SUPPOSITIONAL REASONING AND PERCEPTUAL JUSTIFICATION

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ABSTRACT: James Van Cleve raises some objections to my attempt to solve the bootstrapping problem for what I call "basic justification theories." I argue that given 1 the inference rules endorsed by basic justification theorists, we are a priori (propositionally) justified in believing that perception is reliable. This blocks the bootstrapping result.

KEYWORDS: bootstrapping, basic justification theories, a priori, perception

James Van Cleve raises some objections to my attempt to solve the bootstrapping problem for what I call "basic justification theories."[1] I argue that given 1 the inference rules endorsed by basic justification theorists, we are *a priori* (propositionally) justified in believing that perception is reliable. This blocks the bootstrapping result.[2] I appeal to two defensible claims about perceptual justification:

(1) Perceptual justification proceeds in terms of propositional, i.e., propositionally representable, reasons concerning how things appear.

(2) A proposition *P* can be one's reason, even if one does not believe *P*.

Given (1), we can say that, e.g., *the table looks red* is a (defeasible) reason for me to believe the table is red. Given (2), I can possess that reason even if I do not believe the table looks red. Rather I can possess that reason if I am in a certain phenomenal state, the state of the table's looking red to me. On this view, there is a defeasible inference rule

R: <u>a looks red</u>
a is red

One may think that inference is a relation that obtains only between beliefs. As we do not typically have beliefs about how things appear, it may be misleading to characterize R as an inference rule. If so, we can think of R as a rule

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[1] James Van Cleve, "Does Suppositional Reasoning Solve the Bootstrapping Problem?" *Logos & Episteme* VI, 3 (2015): 351-363. All Van Cleve page references are to this.
[2] See Stewart Cohen, "Bootstrapping, Defeasible Reasoning, and A Priori Justification," *Philosophical Perspectives* 24, 1 (2010):141-159.

that permits transitions from perceptual states to beliefs about the world, e.g., from something's looking red, to believing it is red. So according to R, when the table looks red to me, I can on that basis justifiably believe the table is red. Given the correctness of rule R, I argue we can engage in a kind of reasoning akin to conditional proof in logic. We can suppose

> *a looks red*

Applying R, we can derive

> *a is red*

Then by discharging the assumption, we can conclude

> *If a is red, then a looks red.*

Since R is defeasible, this reasoning does not count as a proof of the conditional. instead it generates a defeasible reason for believing the conditional.

Perceptual Reasons and Experience

Van Cleve's objection to my argument hinges on what he says are "two routes to becoming justified in believing something:"

> To explain why I think Cohen's strategy does not work, I begin by distinguishing two routes to being justified in believing something. One route – the only one recognized by Cohen – proceeds in terms of reasons; the other proceeds in terms of experiences. In the reasons route, one 'has' a reason, which supports some further proposition… A typical case would involve believing some premises and inferring a conclusion from them; the premises would be one's reasons (or their conjunction one's reason). Cohen is willing to speak also of reasons in cases in which one does not believe the premises or draw any explicit inference. (354-355)

On the view of perceptual justification I outlined, what Van Cleve characterizes as two different ways of becoming justified are actually the same. On my view, *a looks red* is a defeasible reason to believe *a is red.* I possess this reason just in case I have a certain kind of experience, viz. an experience whereby *a* does look red to me. So there is no dichotomy between the experiential route to justification and the reasons route. One has a perceptual reason in virtue of having a perceptual experience.[3]

Does Van Cleve have an objection to my account of perceptual justification? Here is Van Cleve:

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[3] I argue for this in Cohen, "Bootstrapping, Defeasible Reasoning," 150-151.

> I think this much is clear, however: having a reason *P* that supports *Q* does not make you justified in believing *Q* (or make *Q* propositionally justified for you) unless *P* is justified for you. (355)

I do not understand this passage. You can possess *P* as a reason by being justified in believing *P*. But Van Cleve seems to be raising the possibility that you could possess *P* even though *P* is not justified for you. On my view, this is indeed possible, for there are two ways you can possess a reason *P*. You can possess *P* by justifiably believing *P*, or where *P* is the proposition that you are in a certain experiential state, you can possess *P* by being in that state. In the latter case, it would be possible to have *P* as a reason without *P* being justified for you. But Van Cleve *contrasts* having a reason with being in an experiential state. So I do not see how it is possible on Van Cleve's view to have *P* as a reason without *P* being justified for you. The important issue however concerns what it take to possess a reason. For if one possesses the reason *P*, then one is thereby (defeasibly) justified in believing *Q*. Perhaps Van Cleve just means to say that the only way to possess a reason is to be justified in believing it. But that is simply a denial of my view, not an argument against it.

