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As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Linda Christine Radzik entitled "The Nature of Normativity" and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Prof. David Schmidt
Prof. Keith Lehrer
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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copy of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

Dissertation Director
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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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Dedicated to the Memory of

Jean Hampton
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ABSTRACT

There is something mysterious, and perhaps even dubious, about 'ought' claims. They seem to exert an authoritative power, a "binding force," over us. The norms of morality are most often said to exhibit such an authoritative force. The "queerness" of this alleged property has led many to moral skepticism. But, normative authority is no less mysterious in the case of the 'oughts' of epistemics, logic or prudence. The questions "Why should I believe the truth? accept deductive inferences? act prudently?" are puzzling in the same way as the more familiar worry "Why should I be moral?"

Moral philosophers who have tried to explain the nature of normative authority have most frequently focused their efforts on developing theories of the nature of moral facts, our epistemic access to such facts, or our motivational responses to them. It seems to me that each of these approaches is inadequate to the task of capturing normative force. One may know that it is a fact that stealing is immoral but still wonder whether one should steal. One may feel a strong motivation to be honest without being convinced that there is good reason to be so motivated. We will not clear up the mystery of normative authority by clearing up the metaphysics, epistemology, or motivational efficacy of norms.

I contend that normative authority is a matter of justification. A norm is authoritative for an agent if and only if it is justified in a thorough-going sense, which I refer to as "justification simpliciter." I analyze the nature of justification simpliciter by means of an extended analogy with epistemic justification. There is a regress problem
with justification simpliciter, and there are foundationalist, coherentist and externalist approaches to solving that problem. I conclude that foundationalist and externalist models of justification simpliciter fail. I then develop a coherentist theory of the nature of normativity, called Reflective Endorsement Coherentism. According to this theory, an agent is justified in accepting norm N as a guide to her action if and only if she can both endorse N upon reflection and reflectively endorse her own practices of endorsement.
CHAPTER 1:
JUSTIFICATION AND THE AUTHORITY OF NORMS

1. Introduction

There is something mysterious, and perhaps even dubious, about ‘ought’ claims (or ‘norms’). They seem to exert an authoritative power, a binding force. This is evinced in our language, where we often replace ‘ought’ statements with ‘can’ statements, as in “You can’t steal, it would be wrong.” The fact that you ought not steal is supposed to restrict your action in a meaningful way. The rules of morality are usually said to have such authoritative force. The “queerness” of this alleged property has led many to moral skepticism.1 But moral rules occupy only a small subset of the class of norms. There are also norms of logic, prudence, science, and epistemics, just to name a few. Even the most adamant of moral skeptics will be loathe to abandon her commitment to the authority of logical, epistemic, and scientific norms. (In fact, she will usually appeal to the nonmoral norms as requiring skepticism about morality.2) If normative authority is “queer” in the moral case, why would it be any less mysterious in the case of the ‘oughts’ of epistemics, logic or rationality? The questions “Why should I believe the truth? accept deductive inferences? act rationally?” are puzzling in the same way as the more familiar worry “Why should I be moral?”3

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1Though not himself a skeptic, J.L. Mackie, in his famous “argument from queerness” [1977, Ch. 1], provides the basic worry of the sort of skeptic I have in mind.

2Cf. Harman’s skeptical argument in [1977, Ch.1].

3Jean Hampton [forthcoming] argues for this claim in detail.
Moral philosophers who have tried to explain the nature of normative authority have most frequently focused their efforts on developing theories of the nature of moral facts, our epistemic access to such facts, and/or our motivational and other psychological responses to them. It seems to me that each of these approaches is inadequate to the task of capturing normative force. One may know that it is a fact that stealing is immoral but still wonder whether one should steal. One may feel a strong motivation to be honest without being convinced that there is good reason to be so motivated. I think that we should tackle the puzzle of the authority of norms from a different angle.

I contend that for a norm (moral and otherwise) to be authoritative is for it to be  

justified in a distinctive way. Facts of value are only relevant to the authority of a norm when it is the case that one is justified in cultivating value. Our motivational, affective, and other psychological reactions only have the power to legitimately bind us when we have good reason to react in such ways. The metaphysical, epistemological and psychological approaches to authority all run into the same problem. One can allow that a norm has the metaphysical, epistemic, or psychological property in question and still

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4 David Copp [1995] and Christine Korsgaard [1996] both have justification-based analyses of normative authority. Hampton [forthcoming] seems to as well. Like Copp, Korsgaard and I, Hampton thinks a norm is authoritative if there is a good reason to accept it. However, she uses the term ‘justification’ to refer to something other than this concept of ‘having a good reason.’

5 P.H. Nowell-Smith [1954] levels this sort of critique against Moore’s nonnaturalism. Nowell-Smith writes:

A new world is revealed for our inspection [by “rational intuition” of nonnatural properties]... it is mapped and described in elaborate detail. No doubt it is all very interesting. If I have a thirst for knowledge I shall read on....But what if I am not interested? Why should I do anything about these newly revealed objects?” [p. 41, as edited by Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton. 1992].
wonder whether one has reason to accept the norm. Reasons are really what seem to matter here. So our analysis of authority should proceed in terms of reasons—justificatory reasons. For a norm to be authoritative is for it to be justified.

It is, of course, far from sufficient to say that normative authority is justification. There are many different kinds of justification, and these relate to norms and to each other in various and complex ways. So the first step in presenting a justification-based theory of normative authority is to specify which sense of justification will be relied on. That is what I will do in this first chapter. For the moment, I will give our target the uninformative (and somewhat redundant) label 'normative justification.'

We can zero in on the proper characterization of normative justification by considering the dimensions along which the various senses of justification differ. In this chapter, I will lay out some of these distinctions. These taxonomize varieties of justification in terms of the evaluative interests to which they are linked, their strength, and their epistemic point of view. We will ask where our thoughts about the binding force of norms draw us on these dimensions. In this way, we will build up to a general characterization of normative justification. Subsequent chapters will be dedicated to specifying what it would be for a norm to be justified in this sense. Only when the arguments therein are complete will we be able to judge whether analyzing authority in terms of normative justification is successful.

Before diving into normative justification, though, let's first stop and take a look at the subject matter of this new kind of justification—norms.
2. Norms

Normative authority is primarily a property of norms. By a norm, I mean to refer to a principle or standard of action, an action-guide. A norm is something that claims or implies there is some reason to perform or abstain from a particular action (we should read "action" broadly, so as to recognize that there are norms for believing, desiring, endorsing, intending, feeling, etc.). We can characterize norms as things that are expressible by normative 'ought'-statements.® Rules, prohibitions, recommendations, and permissions are all kinds of norms. A moral rule is a prime example of a norm, but norms pop up in all areas of life. Norms find expression in scientific guidelines, traffic laws, epistemic warnings, models of rationality, political ideals, standards of etiquette, health tips, the rules of baseball, and even the subtle currents of fashion.

Normativity might also be said to be a property of actions, beliefs, intentions and etc. I find this way of speaking a little odd. What is meant though, is just that there are some actions that one has an authoritative reason to perform, beliefs that one has a genuine reason to hold, and so forth. We can account for the normativity of actions and

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®I say a "normative 'ought'-statement" to mark a distinction between the predictive (e.g. "It ought to rain tomorrow") and the other uses of 'ought.' Compare this linguistic test for norms with Gibbard’s [1990, 70]. According to him, norms are things that are expressible by imperatives. By his test, recommendations are not norms—imperatives imply that there is a decisive reason for action, whereas recommendations imply merely sufficient reasons. The "normative 'ought'-statement" test, on the other hand, counts recommendations as norms. This strikes me as the right result. We run across decisive reasons for action rather seldomly. I suspect. Most of the time our actions are guided by considerations of what we have a "good enough reason" to do.

®A permission to x fits the following form of 'ought'-statement: “It is not the case that S ought not to x.”
beliefs if we first have a theory of authoritative norms. One will have a genuine reason to perform a certain action if and only if there is an authoritative norm that directs one to perform that action. To put this in terms of the ‘justification model’ that I am developing: the normatively justified actions will be the ones dictated by normatively justified ‘ought’ claims.

Speaking of norms, as well as actions, beliefs and intentions, as the subject matter of justification, maybe a bit misleading. An action, for instance, isn’t justified or unjustified in isolation from some actor. Rather persons are justified in acting. When we speak of an action being justified without any specification of an actor, we most likely mean only that it is an action that any actor, or the ordinary actor, would be justified in performing. The actor is not completely out of the picture. So, if we are to be precise, we should say it is persons that are justified in acting. Similarly, beliefs are not justified apart from believers; intentions are not justified independently of the persons who have those intentions; nor are “norms” justified in isolation from the persons who subscribe to those norms. Rather, it is persons who are justified in believing, having particular intentions, and accepting certain norms.

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*One might propose the following counterexample: A consequentialist may want to say that what makes an act morally justified is that it has maximally good consequences. However, a person can perform such an act without having the least idea of benefitting anyone. He may be misled into thinking his action will have bad consequences. For example, an enraged A pushes B off a building, hoping to kill B; but instead, B survives unhurt because her fall is broken by the evil C, who is killed. Good consequences abound. Still, we do not want to say that A is morally justified in acting in this way. So perhaps to say “an action is justified” and to say “a person is justified in acting” are different things after all. My response to this is that the consequentialist theory is a theory of what makes an action morally good, not what makes it morally justified. If we draw this distinction then we can say (perfectly intelligibly) that the action is good but the actor is not justified in performing it.
My understanding of ‘subscribing to’ or ‘accepting a norm’ follows Allan Gibbard [1990, Ch. 4]. To accept a norm is to endorse it as a guide to action. Endorsement is a kind of psychological state, which is tied to motivations to act and dispositions to avow support for the norm. If I endorse the norm “One should not attend parties to which one has not been invited,” then I will think of myself and others as having a reason not to crash parties. I will advise others not to crash and refrain from crashing parties myself, unless I suffer from weakness of will, find that another norm overrides my ‘no party crashing’ norm in a particular situation, or am setting out to do something that I ought not do. As Gibbard says, “Accepting a norm is whatever psychic state...gives rise to this syndrome of avowal of the norm and governance by it” [75].

One might ask at this point whether “subscribing to a norm” and “believing a proposition” are really different activities. I think that they are. Believing a proposition is a representational sort of activity—in believing one represents the world to oneself as being a certain way. Subscribing to a norm is not a representational activity. In subscribing to a norm, one doesn’t represent the world as being some way, rather one adopts a pattern for one’s behavior, or, if you will, an intention to make the world a certain way in the future.

It might be suggested that subscribing to a norm is more like believing a proposition or representing a state of affairs than I have allowed. One might say that to subscribe to a norm, e.g. “One should not eat meat,” is to represent the world as being such that one ought not eat meat. However, there is a gap between representing to oneself that one ought not x and committing oneself to not x-ing. Intuitively, it seems we
often say things like "I know that I ought to become a vegetarian, but I'm not gonna give up my hamburgers." I'm not imagining a case where the agent believes that the vegetarian 'ought' is overridden, but a case where the agent flat-out rejects or defies the norm as a guide for her own action. Representation of and commitment to the 'ought' pull apart (or, at least, it seems possible that they might). It is the necessity of committing oneself to a norm that is really being challenged by questions about normativity like "why should I be moral?" So it is the justification of the acceptance of norms that must be involved in "normative justification."

Now that we have a clearer picture of what norms are, we can turn to normative justification. My project in the next few sections is to characterize normative justification by finding its place in a taxonomy of senses of justification.

3. Interests

Perhaps the most familiar way of sorting types of justification is into categories like moral justification, epistemic justification, and prudential justification. We conclude that these are different kinds of justification by looking at cases where they seem to be in conflict. Jane is in a position to kill her rich Uncle Albert so that it will appear he died from natural causes. If she does this, Jane will quickly inherit all of Albert's vast fortune. This act seems to be prudentially justified (Jane's self-interested goals will be satisfied to a high degree) but it is clearly morally unjustified. Therefore, prudential justification and
moral justification are conceptually distinct. The distinction between epistemic and prudential justification is usually made by appeal to a case like the following. A woman’s son is accused of a brutal crime. All the evidence that the police and lawyers bring forward points to the conclusion that her son is guilty. But if the mother were ever to believe that her son committed such a horrible crime, she would suffer a mental collapse. The mother has epistemic reason to believe in her son’s guilt and prudential reason to believe the opposite. That the moral, the prudential, and the epistemic are different kinds of justification is clear. But it would be good to have a principled way of drawing boundaries. What makes justification moral as opposed to epistemic or prudential?

It seems that such boundaries are drawn, at least in part, on the basis of distinct goals or interests. Epistemic justification is a justification that attaches to whatever serves the characteristic goal of epistemic activity—which is to believe what is true while avoiding believing what is false [Lehrer, 1990, 20-21; BonJour, 1985, 5-8]. An action or norm is prudentially justified if performing that action or subscribing to that norm will serve one’s self-interest. There will often be some debate about which interest is definitive of a particular kind of justification. What, for instance, is the goal of moral activity, the furthering of which brings moral justification? Is it the maximization of happiness? Is it the treatment of people as ends in themselves? Perhaps it is the preservation of a mutually

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9 However, one may try to argue, as Plato does in the Republic, that being immoral will never make one prudentially better off in the long run.

beneficial social contract. Some might even claim that the goal of morality is more like a
disjunction or a conjunction of some of these goals. Further, it may be that both a goal
and some other factor may be needed to distinguish all the different categories that we
ordinarily recognize. For instance, perhaps both morality and etiquette have as a goal the
maintenance of a mutually beneficial social system. The difference may lie in the sorts of
means that are applied to that end or in the severity of response that society attaches to
different failures to serve that goal. Despite these complexities, the appeal to interests
seems a legitimate method for differentiating types of justification into the familiar
categories of the moral versus the epistemic versus the prudent and so forth.

4. Justification Simpliciter

An important thing to note, however, once we claim that a connection to a
particular goal or interest can be definitive of a justificatory scheme, is that we get an
explosion of types of justification. There seems to be one for every goal, and there are an
infinite number of possible goals. Winning at chess is a possible goal and we can classify
actions as chess-justified, unjustified, or (if they neither serve nor detract from the goal of
winning at chess) nonjustified. It is possible to have the goal of extorting money and so
there is also the category of extortion-justification. Goals are a dime a dozen and so are
varieties of justification.

11This seems to be the view of David Schmidtz. See “Self-Interest: What’s in it For Me?”
[forthcoming].
This explosion of norms may strike some as a reductio of the interest-relative method of differentiating kinds of justification. But I disagree. Surely we don’t usually think in categories as narrow as ‘chess-justification,’ but that may simply be because the more general categories, like prudential justification, are more convenient. I ought to protect my queen because I have adopted the goal of playing chess; it has become part of my self-interest to protect my queen. I think of myself as prudentially justified in protecting my queen, not as chess-justified, but that is not because there is anything wrong with the category of chess-justification. In fact, if I earn my living playing chess, chess-justification may be a familiar and important concept to me.

However, the worry with the explosion of types of justification may not be that these new categories are incoherent as much as that they seem to deflate the old categories. Under the interest-relative taxonomy, the only difference between chess-justification and prudential justification is that the latter is a more general category. But this seems to leave something out. It seems to ignore the fact that there is a significant sense in which I ought to be prudent while it is generally a matter of little significance whether I win at chess. I ought to do what is morally justified but I ought not do what is extortion-justified.

Here’s another way of getting at the distinction I want to draw. Take a norm that it is okay to flout—e.g. “Women ought to veil their faces in public.” Even this norm is justified in some sense. It is justified from the point of view of etiquette in Afghanistan. It would be rude for me to walk around Kabul unveiled, people would be offended. Yet, the
fact that showing my face in public is unjustified in this sense does nothing to convince me to wear a veil. Why should I care if I'm rude by Afghani standards of etiquette?

There are lots and lots of interest-defined notions of justification. But rather than exhausting our ideas about justification, it seems that we need the concept of justification in order to decide between them. I judge that I really have reason to do what is morally justified but not what is justified by Afghani etiquette. It seems I need another notion of justification in order to make sense of such judgments. I need another concept of justification in order to say which of these evaluative standpoints matter and which don't, which interests ground justification worth having and which do not.

We seem to have found the place where normative justification fits in. If normativity really is a matter of justification, it must be a very different kind of justification than these interest-driven ones. What must it be like? First of all, it must be a comprehensive sort of justification. It must embody a point of view from which we can look over all the different interest-defined evaluative schemes and, without begging the question, judge which ones should be allowed influence over our choices. The only way a justificatory scheme can judge all the interest-defined evaluative schemes without begging the question is if it is itself interest-neutral. It cannot be defined in terms of some particular concern or goal. So, in order to account for the intuition that some interest-defined senses of justification matter more than others, we must recognize that there is

\[12\text{The term comes from Copp [forthcoming, 16].}\]
also a kind of justification that is comprehensive and (therefore) interest-neutral. Following Copp [forthcoming], I call this “justification simpliciter.”

We can find a further argument for thinking that there must be a kind of justification that is interest-neutral by considering what life would be like if we could think only in terms of moral, epistemic, prudential justification and the like. Notice that when we think about what sorts of reasons we have for acting (or accepting norms, or having a certain belief), sometimes we want to know whether the action is morally justified and sometimes we want to know whether it is prudentially justified. But at other times we ask a different sort of question about justification. For instance, in thinking about the criminal’s mother, we say “Believing in her son’s guilt is epistemically justified but prudentially unjustified. Should she believe or not?” This is a question about which conception of justification ought to have an influence on her action, which goal should be allowed to guide her belief.

Now, by raising such a question, we may still be asking for an interest-relative brand of justification. We may be asking “Does the mother have an epistemic reason to believe what is true or what is prudent?” But that seems a silly thing to ask since the answer is so obvious, epistemic reasons are defined by an interest in truth. Further, we could just as easily note that, though this woman has an epistemic reason to believe the truth, she has a prudential reason to believe what is in her self-interest. When we recognize this, we are right back at the beginning, wondering whether she should attend to her epistemic or her prudential reasons for belief.
If this question is to have any bite at all, and it certainly feels like a genuine question, then we must be asking it, not from the standpoint of the epistemic or of self-interest, but from some other standpoint. We might be asking what the criminal’s mother is justified in believing in another, interest-relative sense of justification—for instance, we may be asking whether she has a moral reason to believe what is true or what is prudent (is there a moral obligation to believe what is true? does she have a moral obligation to protect her own health so that she can be of some aid to her son in his ordeal?). This is certainly a genuine, and even difficult, question. But suppose we answer it by saying that the criminal’s mother has a moral reason to believe the truth. We are now left with another question. Should she believe what she has an epistemic reason to believe, what she has a prudential reason to believe, or what she has a moral reason to believe?

Stepping back to yet another interest-relative interpretation of the justificatory reason being asked for may well yield us some interesting new information, but it will always leave another question—should the criminal’s mother believe what is true, prudent, moral or x? In addition to all the various goal-relative conceptions of justification that we may be asking about, it seems that there is another sort of justificatory question we can raise. We can ask what someone has reason simpliciter to do.

Interest-driven kinds of justification—like the epistemic, prudential and moral—don’t exhaust the sorts of justification that we want to have. They always leave another question because we can always step back from the interest that grounds that evaluative scheme and ask whether that is an interest we should have. But we want there to be some
way of closing the question. Justification simpliciter is whatever can provide that sort of closure.

A person who is justified simpliciter in accepting a norm is one who has an overall reason to accept that norm given all her different interest-oriented kinds of reasons. The intuition that moral justification is significantly different from chess-justification is accounted for, I propose, by the fact that we (almost always) have reason simpliciter to attain moral justification whereas attention to chess-justification is seldom justified simpliciter.

In sum, the reason for thinking that there is such a property as “being justified simpliciter” is that we need there to be such a property. We are actors who need to make decisions. We need to choose between different beliefs, actions, values, ways of life. We depend on notions of justification like the moral, the prudential and the epistemic, in order to make such choices. But sometimes our problem is that prudence and morality point in different directions and we need to decide which to follow. Someone who is skeptical about justification simpliciter cannot provide us with the advice we need. He can tell us that morality or prudence is more justified in some other goal-relative sense, but this always leaves us with another question. Still the choice between morality and prudence is one that we must make. Unless there is justification simpliciter, there is no way of saying that there can really be a better or worse choice to make in such a situation. The best we

\[13\] Copp is this kind of skeptic [forthcoming]. I discuss his arguments for being skeptical about justification simpliciter in Ch. 4.
can do is make choices based on a seemingly arbitrary preference for one evaluative stance or another—a preference, say, for the moral point of view for which there isn’t any deeper reason. Intuitively, though, we feel that there are better and worse choices. We feel that it does matter which way we choose to act, what we believe, what sort of intentions we have.

Further, it is not the case that conflicts between different kinds of justification are rare. If I am right that possible goals ground types of justification, then there are an infinite number of types of justification. So we can expect that for any justificatory reason of type J1 that we find ourselves with, there is another reason for a contrary action of type J2. Which reason should guide us? On the basis of what are we to choose between them if not on the basis of a reason simpliciter? Usually we will be moved by only a few types of reasons—moral ones, prudential ones. But without reasons simpliciter grounding the moral and the prudent, their influence looks insupportable. These points weigh in favor of the presumption that subjects can be justified simpliciter.

So, beside the myriad notions of goal-relative justification there must also be justification that is goal-independent—a justification simpliciter. Of these two categories, justification simpliciter is clearly the better candidate for what we’ve been calling normative justification. Normative justification cannot be goal-relative justification. To show that a norm is justified relative to some goal G is not yet to show that the norm is really binding or authoritative because it is possible to doubt that one should have goal G. On the other hand, when a norm is justified simpliciter, there is a thorough-going, non-
question-begging reason for the influence it has over us. If we want to know what it is that makes norms authoritative, we should look at what makes them justified simpliciter.

5. Strength

A second dimension along which notions of justification differ is strength. According to some conceptions, a subject can count as justified even though it is (or may be) overridden or outweighed by another subject that has a greater degree of justification. For instance, consider how we conceive of the moral justification of norms in the following case: I promise to meet you for lunch. On my way to the restaurant I am the sole witness to a car accident. I stop to help the victims and miss our lunch date. The rule “Help those in need” is a norm that I accept and am morally justified in accepting. It is the norm that guides my action in this case. At the same time, even as I am keeping you waiting at the restaurant, I accept the norm “Keep your promises.” My acceptance of the Promise-Keeping Norm is morally justified, we want to say, even though it happens to be overridden by the Help-the-Needy Norm in this instance. The Promise-Keeping Norm is justified though defeasible.

Other conceptions of justification reserve the label “justified” only for subjects that are decisively justified. Perhaps the moral justification of actions (leaving norms aside for the moment) is like this. If I had continued on to my lunch appointment rather than helped the accident victims, we would not say that my action was morally justified, even though that action has something in its favor, namely, its being an instance of promise-keeping, a
morally worthy enterprise. An action is morally justified only when it is decisively justified—only when it is supported by the best or strongest of my moral reasons for action.¹⁴ So the sort of moral justification that norms have is defeasible but the sort of moral justification that actions have is decisive.

Is normative justification defeasible or decisive? In order for a person to be bound by a norm, does the norm require merely good reasons in its favor or does it need to have the best of reasons on its side? There is something to be said for each option. A decisive justification is forceful indeed. But justification that is merely defeasible can, it seems, exert a binding power too. When I am unable to keep my promise to meet you for lunch, I feel bad. I apologize to you. Even though I had an excellent reason for standing you up, I still feel the weight of my promise. The power of my promise is overcome by the power of the obligation to help the needy, but the former is a genuine power nonetheless.

I suggest that we enrich our notion of normative force in order to recognize the pull that each sort of justification has on us. Let us reserve the term authoritative for norms that have decisive normative justification. The adjectives binding and forceful, as well.

