

## What's Wrong With A Priori Bootstrapping

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*Abstract: According to Perceptual Fundamentalism we can have justified perceptual beliefs solely in virtue of having perceptual experiences with corresponding contents. Recently, it has been argued that Perceptual Fundamentalism entails that it is possible to gain an a priori justified belief that perception is reliable by engaging in a suppositional reasoning process of a priori bootstrapping. But I will show that Perceptual Fundamentalists are not committed to a priori bootstrapping being a rational reasoning process. On the most plausible versions of Perceptual Fundamentalism, a priori bootstrapping cannot be used to rationally support anti-sceptical beliefs about the reliability of perception. Moreover, seeing why Perceptual Fundamentalists are not committed to a priori bootstrapping will help us to better understand the nature of the perceptual entitlements that Perceptual Fundamentalists posit, or at least should posit.*

On a popular and attractive view about perceptual justification, we can have justified perceptual beliefs solely in virtue of having perceptual experiences with corresponding contents. I can be justified in believing that the box is red solely in virtue of having a perceptual experience as of a red box, and independently of any prior justified belief about whether my perceptual apparatus by and large presents the world to me as it really is. Let us call this type of view *Perceptual Fundamentalism*. Recently, Ralph Wedgwood and Stewart Cohen have independently argued that Perceptual Fundamentalism entails that it is possible to gain an a priori justified belief that perception is reliable, or at least that it is not undetectably unreliable, by engaging in a suppositional reasoning process of *a priori bootstrapping*.<sup>1 2</sup> If Wedgwood and Cohen were correct, this would certainly be – whether welcome or not – a surprising consequence of Perceptual Fundamentalism. I think Perceptual Fundamentalism is true. But I will show that Wedgwood and Cohen are not correct in maintaining that Perceptual Fundamentalists are committed to a priori bootstrapping being a rational reasoning process. On the most plausible versions of Perceptual Fundamentalism, a priori bootstrapping cannot be used to rationally support anti-sceptical beliefs about the reliability of perception. Moreover, seeing why Perceptual Fundamentalists are not committed to a priori bootstrapping will help us to better

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, S. (2010): Bootstrapping, Defeasible Reasoning, and A Priori Justification, *Philosophical Perspectives* 24: 141-159, Wedgwood, R. (forthcoming): A Priori Bootstrapping, Casullo, A. / Thurow, J. (eds.), *The A Priori in Philosophy*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> “A priori bootstrapping” is a term Wedgwood introduces. Cohen reserves the term “bootstrapping” for the empirical procedure, and speaks of “a priori suppositional reasoning”. However, given how appropriately Wedgwood’s term fits the reasoning pattern involved, I will use it in what follows.

understand the nature of the perceptual entitlements that Perceptual Fundamentalists posit, or at least should posit.

## **Perceptual Fundamentalism**

The general idea behind a priori bootstrapping is the following: If perceptual experiences by themselves entitle us to believe, in specific situations, that things are as they perceptually appear, then we can exploit these entitlements in the context of suppositional reasoning from the philosophical armchair in order to conclude that our perceptual experience is in general a good guide to how things really are. Wedgwood and Cohen disagree about how exactly a priori bootstrapping is to be understood, but they agree that the basic perceptual entitlements postulated by Perceptual Fundamentalism are what explain its availability.

“Perceptual Fundamentalism” is an umbrella term for any type of view according to which we can have justified perceptual beliefs solely in virtue of having perceptual experiences with the appropriate contents.<sup>3</sup> Dogmatism about perception is one kind of Perceptual Fundamentalism. The Dogmatist claims that having a perceptual experience with the content *p* is, absent defeaters, sufficient to be justified in believing *p*, and that there need not be any other proposition that the subject is justified in believing in order for the subject’s perceptual experience to play this justificatory role – in particular, the subject need not be justified in believing any anti-sceptical proposition about the reliability of perception.<sup>4</sup> But Perceptual Fundamentalism also includes the position favored by Ralph Wedgwood, according to which it is necessary that if one has perceptual justification for believing *p* then one also has justification for the reliability of perception, but where the perceptual justification for believing *p* does not depend on having this further justification.<sup>5</sup> The relevant common element of Perceptual Fundamentalist positions is that they postulate what I call *basic perceptual entitlements*. Basic perceptual entitlements make it epistemically appropriate for the subject to believe *p*

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<sup>3</sup> Obviously, to have justified beliefs of any sort we also have to satisfy whatever conditions need to be met to have a belief with the relevant content. I will omit this conditions in what follows.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Pryor (2000), Michael Huemer (2007) – who calls his view “phenomenal conservatism” – and Chris Tucker (2010) are amongst the proponents of Dogmatism.

