

Meeting 9: Crash Course on Basing

I. Basing: The Very Idea

Consider the following sentences:

“She believes that q because p .”

“She is ϕ -ing because p .”

“She hates him because p .”

The standard term among epistemologists for the relation (or connective) picked out by the first of these sentences is *the basing relation*. We shall generalize this terminology so that it applies to all three sentences.

It is also standard to refer to the items that appear on the right-hand side of such a relation as *motivating reasons*. But this is bad terminology when the item on the left-hand side is not an action, since it is controversial that beliefs, emotions, etc. have a connection to motivation in the way that actions do. A more neutral term that avoids this commitment is *reasons for which*.

Almost all of the locutions used to pick out grounding can also be used to pick out basing:

grounding:

“Act A is pious *because* the gods love it.”

“A is pious *in virtue of* its being loved by the gods.”

“The gods’ love of A *is what makes* A pious.”

“That the gods love A *is the reason why* it is pious.”

basing:

“The gods love A *because* it is pious”

“The gods love A *in virtue of* its piety.”

“A’s piety *is what makes* the gods love it.”

“That A is pious *is the reason for which* the gods love it.”

Basing has a fractured history in recent philosophy. The basing of beliefs, the basing of actions, and the basing of non-doxastic attitudes/emotions/feelings have often been studied by separate literatures that make different background assumptions and have not always been in dialogue with one another.

Many of the choice points that we face when theorizing about grounding have direct analogues when we theorize about basing, such as:

- Is basing itself a form of explanation (*unionism*), or is it a dependence relation that “backs” a distinctive form of explanation (*separatism*)?
- Is basing a relation, or is it a connective?
- What is the “adacity” of the basing relation/connective? One–one, many–one, or many–many?
- Is there a single fundamentally-unique basing relation/connective (*basing monism*), or are there several fundamentally-distinct basing relations/connectives (*basing pluralism*)?
- If basing is a relation, what ontological category of entities does it relate? In particular, what type(s) of entities can be based? And what type(s) of entities can serve as bases?

This last question is a very difficult theoretical choice point, and we will return to it next week. Some options:

mentalism: Bases are mental states.

abstractionism: Bases are (perhaps false) propositions or (perhaps non-obtaining) states of affairs.

factualism: Bases are facts.

disjunctivism: In the Good Case, bases are facts; in the Bad Case, bases are propositions/mental states.

However, there is often less difference between these positions as there at first seems to be. For example, many abstractionists commit themselves to a thesis along the following lines:

- T₁. Necessarily, if S believes that q because p , then S is in a presentational state with content $\langle p \rangle$ (where such presentational states include believing that p , intuiting that p , visually seeming to see that p , etc.).

Some plausible connections between basing and other important philosophical notions:

- *connection to ex post justification*: In epistemology, it is standard to assume that doxastic justification requires propositional justification plus basing:

T₂. Necessarily, S's belief that q is doxastically (i.e. *ex post*) justified only if $(\exists r_1, \dots, \exists r_n)$ (i) believing that q is propositionally (i.e. *ex ante*) justified for S; (ii) r_1, \dots, r_n propositionally (i.e. *ex ante*) justify S in believing that q ; and (iii) S believes that q on the basis of r_1, \dots, r_n .

We can posit a similar thesis for attitudes other than belief, such as:

T₃. Necessarily, S's fear of x is *ex post* justified only if $(\exists r_1, \dots, \exists r_n)$ (i) fearing x is *ex ante* justified for S; (ii) r_1, \dots, r_n *ex ante* justify S in fearing x ; and (iii) S fears x on the basis of r_1, \dots, r_n .

- *connection to inference*: In epistemology, it is standard to assume that one canonical way to base one's belief on other beliefs is to infer the former from the latter, so that we have:

T₄. Necessarily, if S infers $\langle q \rangle$ from $\langle p_1 \rangle, \dots$, and $\langle p_n \rangle$, then S believes that q because (S believes that) p_1, \dots , and p_n .

For this reason, work on the nature of inference is also work on the nature of doxastic basing.

- *connection to normative reasons*: There seems to be a deep connection between bases (or motivating reasons, or reasons for which) and normative reasons (or reasons to). One such connection:

T₅. Necessarily, r is a reason for S to ϕ only if it is possible for S to ϕ on the basis of r (i.e. only if it is possible for r to be one of the reasons for which S ϕ -s).

Bernard Williams appeals to a version of this thesis in his argument against the existence of external reasons, and Thomas Kelly, Derek Parfit, and Nishi Shah appeal to versions of it in their arguments against the existence of practical reasons for belief.

