Self-Trust and the Reasonableness of Acceptance

G. J. Mattey

November 15, 2001

Keith Lehrer's theory of knowledge has undergone considerable transformation since the original version he presented in his 1974 book *Knowledge* [2]. Among the original elements of the theory, belief has been replaced by acceptance, subjective probability by reasonableness, the doxastic system by the acceptance system, and beating competitors by answering objections. New elements, such as the preference system and the reasoning system, have been added. These changes have enhanced the depth and plausibility of the theory.

A feature added in the first edition of *Theory of Knowledge* [3], the "principle of the trustworthiness of acceptance," also known as "(T)," has by contrast been treated by Lehrer in a way that arouses suspicion. The most recent formulation appears in the second edition of *Theory of Knowledge*: "I am trustworthy (worthy of my own trust) in what I accept with the objective of accepting something just in case it is true" ([6], p. 138). Lehrer makes a case, which will be examined below, that one's acceptance of *(T)* contributes to the reasonableness of everything that one accepts.

By virtue of its form, if principle *(T)* is accepted with the objective of accepting it just in case it is true, it applies to itself. Then, given its general contribution to the reasonableness of what one accepts, accepting *(T)* contributes to the reasonableness of accepting *(T)*: "If a person accepts *(T)*, then her acceptance of *(T)* itself will have the result that it is reasonable for her to accept *(T)*" ([6], p. 142). Lehrer regards such direct self-application of *(T)* to be both natural and illuminating. He recognizes that it generates a circle, or "loop," but he claims that that the circularity is not vicious, because the loop is explanatory rather than argumentative ([5], p. 136). This paper will examine the role of the principle of trustworthiness in making acceptance reasonable and the way in which it might make itself reasonable.

1 Acceptance, Justification, and Knowledge

Lehrer intends his theory of knowledge to provide an account of an intellectual sort of knowledge, one that presupposes a healthy degree of cognitive sophistication. In particular, this kind of knowledge is more than the mere possession of correct information, requiring in addition a recognition of the information as being correct. "It is information that we recognize to be correct that yields

the characteristically human sort of knowledge that distinguishes us as adult cognizers from machines, other animals, and even our infant selves" ([6], p. 7). Information recognized as correct "is inextricably woven into reasoning, justification, confirmation, and refutation" ([6], p. 6).

A person who possesses correct information must, in order to have knowledge of the type Lehrer is trying to analyze, take the information to be correct. But recognizing information to be correct involves more than this. A person may take information to be correct without any purpose.[1] Purposive recognition of information as correct is what Lehrer calls "acceptance." It is the taking of information to be true in order to satisfy some specific objective. This requires evaluating how well the act of taking the information to be true furthers the objective. Lehrer claims that such evaluation can take place without reflection. "Positive evaluation may occur without reflection when reflection would be otiose and would leave unchanged our intellectual and practical attitudes concerning what we accept" ([4], p. 4. Cf. [6], p. 40.).

The kind of acceptance that can be knowledge of the sort to be captured by Lehrer's theory is one based on an an evaluation in terms of "the epistemic purpose" of obtaining true information and rejecting false information ([6], p. 14). (We shall call this kind of acceptance "epistemic acceptance.") The purpose is in general to maximize the possession of true information and minimize the possession of false information. The most obvious way in which the evaluation would occur is through reflection on whether acceptance helps to fulfill the epistemic purpose. But since Lehrer claims that acceptance may not require reflection, it appears that he needs to postulate a default mechanism for acceptance in mundane matters so that reflection is called for only when use of that mechanism is inappropriate.[2]

If reflection is involved, there is a decision to made by an epistemic agent whether or not to accept a given piece of information as being true, in order to fulfill the epistemic purpose.[3]

> When I consider accepting something, I have two options, acceptance and non-acceptance. When I accept something, I have, in effect, raised the question, to accept or not to accept, and answered the question with a positive evaluation. ([4], p. 10)

The evaluative criterion governing epistemic acceptance is that of "reasonableness." It can be more or less reasonable to accept epistemically a given piece of information. The minimal degree of reasonableness required for a positive evaluation would be that it be more reasonable to accept the information as being true than not to accept the information.[4] Acceptance might be any-

[1] This seems to be what Lehrer calls mere belief, which "arise[s] in us naturally without our bidding and often against our will" ([6], p. 40).