<sup>5</sup> Roger White (2006) can be read as at least tentatively advocating a position in this spirit.

solely on the basis of having a visual experience with the content *p*. Having a basic perceptual entitlement means that when no defeaters are present, if the subject bases a belief on a perceptual experience with the same content it will be a justified belief. As Jim Pryor writes concerning the Dogmatist position, “the *mere having* of an experience as of *p* is enough for your perceptual justification for believing *p* to be in place.”<sup>6</sup>

According to both Wedgwood and Cohen, the basic perceptual entitlements posited by Perceptual Fundamentalists can be exploited in a priori bootstrapping to support belief in the reliability of perception. In what follows, I will first discuss Wedgwood’s version of a priori bootstrapping and will show that it is not, in fact, supported by his own Perceptual Fundamentalist framework. Then I will turn to Cohen’s version of a priori bootstrapping, and will show that it suffers from a closely related problem.

### **Wedgwood’s A Priori Bootstrapping**

According to Wedgwood, we typically acquire basic empirical beliefs about our environment by engaging in the process of *taking experience at face value*:

*Very roughly, the process of taking experience at face value is the process that one engages in by responding to the fact of one’s having a conscious experience that has the proposition that *p* as part of its representational content by coming to believe *p*.*<sup>7</sup>

Taking experience at face value is, according to Wedgwood, a “fallible primitively rational belief-forming process”; that is, it is a reasoning process that satisfies the following three conditions: a) it results in the thinker’s forming a rational or justified belief; b) it is not infallible; and c) the rationality of the process is not dependent on any “process-independent” justification.<sup>8</sup> A paradigmatic example of engaging in the process of taking experience at face value would be to respond to one’s visual perceptual experience as of a red box by forming the belief that there is a red box. Wedgwood specifies that one’s entitlement to form the belief would be cancelled if one’s overall mental state would

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<sup>6</sup> Pryor (2000), 519.

<sup>7</sup> Wedgwood (2011), section 1.

<sup>8</sup> Wedgwood (2011), section 1.

contain relevant defeaters: for example, if I also receive the information that my current experiences are illusions produced by a drug, and I still form the belief that there is a red box, then I cease to be engaged in a rational process. Strictly speaking, the *rational* process is one of “taking experience at face value when such special defeating reasons are absent.”<sup>9</sup>

To say that the process of taking experience is *primitively rational* in Wedgwood’s sense is tantamount to postulating a basic perceptual entitlement analogous to the one postulated by Dogmatists like Pryor, and it entails commitment to a version of Perceptual Fundamentalism. Wedgwood’s understanding of basic perceptual entitlements is, in fact, very close to that of the Dogmatists. In Pryor’s words:

*The dogmatist about perceptual justification says that when it perceptually seems to you as if p is the case, you have a kind of justification for believing p that does not presuppose or rest on your justification for anything else, which could be cited in an argument – even an ampliative argument – for p.*<sup>10</sup>

In Wedgwood’s words:

*Specifically, as I understand it, engaging in this [primitively rational belief-forming – MBJ] process does not involve relying on any antecedent belief in the reliability of one’s sense experience (or indeed on any belief about one’s sensory experience at all). This process involves coming to believe p in direct response to one’s having an experience that has p as part of its representational content.*<sup>11</sup>

So, for the Dogmatist and for Wedgwood the same conditions need to be met for a subject to be entitled to form a belief about the visible properties of objects in their environment. The crucial novel idea in Wedgwood is that the basic perceptual

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Note that to say that one ceases to engage in a rational process when one takes experience at face value in the presence of defeating reasons indicating that one’s experience is – generally or currently – unreliable is not to say that one ceases to engage in a rational process whenever one’s experience happens to be unreliable unbeknownst to one. I will omit the qualification for the purposes of simplicity in what follows. Nothing in the upcoming discussion exploits issues related to defeaters.

