Internalism and Armchair Reasoning

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I try to answer some basic questions about the a priori. Namely, what is it supposed to be? Should we believe in its existence? And is it important?

Chapter One, “The Problem of Forgotten Evidence,” sets the stage. I introduce the distinction between internalism and externalism, which plays a crucial role throughout the thesis. Roughly speaking, internalists think that one is justified in holding a given belief only if one can access adequate evidence for it, upon reflection, while externalists deny this. I argue that only an externalist can explain why we are now justified in believing things, such as facts about world history, which we originally learned on the basis of reasons we have since forgotten.

Chapter Two, “Two Notions of A Priori Justified Belief,” distinguishes between two ways of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are supposed to be, an internalist way and an externalist way. I argue that the two ways of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are lead to different and somewhat surprising outcomes regarding how much is a priori. When thought of in the internalist way, a priori justified beliefs are unstable and especially hard to come by in the first place. When thought of in the externalist way, however, they are secure and easier to acquire.

Chapter Three, “The Importance of the A Priori,” argues that there is no reason to think that the a priori is important in the strong sense which some philosophers seem to think it is. They argue for their view on the grounds that our ability to learn about the world depends on our being a priori warranted in relying on certain belief forming procedures, like taking our perceptual experiences at face value, and accepting the testimony of other people. I show that there is a sense in which that is true, but that, in that sense, it does not support the strong conclusion they ultimately want. One would mistakenly think that it does only if one illicitly switched back and forth between internalist and externalist perspectives.

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Chapter One
The Problem of Forgotten Evidence

1 Introduction

At any given moment in time, each of us has a vast quantity of beliefs. They span all sorts of subject matters: we have beliefs about past historical events, as well as future occurrences; about details of our personal lives and the lives of family and friends; about contemporary politics; about how people typically behave in certain sorts of situations; and so on and so forth. None of us is right about everything, but even though a number of our beliefs may be mistaken, for the most part, we are not making any serious error in holding on to our beliefs; most of our beliefs are reasonably or justifiably held by us, if occasionally mistaken.

It can be tempting to think that if one is justified in holding a given belief, then there must be some piece of evidence available to one, upon reflection, which reveals the correctness of one's own belief over alternatives. Otherwise, we might be tempted to think, how does one know that one is right? Why not believe something else, if one can find nothing in one's own mind which adequately supports one's current belief? Sticking with what one believes in this sort of situation seems like stubborn dogmatism.

At the same time, however, it appears that often there is not much available to us from the inside, so to speak, which we can use to defend or justify our beliefs. For example, I believe that China is the most populous nation on Earth. But I do not recall whether I read about the population of China in a newspaper, or in an almanac, or whether I heard about it on television, or picked up that information in some other way. If I were asked why I think that China is the most populous nation on Earth, no supporting argument, or at least no decent supporting argument for that belief, would
come to mind. Instead, I would be tempted to say that I just remember it. For the great majority of our beliefs, this is what things are like. There is not, on the face of it, all that much available to us from the inside, as it were, which we can use to support them.

This is a problem for internalists about justified belief, internalists being those philosophers who agree with the tempting thought expressed earlier: that whether one is justified in holding a given belief is an internal matter, settled by what sorts of resources there are in one’s own mind which can be used to support that belief. The problem for the internalist is how to explain why we are justified in holding such a vast quantity of beliefs, given the apparent lack of resources available to each of us to use in defending those beliefs.

There are things that the internalist can say. For example, we can give arguments for some of our beliefs. And we have quite a range of inner, subjective experiences—perceptual experiences, feelings of confidence, intuitions, and so on and so forth—which might be held to justify our beliefs. For example, the internalist might say that it is my apparent memory that China is the most populous nation on earth—my strongly felt sense that it is something I learned in the past—which justifies me in holding that belief now. But the question remains whether there truly are enough resources available to each of us to account for the large quantity of justified beliefs that each of us has.

In this chapter, I examine this problem for internalists. I focus on an aspect of it which is sometimes called ‘the problem of forgotten evidence’.1,2 We all believe lots of

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things now, such as that China is the most populous nation on Earth, which we learned, or came to justifiably believe, at some point in the past. In many cases, we no longer recall what reasons we had for those beliefs in the first place, but we are nevertheless still justified in holding those beliefs now. The problem of forgotten evidence is the problem of explaining why we are justified in holding those beliefs now. I argue that the internalist cannot give a satisfactory explanation of this. Internalism therefore leads to quite a strong form of skepticism.

I should note that the problem of forgotten evidence is not a new problem, and that the basic argumentative moves I make in pressing that problem have all been made before, in one way or another. However, I think that the force of the problem, which seems to me like a deep and fundamental problem, has not been fully appreciated yet. I think that this is mainly because the target, i.e., internalism, has not been understood in a clear enough way.

So the first thing we have to do is get more clear on what we are taking internalism to be. I do that in §1.1. Then, in §1.2, I spell out the problem of forgotten evidence in more detail, and I explain why I think that the internalist has no satisfactory response to it.

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1.1 Internalism

Internalism is stated in a variety of ways. It is, in some cases, described as the thesis that, “[A] person’s beliefs are justified only by things that are internal to the person’s mental life”;³ that, “[W]hat is appealed to for justification must be internal to the individual’s first-person cognitive perspective, that is, something that is unproblematically available from that perspective”;⁴ and that, “[W]hat justifies a belief, i.e., the ground of its justification, is something internal to the subject. The internal, in the relevant sense, is what we might call the (internally) accessible: that to which one has access by introspection or reflection.”⁵ It is said that, “internalists strongly associate having justification for [a] belief and a readiness to justify it using the resources one has in one’s mental inventory: roughly a readiness to give one’s internal ground(s) for it.”⁶

One rough proposal that can be found in the sort of descriptions of internalism mentioned above is this: an agent’s belief is justified iff the agent himself is prepared to give an adequate defense of that belief, with resources available to him from the inside. This is the version of internalism that I am interested in. In what follows, I develop it into a more well-defined thesis, which I call ‘accessibilism’.

One might wonder how well the idea that an agent’s belief is justified iff the agent himself is prepared to give an adequate defense of that belief, from the inside, could represent what internalists are trying to get at. For that idea has some immediate drawbacks. It has a *prima facie* problem, for example, with young children and animals: on

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⁴ BonJour, “The Indispensability of Internalism”: 54.
the face of it, such agents have justified beliefs, but the idea that they are prepared to give an adequate defense of their beliefs, from the inside, seems absurd.

There are a couple of things to say in response to this. First, it is not clear how to spell out a version of internalism that will entirely avoid these problems. Any version of internalism will demand that agents have fairly rich mental lives. Thus any version of internalism will face some prima facie problems with young children and animals.

But, most of all, it should be noted that the idea that an agent's belief is justified just in case he is prepared to give an adequate defense of it, from the inside, has a distinct advantage over some other ways of trying to capture the root internalist idea in that it can seem quite compelling. Imagine that there is no argument, no subjective experience or imagery, no feeling—in short, nothing—that an agent is prepared to point to which adequately defends his belief. Surely, we might easily think, that is the paradigm of someone who is not justified, someone who ought to give up his belief.

But now consider, for example, Alvin Goldman's most recent characterization of internalism. Goldman defines a justifier for a belief as, "any property, condition, or state of affairs (and so on) that is positively or negatively relevant to the justificational status of that [belief]"; a justifier for a belief is anything which, "helps explain why the belief's justificational status is what it is." He then characterizes internalism as the view that, for any given belief, at least the majority of its justifiers are internalist in character. He gives two ways to understand what it is for a justifier to be internalist in character. The Accessibilist Internalist counts a justifier J as internalist in character iff "J is 'directly''

7 Goldman, "Internalism, Externalism, and The Architecture of Justification": 311.
8 Goldman, "Internalism, Externalism, and The Architecture of Justification": 311.
9 Goldman, "Internalism, Externalism, and The Architecture of Justification": 310.
accessible to S at t—that is, S is capable of truly believing or knowing, at t, that J obtains, and is capable of knowing this ‘directly’.\footnote{Goldman, “Internalism, Externalism, and The Architecture of Justification”: 311.} The Mentalist Internalist counts a justifier J as internalist in character iff, “J is a nonfactive mental state, event, or condition of S.”\footnote{Goldman, “Internalism, Externalism, and The Architecture of Justification”: 312.}

These ways of characterizing internalism may reflect ways of understanding internalism which have become popular, and I think that Goldman raises good objections to the views he describes. But I see nothing initially compelling about those views. They do not seem to me to capture the core, intuitive idea which internalists are trying to get at. As I see it, what we get from Goldman, and others, is a jumble of distinctions which have something to do with the internalism/externalism debate but which do not get at the heart of the controversy.

So, although the idea that an agent’s belief is justified iff he is prepared to give an adequate defense of his belief, from the inside, may have some drawbacks, and although some internalists may not automatically recognize it as what they are trying to say, I think it captures an important idea at the heart of the internalism/externalism dispute.

At any rate, the specific problems that I talk about in this chapter have nothing in particular to do with young children and animals. I limit my attention to normal human adults who have normal capacities for reflection and self-awareness. If one were to spell out an alternative version of internalism to the one I am going to spell out—one that somehow fared better with regard to young children and animals—it would still face the problems that I am going to discuss here.

So let us assume that the internalist starts out with the idea that one is justified in holding a belief iff one is prepared to give an adequate defense of that belief, with
resources available from the inside. The question facing us now is how to develop that idea into a more precise thesis.

The internalist might begin by making a slight modification to that idea: she might say that a very limited class of beliefs, namely, beliefs about how things presently appear to us, are not in need of defense. They are justified “automatically.” The great majority of beliefs, however, are in need of defense.

The internalist might see two main ways for us to defend these other beliefs. First, we might defend a belief by pointing to our own subjective state. We do this when, in defense of our belief, we say something like, “I just seem to see such and such,” or, “I just seem to remember such and such.” Second, we might defend a belief by offering an argument. We do this when we say something like, “p because q and r.”

So the internalist might propose that one justifiably believes p iff (i) one has an automatically justified belief in p, or (ii) one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with a claim about one’s own subjective state; or (iii) one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with an argument.

We now need to discuss how the internalist might go on to define the two key notions in her view: being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with a claim about one’s own subjective state, and being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with an argument. Let’s focus first on the former notion.

1.1.1 Appealing to a Subjective State

The internalist might start her explanation of this notion by saying that, in various cases, one is prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief, that one is in a certain subjective state. The paradigm case is a case of perceptual belief, where, for example, one sees a banana
in front of one and thereby comes to believe that there is a banana in front of one. In this case, one is presumably prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief, that one seems to see a banana in front of one.

What is it, exactly, to be prepared to make a certain claim in defense of one’s belief? Being prepared to make a certain claim in defense of one’s belief, the internalist might say, involves being in a position to make that claim. But, the internalist will say, it is more than that. It also entails having a disposition to make that claim in defense of one’s belief, under certain conditions, for example, when one is being serious about the challenge of defending one’s belief. Let us not try to worry too much about what it means to be prepared to make a certain claim in defense of one’s belief.

There may well be other cases, besides cases of perceptual belief, where one is prepared to defend one’s belief by claiming that one is in a certain subjective state. Consider beliefs that are stored in one’s memory, such as that Ronald Reagan was President in the 1980s. One might try to offer some sort of argument in defense of this belief, perhaps appealing to the testimony of some other person or a book one read. But it is easy to imagine that one is simply prepared to claim, in defense of this belief, that one seems to remember that Ronald Reagan was President in the 1980s. Or suppose that one believes some axiom or self-evident truth. We may easily imagine that one is prepared to claim, in defense this belief, that the proposition one believes just strikes one as clearly true.

To be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with a claim about one’s own subjective state is, the internalist might say, in part to be prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief, that one is in a certain subjective state.
However, it is clearly not just that. For being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with a claim about one’s own subjective state is supposed to be sufficient for having a justified belief in \( p \). And clearly it is not sufficient for having a justified belief that one is prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief, that one is in a certain subjective state. Further conditions, the internalist will say, must hold.

“What further conditions?” we might ask. First, the internalist might say, it has to be true that one is in the subjective state in question. But even then there are clearly further constraints. For suppose, for example, that one believes that AT&T has a larger market share than Verizon; one is prepared to claim, in defense of that belief, that one has a strongly felt desire for it to be true; and one does in fact have such a desire. It does not follow that one’s belief is justified.

So, the internalist might say, in order to rule out that sort of case, we introduce the following definition. Suppose one believes that there is a banana in front of one; one is prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief, that one seems to see a banana in front of one; and it is in fact the case that one seems to see a banana in front of one. In that case, the internalist will say, one’s belief that there is a banana in front of one is justified—or at least it is justified as long as one has no reasons for doubting the trustworthiness of one’s perceptual faculties.

