and I will attempt to show that they do not succeed in defeating their respective Radical Empiricist targets. If my analysis is correct, then certain versions of Radical Empiricism can be regarded as plausible alternatives to rationalism or to the “moderate” form of empiricism endorsed by positivists.

## Chapter II

### Bonjour's Argument against Radical Empiricism

In his book *In Defense of Pure Reason* (1998), Lawrence Bonjour argues that “the epistemic justification of at least the vast preponderance of what we think of as empirical knowledge must involve an indispensable *a priori* component – so that the only alternative to the existence of *a priori* justification is skepticism of a most radical kind.”<sup>3</sup> Before examining the argument for this claim, we should first discuss Bonjour's views about the nature of epistemic justification. His precise views on this subject are somewhat difficult to discern in his book; however, when arguing for the indispensability of *a priori* justification, Bonjour adopts a foundationalist model of the structure of epistemic justification. This model divides justification into two types, foundational and inferential, and it allows for foundational justification to be either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. According to Bonjour, *a priori* foundational justification derives from a “direct or immediate, non-discursive” rational insight or intuition.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, *a posteriori* foundational beliefs are “fully justified by appeal to direct experience or sensory observation alone.”<sup>5</sup>

An important component of Bonjour's account of epistemic justification is his view that only beliefs with certain contents can serve as possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs. Bonjour acknowledges, however, that epistemologists may disagree on exactly which beliefs

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<sup>3</sup> Bonjour (1998), 5

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

are included in this category, and for this reason he does not argue for any particular account. Nevertheless, Bonjour seems to take it for granted that any plausible account of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs will limit the class to possible beliefs about present (rather than past or future), particular (rather than universal), non-normative (rather than normative), contingent (rather than necessary) states of affairs.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Bonjour assumes that beliefs about necessary or normative truths cannot be *a posteriori* foundational beliefs. This is a very important assumption, as we shall see below.

According to Bonjour's account of epistemic justification, foundational beliefs are justified through some sort of direct perceptual acquaintance or immediate rationalist insight. By contrast, inferential beliefs are justified by their relation to foundational beliefs. Bonjour claims that in order to have inferential justification for believing a proposition *p*, one must be able to infer *p* from the contents of one's justified foundational beliefs. Though he is not very explicit about which inferences exactly confer justification, Bonjour does think that deductive inferences are one such kind. On this account of inferential justification, in order for a subject *S* to be justified in believing an inferential belief *p*, *S* must be able to deduce *p* from the contents of *S*'s justified foundational beliefs. Bonjour seems to believe that in order for *S* to have this ability, the following two conditions must hold true: 1) *S* has foundational justification for believing a set of propositions [*q*<sub>1</sub>...*q*<sub>*n*</sub>] which entail that *p* is true; and 2) *S* has justification (foundational or inferential) for believing the proposition *r*, which states that [*q*<sub>1</sub>...*q*<sub>*n*</sub>] entail that *p* is true.

As mentioned above, Bonjour is not very explicit in his book about which inferences exactly confer epistemic justification. However, he clearly believes that deductive inferences

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<sup>6</sup> Bonjour seems to believe that the debate among epistemologists is confined to the question of whether *a posteriori* foundational beliefs "concern ordinary physical objects or perhaps only private experiences" (4).

are one such kind, and it is very likely that Bonjour believes that other types of inferences, such as inductive and perhaps abductive inferences, also confer justification. In my reconstruction of his argument against Radical Empiricism, I wish to leave open the possibility that these other types of inferences confer justification as well. Thus, I will attribute to Bonjour an account of inferential justification that differs slightly from the one presented above. This revised account states that in order for  $S$  to have inferential justification for believing a proposition  $p$ ,  $S$  must have foundational justification for believing a set of propositions  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  which entail that  $p$  is true *or is likely to be true*, and  $S$  must have justification for believing the proposition  $r$ , which states that  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  entail that  $p$  is true *or is likely to be true*. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss what exactly it means for  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  to entail that  $p$  is likely to be true. If this way of accommodating inductive or abductive inferences proves to be problematic, the criteria for inferential justification can and should be modified accordingly. I do not believe that my analysis of Bonjour's argument would be affected by such changes.

Having discussed Bonjour's views about the structure of epistemic justification, let us now look at his argument against Radical Empiricism. This argument is not clearly presented in Bonjour's book, and the following is my best attempt at a reconstruction:

1. A subject  $S$ 's justification for believing a proposition  $p$  is either foundational or inferential.
2.  $S$ 's foundational justification for believing a proposition  $p$  is either *a priori* or *a posteriori*.
3. The propositions that  $S$  can have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing are propositions about present (rather than past or future), particular (rather than universal), non-normative (rather than normative), contingent (rather than necessary) states of affairs.
4.  $S$  has inferential justification for believing a proposition  $p$  if and only if the following two conditions are satisfied: 1)  $S$  has foundational justification for believing some set of

propositions  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  which entail that  $p$  is true or is likely to be true; and 2)  $S$  has justification for believing the proposition  $r$ , which states that  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  entail that  $p$  is true or is likely to be true.

5. Suppose that there is no  $S$  who can have *a priori* foundational justification for believing any proposition  $q$ . [claim made by the Radical Empiricist, assumed for *reductio*]
6. If there is no  $S$  who can have *a priori* foundational justification for believing any proposition  $q$ , then if  $S$  has foundational justification for believing  $q$ , then  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $q$ . [from 2]
7. Therefore, if  $S$  has foundational justification for believing any proposition  $q$ , then  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $q$ . [5, 6]
8. Suppose that some  $S$  has inferential justification for believing some proposition  $p$  (where  $p$  is a proposition that  $S$  cannot have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing). [assumption]
9.  $S$  has foundational justification for believing some set of propositions  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  which entail that  $p$  is true or is likely to be true, and  $S$  has justification for believing the proposition  $r$ , which states that  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  entail that  $p$  is true or is likely to be true. [4, 8]
10.  $S$  has justification for believing the proposition  $r$ , which states that  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  entail that  $p$  is true or is likely to be true. [9]
11. If  $S$  has justification for believing the proposition  $r$ , then either  $S$  has foundational justification for believing  $r$  or  $S$  has inferential justification for believing  $r$ . [from 1]
12. Either  $S$  has foundational justification for believing  $r$  or  $S$  has inferential justification for believing  $r$ . [10, 11]
13. Let us suppose that  $S$  has foundational justification for believing  $r$ . [assumption]
14. If  $S$  has foundational justification for believing  $r$ , then either  $S$  has *a priori* foundational justification for believing  $r$  or  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $r$ . [from 2]
15. Either  $S$  has *a priori* foundational justification for believing  $r$  or  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $r$ . [13, 14]
16.  $S$  does not have *a priori* foundational justification for believing  $r$ . [from 5]
17. Therefore,  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $r$ . [15, 16]
18. If  $S$  has foundational justification for believing  $r$ , then  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $r$ . [discharging assumption from line 13]
19.  $S$  does not have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $r$ . [motivation from 3]
20. Therefore,  $S$  does not have foundational justification for believing  $r$ . [18, 19]
21. Therefore,  $S$  has inferential justification for believing  $r$ . [12, 20]
22.  $S$  has foundational justification for believing some set of propositions  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$  which entails that  $r$  is true or is likely to be true. [4, 21]
23. If  $S$  has foundational justification for believing some set of propositions  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$ , then  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$ . [from 7]
24. Therefore,  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing some set of propositions  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$  which entails that  $r$  is true or is likely to be true. [22, 23]
25. If some  $S$  has inferential justification for believing some proposition  $p$ , then  $S$  has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing the set of propositions  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$  which entails that  $r$  is true or is likely to be true. [discharging assumption from line 8]