<sup>10</sup> Pryor (2000), 519.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

entitlements of Perceptual Fundamentalism can also be exploited to arrive at justified beliefs about the epistemic properties of perception as such:

*(T)he rationality of this process of taking one's sensory experiences at face value (in the absence of defeaters of the relevant kind) is not itself explained, even in part, by one's possession of justification for higher-order beliefs about the reliability of one's experiences. Nonetheless, as we shall see, even if the rationality of this process is not explained or constituted by one's possession of justification for such higher-order beliefs, the rationality of this process might still entail the existence of such justification: in this way, the existence of justification for such higher-order beliefs may be explained by the rationality of this process, instead of being what explains or constitutes it.*<sup>12</sup>

More specifically, Wedgwood thinks that there is a *non-empirical* rational reasoning process that is available to anybody who can engage in the process of taking experience at face value (and who satisfies a few additional requirements that are plausibly met by rational thinkers) and that leads to a justified belief in the anti-sceptical hypothesis that one's perceptual experience is not undetectably unreliable.<sup>13</sup> This is the process that he calls "a priori bootstrapping."

A subject who engages in Wedgwood's a priori bootstrapping makes use of a suppositional reasoning pattern of the following form:

Supposition: I have a perceptual experience as of p being the case and no defeating reasons are present.  
So, p.

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Conclusion: So, if I have an experience as of p being the case and no defeating reasons are present, then p.

Here is one natural instance of this reasoning pattern:

Supposition: I have a perceptual experience as of there being something red and no defeating reasons are present.

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<sup>12</sup> Wedgwood (forthcoming), section 3.

<sup>13</sup> See Wedgwood, forthcoming, section 3.

So, there is something red.

Conclusion: 

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So, if I have an experience as of there being something red and no defeating reasons are present, then there is something red.

The reasoning pattern involves first making a supposition about being in a perceptual experiential state, then making a further judgment *under that supposition*, and finally discharging the supposition and inferring a material conditional that corresponds to the inferential transition under the supposition.<sup>14</sup>

Suppose we grant, for the moment, that to reason according to this suppositional pattern is to reason rationally. The remaining steps of the a priori bootstrapping process then appear relatively uncontroversial: First, we repeat the suppositional reasoning pattern for a variety of propositions about perceptual experiential states we could be in, and thereby acquire justified beliefs in a sufficiently large number of relevant material conditionals. Second, we form a belief in the conjunction of these material conditionals: (If I have an experience as of there being something red and no defeating reasons are present, then there is something red) & (If I have an experience as of there being something blue and no defeating reasons are present, then there is something blue) & (If I have an experience as of there being something round and no defeating reasons are present, then there is something round) ... And third, we judge that the best explanation for the truth of this complex conjunction is that when no defeaters are present, perceptual experience generally presents things as they really are. So, abductive inference finally leads us to the justified belief that our perceptual experience is not undetectably unreliable.

To understand the significance of a priori bootstrapping it is crucial to understand why it is allegedly *a priori*. Jonathan Vogel and Stewart Cohen have previously pointed out that certain views about the epistemology of perception have the problematic consequence of allowing bootstrapping reasoning.<sup>15</sup> However, the kind of reasoning they have in mind is one that allegedly gives us a posteriori justification for anti-sceptical claims. One can put one's perceptual capacity to the test by first actually looking at various things in one's

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<sup>14</sup> For the sake of argument, I follow Wedgwood in assuming that there is nothing objectionable about suppositional reasoning with conditional conclusions *in general*. That means that it can be under the appropriate circumstances rational to suppose that p, judge q under that supposition and infer p → q. Nevertheless, in what follows I will raise doubts for the claim that *the particular* reasoning pattern he uses in a priori bootstrapping is not rational.

<sup>15</sup> See Vogel (2000) and Cohen (2002).

environment, forming the corresponding belief in each case to the effect that things are the way they perceptually seem, and then subsequently inductively inferring that one's perceptual apparatus is reliable.<sup>16</sup> A posteriori bootstrapping requires that we actually *engage in* the process of taking experience at face value in order to draw anti-sceptical conclusions. A priori bootstrapping, by contrast, does not require us to engage in the process of taking experience at face value (even though it does presuppose its rationality). Let us grant that there is nothing empirical about the second and third step of a priori bootstrapping: We are presumably justified a priori in believing logical consequences of the propositions we believe. And, we can make rational judgments about what counts as the best explanation for some data without epistemically relying on any empirical information. According to Wedgwood, the reason the first step is a priori, despite the fact that it involves reasoning with propositions about experience, is that,

*the inference is based on the reasoner's merely supposing that she has an experience as of p's being the case, she does not actually have to have any such experience, or even believe that she has such an experience, in order to draw this inference.*<sup>17</sup>

If a priori bootstrapping were a good form of reasoning, it would entail something much more surprising than a posteriori bootstrapping: It would entail that before we even step out into the world and exercise our perceptual capacities, we already have at our disposal all the reasons we need to acquire a justified belief that perceptual experience is not undetectably unreliable.