We say that appealing to the fact that one is in subjective state \( S \) is a \textit{prima facie} legitimate way of defending one’s belief in \( p \) if as long as (i) one is in state \( S \); and (ii) one is prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief in \( p \), that one is in state \( S \); and (iii) one has no reasons for doubt of the relevant sort, then one’s belief in \( p \) is justified.

Thus appealing to the fact that one has a strongly felt desire that AT&T have a larger market share than Verizon is not a \textit{prima facie} legitimate way of defending one’s
belief that AT&T has a larger market share than Verizon. Whereas appealing to the fact that one seems to see a banana in front of one is, the internalist will say, a *prima facie* legitimate way of defending one’s belief that there is a banana in front of one.

So, the internalist might say, we define the notion of being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with a claim about one’s own subjective state as follows. One is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with a claim about one’s own subjective state iff for some subjective state \( S \) (i) one is in state \( S \); (ii) one is prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief in \( p \), that one is in state \( S \); (iii) appealing to the fact that one is in state \( S \) is a *prima facie* legitimate way of defending one’s belief in \( p \); and (iv) one has no reasons for doubt of the relevant sort.

1.1.2 Appealing to an Argument

Now let us consider the notion of being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an argument. How will the internalist spell out this notion? Being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an argument, the internalist will say, is in part a matter of there being some argument which one is prepared to offer in defense of one’s belief in \( p \).

But clearly that cannot be all that being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an argument involves. For being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an argument is supposed to be *sufficient* for having a justified belief in \( p \). And clearly the mere fact that there is some argument which one is prepared to offer in defense of one’s belief in \( p \) is not sufficient for having a justified belief in \( p \).

There seem to be two assumptions we have to add to the supposition that there is some argument one is prepared to offer in defense of one’s belief in \( p \) in order to ensure
that one has a justified belief in p. First, we have to add the assumption that the premises of the argument one is prepared to offer in defense of one’s belief in p are premises one \textit{justifiably} believes. Second, we have to add the assumption that the premises of the argument one is prepared to offer in defense of one’s belief in p \textit{adequately support} p. That one is prepared to offer an argument in defense of one’s belief in p, even if it is an argument whose premises one justifiably believes, is not enough to ensure that one’s belief in p is justified. The premises of the argument must adequately support p.

So, the internalist might say that one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with an argument iff for some propositions \(q_1,...,q_n\) (i) one is prepared to offer the argument \([q_1,...,q_n \text{ therefore } p]\) in defense of one’s belief in p; one justifiably believes each of \(q_1,...,q_n\); and \(q_1,...,q_n\) adequately support p.

It is important to note one thing about the definition of being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief with an argument. That definition uses the notion of some propositions "adequately supporting" another. The internalist might offer a sort of contextual definition of what it is for some propositions to adequately support p. Namely, some propositions \(q_1,...,q_n\) adequately support p iff given that one is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with the argument \([q_1,...,q_n \text{ therefore } p]\), and given that one has a justified belief in each of \(q_1,...,q_n\), one justifiably believes p. This contextual definition ensures that being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with an argument, as we have defined it, is sufficient for having a justified belief in p.

But, although this contextual definition gives us a sense of the role that the notion of adequate support is supposed to play in the internalist’s theory, it does not tell us much more than that. I will not try to spell out, on behalf of the internalist, some more informative definition of what it is for some propositions to adequately support another.
But I want to note one particularly important feature of this relation, and that is that it is not sufficient for some propositions to adequately support $p$ that they make the truth of $p$ probable, or even that they entail $p$.

Here is an example which shows that. Suppose that one has a justified belief in some propositions $A_1$ and $A_2$. For example, let them be some axioms of mathematics. Suppose further that $p$ in fact follows from $A_1$ and $A_2$—$p$ is a theorem—but the claim that $p$ follows from those propositions is itself a sophisticated claim, one that would not be easy to verify. Now suppose that for some reason one just infers $p$ directly from $A_1$ and $A_2$, without noticing at all how difficult it would be to prove that $p$ follows from $A_1$ and $A_2$. Intuitively, one does not thereby come to justifiably believe $p$. But one is prepared to defend one’s belief in $p$ with the argument: $[A_1, A_2 \therefore p]$, one has a justified belief in $A_1$ and $A_2$, and $A_1$ and $A_2$ entail $p$. So that $A_1$ and $A_2$ entail $p$ is not enough to ensure that they adequately support $p$.

I take this sort of example to show that adequate support requires something like obvious support. There are a host of well-known and difficult issues surrounding what obvious support might be, and how to deal with the problems that the notion of obvious support is introduced to solve. But, for our purposes, we may safely set these issues aside.

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Let us take *accessibilism* to be the view that one justifiably believes \( p \) iff (i) one has an automatically justified belief in \( p \); or (ii) one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with a claim about one’s own subjective state; or (iii) one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an argument, as we have defined those notions in §1.1.1 and §1.1.2.

It is now time to consider the problem of forgotten evidence. I will argue that the accessibilist, at least, has no satisfactory response to this problem.

1.2 The Problem

Suppose one comes to justifiably believe that China is the most populous nation on Earth. Perhaps one reads this in a reputable source, like a history textbook given to one by one’s history teacher. Then, let us imagine, time passes, and as time passes one holds on to this belief. Let us suppose that after a certain period of time, one forgets the original reasons one had for believing that China is the most populous nation on Earth. One no longer recalls, for example, whether one read it somewhere, or heard about it on T.V., or picked it up from a conversation. Nevertheless, one remains confident in that belief.

Intuitively, one is still justified in holding that belief, assuming that things proceeded as normal from the time at which one acquired it. For example, one did not receive any compelling evidence against the claim that China is the most populous nation on Earth after one acquired that belief.

This is a very common sort of case: a lot of our beliefs are beliefs that we have held on to since we acquired them, justifiably so, at some point in the past, but which we now no longer recall our original evidence for. An externalist can say that what makes such a belief justified now is the *fact* that it started out as a justified belief, and was then
preserved by one’s memory up to the present moment, during which time things proceeded as normal.

But what makes such a belief justified on the internalist’s view, given that one no longer recalls one’s original reasons for adopting it? This is the problem of forgotten evidence.

There are two options open to the accessibilist when it comes to responding to this problem. The first is to say that one is justified in holding a belief like one’s belief that China is the most populous nation on Earth because one is prepared to adequately defend it with a claim about one’s subjective state. The second is to say that one is justified in holding such a belief because one is prepared to adequately defend it with an argument. Let us consider the first option first.

1.2.1 Apparent Memories to the Rescue?

In order to explain why we are now justified in believing things that we learned some time ago, but which we cannot presently recall our original evidence for, internalists often say that such beliefs are supported by our apparent memories, or memory images, or feelings of confidence and familiarity, and the like.

For example, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman discuss a case involving a woman Sally who starts out with a justified belief that broccoli is good for one’s health (she reads this in The New York Times). She holds on to this belief up to the present moment, by which point her, “original evidence is irretrievably lost and not part of any stored justification that Sally might have.”13 They suggest that perhaps in this case, “Sally’s justification

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consists in conscious qualities of the recollection, such as its vivacity and her associated feeling of confidence.”\textsuperscript{14}

Robert Audi notes that, “We commonly believe things from memory after forgetting our original grounds for them and without having acquired any new ground for them.”\textsuperscript{15} He says that explaining why we are often justified in holding such beliefs is problematic for internalists, but then suggests that things are not as bad as they seem for internalists because, “I have a kind of memorial sense of most of the events in my own past that I take myself to remember: they seem familiar (and usually I can call up images or other events that are confirmatory). With the historical dates that I know, the propositions in question seem to me to be familiar and to be things I have believed right along.”\textsuperscript{16}

The accessibilist might try this same general approach. So, to focus on the case we started with, the accessibilist might say that one justifiably believes that China is the most populous nation on Earth because: (i) one has an “apparent memory” or “feeling of confidence and familiarity” to the effect that China is the most populous nation on Earth; (ii) one is prepared to appeal to the claim that one has such an apparent memory in defense of one’s belief; (iii) appealing to the fact that one has an apparent memory to the effect that China is the most populous nation on Earth is a \textit{prima facie} legitimate way of defending one’s belief that China is the most populous nation on Earth; and (iv) one has no reasons to think that one’s memory is untrustworthy or unreliable.

\textsuperscript{14} Conee and Feldman, “Internalism Defended”: 9.
\textsuperscript{15} Audi, “An Internalist Theory of Normative Grounds”: 30.
\textsuperscript{16} Audi, “An Internalist Theory of Normative Grounds”: 30.
Of course, this solution is supposed to be extendable to other cases as well. The idea is that one always has an apparent memory or the like lying in wait, ready to use to justify beliefs stored in one's memory.

Let it be granted that one has lots of apparent memories which one is prepared to appeal to in defense of one's stored beliefs, and that one has no reasons for thinking that one's memory is unreliable or untrustworthy. The key issue is whether that is enough to make one's stored beliefs justified. The crucial issue, in other words, is whether appealing to the fact that one has an apparent memory as of \( p \) is a \textit{prima facie} legitimate way of defending one's belief in \( p \).

It seems to me that it is not. To see why not, I think it helps to look at things in a general way, before we focus on a particular case.

It is obvious that people sometimes come to believe things in ways that they should not. People trust sources which are clearly biased and ill-informed; they stretch their interpretation of events to fit their self-interest; they jump to desired conclusions from scant evidence. Beliefs acquired in these ways start out as unjustified, unreasonable beliefs. Of course, people also often acquire beliefs in much better ways, with the appropriate care and due diligence, and those beliefs start out as justified.

Both kinds of beliefs stick with people over time, and in both cases people tend to lose track of the original reasons they had for holding their beliefs. Thus, with the passage of time, both sorts of beliefs—those which started out as unreasonable and unjustified, and those which started out as justified—become indistinguishable from the agent's own point of view; the agent would, ultimately, defend both kinds of belief in the same way, with the same assurance and confidence that she is now remembering something which she learned at some point in the past.
Thus, if the internalist were correct—if being prepared to appeal to an apparent memory to the effect that one’s belief is true were enough to make one justified in holding that belief, absent reasons for thinking that one’s memory is untrustworthy or unreliable—then beliefs originally acquired in a bad way, and beliefs originally acquired in a good way would be on a par, equally justified.

But surely this cannot be right. The former sort of beliefs, insofar as they remain with one, remain as unjustified beliefs, and the latter, insofar as they remain, remain as justified beliefs. The history of how we acquired our beliefs determines their present status; there are no second acts in our epistemic lives.

To solidify the point, we can look at a particular case. So suppose, for example, that one makes an acquaintance in class. Imagine that this person starts making some fairly outlandish and paranoid statements, although with conviction and confidence. He says that communism is an increasing threat to our existence. China, he says, is becoming so large and powerful that it will soon be able to overwhelm us easily with sheer manpower. In fact, he says, it is thought in certain circles to be gearing up for a strike very soon. Other people would ignore him, but one is so credulous, naive, and ill-informed about the area at hand, and so impressed by his confident manner, that one accepts what this person is saying without questioning it. On this basis, let us suppose, one comes to believe that China is the most populous nation on Earth. I take this to be a case where one starts out with an *unjustified* belief that China is the most populous nation on Earth.

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17 Externalists often press this point. See Senor, "Internalistic Foundationalism and the Justification of Memory Belief": 465-70; Goldman, "Internalism Exposed": 280-1; Goldman, "Internalism, Externalism, and the Architecture of Justification": 322-8; Huemer, "The Problem of Memory Knowledge": 346-9; and Greco, “Justification is Not Internal”: 260-2.
We can imagine that, as time passes, nothing especially relevant to the topic of China and its size comes up. So one simply maintains one's belief that China is the most populous nation on Earth. Eventually, we can suppose, one forgets about the conversation which prompted that belief.

If one were asked to defend one's belief that China is the most populous nation on Earth now, once one has forgotten the conversation, one would claim, presumably, that one learned it at some point in the past, or at least that it certainly seems like something which one is now remembering. At any rate, we can easily imagine that one would defend one's belief in that way. And we can also easily imagine that one has no reasons for doubting the trustworthiness or reliability of one's memory.

Nevertheless, surely one is not justified in holding the belief that China is the most populous nation on Earth. One's originally unjustified belief has not been converted into a justified belief because of one's forgetfulness and the passage of time. It has remained an unjustified belief all along.

Some internalists offer a reply to this line of argument. They claim that, even in a case where one starts out with an unjustified belief, as long as, later on, one has a “clear apparent memory” to the effect that the belief is true, one is justified in holding that belief at the later time—assuming the absence of various sorts of reasons for doubt.