¹⁴Though I have found it easiest to characterize decisive justification as a matter of having “the best” or “strongest” reasons, we need not assume that decisive justification only attaches to a subject that has such superlative properties. Two actions may tie in strength. Even two incompatible actions may tie in strength (this is the stuff moral dilemmas are made of). It is also possible to have a “threshold model” of decisive justification, wherein a subject is decisively justified if the reasons in its favor reach a certain level of strength or number. Whether a subject exceeds this threshold is a matter of no importance from the point of view of decisive justification. Perhaps the prudential justification of action is like this. In order for an action of mine to be decisively prudentially justified, maybe all I need to do is increase my well-being rather than maximize it. So, for instance, my choice of a bike path is decisively prudentially justified if it is safe, though there may be some other path that is even safer. Perhaps the label “sufficiently” justified is more appropriate to this case than “decisively justified.” Whether the “superlative” or the “threshold” model of decisive reasons is appropriate will likely vary between different types of justification.
however, may be linked with both decisive and defeasible varieties of normative justification. At different points in this dissertation I will talk about both sorts of justification. This should not cause any problem because, I believe, the best way to develop a theory of decisive normative justification is by starting with an analysis of defeasible normative justification.

6. Epistemic Points of View

Another distinction between kinds of justification that we should attend to is the difference between what I call first person and third person justification. This is a difference in the epistemic access of the agent in question to the relevant justifying reasons. In order for an action, intention, or norm to be first person justified for some agent, the agent must have epistemic access, from her own point of view, to the reasons that justify that action, intention, or norm. In contrast, the standard for something being justified in a third person sense involves no such requirement of epistemic access. Instead, a subject is justified if it has some relevant “good-making” property, whether one can know about or appreciate that property or not.

Those familiar with the debate in epistemology between internalism and externalism will be familiar with the distinction I am indicating. The epistemic internalists think that a person’s belief is epistemically justified only if she is aware of the reasons why her belief is likely to be true (true belief being the goal of epistemic activity). They think of epistemic justification as a brand of first person justification. The epistemic externalists,
on the other hand, have a third person understanding of epistemic justification. They say that an agent's belief can be justified even if she has no understanding of what it is that makes the belief justified. For example, some externalists will say that what makes an agent’s belief justified is its having been produced by a reliable cognitive mechanism [Goldman, 1979]. The agent need not know (or justifiedly believe) that the mechanism is reliable; it’s enough that it simply be reliable. According to the epistemic externalist, a belief is justified if it has the relevant good-making feature—e.g. production by a reliable source, or, more generally, likeliness of being true.

This distinction between first and third person conceptions of justification is not exclusive to epistemic justification. For instance, there are also debates about whether moral justification is first or third person. For an action to be morally justified, must the actor be able to detect what it is that makes the action morally justified or need the action only have certain properties, regardless of whether the agent can detect those properties? Is an action morally justified because of the content of the agent’s intentions or because the action has objectively good consequences?

In the next few paragraphs, I will offer some reasons why a scheme of justification might include a requirement of first person access. It will be convenient to continue using theories of epistemic justification because the first person/third person distinction has been

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15I will use the lengthy labels “epistemic internalism and externalism” in order to avoid confusion with the dozen unrelated “internalism/externalism” debates found in metaethics. It should be noted that there are many ways of drawing the internalism/externalism distinction in epistemology. Some of these differ so greatly as to be different distinctions. The version I use follows Alston [1989a].
most thoroughly discussed in that literature. There is some danger of confusion in doing this though. Let me emphasize that although first person justification involves a concern with epistemic access, there can be first person moral, prudential, or etc. as well as first person epistemic justification. So, for example, in order to be first person prudentially justified in acting, a person must have epistemic access to her prudential reasons. The first/third person distinction applies to all types of justification. The question now is, what rides on this distinction?

Access to justifying reasons and the first person point of view will strike one as important or not based one's conception of the role of a justificatory scheme. People who think of justification as requiring some kind of access to justifying reasons are also likely to say that attributions of justification should pick out the agents who are acting conscientiously with regard to what they should do. Here, there is a conceptual link between one’s being justified and one’s having acted in an epistemically responsible or blameless manner with regard to one’s reasons. Justification (be it epistemic or moral or what have you) is first person accessible in the relevant sense of the term only if someone who is sincerely interested in detecting it is capable of doing so. Of course, if we were to make an actual investigation of one’s reasons a criterion of justification, people would almost never be justified. Therefore, we should allow that an agent can be first person justified even though she is not interested in whether she is justified. What matters is that she could detect her reasons were she to make a conscientious effort to do so.

This sensitivity to epistemic blamelessness in the detection of reasons can be seen
in the debate about epistemic justification [Alston, 1989a, 89]. The epistemic internalists defend their intuition that some agent’s belief is justified by pointing out that the agent did the best he could, given his situation, to come to a true belief. However, epistemic externalists usually say that blamelessness in the pursuit of justified reasons for belief is beside the point. They say that an agent could form beliefs as carefully as he is able and still come up with conclusions that are wildly false. Such an agent is epistemically blameless but should still be judged epistemically unjustified because his beliefs don’t have the relevant good-making property—likeliness of truth [Alston, 1989a, 95-96]. According to the externalist, ‘epistemically justified’ is an evaluative concept much like ‘gifted’ or ‘beautiful,’ which do not carry any connotation of responsibility or blamelessness [Alston, 1989a, 97].

Another explanation of the importance of access to reasons to some justificatory schemes has to do with who is thought of as employing the scheme. Theorists who subscribe to first person theories of justification are usually thinking of justification as a property that people should be able to usefully think about in order to decide how to act. These theorists have a regulative theory of justification [Goldman, 1986, 25]. To continue using epistemologists as our example, epistemic internalists see themselves as working toward an analysis of justification, not simply because it is a part of an analysis of knowledge, but because they want to understand what they, as actors, can do to ensure that their beliefs are justified. In contrast, epistemic externalists have a nonregulative conception of epistemic justification. They don’t see the job of providing a theory of
justified beliefs as necessarily related to the job of providing belief-forming guides to agents. They judge which beliefs are justified and which beliefs are not from the third person point of view, the external appraiser's point of view. Epistemic externalists see themselves as something like scientists who discover how to detect particular things in the world: namely, justified believers and people who have knowledge. The agent/believer is the object of study, not the consumer of the theory of justification.¹⁶

We have examined two different reasons for the requirement of epistemic access to justifying reasons, which characterizes a first person notion of justification: (1) a concern for epistemic responsibility and blamelessness with regard to the detection of reasons, and (2) a concern for offering action-guides to agents. We can see in the case of epistemic internalism that these concerns hang together nicely. Here theorists claim epistemic access to the reasons for belief is required for epistemic justification because they want agents to

¹⁶I've been a bit unfair here. Externalists usually think that they have something to say to the believer in way of advice, though this is not their primary objective. Alvin Goldman explains how this is possible by drawing an analogy with utilitarian theories of ethics [in conversation]. The utilitarian's moral principle focuses on the happiness-producing consequences of action, which are good-making features of action not necessarily visible from the first person point of view. But utilitarianism's concentration on the third person features of an action does not prevent it from being useful as an action-guide. Its prescription to us is "maximize happiness." It is useful for me, an agent who is trying to perform the morally best action, to know that this action is whichever one creates the most happiness. If I know this, I will pay more attention to consequences and, other things being equal, I'll have more success at acting morally.

Notice however, that norms that focus on good-making features of action are useful as action-guides only insofar as the agent can have access to information about which things have those features. This means that third person principles of justification are only useful as action-guides insofar as they overlap with first person norms. The utilitarian principle is a useful guide to moral action only to the extent that it coincides with the first person norm "Do whatever you have good reason to believe will maximize happiness." Further, it is interesting to note that some utilitarians do not embrace this first person norm. Mill famously argued that it is better for agents not to think in terms of consequences [Mill, 1861, Ch. 2]. There will be better consequences if agents do not focus on them. Mill said. So we see that it is not necessarily an easy step from a theory of good-making features of action to an appropriate action-guide.
form beliefs on the basis of these reasons. And if epistemic justification involves believing responsibly—where, in the case of epistemic justification, this means believing in the way one would if one were carefully aiming at truth—then the justification conferring properties of one’s beliefs had better be things one can access from the first person point of view. The epistemic externalists do not require epistemic access for justification because they are not interested in offering action-guides or rewarding conscientious epistemic behavior.

Let me clarify that I am not concerned here with whether the epistemic internalists or externalists have the proper view of epistemic justification. In fact, I believe both sides in this debate can concede that the other’s theory of justification explicates a legitimate notion that plays some role in how we think about beliefs and believers. The real point of contention in their debate is which of these conceptions of justification plays a role in the analysis of knowledge. What is of interest to us is that the first versus third person distinction is one that cuts across many kinds of justification. The discussion of epistemic justification has simply helped us to appreciate what is at issue in utilizing first versus third person conceptions of justification. The first person ones link justification with an agent’s sensitivity to reasons and with a regulative purpose.

Now that we understand the first person/third person distinction, we must ask which sort of justification is tied up with our ideas about normative force. When we

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17Actually, epistemologists are rarely as ecumenical as this. Internalists often argue that third person justification is not a genuine kind of justification—that justification is a matter of having a reason and inaccessible reasons are not had [BonJour, 1980]. In response, externalists frequently charge that the first person notion of epistemic justification is incoherent because it confuses being justified with being justified in believing that one is justified. [Alston, 1989c]. For more on this criticism, see n. 18 in this chapter.
suppose that a norm has normative force for an agent, do we suppose that norm to be justified in a first or a third person sense? If a norm is to truly bind an agent, must we suppose that the agent could see that it is binding (were she to choose to inquire)?

It seems that normative justification must be a first person sort of justification because it should have the features that we have said are distinctive of first person sorts of justification—it should be a regulative conception of justification and it should be tied to conscientiousness in the detection of reasons.¹⁸

Why think normative justification must be regulative? Why think that normativity should be a feature of norms that people should be able usefully to think about when deciding what to do? Having already determined that normative justification is a matter of

¹⁸Will a first person theory of normative justification run into a version of the level-confusions objection, which I mentioned in n. 17? In order to evaluate this possibility, let’s first look at the original version of the level-confusion (or ‘JJ objection’) objection. This attacks first person theories of epistemic justification. It proceeds as follows: First person epistemic justification demands that people have access to the reasons in virtue of which they are epistemically justified in believing a proposition. But the very notion of “having access to reasons” (definitive of the first person) is an epistemic notion. So, the objection goes, what we seem to have is a demand that the agent be epistemically justified in thinking herself epistemically justified. This now looks like second-order epistemic justification, rather than simply epistemic justification. The first person theorist has changed the subject.

I don’t, in the end, buy this objection. I don’t like the identification of “having epistemic access to one’s reasons” with “being epistemically justified in thinking one has reasons.” After all, the reasons that you access might be bad reasons (“Why do I believe that Smith is in Barcelona? Because Jones, the habitual liar, told me so”). Still, in epistemology, the JJ objection is interesting because if that identification were to stick, then having a first person conception of epistemic justification would amount to changing the subject to second-order epistemic justification.

In the case of normative justification, or justification simpliciter, however, even if it were to be the case that “having epistemic access to one’s reasons simpliciter” amounts to “being epistemically justified in thinking one has reasons simpliciter,” this doesn’t seem to be a problem. It doesn’t show that first person justification simpliciter is really a second-order notion of justification simpliciter. All it would show is that to be first person justified simpliciter one must be epistemically justified in thinking that one is justified simpliciter. It does not show that first person justification simpliciter amounts to being justified simpliciter in thinking that one is justified simpliciter, which would be a change of topic from first-order to second-order justification.
justification simpliciter, it is clear that it must be regulative. The idea that there must be something like justification simpliciter, a goal-independent sort of justification, is motivated by a first person problem. We were moved to conclude that there must be comprehensive sense of justification because it seems that there needs to be one if an agent is actually going to make a choice about what to do that is reason-guided and ultimately non-arbitrary. If justification simpliciter is to play this kind of role in practical deliberation then reasons simpliciter had better be available to the agent who is reasoning. If thinking about justification simpliciter is supposed to be of any use to me when I am trying to make choices, I had better be able to tell what is justified simpliciter and what isn’t.

Christine Korsgaard’s also seems to base a first person accessibility requirement on the regulative nature of conceptions of normativity [1996, 16-17]. The problem of normativity, she argues, comes up in its most pressing form in the first person context. The question—“Is morality really authoritative?”—is most naturally interpreted as a first person sort of worry. It’s the question an agent asks when morality is commanding him to do something difficult, when he is being ordered to make a great sacrifice. He wants to know “Do I really have to do this? Do I really have to be moral?” If the question about normativity is primarily a first person question—a question that the agent asks about himself—then the answer had better address that agent. Whatever it is that makes morality binding on this agent had better be something that he can grasp and appreciate the import of, otherwise his question hasn’t really been answered.

The notion of normative authority also seems to be tied to a concern for
conscientiousness in the detection of reasons, which is the other feature characteristic of first person theories of justification. One way of bringing out this feature of the concept of normativity is in relation to a version of the ‘ought implies can’ intuition. A rule is normative if you really ought to follow it. There’s a significant sense in which you can’t follow the rule if you can’t see the reasons that justify your obligation to follow it.

Suppose you die and go up to the Pearly Gates and Saint Peter says “No, you can’t come in. God commanded you to become a golf pro you failed miserably.” You’d say, “You’ve got to be kidding! No one ever told me that! I had no idea I would be any good at golf. How can you really consider me bound by a rule I had no way of knowing about!” The complaint is not just “How can you punish me for not fulfilling that obligation?”, it is “How can you really say that this was an obligation!” This intuition provides another reason for thinking that normative justification is a first person kind of justification.

So far, I have not characterized in detail the sort of epistemic access to reasons that is involved in first person notions of justification. All I have said is that the reasons must be such that an agent could see them if she were to make a conscientious effort to do so. At least in the context of normative justification we can get a bit more specific. If a norm is normatively justified, the reasons in support of it must be “transparent,” to use Korsgaard’s term [1996, 17]. It must include an awareness of the justification conferring power of the reasons; the agent must be able to perceive the reasons as having justificatory force. As Korsgaard characterizes transparency, the reason for accepting the norm must
still be apparent to the agent when she understands what makes them justified [17]. An example of a nontransparent normative justification of moral norms, for example, would be the evolutionary one. This says that one should be moral because it serves the survival of the species. Korsgaard asks us to imagine ourselves in 1940s Germany, with Nazis banging at our door and Jews hiding in our house, wondering if we should do the moral thing and risk our lives to protect the innocent. If we believed that the justification of morality is the evolutionary one, wouldn’t we wonder “why should I risk death in order to help preserve the species that produces Nazis?” [15] The evolutionary justification of morality would strike us as no justification at all. In my terminology, a lack of transparency means, at least, that the justification isn’t first person 20.

7. Normativity

My goal in this chapter has been to isolate the sense of justification that is most likely to account for the authority of ‘ought’ claims. I have argued that our target, normative justification, is a comprehensive, interest-neutral sort of justification called justification simpliciter. There are defeasible and decisive variants of justification simpliciter. We can also say justification simpliciter is a first person sort of evaluation.

19I’m not thrilled with the term ‘transparency.’ It would be natural to think of a ‘transparent reason’ as a self-evident reason. But that is not at all what it means in this context. A self-evident reason is one an agent can apprehend noninferentially. A transparent reason is a reason that maintains its force once apprehended (no matter how it comes to be apprehended).

20Whether morality must be first person justified, as Korsgaard claims, will be discussed in Chapter 5.
We can double check this result by testing it against the question "Why be moral?" This question is the most common and intuitive verbalization of a worry about normative authority. Would showing that moral norms are decisively first person justified simpliciter address the worry? It would show that there is a decisive, thorough-going reason to accept moral norms as guides to one's own action. The reason would be epistemically accessible to the agent in her own point of view; and the reason would be such that the agent can still feel the weight of the reason when she understands why it is a reason. This is a very impressive kind of justification. It certainly seems to be a good candidate for an answer to the "why be moral" question.

In the next three chapters, I will try to say what it is for an action-guide to be justified in this sense, what it takes for a norm (whether the norm is moral, epistemic, or a norm of baseball) to be first person justified simpliciter. Chapter 2 will lay out the main criterion of adequacy for a theory of justification simpliciter—that it be able to avoid vicious regress. I will argue that there are two main strategies that seem to have a chance of avoiding such a regress problem, foundationalism and coherentism. Chapter 3 investigates foundationalism, but comes to the conclusion that it is inadequate. Chapter 4 examines coherentism as a general strategy and endorses a particular theory version of a coherentist theory, called "Reflective Endorsement Coherentism." In Chapter 5, I will examine details of the Reflective Endorsement Coherentist answer to the question "Why

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21In what follows I will usually drop the modifier 'first person' and simply say 'justification simpliciter.'
should I be moral?" In doing this, we will see how well the theory matches our more basic intuitions about the authority of norms.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22}It may be noted that, though I’ve talked about many different evaluative points of view and senses of justification, I have not yet mentioned rationality or rational justification. There is such wide disagreement regarding the nature of rationality that I think that it would be of little use in explaining my taxonomy. According to some, rationality is a kind of prudence [Gauthier, 1986]; for others, it seems to be what I call justification simpliciter [Korsgaard, 1996]. Some say it is a first person kind of justification [Gibbard, 1990]; others conceive of it as third person [Hampton, forthcoming].
CHAPTER 2: A NORMATIVE REGRESS PROBLEM

But why, we ask... Because... And when we have gleaned that reason we will want to know, But why that reason? Because... And when we have that further reason, But why again--? Because... Why?... Because... Why?... by which stage that incessant question Whywhywhy has become like a siren wailing in our heads and a further question begins to loom: when--where-- how do we stop asking why?

--Graham Swift, Waterland

1. The Normative Question

The project of this dissertation, to review, is to analyze the normative force of 'ought'-statements in terms of justification simpliciter. The first person nature of this sort of justification means that if a norm is normative for an agent, then the agent is in a position to answer the question “Why should I accept that this norm provides me with a good reason (simpliciter) to act?” This general question-form is what I will call the Normative Question. We can say that a theory of normativity is a theory of what it takes to answer the Normative Question.

In this chapter, I will examine a skeptical argument that claims that justification simpliciter is not to be had because it is plagued by vicious regress. It seems each answer to our question “Why?” can be responded to with another “Why?”, and if we have no

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1Compare my Normative Question with Korsgaard's [1996, 9-10]. Her question--"what justifies the claims that morality makes on us?"--is more narrow than mine in that it asks only for a justification of moral norms. But our questions are both about justification simpliciter--what Korsgaard wants to know is what makes moral norms justified simpliciter for someone. Section 1.2.1 of Korsgaard's work clearly indicates that she is also interested in a first person kind of justification. Here she makes the strong claim that the first person/third person distinction is the difference between justification and explanation. She thinks that a third person justification is no justification at all (a claim that epistemic externalists would hotly dispute).
reply to the latter question, our answer to the former question seems to be no answer at all. The Normative Question, so simply stated above, turns into the incessant "whywhywhy," the wailing siren Swift describes in the opening quotation. And so we arrive at the other question Swift raises—How do we stop asking why? In actual conversation, we stop asking the question "why" when we are satisfied that the norm invoked is a good one. But what can justify such confidence?

We should be troubled by the possibility that a regress problem could push us into skepticism about the justification of norms, and not only because it threatens our justification-oriented analysis of normative authority. Norms are at work in most, if not all, areas of life. People use norms to coordinate their behavior with others. Coordinated action is, in turn, used to solve the basic problems of existence—obtaining and securing food, shelter, and protection from one's neighbors. We also use norms to discipline our own unilateral actions. Most importantly, as agents, we seem to depend on the notion that some norms are better than others, that we have good reason to act in accordance with some principles but not others. This idea that norms can be either good or bad guides to action, that they can be justified or unjustified, is central to the way we live. So, we should hope that it can be made sense of and vindicated. This means that we should devise an answer to the normative skeptic.

In this case, as in others, it is impossible to prove to the skeptic that she is wrong. Proofs presuppose the legitimacy of norms of logic and argumentation, but it is the authoritative status of just such norms that the normative skeptic doubts [Copp, 1995, 46-
We must, nonetheless, find a response to the regress problem that is credible by our own lights.

Our fundamental question, then, is “what will constitute a satisfactory answer to the Normative Question?” or “how can we stop asking ‘why?’” or, what amounts to the same thing, “what is the nature of justification simpliciter?” In approaching these issues, it will be useful to draw some analogies, as we did in the last chapter, with epistemology. Epistemologists since Aristotle have been aware of a possible regress problem in the justification of belief, a troublesome “whywhywhy” question of their own. In fact, this debate has provided much of the structure for the philosophical inquiry into the nature of epistemic justification. The parallel in the normative realm will provide the structure for our examination of the nature of justification simpliciter.

There are three main anti-skeptical reactions to epistemic version of the regress problem, which may have their analogues in the normative case. Epistemologists either argue

(i) that the regress of reasons can be brought to a satisfactory halt,

(ii) that the regress of reasons does not really commence, or

(iii) that the regress does commence and continues infinitely, but that such a regress is not vicious.

In this chapter, I will argue that neither conclusion (ii) nor (iii) can be drawn in the case of a normative regress. The justification simpliciter of norms is indeed liable to regress and such a regress is genuinely problematic. The skeptical objection cannot be sidestepped but
must be met head-on. At the end of this chapter, I will suggest some ways of doing this.

Chapters 3 and 4 will examine these possible solutions in detail.

2. The Regress Problem

Norms, like beliefs, seem to be based on one another. I believe that my dog is in the yard because I believe that my roommate told me so, that my roommate is in a position to know where the dog is, and that she wouldn’t lie to me. And furthermore, when I want to justify my belief that the dog is in the yard I will cite these other beliefs as my reasons. Similarly, it seems that I accept the norm “one ought to feed one’s dog” because it is based on another norm that I accept—“a person ought to maintain the health of creatures that he has encouraged to depend on him.” Were I asked for a justification of the dog-feeding norm—were I asked for a reason for thinking that the dog-feeding norm is one that should guide my actions—I would cite the health-maintaining norm in response. Norms seem to serve as reasons for subscribing to other norms, just as beliefs serve as reasons for holding other beliefs.

Epistemologists have long realized that the fact that beliefs seem to be justified in terms of other beliefs raises a regress problem. If I believe B1 and you ask me what my reason is for believing this, I will say that I believe B1 because of some evidence B2, which I believe. In return, you ask me why I believe B2, and I respond with B3. This chain of justifying reasons has the potential to regress infinitely, with each belief being based on some other belief. But, if the chain never ends, then it seems that I have no
justification at all for B1. This is the famous epistemic regress problem. The skeptic charges that this problem prevents us from having any justified beliefs.

We face a similar problem when we try to offer justifying reasons for subscribing to a norm. Norms are based on one another in some way. Therefore, there is the potential for regress. I accept norm N1. If you ask me why I accept N1, I will cite another norm, N2, as my reason. If you press me for a justification of N2, I will appeal to N3, and so on, potentially without end. But if the chain of reasons never ends then it seems I have no reason for N1 at all. Call this the normative regress problem. It supports a normative skepticism, which denies that we can have any good reason for adopting any norm of behavior.

Let me emphasize that we have here two similar but distinct regress problems pertaining two different types of justification. The epistemic regress problem is pertinent to the epistemic justification of belief. It deals with reasons for thinking that a belief is likely to be true. The normative regress problem affects the sort of practical justification we have been calling justification simpliciter. Justification simpliciter is a matter of having reasons for accepting a particular norm as a guiding principle of behavior.

\footnote{Korsgaard briefly raises the possibility of such a normative regress problem in [1996, 30]. Copp also discusses a similar regress in [1995, 37-49]. Copp’s regress pertains not to justification simpliciter, but to what he calls “moral justification.” The differences do not matter in the present context. The reasons he offers for rejecting the regress of moral justification are also plausible responses to the purported regress of justification simpliciter.}
3. The Presuppositions of The Regress Problem

In order to judge whether this normative regress problem is indeed genuinely problematic, we must uncover its presuppositions. There are, it seems, three such assumptions. I will examine them one by one.

In investigating whether the normative regress is really a problem, it should be noted that even the venerable epistemic regress problem is rejected outright by a growing number of epistemologists. They point out that the regress of reasons for belief is generated only if we assume something that they deny: that in order to be justified in what she believes, a person must be able to offer a justification for her beliefs. These epistemologists caution us not to confuse the state of being justified with the process of justifying. The skeptic’s retort is that the state and the process are very closely linked. In order to be justified, a person must have the ability to offer a justification. Supporting this claim is the intuition that a reason for belief that an agent cannot grasp is not really a reason that she has. We can say, then, that the first assumption lying behind the epistemic regress problem is that

1) an agent must have access to her reasons in order to be justified.