[2] Lehrer acknowledges in his "bear print" example that sometimes circumstances dictate a greater degree of scrutiny than in normal circumstances ([6], p. 73). Complex or highly general information would also call for reflection.

[3] If reflection is not involved, there is no "decision" strictly speaking, but a commitment must be made in a manner analogous to the making of a decision.

[4] This kind of comparison was made by Chisholm in [1].

where from barely to massively more reasonable than withholding acceptance. If an epistemic agent is to know that the information he accepts is true, then the reasonableness of accepting as opposed to withholding should be very high. Otherwise, the correctness of his decision to accept would be fortuitous.[5]

It is tempting to say that if the reasonableness of acceptance meets a certain threshhold level, then the acceptance is justified and thus meets a condition for knowledge of the type under consideration. Lehrer realized from the beginning that such a simple condition for justification is subject to the lottery paradox.[6] To avoid this problem, he considered other pieces of information whose acceptance would make the acceptance of a given piece of information less reasonable. These competing pieces of information he now calls "objections" to the information whose acceptance is at issue. Lehrer uses this device to base his definition of justification on the notion of reasonableness while avoiding the lottery paradox. A piece of information is subjectively or "personally" justified just in case the agent has a way of dealing with all objections.[7] If the information is also true and the acceptance of it is objectively justified, it amounts to knowledge.[8]

The idea that justification consists in the ability to deal with all objections has a certain appeal, especially with respect to the kind of knowledge which is the target of Lehrer's theory. Paradigmatically, knowledge is the outcome of critical inquiry; it is what emerges, or at least would emerge, from the crucible of intensive dialectical engagement with objections.[9] If an actual examination of objections is required in each case of acceptance, the range of information that is accepted, and therefore could count as knowledge would be severely limited.

On Lehrer's view such an examination is not required. The act of epistemic acceptance does not require any reflection at all, so it does not require that objections be taken into account. Ordinarily, the decision to accept is based on positive evidence for the truth of the information, and objections are considered only when there is some reason to think the information is false or when one is being extra-cautious.[10] Note that from a practical standpoint, consideration of myriad objections would thwart the goal of accepting as many truths as possible. Even when reflection is called for in non-routine cases, generally not all objections are taken into account when making a decision to accept a piece of information as true to help fulfill the epistemic purpose.

Then the question arises as to how an acceptance can be justified, given that all objections have to be dealt with. The answer is that one must have the resources to deal with objections, whether or not one has taken them into account in the evaluation leading to the act of acceptance. These resources make the acceptance "reasonable," perhaps reasonable enough to count as knowledge.

[5]It would be fortuitous from the point of view of the agent. There might be some sort of external factor that makes the correctness of the decision non-accidental, as in the case of a device implanted in the brain that brings about correct acceptances. See [6], p. 186-8.

[6]See [2], pp. 192-197.

[7]Objections must either be "answered" or "neutralized" ([6], pp. 134-136.

[8]Objective justification is described in Chapter 7 of [6].

[9]The "justification game" illustrates the way in which critical objections might be handled if they were to arise. See [6], pp. 132-128.

[10]This feature of acceptance is highlighted by theories of *prima facie* justification.

This means that it can be asked *post hoc* to what extent an acceptance is reasonable, where the answer may involve resources that were not drawn upon in the act of acceptance.