Richard Feldman, for instance, describes, “a person Maria, who has a clear apparent memory that Dean Martin is Italian and no current reason against the proposition that he is Italian. However, she initially formed this belief irresponsibly and
unjustifiably, relying on the testimony of someone she knew to be untrustworthy. She has, however, forgotten that this is her source.” \(^{18}\) He writes:

Suppose Maria considers the proposition that Dean Martin is Italian and wonders what attitude to take toward it. She has a clear memory of learning of this, and has good reason to trust her memory. She has, as the statement of the example makes explicit, no reason to think otherwise. It would be absurd for her to think, in spite of all this, that he is not Italian. So, disbelieving the proposition is clearly not a reasonable option, given the situation she is in. Perhaps a critic thinks that she would be most reasonable to suspend judgment. But this, too, is quite implausible. She has reasons to think he is Italian and no reason to think otherwise. Nothing competes with her reasons in favor. She might appeal to some general skeptical worries—one’s memory can always lead one astray—but this is not relevant here. Thus, of the options open to her—believing, disbelieving, suspending judgment—believing is the only sensible option. Her belief is justified after all. \(^{19}\)

We can see why Feldman is tempted to make the judgement that he does. If Maria were to reflect on her belief, we could not blame her if she remained confident in it. Indeed, as Feldman suggests, there would be something wrong if she changed her mind. For, from the inside, everything seems to Maria just as it should. There is no sign that anything is wrong. In fact, things seem the same to her as they would to someone who had actually learned that Dean Martin is Italian in the past.

But there is a difference between saying that Maria would be acting irrationally if she abruptly changed her mind, and saying that her belief is justified. If Maria suddenly declared a change in her attitude, we would of course look upon that action

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\(^{18}\) Feldman, “Justification Is Internal”; 282.

\(^{19}\) Feldman, “Justification Is Internal”; 282.
disapprovingly. But that does not commit us to saying that everything is fine as long as she continues to believe that Dean Martin is Italian.

I think that once we remind ourselves that Maria originally acquired her belief in an irresponsible way, it is clear that she is not justified in holding that belief now, even though someone in the same internal state as her may well be.

1.2.2 Defending Stored Beliefs With an Argument

It seems that the accessibilist cannot respond to the problem of forgotten evidence by saying that the beliefs at issue are justified because we are prepared to adequately defend them with claims about our own subjective state. Sometimes, internalists suggest that the beliefs in question are justified because other beliefs support them.

For example, recall the case of Sally, which Conee and Feldman discuss. Sally starts out with a justified belief that broccoli is healthy, and then stores that belief in her memory, eventually forgetting her original reasons for adopting it. Conee and Feldman say that:

If Sally is a normal contemporary adult, she is likely to have quite a bit of readily retrievable evidence supporting her belief about broccoli. The healthfulness of vegetables is widely reported and widely discussed. Furthermore, her belief about broccoli is probably not undermined by any backgrounds beliefs she is likely to have. Finally, she, like most people, probably has supporting evidence consisting in stored beliefs about the general reliability and accuracy of memory. She knows that she is generally right about this sort of thing. So Sally would have justification for her broccoli belief, thought it is not her original evidence.\(^{20}\)

The accessibilist might try this general approach as well. So, for example, to focus again on the case we started with, the accessibilist might say that one is now justified in holding

the belief that China is the most populous nation on Earth because one is prepared to
defend that belief with an argument.

What argument, however, will the accessibilist say that one is prepared to
adequately defend one’s belief with? Perhaps the accessibilist will say that one is prepared
to defend one’s belief that China is the most populous nation on Earth with an argument
that draws on general knowledge one has about China and the rest of the world. For
example, perhaps one is prepared to offer some argument like: [China has more than two
billion people; surely no country could have more people than that | therefore, China is
the most populous nation on Earth]. Or, failing that, perhaps one is prepared to defend
one’s belief with an argument that appeals to one’s general aptitude regarding the topic at
issue. So for example, maybe one is prepared to defend one’s belief with some argument
like: [I seem to remember that China is the most populous nation on Earth; I would not
seem to recall that sort of thing unless it were true | therefore, China is the most populous
nation on Earth].

But it should be clear that this whole strategy is a non-starter. The fact that one is
able to call up arguments in defense of one’s belief that China is the most populous nation
on Earth only shows that one is prepared to adequately defend that belief with an
argument if one justifiably believes the premises of the arguments one is prepared to call up.

So, for instance, the fact that one is prepared to offer the argument: [China has
more than two billion people; surely no country could have more people than that | therefore, China is the most populous nation on Earth] in defense of one’s belief shows
that one is prepared to adequately defend that belief with an argument only if one
justifiably believes that China has more than two billion people, and also that no country
could have more people than that.
How will the accessibilist explain why one is justified in holding those beliefs? The options are to say that one is prepared to adequately defend them with claims about one’s own subjective state, or that one is prepared to adequately defend them with arguments. The problem of forgotten evidence has merely been pushed back a step. It is clear, then, that it will not work for the accessibilist to say that one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief that China is the most populous nation Earth with an argument.

The upshot is that accessibilism leads to a fairly deep kind of skepticism. Common sense says that beliefs of ours which started out justified, and which have since been preserved by our memory up to the present moment, are normally still justified now, even if we no longer recall our original evidence for them. But accessibilism says otherwise.

1.3 Conclusion

It can be tempting to think that one is justified in holding a belief only if one can find, in one’s own mind, something which confirms the superiority of one’s own belief over alternatives. For if, upon reflection, one cannot come up with evidence that adequately supports one’s own belief, surely, we might easily think, one ought to give that belief up.

But when we examine this idea in detail, it becomes clear that it cannot be right. It is our history, which we may or may not recall, that determines whether we are justified in holding a given belief. Whether we can find something in our own minds to defend that belief with is beside the point. As we are sometimes made painfully aware, those of us who are justified in holding our beliefs and those of us who are not are often times on equal footing when it comes to what we can say in defense of our beliefs.

Even if one is not convinced by my arguments here, it is important at least to recognize the distinction between internalist and externalist ways of thinking, and to be
consistent about which perspective one is adopting. In the next two chapters, I turn to one area of epistemology where I think the internalist and externalist points of view are playing an important if often times unacknowledged role. This is in debates about the a priori. I suggest that the internalist and externalist will conceive of the a priori in different ways, and that separating out those two ways of thinking about the a priori can help us get to the bottom of some debates.
Chapter Two
Two Notions of A Priori Justified Belief

2 Introduction

There are many debates in contemporary philosophy which center on the a priori. For instance, there are, among others, debates about whether there are any contingent a priori truths;\(^{21}\) about whether knowledge gained through testimony is sometimes a priori;\(^{22}\) about whether self-knowledge is a priori;\(^{23}\) and about whether our knowledge of morality and of modal truths must always involve some a priori component.\(^{24}\)

These discussions are, I think, in a somewhat regrettable state. Often, only a cursory attempt is made to explain what is meant by the key term ‘a priori’: the inscrutable phrase ‘independent of experience’, and slightly elaborated variations on it, are in many cases treated as sufficient to give the meaning. Compounding the problem is the proliferation of things that are called ‘a priori’. Besides instances of knowledge and

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justified belief, propositions, sentences, beliefs, rules, methodologies, transitions and entitlements, among other things, are said to be “a priori.”

This is a regrettable state of affairs because there are, I think, some important issues at stake in discussions of the a priori, and we can only make progress on those issues if we are a bit more clear—or, to be frank, a lot more clear—on what we are talking about when we talk about the a priori. So, in this chapter, I try to make a little headway in that direction.

I propose two ways of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are. I should note from the outset one way in which both definitions I offer fall short of what some people might hope for. Both definitions count beliefs justified “through intuition” as a priori justified. But—and this is the potentially disappointing part—I do not attempt to analyze what intuitions are nor do I question how they might provide justification for a belief.

I do this not because I think that there are no legitimate worries about what intuitions are and how they might justify beliefs. I do it because, even when we leave those sorts of worries aside, there are still significant strides to be made before we reach a fully satisfactory understanding of what a priori justified beliefs are supposed to be.

We can see clearly that there is still work to be done, even when we set issues concerning intuition aside, by reflecting on the fact that there are lots of propositions, such as complex logical and mathematical theorems, which we are supposed to be able to justifiably believe a priori, but which are not intuitive or obvious in any way, and hence are not, I assume, things which we can justifiably believe through intuition.

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25 I think that there are two corresponding ways of understanding what a priori knowledge is, but I do not spell them out here.
This means that it is clearly not satisfactory to say that one is a priori justified in holding a belief iff one is justified in holding that belief through intuition, for this would leave out the complex theorems.

The definition of what an a priori justified belief is can start there—that is, we can take being justified through intuition to be one way of being a priori justified in holding a belief—but the definition clearly has to go beyond that. It has to offer some other ways in which one might be a priori justified in holding a belief. This chapter is, in effect, concerned with how we might complete the definition of what an a priori justified belief is, given that starting point. It turns out to be a more complicated and important issue than it might seem.

There is a particular debate about the a priori which I will focus on throughout the chapter, in order to bring out and clarify the two notions of a priori justified belief that I am interested in, and also to demonstrate the relevance of those two notions to contemporary discussions of the a priori. The debate in question is a debate between Tyler Burge and Roderick Chisholm. Let me describe what their dispute is about.

At the start of “Content Preservation”, Burge writes:

Near the beginning of Rules for the Direction of the Mind Descartes holds that some things known "with certainty" and "by deduction" are not evident. He notes that in long deductions, we may know that "the last link is connected with the first, even though we do not take in by means of one and the same act of vision all the intermediate links on which that connection depends, but only remember that we have taken them successively under review...." Though he acknowledges that such knowledge is not evident or purely intuitive, and that long deductions are more subject to error than is intuitive knowledge, Descartes thinks that if the knowledge is deduced from evident mathematical premises, it is certain and demonstrative. Presumably he would not doubt that it is apriori. I lay aside
certainty. But the view that the knowledge is demonstrative and apriori seems to me true.²⁶

So, according to Burge, knowledge that one deduces from “evident mathematical premises,” which, Burge assumes, one knows a priori, is itself a priori, even if the deduction is a lengthy one. This view—that deductive reasoning which starts solely from premises one knows a priori and terminates with one acquiring knowledge of one’s conclusion, terminates with one acquiring a priori knowledge of one’s conclusion, no matter how lengthy or complex the reasoning—is the traditional view.

As Burge points out, Roderick Chisholm disagrees with it. Chisholm writes:

What if S derives a proposition from a set of axioms, not by means of one or two simple steps, but as a result of a complex proof, involving a series of interrelated steps? If the proof is formally valid, then shouldn’t we say that S knows the proposition a priori? I think that the answer is no.²⁷

Chisholm thinks that one might come to know a proposition by deducing it from some axioms, which, Chisholm assumes, one knows a priori, and not thereby come to know that proposition a priori. This happens, according to Chisholm, whenever the deduction is lengthy or complex.

In support of his position, Chisholm writes:

[I]f, in the course of a demonstration, we must rely upon memory at various stages, thus using as premises contingent propositions about what we happen to remember, then, although we might be said to have ‘demonstrative knowledge’ of our conclusion, in a somewhat broad sense of the expression ‘demonstrative knowledge,’ we cannot be said to have an a priori demonstration of the conclusion.²⁸

²⁸ Chisholm, Theory of Knowledge: 44.
Burge responds:

It is one thing to rely on memory in a demonstration, and another to use premises about memory. Any reasoning in time must rely on memory. But not all reasoning must use premises about memory or the past.29

In these passages, Burge and Chisholm talk about a priori knowledge. But we might imagine them having the same disagreement about a priori justified belief, and backing their positions up with essentially the same arguments that they appeal to in the above passages. That version of their disagreement—the one concerned with a priori justified belief—is the version that I will focus on.30

The position Chisholm takes in his debate with Burge seems to lead to a very restrictive attitude towards the a priori, in the following sense. First, Chisholm’s view seems to greatly reduce the range of the a priori: it appears to imply that the set of propositions that (normal human) agents may justifiably believe a priori is much smaller than traditionally thought.