The purveyor of the normative regress problem also makes this assumption about reasons simpliciter for subscribing to norms. If we could show (1) to be false, then we could claim that the regress of normative reasons does not really commence, (which is

\[\text{Cf. Alston [1989a, 82-83]. Copp [1995, 44] registers this complaint against the normative version of the problem.}\]
strategy (ii) for avoiding the regress problem). We cannot, however, deny (1). Our topic is first person justification simpliciter, and first person justification is defined by the requirement of access to reasons.

A second assumption is also common to both skeptical problems. Justification will only tend towards regress if it is the case that

2) the things that do the justificatory work (the justifiers) must themselves be justified.

If I can justify X by appeal to Y, and if Y is not the sort of thing that must be justified itself in order to confer justification on X, then there will be no regress. The justification will come to a stop with Y. If assumption (2) can be denied, then once again, the regress will be avoided altogether. This is another way of proceeding with strategy (ii).

The third premise implicit in the claim that justification is liable to a regress is:

3) infinite chains of reasons are not justificatory.

Even if we suppose that every justifier of a norm is in need of a justification of its own, and even if we were to concede that this chain of justifying reasons continues without end, we do not yet have a regress problem. Infinite regresses of reasons are vicious only when their infinitude nullifies their justification. What, though, is so bad about infinite chains of reasons? Why should we think that an infinite set of reasons is no reason at all? If assumption (3) can be denied, then anti-skeptical strategy (iii) is open to us—we could recognize the regress but deny that it is vicious. The next two sections examine premises (2) and (3) respectively.
4. Why Must Justifiers Be Justified?

Should we accept assumption (2), that the things that impart first person justification simpliciter on action-guides must themselves be justified? It may at first seem natural to think of justification in general as something that is passed from one justified thing to another, but this is not the only option. We can think of different kinds of justification on analogy with different kinds of diseases. Some diseases are more contagious than others and so are some types of justification. There seem to be two relevant categories: (a) diseases that an organism can give to another only when he has them himself, and (b) diseases that an organism can pass on without having them himself (i.e. for some diseases, an organism can be a mere carrier).

Similarly, there are two categories of contagion for justification. (a) Some kinds of justification can be conferred only by things that are themselves in possession of that sort of justification. For example, many epistemologists, including almost all internalists, believe that the epistemic justification of belief is like this. They say that only a belief that is itself justified can provide justification to another belief. (b) Other kinds of justification can be conferred even when the justifiers are not themselves justified. Externalist epistemologists conceive of the epistemic justification of belief in this way. For instance,

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*Mark LeBar presented this image to me in conversation.

1 A third category—diseases that cannot be passed to another organism—is not relevant here because it does not seem to have an analogue in justification. We always seem to conceive of justification as contagious.

according to the process reliabilists, what makes a belief justified is the fact that it was produced by a reliable cognitive process [Goldman, 1979]. Cognitive processes are not the sorts of things that have epistemic justification, though they are things that can confer such justification.

Only the first sort of justification will be troubled by regresses. If every justifier must itself be justified then the source of justification is mysterious. If everything that is justified depends on the existence of something else that is justified, where does justification originate? Perhaps nothing is ever justified after all. To support this suspicion with regard to norms, the skeptic needs to show that justification simpliciter is like a disease that must be had in order to be given.

What reason could there be for justification simpliciter to resemble this model of disease as opposed to the "mere carrier" model? What would support the conclusion that the things that confer justification simpliciter must themselves be justified simpliciter? Once again, thinking about a parallel question for epistemic justification is a good way to start. Why might we think that epistemic justification is like a disease that must be had in order to be given?

It turns out that the epistemologists who think that the justifiers of beliefs must themselves be justified are the ones who also accept what John Pollock [1986, 19] calls the doxastic assumption:

DA) the only thing that can epistemically justify a belief is another belief.

If (DA) is true, it is clear that justifiers must be justified. We know that some beliefs are
justified and others aren’t; that is why we study epistemology in the first place. If justifiers are always beliefs, then justifiers always stand in need of justification.

It seems, here, that we have uncovered an additional premise about the nature of justification that goes hand in hand with assumption (2)—that justifiers must be justified. In general, if we can claim that

2a) justifiers must be the same type of thing as what is being justified,

then (2) follows. Say we are trying to justify an item $K_1$, of kind $K$, and we discover that the only things that can serve as reasons for $K_1$ are other items of kind $K$. We already feel that $K$’s are in need of justification. If the only way to justify $K_1$ is by appeal to $K_2$, we will demand a justification of $K_2$ as well. On the other hand, if we deny (2a) then it is possible that the justifiers are of a type of thing that don’t need to be justified. If we can deny (2a) then we might be able to deny (2), and if we can deny (2) then we can avoid the regress problem.

That the skeptic about justification simpliciter is making assumption (2a) is clear in our original, intuitive characterization of the normative regress problem. This story says that what justifies the norm “you ought to feed the dog” is a second norm—“you ought to maintain the health of creatures you have encouraged to depend on you.” Our skeptic is assuming a specific version of (2a), which I will call the normic assumption:

NA) the only thing that can justify a norm is another norm.

If we make the normic assumption, it then seems obvious that justifiers must be justified in the normative case—our inquiry starts with the observation that norms stand in need of
justification. But why should we make the normic assumption? Maybe something other than a norm can justify a norm. Perhaps facts of value can justify norms, for instance. Perhaps the Self-Preservation Norm, “One ought to preserve one’s life,” is justified because life is in fact good.

I think we must accept the normic assumption, though. Consider the suggestion that a fact of value can justify a norm. It seems a fact of value is only capable of being a justifier insofar as it is conceptually linked with an ‘ought’ statement. A fact of value like, say, the fact that life is good, is only something that can justify the Self-Preservation Norm if it comes hand in hand with the norm “One ought to promote the good.” To see this, suppose we deny the latter norm. Do we still have a justification for the Self-Preservation Norm? Suppose I say, “You ought to preserve your life because life is good, but it is not the case that one ought to promote the good.” This statement may well be self-contradictory, which would indicate that facts of value are necessarily attached to norms. But assume the statement isn’t contradictory, would it seem to provide a justification for self-preservation? I don’t think so. Facts of value that are separable from norms seem incapable of serving as justifiers. The norm seems to be doing the vital work. This same kind of argument works against all the other likely candidates for justifiers of norms—facts of reason, desires, goals.

So it doesn’t seem that we can deny the normic assumption—the assumption that only norms are the justifiers of norms. The conclusion that justifiers must be justified follows. Thus, we have defended (2), the second of the premises that generates the
regress problem. We have failed in both of our attempts to deny that the regress of normative reasons commences. We should now examine the prospects of anti-skeptical strategy (iii), which is to accept that there is an infinite regress but deny that it is vicious.

5. What Is Wrong With an Infinite Chain of Reasons?

The third presupposition behind the skeptical claim that there is a regress problem, is that

3) infinite chains of reasons are not justificatory.

Once again, thinking about the way this claim has been treated in the epistemology literature will help us recognize the relevant considerations in the study of justification simpliciter. The first person theorists about epistemic justification, the internalists, usually defend (3). Reasons for belief must be accessible, in the internalist view, but people cannot comprehend infinite justifications. Therefore, infinite chains of reasons are not justification conferring. It is the first person character of epistemic justification, the internalists would say, that commits us to holding (3) about reasons for belief.

Since our topic is the first person justification simpliciter of norms, it seems we have the same reason to accept (3) in the normative realm. First person justification simpliciter requires access to the reasons for subscribing to a norm by the agent for whom they are reasons. If the reasons form an infinite set, they cannot be accessed. The idea is that (3) follows from

1) reasons must be accessible to the agent for whom they are reasons,
which is a premise that we have already defended.\footnote{Copp [1995, 42-44] denies that the normative regress problem is a genuine problem by denying (3) and (1). He claims that infinite sets of reasons are unproblematic because he takes it that the sort of justification in question is third person.}

We might doubt the inference from (1) to (3), however. Why think that an infinite set of reasons is not susceptible to the proper kind of access? This claim is usually defended by one of the following claims: either (a) agents do not have an infinite number of beliefs [BonJour, 1985, 24] or (b) agents (or at least mortal agents) do not have the time to produce an infinite chain of reasons [cf. Sosa, 1991, 174]. The first of these explanations seems misguided. Don’t each of us, in fact, have an infinite number of beliefs? Isn’t it true that you believe “1 + 1 = 2,” “1 + 2 = 3,” and so on? Of course, there are propositions of this form that you have never considered, but does that mean you don’t believe them? Isn’t it true that yesterday you believed that there was no elephant in your refrigerator, though the thought had never crossed your mind? What this line of questioning suggests is that beliefs are dispositional states—to believe x is (roughly) to have a disposition to affirm x were it to occur to one.

To be sure, dispositional theories of belief are not without their competitors. Suffice it to say that internalist epistemologists, at least, must be committed to something like a dispositional theory of belief. These epistemologists say that what justifies an agent in believing B₁ is some set of other beliefs the agent has, B₂...Bₙ. It is very unlikely that each of these beliefs actually passes through consciousness—either at the time B₁ is adopted or prior to this. After all, the set B₂...Bₙ usually includes beliefs like “If it looks
like a cat, it's probably a cat.” The only reasonable scenario in which people can be said to believe such obscure propositions is if beliefs are dispositional states.

If beliefs are dispositional, we each probably have an infinite number of beliefs. So if infinite chains of epistemic reasons are inaccessible we cannot assume that it is because we do not have enough beliefs to populate the chain. Turning from the epistemic justification of beliefs to the justification simpliciter of norms, we should note that subscriptions to norms may very well be dispositional states. To accept a norm for one's behavior is, plausibly, to adopt a disposition to act as the norms directs, avow allegiance to the norm, etc. If this is right, then we should not say that people do not have enough normative acceptances to populate infinite chains of reasons simpliciter. If we are to get from the first person nature of justification to the conclusion that infinite chains are not justificatory, we will need another bridge premise. Let us, then, examine reason (b) for claiming that infinite chains of reasons are inaccessible—that finite agents do not have the time to run through an infinite series of reasons.

Recall from Chapter 1 that first person conceptions of justification are, by definition, regulative. A conception of epistemic justification is regulative if it is the case that, if the agent were to be familiar with what it is that makes some belief justified, he could use this information in his decisions to believe or not. A conception of justification simpliciter is regulative if it constitutes a standard the agent can apply in choosing between norms. Agents are incapable of using infinite chains of reasons to help them make decisions—they could never get to the point where the justification was complete and so
the decision could be made. A theory of justification that takes an infinite chain of reasons to be a mark of justification is not a theory of a regulative sort of justification. This is true for theories of justification simpliciter as well as theories of epistemic justification. Therefore, (b) provides the correct bridge from (1) to (3)—from the first person nature of reasons to the prohibition on infinite chains of reasons. The third assumption has been upheld.

6. Facing the Regress Problem

We have now examined each of the three premises underlying the skeptical claim that there is a normative regress problem:

1) an agent must have access to her reasons in order to be justified,

2) the things that do the justificatory work must themselves be justified, and

3) infinite chains of reasons are not justificatory.

In Chapter 1, we decided that the sort of justification that seems relevant to normative authority is first person. In doing this, we committed ourselves to (1). In this chapter, we have found reason to accept the remaining premises, (2) and (3). Therefore, we have reason to accept both that a regress of justifying reasons for norms commences and that an infinite regress is vicious. The threatened regress presents us with a genuine problem.

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One might object that people do, in fact, use infinite chains in reasoning. Mathematicians often make reference to the infinite in order to solve particular problems. But they don't rely on an infinite number of steps in doing this. Rather, they manipulate finite representations of the infinite. Considerations of the infinite that cannot be captured by something finite are unavailable to mathematicians.
The only way to avoid it is to solve it. We must put a stop to regress. We must find a way to stop asking “why?”

Thinking about epistemology, and especially about internalist theories of epistemic justification, has helped us identify a problem about justification simpliciter, another first person sort of justification. Continuing to think about epistemology can also help us identify possible solutions to this problem. A group of epistemologists known as foundationalists have traditionally defended their theory of the origin of first person epistemic justification by focusing on the different structures that a regress of reasons for belief might have. Such a regress, they say, can have four possible outcomes:

1) the regress terminates with an unjustified belief (i.e. the chain of beliefs comes to a belief that is not based on any other belief but that is not justified in itself),
2) the regress goes on infinitely,
3) the regress turns into a circle of beliefs,
4) the regress terminates with a belief that is justified in itself (i.e. the belief is not based on any other belief but is not unjustified).

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*This kind of argument traces back to Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, Bk. I, Ch. 2-3.

*Note that the chain of beliefs may contain only the original belief.

*It may be noticed that I do not include the category of “nonjustification” in my discussion of either epistemic justification or justification simpliciter. In both cases I assume that any subject that is not justified is unjustified. ‘Nonjustification,’ the idea would be, is the property of being neither justified nor unjustified. One might be motivated to distinguish between nonjustification and “unjustification” in order to mark a difference between simply failing to be justified in what one accepts (nonjustification) and being justified in accepting the opposite position (unjustification). Presumably, being unjustified is worse than being nonjustified. But when...
Outcomes (1), (2), and (3) are quite clearly situations where the original belief is not justified at all, according to the foundationalist. So, if any beliefs are to be justified, they must be justified in virtue of their relations to beliefs that are justified in themselves, known as ‘basic beliefs’ or ‘foundations.’ This argument is known in the literature as ‘the regress argument.’

Another group of epistemologists, however, takes issue with the regress argument. The third sort of outcome is rejected too hastily, they say. The foundationalist believes that if there is a circle of justificatory reasons then the circle is vicious. But is this right? Circularity is certainly vicious in a demonstrative argument. If the conclusion of a demonstrative argument is identical to (or a mere stylistic variant of) one of the premises, this is surely illicit. But to offer a chain of reasons in answer to a repetition of the question “But why believe that?” is not the same thing as offering a demonstrative argument.

Furthermore, circularity is not treated as a failing in all contexts. Circularity in explanation (thinking of an explanation as a set of statements) seems to be a virtue [Lehrer, 1990, Ch. 5]. What makes for a good explanation? It is that all the statements are linked together by explanatory relations--each bit is both explained by something and seen to explain something else. Unexplained explainers (e.g. claims about the supernatural) and explained unexplainers (e.g. epiphenomena) reduce the goodness of an explanation. To see that there is a kind of circularity here, note that a statement S1 earns justification is a matter of having a reason (as it is in the first person senses of justification that concern me), either you have a reason or you don’t. The two different ways of failing to be justified are irrelevant.
its place in the explanation in part by helping to explain some other statement S₂. At the same time, S₂'s place is earned in part by being partially explained by S₁. This kind of circularity does not strike us as vicious. On the contrary, such reciprocal relations of support are what mark a good explanatory system. A good explanation should paint a coherent picture of the world, it should show how different facts are interrelated, how they hang together.

Circular relations of support, then, are vicious in the case of demonstrative argument and nonvicious in the case of explanation. So, the foundationalist cannot reject circles among reasons for belief outright. She owes us some reason to believe that such a circle is vicious, that it is more like a circle in a deductive argument than a relation of mutual support among explanatory claims. If epistemic justification has more in common with the latter model, then circles among reasons to believe may well be justification conferring. Epistemologists who buy into this model are called 'coherentists.'

The coherentists are right that the regress argument rules out the possibility of justification conferring circles too quickly. Therefore, we should modify the regress argument so that it proceeds as follows: The only four possible outcomes of a regress of reasons for belief are (1) - (4) listed above. (1) and (2) are obviously cases of unjustified beliefs. Therefore, if any beliefs are justified at all, they must be justified in virtue of their relations with either foundational beliefs or justification conferring circles among beliefs. If the regress problem is to have a solution at all, the nature of justification will be either foundationalist or coherentist (or both). Call this the 'modified regress argument'
As we saw, the regress problem regarding norms has a similar structure to the problem about the nature of first person epistemic justification. The regress of norms admits of the same four kinds of outcome:

1) the regress terminates with an unjustified norm,
2) the regress goes on infinitely,
3) the regress turns into a circle of norms,
4) the regress terminates with a norm that is basic or foundational (justified in itself).

Again, outcomes (1) and (2) are cases where the original norm is not justified. If we want to avoid skepticism about normativity, the structure of the justification of norms must be either foundationalist or coherentist (or both). Either there are some norms that need not appeal to other norms in order to answer the Normative Question (normative foundationalism) or else the Normative Question can be answered circularly (normative coherentism). We have here a modified regress argument with regard to normativity.

At this point, I hope to have supported my claim that the normative regress problem is a genuine problem. But we should not give in to skepticism. The following two chapters will be dedicated to examining the positions of the normative foundationalists and coherentists respectively. The foundationalists will all run into the same problem. They always leave some crucial norm unjustified. Coherentism fares better, but not all the kinds of circles among reasons will work. One sort of coherentist theory will succeed though, and that is the sort advocated by the subjectivist.
CHAPTER 3:
NORMATIVE FOUNDATIONALISM

1. Foundational Norms

One possible structure that a solution to the regress problem might have is a foundational structure. On such a theory, norms are justified if and only if they either are supported by, or are themselves, foundational norms. But what could it mean for a norm to be foundational? To answer this question, it is helpful to think about how epistemic foundations are conceived.

Both the epistemic and the normative regresses are constructed from chains of "why" questions. In the epistemic regress, the "why" question is "Why should I believe that this proposition is true?" Call this the Epistemic Question (EQ). A foundational belief is something that is, in itself, a satisfactory answer to the EQ. Suppose an agent asks a specific version of the EQ, "Why should I believe that B1 is true?" The response is, "You should believe B1, because it follows from the basic belief B2." If B2 is really basic, then it would be, in some sense, inappropriate or nonsensical for the agent to repeat the EQ by asking "Why believe B2?" In the normative case, the "why" question that forms the regress is "Why should I accept this norm as a guide for my actions?" This is the Normative Question (NQ). A foundational norm is a norm that can, in itself, be a satisfactory answer to the NQ. It is a norm that is, somehow, not vulnerable to a

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1One norm N is supported by another norm M if N satisfies the standard M sets forth. So, the norm "I ought to eat green, leafy vegetables" is supported by the norm "I ought to do what serves my self-interest" if eating green, leafy vegetables serves my self-interest.
repetition of the NQ. ("Why accept N1?" "Because it is indicated by basic norm N2." If N2 really is basic "Why accept N2?" will not be a live question.)

This characterization of foundations will not be of any help to us until we figure out in what sense it is inappropriate to repeat the "why" question in response to a foundation. What is it that makes a belief or norm invulnerable to the "why" question? In the epistemological literature, a foundational belief is usually characterized as: (a) a belief that can serve as a reason for holding another belief that is (b) not itself justified on the basis of another belief, but is "free-standing," and yet (c) is itself justified. This conception of a foundation is straightforwardly derived from the regress argument—to bring the regress to an abrupt (non-circular) stop, a belief must have these features.

It seems the definition of a foundational norm should be roughly equivalent to the definition of a basic belief. Basic norms are the things that are supposed to bring the normative regress to an abrupt halt. Therefore, a foundational norm must be a norm that (a) is capable of serving as a reason for accepting another norm, (b) is not itself justified on the basis of another norm, but is free-standing, and (c) is itself justified.

Let me emphasize that a foundationalist theory, whether of epistemic justification or justification simpliciter, will not be satisfactory until it fills out condition (c). Some explanation of what it is that makes a belief or norm justified in itself, or privileged, must be given. Familiar accounts of the epistemic privilege of foundational beliefs describe
them as "self-justifying," "self-evidently true" or "incapable of being doubted."² Descartes' \textit{cogito} is taken as a prime example of a foundational belief [1641, Second Meditation]. The belief "I exist" is self-evidently true, or incapable of being doubted, because the evidence of one's existence is contained in the very believing or doubting of the proposition. The normative foundationalist must provide us with a counterpart of self-evident truth. He must explain what makes a foundational norm justified in itself, or \textit{normatively privileged}.

In this chapter, I will evaluate the viability of the normative foundationalist program. One way of doing this would be to look at some likely candidates for foundational norms and see whether they are satisfactory. However, there are too many possible foundations to consider. For instance, there could be a \textit{eudaimonist} foundationalism wherein the foundational norm is "One ought to do what serves one's \textit{eudaimonia}," a realist foundationalism ("One's actions ought to be aimed at what is, in fact, valuable"), an instrumentalist foundationalism ("One ought to satisfy one's basic/higher-order desires"), or an ideal spectator foundationalism ("One ought to choose the actions that would be chosen by the [suitably described] ideal spectator").

Rather than going one by one through particular examples, then, I will take a "big picture" approach to foundationalism. In sections 2-4 I will examine various general

²These substantive characterizations of an epistemic foundation are connected to the claim that foundations must be incorrigible, which is not without its detractors [e.g. Alston, 1989b, Pollock 1986]. In sections 3-5 and 12 of this chapter, I will discuss epistemic theories of prima facie foundations and their counterparts in the normative realm.
argument forms, or recipes for arguments, that charge that some allegedly basic norm lacks either feature (a) or (b). Though the foundationalist has some promising responses to these attacks, section 5 will argue that they turn out to be only marginally successful.

In sections 6-12, our examination of foundationalism will focus on feature (c) and the prospects for developing a theory of privilege for norms. There seem to be five ways in which one might argue that a norm is justified in itself, that it is invulnerable to the Normative Question. One might say that the question is either unreasonable, lacking in practical point, or meaningless, that asking the question condemns us to skepticism, or that the question is answered by the norm itself. In the end, however, all these attempts to provide a theory of privilege will prove to be unsatisfactory. I will conclude that foundationalism is not a workable theory of the nature of normativity.

2. The Incompleteness Strategy

The general anti-foundationalist argument forms that I will examine in this and the following three sections are what I will call the incompleteness strategy, the conflict strategy, and the undermining strategy. In order to examine these, it will be convenient to have an example of an alleged foundation before us. As I've said, a basic norm is one that can put a stop to the regress of "why" questions. So to get an example, we should look for a norm that people seem to treat as a satisfactory answer to the Normative Question. For instance, imagine I tell you that you should eat more vegetables. You ask me why you should accept that norm and I show you that the norm serves your self-interest--that if
you eat more vegetables your goals will be satisfied. Usually, you will not press the
matter further, you will not continue asking "why." This might lead us to conclude that
the Self-Interest Norm, "One ought to serve one's self-interest," is a foundation.

The incompleteness strategy will try to eliminate the Self-Interest Norm as a
candidate foundation by attacking its ability to satisfy feature (a), its ability to serve as a
reason for other norms. The basic argument goes as follows: Nothing can be a
foundational norm, and therefore the source of normativity, if we can find another norm
that is intuitively normative but is not justified in terms of the alleged foundation. For
example, the incompleteness strategist will say the Self-Interest Norm is not a foundation
because it cannot explain why the following norm, call it the Easy Rescue Norm, is
justified: "If one can prevent great harm to another person with little or no cost to oneself
or others, one should." Consider the case where I am standing by a pool in which a child
is drowning. It would be very easy for me to simply lean over, pull the child out, and save
his life. Clearly, this is something I should do, and clearly the Easy Rescue Norm is a rule
that I have a good reason to live by. However, the Self-Interest Norm will not always
lend justificatory support to the Easy Rescue Norm, because following the Easy Rescue
Norm may have no connection at all to my self-interest. The child's survival has no
impact on my interests. Suppose he is not my son or my friend, and I have no fondness
for children generally. Imagine further that there is no way anyone will find out if I do not
rescue the child, so I will suffer no scorn for refusing aid. And if I am particularly hard-
hearted, I will not lose any sleep over it. The Self-Interest Norm does not provide me
with a reason to accept the Easy Rescue Norm. But the Easy Rescue Norm is obviously normative. This means the Self-Interest Norm cannot completely account for the justification of norms. Therefore, the incompleteness strategist concludes, the Self-Interest Norm is not foundational, it is not the source of normativity. In general, the incompleteness strategist's advice to the anti-foundationalist is, "Whenever faced with the claim that a norm is basic, look for some compelling norm to which the supposedly basic norm cannot lend justificatory support."

The problem with the incompleteness strategy is that it incorrectly assumes that there can be only one foundation. The Self-Interest Norm may not be the source of normativity for all the norms that we find compelling, but it may yet be a source of normativity, a foundational norm. So the incompleteness strategy for attacking foundations is misguided. There is no reason to suppose that a foundation must be complete.