The crucial question remains whether the suppositional reasoning pattern at the core of the a priori bootstrapping process is a good form of reasoning:

Supposition: I have a perceptual experience as of p being the case and no defeating reasons are present.

So, p.

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Conclusion: So, if I have an experience as of p being the case and no defeating reasons are present, then p.

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<sup>16</sup> Many different suggestions have been made about why a posteriori bootstrapping is problematic or in some or other way epistemically worthless. As my focus here is on *a priori* bootstrapping, I will not engage in this discussion.

<sup>17</sup> Wedgwood (forthcoming), section 3.

Wedgwood thinks that it is a good form of reasoning, and that its goodness follows from the rationality of taking experience at face value. In other words, he thinks that its rationality – and, in particular, the rationality of the judgment under the supposition – is entailed by (his version of) Perceptual Fundamentalism. But, as I will now argue, Wedgwood is wrong. The rationality of taking experience at face value does *not* entail that the judgment under the supposition is rational, and so it cannot certify the epistemic goodness of the reasoning pattern as a whole.

To say that taking experience at face value is primitively rational is to say that when we have an experience with the content  $p$ , we are entitled to form a belief in  $p$ . But no basic perceptual entitlement of this sort is directly used in a priori bootstrapping; as we have seen, this is what qualifies it as a priori. The crucial inferential step in the bootstrapping reasoning does not proceed from an experiential state with a particular first-level content about the perceptible features of the environment, but from a supposition with a meta-level content about one's mental state: the supposition that one has an experience with the content  $p$ . Contrary to Wedgwood's claim, the rationality of taking *experiences* at face value simply does not entail the rationality of taking any aspects of *propositional attitudes about one's experiences* at face value.

To support his case, Wedgwood writes:

*If the fact that you have such an experience and no defeaters are present provides you with propositional justification in this way, you could surely avail yourself of this justification in a more reflective manner, by first coming to believe the proposition that you have an experience as of  $p$ 's being the case and no special defeaters are present, and the inferring from that the proposition (...) that the proposition  $p$  is true. It is hard to see how this more reflective way (...) could be any less rational than the less reflective way that I called "taking experience at face value"; indeed the more reflective process could be called the "inferential analogue" of the less reflective process. (...) We could call this form of inference the rule of "external world introduction".<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



This passage shows that Wedgwood is aware that a priori bootstrapping relies on a distinctive - and as he says “more reflective” – form of reasoning, which he calls “external world introduction”. However, he insists that there is a close connection between taking experience at face value and external world introduction: First, when you use external world introduction you “avail yourself of this [that is: the same – MB] justification”. And second, external world introduction is the “inferential analogue” of taking experience at face value.

To evaluate the first claim, let us take a closer look at what motivates basic perceptual entitlements such as taking experience at face value. According to Wedgwood himself, “any primitively rational belief-forming process is rational purely in virtue of the nature of all the concepts and internal mental states involved.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of taking experience at face value, the relevant states include a belief and *a perceptual experience*. A core fact about perceptual experiences (and potentially some other types of experiences) is that they have a specific presentational phenomenal character.<sup>20</sup> Perceptual experiences represent things as being a certain way in a phenomenally conscious way. Despite the fact that it is notoriously difficult to give a clear description of the presentational phenomenal character of perception, as perceiving subjects we are all acquainted with it. And in the eyes of Perceptual Fundamentalists, it is this presentational phenomenal character that grounds the justification of our basic perceptual beliefs. The following two quotes from Jim Pryor and Chris Tucker illustrate this:

*(...) It's the peculiar “phenomenal force” or way our experiences have of presenting propositions to us. Our experience represent propositions in such a way that it “feels as if” we could tell that those propositions are true – and that we’re perceiving them to be true – just in virtue of having them so represented. (...) I think this “feeling” is part of what distinguishes the attitude of experiencing that p from other propositional attitudes, like belief and visual imagination. (...) It's difficult to explain what this “phenomenal force” amounts to, but I think that it is an important notion, and that it needs to be part of the story of why our experiences give us the justification they do.<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> Wedgwood (2011), section 3.

<sup>20</sup> This feature of perceptual experience has been described in countless articles and books in the philosophy of mind. (References)

<sup>21</sup> See Pryor (2000), 547.