Another plausible connection runs in the reverse direction:

T₆. Necessarily, if it is possible for there to be reasons for which S is in mental state M, then M is the sort of mental state that can have normative reasons in its favor.

Zoe Jenkin appeals to (T₆) in order to argue that perceptual experiences can be justified, and (T₆) can be used to put pressure on Barry Maguire's recent claim that there are no normative reasons for affective attitudes such as desire, fear, etc.

- *connection to grounding*: There also seems to be a deep connection between grounding and basing, along roughly the following lines: the proper way to be in cognitive contact with the fact $[q \text{ because}_{\text{grounding}} p]$ is to believe that q because_{basing} p . (We'll explore this idea in more detail in our final meeting.)

II. Basing: Some Distinctions

We can draw a number of distinctions with regard to basing that parallel distinctions we drew for grounding:

- *full vs. partial basing*:

Suppose I intend to ϕ because I intend to ψ and I believe that ϕ -ing is necessary for ψ -ing. Then if we assume mentalism, it's natural to say that my intention to ϕ is *partially based* on my intention to ψ and is *fully based* on my intention to ψ and my belief that ϕ -ing is necessary for ψ -ing, taken together.

It is tempting to define *partial basing* in terms of *full basing*, like so:

D₁. x is partially based on $yy =_{df} (\exists zz: yy \subseteq zz)(x \text{ is fully based on } zz)$.

- *partial bases vs. entities that partly base:*

Even though I criticized Cohen's distinction between the facts *that are partial grounds of* some fact and the facts *that partly ground* that fact, I am more inclined to countenance a parallel distinction for basing.

Suppose I believe that the lecture is in Emerson 210 because I believe the following propositions: <Eden told me that the lecture is in Emerson 210>; <Megan told me that if the lecture is on Friday, then it's in Emerson 210>; and <The lecture is on Friday>.

Then it is plausible that, although my belief in <The lecture is on Friday> is a partial basis of my belief in <The lecture is in Emerson 210> (since it's part of a full basis for that belief), it does not partly base that belief (since it does not do "some of the actual basing work" on its own).

Does making this distinction force us to adopt a psychological-force-vector model of basing? Perhaps. But that makes me uneasy, since it's not clear that such a model is accurate.

But, in defense of that model, it's worth noting that whereas in earlier weeks we expressed skepticism about the notion of an anti-grounds, the notion of an anti-basis seems less suspect.

Suppose, in the case already described, I also believe <Sam told me that the lecture is in Emerson 305>. We can imagine a version of this case where this belief plays a con-role that is outweighed by other pro-factors in my coming (and continuing) to believe <The lecture is in Emerson 210> and a version where it is irrelevant.

- *immediate vs. mediate basing:*

Intuitively, my belief in <Today is Wednesday or Saturday> is *immediately (or directly) based* on my belief in <Today is Wednesday>; my belief in <Today is Wednesday or Saturday, and next month is December> is *immediately (or directly) based* on my belief in <Today is Wednesday or Saturday> and my belief in <Next month is December>, taken together; and my belief in <Today is Wednesday or Saturday, and next month is December> is *mediately (or indirectly) based* on my belief in <Today is Wednesday> and my belief in <Next month is December>, taken together.

Can we define *immediate basing* as a lack of *mediate basing*? (Here I restrict things to one-one basing, to keep things simple.)

D₂. x is immediately based on $z =_{df} \neg(\exists y)((x \text{ is based on } y) \ \& \ (y \text{ is based on } z))$

No, we can't: cases in which one item is both a mediate and an immediate basis for some act/attitude are counterexamples to (D₂). For example, I might believe <Either something is red, or the insignia is crimson> both immediately because I believe <The insignia is crimson> (via the second disjunct) and mediate because of that same belief (via the first disjunct).

Can we define *mediate basing* as the transitive closure of *immediate basing*? Well, that depends on whether the basing relation is transitive, an issue we will discuss next week.

Can we define both *mediate basing* and *immediate basing* in terms of *basing (simpliciter)*? The definition of mediate basing would go roughly as follows:

D₃. x is mediate based on $z =_{df} x \text{ is based on } z \ \& \ (\exists y)(x \text{ is based on } z \text{ because } x \text{ is based on } y \text{ and } y \text{ is based on } z),$

where the 'because' in the definiens either is grounding (if the basing relation is transitive) or is basing (if we allow basing states to be based and to serve as bases). The definition of immediate basing would go roughly as follows:

D₄. x is immediately based on $z =_{df} x \text{ is based on } z \ \& \ \neg(\exists y)(x \text{ is based on } z \text{ only by way of } x \text{ being based on } y \text{ and } y \text{ being based on } z),$

- *bases vs. enablers:*

Just as we can distinguish *grounds*, (*metaphysical*) *enablers*, and (*metaphysical*) *disablers*, so too can we distinguish the following:

bases: The reasons for which we perform some act or have some attitude.