The incompleteness strategy is worth mentioning because it is a tempting error to make. In fact, Korsgaard seems to use the incompleteness strategy against a Humean theory of normativity [1996, 86-89]. In my terminology, the Humean proposes as a foundational norm "One ought to serve one's basic desires." Korsgaard offers as a counterexample a case of a lawyer who suppresses a will (something we judge her to have a good reason not to do) because her basic desires provide no justificatory support to the claim that she should respect the last wishes of her client. Korsgaard's case is a counterexample to the Humean theory of normativity only if the Humean is claiming that
basic desires are the only source of normativity. In fact, many Humeans do seem to believe this. But Korsgaard cannot conclude without further argument that basic desires are not a source of normativity.

3. The Conflict Strategy

The next anti-foundationalist argument form that I would like to examine is the conflict strategy. It attacks the free-standing status (feature (b)) of candidate foundations. Call the alleged foundation ‘F.’ The conflict strategist looks for another norm G that seems to be justified simpliciter, but that is at odds with F. Then she asks, “How could F be a foundation when G conflicts with it? If F is a foundational norm, if it is something that can really stop my questioning "whywhywhy" then it seems that, when I come to see that an action of mine is in accord with norm F, I should be able to feel perfectly comfortable with that action. This indicates that, if F is a foundation, then there should be no situations in which it will lead me to violate some other justified norm G.”

Let’s apply the conflict strategy to our example, the Self-Interest Norm. We look for a norm that seems intuitively justified but which is in conflict with the Self-Interest Norm. There are many such norms. Recall, for instance, the case of Jane and rich Uncle Albert from Chapter 1. It is in Jane’s self-interest to kill Uncle Albert (she will inherit his money, there is no risk of being caught...). But there is a norm, the Anti-Homicide Norm “Do not murder,” that conflicts with the Self-Interest Norm in this situation. And the Anti-Homicide Norm certainly seems to be a justified action-guide. If the Self-Interest
Norm is really a foundation, Jane should be able to stop her reasoning about what to do with a consideration of that norm; but if she does that, she'll violate a justified norm (the Anti-Homicide Norm).

The foundationalist will claim that he need not be worried by this argument, however. The foundationalist can say that the objection is only successful if we make an assumption that he need not make. This is the assumption that foundations are incorrigible, that they always provide decisive reasons for action. But there is no reason to think a norm cannot be both foundational and overridable.

This response will sound familiar to those acquainted with the recent literature in epistemology. Many epistemologists have, for various reasons, abandoned the idea that foundational beliefs need to be incorrigible [Alston, 1989b; Pollock, 1986]. (In the epistemic context, a belief is incorrigible if there is a decisive reason to think that it is true whenever it is believed, an alleged example being "I am appeared to redly.") Foundationalists who have given up on the incorrigibility of basic beliefs remain foundationalists nonetheless by holding that a belief can be basic even if it is merely prima facie, or defeasibly, justified. A prima facie justified belief is one that will only be accepted unjustifiably when the agent has access to some evidence that the belief is false [Pollock, 1986, 29]. Proponents of defeasible foundationalism defend their theory by appeal to the classic regress argument for foundationalism. They point out that the regress argument requires that a basic belief be one that is not justified on the basis of another belief, yet is itself justified. There is no need to add that the belief must be incorrigible in order to stop
the regress of justification.\textsuperscript{3}

Alleged examples of defeasible epistemic foundations are object-level perceptual beliefs, like "I see a red ball."\textsuperscript{4} This belief is not justified by appeal to any other belief. I have a prima facie reason to believe it is true. I am justified in believing that I see a red ball unless I have some reason for thinking that my eyes might be deceiving me (e.g. if I have a reason to think that there are likely to be holographic projections of red balls in the vicinity). In such a case, the prima facie reason for my belief is defeated.\textsuperscript{5}

A similar appeal to the normative regress argument can support the claim that a foundational norm need only be prima facie justified and not necessarily incorrigibly justified. A prima facie justified norm meets our criteria for a basic norm: it is (a) capable of serving as a reason for accepting another norm, (b) free-standing, and (c) is itself justified. A prima facie justified norm is as capable of putting an abrupt end to requests for justificatory reasons as incorrigibly justified norms. The only difference is that defeasible normative foundations provide reasons for subscribing to norms that are subject to defeat by other justified norms.

In sum, the conflict strategy for attacking the free-standing status of alleged foundations can be avoided if the foundation is only prima facie justified. Showing that

\textsuperscript{3}Alston [1989b, 53-56] presents this argument though he is not himself a foundationalist.

\textsuperscript{4}Contrast appearance-level perceptual beliefs--e.g. "I am being appeared to redly"--which are usually said to be incorrigible.

\textsuperscript{5}John Pollock [1986, Ch. 2] contains a very helpful discussion of prima facie epistemic foundations and a detailed account of the epistemic defeater relation. A full-fledged theory of defeasible normative foundationalism would have to give an account of a defeater relation for norms.
there is a justified norm G that can conflict with norm F doesn’t prove that F is not a foundation. At most, it shows that F is not an incorrigible foundation. F may still be a foundational norm whose prima facie justification is defeated in cases where G applies.

4. The Undermining Strategy

The third anti-foundationalist plan of attack is the undermining strategy. The idea here is to subvert the claim that a norm N is free-standing by suggesting that its force is influenced by the status of another norm M. If altering the justificatory status of M changes our intuitive judgment about N, then this might be evidence that N’s justification is dependent on M’s and that N is not free-standing at all.

Let’s apply the undermining strategy to a candidate foundation. A norm that might strike many as a sufficient answer to the Normative Question is the Theistic Norm “One ought to do what God commands.” We might press the “why” question to discover the justification for moral norms like “Do not murder” and find our answer in the response “One ought not to murder because God commands us not to, and one ought to do what God commands, end of story.” The undermining strategist will try to show that there is another norm that the justification of the Theistic Norm rests on. For instance, the undermining strategist might say to the theist, “Isn’t it the case that you really only think that God’s commands provide you with good reasons for action because you are afraid of winding up in Hell if you break them? Isn’t it the Self-Interest Norm (putting aside for the moment the question of whether this norm is basic) that justifies the Theistic Norm?
Imagine for an instant that God does not punish the breaking of His commandments. Is 'God says not to' still going to strike you as a sufficient reason for foregoing murder and theft?" Or the undermining strategist might suspect that a different norm is at work. Rather than having a justificatory basis in self-interest (not all theists believe in Hell after all), perhaps the Theistic Norm inherits its justificatory power from the Gratitude Norm, "One ought to show gratitude to those who have benefitted her." Perhaps the theist thinks God’s commands are normative because obedience is the way in which we show proper gratitude to God, without whom our existence and sustenance would not be possible. To check if this is true, imagine that it is not the case that one must show gratitude to her benefactors and see if you still have the intuition that you must follow God’s commands. If you no longer have the intuition, then this might be because that the Theistic Norm is not a free-standing, foundational norm; instead, it is justified by its relation to the Gratitude Norm.

The foundationalist can avoid this argumentative strategy by again claiming that foundations require merely prima facie, not incorrigible, justification. So even if one’s intuitions about the normative force of the Theistic Norm change when one imagines that the Self-Interest Norm or the Gratitude Norm is no longer justified, this is not evidence that the Theistic Norm isn't basic. Instead, what this change in intuition shows is that the Theistic Norm is defeated in circumstances such as these, though it is prima facie justified nonetheless.

So a theory of defeasible foundations may allow the foundationalist to avoid both...
the conflict and the undermining strategies. In the next section, we will ask whether this move is really open to the normative foundationalist. But before moving on, there is one other response to the undermining strategy to note.

The anti-foundationalist argument against the free-standing status of the Theistic Norm will not succeed if our theist simply fails to share the intuitions that would indicate a justificatory role for the Self-Interest or Gratitude Norms. At the same time, someone else might deny that, supposing there is a God, His commands would have any normative import at all. We will often find this sort of incompatibility of intuitions regarding the justificatory status of norms. This just highlights the foundationalist's need for a theory of normative privilege, which is the topic of sections 6-12.

5. Defeasible Foundationalism

If the foundationalist can claim that all basic norms are defeasible, he can forestall any counterexamples that follow the conflict or undermining pattern. In this section, I will present a series of critiques of defeasible foundationalism. Some claim that the very notion of a defeasible foundation is vacuous or incoherent, and that, therefore, the foundationalist must rely on incorrigible norms instead. Others allow that the idea of a defeasible foundation is coherent but argue that the foundationalist must posit incorrigible norms as well. If these objections are successful, and the foundationalist can be saddled with incorrigible foundations, then the conflict and undermining strategists are back in business.
The first objection is based on one found in the epistemological literature and set against theories of defeasible basic beliefs. Keith Lehrer claims that any argument that a belief is not a foundation can simply be reinterpreted as an argument that the belief’s justification is defeated in the particular circumstances at hand [1990, 73]. “In this way,” he says, “all beliefs, as well as beliefs of their denials, may be trivially affirmed to be prima facie justified,” thus rendering the theory of prima facie epistemic foundations “untestable and invulnerable to criticism but, alas, only at the cost of rendering it vacuous” [73].

The same criticism seems appropriate for normative theories of prima facie foundations. The foundationalist defended the Theistic Norm against the undermining strategist’s attack by claiming that the circumstances in which the Self-Interest Norm and the Gratitude Norm are unjustified are circumstances in which the Theistic Norm’s prima facie justification is overridden. This defensive strategy is too strong for the foundationalist’s own good, because it could be used to protect any alleged normative foundation against attack. For instance, we might say that the Homicide Norm “One ought to murder other people whenever they are encountered” is a justified norm. It just so happens that, in all the circumstances that one is ever going to be in, the justification is defeated—but it is a foundation nonetheless. Claims of prima facie justification look vacuous. They are also in danger of violating the requirement that justification be transparent from the first person point of view, since they seem to leave room for concluding that we are justified in subscribing to norms that we find repugnant, like the Homicide Norm.
The foundationalist may be able to avoid the charge of vacuity if she can come up with a sufficiently substantive (i.e. nonvacuous) theory of normative privilege. Such a theory may be able to explain why the Homicide Norm isn’t prima facie justified though something like the Theistic Norm or the Self-Interest Norm is. (But in sections 6-12, I will argue that the foundationalist cannot come up with even a minimally satisfactory theory of privilege.)

The defeasible foundationalist might also have a response to the charge that she violates transparency, depending on how she understands prima facie justification. There seem to be two ways of conceiving of defeasible reasons. It may be the case that if there is a defeasible reason R and a defeater D for R, then R’s justification disappears; D undermines R’s justification. Call this the Undermining Model of Defeasible Reasons. This conception of defeasible reasons allows the foundationalist to avoid attributing to us reasons to accept norms we find repugnant. Repugnant norms are defeated, and this means that we have no reason to accept them. On the other hand, it may be that when R is defeated by D, R’s justification is not obliterated. It is still there. It is simply suppressed by the weight of the defeating reason. Call this the Suppression Model of Defeasible Reasons. The Suppression Model does not provide a way of avoiding the transparency problem.

In other respects, though, the Suppression Model has advantages over the Undermining Model. In Chapter 1, section 5, we said that we want to recognize that a norm can still have a recognizable justificatory force even when it is not decisively justified
in a particular circumstance. Though I may be required to break my promise to meet you for lunch in order to help an accident victim, I still feel the force of the Promise-Keeping Norm. This intuition cannot be accounted for on the Undermining Model, which says the justification of Promise-Keeping Norm disappears when it is defeated by the norm that tells me to help the accident victim.

The Undermining Model will cause an even more serious problem for the normative foundationalist. If it is the right model of defeasible reasons, then it follows that there are no prima facie foundations. To see why this is so, note that relations of defeat must be norm-guided. There must be some rule or principle for determining what should defeat what; and rules and principles just are norms. I’ll refer to norms that specify defeat relations as a ‘governing norms.’ So a governing norm is required to determine when a prima facie foundation is defeated and when not. But, according to the Undermining Model, a prima facie reason is actually justified only if it is undefeated. So the governing norm controls whether the alleged foundation is justified or not. But if a norm’s justificatory status depends on another norm, then it is not free-standing; and therefore, it is not a foundation at all. A norm cannot be both defeasible and free-standing on the Undermining Model of Defeasible Reasons.

Recall the scenario that the conflict strategist focused on. The Self-Interest Norm is the allegedly foundational norm and the Anti-Homicide Norm is one that conflicts with Self-Interest in certain circumstances. Jane is told by Self-Interest to kill her uncle and told by the Anti-Homicide Norm not to. How will Jane decide what she ought to do? She
will appeal to another norm that can adjudicate between these two. She will appeal, for
instance, to the Anti-Selfishness Norm, which says, "When one’s basic self-interest (food,
shelter, physical security) is tolerably well satisfied, one may not cause great harm to
another in order to fulfill other interests one has." Suppose the Anti-Selfishness Norm is
justified for Jane. It is this norm that determines that it is the Anti-Homicide Norm which
defeats the Self-Interest Norm and not the other way around. The Self-Interest Norm is
undefeated only when it is permitted by the Anti-Selfishness Norm. So, the Self-Interest
Norm is justified only insofar as it is permitted by the governing Anti-Selfishness Norm.
The Self-Interest Norm isn’t free-standing at all--its justification is based on the
justification of the Anti-Selfishness Norm.

So, assuming the Undermining Model is correct, governing norms determine
whether or not defeasible norms are justified in particular circumstances. But this means
that a norm cannot be both defeasible and free-standing. Foundations are, by definition,
free-standing, therefore, they cannot be defeasible. If there are to be any foundations at
all, they must be incorrigible. And incorrigible foundations are legitimate targets for the
conflict and undermining strategies.

This argument cannot be run against a prima facie foundationalism that utilizes the
Suppression Model of Defeasible Reasons. Here, it is still the case that defeat relations
are norm-governed, and so governing norms exert an influence on prima facie norms.
But, according to the Suppression Model, a governing norm cannot remove the
justification of a defeasible reason just by determining whether it is defeated. Even if the
reason is defeated, it still has its degree of justification. Defeasible reasons are still free-standing. Their justification is not dependent on the justification of any other norm.

For this reason, the Suppression Model looks like just the thing our normative foundationalist needs to support her claim that a single norm can be an origin of justification. I will argue, however, that this model does not allow the foundationalist to account for the decisive justification of norms. Recall that our notion of normative force includes both defeasible and decisive variants of justification simpliciter [Ch. 1, section 5]. It is particularly important that a theory of normativity be able to account for the decisive justification simpliciter of norms. Normativity seems to be a regulative evaluative property—it seems to be something that people must be able to be guided by in deciding what to do. Unless norms can be decisively justified, a gap remains between the judgment that the norm (or action-guide) is justified and the choice of a particular action on a particular occasion.

In order for a prima facie foundation $N$ to provide decisive justification for a norm, $N$'s justification must not be overridden. Say that $M$ is the justified governing norm that determines when $N$ is defeated and when it isn't. If $M$ is itself defeasible, then some other norm, $L$, is needed to guide that defeat relation; if $L$ is defeasible, then another governing norm $K$ is needed; and so on. In order to stop this regress, there must be some governing norm that is incorrigible. Therefore, the foundationalist cannot provide a theory of what it is to have a decisive reason to accept a norm unless she can appeal to incorrigible
foundations; defeasible foundations are insufficient. \(^6\)

At this point, we can conclude that a foundationalist must posit the existence of at least one incorrigible foundation, no matter which model of defeasible reasons she adopts. If the foundationalist accepts the Undermining Model, then the very idea of a defeasible normative foundation falls apart. All foundations on this account must be incorrigible. If the foundationalist accepts the Suppression Model, then it is coherent to talk about a defeasibly foundational norm, but we cannot ascribe decisive reasons for action without appealing to incorrigible foundations.

Let's summarize the last few sections. We were looking at different kinds of arguments that an anti-foundationalist could deploy against a claim that some particular norm is basic. The incompleteness strategy attacked the norm's satisfaction of criterion (a)—its ability to lend justification to other norms. The charge of incompleteness will always be misguided because it does not recognize that there can be more than one foundational norm. The conflict strategy and the undermining strategy focused their attack on criterion (b)—the free-standing status of a candidate foundation. These two argument forms can be disregarded by the foundationalist if he can claim that he need only posit defeasible foundations. We might well wonder whether a plausible, non-vacuous account of defeasible foundations can be given. Even if it can, though, it turns out that the foundationalist cannot limit himself to defeasible foundations. He must claim that at least

\(^6\)Since governing norms are needed in the Undermining Model as well, this same argument can be used to show that neither model can provide an account of decisive justification.
one foundation is incorrigible. The conflict and undermining strategies are capable of refuting claims that a particular foundation is incorrigible. In this way they remain threatening.

The conflict and undermining strategies are recipes for finding counterexamples for allegedly incorrigible norms. They attack foundationalism on a case by case basis only. For this reason, these argumentative strategies will never be able to show conclusively that foundationalism is unsatisfactory. No matter how many candidates foundations they eliminate, it is still possible that there is some incorrigibly justified norm that has been overlooked. If we want to be able to categorically reject foundationalism, we need to find some other sort of argument to use against it.

6. Incorrigible Privilege as Unquestionability

In the remainder of the chapter, our focus will be on criterion (c) for foundations—we will press the foundationalist to fill out her claim that a norm can be justified in itself. What makes a free-standing norm an original source of reasons to act? In showing that the foundationalist cannot count on all defeasible foundations, we have raised the degree of difficulty for the theory of privilege. We need an account of what can make a norm, not just a prima facie good guide to action, but a good guide to action without a doubt, or beyond question. A norm will only be incorrigibly privileged if it is invulnerable to the Normative Question.

In order to develop a theory of privilege, the foundationalist needs to tell us in
what sense a norm can be unquestionable. After all, it is obvious that I can always utter the words “But why should I accept N?” I think the most plausible interpretations of the “unquestionability” of basic norms are that these norms are either (1) insusceptible to reasonable or rational doubt, (2) such that there can be no practical point in doubting them, (3) such that we cannot question them and have our questions be intelligible, (4) such that they provide the only alternative to skepticism, or (5) such that the norm is itself the answer to the question. Sections 7-11 will ask whether any of these readings of “unquestionability” are capable of supporting a theory of privilege for normative foundationalism.

7. The “Reasonableness” Interpretation

Let’s start by trying to capture the sense in which the Normative Question cannot be asked about a foundational norm by supposing that the question would be unreasonable. This interpretation of the unquestionability of a foundational norm parallels what epistemologists seem to think about foundational beliefs. According to them, the Epistemic Question (“Why should I believe b?”) is not a live question for a basic belief because asking the question would be unreasonable. Say the belief in question is “I exist.” The sense in which I cannot ask the question “Why should I believe that I exist?” is that one cannot reasonably doubt the truth of the statement “I exist.” The evidence for it is present in the very thinking of the thought.

The problems with developing a theory of normative privilege on the basis of the
"reasonableness" interpretation become clear when we note that to say a norm cannot be reasonably questioned is to say "If you question this norm, you will have done something you ought not to have done." We are forced to ask, at this point, what kind of 'ought' is being employed. If the 'ought' is the 'ought' of normativity, the 'ought' of justification simpliciter, then the interpretation presupposes the notion that we are trying to use it to analyze. On the other hand, if the 'ought' is of any other type—e.g. if it is the 'ought' of prudence or rationality (where rationality is defined in terms that do not make it identical to justification simpliciter from the beginning)—then the theory of privilege is informative, but it depends on a norm. It presupposes the Prudential Norm "One ought to serve one's self-interest," or the Rational Norm "One ought to be rational."

Making a theory of privilege dependent on a norm in this way leads to two fatal problems. First of all, it undermines the claim that an alleged foundation is free-standing. Say that the foundationalist's claim is that norm N is foundational. In order to be foundational, N must be both free-standing and privileged. But, if in saying what makes N privileged, the foundationalist needs to appeal to a norm—"N is privileged because it cannot be questioned without violating the Rational Norm"—she can no longer claim that N is free-standing. N's justification depends on the justification of another norm, the Rational Norm. If I am not already convinced that I should be rational, being told that a norm N is beyond rational doubt will not affect the standing of N in my eyes. The second major problem with such a theory of privilege is that it cannot account for the justification simpliciter of the Rational Norm. It must presuppose that the Rational Norm is normative
in order to account for the authority of anything else. The regress of norms has not been resolved.

8. The Practical Interpretation

Perhaps the foundationalist can develop a theory of privilege if he can think about unquestionability in another way. Perhaps the sense in which a norm $N$ is unquestionable is that creatures like us cannot help but be motivated by $N$; so questioning $N$ is, from a practical point of view, pointless.

We should not mistake motivation for justification, though. Even if there were norms that invariably had motivational force (which I find highly improbable), they could fail to have any justificatory force. To illustrate the difference between these two forces, Korsgaard asks us to imagine that we have developed, as a product of evolution, an irresistible instinct to act in accordance with a particular norm [1996, 14-15]. Would such an instinct make this norm justified? Korsgaard says it would not since the norm could fail to seem adequate from one’s own point of view, even as one found oneself being motivated by it.

Although the case is fanciful, we can imagine it this way: given the strength of the...instinct, you would find yourself overwhelmed with the urge to do what [the norm] demands even though you think that the reason for doing it is inadequate. Perhaps the pain of ignoring this instinct breaks you down, like the pains of torture or extreme starvation. Then you might be moved by the instinct even though you don’t upon reflection endorse its claims. In that case the [motivational force of the norm] would still explain your action. But it would not justify it from your own point of view. This is clear from the fact that you would wish that you didn’t have this instinct, that you would wish you
could make it go away... [15].

Recall that one of our criteria for an adequate first person justification is that it be "transparent," that it still strike one as justificatory when one understands the explanation of its justificatory force.\textsuperscript{7} Regret that one is motivated by a norm is a sign that one takes oneself to have good reason not to be so motivated. A norm can be practically unquestionable and yet still fail to be justified simpliciter in the first person sense.

9. The Semantic Interpretation

A norm is unquestionable, according to the "semantic interpretation," if one cannot question the norm and have that question be meaningful. In Chapter 2, section 4, I mentioned the possibility that values are conceptually linked to 'ought' claims. To say that something is valuable just is to say that one ought to aim at, preserve or promote it. If this is true, then the norm "One ought to aim at the good" is seemingly beyond question. You can utter the words "This is good, but should I aim at it?" but in doing so, you are asking "I should aim at this, but should I aim at it?", which is nonsense.\textsuperscript{8}

It may be that values are conceptually linked with 'ought' claims, but we need to be clear what sort of 'ought' claims these are. As I argued in Chapter 1, there are many

\textsuperscript{7}Cf. Ch. 1. section 6, of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{8}I have run this argument in terms of values, but it could also be stated in terms of rationality, as Kurt Baier does in [1958, 317-8]. One might say that if something is rational that just means there is a reason to do it. So to question whether one should be rational is to ask "This is something that I have reason to do, but do I have reason to do it?", which, according to Baier, doesn't make sense. My objection is the same for both versions.
kinds of justification, and so there are many kinds of 'oughts.' There are moral 'oughts,' prudential 'oughts,' 'oughts' of etiquette, of baseball, and so on. Similarly, we often talk as though there are different kinds of value--some things are morally good, others are prudentially good, etc. It may well be that moral value, say, is conceptually linked with an 'ought' claim; but the kind of 'ought' claim to which it is linked is a moral 'ought' claim. The question "This is good, but should I aim at it?" is a trivial or empty query only if the 'good' and the 'should' are of the same kind. The question "This is prudentially good, but do I have a moral reason to aim at it?" is clearly meaningful and substantive. In order for the foundationalist to argue that the norm "One ought to aim at the good" is a source of normativity, the 'ought' must be the 'ought' of justification simpliciter. This means that the 'good' had better be valuable simpliciter. So the norm that looks to be foundational is "One ought simpliciter to aim at what is good simpliciter." Call this the Value Norm.