Van Cleve also objects to the possibility of doing suppositional reasoning on an experiential view or perceptual justification:

> But how would suppositional reasoning work in the framework of an experiential theory, in which what justifies me in believing that something is red is the experiential state of something's looking red to me?… First, I would make the supposition that x looks red to me; let's say I write it down. Next, I would conclude that x is red and write that down, too. But what authorizes me in doing that? What it takes to make me justified in believing that something is red is being in the state of having it look red to me, and I am not in that state. (356)

I agree that suppositional reasoning does not make sense if we do not view perceptual justification as deriving from perceptual reasons. We can do the suppositional reasoning only if *a looks red* is a reason to believe *a is red.* But just as in conditional proof, we do not have to prove *P* in order to suppose *P* in conditional proof, so we do not have to be justified in believing *P* in order to suppose *P* in suppositional reasoning. The whole point is to *assume P*, and then infer *Q* by the relevant rules. This allows us either to either prove (via conditional proof), or acquire a defeasible reason (via suppositional reasoning) for *P —> Q.*

Of course one may object to using conditional proof as a model for suppositional reasoning.[4] I argue that one may follow essentially the same procedure in doing suppositional proof that one follows when doing conditional

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[4] Brian Weatherson, "Induction and Supposition," *The Reasoner* 6 (2012): 78-80.

proof. But Van Cleve's objection is not that one cannot do suppositional reasoning with perceptual reasons. Rather it is that there are no perceptual reasons to form the basis for suppositional reasoning But I do not see that he has an argument for this.

Incoherence

I argue that basic justification theories are incoherent in denying

> (1) We cannot have justified perceptual beliefs without having a prior justified belief that perception is reliable.

Basic justification theorists endorse rule *R* that allows one to believe *a is red* on the basis of *a looks red*. But if my argument is correct, anyone who is competent in the use of the rule is propositionally justified via suppositional reasoning in believing that perception is reliable. This means one cannot have justified perceptual beliefs without having a prior justified belief that perception is reliable.

Van Cleve suggests that I myself am guilty of incoherence. I endorse rule R while also accepting (1). R allows me to be justified in believe a is red on the basis of a looks red, while (1) says that one cannot have a justified perceptual belief without a prior justified belief that perception is reliable. Van Cleve questions how a looks red can be sufficient for me to be justified in believing a is red, if a necessary condition of my being so justified is that I have prior justification for believing that perception is reliable.

But there is no incoherence here. The table's looking red is sufficient for me to believe that it is red because rule *R* licenses my believing the table is red solely *on the basis of* its looking red. But that is consistent with (1) in that my being justified in this way *entails* that I have justification for believing that perception is reliable. For if I am justified via the rule, then I am competent in the use of *R*. And if I am competent to use *R*, then I am propositionally justified via suppositional reasoning in believing perception is reliable. That perception is reliable is not part of my justificatory basis for believing the table is red, rather it is a necessary consequence of it.

Epistemic Supervenience

Van Cleve argues that my view violates a plausible epistemic supervenience principle:

> if two beliefs (occurring in the same or different worlds) are just alike in all nonepistemic respects – in their content, their environmental causes, the

experiences that accompany them, their relations to the other beliefs of the subject, and so on – then they are also alike in epistemic status; both are justified to the same degree. Equivalently, whenever a belief is justified or has a certain epistemic status, it also has some constellation of nonepistemic properties such that (necessarily) any belief with those properties is justified. For short, for any epistemic property any belief possesses, there is a nonepistemic sufficient condition for it. (361)

I agree that we should accept this principle, but disagree that my view violates it. On my view, there is a non-epistemic condition sufficient for perceptual justification. For example, having the reason *a looks red* is sufficient for justifiably believing *a is red.* Van Cleve worries that my view violates supervenience because I say that perceptual justification requires having justification for believing perception is reliable, an epistemic condition. But given that the epistemic condition is entailed by the non-epistemic condition, there is no violation of supervenience. There is no barrier to saying that if two beliefs are alike in all non-epistemic respects then they are also alike in epistemic status.