(*psychological*) *enablers*: Background factors that “turn on” a basing relation between the bases and the act/attitude that is based.

(*psychological*) *disablers*: Background factors that “turn off” a basing relation between (what would otherwise be) the bases and the act/attitude that is based.

III. Theories of Doxastic Basing

Although most groundologists take grounding to be metaphysically primitive/irreducible/unanalyzable, much work on basing is devoted to attempts to analyze basing in other terms.

For example, in the post-Gettier era, there was a mini-explosion of work on the doxastic basing relation, with analyses splitting into three broad groups:

causal theories of doxastic basing: Theories that analyze S’s believing that q for reason r in terms of a causal relation between r (or a presentational state with the same content as r) and S’s belief that q .

representational theories of doxastic basing: Theories that analyze S’s believing that q for reason r in terms of S’s believing, taking, or in some way representing r to be a normative reason for S to believe that q .

mixed theories of doxastic basing: Theories that analyze S’s believing that q for reason r in terms of both causal and representational elements.

Standard objections to causal theories of doxastic basing include:

- Cases involving deviant causal chains supposedly show that a causal relation is not sufficient for doxastic basing.
- Lehrer’s case of the Romany lawyer (now rebranded “the superstitious lawyer”) supposedly shows that a causal relation is not necessary for doxastic basing.

Standard objections to representational theories of doxastic basing include:

- Cases involving small children who do not possess the concept NORMATIVE REASON supposedly show that a meta-belief about the normative reasons for a belief is not necessary for doxastic basing.
- Cases in which someone possesses such a meta-belief but has the first-order belief for other reasons supposedly show that a meta-belief of that sort is not sufficient for doxastic basing.

Eventually the going theories of doxastic basing became so baroque and the counterexamples so complicated that most epistemologies gave up and stopped working on the basing relation for several decades. But recently there has been renewed interest in the topic, inspired in part by some very interesting work on the nature of inference.

IV. Blake-Turner’s Hereby-Commit Account of Inference

According to Blake-Turner, the Standard View of inference (and hence of doxastic inferential basing) consists in two theses:

TAKING: S’s transition from believing $\langle p_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle p_n \rangle$ to believing $\langle q \rangle$ is an inference only if, and partly because, the transition involves S’s having the *corresponding taking state*: S takes $\langle p_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle p_n \rangle$ to support $\langle q \rangle$.

PRIORITY: A corresponding taking state is causally prior to an inferential transition.

A taking state is a “*committal, obtaining representation*” that opens its subject “to rational appraisal” (p. 4).

One standard problem for the Standard View:

- *the Carrollian challenge*: What role do taking states play in inferences, given that—on pain of regress—they can't play the role of being just more premises?

Boghossian's version of the Standard View meets this challenge by helping itself to an unanalyzed, primitive notion of *rule following*, but Blake-Turner argues that in doing so it opens itself to three other problems:

- *the Origin Problem*: How do taking states arise, given that—on pain of regress—they can't always be the products of further inferential processes?
- *the Explanation Problem*: Rule following is at least as mysterious as inference, so analyzing inference in terms of rule following is not very illuminating or explanatorily satisfying.
- *the Rational Distinctiveness Problem*: "If being moved by premises in the absence of a taking state is mere mental jogging—is just being buffeted about by causal winds—then why does adding another thing to the causal base turn mere mechanics into a rational process?" (pp. 6-7).

Blake-Turner proposes retaining TAKING while jettisoning PRIORITY, by holding that rather than *a corresponding taking state (partially) causing a premise-conclusion transition*, instead *a corresponding taking state is (partially) constituted by a premise-conclusion transition*, and it is (partially) in virtue of this fact that the transition counts as an inference.

He summarizes his view as one on which "taking states are at once *explanatorily prior* to inferential transitions (taking states characterize certain transitions as inferential) and *metaphysically posterior* to them (taking states are constituted by inference transitions)" (p. 8).

But this is an inaccurate way of describing his view: he is conflating *the premise-conclusion transition* and *the fact that this premise-conclusion transition is an inference*. The latter is explained in part by the fact that the former in part constitutes a certain taking state.

Two analogies that Blake-Turner uses to motivate his proposal:

- *goal-scoring kicks in soccer*: My kicking the ball somewhere is a goal-scoring kick because my kicking the ball to that location constitutes my scoring a goal.