The foundationalist who wants to use the semantic interpretation as a basis for her theory of privilege should worry that she will be unable to provide an account of value simpliciter that doesn't presuppose an account of the thing we are trying to analyze--normativity. If the only way of defining value simpliciter is as "that which we have reason simpliciter to value," then the foundationalist has not made any progress in explicating the nature of normativity by defending the Value Norm. Further, even if we can gain an independent characterization of this sort of value, it may be that our only evidence for thinking there is such a thing is that some norms are justified simpliciter. As Korsgaard argues,
The metaphysical view that intrinsically normative entities or properties exist must be supported by our confidence that we really do have obligations. It is because we are confident that obligation is real that we are prepared to believe in the existence of some sort of objective values. But for that very reason the appeal to the existence of objective values cannot be used to support our confidence. [1996, 40]

10. The Anti-Skeptical Interpretation

Korsgaard's version of a Kantian theory of normativity [1996, Lecture 3] can be interpreted as a kind of incorrigibilist foundationalism, built from a fourth theory of privilege. In brief, Korsgaard thinks that norms have a binding power when they are wrapped up in one's sense of identity. A sense of identity is a description under which one values oneself [101]. A particular rule like “Never use violence” is justified for me if it is wrapped up in my conception of myself. If I am a Quaker, it will be part of that conception. Being a pacifist is part of who I am. So if I violate the Pacifist Norm, then, in a sense, I cease to be myself. Ceasing to be oneself anymore is generally thought to be as bad as death. And so violating my normative commitment to pacifism is as bad or worse than death [101-2]. This paints a graphic picture of the person as bound by norms.

But the story cannot be this simple, as Korsgaard recognizes [102-3, 120]. The Pacifist Norm will not be binding on me in virtue of my being a Quaker if it's the case that

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"Actually, I can see two different ways of interpreting Korsgaard's theory of normativity in terms of an epistemic analogy: as a foundationalist theory that rests on incorrigible norms and as a version of defeasibilist foundationalism. Both are suggested to me by different bits of The Sources of Normativity, though careful scholarship might show one to be better supported. I'll leave the interpretive issue to one side and discuss both versions. The incorrigibilist foundationalism will be discussed in the current section. The defeasibilist interpretation will be commented on in note 12 of this chapter."
I should not be a Quaker. My Quaker sense of identity needs to be justified if it is going to justify anything else. So, the norm “I ought to be a Quaker” must be justified too. This is how Korsgaard’s identity-centered theory of normativity runs into the regress problem.

Since identities are the sources of reasons simpliciter for Korsgaard, the reasons for having any particular identity must come from another sense of identity. One identity will be defended in terms of a more fundamental sense of identity. The regress will be a regress of identities. But Korsgaard does not think that this will continue infinitely because there is a most fundamental identity that one has—oneself as human [121]. To identify myself as human is to value myself qua human being—it is to be committed to the norm, “One ought to value humanity as such,” which is simply a version of the Categorical Imperative [121-3]. Underneath all this talk of identities, Korsgaard is offering us the Categorical Imperative as a foundational norm.

But can the Categorical Imperative really stop the regress? Why is being human a foundational identity? Can’t we ask “Why should I value myself under the description ‘human’?” I may not be able to stop being human. But I can’t stop being Irish either. Still, I can refuse to stop seeing my Irish identity as a source of reasons for action, and perhaps that is what I should do. In the same way, maybe I should stop seeing my human identity as a source of reasons. Why should we think that the authority of our humanity is beyond question?

Korsgaard’s answer seems to be: because the only other option is skepticism about normativity and skepticism cannot be right. She writes, “[R]ational action,” i.e. action
that is justified simpliciter, "exists, so we know it is possible...[R]ational action is possible only if human beings find their own humanity valuable" [123-24]. The reason the Categorical Imperative is unquestionable is that, if it is not, then no actions are justified simpliciter at all.

But this answer is not satisfying. First of all, it is not clear the Categorical Imperative is the only option to normative skepticism—perhaps coherentist theories or other versions of foundationalism will be acceptable. Secondly, it seems that, in order to support this anti-skeptical interpretation of unquestionability, we need to have reason to think that skepticism about justification simpliciter must be false. I am not saying that Korsgaard must convince those of us who are trying to build a theory of normativity that there is an epistemically justified, or truth-interested, reason for rejecting skepticism. Rather, she must show us that the agent in the first person position of choice has a reason for thinking that he ought simpliciter to believe skepticism is false.\(^\text{10}\) The fact that the agent needs this reason undermines the claim that the Categorical Imperative is a freestanding norm. The anti-skeptical conviction is supposed to help account for the normative status of the Categorical Imperative. But, given that normativity is a first person sort of justification, anything that is to count as a justificatory reason must be accessible to the agent from her own first person point of view. That is, if anti-skepticism is to play any role in justification, the agent must have a first person reason simpliciter to

\(^{10}\text{Note that it is possible for the agent to have a reason simpliciter to reject skepticism in spite of having an epistemic reason to accept it.}\)
be committed to anti-skepticism. But what could justify that commitment?

Once again, a norm has been appealed to in the attempt to develop a theory of privilege. In this case, the norm is “One ought to believe that skepticism about justification simpliciter is false,” which I will call the Anti-Skeptical Norm. The problems this raises are of the same sort as those encountered by the “reasonableness” interpretation in section 7. The Categorical Imperative loses its free-standing status because it inherits its justification from the Anti-Skeptical Norm. Further, the theory of privilege cannot account for the justification simpliciter of the Anti-Skeptical Norm, but instead must presuppose that it is justified in order to account for the justification of anything else.

Let me make one quick note, off the topic of privilege, about Korsgaard’s theory of normativity. On her theory, an agent’s sense of identity is always the justifier of norms. For example, it is the agent’s identification of herself as Quaker that is her reason to accept the Pacifist Norm. This conflicts with the claim I made in Chapter 2, section 4, that only norms can justify norms. In favor of my position, note that Korsgaard herself seems to recognize that one’s having a certain identity is only a good reason for action if it is the case that the following norm is justified for that agent: “I ought to value myself under this description.” The necessity of defending this norm is what leads Korsgaard to appeal to the Anti-Skeptical position. So, it is really the norm “I ought to value myself as a Quaker” that carries the justificatory weight in the example, not the sense of identity itself.

11. The Reflexivity Interpretation
The fifth attempt to account for incorrigible privilege argues that a foundational norm is a norm that is self-justifying. The sense in which a basic norm is unquestionable is that, when you ask the Normative Question about it, the answer is found in that very same norm. One may try to support a realist theory of normativity in this way. The candidate foundation in this case would be:

R: One ought to accept norms that will direct one to promote or preserve what is valuable.

(I will put to one side worries about whether value can be given any satisfactory characterization or metaphysical plausibility independent of normativity.) The reason for accepting R, on this theory of privilege, is that it meets its own standard. R is itself a norm that would direct one to what is valuable. The realist would deny that she is begging the question here. Rather it is the reflexive character of R that makes it an original source of justification—it is its own reason.

In defense of this theory of privilege, we can give an independent argument for thinking that the justification simpliciter of norms must have something to do with reflexivity. Call whatever condition (or set of conditions) is sufficient for justification simpliciter 'J.' Next, consider the question, “Why should I subscribe to norms that are J?” This just is a version of the Normative Question (the question that a theory of justification simpliciter is supposed to help answer). If J really does provide a sufficient condition for justification simpliciter, then the answer to the question should be “Because they are J.” So any adequate answer to the NQ must be capable of accounting for its own justification,
it must be capable of bootstrapping itself. A standard of justification must apply to itself—it must be reflexive. Call this the Argument for Reflexivity.

But though a standard of justification may need to be reflexive, not every reflexive norm is a standard of justification simpliciter. Reflexivity as a theory of privilege can easily be reduced to absurdity. Choose a property at random and put it in place of the term 'valuable' in the candidate R, above, and you create a new foundation. So we have among the set of allegedly incorrigible foundations:

H: One ought to accept norms that will direct one to promote or preserve what is harmful.
B: One ought to accept norms that will direct one to promote or preserve what is beautiful.
U: One ought to accept norms that will direct one to promote or preserve what is ugly.

David Copp's favorite candidate for a silly norm that meets the reflexivity test is:

C: A standard is to be subscribed to if it can be expressed in English in fewer than twenty words [Copp, 1995, 41].

This nineteen word long standard meets its own criterion.

Reflexivity seems to be necessary for justification simpliciter, but it is not sufficient. H, B, U and C are reflexive but they are not compelling candidates for basic norms. Transparency is one of our criteria for a theory of normativity. Coming to understand what it is that makes a norm justified should not make it the case that one can
no longer see the norm as justified. Seeing that norm C counts as authoritative for the same reason R does seems to destroy any appearance of justification R may have originally had. The reflexive theory of privilege does not have the resources to recognize any relevant difference between R and C. In order to draw such a distinction, the foundationalist would have to supplement her theory of privilege. But what could she supplement it with? We have not found any sort of property that seems up to the job.

Another problem the (unsupplemented) reflexivity theory of privilege encounters is that the foundations it claims to identify are not shown to be incorrigible. Both R and H (and B and U) pass the self-support test, though they direct one to perform incompatible actions. They order the actor to both benefit and harm others. Since R and H provide defeating reasons for each other, they cannot both be incorrigible.

12. Privilege and Interest-Neutrality

It was the conclusion of sections 2-5 that a theory of foundational norms must include at least some norms that are incorrigible. This has proven to be a very difficult standard to meet. What could make a norm justified beyond question? In sections 7-11 we looked at five different ways in which a normative foundationalist might try to develop a theory of privilege for incorrigible foundations. These were to say that a basic norm is not subject to the Normative Question in virtue of the (1) unreasonableness, (2) lack of effect on motivation, or (3) meaninglessness of the question when applied to that norm, (4) that the norm is the only alternative to skepticism, or (5) that the norm provides its
own support. None of these strategies proved satisfactory. The first and fourth smuggled in norms without being able to account for their justification, and thus, were unable to put a stop to the regress. The second was misguided because it confused motivation with justification. The third either makes no progress or begs the question. The fifth cannot support a theory of normativity that is transparent or foundations that are incorrigible. I can see no other reading of the claim that a basic norm is “unquestionable” upon which to develop a theory of incorrigible privilege. At this point, I believe, we must conclude that a foundationalist theory of normativity is unworkable.

Or, rather, what we should conclude at this point is that the proper theory of normativity cannot be purely foundationalist. Perhaps normativity can still be accounted for, at least in part, by defeasible foundations. However, a theory of defeasible privilege (where the standard would be something more modest than unquestionability) is no easier to come by than a theory of incorrigible privilege. In this section, I will say why this is so. The argument I will present will also give us another way of understanding the failure of incorrigibilist theories of privilege.

Thinking about epistemic privilege will be of some help to us here. What is thought to make a belief epistemically privileged? It is usually said that incorrigible foundational beliefs are original sources of justification because they are self-evidently true, unquestionably true, or true beyond a (reasonable) doubt. Defeasible epistemic
foundations are usually characterized as beliefs that are prima facie true. Truth plays a key role in both kinds of epistemic privilege. The normative foundationalist, it seems, needs to fill out the following formula: a norm is normatively privileged if and only if it is self-evidently or prima facie P. P stands for a property that plays the anchoring role in the normative theory of privilege that truth plays in the epistemic theory.

But here we run into a couple of problems. First of all, it seems that if you say self-evident or prima facie possession of property P makes a norm justified in itself, then you are presupposing that another norm is justified—the norm:

NP: One ought simpliciter to accept norms that are P.

But this means the regress continues. Say that the allegedly basic norm is the Categorical Imperative. In giving her theory of privilege the foundationalist is saying “One ought simpliciter to accept the Categorical Imperative because it has property P and (NP) one ought simpliciter to accept norms that are P.” This makes the justification of the Categorical Imperative depend on the justification of this other norm, NP. But that means that the Categorical Imperative isn’t a foundation after all—foundations are justified independently of any other norm. Further, the foundationalist now owes us some story about why NP is justified simpliciter. In sum, the foundationalist’s problem is that to

\footnote{Actually the most common definition of defeasible foundations is that they are beliefs that are only held without justification when the agent is justified in believing some defeater for it [Pollock, 1986, 29; Lehrer, 1990, 72]. But this is completely uninformative regarding what it is that makes a belief something that is justified unless defeated—what it is that separates defeasible foundations from non-foundational beliefs, what it is that makes a belief a source of defeasible privilege. Some defeasibilists count all beliefs as innocent until proven guilty, as justified in virtue of being held unless defeated. I will not discuss this position because the analogous theory of normative privilege fails the transparency condition, as I argued in section 5.}
present a standard of justified norms is to appeal to another norm—a norm that says what kind of norms you can accept. And so the regress continues.

The epistemic foundationalist does not run into this problem. His theory of privilege also presupposes a norm:

EP: One's beliefs epistemically ought to be true.

But this is okay because the epistemologist is not under any obligation to defend this norm. The aim of truth is the starting point of epistemology. Epistemology is defined by an interest in truth. Of course, you can sensibly ask “Should I really form my beliefs with the aim of truth?”, but the 'should' here is not an epistemic 'should.' In asking this question, you have stepped outside of epistemology. Your question is not one the epistemologist needs to answer; that's not his job.

The normative foundationalist cannot take the same way out, though. If I ask the normative foundationalist, “Why should I accept norm NP?” she cannot respond, “I don’t have to answer that question, it falls beyond the scope of my discipline.” Her job is to give an account of justification simpliciter and justification simpliciter is, by definition, a thorough-going sort of justification. All norms fall within its scope, including the standard of privilege, NP. This problem is equally damning for both the incorrigibilist and the defeasibilist versions of foundationalism.¹²

¹²As I mentioned in note 9 of this chapter, there is a way of interpreting Korsgaard as a defeasibilist foundationalist. On this version of her theory, any sense of identity that a person has constitutes a prima facie source of reasons simpliciter. So if I conceive of myself as a Quaker, then the norm “I ought to be a Quaker” is prima facie justified for me. If I also conceive of myself as an American in a time of war, then the norm “I ought to be an American” is prima facie justified as well. An Identity Norm (i.e. a norm that tells one to have a
Perhaps the foundationalist has a response to the problem I'm posing. She might fill out P in the normative theory of privilege with "truth"—a norm is normatively privileged if and only if it is self-evidently or prima facie true. This theory of normativity would maintain a very close analogy with epistemology. I do not think that this proposal works though. There seem to me to be two options for understanding the claim that a norm is true. On the first, to say "it is true that one ought to x" is just to say "one really ought to x" or "one would be justified simpliciter in x-ing." If this is the case (and I think that it is), then "I ought simpliciter to accept norms that are true" will be foundational; but it will also be completely vacuous (we will not be able to extend the justification of this foundational norm to support other norms that require justification like "I ought to eat green leafy vegetables"). So on this first interpretation, we cannot make any progress in understanding justificatory privilege by appealing to truth because we need to appeal to justification in order to make sense of truth. The second interpretation assumes that the truth-conditions and the justification-conditions for norms are distinct. What makes a norm true, then, is that it guides one to real values, or that following it would maximize

sense of identity) that I actually accept is not in need of any further support. It is justified in itself. However this justification may be defeated when two Identity Norms come into conflict (as the Quaker Identity Norm, with its pacifist elements, and the American Identity Norm might when the U.S. is involved in a just war). On this reading, the Categorical Imperative ("I ought to value myself qua human/l ought to value humanity as such") will be the ultimate governing norm—the one incorrigible foundation that is needed in every defeasibilist foundationalist theory (cf. section 5 of this chapter).

The problem with this theory is that there seems to be no way to argue that only Identity Norms are defeasibly privileged. Another problem is that this reading of Korsgaard's theory commits her to accepting that the norms associated with nasty identities—e.g. "I ought to be a serial killer"—are prima facie justified for anyone who accepts them. Of course, the theory would say that the justification of such Identity Norms are always defeated by the Categorical Imperative, but the fact that the theory allows even prima facie justification to such norms may be enough to make it fail the transparency condition.
happiness, or something along these lines. But once we give substantive truth-conditions like these, truth becomes a substantive interest, an interest that one might accept or reject. Why should I care about being guided by real values? Why should I care about maximizing happiness? So, on the second reading of the claim that a norm is true, self-evident truth is not equivalent to self-evident justification.

Another attempt to get a successful theory of privilege may go as follows: it is NP which is the foundational norm, and we can answer the question “Why accept NP?” by pointing out that NP is itself a norm that has property P. In this way the regress is stopped with a very small circle. NP is self-justifying because it is reflexive. We have already seen good reason to reject this proposal though. Norm C, “a standard is to be subscribed to if it can be expressed in English in fewer than twenty words,” is reflexive but it is clearly neither incorrigibly nor even prima facie justified. The foundationalist needs to give us some grounds for choosing between the reflexive norms that are foundations, the ones that are really privileged, and the ones that aren’t. But how can she do this?

In sum, the normative foundationalist cannot develop a theory of privilege because she cannot find an anchoring property “P.” Why can’t she do this? Why does she fare so much worse than her counterpart in epistemology? The epistemologist can make truth central to his theory of privilege because true belief is the definitive interest of epistemology. But the normative foundationalist cannot follow suit. She cannot fill out her anchoring property P by appealing to some goal or interest that is definitive of justification simpliciter, because justification simpliciter is, by definition, interest-neutral.
The normative foundationalist cannot fill out her theory of privilege without just begging the question. ¹³

13. The Ubiquity of Norms

We have found that, in trying to develop a foundationalist theory of normativity, we run into problems that foundationalist epistemologists do not. An epistemic foundationalist seems to be able to avoid the task of searching for incorrigible foundations by settling for defeasible ones, but I have argued that the normative foundationalist must appeal to incorrigible norms. The epistemic foundationalist can rely on a "reasonableness" interpretation of the unquestionability of foundations in order to develop her theory of privilege, but the "reasonableness" interpretation is unavailable to one trying to account for foundational norms. The epistemologist can use truth as an anchoring property in his theory of privilege because epistemic justification is defined in terms on an interest in truth, but the normative foundationalist cannot find such an anchoring property. These differences are accounted for by the fact that normativity is a thorough-going kind of

¹³This argument against foundationalism is also an argument against theories of normativity that take epistemic externalism as their model. An externalist theory of epistemic justification, recall, says that a belief is justified by its possession of some good-making feature, even though that feature may not be epistemically accessible to the believer [cf. Ch. 1, section 6]. For example, the reliabilist says that a belief is justified if and only if it is produced by a reliable cognitive mechanism; the fact that the agent has no way of knowing whether her belief-forming mechanism is reliable is neither here nor there. In Chapter 1, I rejected externalism as a model for a theory of normativity on the grounds that normative justification must be first person. We can now add the complaint that externalist theories of justification simpliciter are unworkable because there is no way to pick out the "good-making feature." The epistemic externalist is guided by the definitive goal of epistemic activity, truth, to the idea that production by a reliable mechanism makes a belief "good." But there is no such definitive goal in justification simpliciter. (Thanks to Keith Lehrer for pointing out this extension of the argument to me.)
justification that applies to norms. Normative foundations cannot all be defeasible because defeat relations rely on norms. The "reasonableness" interpretation is unavailable because it sneaks in a norm—that one ought to attend to reasons of a certain sort. Justification simpliciter cannot be characterized by any particular interest because interests involve commitments to norms ("I ought to aim at this goal"). The normative foundationalist cannot presuppose norms in developing her theory because her job is to account for the justification of these norms. But it is really hard not to build one's theory of justification on top of norms—they're everywhere!

This ubiquity of norms makes one suspect that there may be no way to avoid relying on them in explicating the nature of normativity. There seems to be no exit from the system of norms. This is just the idea that the coherentist embraces. If the regress cannot be stopped abruptly by appeal to foundational norms, then our last hope for avoiding skepticism lies in finding the source of justification in the very interrelatedness and interdependence of norms. The viability of normative coherentism will be the topic of Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4: NORMATIVE COHERENTISM

1. Introduction

The main obstacle to figuring out what first person justification simpliciter (and, thereby, normativity) consists in is the fact that nothing but a norm can act as a justifier for a norm. This generates a regress. As was said in Chapter 2, the only four possible outcomes of a regress of norms are:

1) termination in an unjustified norm,
2) infinite regress,
3) termination in a norm that is justified in itself, or
4) a circle of norms, where the regress turns back upon itself.

Scenario (1) is clearly not a case in which the original norm is successfully justified. In Chapter 2, section 5, I argued that (2) is incompatible with the first person sort of justification of interest to us. Chapter 3 examined the possibility of foundationalism in detail but found no feasible interpretation of the notion that a norm could be justified in itself. Our last hope of avoiding skepticism lies in the possibility that some sort of reciprocal support relation among norms can be a source of normativity. That possibility is the topic of this chapter.

The idea that reciprocal support relations could be a source of justification simpliciter is inspired by coherentism in epistemology, a family of theories that take this strategy for accounting for first person epistemic justification. The main idea, here, is that
what makes a belief epistemically justified for an agent is the way that the belief coheres
with the other beliefs that the agent holds. Because of this heritage, I will refer to theories
of justification simpliciter that embrace (4) as "normative coherentist theories."^1

My aim in this chapter is to present and defend a particular coherentist theory of
justification simpliciter. Section 2 reviews the criteria of adequacy for a theory of
justification simpliciter, which we have uncovered in earlier chapters. In the following
three sections, I proceed by a method of successive approximation to develop an
acceptable account of a coherence standard of justification. The most promising theory is
one I call Reflective Endorsement Coherentism (or REC). Part 6 argues that REC meets
all four of the criteria of adequacy.

2. A Review of the Criteria of Justification Simpliciter

What are the marks of a successful theory of first person justification simpliciter?

In the past few chapters, we have uncovered a handful of criteria of adequacy. The
standard of justification (1) must entail that justificatory reasons are first person accessible,
(2) the standard must not fall into regress, (3) it must be comprehensive, (4) it must be
transparent, and (5) it must be reflexive. Let me quickly review the reasons for demanding
that these criteria be met. Each of them falls out of the concept of normativity, or
justification simpliciter, in one way or another.

^1For examples of coherentist epistemologies see Blanshard [1939], Sellars [1963], Harman [1973],
BonJour [1985], and Lehrer [1974], [1990] and [1997].
The first criterion of adequacy is first person accessibility. Some arguments for this criterion appeared in Chapter 1, section 6. The main reason for demanding first person accessibility is that we want our theory of normativity to be regulative—people should be able to usefully think about normative justification in deciding what to accept. Only first person accessible sorts of justification can be regulative.

In Chapter 2, I argued that an infinite set of justificatory reasons is not first person accessible. Therefore, any standard of justification that implies that one needs an infinite number of reasons cannot account for normativity. A minimally satisfactory theory of justification simpliciter must be able to solve the regress problem.

The third criterion of adequacy is comprehensiveness. A standard is comprehensive if it would take the verdicts given by all the special standpoints [the moral, the epistemic, etc.] regarding any situation where an agent needs to choose; it would evaluate these verdicts without any question-begging, and it would produce an overall verdict as to what the agent is to do [Copp, forthcoming, 16].

It must also take norms of all strengths (rules, recommendations, permissions) into its range of evaluation. The requirement of comprehensiveness falls out of the very concept of justification simpliciter [Ch. 1, section 4]. Justification simpliciter is by definition the sort of justification that is attached to the most general evaluative standpoint. We concluded that there must be reasons simpliciter when we noticed that, when confronted with a reason of a specific, interest-defined sort, say, a moral reason, we could always ask, "But do I really have reason to do what morality tells me?" We can ask the Normative
Question whether the norm under inspection gives us orders, makes recommendations, or merely permits. These questions are possible, so we want to have a justificatory scheme with which to make such judgments. We have been calling this evaluative scheme "justification simpliciter." Any scheme that is not comprehensive is not a scheme of justification simpliciter.

The fourth criterion of adequacy on a standard of justification simpliciter is transparency [Ch. 1, section 6]. It states that it must not be the case that, were the agent to come to understand what it is that makes his normative acceptances justified simpliciter, he would no longer be able to see them as justified. We want a theory of justification simpliciter in order to account for and vindicate our intuition that some norms are authoritative while others are not. This task cannot be completed if, in coming to know this theory, we lose that very intuition. A non-transparent theory of justification simpliciter is practically indistinguishable from skepticism about normativity.

The fifth and final criterion of adequacy on our list, the reflexivity condition, requires that a standard of justification simpliciter apply to itself [cf Ch. 3, section 11]. The argument that was originally given for this requirement ran as follows: Call whatever condition (or set of conditions) is sufficient for justification simpliciter 'J.' If J really does provide a sufficient condition for justification simpliciter, then the answer to the question "Why should I subscribe to norms that are J?" should be "Because they are J." So the standard of justification simpliciter must apply to itself.

