

# Experience and Foundationalism in Audi's *The Architecture of Reason*

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Robert Audi's *The Architecture of Reason* is a magnificent consolidation of decades of original work by a masterful philosopher. Its scope is impressive, as it covers both theoretical and practical reason in a slim volume. More impressive yet is its coherence, for Audi reveals a unified structure shared by what many philosophers assume to be disparate fields.

In this short comment, I will focus on just a few aspects of Audi's primary analogies between theoretical and practical reason. He argues that "reason, conceived as a general human capacity, is, as Kant thought, unified. It is unified above all by its grounding, directly or through belief, in experience, sensory, introspective, memorial, and reflective." (233; cf. ix, 16, 80, 222) Audi's structural thesis, then, is that good reasoning always has some foundation. His substantive thesis is that the foundation is always some experience. Hence his subtitle, "The Structure and Substance of Rationality".

## 1 - Experience

Audi admits "some differences between theoretical and practical reason", but he claims that "none of them undermines the main analogies." (193) It is not clear what it takes to undermine an analogy. Still, his main analogy regarding substance depends on a wide concept of experience, so his analogy seems problematic if his notion of experience is not adequately unified.

One striking difference between the experiences that are said to ground theoretical reason and those said to ground practical reason concerns time. In Audi's own examples, "as the justification of my belief that there is paper before me is grounded in my visual experience of paper, the rationality of my intrinsically wanting to listen to Beethoven's *Appassionata* is grounded (at least partly) in my enjoying my doing so." (216; cf. 7) Notice that my visual experience of paper does *not* justify me in any belief about that paper *before* I have that experience. If I have not yet seen the paper there, then I am not yet justified in believing that the paper is there, assuming that I have no other source of information about it. In contrast, my enjoyment in listening

to Beethoven's music is said to ground my desire to listen to it, even though that desire becomes rational *before* the experience of enjoyment. It can be rational for me on Tuesday to want to hear Beethoven's music on Wednesday, even if this desire gives me no pleasure on Tuesday, and even if I have never heard any similar music before then. Thus, practical attitudes (such as wanting) can be well-grounded in future experiences, whereas future experiences alone are not enough to ground or justify theoretical attitudes (such as beliefs).<sup>1</sup>

To restore the analogy, Audi seems to need desires and valuations to be grounded on some experience before or at the same time as those desires and valuations. One possibility is a special experience of wanting or valuing. (cf.224-5) However, I do not seem to have any special valuational experience. While I lick my ice cream cone, I experience pleasure, and I believe it is good. I do not seem to have any separate experience of the value of the pleasure. But that is what Audi seems to need if some experience is to ground not only my belief that I am feeling pleasure but also my belief that this pleasure is good. Similarly for wants and desires. Sometimes it is rational to want (or to fear) things that neither I nor anyone else has ever experienced, possibly because they have never existed. Even when the object of my desire does exist, there often does not seem to be any distinctive experience of wanting it at the time when I want it. Audi makes the important point that desires often lead to negative experiences when frustrated, but that does not show that they are accompanied by any distinctive grounding experience at the time of the desire, so this cannot reinstate the analogy with theoretical reason.

Another possible ground for valuational beliefs is the same kind of "reflective experience" that is supposed to ground justification in mathematics and logic. (16, 233) In previous works, Audi has written insightfully about reflection as a "process", "procedure", or "method" that "may be as brief as simply focusing clearly on the proposition, or ... may require many sittings, possibly spread over many years."<sup>2</sup> It is hard to see how a single experience could span many disjoint "sittings" or "years", so reflective experience cannot be an experience one has throughout reflection. That can't be what Audi meant. But then what is "reflective experience"? Audi explains reflective experience by contrasting it with perception, memory, and introspection, but he also insists on a commonality: "It is important to see that a kind of expe-

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<sup>1</sup> Notice also that few moral philosophers have qualms about postulating imaginary cases to justify their views or to refute their opponents. What if a doctor cut up one patient for organs needed to save five other patients? Most people would not hesitate to agree that such acts are immoral, even if nobody has ever had any experience of any situation like the imagined one.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Audi, "Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics", in *Moral Knowledge? New Essays in Moral Epistemology*, eds. W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 119.

rience, in the sense of mental activity or conscious awareness, occurs in both cases.” (16) The problem here is that reflective experience could be a “mental activity or conscious awareness”, even if it were a kind of belief. However, Audi needs to contrast experience with belief in order to defend his foundationalism. For example, in response to Sellars’ argument that experience needs justification because it is conceptual, Audi responds, “The conceptual, as opposed to the doxastic (the belief-constituted), need not admit of justification.” (17) This response is not available, Audi seems to admit, if so-called reflective experience is “belief-constituted”. That possibility is not excluded by Audi’s point that reflective experience is “mental activity or conscious awareness”. So Audi needs to tell us more about why reflective experience is not subject to Sellars’ argument and, more generally, about its relation to belief.

