ABSTRACT. This paper is a reply to James Keller's criticisms of my 'Foundationalism, Coherentism and the Levels Gambit' (Synthese 55, April 1983).

Foundationalists have often claimed that, within a foundationalist framework, one can justify beliefs about epistemic principles in a mediate, empirical fashion, while escaping the charge of vicious circularity that is usually thought to afflict such methods of justification. In my original paper I attacked this foundationalist strategy; I argued that once mediate, empirical justification of epistemic principles is allowed, the foundationalist must also allow circular patterns of justification of the sort that he typically criticizes coherentists for espousing. Here I argue that Keller's reply only makes matters worse for the foundationalist. At several points, his reply turns out to be inconsistent either with reliabilism or with the foundationalist strategy he is trying to defend.

It has often been suggested, in response to the problem of the Cartesian circle, that Descartes can be certain that whatever he perceives clearly and distinctly is true as long as he has individual clear and distinct perceptions that lead him up to this generalization; he need not use the clearness and distinctness principle as a premise of his justifying argument, and hence escapes circularity. Following a similar strategy, defenders of foundationalism who are sympathetic to reliabilism have suggested a noncircular way of empirically justifying beliefs about epistemic principles – principles specifying which kinds of beliefs are justified and which not. The thought is that if one has individual perceptual or memory beliefs that are reliable, one may use those (justified) beliefs to justify beliefs to the effect that beliefs produced by perceptual or memory processes are reliable and justified. No circularity is incurred because the epistemic principles justified by this procedure do not function as premises in the justification of the data base perceptual or memory beliefs. Those are justified by the truth of the epistemic principles.

In 'Foundationalism, Coherentism, and the Levels Gambit' I put forth a difficulty for this strategy. If a foundationalist-cum-reliabilist maintains that beliefs about epistemic principles are justified in this mediate, empirical fashion, so I argued, he winds up having to countenance the sort of circular justification that he typically criticizes...
coherentists for espousing. My argument has recently been challenged by James Keller. Here I want to show that Keller’s reply goes wrong—and in an intriguing way. Specifically, his reply turns out to be inconsistent, at several points, either with reliabilism or with the foundationalist strategy he is trying to defend.

The gravamen of my original criticism was this. Suppose that a number of first-level perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, or whatever, are used as the empirical data base for a generalization to the effect that all perceptual (or memory) beliefs, or at least those satisfying certain conditions, are reliably produced or sustained, hence immediately justified. Foundationalists maintain that, although the principle that beliefs formed by perception (memory) are reliable must be true in order for the subject to be justified in holding the first-level beliefs that form his data base, the subject need not believe such principles or use them as premises; a fortiori, he need not justifiably believe the relevant generalization in order licitly to use his data base. This last claim is of course denied by coherentists. Against the foundationalist, I suggested that we consider a person who rehearsed this empirical justification. He could then proceed to justify a given first-level perceptual or memory belief by arguing from two now justified beliefs: that this belief was formed in conditions of type C, and that beliefs formed in conditions of type C tend to be true (i.e., they are reliable). This justification can proceed in virtue of a plausible trickle-down principle: the empirical evidence one has for the generalization trickles down to justify beliefs that the principle declares to be justified. Thus, a given perceptual or memory belief can be justified both by the fact it is reliable and by this inferential reasoning. But this inferential justification displays a circular justificatory pattern of the type a coherentist would favor. Hence foundationalists cannot use the popular regress argument to motivate foundationalism, for the regress argument typically incorporates a rejection of coherentist patterns on the grounds they are circular. I proceeded to defend the trickle-down principle (TDP) on which my argument was based.

My thesis, then, is that once one allows epistemic principles to be justified mediately and empirically, one becomes a coherentist. Interestingly, the conclusion that reliabilists must embrace coherentism with respect to the justification of epistemic principles is arrived at independently by Ernest Sosa in the same issue of Synthese:

Reliabilism is thus [i.e., by Sosa’s argument, which is different from mine] driven to seek