We can develop a second argument for the reflexivity condition by noting that it is
a consequence of the comprehensiveness and transparency conditions. The standard of justification simpliciter can be viewed as a norm that tells us which norms we ought simpliciter to accept. Since all norms are subject to the Normative Question, we can ask whether we have reason simpliciter to accept this norm—whether we have reason to be justified simpliciter in our normative acceptances. Comprehensiveness says that an adequate standard must have the resources to answer this question. The transparency condition adds the requirement that this question be answered in the affirmative. After all, if our theory implied that we do not have reason simpliciter to accept the norms that we are justified simpliciter in accepting, then we would no longer be able to feel the force of norms that are justified simpliciter. We would say, "Norm N1 is justified simpliciter, but so what?" The normative force of N1 would "evaporate in our hands," as Korsgaard would say [1996, 30]. In order to prevent this loss of transparency, it must be the case that the alleged standard of justification passes its own test.²

²The conclusion that reflexivity is a criterion of adequacy on a theory of justification simpliciter gives us an interesting response to David Copp's brand of skepticism about justification simpliciter [forthcoming]. Copp argues that justification simpliciter is an incoherent concept. The argument can be summarized as follows:
1. Suppose that standard R is the standard of justification simpliciter.
2. The standard of justification simpliciter must be the normatively most important standard there is.
3. In order for a standard to be "normatively the most important," it must be judged so by some standard, call it S.
4. If R is not the same standard as S, then R is not the normatively most important standard (S is) and so R is not the standard of justification simpliciter.
5. If R is the same standard as S, then its justification is viciously circular.
6. Therefore, R cannot be the standard of justification simpliciter.
7. Therefore, there is no standard of justification simpliciter.
The argument for reflexivity gives us reason to reject premise 5. That R and S are the same standard is not proof that there is a vicious circle. Rather, it seems that self-support is a feature that any plausible standard of justification simpliciter must have. (Of course, self-support is not a sufficient condition for justification...
3. Global Coherentism

In this section, I want to make a first pass at giving a coherence theory of justification simpliciter. I'll start by laying out the famous raft metaphor, a favorite of coherentist device for communicating the main idea of their theory of justification. The model will not be very precise, but it will be clear enough for us to see some of the advantages of a coherentist approach to justification. In section 3.1, I will point out how the coherentist model is able to avoid the problem that foiled the foundationalist project. Unfortunately, the simple model we get from the raft metaphor is unable to satisfy all our demands on a theory of normativity, for reasons that I will point out in section 3.2. Appreciating these advantages and disadvantages will put us in a good position to develop a better version of coherentism in sections 4 and 5.

Once again, the best way to embark on the project at hand is to take a lesson from the epistemologists. In developing their theory of the epistemic justification of belief, epistemic coherentists often appeal to Neurath's raft metaphor [1932]. A belief set, says the coherentist, is like a raft adrift in an ocean. Each plank represents a belief and repairing the raft is like improving your belief-set. If you are standing on a raft in the ocean and you want to check that the raft is sound, you examine it plank by plank. Of course, in order to check whether plank A is good you have to be standing on some other plank, B. That is okay though because you can check B for soundness too, though not at

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simpliciter, as we saw in the case of reflexive foundations [Ch. 3, section 11].
the same time. When you want to examine B you move over and stand on another plank---C or back to A. A good raft is one in which each of the planks passes the test for soundness from the point of view of the other planks.

The coherentist says that the evaluation of beliefs is like this. In order to judge whether a belief is likely to be true, the agent must rely on some other beliefs of hers. But those beliefs are not beyond question, they must pass inspection themselves. They are evaluated in light of the other beliefs in the set, including the ones first checked. A justified belief set is one in which each of the beliefs seems likely to be true given the other things believed. A particular belief is justified by its membership in such a set.

One nice thing about this model of justification is that it provides us with a picture of a reciprocal support relation among beliefs. Another is that it respects the epistemic internalist’s intuition that justificatory reasons be first person accessible. The coherentist starts with the agent’s own set of beliefs; justification is a product of these beliefs’ interrelations. A third advantage of the coherentist model is that it seems to solve the regress problem. Reasons are provided for each belief, though the set of beliefs is finite and no belief is taken as self-evident.

The raft model can be applied to the justification simpliciter of norms as well. A set of norms that an agent accepts is justified simpliciter if each norm passes the standards laid out by the other norms in the set. A particular norm will be justified by its coherence with such a set. I’ll call this brand of coherentism ‘global coherentism’ because the standard requires that each norm in the set cohere with every other norm in the set.
The same advantages accrue here as in the epistemic model. We are given a picture of a reciprocal support relation. Justificatory reasons are accessible since justification simpliciter is built up from the relations that pertain among an agent’s own set of accepted norms.\(^3\) This kind of accessibility is right in line with our interest in having a theory of justification simpliciter that is regulative. After all, the agent who is trying to figure out what she herself is justified in accepting must start with the things that she already accepts. What else could she depend on? The most important advantage of the coherentist model of normativity is that it avoids the vicious regress of norms. Reasons are provided for each norm, though the set of norms is finite and no norm is taken as self-evident.

In what sense are we bound by norms that are justified in this sense? The basic idea is that, if you act in violation of a norm that coheres with your own acceptances, then you are doing something that you yourself disapprove of. Doing the wrong thing amounts to betraying what you care about. The cost is that you will have to live with yourself.

3.1 Solving the Foundationalist’s Problem

Now you may suspect that the coherentist will run into the same problem that the foundationalist does. Recall, in providing his standard of justification, the foundationalist appears to be arbitrarily assuming that the norm NP is justified for the agent in question.

\(^3\)As I said in Chapter 1, section 2, to accept a norm is to endorse it as a guide to action. Endorsement is a kind of psychological state, which is tied to motivations to act and dispositions to avow support for the norm.
NP: One ought simpliciter to accept norms that are P.

In presenting the coherentist standard of justification simpliciter, I seem to be arbitrarily assuming that the following norm is justified simpliciter for the agent:

The Norm of Coherence (NC): One ought simpliciter to accept norms that cohere with one's set of accepted norms.

The coherentist can avoid this objection though. The problem with the foundationalist presupposing NP is that it is a norm he cannot justify to the agent. However, the norm NC may well be one that is justified for the agent. If the agent accepts NC and if NC coheres with the other things that she accepts, then NC is justified. The coherentist can justify her own standard of justification, she doesn't simply have to assume it.

In order to avoid the objection that doomed foundationalism, then, the coherentist must include in her theory of justification simpliciter the claim that an agent is only able to be justified simpliciter in her normative acceptances if she accepts, and accepts coherently, the Norm of Coherence.

3.2 Psychological Implausibility

Global coherentism has some advantages, as we have seen. Unfortunately, it has at least one important disadvantage that prevents it from being an acceptable theory of justification simpliciter. Despite initial appearances, justification is not really first person
accessible in the right way on this account. The sort of accessibility that is involved in
global coherentism doesn’t translate into a regulative sort of justification. (Recall, an
interest in regulativeness is what motivated our interest in accessibility). We want
justification simpliciter to be something that an agent can usefully think about in order to
decide what to do. But, on the global coherentist account, in order to determine whether
a particular norm is one that she should accept as a guide to her action, the agent would
have to examine her entire set of acceptances for coherence! Even if we were to grossly
underestimate the number of acceptances in the ordinary person’s acceptance set, there
would be an enormous number of norm-to-norm relationships that would have to be
checked—far more than an agent could cover in a lifetime. As a regulative theory of
justification, global coherentism fails miserably.

Further, the standard of justification set by global coherentism is so high that it is
likely that no actual agents satisfy it. All of us have some incoherence among our
acceptances. So global coherentism is not an improvement over the skeptical position we
are trying to avoid.

4. Full Circle Coherentism

In order to build a better coherentist model, let’s return our focus to the problem
we are trying to solve—the regress problem. In the last chapter, we tried to stop the

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*This criticism is an extension to the normative case of a criticism Christopher Cherniak has offered against internalist epistemic theories [1986].
regress of 'why' questions by finding a norm (or class of norms) that is invulnerable to the Normative Question. However, we were unable to make sense of the idea that a norm could be unquestionable. If we cannot achieve justification by preventing the Normative Question, maybe we can become justified by always having an answer to it. What I am imagining is an agent whose set of normative acceptances is such that, when she enters into the chain of 'why' questions, she can find the response to each repetition of the Normative Question amongst the other norms in the set. This chain of reasons does not go on infinitely, but eventually comes back to a norm that has already been defended.

We have here the germ of a proposal for a new version of coherentism: coherence is a matter of always having an answer to the Normative Question. Justification can be had by coming full circle in one's defense of a norm.\(^5\) I'll call this Full Circle Coherentism. Its standard of justification simpliciter, put more formally, says that a norm \(N\) is defeasibly justified simpliciter for an agent if and only if the agent accepts another norm, \(M\), that directs her to accept \(N\); and she accepts another norm that supports \(M\); and so on, till this chain of reasons loops back on itself, arriving at a norm that has already been defended. Another way of stating the standard is that a norm is normative if and only if a reason for it and for all its (finite) supporting reasons can be found among the other norms the agent accepts.

One norm \(N\) is \textbf{supported by} another norm \(M\) if \(N\) satisfies the standard \(M\) sets

\(^5\)This theory of justification simpliciter is modeled on Keith Lehrer's [1990] theory of epistemic justification.
forth. So, the norm "I ought to eat green, leafy vegetables" is supported by the norm "I ought to do what serves my self-interest" if eating green, leafy vegetables serves my self-interest.

Unlike the global coherentist theory, the agent is not required to perform the impossible task of appealing to all of her acceptances in order to defend a particular norm. Instead, she need only appeal to a subset of her acceptances that form a chain of supporting norms. "Coherence," then, need only be coherence with a subset of acceptances.

At the same time, Full Circle Coherentism preserves the same advantages that were had by Global Coherentism. Justification remains first person accessible, since it is still the agent's acceptances that generate justification. The regress problem is solved in the same way as well. Reasons are provided for each norm, though the set of norms is finite and no norm is taken as self-evident. In order to maintain the ability to solve the foundationalist's problem—the worry that in putting forward a standard of justification, one is appealing to a norm that one cannot justify—acceptance of the Norm of Coherence can be built into Full Circle Coherentism as well. If an agent is to have any justified acceptances, she must accept norm NC, and NC must be supported by circle of norms within her acceptance set.

4.1 Defeasible and Decisive Support

As it stands, Full Circle Coherentism, is vulnerable to the charge that it fails the
transparency condition. An agent may have a subset of acceptances that forms a circle of support for a norm N, and yet, if she were to reflect on this set, she would find herself no longer able to accept N. Perhaps she would feel that she has been mistaken in accepting one or more of the norms in this chain. The agent would be unable to see N as justified once she comes to understand what it is that justifies it.

Note that the agent's dissatisfaction with the justification of N is based on her dissatisfaction with one or more of the norms that support it, say, norm M. It seems that, if the agent disapproves of M, it must be on the basis of some other norm, L, that she accepts--L tells her not to accept norms like M. Coherence in one part of an agent's acceptance set can coexist with incoherence in another part of the set (as L fails to cohere with M). So coherence--support relations that come full circle--may generate justification, but it is a defeasible kind of justification. It can be defeated if some norm in the circle is defeated by another norm in the acceptance system. What we need to do, in order to defend Full Circle Coherentism, is to distinguish between defeasible and decisive justification.6

In order to get an account of decisive justification, we need to define a defeat relation among norms. Let's start with the notion that norms can be in competition with each other. Norms N1 and N2 are in competition if one prohibits the other (e.g. if N1 says "Don't accept norm N2") or if they direct the agent to perform incompatible actions.

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6Making this distinction is advantageous in other ways. In Chapter 1, section 5, we said that, intuitively, normative justification seemed to come in both defeasible and decisive variants.
(e.g. if N1 says “Do y” and N2 says “Don’t do y”). Given that we are interested in what an agent is decisively justified in accepting in a first person sense, the only competing norms that are relevant are ones that she accepts and ones that she has reason to accept on the basis of norms she actually accepts. N1 defeats N2 when a (justified) governing norm directs the agent to weigh N1 more heavily than N2. N1 is decisively justified for an agent when none of the other defeasibly justified norms he accepts ultimately defeat N1. I say “ultimate” defeat in order to mark the possibility that a defeater is itself defeated. Norm N2 may be defeated by N1, but N1 may itself be defeated, leaving N2 decisively justified after all. Or perhaps the governing norm which dictates that N1 overrides N2 will itself be defeated. Defeat may come fairly late in the chain of reasons and be communicated to the original norm. If N is supported by M, which is supported by L, and L is ultimately defeated by K, then N’s justification is defeated as well (assuming that it is not justified by a different subset of acceptances, unrelated to M and L).

One might worry that the coherentist will fall back into the regress of norms by relying on defeat relations in his theory of decisive justification. As was emphasized in the Chapter 3 discussion of prima facie foundationalism, defeat is a norm-governed relation. This means that there must be governing norms, and these governing norms must be justified. But the coherentist can easily accommodate this. The governing norms are part

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7The possibility of this latter kind of relationship among norms should be highlighted. Say I accept a norm N of type t. There is another norm, D, which says, “Don’t accept norms of type t.” D is not a norm I accept. However, I do accept (with justification) norm M, which tells me I ought to accept norm D. In this scenario, N is defeated. M indirectly defeats N by providing the agent with a reason to accept a direct defeater of N.
of the acceptance system, they receive their justification in the same way other norms do—by cohering with the acceptance system. Governing norms are decisively justified if the reasons supporting them are undefeated.

A system that does not contain decisively justified governing norms has no way of accommodating defeat relations. In such a system every justified norm is decisively justified because no norm is defeated. However, competition between norms will never be resolved. Two norms that direct the agent to perform incompatible actions will both be decisively justified. This engenders the sort of frustration that leads people to accept governing norms. Note, I state this descriptively. We can say that the agent ought to accept governing norms only if the agent justifiedly accepts (or has reason to accept) a norm that says “I ought to avoid frustration” (or something similar).

5. Reflective Endorsement Coherentism

The distinction between defeasible and decisive justification was introduced into our discussion of Full Circle Coherentism in order to defend the theory against a charge that it fails the transparency requirement. The objection was that an agent would not be satisfied with the fact that she has a full circle of support in favor of a norm N. My response was to explain away the dissatisfaction as simply a sign that N has competition within the agent’s acceptance system. However the objector may insist that this is not the correct explanation of her worry. Rather, she will say that coming full circle doesn’t seem to grant even defeasible justification to the norm. She can see that a subset of her
acceptance set forms a circle of support for a norm N, and yet, when she reflects on this set, she finds herself no longer able to accept N. The transparency objection still stands.

If the problem with our theory so far is that it may not survive reflection, then we should modify it to ensure that it does. In order to get just such a modification, there is no need to be subtle, we should simply add to our coherentist standard of justification the requirement that the agent must be able to endorse the norm upon reflection. Let's call this new theory of justification Reflective Endorsement Coherentism (REC).

5.1 The Norms of Reflective Endorsement and the Foundationalist's Problem

An objector might point out that the REC standard of justification seems to rest on an appeal to a norm, viz.:

The First Norm of Reflective Endorsement (RE1): One ought to accept norms that one endorses upon reflection.

But we can ask versions of the Normative Question about this norm. Why think that my reflection is any good? Why should I think that I've reflected in the right way? How do I know I haven't overlooked something important? Reflection is a norm-guided activity. We each accept that some methods of reflection are better than others. For example, we usually value the results of reflection performed when calm and sober than when agitated or drunk. In other words, we adopt norms of reflection for ourselves. Different agents accept different norms of reflection and they rely on them in different ways. Some people are more systematic than others. Some people simply trust that the relevant norms will
float before their minds, others will have policies of always self-consciously evaluating
norms in a certain way, perhaps checking that particular positive features are present or
that common negative features have been avoided. The actual shape that my reflective
endorsement takes will depend in large part on what reflective habits I have acquired,
what desires I have, and so forth. Perhaps my habits and desires are ones that I have
reason to reject. If they are, then how could my reflective endorsements be justification
conferring?

This objection is really the same worry that troubled the foundationalist in the last
chapter [section 12] and that we discussed in connection with Global Coherentism in
section 3.1 of this chapter. In making reflective endorsement a standard of justification for
norms, the REC theorist is appealing to a norm, RE1. The response that we should give
in defense of the REC theorist is the same in kind as the one that we gave in defense of the
Global Coherentist.

The foundationalist’s problem was that, in advancing her standard of justification,
she made implicit appeal to a norm, (NP), that she couldn’t justify for the agent. In
advancing the Reflective Endorsement standard of justification, the coherentist also makes
implicit appeal to a norm (RE1), but the coherentist can justify RE1. An agent is justified
in accepting RE1 if he has a good reason to reflectively endorse norms in just the way that
he does—i.e. if his reflection is conducted in accordance with justified norms. He can
justify RE1 if he can claim,

The Second Norm of Reflective Endorsement (RE2): I ought to accept the
norms of reflection that I do.

RE1 is a norm of reflection that the agent accepts. Therefore, it is supported by RE2.

Appeal to this norm, of course, raises another version of the Normative Question: why should I accept RE2? The agent needs to be able to justify RE2 by appeal to some other norm that he accepts. He can do that. The reason for accepting RE2 is RE1. He ought to accept the norms of reflection that he does because when he reflects on those norms, he endorses them, and he ought to accept norms that he endorses upon reflection. So RE1 supports RE2 while RE2 supports RE1. I will refer to this as the “loop of reflective endorsement.” As Onora O’Neill might say, reflective endorsement is like a tribunal that passes judgment on its own procedures [1989, Ch. 1].

So, at this point, I will amend my theory of normativity once again. An agent’s reflective endorsement of a norm is capable of generating justification for that norm only if

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8In Self-Trust [1997], Keith Lehrer uses a loop similar to this one to tie up his theory of practical wisdom. His loop involves the notion of being trustworthy in judging oneself trustworthy. My theory has an advantage over Lehrer’s, I think, in that reflective endorsement is a more determinate concept than trustworthiness. (Lehrer resists simple reductions of trustworthiness to non-normative notions such as reliability. He says that trustworthiness is a primitive concept.)

The theory of normativity that I am suggesting, or at least this part of it, also bears a strong resemblance to Hume (at least on Korsgaard’s interpretation [1996, 54 ff.]). Hume says that the moral sense (unlike the understanding) can approve of itself. This is what makes the dictates of the moral sense normative on Hume’s account. My theory—which focuses on reflection in general rather than particular reflective faculties—has advantages over Hume’s though. First of all, Hume will have the problem of delineating various faculties. Secondly, Hume owes us a story about how we adjudicate conflicts between the dictates of moral sense and the dictates of other self-supporting faculties (say, the faculty linked to self-interest).

Those familiar with Korsgaard’s The Sources of Normativity will also notice the similarity between REC and the theory of normativity that Korsgaard attributes to Bernard Williams and Mill [Lecture 2]. She reads each of these writers as claiming that something is normative for an agent only if he endorses it upon reflection. They differ slightly in what sort of reflection is required. REC differs from both by requiring that the agent’s norms for reflection survive reflection themselves. This is what turns the foundationalist theories of Williams and Mill into a coherentist theory. And this is what saves my theory from the objection Korsgaard levels against these writers, that they cannot answer the question “Why should I think my reflective endorsements matter?”
the agent accepts the loop of reflective endorsement. An agent must accept both RE1 and RE2 if any of his normative acceptances are to count as justified simpliciter.9

According to the Reflective Endorsement Coherentist model, then, a norm N is defeasibly justified simpliciter for agent A if and only if:

1. A would endorse N upon reflection (i.e. she would endorse N were she to reflect on it in accordance with the norms of reflection that she accepts); and

2. A would endorse RE1 and RE2 upon reflection.10

5.2 Foundationalism Revisited?

As I’ve presented them above, norms RE1 and RE2 are distinct. But an objector may point out that what I am actually appealing to is one reflexive norm. Really, all we need to note in order to see the loop of reflective endorsement is that RE1 applies to itself. “Why should I accept that ‘I ought to accept norms that I endorse upon reflection’?” “Because when I reflect on that norm, I endorse it.” So, the objector continues, what is really at the root of the Reflective Endorsement theory is a single norm, from which justification springs—RE1 is being used as a foundation! And not only that, it is a pretty lousy candidate for a foundation. Recall the way reflexive norms were ridiculed in Chapter 3, section II. If we say that RE1 is justified because it can count as its own

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9So, the loop of reflective endorsement performs the same role that NC (the Norm of Coherence) played in Global Coherentism.

10Note that I use the subjunctive tense. Requiring actual reflection on each norm would make the standard too demanding.
reason, then we must also acknowledge that the following self-supporting norm is justified:

C. A standard is to be subscribed to if it can be expressed in English in fewer than twenty words.

Fortunately, this charge is misguided. RE1 is not a foundation because it is not free-standing. To say that RE1, or any other norm, is justified because it is endorsed upon reflection is to acknowledge that other norms play a role in the justification of that norm. Reflection is a norm-governed process. Norms from the set of acceptances are what reflection appeals to in determining whether to endorse RE1. Since other norms come to play a role in the justification of RE1, an agent will not automatically endorse her own norms of reflection. She may come to believe that the norms she uses for reflection are prejudiced, insufficiently thorough, childish, or inconsistent; and, given that she accepts norms that say that one ought not be prejudiced, careless, childish, or inconsistent, this will prevent her from endorsing her norms of reflection. RE1's self-support is not at all automatic or necessary, and this indicates that RE1 is not a foundation. This objection can be dismissed.

6. REC and the Criteria for Justification Simpliciter

In this section I want to argue that REC meets the five criteria of adequacy for a

11Note that these other norms do not simply play the role of defeaters to a defeasibly justified RE1. RE1 must be reflectively endorsed in order to become defeasibly justified. What I'm pointing out is that RE1 may not be reflectively endorsed.
theory of justification simpliciter, which were discussed in section 2 above—first person accessibility, the ability to solve the regress problem, comprehensiveness, reflexivity, and transparency. I do not claim that these necessary conditions for justification simpliciter are also sufficient. There may be some other standard of justification that meets all of them as well. There may be some other necessary criterion of justification simpliciter that I have overlooked. The five criteria I recognize fall out of our conception of normativity. Any other necessary condition must do so as well, it seems. To recognize anything else as a source of necessary conditions would amount to an appeal to an external authority, and an appeal to an external authority will land one back in the regress problem ("Why should I accept what this authority commands?"). For this reason, I doubt that any new necessary criterion of justification simpliciter will push us towards a theory that differs radically from REC. Whether or not that is so, I will be satisfied if I convince the reader that REC is, at least, a plausible candidate for the standard of justification simpliciter.

6.1 Accessibility

Reflective Endorsement Coherentism recognizes that the reasons for accepting norms must be first person accessible. REC's starting point is the agent's own set of accepted norms. Justification is constructed out of this set by a process of reflective endorsement. In defining the sort of epistemic access to reasons that is required for normativity, we said that the reasons must be accessible to someone who is interested in detecting them [Chapter 1, section 6]. This is the sort of epistemic state I mean to refer to
by the term "reflection." We believe propositions, form desires, and internalize norms quite automatically at times. In reflection, we think about these different acceptances and desires with a degree of detachment and ask, "What reason do I have for this?"

The requirement of accessibility was motivated by an interest in having a standard of justification that is regulative. In this respect, REC is an improvement over the other two versions of coherentism that we have examined. The Global Coherentist standard (which required that every accepted norm cohere with every other accepted norm) was psychologically unrealistic. So, though the Global Coherentist standard was accessible in a sense (it appealed only to the agent's own acceptances, which are accessible to her), it was not accessible in a sense that is compatible with the interest in regulativeness.

The Full Circle standard (which required only that a particular norm be supported by a coherent subset of the agent's acceptance set) was more psychologically realistic, but, it seems, still very demanding. Actually coming up with a set of norms that can form the required sort of circle of support is very difficult. Try to design one and you'll discover this. Once we recognize that the loop of reflective endorsement is a possible way of coming full circle, then we can see that it is a standard people will plausibly meet. There are fewer norms that must come into play and their relation to each other is not very complicated. It is more likely that people can present their positive reasons for accepting N when there are only two norms that need to be cited in N's defense. A full justification of a norm N might go like this:

I accept N.
Why accept that?