*Dogmatism holds that seemings necessarily provide prima facie justification. But what is a seeming? A seeming that P is neither a belief that P nor an inclination to believe P; it is a certain kind of experience with propositional content. What distinguishes seemings from other experiences is their peculiar phenomenal character. (...) The phenomenology of seeming makes it feel as though the seeming is “recommending” its propositional content as true or “assuring” us of the content’s truth.<sup>22</sup>*

But if it is the presentational phenomenal character of perceptual experiences that grounds the rationality of basic perceptual entitlements such as taking experience at face value, then using external world introduction cannot amount to availing oneself of same justification. External world introduction can be used in the absence of any perceptual experience whatsoever, and so even when one is in no state with the relevant presentational phenomenology.

Wedgwood is sympathetic to the Dogmatist-type phenomenological justification of Perceptual Fundamentalism. But the same line of reasoning will plausibly transfer to any proposal about the distinctive feature of perceptual experience, in contrast to other propositional attitudes such as beliefs, that grounds basic perceptual entitlements. Even if external world introduction can truthfully be regarded as a “more reflective process,” it is not a transition from a perceptual experience, and so it lacks the feature that is responsible for the fundamental justificatory power of taking experience at face value. In fact, if the epistemic facts about perceptual experiences are grounded in fundamental features such as their phenomenology – an idea that is at the very heart of Perceptual Fundamentalism – it is very easy to see, pace Wedgwood, how certain more reflective processes might be *less* rational than less reflective ones that directly involve perceptual experience.

Given these observations, it is hard to even understand what it could be for the rule of external world introduction to be “the inferential analogue” of taking experience at face value, as Wedgwood suggests. One possibility is that he thinks that there is a fundamental distinction between basic rational belief-forming processes and inferential

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<sup>22</sup> See Tucker (2010), section 1, page 3 of the paper. For a similar explanation of how the phenomenology of seemings – or as he prefers to call them “appearances” - grounds basic perceptual entitlements, see Huemer (2007) on Phenomenal Conservatism.

rules, such that only the latter can be used in suppositional thinking, but that specific basic belief-forming processes give rise to corresponding specific inferential rules.<sup>23</sup> Given that Wedgwood does not say much on how to understand his remark, while Cohen directly addresses the issue of embedding inferential rules about experience in suppositional reasoning of the a priori bootstrapping kind, I will postpone the discussion of these questions until the next section.

One might hope to sidestep the argument presented here by insisting that external world introduction is a good inferential rule, even though its rationality cannot be directly explained by the rationality of taking experience at face value. This is in fact the route Wedgwood tentatively suggests in response to my arguments in the newest version of his forthcoming paper:

*Although it seems intuitively plausible that there is a rational rule of inference that corresponds to the non-inferential process in this way, it is a good question why this is so. (I have been helped to see that this is a good question, and that it is not obvious that it can be answered merely with the resources of this essay, by Magdalena Balcerak Jackson.) It may be that the ‘meta-justificatory’ reasoning explored at the end of this section can itself help to explain why this rule is rational.<sup>24</sup>*

But notice that doing so amounts to abandoning the original project of “solving the sceptical paradox” by showing how “the availability of a *priori* justification for anti-sceptical propositions is simply a *necessary* consequence of the fact that sensory experiences justify ordinary propositions”<sup>25</sup> in the way suggested by the Perceptual Fundamentalist. The very idea of a priori bootstrapping is that it is a reasoning procedure by means of which we can get additional mileage out of the very basic perceptual entitlements that give us ordinary justified perceptual beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Maybe there is a way to

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<sup>23</sup> I have already shown that, at least in the case of taking experience at face value and external world introduction, such a close connection is doubtful.

<sup>24</sup> See Wedgwood (forthcoming), footnote 12.

<sup>25</sup> Wedgwood (forthcoming), section 2.

<sup>26</sup> Wedgwood assumes that Roger White (2006) has given a successful probabilistic argument to the effect that certain plausible assumptions about the probabilist and evidentialist structure of justification, together with a simple assumption about specific evidence supporting specific ordinary propositions, necessarily entail that we have a priori justification for a specific anti-sceptical claim; see Wedgwood (forthcoming), section 2. However, the question I am evaluating is not whether there has to be such a priori justification, but whether the reasoning procedure of a priori bootstrapping leads us to a justified anti-sceptical belief.

solve the sceptical paradox by pointing to some other grounds for the rule of external world introduction, but Wedgwood gives us no reason to suppose that this way will simply consist in pulling on the Perceptual Fundamentalist's bootstraps.<sup>27</sup>