26. There is no  $S$  who has *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing the set of propositions  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$  which entail that  $r$  is true or is likely to be true. [motivation from 3]
27. Therefore, there is no  $S$  who has inferential justification for believing any proposition  $p$  (where  $p$  is a proposition that  $S$  cannot have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing). [25, 26]
28. If there is no  $S$  who can have *a priori* foundational justification for believing some proposition  $q$ , then there is no  $S$  who has inferential justification for believing any proposition  $p$  (where  $p$  is a proposition that  $S$  cannot have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing). [discharging the assumption from line 5]
29. There is some  $S$  who has inferential justification for believing some proposition  $p$  (where  $p$  is a proposition that  $S$  cannot have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing).
30. Therefore, there is some  $S$  who can have *a priori* foundational justification for believing some proposition  $q$ . [28, 29]

Despite its length, this argument is fairly straightforward. It purports to show that Radical Empiricism (understood as the claim that there is no *a priori* foundational justification) leads to an absurd skepticism about all inferential beliefs (i.e. those beliefs whose contents cannot be justified by direct experience or observation alone). Given Bonjour's restrictions on the set of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs (described in line 3), this skepticism encompasses all beliefs about universal generalizations, necessary truths, propositions about the past or future, moral and epistemological truths, etc. Thus, if the argument is correct, then Radical Empiricism entails skepticism about much of what we thought was knowable.

The argument invites us first to suppose that the Radical Empiricist is correct and that there is no *a priori* foundational justification. We are also invited to suppose that there is some subject  $S$  who has inferential justification for believing a proposition  $p$  that cannot be fully justified by direct experience or observation alone (again, this may be a universal generalization, a necessary truth, etc.). From Bonjour's conditions for inferential justification (described in line 4), it follows that  $S$  has foundational justification for believing

a set of propositions  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  which entails that  $p$  is true or is likely to be true, and  $S$  also has justification for believing the proposition  $r$ , which states that the set of propositions entails that  $p$  is true or is likely to be true. Let us now focus on  $S$ 's justification for believing  $r$ . Given the bifurcated structure of justification,  $S$ 's justification for believing  $r$  must be either foundational or inferential. Since we have assumed that there is no *a priori* foundational justification, it follows that  $S$ 's justification for believing  $r$  must be either *a posteriori* foundational or inferential. Bonjour believes that  $S$ 's justification for believing  $r$  cannot be *a posteriori* foundational (the claim in line 19). The reason has to do with the fact that  $r$  expresses a necessary truth – i.e. that  $p$  *must* be true (or at least likely to be true) if  $[q_1 \dots q_n]$  are true. Since beliefs about such propositions are not possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs (from line 3), it follows that  $S$ 's justification for believing  $r$  cannot be *a posteriori* foundational.

If  $S$  does in fact have inferential justification for believing  $p$ , it follows that  $S$ 's justification for believing the proposition  $r$  must be inferential. Now if  $S$ 's justification for believing  $r$  is inferential, then  $S$  must have foundational justification for believing a further set of propositions  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$  which entail that  $r$  is true or is likely to be true. Since we are assuming that there is no *a priori* foundational justification,  $S$ 's justification for believing  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$  must then be *a posteriori* foundational. Thus, if  $S$  has inferential justification for believing  $p$ , then  $S$  must have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing  $[s_1 \dots s_n]$ . Bonjour believes, however, that the consequent of this conditional cannot be satisfied (this is the claim in line 26). The reason once again has to do with the fact that  $r$  expresses a necessary truth. According to Bonjour, statements about what must be the case cannot be deduced or otherwise inferred from statements about what is contingently the case. In other

words, there is no set of *a posteriori* foundational beliefs which entails that *r* is true or is likely to be true. It follows that *S* cannot have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing a set of propositions that entail that *r* is true or is likely to be true, and so *S* cannot have justification for believing any inferential belief *p*. Of course we have arrived at this skeptical conclusion only by first assuming that there is no *a posteriori* foundational justification. Given that the skeptical conclusion is clearly absurd, we have good reason, according to Bonjour, to reject Radical Empiricism.

Let us now evaluate this argument and attempt to determine how much of a threat it poses to Radical Empiricism. There seem to be two potential weaknesses of the argument, the first of which is the premise in line 3 – i.e. the claim that the only possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs are possible beliefs about present (rather than past or future), particular (rather than universal), non-normative (rather than normative), contingent (rather than necessary) states of affairs. As discussed above, this premise provides the motivation for two other key premises: the claim that *S*'s belief that *r* cannot be an *a posteriori* foundational belief (line 19), and the claim that *r* cannot be inferred from the contents of *S*'s *a posteriori* foundational beliefs (line 26). Without these latter two premises, the conclusion of the argument doesn't follow.

In his book *In Defense of Pure Reason*, Bonjour never explicitly argues for the premise in line 3. While he seems open to the idea that the class of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs includes beliefs about physical objects, Bonjour never provides an argument as to why it cannot also include beliefs about necessary truths, normative truths, universal generalizations, etc. If it does include beliefs about necessary truths (such as those expressed by the proposition *r*), then the claim in line 19 is false and the argument against



Radical Empiricism fails. In order to demonstrate convincingly that Radical Empiricism does in fact lead to an absurd skepticism about all inferential beliefs, Bonjour needs to argue for a particular account of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs, one that limits the class (at least) to beliefs about contingent states of affairs. Bonjour has not done this, however, and so we lack a compelling reason to reject Radical Empiricism instead of premise 3.