So we need to make a distinction between the act of accepting and the ongoing commitment to truth that can also be called acceptance. At one point in time, acceptance is a mental act of committing to the truth of a piece of information, in order to help fulfill the epistemic purpose. Reasonableness plays the role of a criterion for making the commitment. At a later point in time, acceptance is a commitment already made. As such, it is a candidate for knowledge. The reasonableness of already-made acceptance might be understood in terms of whether it is permissible to retain it or perhaps whether the act of acceptance would be called for given the information one has at the time. In discussing the reasonableness of acceptance, Lehrer draws on both of these aspects without clearly indicating which one is in play.

2 Reasonableness

What does it mean to say that it is reasonable, to some degree, for a person to accept the information that p to fulfill the epistemic purpose of obtaining truth and avoiding error? Lehrer treats reasonableness as a primitive notion, though he does note a relation between reasonableness and the epistemic purpose. For the information that p to be reasonable (to some degree) to be accepted, it must be subjectively probable to a certain degree, which promotes the goal of avoiding error. Conversely, accepting information that p is made more reasonable as it is more informative, which promotes the goal of obtaining truth ([6], pp. 144-145). Typical of somewhat risky, but highly informative, information are "major scientific claims, those concerning galaxies, genes, and electrons" ([6], p. 145).

How reasonable it is to accept epistemically a piece of information would seem on the face of it to be a complex matter, which is perhaps not easily determined. Lehrer sidesteps this issue by simply assuming that "we are able to tell, at least intuitively, when it is more reasonable to accept one thing than the other" ([6], p. 128).[11] This allows him to make reasonableness the determining factor in any evaluation that results in the acceptance of the information that p to fulfill the epistemic purpose. "I confront the question of whether or not to accept some information that I receive," and I answer the question on the basis of "how reasonable it is to accept the information in comparison to other competing considerations" ([6], p. 126).

The sole source of reasonableness, on Lehrer's account, is the agent's "evaluation system."[12] Several components together make up the evaluation system, of which one, the "acceptance system," is relevant to the present discussion.[13]

[11] Presumably, one would be able to tell as well whether it is more reasonable to accept than to withhold acceptance.

[12] This is less evident with respect to informativeness than with probability, but very general information can be completely uninformative to a person who does not have the conceptual resources to integrate it into his view of the world.

[13] The other components are the "preference system" and the "reasoning system." See [6],

This is the repository of information a person has already taken to be true for the purposes of obtaining truth and avoiding error. As the evaluation system is internal to the agent, no external factors contribute to the reasonableness of acceptance.

Lehrer describes the role of the acceptance system in terms of its contribution to the reasonableness of the act of accepting. "In deciding whether to accept something or not at the present moment, reason requires the use of relevant information I have accumulated in the quest for truth. That information is contained in my acceptance system" ([6], p. 125).[14] The evaluation system enables the evaluation to take place by "informing" or "telling" the agent the extent to which the information available to him is reasonable and how reasonable the information under evaluation is relative to it ([6], p. 125).[15] Lehrer's account of how the evaluation system makes acceptance reasonable does not describe what makes an already-held acceptance reasonable. The account can be applied in a couple of different ways to an acceptance one has already made. The evaluation system might inform the agent about the reasonableness of retaining the acceptance, or it might inform him about how reasonable a fresh acceptance would be in light of the information he now has.

When the acceptance system makes it reasonable for a person to accept some information p to fulfill the epistemic purpose, it can be described as providing evidential support for the acceptance. Because Lehrer makes the acceptance system the sole means by which support is conferred, the relation of support is mutual or reciprocal. The accepted information p is supported by the rest of the acceptance system. The reasonableness of accepting any information q contained in the rest of the acceptance system is supported by the remainder of the acceptance system, which includes the acceptance of p. The mutual "fit" of information within an acceptance system will be henceforth be referred to as "concurrence."[16]

Concurrence is not the same as what Lehrer calls "coherence." Coherence is a relation that is defined in terms of the already-established reasonableness of accepting that p in the face of objections to that acceptance, and so it is a condition of justification rather than of reasonableness.[17] Concurrence and coherence are closely related in that both are based on the evaluation system. So the acceptance of p may be invoked to answer an objection to the acceptance of q, and *vice-versa*.

pp. 126-127. In [5], Lehrer notes that only the acceptance system is relevant to the issues that he raises there, and these are the issues discussed in the present paper. See p. 138, note 2.