### **Cohen's A Priori Suppositional Reasoning**

Unlike Wedgwood, Stewart Cohen does not endorse Perceptual Fundamentalism. He presents a version of a priori bootstrapping – which he calls “a priori suppositional reasoning” – as a problem for those versions of Perceptual Fundamentalism that postulate what he calls “basic justification.”<sup>28</sup> On the most charitable interpretation, Cohen understands basic justification as follows: To postulate basic justification is to postulate the possibility of having justification for perceptual beliefs without having prior justification for believing that perception is reliable. Cohen's goal is to show that “the very idea of basic justification is incoherent,”<sup>29</sup> because postulating basic perceptual entitlements entails that we have a priori justification for believing that perception is reliable.<sup>30</sup> In our terms, then, what Cohen tries to show is that Perceptual

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<sup>27</sup> How else could it be rational for the subject to use external world introduction? The subject could be entitled to inferences of the relevant form in virtue of having sufficient empirical evidence for the good track-record of her perceptual experiences. But in that case, the bootstrapping reasoning would not be a priori, and more importantly, the suppositional reasoning would be superfluous. It would not establish anything that the subject does not already independently justifiably believe on the basis of the relevant empirical evidence. Alternatively, the subject could be entitled to follow the relevant inference pattern in virtue of justifiably believing an adequate theory of the fundamental nature of perceptual experience that would warrant external world introduction. However, justifiably believing such a theory would plausibly go well beyond the capacity of having experiences, the possession conditions for the concept ‘experience’, and the capacity to attribute experiences to oneself and others. It would therefore make a priori bootstrapping only available to highly sophisticated subjects and not - as intended - to the ordinary perceivers and subjects who in general can engage in reasoning of this sort. What about the “meta-justificatory” reasoning Wedgwood mentions in footnote 12? I think that this line of reasoning – whether it could support external world introduction or not – suffers from some problems that ultimately bottom out in the question whether a Perceptual Fundamentalist should endorse White's Meta-justification Principle that “evidence of evidence is evidence”; see White (2006), 538. However, an adequate critique of White-style worries about Dogmatism is a project for another paper.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen (2010), 155.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> In fact, Cohen claims that one postulates basic justification when one denies the claim that “we cannot have justified perceptual beliefs without having a prior justified belief that perception is reliable.”; see Cohen (2010), 141. However, taking this literally would lead to a problem: Even if one succeeds in showing that basic perceptual entitlements lead to justification for believing that perception is reliable, it does not follow that it is incoherent to think that we can have justified perceptual beliefs without having a prior justified belief that perception is reliable. It could be that we often simply do not form a belief in the reliability of perception, even though we have justification for doing so. This is why I rephrase the characterization of basic justification in terms of propositional justification rather than doxastic justification.

Fundamentalism entails that one can come to justifiably believe that perception is reliable on the basis of a priori bootstrapping. As a consequence, according to Cohen, one cannot be a Perceptual Fundamentalist without accepting that we have a priori justification for the reliability of perception.<sup>31</sup>

Cohen's starting point is to reconstruct basic perceptual entitlements as being "defeasible inference rules," or at least as entailing or generating such defeasible inference rules:

*These considerations about perceptual justification show that the table looks red (to me) is a defeasible reason to believe the table is red. (More generally, the proposition that something looks a certain way is a defeasible reason to believe that it is that way). This means there is a defeasible inference rule*

*a looks red*  
*a is red*<sup>32</sup>

He further assumes that all correct defeasible inference rules can be used in suppositional reasoning, analogous to the way deductive inference rules can be used in conditional proofs in a deductive system. If  $p/q$  is a defeasible inference rule, we can suppose  $p$ , use the inference rule to derive  $q$ , discharge the assumption and infer  $p \rightarrow q$ .<sup>33</sup> We can therefore engage in the following kind of a priori bootstrapping reasoning:

*Suppose, I have yet to look at the colored card. I suppose the card looks red. Then using the rule I infer that it is red. This reasoning gives me a defeasible reason to believe that if the card looks red, then it is red. Of course, there are analogous rules for other colors, each of which is an instance of the more general rule*

*a looks C.*  
*a is C.*

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<sup>31</sup> Cohen's main opponent is the Dogmatist, whom he takes to endorse exactly this combination of attitudes.

<sup>32</sup> Cohen (2010), 151. On page 153 Cohen also directly states that the "basic perceptual justification theorist" endorses such inference rules.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 152.

*where C can be any color. So, whatever color the card is, before I look, I have an a priori defeasible justification for believing that if the card appears to have that color, then it actually has that color.*<sup>34</sup>

Here is a more schematic representation of this form of a priori bootstrapping:

Supposition: a looks C.

So, a is C.

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Conclusion: So, if a looks C, a is C.