The second potential weakness of the argument is the premise in line 4 – i.e. Bonjour’s two conditions for inferential justification. We should note that it is the second of the two conditions that drives the argument against Radical Empiricism. Given the *S* must be justified in believing the proposition *r* in order to be justified in believing any inferential belief *p*, it’s not clear how that this requirement can be satisfied if there is no *a priori* foundational justification (and if we accept Bonjour’s restrictions on possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs). Bonjour does not argue for why we should accept the second condition for inferential justification, however, and I believe his case against Radical Empiricism suffers as a result. Why should we reject Radical Empiricism instead of the second condition for inferential justification?

Bonjour might respond by saying that *even if* we reject the second condition for inferential justification, Radical Empiricism still leads to massive (if not total) skepticism. To see why, let us focus on the first condition for inferential justification, which states that in order for *S* to have inferential justification for believing a proposition *p*, *S* must have foundational justification for believing a set of propositions [*q*<sub>1</sub>...*q*<sub>*n*</sub>] which entails that *p* is true or is likely to be true. Assuming that there is no *a priori* foundational justification, it follows that *S* must have *a posteriori* foundational justification for believing [*q*<sub>1</sub>...*q*<sub>*n*</sub>] which entail that *p* is true or is likely to be true. Now if the set of possible *a posteriori* foundational

beliefs is limited to possible beliefs about contingent, non-normative states of affairs, it does not seem possible that *S* could deduce or otherwise infer normative principles or necessary truths from *S*'s *a posteriori* foundational beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Thus, even if we were to reject the second condition for inferential justification, Radical Empiricism would still entail skepticism about certain classes of propositions.

This argument assumes of course that we have good reason to accept Bonjour's restrictions on the contents of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs. As discussed above, however, Bonjour has not provided an argument for the premise that the set of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs is limited to possible beliefs about present, particular, contingent, non-normative states of affairs. If this assumption proves false (i.e. if one's set of *a posteriori* foundational beliefs does include normative or necessary truths), one could surely infer other normative principles and other necessary truths from one's *a posteriori* foundational beliefs. Without an argument as to why the set of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs cannot include normative or necessary truths, we still lack a compelling reason to believe that Radical Empiricism entails an unacceptable skepticism.

I stated above that there were two potential weaknesses with the argument against Radical Empiricism. The first is the premise in line 3 – the claim that the set of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs is limited to possible beliefs about present, particular, non-normative, contingent states of affairs. The second potential weakness is the second condition for inferential justification described in line 4. Neither is argued for by Bonjour in his book. Nevertheless, we saw that even if we reject the second condition for inferential

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<sup>7</sup> The Radical Empiricist might be able to challenge this point, especially if we are allowing inductive or abductive inferences to confer justification. Unfortunately, discussing this point in depth is beyond the scope of this paper, so I will simply assume for the sake of argument that normative and necessary truths cannot be inferred from the contents of *a posteriori* foundational beliefs.

justification, Radical Empiricism still seems to entail skepticism about certain classes of propositions, such as those about normative principles or necessary truths. This conclusion only follows, however, if we first accept the claim that the set of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs cannot include normative principles or necessary truths. Thus, the real weakness of the argument seems to be line 3. As noted above, Bonjour does not argue for this claim in his book, and unless he can provide one, we do not have a compelling reason to reject Radical Empiricism.

## Chapter III

### Peacocke's Argument against Radical Empiricism

In his book *The Realm of Reason*, Christopher Peacocke claims that “[n]ot all warrants can be empirical, on pain of regress.”<sup>8</sup> Though he does not provide a clear argument for this claim, Peacocke seems to believe that if Radical Empiricism (understood as the claim that there are no *a priori* warrants or entitlements) is true, then a subject *S*'s entitlement to any belief *p* must rest on an infinite regress of entitlements. On the face of it, an infinite regress of entitlements seems impossible, so it follows that *S* is not entitled to any belief. Given the absurdity of this conclusion, Peacocke believes that we have good reason to reject Radical Empiricism.

Before looking at the details of this argument, we should first discuss Peacocke's views about the rationality of belief formation. The first thing to note is a terminological difference between Peacocke and Bonjour: whereas the latter describes this rationality in terms of epistemic justification, the former does so in terms of epistemic warrant or entitlement. This difference is more than terminological, however. We saw that Bonjour divides epistemic justification into two types – foundational and inferential. One acquires foundational justification either through some direct perceptual acquaintance (*a posteriori*) or through some direct rational insight (*a priori*). By contrast, inferential justification derives directly or indirectly from one's justification for believing foundational beliefs. Peacocke rejects this bifurcated structure of justification. Instead, he accepts a view according to

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<sup>8</sup> Peacocke (2004), 31

which a belief is rationally held (i.e. warranted) if doing so conforms to certain objective epistemological norms. Though Peacocke is not very clear about the actual contents of these norms, he seems to believe that they may refer to a person's perceptual experiences and/or mental states. For instance, a norm may say that if a subject *S* has had certain perceptual experiences [ $E_1 \dots E_n$ ] and if *S* is entitled to beliefs [ $p_1 \dots p_n$ ], then *S* is also entitled to belief *q*. According to Peacocke, if an entitlement does not rest on any of *S*'s perceptual experiences, then it is *a priori*. If an entitlement rests on one or more of *S*'s perceptual experiences, then it is *a posteriori*.