[14] It appears to be psychologically unrealistic to assume that an epistemic agent can properly distinguish between what he already believes and what he has already accepted. One reason is that we often forget how we came to take a given information to be true.

[15] The information contained in the acceptance system is also the basis for the determination of justification.

[16] This term is taken from Chisholm, who attributes the concept to the ancient academic skeptic Carneades ([1] p. 43).

[17] It may be that in many, most, or all cases, concurrence involves dealing with objections, in which case it is closely related to justification.

It is open to foundationalists to incorporate mutual support into their systems. Chisholm allows that concurrence can add to the reasonableness of what is in itself reasonable to some extent.[18] He illustrates the role of concurrence using Meinong's analogy of cards tilted up against one another so as to provide mutual support.

> Each of the propositions in our concurrent set must be acceptable on its own if we are to derive reasonability from concurrence, just as each of the members of a house of cards must have its own degree of substance and rigidity if the house is not to collapse. ([1], p. 123)

In general, for foundationalists there are some acceptances whose reasonableness can be accounted for, but which need no other acceptances to make them reasonable. They might be made reasonable by themselves or by some external factor.

As it has been described thus far, Lehrer's account of concurrence is non-foundationalist. There appears to be nothing in it that can confer any degree of "substance and rigidity" except for other acceptances. Lehrer, as is well-known, rejects foundationalist accounts of justification. One of his central anti-foundationalist arguments helps to flesh out the ways in which acceptances support each other reciprocally. The justification of particular beliefs usually rests on an appeal to general beliefs, e.g. those concerning how successful one is in making judgments based on perceptual evidence (one's "track record"). Lehrer makes the case that such general beliefs are not basic but are justified by particular beliefs about individual cases of success, and *vice versa*, which involves "arguing in a circle" ([6], p. 93).

> This suggests, contrary to the foundation theory, that the justification of both kinds of statements may be reciprocal, that each justifies the other as the result of cohering with a system of beliefs containing particular beliefs about what we experience, as well as general beliefs about our competence to discern truth from error and the frequency of our success in so doing. To concede this, however, is to give up the foundation theory and embrace the coherence theory instead. ([6], pp. 93-4)

This account of coherence in justification can be straightforwardly extrapolated to the way in which acceptances are made reasonable by other acceptances through concurrence. What makes it reasonable for an epistemic agent to accept that p is what he accepts about his competence and previous success, and it is reasonable for the agent to accept this general information about himself because of what he accepts about features of himself that make him competent and about individual instances of success. There is no independent source of reasonableness, nor is any acceptance reasonable in itself. This can be called a "broad concurrence" account of reasonableness. In the balance of the paper, it will be argued that this account is preferable to another account proposed by Lehrer—one which is very suggestive of foundationalism.

[18] See [1], Chapter 3.

3 Trustworthiness

The reasonableness of acceptance is said by Lehrer to depend on acceptances about one's competence and record of success. It is convenient to say that in that case, reasonableness depends on acceptance of one's "trustworthiness." It is more difficult to say, however, what exactly trustworthiness is for Lehrer. At times, he seems to equate it with competence in accepting information successfully. An example is the acceptance that I see a zebra. In order to to be justified, the acceptance must be reasonable to some extent. For it to be reasonable to accept, "I must have reason to think that I can tell a zebra when I see one in circumstances like those I am in at the moment, and consequently that I am trustworthy in such matters" ([6], p. 138). If I accept that I am competent in evaluating information that I have accepted, I can be said to accept that I am trustworthy in fulfilling the epistemic purpose in the present case. Note that one need not actually be successful in the present case, or even in a large number of cases, to qualify as being competent. So trustworthiness need not be a function of "my current rate of success in obtaining truth and avoiding error" ([6], p. 139). We may grant that someone is competent in fufilling the epistemic goal but has run into a streak of bad luck.