(I have replaced Blake-Turner's 'kicking the ball' with 'kicking the ball somewhere', because I find it more plausible that *my scoring a goal* is constituted by *my kicking the ball somewhere*, not by *my kicking the ball*.)

- *promises*: My uttering the words, "I promise to deliver the message," amounts to my promising you that I will deliver the message because my uttering those words constitutes my having an obligation to you to deliver the message.

Blake-Turner sees a difference between these cases: whereas "we could in principle specify necessary and sufficient conditions under which a kick [somewhere] constitutes the scoring of a goal," he's skeptical that "we can give information, independent, necessary and sufficient conditions under which an utterance constitutes an obligation" (p. 9).

But talking this way makes it seem like these are necessary and sufficient conditions in virtue of which the following fact obtains: [My kicking the ball to location *l* constitutes my scoring a goal].

However, presumably Blake-Turner wants these conditions to be the ones that *in addition* to the fact that I kicked the ball somewhere make it the case that I scored a goal (perhaps in Cohen's inclusive sense of 'make', where we include enablers, absences of disablers, etc.). So maybe in the end we should replace Blake-Turner's 'constitution'-talk with 'grounding'-talk in his proposal.

Blake-Turner's account of inference is inspired by these analogies:

HEREBY-COMMIT ACCOUNT: An inference is a mental transition of S's that consists in:

- (i) S's believing $\langle p_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle p_n \rangle$ (= *the premises*) causes S to believe $\langle q \rangle$ (= *the conclusion*);
- (ii) that causal transition constitutes S's taking $\langle p_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle p_n \rangle$ to support $\langle q \rangle$ (= *the corresponding taking state*); and
- (iii) the causal transition from premises to conclusion plays the hereby-commit functional role, which is expressible by, but not reducible to, S's thinking, "I hereby commit to $\langle p_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle p_n \rangle$'s supporting $\langle q \rangle$."

At one point Blake-Turner writes that "a premise–conclusion transition constitutes a corresponding taking state . . . when and only when the transition plays the *hereby-commit* functional role" (p. 11), which suggests that, as he puts it in a companion piece, "[c]lause (iii) is an elucidation of clause (ii), rather than an addition" ("Acting on the Basis of a Reason," p. 26, n. 29).

Blake-Turner insists that the HEREBY-COMMIT ACCOUNT solves our four problems for the Standard View:

- *How it meets the Carrollian Challenge*: "An inference's corresponding taking state is not a premise. Rather, it is constituted by the causal transition from premise-beliefs to conclusion-belief" (p. 12).
- *How it solves the Origin Problem*: "[T]here is no mystery about the origin of an inference's corresponding taking state: it is constituted by the premise–conclusion transition" (ibid.).

(But how the transition manages to constitute that taking state does seem rather mysterious, especially given that we don't have an independent grip on the other conditions that together with the fact that a causal premise–conclusion transition has occurred make it the case that such a transition constitutes a corresponding taking state.)

- *How it solves the Explanation Problem*: "I avoid Carroll's regress by appealing to notions that are further removed from inference [than Boghossian's notion of rule following is]—causation, constitution, and the hereby-commit functional role. Because of this, my account better illuminates the nature of inference" (ibid.).

(But there were two worries contained with the Explanation Problem: first, that rule following is too close to inference; and, second, that rule following is just as mysterious as inference. While perhaps Blake-Turner's proposal does better than Boghossian's on the first score, it is not clear it does much better on the second score, since the hereby-commit functional role is also quite mysterious.)

- *How it solves the Rational Distinctiveness Problem*: "I locate the distinctiveness of inference in the way that conclusions are drawn. . . . [T]o draw a conclusion is to take a rational stand. . . . [T]he taking state is not just another causal lever. The taking state instead reflects the agent's having made up her mind—in the very inferring—about whether the premises support the conclusion" (p. 13).

(The way in which it meets this problem head-on is the primary virtue of Blake-Turner's account, it seems to me.)

An additional objection that Blake-Turner addresses:

- *objection*: Sometimes agents infer by explicitly relying on a prior taking state according to which $\langle p_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle p_n \rangle$ support $\langle q \rangle$.

Blake-Turner's reply: This prior taking state "is not the *corresponding* taking state of the inference" (p. 14). Instead, the prior taking state acts as an additional premise in the inference, and the inference's corresponding taking state consists in S's taking $\langle p_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle p_n \rangle, \langle \langle p_1 \rangle, \dots, \langle p_n \rangle \text{ support } \langle q \rangle \rangle$ to support $\langle q \rangle$.

(But do those $n + 1$ propositions really together support $\langle q \rangle$? The final one seems irrelevant: if true, it is not itself a reason to believe $\langle q \rangle$, nor does it seem to be part of such a reason.)