For, if Chisholm is right, then when one comes to justifiably believe p through lengthy deductive reasoning, one does not come to have an a priori justified belief in p, even if one started the reasoning from a priori justified beliefs. But how else is one supposed to acquire an a priori justified belief in a non-obvious claim—such as a complex mathematical theorem—if not through multi-step deductive reasoning starting from

29 Burge, “Content Preservation”: 463.
30 It should be noted that, for Burge, the term ‘warranted belief’ expresses the intuitive notion which many others use ‘justified belief’ or ‘reasonable belief’ to express. Burge then uses ‘justified belief’ and ‘entitled belief’ to talk about different kinds of warranted belief. I use ‘justified belief’ to express the intuitive notion which Burge uses ‘warranted belief’ to express (Burge also sometimes uses the term ‘justified belief’ in the way that I use it).
obvious premises that one already justifiably believes a priori? It’s not clear. Chisholm’s
view therefore seems to have the result that only obvious claims, and things which follow
rather easily from them, may be justifiably believed a priori by us. This leaves out quite a
lot.

Second, Chisholm’s view seems to imply that a priori justified beliefs are
incredibly unstable in the sense that, even if one comes to justifiably believe some
proposition a priori, one will immediately cease to be a priori justified in believing it. For
consider the assumption, to which Chisholm implicitly appeals, that “relying on one’s
memory” implies “using as premises” contingent propositions about one’s memory. As
soon as one acquires an a priori justified belief, that belief will depend for its continued
existence, as all one’s beliefs do, on the proper functioning of one’s memory. Thus if
“relying on one’s memory” in holding on to a belief implied “using as premises” in
support of that belief contingent propositions about one’s memory, it seems that any a
priori justified beliefs one did manage to acquire would immediately cease to be a priori
justified as soon as they were stored in one’s memory.

Burge’s view, on the other hand, leads to a much less restrictive and much more
traditional attitude towards the a priori. For if one may justifiably believe self-evident
truths a priori, as Burge assumes, and any justified belief one deduces solely from a priori
justified beliefs is itself an a priori justified belief, as Burge also assumes, then any
proposition which is deducible from self-evident truths counts as a priori, no matter how

31 In “Content Preservation”, Burge argues, quite controversially, that one may come to justifiably
believe a proposition a priori through testimony. If he is right, then there is at least one way to
come to justifiably believe non-obvious claims a priori other than through lengthy deductive
reasoning. For a critical discussion of Burge’s views on this topic, see Malmgren, “Is There A
Priori Knowledge by Testimony?”
sophisticated. So, on Burge’s view, the range of the a priori is much greater than on Chisholm’s view. Moreover, Burge rejects the idea that “relying on one’s memory” implies “using as premises” contingent propositions about one’s memory. So, on his view, there is no reason to think that a priori justified beliefs are unstable.

The key issue separating Chisholm from Burge appears to be whether “relying on one’s memory” implies “using as premises” contingent propositions about one’s memory. Note that the position which Chisholm takes on that issue is the sort of position that an internalist about justification might take. One would expect an internalist to say that what makes a belief stored in memory justified is that one can defend or justify that belief by appeal to claims about one’s memory, for instance, that one has an apparent memory to the effect the content of that belief is true.32

On the other hand, the position Burge takes is the sort of position an externalist about justification might take. One would expect an externalist to say that what makes a belief stored in memory justified is the fact that it was initially acquired in an appropriate way and then appropriately preserved by one’s memory after that. On the externalist view, one does not need to be able to provide any kind of defense or justification for beliefs stored in memory in order for them to be justified.

The fact that Chisholm appears to be approaching things from an internalist perspective, and Burge from an externalist perspective, is, in my view, highly significant. I think that there is an internalist way of thinking about what a priori justified beliefs are on which Chisholm’s restrictive view of the a priori is correct, as well as an externalist way of thinking about what a priori justified beliefs are on which Burge’s more traditional view

32 See Chapter One.
of the a priori is correct. Those are the two notions of a priori justified belief that I spell out in this chapter.

The overall structure of the chapter is as follows. In §2.1, I spell out the internalist way of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are. I then show that, if one conceives of what a priori justified beliefs are in that way, a restrictive view of the a priori emerges, like the one that Chisholm has. In §2.2, I spell out the externalist way of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are. I then show that, if one conceives of what a priori justified beliefs are in that way, what follows is a much less restrictive and more traditional view of the a priori, like the one that Burge has.

2.1 The Internalist Notion of A Priori Justified Belief

There are many different theses about justification which might be thought of as versions of internalism. As I say in the previous chapter, the thesis I call ‘accessibilism’ represents my best attempt at finding a root intuitive idea which internalists are trying to get at and then developing it into a fairly precise thesis. In this section, I suggest a way of thinking about what a priori justified beliefs are which might come naturally to the accessibilist. It is that way of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are which I have in mind when I talk about the internalist way of thinking about what a priori justified beliefs are.

The first thing we have to do is elaborate a bit on what accessibilism says. Recall that accessibilism is the thesis that one justifiably believes p iff (i) one has an automatically justified belief in p; or (ii) one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with a claim about one’s own subjective state; or (iii) one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with an argument.
In the next section, I offer a way of understanding what accessibilism says which brings out its foundationalist structure. This will help us get clear on how the accessibilist would conceive of a priori justified beliefs.

2.1.1 The Foundationalist Structure of Accessibilism

Suppose we label beliefs which are automatically justified, as well as beliefs which one is prepared to adequately defend with a claim about one’s own subjective state, *directly* justified beliefs. Accessibilism may then be stated as the thesis that one justifiably believes p iff one has a directly justified belief in p, or one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with an argument.

Now recall that one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with an argument iff for some propositions $q_1, \ldots, q_n$ (i) one is prepared to offer the argument $[q_1, \ldots, q_n \therefore p]$ in defense of one’s belief in p; one justifiably believes each of $q_1, \ldots, q_n$; and $q_1, \ldots, q_n$ adequately support p.

On the accessibilist view, then, there are the following ways in which one might be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief with an argument. First, the simplest way to be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief with an argument, on the accessibilist view, is to be prepared to defend one’s belief with an argument all of whose premises are *directly justified*.

In other words, the simplest way is to be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief with a *one-level* argument. Where one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with a one-level argument iff for some propositions $q_1, \ldots, q_n$, one is prepared to offer, in defense of one’s belief in p, the argument $[q_1, \ldots, q_n \therefore p]$; one has a directly justified belief in each of $q_1, \ldots, q_n$; and $q_1, \ldots, q_n$ adequately support p.
So, for example, imagine someone who is prepared to offer, in defense of her belief that there are two pieces of fruit on the table, the argument [there is an apple on the table, there is a banana on the table therefore there are two pieces of fruit on the table]. Suppose that she is prepared to adequately defend the claim about the apple and the claim about the banana with claims about how her perceptual experiences. And, finally, suppose that the claim about the apple and the claim about the banana adequately support her belief. In that case, she is prepared to adequately defend her belief that there are two pieces of fruit on the table with a one-level argument.

The next simplest way to be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief with an argument, on the accessibilist view, is to be prepared to defend it with an argument at least some of whose premises are justified because one is prepared, in turn, to adequately defend them with a one-level argument, and the rest of whose premises are justified directly.

In other words, the next simplest way is to be prepared to adequately defend one's belief with a two-level argument. Where one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with a two-level argument iff for some propositions q₁,...,qₙ, one is prepared to offer, in defense of one’s belief in p, the argument [q₁,...,qₙ | therefore p]; at least some of the premises are justified because one is prepared to adequately defend them with a one-level argument, and the rest are directly justified; and q₁,...,qₙ adequately support p.

So, for example, imagine someone who is prepared to offer, in defense of her belief that there are two pieces of fruit and a vase on the table, the argument [there are two pieces of fruit on the table, there is a vase on the table therefore there are two pieces of fruit and a vase on the table]. Suppose that she is prepared to adequately defend her belief that there are two pieces of fruit on the table with a one-level argument, as above,
and that she is prepared to adequately defend her belief about the vase with a claim about her own subjective state. Then she is prepared to adequately defend her belief that there are two pieces of fruit and a vase on the table with a two-level argument.

One may go on to define, in the same fashion, what it is to be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an argument of three-levels, four-levels, five-levels, and so on. 33 Those ways of being prepared to adequately defend one’s belief with an argument represent all the ways in which one might be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief with an argument, on the accessibilist view.

Thus, according to the accessibilist, one justifiably believes \( p \) iff one has a directly justified belief in \( p \), or one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an \( n \)-level argument, for some \( n \). In other words, to put it roughly, one justifiably believes \( p \) iff one has a directly justified belief in \( p \), or one is prepared to defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an argument ultimately grounded in directly justified beliefs. Hence the foundationalist structure.

We can perhaps bring out that structure more clearly by offering yet another way of understanding what accessibilism says.

Say that one is prepared to defend one’s belief in \( p \) with argument \( A \) iff for each conclusion \( C \) in argument \( A \), one is prepared to defend one’s belief in \( C \) by appeal to the

33 To define precisely what it is to be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an \( n \)-level argument, for arbitrary \( n \), we start with the definition of what it is to be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with a one-level argument. Then we add the following definition of what it is to be prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an \( n+1 \)-level argument: for some propositions \( q_1, \ldots, q_n \), one is prepared to offer, in defense of one’s belief in \( p \), the argument \([q_1, \ldots, q_n] \therefore p\); for some \( q_n \), one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( q_n \) with an \( n \)-level argument, and for each of the other \( q_i \), one is either prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( q_i \) with an argument of \( n \) or fewer levels, or one has a directly justified belief in \( q_i \) and \( q_1, \ldots, q_n \) adequately support \( p \).
premises from which C directly follows, according to argument A. So, for example, consider the argument made up out of the following series of inferences:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
A_1 & A_3 & C_1 \\
A_2 & A_4 & C_2 \\
C_1 & C_2 & p
\end{array}
\]

One is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with this argument just in case: one is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with the argument \([C_1, C_2 | \text{therefore } p]\); one is prepared to defend one’s belief in \(C_2\) with the argument \([A_3, A_4 | \text{therefore } C_2]\); and one is prepared to defend one’s belief in \(C_1\) with the argument \([A_1, A_2 | \text{therefore } C_1]\).

Now say that an argument for p constitutes a complete justification for one’s belief in p iff each of its underived premises is a proposition which one has a directly justified belief in, and each of its inferences is a good inference, in the sense that its premises adequately support its conclusion.

So, for example, the argument above counts as a complete justification for one’s belief in p iff one has a directly justified belief in each of \(A_1-A_4\), and \(A_1\) and \(A_2\) adequately support \(C_1\), \(A_3\) and \(A_4\) adequately support \(C_2\), and \(C_1\) and \(C_2\) adequately support p.

Then, as the accessibilist sees it, one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in p with an argument iff one is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with an argument that counts as a complete justification for one’s belief in p.

So accessibilism may be seen as the view that one justifiably believes p iff one has a directly justified belief in p, or one is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with an argument that counts as a complete justification of it, i.e., an argument for it all of whose
inferences are good inferences and all of whose fundamental premises are directly justified.

With this understanding of how the accessibilist thinks of justified beliefs, we can understand how the accessibilist might conceive of a priori justified beliefs.

2.1.2 The Definition

Presumably the accessibilist would distinguish the a priori justified beliefs from the rest of the justified beliefs by saying that one justifiably believes \( p \) a priori iff one has a directly a priori justified belief in \( p \), or one is prepared to defend one’s belief in \( p \) with an argument that counts as a complete a priori justification of one’s belief in \( p \), i.e., an argument for \( p \) each of whose underived premises is a proposition which one has a directly a priori justified belief in, and each of whose inferences is a good inference. To complete this definition, all one has to do is say which of the directly justified beliefs are to be counted as the directly a priori justified beliefs.

The directly justified beliefs come in two kinds. There are the automatically justified beliefs, and the beliefs which one is prepared to adequately defend with a claim about one’s own subjective state. Let us consider the automatically justified beliefs first.

These are beliefs about one’s present subjective state, such as that one seems to see a banana in front of one. Perhaps the accessibilist would take these to be directly a priori justified beliefs. For our purposes, it does not matter.

Next there are the beliefs that one is prepared to adequately defend with a claim about one’s own subjective state. Whether the accessibilist counts such a belief as a priori justified will presumably depend on what makes it the case that one is prepared to
adequately defend the belief with a claim about one’s own subjective state. In particular, it will depend on what the subjective state in question is.

So, for example, the accessibilist will presumably say that sometimes one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with a claim about one’s subjective state because: (i) one has a clear intuition that \( p \) is true; (ii) one is prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief, that one has a clear intuition that \( p \) is true; (iii) appealing to the fact that one has a clear intuition that \( p \) is true is a \textit{prima facie} legitimate way of defending one’s belief in \( p \); and (iv) one has no reasons for doubt of the relevant sort. Clearly the natural thing for the accessibilist to say is that in this case one has a directly \textit{a priori} justified belief in \( p \).