Let us now examine Peacocke's arguments against Radical Empiricism:

1. A subject *S*'s entitlement *E* to a belief *p* may be either *a priori* or *a posteriori*.
2. *S*'s entitlement *E* to a belief *p* is *a priori* if and only if *E* does not rest on any of *S*'s perceptual experiences.
3. *S*'s entitlement *E* to a belief *p* is *a posteriori* if and only if *E* rests on one or more of *S*'s perceptual experiences.
4. Suppose that the set of possible *a priori* entitlements is empty. [claim made by the radical empiricist, assumed for *reductio*]
5. If the set of possible *a priori* entitlements is empty, then if *S* is entitled to a belief *p*, then *S*'s entitlement to *p* is an *a posteriori* entitlement. [from 1]
6. If *S* is entitled to a belief *p*, then *S*'s entitlement to *p* is an *a posteriori* entitlement. [4, 5]
7. Suppose that there is some subject *S* who is entitled to any belief *p*. [assumption]
8. *S*'s entitlement to the belief *p* is an *a posteriori* entitlement. [6, 7]
9. *S*'s entitlement to the belief *p* rests on one or more of *S*'s perceptual experiences. [3, 8]
10. If *S*'s entitlement to the belief *p* rests on one or more of *S*'s perceptual experiences, then *S*'s entitlement to the belief *p* also rests on an entitlement to the further belief *q* – that *S*'s perceptual experiences entitle *S* to the belief *p*.
11. *S*'s entitlement to the belief *p* rests on an entitlement to the further belief *q* – that *S*'s perceptual experiences entitle *S* to the belief *p*. [9, 10]
12. If there is some *S* who is entitled to any belief *p*, then *S*'s entitlement to *p* rests on an entitlement to the further belief *q*. [discharging assumption from line 7]
13. If there is some *S* who is entitled to any belief *p*, then *S*'s entitlement to *p* rests on an infinite regress of entitlements to beliefs.
14. *S*'s entitlement to *p* cannot rest on an infinite regress of entitlements to beliefs.
15. Therefore, there is no *S* who is entitled to any belief *p*. [13, 14]
16. If the set of possible outright *a priori* entitlements is empty, then there is no *S* who is entitled to any belief *p*. [discharging assumption from line 4]
17. There is some *S* who is entitled to some belief *p*.

18. Therefore, the set of possible outright *a priori* entitlements is *not* empty. [16, 17]

This argument attempts to show that the denial of *a priori* entitlements ultimately leads to total skepticism – i.e. the conclusion that no one is entitled to any belief. We are invited to suppose that the Radical Empiricist is correct and that there are no *a priori* entitlements. Thus, assuming that a subject *S* is entitled to any belief *p*, *S*'s entitlement must be an *a posteriori* entitlement. Since *a posteriori* entitlements are those that rest on one or more of the subject's perceptual experiences, it follows that *S*'s entitlement to *p* must rest on at least one of *S*'s perceptual experiences. A key premise comes in line 10: according to Peacocke, if *S*'s entitlement to *p* rests on one or more of *S*'s perceptual experiences, then *S*'s entitlements to *p* must rest on an entitlement to a further belief *q*, which states that *S*'s perceptual experiences entitle *S* to the belief *p*. In other words, in order for *S* to be entitled to the belief *p*, *S* must have had the relevant perceptual experiences and *S* must *also* be entitled to that further belief *q*. Of course *S*'s entitlement to *q* must also be *a posteriori*, and so it in turn must rest on one or more of *S*'s perceptual experiences. *S*'s entitlement to *q* must also rest on an *a posteriori* entitlement to a further belief *r*, and so on. Thus, if *S* is entitled to any belief *p*, then *S*'s entitlement to *p* must rest on an infinite regress of *a posteriori* entitlements to beliefs. According to Peacocke, this is not possible, and so there is no *S* who is entitled to any belief *p*. Of course this conclusion only follows if we first assume that there are no *a priori* entitlements, and given the absurdity of the conclusion, we have good reason to reject Radical Empiricism.

Let us now attempt to assess the strength of this argument. There are at least two potential weaknesses, and these are found in lines 10 and 14. Let us look at them in turn. The premise in line 10 is crucial in establishing the infinite regress of entitlements. This

claim states that if  $S$ 's entitlement to  $p$  rests on one or more of  $S$ 's perceptual experiences, then  $S$ 's entitlement to  $p$  also rests on an entitlement to the belief  $q$ , which states that  $S$ 's perceptual experiences entitle  $S$  to the belief  $p$ . As currently stated, however, line 10 needs to be amended.<sup>9</sup> The content of belief  $q$  states that the relevant perceptual experiences entitle  $S$  to the belief  $p$ . However, if  $S$ 's entitlement to belief  $p$  rests not only on  $S$ 's perceptual experiences but also on an entitlement to belief  $q$ , then it is simply false that  $S$ 's perceptual experiences are sufficient for  $S$  to be entitled to belief  $p$ . The content of belief  $q$  would have to be something like the following:  $S$ 's perceptual experiences and  $S$ 's entitlement to belief  $q$  jointly entitle  $S$  to belief  $p$ . This self-referring proposition might be philosophically problematic for other reasons, so we might amend the content of belief  $q$  to read something like the following:  $S$ 's perceptual experiences are necessary (though not sufficient) for  $S$  to be entitled to belief  $p$ .

Peacocke seems to believe that this premise captures a necessary condition for a belief to be held rationally: if  $S$  has the relevant perceptual experiences but is not entitled to the further epistemological belief  $q$ , then it simply would not be rational for  $S$  to form the belief  $p$ .<sup>10</sup> Peacocke does not specifically argue for this conception of rationality, and it's not clear why the Radical Empiricist should accept it, especially if we must revise the content of belief  $q$  in the way described above. Why exactly must  $S$  be entitled to *this* proposition if  $S$  has an *a posteriori* entitlement to  $p$ ? Why must the entitlement rest upon an entitlement to any further belief? Why can't all *a posteriori* entitlements simply rest on perceptual experiences? Peacocke has not provided an argument for the premise in line 10, however,

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<sup>9</sup> I have stated line 10 in the problematic way in order to remain faithful to what I take to be Peacocke's actual view (151).

<sup>10</sup> Peacocke (2004), 151

and by itself the premise doesn't seem very intuitive. For this reason, I believe that Peacocke's argument against Radical Empiricism is rather weak.

We saw in the previous section, however, that even if we reject Bonjour's second criterion for inferential justification, Radical Empiricism still entails skepticism about certain classes of propositions (given, of course, Bonjour's restrictions on possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs). It is worth considering whether a similar situation might exist here. Perhaps Radical Empiricism leads to skepticism *regardless* of whether the premise in line 10 is correct or not. In order to determine whether this is a real possibility or not, we should recall why Radical Empiricism seems to entail skepticism even if we reject Bonjour's second condition for inferential justification. The reason had to do with the fact that, for certain classes of propositions, the *first* condition cannot be satisfied if Radical Empiricism is true (and if we accept Bonjour's restrictions on possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs). Since necessary truths and normative principles cannot be deduced or otherwise inferred from propositions about contingent, non-normative states of affairs, Radical Empiricism entails that we cannot be justified in believing such propositions. In Peacocke's case, however, the Radical Empiricist does not seem to face an analogous problem. On his account, in order to be justified in believing a necessary truth or normative principle, one need only conform to the relevant epistemological norms. But why can't these norms be such that these entitlements (and all other entitlements) rest exclusively on perceptual experiences? Peacocke needs to show this cannot be the case; however, if we reject the premise in line 10, the regress argument doesn't go through, and it's not clear how else he might argue for the indispensability of *a priori* entitlements. Thus, the premise in line 10 seems to be necessary for the argument against Radical Empiricism. As discussed above, however, it's not clear



that we have an independent reason to accept it. Why does our notion of rationality require it? Peacocke has not adequately answered this question, and thus I do not see a compelling reason to reject Radical Empiricism.