I have canvassed only three kinds of experience—future, valuational, and reflective—that might ground practical reason. None of them seems to play the role Audi needs. But additional possibilities abound. I just want to invite Audi to tell us more precisely what kind of present or past experience he has in mind as the ground of practical reason and when he refers to reflective experience.

## 2 - Foundationalism

The other aspect of Audi’s theory is structural. In opposition to both coheren-tism and skepticism, Audi endorses moderate foundationalism, whose central claim for theoretical reason is that some beliefs are non-inferentially justified, and they provide the foundation for all other justified beliefs. (viii, 30, 232) What makes Audi’s foundationalism moderate is that a belief can be non-inferentially justified without being infallible or indefeasible or indubitable (certain) or underivable (strongly axiomatic) or self-evident. These negative points, however, do not provide any positive account of what does make a belief justified non-inferentially.

In Audi’s usage, to call a belief *justified* is to describe its status, not any process. (14, 18, 28) This status is “well-groundedness of a rather full-blooded sort”, which requires “an adequate ground.” (19) Such justifiedness is inferential when the ground or its adequacy positively depends on inferences. Thus, to say that a belief is justified *non-inferentially* is to say that its grounds are adequate without positive dependence on any inference.

Audi’s moderate version of foundationalism admits that such grounds can be defeated by overriding or undermining inferences, so he allows negative dependence on the absence of defeating inferences. However, this absence gets classified as an “enabling condition” rather than a “source”. (26) Just as the absence of too much carbon dioxide enables a match to light but is not a

source of fire, so the absence of defeating inferences can enable a belief to be justified without being a source of its justifiedness.

It is notoriously difficult to distinguish some enabling conditions from sources and, hence, negative from positive dependence. To clarify this distinction, Audi tells us, "A source provides both a genetic explanation of where a thing comes from and, often, a contemporaneous partial explanation of why it is as it is; enabling conditions, by contrast, provide neither. Taken together, they explain its possibility, but not its genesis or its character." (26) However, insofar as explanation is pragmatic, it is often unclear what counts as part of an explanation. Since no fire would occur if a match were struck on glass, scientists might cite friction as part of the source of fire when someone strikes a match, although common people rarely mention friction in their explanations of the same fire. Such examples suggest that what counts as a source or as an enabling condition might vary with the concerns of the person giving the explanation. I think Audi wants to avoid this kind of relativity; but, to do so, he needs either a non-pragmatic account of explanation or an explanation-independent way to distinguish sources from enabling conditions and negative from positive dependence.

More importantly, even if Audi shows why inferences are not *sources* of some justified beliefs, inferences still might be "indispensable" (26) or *necessary* for those justified beliefs. If so, whether the inferences are sources or enabling conditions (26), whether the necessity is consequential or constitutive (47-48), and whether the dependence is positive or negative, the belief is still not justified without the inference. This makes it hard to see how the belief can be justified when the premises in the inference are not justified. But requiring the premises to be justified seems enough to start the classic skeptical regress. If so, Audi's moderate foundationalism is inadequate as a response to skepticism if all Audi claims is that inferences are not sources or constitutive conditions of some justified beliefs, which do not depend positively on inference. To avoid the regress, Audi must make the stronger claim either that no inference is necessary for justified belief or that the inferences that are necessary need not have justified premises. In any case, I want to invite Audi to tell us why his distinctions matter to the skeptical regress.

The goal of stopping the skeptical regress also affects the kind of inference that foundationalists must claim to be positively independent of justified belief. If every inference is a conscious "mental operation" (viii) whose premises are conscious beliefs, then some grounds do seem positively independent of any such inference. Seeing a red bird seems to justify me in believing that the bird is red without running through any actual conscious inference from conscious beliefs. I don't, needn't, and can't bother to formulate every inference explicitly.

However, coherentists and skeptics can accept that much independence. For example, Bonjour (in his coherentist days) held that justified belief always depends on inferences, but those inferences could be “tacit” or “implicit” in such a way that the believer “does not bring them explicitly to mind and indeed would normally be unable to do so even if explicitly challenged.”<sup>3</sup> Justified belief could positively depend on such tacit inferences, as coherentists claim, even if it does not positively depend on conscious inferences. Skeptics can also agree to independence of conscious inference, since that independence is not enough to stop the skeptical regress. If justified belief positively depends on tacit inferences, then the premises of those tacit inferences presumably need to be justified, which starts the regress. Thus, foundationalism cannot play its traditional role as a response to skepticism unless it makes the stronger claim that some beliefs are justified by grounds that do not positively depend on tacit inferences. The same goes for dispositions to infer, abilities to infer, and even “mere brain process[es]” (viii). If justified belief depends on any inference at any level, then the premises of the inference would seem to need to be justified, which leads to the skeptical regress.