Because when I reflect on N, I endorse it; and (RE1) I ought to accept norms I reflectively endorse.

Why think that my reflective endorsement is a reason for acceptance?

Because (RE2) I accept the norms of reflective endorsement that I ought to accept.

This is not an overly complicated train of thought. So, REC seems to provide a standard of justification that is simple enough to be regulative.

6.2 Solving the Regress Problem

According to REC, the agent can bring a halt to the regress of 'why' questions by always having an answer to the question. If the agent provides a reason for her acceptance of N, and a reason for that reason, and so on until she comes to a point where the reason she cites is a norm that has already been defended, then there are no more 'why' questions that she needs to answer. The agent can stop when she comes back to a question which she has already answered. And this is what the agent does when she defends a norm with the loop of reflective endorsement.

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12But what if the pesky skeptic won't let the agent alone and keeps repeating questions that she has already answered? Though I have often set up the regress problem as a matter of answering the questions of a skeptic, convincing the skeptic is not a criterion of adequacy. A normative skeptic cannot be refuted. To prove something to the skeptic, one would need to appeal to rules of good argumentation, but these rules are just the sorts of thing that the skeptic rejects. The skeptic is useful because she makes us be rigorous, she points out things that we take for granted. What we need to do is find an answer to the regress that we non-skeptics can find satisfactory.
But has the agent really answered all the questions that she needs to in fulfilling REC’s standard of justification? Or are there some other norms to which the agent is appealing that are in need of justification? In this section, I will look at various claims that there are norms hidden in the REC standard.

Since REC says that norms are only justified when they would be endorsed upon reflection, we might suspect that it is implicitly invoking the norm “One must be reflective.” If that is the case, then there is another version of the Normative Question that the agent must answer: “Why should I reflect?” This objection does not stick, however. REC does not order agents to reflect. All it says is that, if agents do reflect, then justification may be generated. Agents who don’t reflect (if one who doesn’t reflect can truly be described as an agent) have no reasons simpliciter at all; they are neither justified simpliciter nor unjustified simpliciter in any of their acceptances.

Another normative presupposition the skeptic might try to saddle REC with is “One must be coherent.” This charge is avoided in the same way. REC doesn’t demand that people be coherent, but if they are, they might be justified in the norms they accept.

Of course, it may be the case that a particular agent is required to accept that she should reflect and be coherent. But if she is, this is in virtue of her reflectively endorsing norms that mandate reflection and coherence. An agent who accepted the norm “I ought to reflect,” but who did not accept it coherently, would not be justified in her acceptance of the norm (nor would she be unjustified).

The skeptic’s next objection is that REC sneaks in norms of deontic logic. In
order for one norm to be judged to support another in a relation of coherence, the agent must count the following pattern of reasoning as capable of conferring justification from premise to conclusion:

1. Norm N requires acceptance of norms of type t.
2. Norm M is of type t.
3. Therefore, norm N requires acceptance of norm M.

This implies that the agent must think the norm that requires the deduction of (3) from premises (1) and (2) is justified. But what justifies that norm of inference? Why should I accept deontic logic?

The skeptic is right to point out that the very notion that support extends justification from one norm to another involves a sort of logical norm. This norm must be accepted if coherence is to be justification-conferring. Still, REC doesn't demand that agents be coherent and so it doesn't demand that they accept the logical norm either. If the agent does accept the norm then justification is possible. But what justifies the logical norm, in cases where it is justified, is its coherence with the agent's acceptance set. The norm of deontic logic, when justified, is justified through a kind of self-support. The norm is endorsed upon reflection, and the agent endorses her own norms of reflective endorsement. The coherence that is appealed to between the logical norm and the loop of reflective endorsement is itself an instance of reasoning in accordance with the logical norm. However, this doesn't mean that the logical norm is a foundation. The sort of self-support it has necessarily involves appeal to other norms.
Though REC must rely on norms in order to attribute justification to a norm $N$, this does not mean that these norms are doing illicit work. Rather, all the norms REC uses are justified, in those cases where they are justified at all, within the loop of reflection.

### 6.3 Comprehensiveness

A standard is comprehensive in the relevant sense if and only if it accounts for the justification simpliciter of all sorts of norms (e.g. moral, epistemic, logical), of all scopes (rules, recommendations, permissions), and all strengths (defeasible, decisive). Reflective Endorsement Coherentism appears to be a comprehensive standard of justification simpliciter. REC can include norms of all types within its range of evaluation. REC builds justification out of reflective endorsement. Reflective endorsement is a very general sort of attitude, it can be taken in regard to a wide range of subjects. It seems any kind of norm—be it moral or epistemic, a rule or a permission—can be endorsed upon reflection.

The REC theory can move from its standard of defeasible justification to a standard of decisive distinction in the same way that the Full Circle version of coherentism did—by appealing to an absence of defeat by other justified norms [section 4.1]. A norm $N$ is defeasibly justified if and only if the agent would endorse $N$ upon reflection and would reflectively endorse her own norms for reflection. $N$ is decisively justified for an agent when none of the other defeasibly justified norms he accepts ultimately defeat $N$.\(^{13}\) We

\(^{13}\)Note that in order for a norm $N_2$ to be a competitor for $N$, $N_2$ must itself be at least defeasibly justified. In other words, $N_2$ must itself cohere with the loop of reflective endorsement. If $N_2$ is to, not just compete with, but defeat $N$, $N_2$ must be decisively justified. If $N_2$ does not defeat $N$, it must be because $N_2$ is
should also add that, if any norm N is to be decisively justified for an agent, she must also
be decisively justified in her acceptance of the loop of reflective endorsement. If RE1 or
RE2 were defeated for her, this would undermine her justification in accepting any N.¹⁴
The loop of reflective endorsement is required to uphold reflection’s power to generate
justification.

So, it seems that REC’s standard of justification is comprehensive. But before we
can conclude this, we must first determine whether it is reflexive. We must see whether
REC can justify its own standard of justification.

6.4 Reflexivity

REC does, of course, satisfy the reflexivity condition. It has the ability (in fact it
has a built-in requirement that gives it the ability) to count its own standard of justification
as decisively justified. That is just what was provided for by the requirement that the loop
of reflective endorsement—RE1 and RE2—be included and decisively justified within the
agent’s acceptance system.

¹⁴Actually, perhaps RE2 as stated so far need not be decisively justified. I said that this norm is “I
ought to accept the norms of reflection that I do.” This implies that I ought to accept all the norms of reflection
that I do. But maybe, among this set of norms, there is one that is defeated—e.g. “I ought to count John’s
opinion as weighty in my reflection.” If I didn’t rely on this unjustified norm in my reflective endorsement of
norm N, then, it seems, its defeat shouldn’t affect N’s status. If all the norms of reflection that I use in
derorsing N are undefeated, that seems sufficient.
6.5 Transparency

A theory of normativity is not transparent if, were the agent to believe that this is really what gives her reason to accept norms, she could no longer feel the force of reasons or see any norms as justified. In a way, REC has a built-in safeguard against failures of transparency. To say that a theory of normativity is not transparent is to say that its standard of justification would not survive one's reflection. But REC's standard of justification just is, in part, the requirement that standards survive reflection. By requiring the loop of reflective endorsement, REC requires that the agent find the results of her own reflection compelling.

Still, there are a couple of comprehensible ways in which to charge REC with a failure of transparency. First of all, one might worry that REC's self-supporting standard of justification is actually viciously circular. Though I have given two different arguments for thinking that reflexivity is a necessary condition of a theory of justification simpliciter [section 2], one may still be uneasy with reflexive standards. One might say, "If a standard of justification simpliciter must be reflexive, then that just shows that the very notion of such a standard and of justification simpliciter in general is ultimately self-defeating or incoherent. It shows that the only possible standard of justification simpliciter would have to beg the question. After all, if I didn't already believe that reflective endorsement is a source of justification, I certainly wouldn't come to be convinced of that fact by being told..."
that I reflectively endorse my reflective endorsement."\textsuperscript{15}

My own view, though, is that once one understands that a standard of justification simpliciter must be reflexive, and that a reflexive standard of justification need not be trivial, then REC will no longer strike one as viciously circular. The reason that REC is not a trivial standard is that the loop of reflective endorsement is not automatic—it is possible for an agent not to endorse her own norms upon reflection. In fact, satisfying REC's standard, especially the standard for decisive justification simpliciter, is really rather demanding. The objector's charge, "if I didn't already believe that reflective endorsement is a source of justification, I wouldn't come to believe it on the grounds that I reflectively endorse my reflective endorsement," if it contained an accurate description of the Reflective Endorsement Coherentist theory, would be worrying. If that was all there was to the theory of justification simpliciter, the theory would not be transparent. If the agent believed that this, and this alone, explained the normative force of his principles of action, he would no longer be able to see those principles as justified. But a more accurate understanding of the REC theory would include the information that a theory of justification simpliciter must be reflexive and that reflective endorsement is not automatic or trivial. An agent who believed this explanation of REC would not, I think, be disillusioned with normativity on grounds of vicious circularity.

Another strategy for charging REC with violations of transparency would start

\textsuperscript{15}This seems to be Copp's opinion of reflexive standards, and the reason why he argues that no standard could be comprehensive [forthcoming]. His definition of comprehensiveness explicitly precludes question-begging [16].
with the observation that we have general but firm intuitions that certain sorts of people are reasonable. If REC concludes that these people fail to have reason simpliciter to follow norms that we confidently believe to be authoritative—say, moral norms—then REC is not a good theory of normativity. We think that we generally know who has reason simpliciter to be moral and under what circumstances. If REC does not yield similar judgments, then REC loses credibility. The next chapter will be dedicated to defending REC against this sort of charge of a failure of transparency.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Reflective Endorsement Coherentism meets at least four of the five known criteria of adequacy for a theory of justification simpliciter. It makes justification first person accessible, it can bring a halt to the regress of “why” questions, it applies to all sorts of norms without begging the question, and it passes its own test for justification. It has not been shown that REC meets the transparency condition; that will be the focus of the next chapter. But what this and the last chapter have shown is that coherentism is our best hope for avoiding skepticism about normativity.

Before closing let me highlight what is intuitively appealing about REC as a theory of normativity. The tie between reflection and normativity seems to be just what is needed. In a nutshell, REC proposes that the Normative Question, the persistent “whywhywhy,” finds its resolution within a loop of reflective endorsement. This seems
fitting since, as Christine Korsgaard claims, it is our capacity to be reflective that sets the problem of answering the "why" question in the first place [1996, 92-94].

[Our capacity to turn our attention onto our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them and call them into question. I perceive, and I find myself with a powerful impulse to believe. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I believe? Is this perception really a reason to believe? [93]

The reflective mind, because it is reflective, needs a reason. Skepticism about justification, Korsgaard continues, is not a metaphysical skepticism, it is not the doubt that there are values "out there in the world." Rather, normative skepticism is the worry that when I reflect on my impulses to believe, act, or accept norms, I won't be able to come to any resolution [94]. It is the fear that once we really look at our principles, we won't be able to care about them anymore [13-14].

But, "[i]f the problem springs from reflection, then the solution must do so as well. If the problem is that our perceptions and desires might not withstand scrutiny, then the solution is that they might" [3.2.1]. What Reflective Endorsement Coherentism provides is a description of the way in which a norm can withstand scrutiny while avoiding the regress problem. The norm can be such that it, and everything that is counted as a reason for it, is supported by a norm that one endorses upon reflection, where the process of reflection is itself reflectively endorsed. The price of failing reflective endorsement is skepticism, irresolution, and alienation from one's values.
CHAPTER 5:
WHY SHOULD I BE MORAL?

1. Introduction

In Chapters 2-4 we were concerned with the normative regress problem, a skeptical argument against the possibility of obtaining a justification simpliciter for any sort of norm. I have argued that the only feasible way to solve the regress problem is within a loop of reflective endorsement. In this chapter, I want to apply Reflective Endorsement Coherentism to the question of whether one has reason simpliciter to be moral. I hope that this will shed some light on our relation to moral norms—that the theory of normativity that I have been developing will help us to understand morality. But of equal interest to me is how the theory of normativity looks from the point of view of morality.

Any theory of normativity that is not compatible with a plausible theory of morality will not be satisfactory. There are two reasons for saying this. First of all, the Normative Question is particularly important in moral philosophy. All norms are susceptible to the query “Why should I accept this as a guide to my action?” But in ethics, the question can become urgent, for the day will come, for most of us, when what morality commands, obliges, or recommends is hard: that we share decisions with people whose intelligence or integrity don’t inspire our confidence; that we assume grave responsibilities to which we feel inadequate; that we sacrifice our lives, or voluntarily relinquish what makes them sweet. And then the question—why?—will press, and rightly so. Why should I be moral? [Korsgaard, 1996, 9].

The Normative Question is most pressing in the moral case because morality is so
demanding.

The second reason for making a theory of normativity beholden to a theory of morality is that, despite our inclination to resist morality in the hard cases, we are confident that when the question is “Should I be moral?” the answer is usually “yes.” This is one of our strongest, most persistent intuitions about normative authority. Any theory of normativity that cannot preserve this intuition is unsatisfactory; it will fail the transparency condition.

2. Normativity and Morality

Before discussing the specific implications of our understanding of morality for the REC theory of normativity, let me take a moment to clarify my terms. A theory of normativity explains the authoritative force of a norm; specifically, it presents the criteria for an agent’s having first person reason simpliciter to accept a norm.1 A theory of morality deals with a much wider variety of questions. One of the tasks of a theory of morality is to pick out the distinctively moral principle for action (the distinctively moral norm).2 Some plausible candidates for moral principles are the utilitarian (one ought to maximize happiness), Kantian (one ought to treat people as ends in themselves), contractarian (one ought to do what would have been agreed upon by a suitably described

1I will only specify whether these reasons are defeasible or decisive when it makes some difference.

2A full theory of morality should also answer the following questions: What makes a principle of action distinctively moral? How do we come to know moral facts? How do we come to be motivated by moral facts?
group of agents under suitably described circumstances), and ideal spectator theories (one ought to do what would be chosen by a calm and impartial spectator). Actions, intentions, agents, and norms are morally justified if they meet the standard set by the moral principle. A person has a moral reason to do x if her x-ing is required, permitted, or recommended by the moral principle.

The distinction between theories of normativity and theories of morality should be appreciated. Of course, the two theories will have implications for each other, and these implications should be taken into account. Still, at least at the outset, it should be noted that the correct theory of morality and the correct theory of normativity may have very different features. The truth conditions for statements of the form “S has a reason simpliciter to x” may be very different from the truth conditions for statements of the form “S has a moral reason to x.” Perhaps one set of truth conditions will be objective (consisting in mind- and evidence-independent features of the world) while the other is subjective. Perhaps one will be naturalistic while the other is not. Furthermore, there is conceptual space for the possibility that a single agent has a moral reason to x but no reason simpliciter to x.

3. REC's Judgments about Morality

According to Reflective Endorsement Coherentism, an agent has good reason to accept moral norms for his own behavior if and only if he can endorse the norms upon reflection, where that reflection is itself endorsable upon reflection. This response, of
course, is not of the sort that will make us exclaim "Ah! Now I see the light! No more lying, cheating and stealing for me!" There is still a lot more reflection that would need to be done in order for any particular individual to come to such a conclusion. REC lays out the general structure of normativity. It is useful primarily as a response to skeptics who charge that the whole notion of having a reason simpliciter to follow norms, moral or otherwise, falls apart. REC shows justification simpliciter to be comprehensible and, further, achievable (it is perfectly feasible that actual agents will often have reasons simpliciter). So, REC doesn’t by itself enable me to decide whether or not I should be moral--the answer to that question depends on which norms are actually in my acceptance set and how they relate to one another--but it does tell me that it is a genuine possibility that I could have reason simpliciter to be moral.

REC may look unilluminating from the point of view of the “why be moral” question at first, but there is definitely some substance to it. According to REC, reasons simpliciter have a subjective source. It is each agent’s own reflection that binds her to particular norms. Further, the features of the agent that generate justification (the specific norms in the acceptance set) are contingent; they may differ from agent to agent. Agent A’s reasons may differ greatly from agent B’s reasons. It is possible that A’s reason to be moral is different from B’s reason to be moral. And it is even possible that A may have reason to be moral, B may not have reason to be moral, and C may have reason to actually

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3 Contrast Kantian theories of normativity, which are subjective but necessary. Normativity results from laws that agents give to themselves, but there are some laws (including the moral law) that all agents, given the very nature of their reasoning, must give to themselves. Cf. Korsgaard, 1996, Lecture 3.
be immoral. The idea that there could be a person who does not have reason to be moral—
a "moral knave"—has struck some as very unintuitive. In fact, some find it so unintuitive
that they are inclined to count the fact that a particular theory of normativity allows for
knives as sufficient grounds for rejecting that theory [Hampton, forthcoming]. So, REC's
subjectivism makes it very controversial from the point of view of the theory of morality.

The conclusion that normativity is subjective is important for metaethical issues as
well as the "why be moral" question. It is commonly said both that morality is necessarily
normative and that morality is not subjective (but is instead either objective or
intersubjective). But if REC is right about what normativity is, then morality cannot have
both of these properties. If normativity is subjective then the justification simpliciter of a
particular norm, e.g. "I ought not murder," will vary from person to person based on
differences in their individual, subjective features—specifically, differences in their
acceptance sets. If morality is necessarily normative, then whether the norm "I ought not
murder" is morally justified will also vary from person to person, based on their subjective
features. "I ought not murder" may then be morally justified for me but not for you. In
other words, if justification simpliciter is subjective, then moral reasons are necessarily
reasons simpliciter only if moral reasons are also subjective. If we want to retain the
conviction that morality is not radically relativistic (and I think that we should), then,
given that normativity is subjective, morality cannot be necessarily normative.

The intuition that morality is both necessarily normative and not subjective has
played an important role in metaethical debates about the metaphysical status of moral
facts. Many seem to think that the only way to ensure that morality is necessarily normative is to make its truth conditions objective. This assumption has lead some to realism and others to anti-realism. Those committed to the necessary normativity of morality are sometimes willing to widen their metaphysics in radical ways in order to accommodate the sort of objective moral facts they believe normativity requires [Moore, 1903]. Others, who reject such permissive metaphysics, sometimes use their metaphysical complaints as arguments for non-objectivist (anti-realist) theories of morality [Mackie, 1977; Harman, 1977]. If we give up on the idea that morality is necessarily normative, then all of these arguments seem to be decidedly beside the point.

So the conclusion that REC is the correct theory of normativity can be seen to have implications for our theorizing and metatheorizing about morality. But one person's modus ponens is another's modus tollens. It is open to the defender of our moral intuitions to claim that, if REC is incompatible with the conclusion that morality is both necessarily normative and not subjective, we should reject REC.

What can I say to such an objector? I can hope that my arguments in Chapters 2-4 will lead him to agree with me that to reject REC is to condemn oneself to normative skepticism. The objector may respond that subjective normativity is no improvement over

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1As I argued in Chapter 3, section 9, such attempts to develop a theory of normativity on the basis of facts of value cannot get off the ground.

2Jean Hampton seems to have been leaning in this direction. She says if the scientific picture of the world is incompatible with objective and necessarily normative moral facts, then so much the worse for science [forthcoming].
skepticism. He may support this claim by arguing that REC is unable to accommodate many of our other, firm intuitions about morality. This brings us to the constraints that our theory of morality places on our theory of normativity. In the rest of this chapter, I will argue that REC actually does a good job, on the whole, of accommodating our intuitions about the morality. Although REC is incompatible with the popular claim that morality is both non-subjective and necessarily normative, and thereby entails that moral knaves are possible, REC is compatible with a morality worth having.

4. Theory of Morality's Implications for REC

The claim that our ideas about morality place constraints on our theory of normativity is related to the transparency criterion of adequacy. A theory of normativity is not transparent if it is the case that, upon coming to understand what it is that makes a norm authoritative, the agent were no longer able to feel the binding force of any norms. What I am suggesting here is that, intuitively, we think morality is so important that at least most of our intuitions about the authority of morality should survive the agent's coming to believe a certain theory of normativity, or else the theory fails. This is the standard against which Reflective Endorsement Coherentism must be held.

Transparency differs from the other criteria of adequacy discussed in Chapter 4 in that its satisfaction is not demonstrable. I cannot prove that any agent who really understands the REC theory and believes it to be true would still feel the normative force of norms in general or of moral norms in particular. I can respond to various charges that
agents would find REC nontransparent for some particular reason by clarifying the theory in a way that undermines the worry; but I have no blanket response to all possible charges of nontransparency. The best I can do to offer a positive defense of REC as meeting the transparency condition is to further defend features of REC that might trouble the people we think of as generally reasonable. To that end, I will look at specific intuitions about the authority of morality that might be incompatible with REC.

5. Do People Generally Have Reason to Be Moral?

Though the intuition that everyone always has a reason to be moral (i.e. that there are no moral knaves) is not universally shared, almost all of us would agree that most people have decisive reason to be moral most of the time. To understand morality, we believe, is to understand that it almost always wins out over other considerations. At first it may seem that REC is ill-qualified to explain the importance that we assign to moral rules. REC identifies justified norms formally, in terms of their quasi-logical relations to other norms that the agent accepts. There is no clause that requires that the agent accept anything like the norms of morality in the first place, let alone that she accept them in the way required for them to count as decisively justified. The worry lurking here is that, if REC is the correct theory of normativity, perhaps there are more moral knaves than we ever dreamed. Perhaps almost no one has reason to be moral. After all, it seems to pretty easy to avoid the requirement to be moral—just don’t have an acceptance set of the right shape.
I think, though, that REC can conclude that people generally have reason simpliciter to be moral. It will do this by taking advantage of the fact that being moral is generally in one's self-interest. Norms that tell one to serve one's own self-interest (at least where "interest" is given a subjectivist reading) are ones that we would expect to be reflectively endorsed by most people. The things that they most care about form their interests. The things that they most care about just are, I presume, the things that they will endorse upon reflection. If morality is a system of norms that usually is in line with what most agents count as their interests (and the social needs of individuals combined with the social enforcement of moral norms makes this likely), then people usually have a reason to be moral.

6. Error

Another of the firm intuitions that we have about morality is that sometimes people do not think that they have a reason to be moral when they really do. Since REC makes reasons subjective, it doesn't seem to allow for error. If my own reflective endorsements are what makes a norm justified or unjustified, then how could I be mistaken in judging that a norm is justified? It is especially important that REC be able to meet this objection. Justification is only an issue in areas of life where there is the possibility of making a mistake. A theory of justification that does not allow for error seems not to be a theory of justification at all.

Fortunately, REC can account for the possibility of error. In general, the reflective
endorsement theory says that x (an act, belief, acceptance of a norm) is wrong for a person if x violates some norm which is justified for her. For example, Mary might accept the norm “I may take office supplies home from work with me” even though she also accepts, with decisive justification, the moral norm “I ought not steal.” The Pilfering Norm is accepted in violation of the moral norm. Mary ought not take office supplies, even though she does not believe that this is the case. Mary probably fell into this error because she failed to recognize that taking office supplies is stealing, perhaps because it is easy to think of businesses as impersonal. Mary doesn’t see that taking office supplies amounts to taking the possessions of her employer or taking money out of the pockets of the stockholders of the corporation for which she works.

Even the endorsement of a norm upon reflection can be in error. Perhaps Mary not only accepts the Pilfering Norm but accepts it upon reflection. Reflection does not remove the possibility of error. Reflective endorsements only are justification-conferring when they are the results of a process of reflection that one also endorses. If I judge myself not to have a reason to be moral, but I come to this judgment in a way that violates the norms of reflection that I reflectively endorse, then my judgment is in error. Sometimes errors like these are due to self-deception or willful blindness.

Of course, what counts as an error in reflection will depend on which norms of reflection I accept. There might be an agent who approves of self-deception generally or within a certain context. If he engages in self-deception in judging whether to endorse some norm, this may not be an error. Self-deception isn’t necessarily prohibited by REC,
but people are such that self-deception will not generally pass their reflection. In fact, self-deception probably works by shielding certain beliefs, inferences or motivations from our reflection [Talbott, 1995].