Like Wedgwood's reasoning process, Cohen's reasoning pattern justifies us merely in believing certain conditional claims. However, we have already seen how conditionals of this sort can be employed in non-empirical reasoning to the conclusion that our perceptual experience is reliable. And, as before, I will assume that there is nothing problematic about these further steps.

There are two main differences between Wedgwood's and Cohen's discussions of a priori bootstrapping. First, Wedgwood endorses basic perceptual entitlements and the rationality of a priori bootstrapping as a solution to the skeptical paradox. Cohen, by contrast, uses the alleged fact that basic perceptual entitlements entail the availability of a priori bootstrapping to argue that certain versions of Perceptual Fundamentalism, such as Dogmatism, are incoherent. So while the rationality of a priori bootstrapping is thought of as a welcome consequence of Perceptual Fundamentalism by Wedgwood, it is thought of as a problematic consequence by Cohen. What is at issue here, of course, is whether either of them is correct to see it as a consequence of Perceptual Fundamentalism at all.

Second, and more importantly, in Wedgwood's a priori bootstrapping we do not engage in the process of taking experience at face value. So we do not directly use the basic belief-forming process that justifies us in our ordinary perceptual beliefs. As we saw in the previous section, this leads to the problem that Wedgwood needs to explain how the rationality of the process we actually use in a priori bootstrapping – external world introduction – can be epistemically supported by taking experience at face value. In

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 154.

Cohen's a priori suppositional reasoning however, we allegedly use exactly the same defeasible inferential rules that we use when we come to be justified in ordinary perceptual beliefs: rules that are special instances of the general kind 'a looks C, so a is C.' So, it might seem that Cohen is in a better argumentative position than Wedgwood: according to Cohen, Perceptual Fundamentalism entails that a priori bootstrapping is a rational reasoning procedure, because a priori bootstrapping merely consists in putting further use to defeasible inference rules that Perceptual Fundamentalists already accept. As Cohen says:

*As we have seen, the suppositional reasoning can be run on any inference rule, defeasible or otherwise. Having said that, I must acknowledge that the a priori suppositional reasoning to the contingent conditional has an air of "pulling the rabbit out of the hat". Perhaps this shows that the defeasible reasons posited by the Dogmatist/Direct Realist are not so innocent as they might initially seem. It turns out that there is more built in to the notion of a defeasible reason than we supposed. (...) Any inference rule linking perceptual states with justified beliefs about the world gives rise to a priori justification for the reliability of perception.<sup>35</sup>*

But the impression that Cohen is in a better position than Wedgwood is misleading; Cohen is actually in no better position than Wedgwood to argue that basic perceptual entitlements give rise to a priori bootstrapping. Here is what the Perceptual Fundamentalist should say: even if we follow Cohen in construing basic perceptual entitlements as defeasible inference rules, they are not rules that can be rationally used in suppositional reasoning. More precisely, no basic perceptual entitlement supports the transition from supposing that a looks C to judging under this supposition that a is C.<sup>36</sup> In what follows I will explain why the Perceptual Fundamentalist can and should say this.

Basic perceptual entitlements make it epistemically appropriate for us to believe p solely on the basis of having a perceptual experience with the content p. If I have a visual experience as of something red, I am thereby justified in believing that there is something

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<sup>35</sup> Cohen (2010), 156.

<sup>36</sup> It is important to keep in mind that this line of reasoning is about why a priori bootstrapping is not a good reasoning procedure. It does not automatically transfer to what is wrong a posteriori bootstrapping that Cohen is also concerned with. Other independent arguments have already been given in the literature for the second claim.

red. The Perceptual Fundamentalist can also express basic perceptual entitlements as claims about what one (epistemically) ought to do, which we can regard as rules of a certain sort. They are rules like: if you have a visual experience as of something red, you (epistemically) ought to believe that there is something red. This rule tells me what to do when certain circumstances obtain, namely circumstances in which I undergo a certain perceptual experience. The rule is silent on what I should do when those circumstances don't obtain. Rules of this sort are sometimes also called narrow-scope reasons or requirements, in contrast to wide-scope reasons or requirements that make conditional recommendations about what you ought to do regardless of the circumstances.<sup>37</sup> The paradigm examples of wide-scope reasons are rules of reasoning corresponding to logical entailments, such as the rule that (in general) you ought to see it to it that if you believe  $p$  and you believe  $p \rightarrow q$ , then you believe  $q$ .<sup>38</sup> Now, if we understand basic perceptual entitlements as narrow-scope reasons in the way just suggested, then we should reject the idea that they can be used in suppositional reasoning. After all, when I merely suppose that something looks red, I am not having a perceptual experience as of something red, and so the relevant rule makes no recommendation one way or the other about what I should believe under these circumstances. The relevant narrow scope requirement simply does not apply in the suppositional case.