On the other hand, if one is prepared to adequately defend one’s belief in \( p \) with a claim about one’s subjective state because: (i) one has a perceptual experience as of \( p \); (ii) one is prepared to claim, in defense of one’s belief, that one has a perceptual experience as of \( p \), etc., etc., then clearly the natural thing for the accessibilist to say is that one thereby has a directly empirically justified belief in \( p \).

One crucial case, for our purposes, is the case where the subjective state in question has to do with one’s apparent memories, or the like. Most people, I think, would tend to classify beliefs justified by apparent memories as empirically justified, rather than \textit{a priori} justified, and I think it is especially clear that the accessibilist will naturally divide things up in this way.

The reason is that, on the accessibilist view, what makes beliefs stored in our memory justified, in many cases, is that we are prepared to adequately defend them with
claims about our apparent memories. Thus, if the accessibilityist counted beliefs we are prepared to adequately defend with claims about our apparent memories as directly a priori justified, she would end up counting many beliefs as a priori justified which by anyone's standard are only empirically justified.

So, the accessibilityist might naturally take the directly a priori justified beliefs to be limited to the beliefs that one is prepared to adequately defend with claims about one's intuitions, or perhaps those beliefs plus the automatically justified beliefs.

This completes our description of how the accessibilityist might naturally define the notion of an a priori justified belief. It is that way of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are which I think of as the internalist way.

I will now argue that, as long as one conceives of what a priori justified beliefs are in the internalist way, a priori justified beliefs turn out to be unstable and harder to acquire than traditionally assumed. I will then turn my attention to the externalist conception of what a priori justified beliefs are, which, I argue, leads to quite different results.

2.1.3 Beliefs Acquired Through Lengthy Deductions

The first thing I want to discuss is the possibility, debated by Chisholm and Burge, of gaining a priori justified beliefs through lengthy or complex deductive reasoning.

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See Chapter One.

The accessibilityist might naturally define the notion of an empirically justified belief as follows. One justifiably believes p empirically iff one has a directly empirically justified belief in p, or one is prepared to defend one's belief in p with an argument that counts as a complete empirical justification of one's belief in p—i.e., an argument for p each of whose inferences is a good inferences, and each of whose fundamental premises one has a directly justified belief in, at least one of them being a directly empirically justified belief. Directly empirically justified beliefs are defined as those directly justified beliefs which are not directly a priori justified.
Typically, one only has clear intuitions about a limited set of claims. Many mathematical and logical theorems, for instance, are not themselves obvious. This, however, is not supposed to prevent one from being able to justifiably believe those sophisticated mathematical and logical theorems a priori.

The reason is this. It is assumed, first of all, that one can come to justifiably believe those sophisticated propositions by deducing them from more basic truths which one does have clear intuitions about, and hence can justifiably believe a priori. And it is supposed, second of all, that whenever one comes to justifiably believe a proposition in that way—i.e., by deducing it from premises one justifiably believes a priori—one thereby acquires an a priori justified belief in it.

The second assumption, however, is not correct if one thinks of what a priori justified beliefs are as the internalist does. Here is why.

Suppose that one comes to justifiably believe a sophisticated proposition $p$ by making the series of inferences illustrated below, where it is supposed that (i) one has a directly a priori justified belief in the fundamental premises $A_1$ and $A_2$, when one starts the series of inferences, and that (ii) each inference in the series is obviously valid:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
A_1 & A_1 & C_1 & C_9 \\
A_2 & C_i & C_2 & \ldots & C_{10} \\
\hline
C_1 & C_2 & C_3 & p
\end{array}
\]

According to the internalist conception, one justifiably believes $p$ a priori only if one has a directly a priori justified belief in $p$, or one is prepared to defend one's belief in $p$ with an argument that counts as a complete a priori justification of it.
By hypothesis, p is a sophisticated proposition, meaning that it is not itself obvious—one has no clear intuition that it is true—nor does it obviously follow from claims that are obvious. Given that one has no clear intuition that it is true, one does not have a directly a priori justified belief in p. Hence one justifiably believes p a priori only if one is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with an argument that counts as a complete a priori justification of it. But what might make that true? There are three suggestions we might try, none of which work.

First Suggestion

We might suggest that one is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with an argument that counts as a complete a priori justification of it because one is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with the argument corresponding to the series of inferences which one has just made.

Now, that argument does count as a complete a priori justification of one’s belief in p. For one has a directly a priori justified belief in each of that argument’s fundamental premises, A₁ and A₂, and each of the argument’s inferences is a good inference, since each inference is obviously valid, by hypothesis.

However, the claim that one is prepared to defend one’s belief in p with the argument corresponding to the series of inferences one has just made will, ordinarily, be false.

To see this, imagine a case where one infers one proposition from another: for example, from the proposition that the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum was robbed in 1983, one infers that it was robbed in the 1980s. It is an obvious and commonly noted fact in discussions of memory that people often retain belief in some proposition that they have inferred, e.g., that the Gardner Museum was robbed in the 1980s, even though they
are unable to bring to mind, and indeed have not even retained belief in, the proposition or propositions which they originally took to support it.

The claim that one is prepared to defend one’s belief in $p$ with the argument corresponding to the series of inferences one has just made implies that, for each of the eleven conclusions that one reached while going through that series of inferences—$p$, plus $C_1$-$C_{10}$—one is in a position to bring to mind the premises which one originally took to support that conclusion, and offer them in defense of that conclusion. It is clear that this will ordinarily be false. Note that if one had made an even longer series of inferences, it would be even more unlikely that one would be prepared to defend one’s belief with the argument corresponding to the series of inferences one made.

**Second Suggestion**

We might suggest that one is prepared to defend one’s belief in $p$ with an argument that counts as a complete a priori justification of that belief because one is prepared to offer the following argument in defense of one’s belief in $p$:

\[
\begin{align*}
A_1 \\
A_2 \\
A_1 \text{ and } A_2 \text{ entail } p \\
p
\end{align*}
\]

But even if one is prepared to offer that argument in defense of one’s belief, there is still a problem with this suggestion. The problem is that the above argument does not count as a complete a priori justification of one’s belief in $p$. The reason is that it counts as a complete a priori justification of one’s belief in $p$ only if one has a directly a priori justified belief in each of its fundamental premises.

We are supposing that one has a directly a priori justified belief in $A_1$ and $A_2$. So the first two premises are covered. But that one has a directly a priori justified belief in
those premises implies that they are obvious—it implies that one has clear intuitions that
they are true. And, by hypothesis, $p$ is a sophisticated proposition. So $p$ does not
obviously follow from claims that are themselves obvious. So it does not follow obviously
from $A_1$ and $A_2$. But if it is not obvious that $p$ follows from $A_1$ and $A_2$—if one has no clear
intuition to that effect—then there is no way for one to have a directly a priori justified
belief in that claim. So one does not have a directly a priori justified belief in the third
premise. Thus the above argument does not count as a complete a priori justification of
one’s belief in $p$.

Third Suggestion

We might suggest that one is prepared to defend one’s belief in $p$ with the
argument made up of these two inferences:

$$
\begin{array}{c}
\text{I deduced } p \text{ from } A_1 \text{ and } A_2 \text{ in some series of valid steps (although I'm not sure which)} \\
\hline
A_1 \text{ and } A_2 \text{ entail } p
\end{array}
$$

But this argument counts as a complete a priori justification of one’s belief in $p$ only if one
has a directly a priori justified belief in each of its premises. By hypothesis, one has a
directly a priori justified belief in $A_1$ and in $A_2$, so once again those two premises are
covered. But this leaves the premise that one deduced $p$ from $A_1$ and $A_2$ in a series of
valid steps.

We might say that (i) one has an apparent memory to the effect that one deduced $p$
from $A_1$ and $A_2$ in a series of valid steps; (ii) one is prepared to claim that one has such an
apparent memory in defense of one's belief that one deduced $p$ from $A_1$ and $A_2$ in a series of valid steps; (iii) appealing that to the fact that one has such an apparent memory is a \textit{prima facie} legitimate way of defending one's belief that one deduced $p$ from $A_1$ and $A_2$ in a series of valid steps; and (iv) one has no reasons for doubting the reliability or trustworthiness of one's memory.

But, even if that were true, it would not show that one has a directly \textit{a priori} justified belief that one deduced $p$ from $A_1$ and $A_2$ in a series of valid steps. It would show that one has a directly \textit{empirically} justified in that premise. So the third suggestion fails as well.

Thus, if one thinks about what a priori justified beliefs are in the \textit{internalist} way, deductive reasoning does not have the power to extend and grow one's body of a priori justified beliefs that it is normally thought to have. Sophisticated propositions are, for the most part, out of our reach.

2.1.4 Beliefs Stored in Memory

The next thing I want to talk about is whether a priori justified beliefs remain \textit{a priori} justified as they are stored in one's memory. Normally, it is presupposed that such beliefs do remain a priori justified. However, this assumption fails if one thinks about what a priori justified beliefs are as the internalist does.

To see why, suppose that one justifiably believes a sophisticated proposition $p$ \textit{a priori}, at time $t$. Suppose further that one's belief is preserved by one's memory to a later time $t'$, and that appropriate further conditions hold so that one's belief is still justified at the later time. Normally, it is assumed that one's belief is still \textit{a priori} justified at the later time.
But consider things from the internalist's point of view. As the internalist sees it, one must have been prepared to defend one's belief in \( p \) with an argument that counts as a complete a priori justification of it, at the initial time \( t \). For, by hypothesis, \( p \) is a sophisticated proposition, and hence not a proposition that one could have had a directly a priori justified belief in.

Moreover, one justifiably believes \( p \) a priori, at the later time \( t' \), only if one is still prepared, at that time, to defend one's belief in \( p \) with an argument that counts as a complete a priori justification of it.

But what would make that true? We might say that, at the later time, one is prepared to defend one's belief in \( p \) with the same argument that one was prepared to defend it with at the original time. But, as time passes, the chance drops that one is still prepared to defend one's belief with the same argument that one was prepared to defend it with originally. As we noted in the previous section, as time goes by, we are often unable to recall, indeed we often no longer even believe, those propositions which we took to support our belief earlier. So ordinarily one will not be prepared to defend one's belief in \( p \) with the same argument that one was prepared to defend it with originally.

Now, we might say that, at the later time \( t' \), (i) one has an apparent memory as of \( p \); (ii) one is prepared to claim that one has such an apparent memory in defense of one's belief in \( p \); (iii) appealing that to the fact that one has such an apparent memory is a \textit{prima facie} legitimate way of defending one's belief in \( p \); and (iv) one has no reasons for doubt of the relevant sort. But even if this were true it would not show that one has an \textit{a priori} justified belief in \( p \) at time \( t' \).

So, if we conceive of what a priori justified beliefs are in the internalist way, then not only is it much more difficult for us to acquire a priori justified beliefs than
traditionally thought, but many a priori justified beliefs are quite unstable, in sense that they do not last long as a priori justified beliefs.

If we think of what a priori justified beliefs are in an externalist way, however, things are quite different. In the next section, I spell out an externalist way of thinking about what a priori justified beliefs are, and I show that it leads to a more traditional take on the a priori, like the one that Burge has.

2.2 The Externalist Notion of A Priori Justified Belief

Externalists about justification deny that for an agent to be justified in holding a belief, she has to be prepared to give an adequate defense of her belief, from the inside. This is so, the externalist will say, even for more “sophisticated” or “theoretical” beliefs, such as that China is the most populous nation on Earth, that the sun will rise tomorrow morning, and that one’s own perceptual and cognitive faculties are reliable.

The externalist will say that there is presumably some explanation of why a given agent is justified in holding a given belief. In giving this explanation, however, one is not trying to provide an argument which the agent herself might use to defend her belief. So the explanation does not have to employ facts which are themselves available to that agent. The explanation can appeal to facts about how the agent originally acquired the belief in question, facts about the normal expectations and habits of human beings, facts about our evolutionary history, and other facts of which the agent herself may well be ignorant.

Since the accessibilist takes justified beliefs to be beliefs that one is prepared to give an adequate defense of, it is natural for the accessibilist to think of a priori justified beliefs as beliefs for which one is prepared to give a certain special kind of adequate
defense. Because externalists make different assumptions about what justified beliefs are, they will define what a priori justified beliefs are in a different way.

An externalist might distinguish between empirically and a priori justified beliefs by making a distinction between the ways in which a justified belief may be acquired. In particular, an externalist might understand what a priori justified beliefs are as follows. One justifiably believes $p$ a priori, at time $t$ iff:

(i) at time $t$, one comes to justifiably believe $p$ through intuition; or

(ii) at a time before $t$, one comes to justifiably believe $p$ a priori; plus one’s belief in $p$ is preserved by one’s memory from that time to time $t$; plus appropriate further conditions hold so that one still justifiably believes $p$ at time $t$; or

(iii) at time $t$, one comes to justifiably believe $p$ by inferring $p$ directly from some propositions that one justifiably believes a priori.