7. Narrow Acceptance Systems

Though REC can recognize that errors are possible, perhaps its judgments will not correspond with our intuitive judgments of error. For instance, it may not be able to detect what is wrong with Count Vronsky, Anna Karenina’s lover, whose normative life is described by Tolstoy in the following passage:

[Vronsky] had a code of principles that defined beyond question everything that ought and ought not to be done. This code of rules took up a very small circle of contingencies, but to make up for it the rules were beyond discussion, and Vronsky, who never went outside this circle, never hesitated for a moment to do what had to be done. These rules laid it down beyond question that a card sharper had to be paid, while a tailor did not, that you must not lie to men, but that you could to women, that you could not forgive insults but that you could insult others, and so on. [Tolstoy, 1877/1981, 325-6]

Let us suppose that the “and so on” includes the loop of reflective endorsement. It seems that he will count as justified simpliciter under REC. The description of Vronsky points out that even a very small set of normative acceptances that covers only a quirky range of issues can generate justification by REC’s standard. But, doesn’t it seem that Vronsky ought to accept norms on a wider range of topics, including (given the situations we know

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*Some epistemic versions of coherentism explain their intuitive appeal by saying that circles are not pernicious if only the circles are large enough. I have placed no size requirement on the size of acceptance sets in my theory of justification simpliciter.
he gets himself into) moral norms about seducing married women and about caring for his loved ones? REC doesn't seem to have the resources to make this judgment.

However, Tolstoy's continuing description of Vronsky points to just the response the REC theorist will give.

It was only recently, because of his relations with Anna, that he had begun to feel that his code of rules did not completely cover all situations, and that difficulties and doubts would be coming up in the future for which he would find no guiding thread at all [326].

Vronsky's narrow but seemingly coherent set of acceptances is not coherent after all, it turns out. Vronsky reflectively endorses the idea that he should preserve his long-term happiness. Having such a small and quirky set of normative acceptances is incompatible with his happiness. It lands him in situations, like his tragic affair with Anna, with which he is not equipped to respond. Therefore, he has a reason to accept more norms.

What is true of Vronsky will be true generally. Given that people do usually coherently accept norms that direct them to preserve their happiness, and given that lacking a means for guidance is usually destructive of happiness, people will almost always have good reason to accept a fairly comprehensive set of norms. It is true that the REC does not guarantee that an agent will have a reason to accept a set of norms that is broad. But given what people are generally like, it will yield that result in the great majority of cases.

Note, the explanation for broad acceptance sets lies in human nature—something about the way we are built seems to lead us to accept norms that require our protection of
our happiness (or interests, if you like). But the justification of the norm that one ought to accept a broad range of norms is not that norm's link with human nature but its coherence with other accepted norms.

8. Obligation and Caprice

One might charge that on REC errors are too easy to fix. If the source of my obligation by moral norms is my own reflection, then what is to stop me, when being moral becomes hard, from simply releasing myself from these obligations? If obligations can be dissolved so easily, then are they really binding or authoritative after all? Doesn't it seem that any obligation that I can simply release myself from at will is really no obligation at all?

It is, of course, possible under REC that an agent who comes to see that being moral is costly in a particular circumstance will enter this information into his reflection and stop endorsing the moral norm in question (or at least count the reason for following the norm as overridden in this circumstance). But REC can account for the intuition that there are times in which a person cannot simply release himself from an obligation, there are times in which morality is really binding.

REC can account for this judgment because it can assign error to the ways in which agents change their acceptance systems. Whether I can justifiably alter my reflective judgment of a norm from endorsement to rejection will depend on what norms of reflection I endorse. Most agents will endorse norms that will restrict their ability to
justifiably shrug off obligations. For example, they will accept that general principles of action are only worth having when one abides by them over the long term, that changing one’s principles in circumstances that are stressful and unnerving will lead to regret later (and that regret should be avoided), etc. Of course, it is possible that there will be agents, who have no such acceptances and no reason to refrain from capricious changes in their acceptance sets. But, most people will not be like this. For most people, obligations, moral and otherwise, cannot be easily shed.

9. Coherent Madmen

The next objection also charges that REC fails to detect enough (of what we intuitively think of as) errors. For REC, error can only be a matter of incoherence, but even a madman can be coherent. Pick the craziest norm that you can think of, there is some set of norms that could be joined with it such that the agent comes out, not only defeasibly, but decisively justified in her acceptance.7

I admit that REC lends itself open to wacky counterexamples, wherein people with strange acceptance sets come out justified. I bite the bullet on most of these, noting that, luckily, human nature is such that people do not, or will have reason not to, have

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7The counterpart of this objection in the literature on coherentist theories of epistemic justification use the example of a madman who believes that his brain is being controlled by aliens [BonJour, 1985, 150]. This madman may have other beliefs that explain away all the things that we would count as evidence that he is not so controlled. He believes that the doctors who examine him and declare that there are no implants in his head are alien spies who are in on the deception, etc. The madman’s beliefs are completely coherent but completely unjustified nonetheless, according to the objector.
acceptance sets like these. There are many norms that seem so central to our own normative lives that the idea that a person could justifiably fail to accept those norms seems to render REC insufficient. If we are imagining agents similar to ourselves there will likely be an explanation for why they will accept, or have reason to accept, the norms we find central. Agents very different from us will not accept these. When we try to imagine what is justified for agents radically different from us, say agents who cannot feel pain or love, the confidence that everyone must accept some norm N disappears.

So, we may expect people with wacky but coherent acceptance sets to be relatively few and far between, but they are certainly possible under REC. Should we consider this reason to reject REC? I think not. It is important to keep in mind that the sort of justification under analysis is a first person sort of justification. From the external point of view, we may see that an agent is mad, that the norms she accepts are crazy. But from the agent's internal point of view, if she really is coherent, we will see that the agent has reason to accept them and no reason to accept any norm that ultimately defeats them. We can say to her "But accepting that norm is mad!" But this will only provide her with a reason to change her acceptance if she also accepts norms of belief-formation that sanction her taking our word that she is mad or if she accepts norms that lead her to consider madness a flaw.

10. Judging Others

I have already noted that, on REC, it is possible for a person to fail to have any
reason simpliciter to be moral [section 3]. It is also true that REC allows that a person could have good reason simpliciter to accept norms that are immoral. This result may strike many as unacceptable because it seems to bar us from reacting to others in the ways that seem most reasonable. If someone commits a morally wrong act, I want to blame and punish her. But if she had a justification simpliciter for doing what she did, then it doesn’t seem that I can blame her. To blame her would be to suggest that she had a reason not to be immoral [Strawson, 1962; Wolf, 1990, 19].

This seems to me to put the cart before the horse. Blame and punishment, as well as praise and reward, are norm-guided activities. To say that we cannot condemn a person who has reason to be immoral is to presuppose a norm for praising and blaming that is neither necessary nor attractive. The norm, call it M, would be: “Do not condemn someone for doing something she has a reason to do.” If the reflective endorsement theory of reasons is true, and if one is aware of it and the possibility of knaves, then norm M simply would not survive reflection (or not mine anyway). If you coherently endorse the promotion of the welfare of human beings, or peaceful societal relations, or many other similar norms, then M is in violation of a justified norm for you and you should reject it. M would lead to a lack of control over knaves, and this is surely an unacceptable result to most of us. Condemnation is a normatively loaded activity. Rules for condemnation are not prior to the theory of normativity, rather they are constrained by it.

Further, if normativity is subjective rather than objective, then it seems we have even more reason to try to exert an influence over each other through praise and blame.
We cannot simply rely on the hope that knaves will eventually come to recognize some objective fact that indicates that they should act morally. On the other hand, if we exert social pressure on them, if we make their lives miserable when they act immorally, hopefully we will inhibit their immoral behavior. Perhaps this will all be helped along by a Humean sort of capacity for sympathy, whereby the knave may pick up on and internalize our disapprobation of her [Hume, 1740, III.1.i]. In this way, we may even influence her normative acceptances and her reflection so that she might even come to have reason to be moral in situations where punishment is not a threat. Even if knaves prove to be beyond the reach of such influence, at least we are sending messages to others that will encourage them to be moral.8

11. Alienation

REC’s responses to the objections so far discussed may strike some as mere patchwork. These people are likely to claim that a subjectivist theory of normativity is not true to how we think about our reasons for accepting moral norms, and that this incompatibility renders REC nontransparent. They will say, “I thought that the moral norms I endorsed upon reflection were normative in virtue of their relation to real values or to facts of reason, not in virtue of their relations to each other. If normativity comes

8Thomas Nagel [1970, 83, 145] argues that there is a link between the emotion of resentment and the judgment that the object of resentment had a reason to have acted otherwise. Apparently, Nagel would say that if we came to see that knaves really have no reason to be moral, we would no longer be able to resent them (our resentment would not pass our own reflective endorsement, in my terminology). Even if Nagel is right about this, we would still be able to blame and punish knaves.
only from me and from my reflection, then that’s not enough. Sure I have been approving of my own reflective endorsements up till now, but that is because I thought that in making those endorsements I was somehow tracking something objective. If it is really just my own endorsements that are doing all the work, then morality seems a charade. None of it matters to me anymore. All the norms I used to accept now strike me as empty and meaningless.” These anti-subjectivists are likely to point out that the particular shape that an acceptance system takes will likely be the result of personal history and individual differences in temperament and taste. Given that an agent’s particular reflective endorsements can be explained in terms of their particular desires and passions, the REC theory really amounts to the claim that “N is normative if and only if I like it (in a certain loopy way).” But this is a very disappointing theory of normativity, and it is liable to leave us feeling alienated from our normative commitments.

In response to this line of objection, it should, first of all, be noted though the explanation for why I reflectively endorse the particular norms that I do may be desire-based, the justification for those endorsements is their relation to my other endorsements, not their causal origin in desire.

Looking at things from the first person point of view, we do not commit ourselves to most of our ends and principles because we like them. As Simon Blackburn puts it, we are committed to the idea that “[w]hat makes cruelty abhorrent is not that it offends us, but all those hideous things that make it do so” [1993, 172]. “From the inside, the objects of our passions are their immediate objects: it is the death, the loved one, the sunset that
matters to us. It is not our own state of satisfaction or pleasure” [176].

This is how our commitments appear to us from the inside, but once we realize that these commitments are only binding because they survive the desire-driven process of reflection, will they lose their authority? Again, a response can be borrowed from Blackburn:

Is it that we..., at the crucial moment when we are about to save the child, throw ourselves on the grenade, walk out into the snow, will think, ‘Oh, it’s only me and my desires or other conative pressures—forget it’?

It ought to be sufficient refutation of this doubt to mention other cases. Does the lover escape his passion by thinking, ‘Oh, it’s only my passion, forget it”? When the world affords occasion for grief does it brighten when we realize that it is we who grieve? [176].

The external view of our commitments will tell us that they are only normative because we value them in such a way that they survive reflection. Upon reflecting on this from the internal viewpoint, though, we need not lose sight of the immediate objects of our commitment. In the cases of grief and passion, it is clear that we do not lose sight of them. The objects still matter to us. This is probably true of many of our other concerns as well. In that case, these commitments will continue to lead us to endorse norms from the reflective standpoint, and so norms will continue to have force for us. It seems to me that most of us care about morality because we care about human beings for their own sake. We cringe at cruelty and injustice because we empathize with the victims. If this is right, then our moral commitments, like our feelings of love of grief, are highly likely to continue to be important to us, even when we recognize that our reasons for being moral are subjective.
12. The Possibility of Confidence

I think that we can say even more to defend REC against the objection that it leaves us alienated from our moral commitments. So far I have said that there is no reason to think that subjectivity will undermine our commitments. I also think that it is possible for a subjective theory of normativity to provide us with positive reasons for confidence in our commitments.

Bernard Williams has noted that it is usually assumed that our relation to moral norms is either a knowledge relation to independently existing moral facts or an existentialist sort of relation, where our norms are mere decisions [1985]. According to REC, the knowledge relation is not the relation of normativity. I can know that it is an independent fact that N is immoral and yet it is still a substantive question, "Do I have reason simpliciter to reject N?" This seems, then, to condemn REC to saying that our relation to moral norms is a matter of mere decision—whether moral norms are authoritative for me simply depends on whether I decide that they are or decide that they are not. But, if this is the case, then REC will leave us feeling as flat as existentialism does. Williams claims there is no reason to think that the 'knowledge' relation and the 'mere decision' relation are our only options [169]. There is a possible intermediate position, which he calls 'confidence' [170-1]. Williams says almost nothing about what this position of confidence is like, but I suggest that it can be filled in using the model of
Imagine an agent, Susan, who reflectively endorses the moral norms associated with a contemporary American of a liberal bent. Susan is concerned about whether her norms are arbitrary. She reflectively endorses a norm that says, "Do not be the sort of sheep-like, unimaginative agent who simply absorbs the popular norms of her society." Susan sees her membership in late 20th century, middle-class, American society as a matter of chance and the idea that her moral ideals are a matter of such chance is disturbing to her. Susan is also a reflective endorsement theorist about normativity, and so she does not look for an objective moral reality or facts of reason as an answer to her normative questions. Instead, Susan studies other societies, converses with people of widely varying normative positions, and even searches out and talks to some moral knaves. She gathers information, imagines her life and the world guided by different systems of norms, and searches her own acceptance system for errors and inconsistencies (she strongly disapproves of inconsistency). After this whole process is complete, she still reflectively endorses norms of personal freedom and equality. Moreover, she feels a new confidence in those endorsements. After considering many possible competitors to these ideals, she still approves of them, and she feels sure that she will be able to maintain this approval in the face of whatever new information or new ideas come her way. Susan does not feel that her moral acceptances are arbitrary or meaningless.

9Actually, I think that it is not clear whether Williams' topic in [1985] is the normativity of morality. Korsgaard reads him in this way, though. See her [1996, 67-78].
I intend the example of Susan to show that REC does not doom us to alienation from our norms and may even reassure us. Of course, not every agent’s experience will be like Susan’s. Some agents will take up a search like hers and end up changing their normative acceptances dramatically. Others may never find a comprehensive set of norms in which they are confident. Perhaps there will also be a few who do not, and have no reason to, care about whether they are simply unimaginatively following the popular norms of their peers, and these people will have no reason to follow Susan in examining their normative acceptances from widely diverse points of view. The purpose of the portrait of Susan is simply to show that Reflective Endorsement Coherentism need not make us feel that our norms are empty. The ability of our norms to survive systematic, wide-ranging and critical reflection can inspire our confidence.

The objectivist that I have been using as my imagined objector in this chapter is a person who is committed to certain norms—norms that have an objectivist flavor to them. He reflectively endorses norms that require him to reflect in ways that strike him as maximally separate from the peculiarities of his own, individual perspective. He accepts, and is justified in accepting (let us allow), norms that encourage looking at candidate principles of action from many different points of view, that require him to vividly imagine the consequences of acting upon those principles of action, that give more informed acceptances the right to trump less informed acceptances, that prohibit inconsistency at a time and are hostile to inconstancy over time, and so forth. REC recognizes that these norms influence what it is that is justified for this agent. So our objectivist’s intuitions
about what matters in making a norm one he should accept are right. But these concerns don’t matter in exactly the way he thinks they do. The difference is that, though these objective-like norms of reflection are ones that he must follow, they are not ones that are automatically required for everyone. Should this realization lead the agent to reject these objective-like norms of reflection once he comes to believe REC? There is nothing in REC that requires that. In fact, given the particulars of his acceptance set, he is probably required to maintain his acceptances. To cease to be concerned, for example, with a variety of points of view would be in violation of the norms that he justifiably accepts.

But is it to be expected that, on coming to believe REC, our former objectivist just will be psychologically unable to continue endorsing the same norms? It’s possible, but I doubt it. I think that the people who we intuitively think of as both reasonable and moral would maintain their commitment to moral norms even if they were to come to believe REC.

13. A Defense of Subjectivism and Minimalism

The various objections to REC that I have responded to in this chapter—that too few people will have reason to be moral, that it will not yield intuitive judgments about error, that it will not allow us to condemn moral knaves, that it will leave us alienated

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10 This objection reminds me of the old worry that without a belief in God, people would no longer feel required to be moral. Neither worry seems credible to me. People’s sentiments—the depth of love they feel for each other and themselves, the strength of their desires—are perfectly capable of binding them to principles and ends, moral and otherwise. They don’t require objective sources of normativity. They are able to oblige themselves.
from our normative commitments—are motivated by two basic features of REC: its subjectivism and its minimalism. REC is subjective in the sense that it makes justification simpliciter a product of the individual agent’s internal states, specifically his acceptance set and his practices of reflective endorsement. It is a “minimalist” theory of justification in that it places very minimal constraints on the content of the agent’s acceptance set or the manner in which he reflects. In this section, I want to state why the subjectivism and the minimalism of REC cannot be rejected. I will say that raising the standard of justification to something more objective or stringent amounts to either an illicit appeal to an unjustified norm or an ad hoc reconception of normativity.

REC’s subjectivism and minimalism fall out of the concept of first person justification simpliciter. Objective standards are not guaranteed to be accessible to the agent from his own first person point of view. In order to get accessibility, it seems we must start with the set of norms that the agent accepts. This will make our theory subjectivist. This subjectivism then commits us to minimalism. Any general statements that we can make about a subjective sort of justification—given all the differences that can exist among people and given that justification must be accessible to and transparent to these agents—will have to be very minimal.

One might accept REC’s basic claim that we must start with the agent’s own acceptance system and her own reflection, and yet object to the degree to which REC remains subjective. One might try to develop an alternative version of Reflective Endorsement Coherentism that places more limits on the form that reflection may take or
on the content of the acceptance system. For instance, one might turn REC into a kind of Ideal Spectator theory, requiring that only reflection conducted when calm and fully informed is capable of generating justification. Another theory might stipulate that only acceptance systems that include the Categorical Imperative can ground justification, another that acceptance systems must include a norm that tells the agent to be sensitive to what is in fact valuable.

The problem with placing such restrictions on the shape reflective endorsement or an acceptance system must take is that it is not clear how these requirements are to be justified. Why ought I accept the results of calm and informed reflection only? Why must I accept the Categorical Imperative? Why should my acceptances track facts of value? Of course, these norms might be accepted and justified through coherence. But to propose them as separate requirements is to suggest that they are relevant to normativity whether they are accepted in a coherent way or not. If these norms cohere with the agent's acceptance set, then stating them as separate requirements is unnecessary. But if they do not cohere, then they are arbitrary from the point of view of the agent.11

Perhaps the coherentist who wants a more stringent or objective sort of theory can avoid the charge that he is appealing to hidden norms in the same way that the REC theorist avoided that charge in the last chapter [section 6.2]. Why can't the demanding coherentist say "It's not that agents must accept the Categorical Imperative, but if they do,

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11 This response to attempts to objectivize REC follows the pattern of Keith Lehrer's response to attempts to objectivize coherentist theories of first person epistemic justification [Lehrer, 1990, 101].
and only if they do, then justification simpliciter is a possibility for them. Of course, if the Categorical Imperative is accepted, what justifies it is coherence with the other norms in the acceptance set.

The only rationale for building the Categorical Imperative into a coherence theory in this way is the theorist’s desire that normativity have a more objective, stringent, or moral aspect to it. REC, on the other hand, only builds in as much as is required to put an end to the regress. If the regress is to stop, norms must lend support to each other in a way that can be endorsed upon reflection. If an agent’s system of norms is to have the capacity to meet these conditions, the First and Second Norms of Reflective Endorsement and some simple norms of deontic logic must be accepted. But acceptance of the Categorical Imperative is not necessary for an agent to have a coherent defense of her normative commitments. The objectivist’s addition to REC seems arbitrary. A subjective coherentism is capable of putting a stop to the regress. An objective coherentism can do this too, but it includes more theoretical baggage than it needs.

We can argue against the objectivist move by mocking it. We might also say, without begging the question, “It’s not that agents must accept the norm ‘One should stand on one’s head at least 5 minutes everyday,’ but if, and only if, they do, then justification simpliciter is a possibility for them. Of course, if the Head-Standing Norm is accepted, what justifies it is coherence with the other norms in the acceptance set.” This is surely arbitrary. And it is arbitrary because it requires more than is needed to always provide an answer to the NQ. Therefore, it should not be part of our theory of
normativity. REC must remain subjectivist and minimalist.

14. Knaves and You

My aim in this chapter has been to explore the connections between normativity and morality. If REC is the right theory of normativity, then one's reason to be moral is subjective—it is based on one's own acceptances. Does this consequence put REC so seriously at odds with our intuitive judgments about the authority of morality as to render REC nontransparent? Are there severe enough conflicts between REC and our moral intuitions that we are inclined to say "If I were to believe REC, then I would longer be able to feel the binding force of morality?" I have argued that the conflicts are not at all this severe.

Admittedly, the Reflective Endorsement Coherentist theory of normativity entails that moral knaves (people who have no reason to be moral) are a possibility. This is the feature of REC that is most likely to rub people the wrong way. The possibility of the knave might turn out to be less worrying if, as I suggested in section 5, people do, as a matter of contingent fact, always, or almost always, have acceptances that can ground reasons to be moral. But even when this is conceded, many will still find the possibility of the knave disturbing, and some may count it as sufficient reason to reject the REC theory of normativity.

But what is really so bad about having to countenance the possibility of knaves? Why should we worry about not being able to tell the knave she has no reason to be
moral? Is it because we don’t want to have to recognize the reasons she does have (which
are contrary to morality) as legitimate? Why not? Because we don’t want to have to aid
her in her nasty plans? That is not a threat. We non-knaves have reasons, based on our
own acceptance sets, not to participate in immoral acts. Just because one person has a
reason to do something it does not follow automatically that others have reason to offer
assistance. I may recognize that my competitor in the 100-yard-dash has a reason
simpliciter to win the race, but that doesn’t mean that I am obligated to help him achieve
his reasonable goal. In fact, I have reason to frustrate his goal if I can. The same is true in
the moral case. The knave has reason simpliciter to murder and steal, but I have reason
simpliciter to stop her.

Is the concern that our recognition of the knave’s reason to be immoral would
mean that we would somehow have to take the same reason seriously as an option for our
own action? This is not threatening either. Her immoral norms will not cohere with our
acceptance sets. We will simply reflect on and justifiedly reject the knavish principles of
action.

Is the worry that, if we recognize the knave’s reason to be immoral, then we will
not be able to condemn her? As I argued in section 10, that conclusion would presuppose
a norm for blaming that is neither necessary nor attractive. Our own moral commitments
will provide us with reasons to try to prevent knaves from acting immorally. Blame and
punishment will be important means to this end.

Should we worry about having to recognize the knave’s reason not to be moral
because it makes us feel that the reasons we have ourselves are arbitrary? "I could just as easily have turned out like the knave! If I had her acceptance set, I would not have a reason to be moral!" I have argued, in section 12, that REC does not condemn us to arbitrariness. If one has an acceptance set like Susan’s, which contains norms of reflection requiring an agent to consider her norms from a variety of points of view and so forth, then the appearance of arbitrariness disappears.

I agree that the conclusion that there can be knaves, who have no reason to be moral, is unintuitive at first. But, I suggest, when we try to spell out the concerns underlying this intuition, they can be satisfactorily answered by Reflective Endorsement Coherentism. We can accurately label knaves as immoral and evil. We can justifiably interfere with their nefarious plans, condemn them, and punish them. We can discount their reasons as reasons for us to behave in similar ways. Really, the only thing that REC will not allow us to do is to truthfully say, "The knave has a reason simpliciter to be moral" (though it is possible that we could justifiably say this despite its falsehood). Given everything that we can say and do with regard to knaves, it is not at all clear to me that this is any great loss. REC is compatible with a morality worth having. The knave problem is not a sufficient reason to reject REC, especially when the only alternative seems to be normative skepticism.

As I said in section 4, transparency does not admit of positive proof. I cannot demonstrate that REC is transparent. All I can do is to counter reasonably foreseeable objections to its transparency, and that is what I have done (both here and in Ch. 4,
section 6.5). At this point, I think that we can say that REC seems to be transparent.

15. Conclusion

In this and the last chapter, I have argued that Reflective Endorsement Coherentism satisfies all five of the known criteria of adequacy for a theory of normativity. REC makes justificatory reasons first person accessible; its standard of justification is comprehensive, reflexive, and transparent; and, most importantly, REC solves the skeptic's regress problem. REC, then, is a successful theory of justification simpliciter.
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