Much to his credit, Audi recognizes this. He allows “unconscious beliefs” (242n22) as well as “dispositions to believe” (114, 174) and abilities to infer. (25, 198, 238n23) He even admits that unconscious but “presuppositionally available” beliefs can ground some inferentially justified beliefs (33; cf. 48), that inferentially justified beliefs might depend on a disposition to believe the principles of inferences one uses (207), and that “having justification” for a proposition that one does “not actually believe” can defeat “the rationality of my belief”. (207) So tacit beliefs and inferences exist and have some epistemic force.

Nonetheless, Audi denies that justified belief positively depends on any of this. He claims that certain kinds of experience by themselves are sufficient to ground justified beliefs: “justification—of some degree—from one of the four standard sources does not wait upon corroboration from other sources.” (22)<sup>4</sup> The four standard sources are perception, introspection, memory, and reflection. Audi’s claim, thus, implies that, when I see a red bird, my visual experience can be enough to make me justified in believing that the bird is red, even if I do not believe (consciously or unconsciously) that my eyes are reliable at detecting color in such circumstances, and even if I have no disposition or ability to infer the bird’s color from my experience plus the

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<sup>3</sup> Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 152; cf. 20, 154-5.

<sup>4</sup> This claim cannot be just that, for example, memory in general need not be corroborated by some source other than memory. Instead, Audi claims that some particular memorial beliefs are justified without corroboration either from any other memory or from anything outside memory.

reliability of my experience. Since most of us know from past experience when our eyes are reliable or unreliable, the crucial test case would be someone who is blind or colorblind from birth but suddenly starts to experience colors. Suppose this person does not believe that his new experiences are reliable indicators of colors. Nor does he believe that they are unreliable. He wouldn't hazard a guess, because they are new to him. Yet he sees a bird, experiences its color, and believes that it is red. He does not confirm this belief either by checking other experiences or by asking people who have seen colors longer. Audi's theory implies that this person is justified in believing that the bird is red. This claim, even if correct, is surely controversial, so Audi owes us some reason why such experience alone is enough without even any ability to back it up in any way.

Audi hints at one response when he claims that visual experience (as distinct from belief) "need not admit of justification." (17) Maybe the point is that what does not admit of justification by inference cannot need justification by inference. If this is the point, then it should apply to every kind of experience that is not "belief-constituted". However, Audi writes, "It appears that the four standard sources of justification are the *only* sources of it that do not need to earn their justificational credentials, as extrasensory perception presumably would, by correlation with one or another kind of ground already taken to generate justification." (19; my emphasis) But why does extra-sensory perception have this need for corroboration? Audi already said, "Perception is not necessarily tied to the five senses. It could occur through some other causally sensitive modality associated with the right sorts of experiential responses." (18) He also does not exclude the possibility that religious experience counts as a kind of perception and qualifies as a basic source "whose justificatory power is non-derivative." (18; cf. note 11 on 237) But, if we allow religious experience to be basic, then why should we require corroboration of extra-sensory perception? If Audi is to allow some experiences but not others as foundational sources of justified belief, he needs to tell us why some experiences do not require corroboration and also why the others do.

One possible response is that some sources are reliable but others are not. Most readers probably assume that extra-sensory perception is not reliable and that vision is. This cannot be Audi's answer, however, because he rejects such externalism for justified belief (48-49). Moreover, if reliability is what makes memory experience need no corroboration, then, to justify his claim that memory experience needs no corroboration, Audi would have to show that memory is reliable without relying on memory itself. That wouldn't be easy. So it is hard to see how his crucial claim could be justified.

Audi might respond that we know by reflection which sources do or do not need corroboration. But it begs the question to hold that we know by

reflection that reflective experience needs no corroboration. Besides, different people reach different conclusions when they reflect on extra-sensory perception and religious experience, so why trust some reflection more than any other reflection?

In some passages, Audi might seem to suggest that common practice explains why the standard sources do not need backup by inference, but extra-sensory perception does. For example, he writes, "There is no reason to think that any other sources play the same role in the notion of justification that operates in the standard descriptive and critical practices of normal adults. It appears that the four standard sources of justification are the only sources of it that do not need to earn their justificational credentials." (19) If the first sentence gives Audi's reason for the second sentence, then he infers a normative epistemological conclusion about what is needed from a description of "standard ... practices." (Compare also 73, 220, and note 21 on 269.) However, I doubt that this is really Audi's view. In later passages, he rejects "genetic relativity" (176) and emphasizes that theoretical and practical rationality are "not mere products of" culture (188). But then he needs something outside culture or "standard ... practices" to explain why standard sources need no corroboration, but extrasensory perception does.

This, then, is my final question for Audi: What creates the need for inferential corroboration in some sources but not others? Is this just a prejudice in favor of the familiar or is there some rational basis for the standards that Audi accepts along with the rest of us?