This definition of what a priori justified beliefs are characterizes an a priori justified belief as a justified belief acquired through a certain sort of process, namely, as a justified belief acquired solely through some combination of intuition, inference, and memory.\(^{36}\)

When a priori justified beliefs are thought of in this externalist way, a more traditional view of the a priori emerges. First, a priori justified beliefs are stable, in the sense that they remain a priori justified as they are stored in one’s memory. This is simply stipulated to be true in clause (ii) of the definition.

Second, and this may be seen as a consequence of the first point, we have the ability to grow our body of a priori justified beliefs as much as we want through deductive reasoning. So the range of the a priori takes its traditional scope: any proposition which is

\(^{36}\) The externalist might define an empirically justified belief as a justified belief acquired in any other way.
deducible from obvious truths, even an extremely sophisticated mathematical or logical theorem, counts as something which we may justifiably believe a priori.

For suppose that one starts out with some a priori justified beliefs. One may directly deduce some further propositions from those, thereby coming to justifiably believe those propositions, and hence thereby coming to justifiably believe those propositions a priori.

One may then preserve the beliefs one has just acquired in one’s memory. If appropriate further conditions hold, so that those beliefs remain justified, they remain a priori justified. At that point, one may deduce further conclusions directly from those beliefs, thereby coming to justifiably believe those further conclusions, and hence thereby coming to justifiably believe those further conclusions a priori. One may then continue with this process, constantly growing one’s body of a priori justified beliefs, even, if one wishes, all the way out to extremely sophisticated logical and mathematical theorems.

2.3 Conclusion

I have suggested two ways of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are: an internalist way, and an externalist way. If one thinks about what a priori justified beliefs are in the internalist way, then they are unstable and harder to acquire than traditionally assumed. If one thinks about them in the externalist way, on the other hand, they are secure and easier to acquire. This is somewhat surprising. Normally, it is supposed that an internalist point of view is more hospitable to the a priori than an externalist point of view, but in fact the opposite seems to be true.

Bringing out the distinction between internalist and externalist ways of thinking has already helped us clear up what is going on in one debate about the a priori. Namely,
the debate between Burge and Chisholm about whether a priori justified beliefs can be
gained through lengthy stretches of deductive reasoning. In the next chapter, I suggest
that paying close attention to this same distinction can help us get to the bottom of
another dispute about the a priori.
Chapter Three
The Importance of the A Priori

3  Introduction

We might imagine dividing philosophers into two groups. In the first group are those who put a lot of weight on the a priori. Not only do they think that there are such things as a priori knowledge, and a priori warrants, and a priori methods of belief formation, and so on, they say that the a priori is heavily implicated in our epistemic lives. It is, they say, necessarily involved in our knowledge of morality, and of modality, and of the physical world, and so on and so forth.

In the second group are those who are skeptical about the importance of the a priori: they think that, even if we should acknowledge the existence of some kinds of a priori knowledge and a priori warrant and the rest, they are not that significant. We do not have to appeal to those things in order to explain how we are able to learn about the world.

Two philosophers who are squarely in the first group are Christopher Peacocke and Tyler Burge. They say things like, “Any case of knowledge of an empirical theory exists only because some a priori entitlements also exist...the a priori provides the girders without which empirical entitlement would collapse,” and, “For most of this century, various forms of deflationary empiricism have dominated thinking about knowledge. In my view, this dominance is poorly grounded and will collapse...[empiricism] fails to yield a credible, complete account of our knowledge of logic, mathematics, self-knowledge,


ethics, and several other parts of philosophy.\textsuperscript{39} A philosopher firmly planted in the second group is W.V. Quine.\textsuperscript{40}

It is important to recognize that, although the two groups seem directly opposed to each other, there may not be as much conflict as there appears to be. People sometimes use different conceptions of the a priori. So at least some aspects of their dispute might simply be based on a misunderstanding. But it seems to me that Peacocke and Burge, in particular, do think that the a priori is important in a strong and controversial sense.

I argue, however, that Burge and Peacocke give us no good reason to accept that strong and controversial thesis, which I call their \textit{genuinely rationalist} thesis.

The overall structure of the chapter is as follows. One idea commonly appealed to by those who attach a lot of importance to the a priori is the rough idea that we can explain why our attempts to learn about the world are successful only by supposing that we are given some a priori starting points from which to begin. I think that it is a version of this basic idea which ultimately motivates Peacocke and Burge to accept their genuinely rationalist thesis.

More specifically, both Peacocke and Burge talk a lot about agents being a priori entitled to rely on certain belief forming methods or procedures. For instance, Burge’s paper “Content Preservation” is mainly devoted to a justification and defense of his claim that, “A person is a priori entitled to accept a proposition that is presented as true and

that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so.\textsuperscript{41} Burge continues his defense of that claim in subsequent work.\textsuperscript{42} Elsewhere, he argues for the existence of other a priori entitlements.\textsuperscript{43} In \textit{The Realm of Reason}, Peacocke spends most of two chapters arguing for the claim that we are a priori entitled to take certain of our perceptual experiences at face value,\textsuperscript{44} and another chapter arguing that we are a priori entitled to make certain inductive inferences.\textsuperscript{45}

For Peacocke and Burge, the point is not just that we have these a priori entitlements. On their view, an agent's ability to become justifiably confident in what the world around him is like depends on his being a priori entitled to rely on certain basic belief forming procedures, like taking his perceptual experiences at face value, and accepting the testimony of other people.\textsuperscript{46} I think that it is this idea which ultimately drives Peacocke and Burge to accept their genuinely rationalist thesis. In §3.1, I explain what their genuinely rationalist thesis is, and I explain the basic steps of the argument which seems to lead them to it.

In §3.2, I look at how Burge and Peacocke argue for the first premise of that argument: that an agent’s ability to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world depends on his being a priori entitled to rely on certain belief forming procedures. I show that, as long as we understand what it means for an agent to be a priori entitled to rely on a belief forming procedure in a certain way, their arguments are successful. Their

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Burge, “Content Preservation”: 469.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Burge, “Interlocution, Perception, and Memory”: 21-36.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Peacocke, \textit{The Realm of Reason}: 74-134.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Peacocke, \textit{The Realm of Reason}: 135-147.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Peacocke, \textit{The Realm of Reason}; Burge, “Content Preservation.” See §3.2.1.
\end{itemize}
arguments work when we take the claim that one is a priori entitled to rely on a belief forming procedure to mean that one is default justified in relying on it, where being default justified means something like: being justified in the absence of empirical support. So, the first premise of Burge and Peacocke's argument is true when we take 'a priori entitled' to mean default justified.

In §3.3, I turn my attention to the second premise of Burge and Peacocke's argument. This premise draws a connection between one's being a priori entitled to rely on a belief forming procedure and its being a priori that the belief forming procedure is a good one. I argue that when we understand a priori entitlement as default justification, this premise fails. I explain why one would find it compelling, however, if one illicitly switched back and forth between internalist and externalist ways of thinking. Finally, I point out that we could understand the notion of a priori entitlement in a different way, so that the second premise comes out true. But, in that case, there would be no reason to accept the first premise.

The upshot is that there is no reason to think that the a priori is important in the strong and controversial sense in which Burge and Peacocke seem to think it is.

3.1 The Main Argument

I want to start by looking at some striking philosophical projects which Peacocke and Burge attempt to carry out. I will suggest that the reason they attempt to carry out these projects is that they accept the genuinely rationalist thesis I am talking about, and I will explain the basic reasoning which I think leads them to accept that thesis.

A substantial chunk of Peacocke's book *The Realm of Reason* consists of a long, complex, argument for a certain thesis. Notably, the argument in question appeals to
obvious-seeming premises which Peacocke calls ‘a priori’, such as, “[I]t is rational to hold that things have come about in a way in which they are more likely to have come about.” 47 In fact, according to Peacocke, the whole argument is “a priori.” 48

It is not entirely clear what the argument is ultimately an argument for. On the one hand, Peacocke offers the argument in the context of trying to give a “philosophical explanation” of why we are entitled to take certain sorts of perceptual experiences at face value. 49 This suggests that the conclusion of the argument is simply that we are entitled to take certain sorts of perceptual experiences at face value.

On the other hand, when one looks at the details of the argument, and at Peacocke’s summary of it, the conclusion of the argument seems to be that our perceptual experiences tend to be accurate, or something along those lines. Peacocke writes:

The complexity-reduction explanation of the entitlement to take certain perceptual experiences at face value has two properties that we should require of any such explanation. First, it is a priori. The Level-(3) explanation I have offered has not been that since we are creatures of a kind that has evolved through natural selection our experiences are likely to be veridical on whole. It is an empirical fact that we are members of a kind that has evolved through natural selection. Our knowledge of that fact rests on various pieces of evidence, which in turn rely ultimately on our perceptions. No a priori Level-(3) explanation could be extracted from this source. Our argument has rather been this:

Experiences are complex events.

As such, experiences are in need of complexity-reducing explanations.

A natural selection explanation of their occurrence meets the requirement of complexity reduction, and it is not clear that there is any other that does.

The natural selection explanation makes the contents of the experiences it explains by and large correct.\textsuperscript{50}

This suggests that the conclusion of Peacocke’s argument is something like: our perceptual experiences tend to be accurate.\textsuperscript{51}

Whatever conclusion Peacocke’s argument is ultimately an argument for, however, the following seems clear. Peacocke is trying to establish that taking one’s perceptual experiences at face value is, in some sense, a legitimate or responsible way of forming beliefs about the world. He is trying to establish that there is something good about that way of forming beliefs. Moreover, Peacocke is trying to establish this solely on the basis of obvious or self-evident truths. This is quite an ambitious philosophical project.

Burge engages in a remarkably similar endeavor in “Content Preservation.” In that paper, Burge offers a long, complex argument for a certain thesis.\textsuperscript{52} The argument appeals to premises which are presumably supposed to be obvious, like, “a condition on reasons, rationality, and reason is that they be guides to truth.”\textsuperscript{53} Burge makes a point of saying that the argument does not appeal to empirical premises, such as that most people are rational.\textsuperscript{54}

As with Peacocke’s argument, it is not entirely clear what Burge’s argument is ultimately supposed to be an argument for. On the one hand, Burge consistently describes his argument as a “justification of” or “justification for” the Acceptance

\textsuperscript{50} Peacocke, \textit{The Realm of Reason}: 98.
\textsuperscript{51} A couple of Peacocke’s remarks elsewhere in \textit{The Realm of Reason} tell strongly against this interpretation, however. Peacocke says that his, “approach does not say that it is a priori that hallucinations are rare... Hallucinations may be frequent” (106). And he says, “It is not outright a priori that experience is normally veridical” (196).
\textsuperscript{52} Burge, “Content Preservation”: 469-76.
\textsuperscript{53} Burge, “Content Preservation”: 470.
\textsuperscript{54} Burge, “Content Preservation”: 473.
Principle,\textsuperscript{55} which, Burge says, “is not an empirical principle.”\textsuperscript{56} This suggests that the conclusion of Burge’s argument is supposed to be the Acceptance Principle itself—i.e., the claim that we are, roughly speaking, entitled to accept the testimony of others.\textsuperscript{57} On the other hand, when one examines the actual content of Burge’s argument, it seems to be driving towards the conclusion that people’s assertions are normally true, or something along those lines.

But whatever conclusion Burge’s argument is ultimately an argument for, again the following seems clear. Burge is trying to establish that accepting other people’s testimony is, in some sense, a legitimate or responsible way of forming beliefs about the world. Moreover, Burge is trying to do so solely on the basis of obvious truths.

Why would Peacocke and Burge attempt to carry out such difficult and ambitious projects? Here is one explanation.

First, they accept that an agent’s ability to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world depends on his being \textit{a priori} entitled to rely on certain belief forming procedures, such as taking his perceptual experiences at face value, and accepting the testimony of others.

Second, they take the claim that an agent is \textit{a priori} entitled to rely on a given belief forming procedure to imply that it is \textit{a priori} that the belief forming procedure in question is legitimate. So, for example, they take the claim that an agent is \textit{a priori} entitled to take his perceptual experiences at face value to imply that it is \textit{a priori} that taking his perceptual experiences at face value is a legitimate way for him to gather beliefs.

\textsuperscript{55} Burge, “Content Preservation”: 467.
\textsuperscript{56} Burge, “Content Preservation”: 469, 476.
\textsuperscript{57} Burge, “Content Preservation”: 467.
about the world. The terminology of 'a priori entitlement' certainly suggests that something like this premise is true.