I have argued that the premise in line 10 represents a weakness in Peacocke's argument. A different way to resist the argument is to challenge the premise in line 14 – i.e. the claim that an entitlement to a belief cannot rest on an infinite regress of entitlements. It's not entirely clear to me why this cannot be the case. In order to evaluate this claim better, let us consider again Peacocke's requirement for *a posteriori* entitlement. On this view, in order for *S* to be entitled to *p*, *S* must have had certain experiences  $[E_1...E_n]$  and *S* must hold a further entitlement to the belief *q* (which states that the experiences are necessary for *S* to be entitled to *p*). Of course in order to hold this further entitlement to *q*, *S* must have had certain experience  $[E^*_1...E^*_n]$  and hold an entitlement to a respective belief *r*. Now in order to be entitled to *r*, *S* must have had certain experiences  $[E^{**}_1...E^{**}_n]$ , and so on. This might seem to suggest that *S* must have an infinite number of experiences in order to be entitled to *p* (which would not be possible), but this conclusion surely does not necessarily follow. Perhaps the experiences that entitle *S* to *p* are the same ones that entitle *S* to *q* and are the same ones that entitle *S* to *r*, etc. In other words, it might be possible that  $[E_1...E_n] = [E^*_1...E^*_n] = [E^{**}_1...E^{**}_n]$ , etc. A similar possibility is suggested by Ram Neta in his review of Peacocke's book:

Let E be the totality of my experiences. And let J be the totality of judgments that I'm entitled to form on the basis of E. Now, why should we think that J cannot include judgments about the entitlement relation between E and J? Why couldn't E entitle me to form judgments about the world, and also entitle me to form judgments about how E itself entitles me to form judgments about the world, and also entitle me to form judgments about how E itself entitles me to form judgments about the world, and so on?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Neta (2004), 10-11

If epistemological norms allow for the possibility that a finite number of perceptual experiences could generate an infinite number of entitlements, it seems possible that an entitlement could rest on an infinite regress of entitlements (contra the claim in line 14). Peacocke has not provided an argument as for why epistemological norms are not such as to allow for this possibility; therefore, it is not clear why we should accept the premise in line 14 of the argument. Since this premise is necessary for the argument to go through, we do not have a compelling reason to reject Radical Empiricism rather than line 14 of the argument.

## Chapter IV

### Bealer's Arguments against Radical Empiricism

In his paper "The Incoherence of Empiricism" (1993) George Bealer argues that Radical Empiricism, as he understands it, is simply incoherent. While he does not spell out exactly what he means by 'incoherent,' Bealer seems to believe that Radical Empiricism is internally inconsistent in a way that will become more obvious later on. Bealer presents three arguments in his paper which purport to "lay bare difficulties internal to [the Radical Empiricists'] view"; however, before analyzing these arguments, we should first discuss the version of Radical Empiricism against which he is arguing.<sup>12</sup> Bealer's stated target is an empiricist view that endorses the following principle, which he calls the Principle of Empiricism:

A person's experience and/or observations comprise the person's *prima facie* evidence.

We can understand this version of empiricism as embodying a structure of justification similar to the foundationalist model that Bonjour adopts in his book *In Defense of Pure Reason*. The claim that a person's experiences and/or observations comprise his or her *prima facie* evidence corresponds to the claim that only beliefs that derive from experience can be foundationally justified. Bealer makes it clear that that the Principle of Empiricism necessarily excludes *a priori* intuition as a source of *prima facie* evidence. Thus, we can understand the Principle of Empiricism as claiming that the only possible foundational beliefs are *a posteriori* foundational beliefs (or equivalently, that there are no possible *a*

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<sup>12</sup> Bealer (1993), 163

*priori* foundational beliefs). If this interpretation is correct, then the version of empiricism that serves as Bealer's target is indeed a version of what I have called Radical Empiricism.

Bealer's three arguments against Radical Empiricism rely on a particular account of *a priori* intuition and its perceived role in the construction of epistemological theories. Thus, in order to evaluate Bealer's arguments, it is important to discuss this background theory first. 'Intuition' is a technical term for Bealer, and he distinguishes intuitions from judgments, guesses, hunches, common sense, and certain types of memory, all of which in his view are commonly mistaken for intuitions. According to Bealer, there are two distinguishing features of intuitions. First, an intuition is an "intellectual seeming," which we should understand as a distinct type of mental process. In his paper "On the Possibility of Philosophical Knowledge" (1996), Bealer provides the following example to help us get a grip on this claim:

[W]hen you first consider one of de Morgan's laws, often it neither seems to be true nor seems to be false. After a moment's reflection, however, something happens: it now seems true; you suddenly 'just see' that it is true. Of course, this is *intellectual* seeming, not sensory or introspective seeming.<sup>13</sup>

The second distinguishing feature of an intuition is that it "presents itself as how things must be."<sup>14</sup> Bealer seems to believe that since intuitions present their contents as necessary, they must be *a priori*.<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, this is a significant theoretical claim.

Bealer's arguments also make reference to certain views about epistemological methodology. He uses the expression "Standard Justificatory Procedure" to refer to "plain

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<sup>13</sup> Bealer (1996), 5

<sup>14</sup> Bealer (1993), 165

<sup>15</sup> According to Bealer, "[w]hen we speak of intuition, we mean '*a priori* intuition.' This is distinguished from what physicists call 'physical intuition.' We have a physical intuition that, when a house is undermined, it will fall. This does not count as an *a priori* intuition, for it does not present itself as necessary . . ." (1996, 165)

truths about the procedure we standardly use to justify our beliefs and theories.”<sup>16</sup> He suggests that when epistemologists – empiricists included – construct epistemological theories, they do so by consulting their intuitions. For example, intuitions about possible cases of knowledge serve as *prima facie* evidence for theories about the nature of knowledge. Thus, Bealer claims that “according to our standard justificatory procedure, *intuitions* count as *prima facie* evidence.”<sup>17</sup>

Having discussed the relevant theoretical background, let us look at Bealer’s first argument against Radical Empiricism. In the reconstruction of this argument I have used the name ‘*S*’ to refer to anyone who endorses the Principle of Empiricism (presented above). I have also used the term ‘starting points’ to refer to basic epistemological categories (e.g. ‘experience,’ ‘observation,’ ‘theory,’ ‘explanation,’ ‘logical truth,’ ‘*prima facie* evidence,’ etc.).