One might object that this response stands at odds with Cohen's assumption that "perceptual justification proceeds in terms of propositional, i.e. propositionally representable, reasons concerning how things appear."<sup>39</sup> According to this assumption, our reasons are not the experiences themselves, but propositions about how things appear, such as the proposition that something looks red. So, one might think that if Perceptual Fundamentalists respect the propositional nature of justification, then they will construct basic perceptual entitlements as relations between propositions: the proposition that something looks red is a defeasible reason for the proposition that something is red. And one might further think that it is just this relation between the

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<sup>37</sup> I do not want to engage in the terminological dispute about what deserves to be called a rule. Nothing in this paper hinges on this. The important thing is what is epistemically required of us by the relevant perceptual entitlement.

<sup>38</sup> For the distinction between narrow and wide scope reasons see for example Broome (1999), who reserves the term 'reason' for narrow scope reasons, and uses the term 'requirement' to refer to wide scope reasons.

<sup>39</sup> Cohen (2010), 150.



propositions that one exploits when one makes the transition from supposing that something looks red to judging under the supposition that something is red.

However, it would be illegitimate to assume that basic perceptual entitlements are relations between propositions if this would undermine the primary motivation for Perceptual Fundamentalism, as Cohen himself acknowledges:

*Pryor, in his defense of Dogmatism, observes that the phenomenology of perception plays a central role in perceptual justification. We can plausibly accommodate Pryor's observation by supposing that my being in the phenomenal state is what makes the proposition my reason. This would explain how (15) [The table looks red – MBJ] can be my reason. It is my reason because in fact the table does look red to me. So, it is the truth of (15) that makes it my reason.<sup>40</sup>*

So Cohen acknowledges that for the Perceptual Fundamentalist, the proposition only counts as my reason if I actually am in the phenomenal mental state captured by the proposition. However, in the suppositional case I am not in the relevant phenomenal mental state. In these circumstances, how can the proposition that something looks red warrant the further judgment that something is red? If the proposition that something looks red is a reason for judging that something is red only when I actually have a perceptual experience as of something red, then the corresponding defeasible inference rule 'a looks red, so a is red' can only be applied in cases where I actually have a perceptual experience as of something red. Hence, if basic perceptual entitlements are or generate defeasible inference rules of the form 'a looks C, so a is C', then these inference rules should be understood as having narrow scope, and they should be understood as rules that cannot be rationally employed in suppositional reasoning. If they are so understood, then it becomes obvious how one can be a Perceptual Fundamentalist without accepting that we have a priori justification for the reliability of perception.

## Conclusions

In the previous sections, I have shown why both Wedgwood and Cohen are wrong to think that Perceptual Fundamentalism entails that we can use a priori bootstrapping to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 150.

acquire a justified belief about the reliability of our perceptual experience. The failure of both arguments has a common ground: Wedgwood and Cohen fail to recognize the distinctive nature of the basic perceptual entitlements posited by Perceptual Fundamentalists. Basic perceptual entitlements arise out of the very nature of perceptual experience. Just by virtue of being the subjects of perceptual experiences with certain contents, we are justified in forming certain beliefs. As such, basic perceptual entitlements do not give rise to inference rules that can be rationally used in contexts in which we are not undergoing perceptual experiences, such as in the context of suppositional reasoning – even suppositional reasoning *about* experience. Nor is there any straightforward way they can be shown to entail the existence of such rules.

As suggested in my discussion of Cohen, the framework of narrow versus wide scope reasons or requirements gives us a promising way to characterize the distinctive nature of basic perceptual entitlements: basic perceptual entitlements are narrow scope reasons, in the sense that having an experience makes it the case that – absent relevant defeaters – you ought to believe what the experience represents. It is because perceptual experience provides narrow scope reasons of this kind that basic perceptual entitlements cannot be exploited in the suppositional reasoning procedure of a priori bootstrapping. Perceptual Fundamentalists may not have been thinking of the perceptual entitlements they posit in this way. But I hope to have shown that if they want to respect the fundamental motivation to be a Perceptual Fundamentalist, this is how they should think of them. I believe that fully developing Perceptual Fundamentalism within this framework leads to the most powerful picture of perceptual reasons and their place within the structure of justification.

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