Moreover, I suggest, Burge and Peacocke have a certain sense of 'a priori' in mind. On some ways of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are, a priori justified beliefs do not automatically have a connection with intuition and self-evident truths and armchair reasoning. So, for instance, one might define an a priori justified belief as any belief that is justified "by default" in the absence of reasons for doubting it. In that case, one might take an agent's belief, upon entering a room, that there is no invisible elephant in the room to be an a priori justified belief. But this does not mean, certainly not as a matter of definition, that the agent deduced that belief from self-evident truths, or anything along those lines. Nor would it seem to be sufficient for an agent to have an a priori justified belief, in this sense, that he came to justifiably believe it through intuition or by deduction from obvious truths. So, for a proposition to be a priori, in this sense, it is neither necessary nor sufficient that it be deducible from obvious truths.

On the other hand, one might understand what priori justified beliefs are in a different way, so that there is an automatic connection between them and intuitions, obviousness, and deductive reasoning. So, for example, one might conceive of what a priori justified beliefs are as the externalist does: as a justified belief acquired solely through some combination of intuition, inference, and memory. In that case, one ends up with a much more traditional way of understanding what a priori justified beliefs are. Having an a priori justified belief in something requires that one come to justifiably believe it through intuition, or by deduction from obvious truths that one intuited. And

\[58\] See §2.2.
coming to justifiably believe something in either of those ways is sufficient for having an a
priori justified belief in that thing. So, for a proposition to be a priori, in this sense, it is
both necessary and sufficient that it be deducible from obvious truths. When a
proposition is a priori in a sense according to which \( p \) is a priori iff \( p \) is deducible from
obvious truths, let us say that the proposition is a priori in a traditional sense.

The second premise which Burge and Peacocke accept, on this explanation, is
that that an agent is a priori entitled to rely on a given belief forming procedure implies
that it is a priori, in a traditional sense, that that way of forming beliefs about the world is
legitimate. So, for example, they take the claim that an agent is a priori entitled to take his
perceptual experiences at face value to imply that it is a priori, in a traditional sense, that
taking his perceptual experiences at face value is a legitimate way of forming beliefs about
the world.

They therefore reach the following conclusion: supposing that an agent is able to
acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world implies that it is a priori, in a traditional
sense, that certain basic ways he might go about forming beliefs, such as taking his
perceptual experiences at face value, and accepting the testimony of other people, are
legitimate or responsible ways of forming beliefs about the world.

This would seem to explain why Peacocke tries to establish, solely on the basis of
obvious truths, that taking our perceptual experiences at face value is a legitimate way to
form beliefs about the world, and why Burge tries to show, also solely on the basis of
obvious truths, that accepting the testimony of other agents is a legitimate belief forming
procedure.

For having reached the above conclusion, they would not want that conclusion to
commit them to skepticism. But, in order to show that that conclusion does not commit
them to skepticism, they would have to show that it is a priori, in a traditional sense, that taking our perceptual experiences at face value is a legitimate way to form beliefs about the world; and also that it is a priori, in a traditional sense, that accepting the testimony of others is a legitimate belief forming procedure. But the only way to do that is to show that those propositions can be deduced from obvious truths. So that is what Burge and Peacocke try to do.

The conclusion which Burge and Peacocke reach, on this interpretation of them, is their genuinely rationalist thesis. If it is correct, then it does seem that, like Burge and Peacocke, we ought to try to give armchair justifications of our basic belief forming methods. If we find their attempts unsuccessful, then, rather than sitting on the sidelines, poking holes in their arguments, we ought to see if we can do better. We would have to, in order to ensure that we were not committed to skepticism. The idea that we ought to be trying to establish the legitimacy of our basic belief forming methods from the armchair would certainly bother plenty of those who tend to be skeptical about the a priori, such as Quine, who calls for the, “abandonment of the goal of a first philosophy.”

I argue, however, that the reasoning which appears to lead Burge and Peacocke to accept their genuinely rationalist thesis is unsound. In order to show this, the first thing I want to do is look at how Burge and Peacocke argue for the first premise of that reasoning: that an agent's ability to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world depends on his being a priori entitled to rely on certain belief forming procedures. This will help us identify the sense in which that premise is correct.

3.2 The First Premise

It is hard to say exactly how Burge and Peacocke argue for the idea that an agent’s ability to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world depends on his being a priori entitled to go about forming beliefs in various ways. But we can say something about what arguments they seem to have in mind.

3.2.1 Peacocke’s Argument for the First Premise

Consider Peacocke first. He writes:

Many philosophers have held that a person is a priori, but non-conclusively, entitled to take the representational content of her perceptual experiences, and her memories, and the utterances of other persons, at face value. It seems that no such entitlement could ever emerge solely from experience itself. Experience can lead to new entitlements only if the subject is already entitled to take at least some experiences at face value. The same seems to apply to memory and to testimony. If it is sound, this type of reasoning shows that such instances of non-conclusive and empirically defeasible entitlement must be a priori.60

In this passage, Peacocke seems to be arguing for, among other things, some thesis like: one would never have been able to learn about the world through experience if one were not a priori entitled to take at least some perceptual experiences at face value. The argument Peacocke seems to give for that thesis is that, “no such entitlement [to take one’s perceptual experiences at face value] could ever emerge solely from experience itself. Experience can lead to new entitlements only if the subject is already entitled to take at least some experiences at face value.”

Other passages may be read as endorsing a similar thesis. For instance, Peacocke writes:

What of defeasible a priori entitlements? Are they drained of philosophical interest on this approach? In my judgement, the...a priori character of some defeasible experience-based entitlements is essential to a transition in thought being rational at all. If the supporter of the defeasible a priori is pressed by Kitcher for an explanation of the philosophical significance of these cases his answer should be as follows. Defeasible entitlement is a notion that must be instantiated if rational thought is to get started at all. Not all warrants can be empirical, on pain of regress.61

When Peacocke says, “the...a priori character of some defeasible experience-based entitlements is essential to a transition in thought being rational at all,” he might be saying something like: “if rational thought is to get started at all,” then agents have to be a priori entitled to make some “experience-based” transitions—that is, transitions from perceptual experiences to judgements about the world. This is very similar to what Peacocke appears to be saying in the other passage we just mentioned. This time, Peacocke does not offer an argument to justify what he is saying, but he does allude to some sort of regress argument which is supposed to be relevant.

These passages only offer us small hints as to what sort of argument Peacocke is making. But perhaps Peacocke has something like the following argument in mind:

One is able to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world only if one is entitled to take some perceptual experiences at face value. This is obvious. But now suppose that one is entitled to take some perceptual experiences at face value without being a priori entitled to do so. In that case, one’s entitlement to take those perceptual

experiences at face value must “come from experience.” It must rest on empirical grounds.

But if one’s entitlement rests on empirical grounds, then one must have acquired those empirical grounds in some way, at some point in the past. Hence, there must be some previous occasions at which one was entitled to take some perceptual experiences at face value. If we suppose that one was not a priori entitled to take those perceptual experiences at face value either, and thus that one’s entitlement to take those perceptual experiences at face value was also grounded in experience, we are off on a vicious regress.

So, if one is entitled to take some perceptual experiences at face value now, then either one is a priori entitled to take those perceptual experiences at face value, or, at the very least, there is some point in the past at which one was a priori entitled to take some perceptual experiences at face value. In that respect, an agent’s ability to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world depends on his being a priori entitled to take his perceptual experiences at face value, at least at some point.

3.2.2 Burge’s Argument for the First Premise

Burge says that, “Given life’s complexities,” our a priori entitlement to accept what others tell us, “is often left far behind in reasoning about whether to rely on a source.” He continues:

One might wonder, with some hyperbole, whether it can ever be the last word in the epistemology of acceptance for anyone over the age of eleven. But I think it has broader application than the hyperbolic conjecture suggests. Unquestioned reliance is also common in adult life. When we ask someone on the street the time, or the direction of some landmark, or when we ask someone to do a simple sum, we rely on the answer. We make use of a presumption of credibility when we read books, signs, or newspapers, or talk to strangers on unloaded topics. We
need not engage in reasoning about the person’s qualifications to be rational in accepting what he or she says.\textsuperscript{62}

What I take Burge to be saying in this passage is something like this: in certain situations of limited information, such as when we ask a random stranger on the street the time, we are justified in accepting what the other person tells us only because we are \textit{a priori} entitled to accept his or her testimony.

Burge seems to say similar things in other passages. For instance, in one passage, Burge refers to “two a priori prima facie entitlements” he thinks we have, in virtue of which we are a priori entitled to accept what others tell us. He then says that:

The two \textit{a priori prima facie} entitlements...are rational starting points. They function for children at early stages of linguistic competence. They are salient in adults who lack information about their interlocutors, on topics they have no reason to think are problematic. To be entitled to accept what they are told, children or adults need not know that there are no counterconsiderations. Children may not conceive of counterconsiderations as possible. It is normally enough that there be no available counter reasons. In such cases, they may be \textit{a priori} entitled to accept what they are told.\textsuperscript{63}

Burge seems to be saying that, in certain situations where we have limited information, such as when we converse with people unfamiliar to us, we are justified in accepting what we are told only because we are \textit{a priori} entitled to—our a priori entitlement to do so is “salient” in those situations.

It is not clear exactly why Burge thinks that our ability to gain justified beliefs through testimony, in the sorts of situations he describes, depends on our being \textit{a priori}...
entitled to accept the testimony of others. But I think that Burge has something like the following argument in mind:

Suppose that one asks a random, normal-looking stranger for the time. The stranger says that it is around noon. Presumably, if one were to trust this stranger, and on the basis of his testimony form the belief that it is around noon, one’s belief would be justified.

But surely one does not have adequate empirical grounds for thinking that this stranger is worthy of being trusted. One has so little information about him. Thus, assuming that one is entitled to accept the stranger’s testimony, it must be that one’s entitlement to do so is not grounded in experience, but is rather a priori.

Of course, many other situations are just like this one: one is often justified in accepting what one is told even though one has scant information about the person one is talking to—certainly not enough to have adequate empirical reasons for thinking that the other person is trustworthy.

So, in lots of situations, one is justified in accepting what one is told only on the assumption that one is a priori entitled to do so. In that respect, one’s ability to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world depends on one’s being a priori entitled to accept the testimony of others.

We now have a better sense of what arguments Burge and Peacocke give for thinking that an agent’s ability to become justifiably confident in what the world around him is like depends on his being a priori entitled to form beliefs in various ways. I will now offer a way of understanding those arguments which makes them out to be successful.
3.2.3 A Priori Entitlement as Default Justification

There is one crucial step in developing an interpretation of Peacocke's and Burge's arguments on which they are successful. It is coming up with a suitable way of understanding what it means for an agent to be a priori entitled to rely on a given belief forming procedure. The key, in other words, is to understand that notion in such a way that it allows us to make the arguments of Peacocke and Burge come out sound. That is what I will try to do in this section. I will build up to the definition in a series of steps.

First, we need the notion of making a transition. To make a transition is to go from being in a certain state—such as believing that Mary's car is in her driveway; having a visual experience as of a red object before one; experiencing pain, etc.—to believing a certain proposition—such as believing that Mary is at home; believing that there is a red object before one; believing that one is in pain, etc.

Next, we need the notion of being justified in making a transition. Let us say that an agent A is justified in making a transition from being in state s to believing p iff if A makes that transition, A will thereby come to justifiably believe p. So, for example, to say that one is justified in making a transition from having a visual experience as of a red object before one to believing that there is a red object before one is to say that, if one makes that transition, one will thereby come to justifiably believe that there is a red object before one.

Finally, we need the notion of being default justified in making a transition. Roughly speaking, one is default justified in making a transition just in case one is justified

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in making it, even though one cannot provide adequate empirical grounds for thinking that it is a safe transition to make, i.e., a transition which will not lead one away from the truth.

This rough definition is probably good enough for our purposes, but we can define the notion more precisely. To do that, we first define the notion of a safe or reliable transition.

Say that a transition from being in state s to believing \( p \) is an inferential transition iff being in state s is simply a matter of believing certain propositions, e.g., believing that Mary's car is in her driveway. If the transition from being in state s to believing \( p \) is an inferential transition, and \( q_1, ..., q_n \) represent the propositions that being in state s involves believing, then that transition is safe (or reliable) iff that \( q_1, ..., q_n \) are true is a good indication that \( p \) is true. So, for example, the transition from believing that Mary’s car is in her driveway to believing that Mary is at home is normally a safe transition to make, since that’s Mary’s car is in her driveway is normally a good indication that Mary is at home.