### **Starting Points Argument**

1. If *S* conforms to the Standard Justificatory Procedure, then if *S* endorses a theory *T* concerning the nature of a starting point, then *T* coheres with *S*’s non-inferential judgments about that starting point.
2. *S* conforms to the Standard Justificatory Procedure.
3. Therefore, if *S* endorses a theory *T* concerning the nature of a starting point, then *T* coheres with *S*’s non-inferential judgments about that starting point. [1, 2]
4. *S* endorses a theory *T* (i.e. the Principle of Empiricism) about the nature of a starting point (i.e. *prima facie* evidence).
5. Therefore, the Principle of Empiricism coheres with *S*’s non-inferential judgments about *prima facie* evidence. [3, 4]
6. Suppose that *S*’s non-inferential judgments about starting points are un-reliable. [assumption]
7. If *S*’s non-inferential judgments about starting points are un-reliable, then any theory that coheres with *S*’s non-inferential judgments about starting points is false.

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<sup>16</sup> Bealer (1996), 164

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis his

8. Any theory that coheres with *S*'s non-inferential judgments about starting points is false. [6, 7]
9. The Principle of Empiricism coheres with *S*'s non-inferential judgments about a starting point (i.e. *prima facie* evidence). [restatement of 5]
10. The Principle of Empiricism is false. [8, 9]
11. If *S*'s non-inferential judgments about starting points are un-reliable, then the Principle of Empiricism is false. [discharging assumption from line 6]
12. Suppose that *S*'s non-inferential judgments about starting points are reliable. [assumption]
13. If *S*'s non-inferential judgments about starting points are reliable, then *S*'s non-inferential judgments about what counts as *prima facie* evidence are reliable.
14. *S*'s non-inferential judgments about what counts as *prima facie* evidence are reliable. [12, 13]
15. *S* has non-inferential judgments that *a priori* intuition counts as *prima facie* evidence. [claim made by Bealer]
16. Therefore, *S*'s non-inferential judgments that *a priori* intuition counts as *prima facie* evidence are reliable. [14, 15]
17. Therefore, *a priori* intuition is in fact *prima facie* evidence. [from 16]
18. If *a priori* intuition is in fact *prima facie* evidence, then the Principle of Empiricism is false. [follows from the definition of the Principle above]
19. The Principle of Empiricism is false. [17, 18]
20. If *S*'s non-inferential judgments about starting points are reliable, then the Principle of Empiricism is false. [discharging assumption from line 12]
21. If *S*'s non-inferential judgments about starting points are either reliable or not reliable, then the Principle of Empiricism is false. [11, 20]
22. *S*'s non-inferential judgments about starting points are either reliable or not reliable. [logical truth]
23. The Principle of Empiricism is false. [21, 22]

Before evaluating this argument, it's important to make a few notes about some of the premises. As discussed above, Bealer seems to think that when we do epistemology (well), we always follow the Standard Justificatory Procedure, and this involves constructing theories based on one's *a priori* intuition. This characterization begs the question against the Radical Empiricist, who might maintain that the contents of intuition are justified *a posteriori* rather than *a priori*. Thus, in outlining this argument, I have used the expression "non-inferential judgment" instead of "*a priori* intuition" in order to be fair to the Radical Empiricist.

According to Bealer, we justify epistemological theories by consulting our intuitions / non-inferential judgments. This claim seems somewhat plausible if we reflect on the fact that epistemologists do frequently use intuitions/non-inferential judgments about possible cases of knowledge as “data points” that theories must accommodate (or “cohere with”). In this argument, however, Bealer is making the claim that epistemologists basically do the same thing when constructing accounts of *prima facie* evidence. Now there seem to be important differences between the case of knowledge and the case of *prima facie* evidence (e.g. judgments about *prima facie* evidence are usually based on significant background theory, whereas judgments about knowledge are supposed to be pre- or non-theoretical); however, these issues need not concern us here. Let us assume for the sake of argument that epistemologists do in fact have non-inferential judgments about what counts as *prima facie* evidence. According to Bealer, if epistemologists successfully follow the Standard Justificatory Procedure, then they will construct theories that cohere with their non-inferential judgments.

The Starting Points Argument invites us to consider a Radical Empiricist who endorses the Principle of Empiricism. Presumably, she has arrived at this principle by successfully following the Standard Justificatory Procedure and thus her non-inferential judgments cohere with the Principle of Empiricism. Bealer claims that the Radical Empiricist is caught in a “fatal dilemma” concerning the reliability of her non-inferential judgments. If these non-inferential judgments are un-reliable, then the Principle of Empiricism, which is built around these judgments, will be false. Alternatively, if her non-inferential judgments are in fact reliable, then the Principle of Empiricism is again false. The reason, according to Bealer, is that the Radical Empiricist has non-inferential judgments to the effect that *a priori* intuition

counts as *prima facie* evidence (line 17). This is a key premise in the argument, but it's not entirely clear to me why Bealer endorses it. I attribute this claim to Bealer because he states very clearly that "we have a wealth of concrete-case intuitions to the effect that intuitions are *prima facie* evidence."<sup>18</sup> Unless this "we" includes the Radical Empiricist, the argument simply doesn't go through. But attributing these non-inferential judgments to the Radical Empiricist seems contradictory. If the Radical Empiricist has successfully followed the Standard Justificatory Procedure, then the theory she endorses (i.e. the Principle of Empiricism) should cohere with her non-inferential judgments about *prima facie* evidence. Since the Principle of Empiricism claims that *a priori* intuition is *not* a source of *prima facie* evidence, she should have non-inferential judgments to this effect. But in line 17 Bealer claims that the Radical Empiricist has non-inferential judgments to the effect that *a priori* intuition *does* count as *prima facie* evidence. It follows that either the Radical Empiricist has *not* successfully followed the Standard Justificatory Procedure (and hence line 4 is false) or she does *not* in fact have non-inferential judgments to the effect that *a priori* intuition counts as *prima facie* evidence (and hence line 17 is false).