Say that a transition from being in state s to believing \( p \) is a non-inferential transition iff being in state s is not simply a matter of believing certain propositions, e.g., if state s is having a visual experience as of a red object before one. If the transition from being in state s to believing \( p \) is non-inferential, then it counts as safe (or reliable) iff that one is in state s is a good indication that \( p \) is true. So, for example, the transition from having a visual experience as of a red object before one to believing that there is a red object before one is typically a safe transition to make, since that one is having a visual experience as of a red object before one is typically a good indication that there is a red object before one.
Next, we introduce the notion of being prepared to offer an adequate empirical justification for believing \( p \). Roughly speaking, one is prepared to offer an adequate empirical justification for believing \( p \) iff (i) one is prepared to defend \( p \) with an appropriate claim about one's own subjective state, e.g., "I seem to see \( p \)"; or (ii) one is prepared defend \( p \) with an argument of the right sort, i.e., an argument which is made up of good inferences and whose fundamental premises one is prepared to defend directly with an appropriate claim about one's own subjective state.\(^{65}\)

Finally, we say that one is default justified in making a transition iff one is justified in making that transition, even though one is not prepared to offer an adequate empirical justification for thinking that it is a safe transition to make.

So, for example, one is default justified in making a transition from having a visual experience as of a red object before one to believing that there is a red object before one iff one is justified in making that transition, but it is not a transition whose reliability or trustworthiness one is prepared to give an adequate empirical defense of.

I suggest that, in order to make the arguments of Peacocke and Burge come out sound, we take the claim that one is a priori entitled to rely on a given belief forming procedure to mean that one is default justified in making certain transitions. For instance, we take the claim that one is a priori entitled to take one's perceptual experiences at face value to mean that one is default justified in making a transition from having a perceptual experience as of \( p \) to believing \( p \). And we take the claim that one is a priori entitled to accept another person's testimony to mean that one is default justified in making a transition from believing that the person asserted \( p \) to believing \( p \).

\(^{65}\) See §2.1.2.
If we use these definitions of what it means to be a priori entitled, then I think we can understand the arguments Peacocke and Burge are making in such a way that those arguments turn out to be successful. Let us consider Peacocke first.

3.2.4 A Way of Understanding Peacocke’s Argument

We can take Peacocke to be making the following argument:

Suppose that one is now justified in taking a perceptual experience at face value, but that one is not default justified in taking that perceptual experience at face value. In that case, one must be prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for thinking that taking that perceptual experience at face value is a safe transition to make. But that could only be because one is prepared to give the right sort of argument for thinking that it is a safe transition to make. And that could be true only if one previously gained some justified beliefs through experience, beliefs which one is now prepared to appeal to as premises.

But if one previously gained some justified beliefs through experience, then there was a previous time at which one was justified in taking some perceptual experiences at face value. If we suppose that one was not default justified in taking those perceptual experiences at face value either, then it follows that one was prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for thinking that by taking those perceptual experiences at face value, one was making safe transitions. Thus we are off on a vicious regress.

So, if one is now justified in taking a perceptual experience at face value, then either one must be default justified in taking that perceptual experience at face value, or there must at least be some point in the past at which one was default justified in taking some perceptual experiences at face value. In that respect, an agent’s ability to become
justifiably confident in what the world around him is like depends on his being \textit{default justified} in taking his perceptual experiences at face value, at least at some point.

When understood in this way, Peacocke’s argument is plausibly sound.

3.2.5 A Way of Understanding Burge’s Argument

We can take Burge to be making the following argument:

Suppose that one asks a normal-looking stranger for the time, and the stranger says that it is around noon. Presumably, one is justified in accepting his testimony. But surely one is not prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for thinking that the stranger’s saying that it is around noon is a good indication that it is around noon.

Certainly one does not have any specific information about this stranger that bears on his trustworthiness or reliability, as one might regarding people one knows more closely. And it seems dubious that one would be able to provide the right sort of justification for thinking that people in general can be relied upon to be telling the truth.

So, assuming that one is justified in accepting the stranger’s testimony, one is \textit{default justified} in doing so—one is justified in doing so without being able to give an adequate empirical justification for thinking that his assertions are a good guide to the truth.

In lots of other situations, one is similarly ill-equipped to argue for the reliability of the person one is talking to. So, in many situations, assuming that one is justified in accepting the testimony of one’s interlocutor, one is justified in doing so without being prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for thinking that the other person’s assertions are normally on the mark. In that respect, an agent’s ability to acquire a body
of justified beliefs about the world around her depends on her being default justified in accepting the testimony of other people.

When understood in this way, Burge’s argument seems sound.

So, when Burge and Peacocke argue that an agent’s ability to become justifiably confident in what the world around her is like depends on her being a priori entitled to rely on certain belief forming procedures, there is a way to understand what they are arguing for, and how they are arguing for it, on which their arguments are successful. Namely, we take them to be arguing that an agent’s ability to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world depends on her being default justified in making various transitions.

Hence, there is a sense in which the first premise of Burge and Peacocke’s argument for their genuinely rationalist thesis is true. It is true if we understand the claim that one is a priori entitled to rely on a belief forming procedure to mean that one is default justified in making various transitions. Let us now turn to whether the second premise of Burge and Peacocke’s argument is also true, if understood in that way.

3.3 The Second Premise

If we understand the claim that one is a priori entitled to rely on a belief forming procedure to mean that one is default justified in making various transitions, then the second premise of Burge and Peacocke’s argument says this: if one is default justified in making a certain set of transitions, then it is a priori, in a traditional sense, that making those transitions is a legitimate way to form beliefs about the world.

I think that there is no reason to accept this claim. But we can see why one would accept it. The series of inferences one would have to make is somewhat convoluted. But one can start from the supposition that an agent is default justified in making some
transitions and end up at the conclusion that it is a priori, in a traditional sense, that making those transitions is a safe, and hence legitimate way, to form beliefs about the world. In order to do so, however, one has to switch back and forth between internalist and externalist perspectives. I will now describe how that would work.

§3.3.1 Starting From an Externalist Perspective

It is a controversial assumption that one is justified in using a belief forming method only if one has a justified belief to the effect that that way of forming beliefs is reliable. So, for example, it would be controversial that, in order to be justified in taking a perceptual experience as of a red object before one at face value, one has to have a justified belief that that would be a safe transition to make.

Some philosophers would criticize that assumption as placing too strong a requirement on what it takes to be justified in using a belief forming method. They would say that it is demonstrated to be false by the fact that children and animals are clearly justified in using certain belief forming methods, such as taking their perceptual experiences at face value, even though they could not be justified in thinking that those methods are reliable. Or these philosophers might say that the assumption in question leads to a vicious regress.

But externalists do not think that agents have to be able to access adequate evidence for their beliefs in order to be justified in holding them. So they would not be nearly as troubled as an internalist would by the idea that children and animals are

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justified in assuming that various belief forming methods, such as taking their perceptual experiences at face value, can be trusted.

For the same reason, externalists would not see the claim that one is justified in using a belief forming method only if one has a justified belief to the effect that that way of forming beliefs is reliable as leading to a vicious regress. An internalist would think that having a justified belief in the reliability of a belief forming procedure, like taking one’s perceptual experiences at face value, requires being able to support that belief which further justified beliefs. So an internalist may well see a vicious regress looming. But an externalist will not.

Thus, if one starts off looking at things from an externalist perspective, one might make the assumption that, in order to be justified in making a transition, one has to have a justified belief to the effect that it is a safe transition to make.

Now, anyone who is default justified in making some transitions, such as taking his perceptual experiences at face value, is of course justified in making those transitions. So, on the assumption we have just been talking about, anyone who is default justified in taking his perceptual experiences at face value, for example, is also justified in believing that, by taking his perceptual experiences at face value, he is making safe transitions.

But being default justified in making a transition also means not being able to give an adequate empirical justification for thinking that it is a safe transition to make. So anyone who is default justified in taking his perceptual experiences at face value, for example, is not prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for thinking that, by taking his perceptual experiences at face value, he is making safe transitions.

Putting these two things together, we get the result that anyone who is default justified in making a transition: (i) has a justified belief to the effect that it is a safe
transition; *which* (ii) he is not prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for. So, for example, someone who is default justified in taking his perceptual experiences at face value: (i) has a justified belief that by taking his perceptual experiences at face value he is making safe transitions; which (ii) he is not prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for.

3.3.2 Switching to an Internalist Perspective

From an internalist perspective, an agent is justified in holding a belief only if he is prepared to offer an adequate justification for it. So, if an agent is not prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for a belief, but he is still justified in holding it, then he must be prepared to give an adequate *a priori* justification for that belief, according to the internalist. On an internalist way of looking at things, to be *a priori* justified in holding a belief just is to be prepared to give an adequate *a priori* justification for it. So, from an internalist point of view, a justified belief which one is not prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for is an *a priori* justified belief.

Thus, if one switched to an internalist perspective, one would conclude that anyone who is default justified in making some transitions, such as taking his perceptual experiences at face value, has an *a priori* justified belief to the effect that those transitions are safe transitions to make. Thus, one would conclude that if an agent is default justified in making some transitions, it is *a priori* that those transitions are safe to make.

Note that if one stuck with the externalist perspective, one would not come to this conclusion. This is because, for an externalist, a justified belief which one is not prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for does *not* thereby count as an *a priori* justified belief. For example, typically one will have many justified beliefs stored in
memory, such as that China is the most populous nation on Earth, or that Michael Phelps
won several gold medals at the Summer Olympics in China. These beliefs are not beliefs
which one is normally prepared to give an adequate empirical justification for, or so an
externalist will say.68 But nor do these beliefs count as a priori justified beliefs, as the
externalist thinks of them; they were not acquired solely through some combination of
intuition, inference, and memory, but, typically, in some other way.69

3.3.3 Switching Back to an Externalist Perspective

One has already come to the conclusion that if agent is default justified in making a
certain set of transitions, then it is a priori that those transitions are safe to make. From an
externalist perspective, a proposition is a priori iff it is deducible from obvious truths.70
So, if, finally, one switches back to an externalist perspective, one will conclude that if an
agent is default justified in making some transitions, then it is a priori, in a traditional
sense, that that those are safe transitions to make.

Note that if one stays with an internalist perspective, one will not arrive at this
conclusion. The reason is that, from an internalist perspective, it is not true that a
proposition is a priori iff it is deducible from obvious truths. For, from that perspective,
the fact that a proposition is deducible from obvious truths is not sufficient to show that it is
a priori.71 Thus, if one stays with an internalist perspective, one will conclude that if agent
is default justified in making some transitions, then it is a priori, in a non-traditional sense,
that those are safe transitions.

68 See Chapter One.
69 See §2.2.
70 See §2.2.
71 See §2.1.
So, if one switches back and forth between internalist and externalist perspectives, one will eventually conclude that if an agent is default justified in making certain transitions, then it is a priori, in a traditional sense, that making those transitions is a safe, and hence legitimate way, to form beliefs about the world. But there is no good reason to accept that claim.

Thus, when we take the claim that one is a priori entitled to rely on a belief forming procedure to mean that one is default justified in making various transitions, the first premise of Burge and Peacocke's argument for their genuinely rationalist thesis is correct. But, in that case, there is no good reason to accept the second premise. So their argument fails, on this interpretation of it.

There is another way to interpret Burge and Peacocke's argument which bears mentioning. We might simply take the claim that one is a priori entitled to rely on a given belief forming procedure to mean that it is a priori, in a traditional sense, that one is entitled to rely on that procedure, as both Burge and Peacocke seem to do on occasion. In that case, the second premise of their argument is, trivially, true. But then there is no reason to accept the first premise: there is no reason to think that an agent's ability to acquire a body of justified beliefs about the world depends on his being a priori entitled to rely on certain belief forming procedures. The arguments which Peacocke and Burge give for that premise clearly do not work when the notion of a priori entitlement is understood in the way just suggested. So their argument fails on this interpretation as well.

3.4 Conclusion

On the face of it, there is a lot of disagreement about the importance of the a priori. Some of this conflict might be merely apparent, since people tend to work with different
conceptions of the a priori. But Peacocke and Burge seem to advocate for the importance of the a priori in a strong and controversial sense.

It seems that what pushes them towards this position is the basic idea that we need a priori starting points. More specifically, what drives them is the idea that we have to be a priori warranted to go about forming beliefs in various natural ways, such as taking our perceptual experiences at face value, and accepting the testimony of others.

But what is true is that we need default justified starting points. We need to be justified in relying on various belief forming procedures even when we do not have adequate empirical support for them. This truth, however, is innocuous. It lends supports to Burge and Peacocke's genuinely rationalist position only if one loses sight of the distinction between internalist and externalist ways of thinking, and starts switching back and forth between them.
Works Consulted