Bealer might respond by admitting that there is a conflict but maintaining that line 4, and not line 17, is the problem. This response effectively undermines the argument as it is stated above; however, Bealer might welcome the conclusion that Radical Empiricists do not follow the Standard Justificatory Procedure. He might say that Radical Empiricists *do* in fact have non-inferential judgments to the effect that *a priori* intuitions count as *prima facie* evidence but irrationally endorse the Principle of Empiricism anyway. This is not a very charitable understanding of Radical Empiricists. It seems much more plausible to believe that they do

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 169, emphasis mine



*not* in fact non-inferential judgments to the effect that *a priori* intuitions count as *prima facie* evidence (and hence line 17 is false) and therefore are *not* irrationally endorsing the Principle of Empiricism.

But if the Radical Empiricist does not irrationally endorse the Principle of Empiricism, what sort of justification does she have for accepting it? According to Bealer, the only way to justify an epistemological theory is to appeal to one's *a priori* intuitions. If he is right, then Radical Empiricist is caught in a contradiction between theory and practice. Bealer explicitly raises this issue in the second argument against Radical Empiricism:

### Argument from Epistemic Norms

1. If *S* conforms to the Standard Justificatory Procedure with respect to *prima facie* evidence, then *S* endorses the thesis that *a priori* intuition is a source of *prima facie* evidence.
2. *S* does not endorse the thesis that *a priori* intuition is a source of *prima facie* evidence.
3. Therefore, *S* does not conform to the Standard Justificatory Procedure with respect to *prima facie* evidence. [1, 2]
4. *S* is justified in deviating from the Standard Justificatory Procedure with respect to *prima facie* evidence if and only if *S* is justified, via the Standard Justificatory Procedure's "mechanism of self-criticism," in believing that *a priori* intuition is not a source of *prima facie* evidence.<sup>19</sup>
5. According to the Standard Justificatory Procedure's mechanism for self-criticism, *S* is justified in believing that *a priori* intuition is not a source of *prima facie* evidence only if *a priori* intuition "fails to satisfy the 'three cs' – consistency, corroboration, and confirmation."<sup>20</sup>
6. *A priori* intuition fails to satisfy the 'three cs' – consistency, corroboration, and confirmation if and only if 1) a person's intuitions are not consistent with each other to a significant degree, or 2) a person's intuitions are not corroborated by others to a significant degree, or 3) a person's intuitions are not confirmed by his/her observations and experiences to a significant degree.
7. A person's intuitions *are* consistent with each other to a significant degree.
8. A person's intuitions *are* corroborated by others to a significant degree.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 171

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 172

9. A person's intuitions *are* confirmed by his/her observations and experiences to a significant degree.
10. Therefore, *a priori* intuition satisfies the 'three cs' – *consistency*, *corroboration*, and *confirmation*. [6, 7, 8, 9]
11. Therefore, according to the Standard Justificatory Procedure's mechanism for self-criticism, *S* is *not* justified in believing that *a priori* intuition is not a source of *prima facie* evidence. [5, 10]
12. Therefore, *S* is not justified in deviating from the Standard Justificatory Procedure with respect to *prima facie* evidence. [4, 11]
13. If *S* is not justified in deviating from the Standard Justificatory Procedure with respect to *prima facie* evidence, then *a priori* intuition is in fact *prima facie* evidence.
14. *A priori* intuition is in fact *prima facie* evidence. [12, 13]
15. If *a priori* intuition is in fact *prima facie* evidence, then the Principle of Empiricism is false. [follows from the statements of the Principle of Empiricism]
16. The Principle of Empiricism is false. [14, 15]

As mentioned above, according to Bealer, the claim that *a priori* intuition counts as *prima facie* evidence is a view that is presupposed by our standard epistemological methodology: "the standard justificatory procedure admits as *prima facie* evidence not only experience and observation but also intuition."<sup>21</sup> Thus, any theorist who follows the Standard Justificatory Procedure is bound, on pain of contradiction, to accept the view that *a priori* intuition counts as *prima facie* evidence. According to Bealer, the only way that one might be justified in believing the opposite view (i.e. Radical Empiricism) is to make use of what he calls the Standard Justificatory Procedure's "mechanism of self-criticism." One can be justified in rejecting a component of the Standard Justificatory Procedure if certain conditions are met. In the case of *prima facie* evidence, Bealer states that in order to be justified in rejecting something as a source of *prima facie* evidence, one has to be able to show that it fails the tests of consistency, corroboration, and confirmation. Presumably, this too is built into the Standard Justificatory Procedure. Bealer discusses at great length in his paper whether intuition fails the tests of consistency, corroboration, and confirmation. He

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-171

concludes that intuition does *not* fail these tests, and hence that the Radical Empiricist is not justified in rejecting *a priori* intuition as a source of *prima facie* evidence. For the sake of brevity I have omitted the various considerations that he raises in order to motivation lines 8 through 10. Though I believe one could quarrel with the details of his reasoning, I do not think that these conclusions represent the greatest weaknesses of the Argument from Epistemic Norms.

In my opinion, the greatest weakness of this argument is line 2 – the claim that if one conforms to the Standard Justificatory Procedure, then one is bound, on pain of contradiction, to accept the view that *a priori* intuition counts as *prima facie* evidence. Bealer seems to think it is simply a “plain truth” that epistemologists justify theories by appealing to *a priori* intuitions; however, this claim is clearly question-begging. While it may be true (if it is true) that epistemologists appeal to non-inferential judgments when constructing epistemological theories, Bealer cannot simply assert that these contents are justified *a priori*. Perhaps they are justified *a posteriori*. Perhaps epistemological “data points” derive from experience and/or observation instead of intuition. We saw in the discussion of Bonjour’s argument that the Radical Empiricism might have room to maneuver here. In his paper “The Incoherence of Empiricism,” Bealer never argues for the claim that the contents of these non-inferential judgments can only be justified *a priori*. Without this argument, we lack a compelling reason to accept the crucial premise that epistemologists justify theories by appealing to *a priori* intuition instead of experience and/or observation. If the Radical Empiricist is correct that epistemological theories are justified *a posteriori*, then Radical Empiricists actually do conform to the Standard Justificatory Procedure when they endorse the Principle of Empiricism.

## Terms of Epistemic Appraisal Argument

1. Principle of Holism: a theory is justified (acceptable, more reasonable than its competitors, legitimate, warranted) for a person if and only if it is, or belongs to, the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all, or most, of the person's *prima facie* evidence.
2. Principle of Naturalism: the natural sciences (plus the logic and mathematics needed by them) constitute the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all, or most, of a person's experiences and/or observations.
3. Suppose that the Principle of Empiricism is true – that a person's experiences and/or observations comprise the person's *prima facie* evidence.
4. A theory is justified for some possible *S* if and only if it is, or belongs to, the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all, or most, of the person's experiences and/or observations. [1, 3]
5. A theory can be justified for some possible *S* if and only if it is, or belongs to, the natural sciences. [2, 4]
6. The terms 'justified', 'simplest', 'theory', 'explain', 'and' *prima facie* evidence' (let us call them "basic epistemological terms") do not belong to the primitive vocabulary of the simplest regimented formulation of the natural sciences.
7. Statements that incorporate these terms cannot be translated into statements that only mention terms that belong to the primitive vocabulary of the simplest regimented formulation of the natural sciences.
8. If a statement incorporates one or more basic epistemological terms, then it does not belong to the natural sciences. [from 6, 7]
9. The Principle of Empiricism is a statement that incorporates one or more basic epistemological terms.
10. Therefore, the Principle of Empiricism does not belong to the natural sciences. [8, 9]
11. *S* cannot be justified in believing the Principle of Empiricism. [5, 10]
12. If the Principle of Empiricism is true, then *S* cannot be justified in believing the Principle of Empiricism. [discharging assumption from line 3]
13. There is no true epistemological theory *T* such that if *T* is true, then *S* cannot be justified in believing *T*.
14. Therefore, the Principle of Empiricism is false. [12, 13]

Bealer's third argument attempts to show that anyone who endorses the Principle of Empiricism, the Principle of Holism, and the Principle of Naturalism cannot be justified in believing any proposition that does not belong to the natural sciences. Since the Principle of Empiricism is not a proposition that belongs to the natural sciences (because it cannot be

translated into a statement that only contains scientific terms), the Radical Empiricist (or anyone else) cannot be justified in endorsing it.

One possible weakness of this argument is the Principle of Holism (line 1). Bealer thinks that this principle is “very plausible” and that “[s]omething like it is surely embedded in our standard justificatory procedure.”<sup>22</sup> He acknowledges that there might be reasonable alternatives to the Principle of Holism; however, he states that “none of them is sufficiently different to enable empiricists to escape the self-defeat.”<sup>23</sup> Bealer does not attempt to justify this claim, but it’s not clear to me why the Radical Empiricist must accept the Principle of Holism or something like it. One potential problem has to do with the explanation relation that figures in the principle. Why should a theory be justified for a person just in case it belongs to the simplest theory that *explains* one’s *prima facie* evidence? If a proposition is *deduced* from one’s *prima facie* evidence, would a person not be justified in believing it? Let us suppose that I acquire the perceptual belief that there is a book in front of me. Presumably, this belief is part of my *prima facie* evidence. Suppose further that I deduce from my perceptual belief the following proposition *p*: either there is a book in front of me or cows live on the moon. This proposition does not *explain* my *prima facie* evidence in any obvious way, but my belief still seems to be justified because I have *deduced* it from my *prima facie* evidence. Bealer might argue that while *p* does not explain my *prima facie* evidence, it still might belong to the simplest comprehensive theory that explains my *prima facie* evidence. It’s not clear to me, however, what it means for this proposition to *belong* to another theory, and Bealer has not provide any sort of help. Unless Bealer can explain the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 185

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Principle of Holism in more detail and in particular how it can avoid counter-examples of this sort, I see no compelling reason to accept it or anything like it.

Another potential weakness of the argument is the Principle of Naturalism (line 2). To see why, let us suppose with the Radical Empiricist that epistemological propositions can be justified on the basis of experience and/or observation. If so, then the natural sciences do not constitute the simplest comprehensive theory that explains all or most of a person's experiences and/or observations. The reason is that the natural sciences do not include epistemological propositions. Of course we might then enlarge the scope of science to include epistemology, but then it would not follow that the Principle of Empiricism could not belong to the natural sciences. Thus, if the Radical Empiricist is correct, the Principle of Naturalism is false and the argument subsequently fails. In order to avoid this objection, Bealer would have to show that epistemological propositions cannot be known on the basis of experience and/or observation and, as discussed above, he has not done this.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that various arguments which purport to show that Radical Empiricism is false are ultimately unconvincing. Bonjour and Peacocke both attempt to show that the denial of *a priori* justification / entitlement lead to radical forms of skepticism. We saw that Bonjour's argument suffers from the fact that he does not argue for a key premise – i.e. that the set of possible *a posteriori* foundational beliefs is limited to possible beliefs about present, particular, non-normative, contingent states of affairs. We saw that Peacocke does not argue for a key premise regarding the nature of *a posteriori* entitlements; however, his argument can also be resisted by questioning the assumption that an entitlement cannot rest on an infinite regress of other entitlements. Bealer's arguments against Radical Empiricism are also unsuccessful. The Starting Points Argument is not internally consistent, and Argument from Epistemic Norms simply assumes that epistemological propositions cannot be *prima facie* empirical evidence. By challenging the view that epistemological propositions cannot be justified on the basis of experience, the Radical Empiricist can also defeat the Terms of Epistemic Appraisal Argument as well.

At the beginning of this paper I explained that Radical Empiricism can be understood as a family of views and that Bonjour, Peacocke, and Bealer each argue against slightly different versions. I have attempted to show that these arguments are

ultimately unconvincing. If my analysis is successful, then two promising accounts of Radical Empiricism emerge from these discussions. The first maintains the division of justification into foundational and inferential but denies the view (held by both Bonjour and Bealer) that beliefs about necessary and normative propositions cannot be *a posteriori* foundational beliefs. This version of foundationalism denies that there are *a priori* foundational beliefs, but it does not entail skepticism nor does it suffer from the problems that Bealer attributes to it. The second plausible version of Radical Empiricism adopts the non-foundational structure of entitlement as described by Peacocke. On this view, a person is entitled to form a belief if doing so accords with epistemological norms, and these norms are such that all entitlements rest on perceptual experiences. *A priori* entitlements need not enter into the picture. These two versions of Radical Empiricism are plausible theories, and until someone provides a compelling argument as to why they must be false, I believe that they should be taken seriously as alternatives to rationalism or other forms of empiricism.



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