Even if competence does not require a successful track record, success does have a role to play in making acceptance reasonable. Specifically, it provides evidential support of the acceptance of one's competence.

> The claim that I am trustworthy in any particular matter under any special set of circumstances may be justified on the basis of the other things that I accept; I accept that I have had success in reaching the truth about similar matters in similar circumstances in the past and that the present circumstances do not differ in any relevant way from past circumstances when I was correct. ([6], p. 138)

This approach might be generalized beyond particular cases to one's competence in acceptance overall. A generalized view of one's own competence seems to be what is codified in principle *(T)*, which states in an unqualified way that I am trustworthy in what I accept. Lehrer claims that this principle must be accepted in order for any acceptance to be justified ([6], p. 138), and it plays a crucial role in conferring reasonableness. If one did not accept that one is trustworthy in general, then one would be unable to respond to an objection that casts doubt on competence in accepting in general. And since the acceptance system is the basis for responding to objections, its use would be indefensible. By extension, since the acceptance system also supports the reasonableness of acceptance, it would not be very reasonable to accept anything unless one accepted that one is trustworthy in what one accepts in general.

On the interpretation of trustworthiness as competence, the principle means that in accepting what I do in general, I exercise competence in fufilling the epistemic purpose of acceptance. In that case, the reasonableness of principle *(T)* would be supported by acceptances about one's overall record of one's success in everything one accepts. It is reasonable to accept that I am generally

worthy of my own trust to the extent that I accept that I have earned that trust, so to speak.

Lehrer has a second way of understanding trustworthiness: as a deontological notion, "an irreducible element of epistemic value" ([5], p. 138). He describes it as "a notion of what is worth accepting and what methods are worth using" ([5], p. 138). In his account of the normative dimension of trustworthiness, he divorces it entirely from considerations of actual competence and success. His purpose in so doing is to accommodate the intuition that it is reasonable to accept what one does even if one is the victim of massive deception. Though Lehrer does not make this point, it is clear that such an agent would then be completely incompetent, not merely unsuccessful, in fulfilling the epistemic purpose. Since, reasonableness requires acceptance of trustworthiness, Lehrer wants to say that a victim of deception may nonetheless be trustworthy. "I am worthy of my trust in what I accept though I am deceived. I am as trustworthy as the circumstances allow" ([6], p. 140).

If worthiness of one's trust in acceptance does not require actual competence in fulfilling the epistemic purpose, what does it require? Lehrer casts himself in the role of a hypothetical demon-victim and describes himself as being deceived "through no fault of my own" ([6], p. 139). Being worthy of one's own trust, on this deontological construal, is a matter of having followed certain standards in searching for the truth. As Lehrer puts it regarding the demon case, "I seek to obtain truth and avoid error with the greatest intellectual integrity" ([6], p. 140). Similarly, one is trustworthy when one is "circumspect and seeks to detect every error" ([6], p. 192).

Trustworthiness, viewed deontologically, is the result of the use of a general method of approaching acceptance, in the exercise of which one takes on objections forthrightly, meeting them when one can and changing one's view when one must. It also requires the willingness to change one's methods of getting at the truth if need be. In general, Lehrer says that his trustworthiness "rests on a dynamic process of evaluation and amalgamation of information I receive from others and from my own experience" ([6], p. 140).

Lehrer's example of trustworthy but unreliable acceptance is described in a way that suggests that the agent has, in general, done her best to fulfill the epistemic purpose. But it is psychologically unrealistic to assume that there is a constant level of circumspection applied in every act of acceptance, so in general, one's acceptances will fall somewhat short of this standard. If acceptance is restricted to cases of taking information to be true in which one has done one's utmost to avoid error, then there is little, if anything, that people accept. We simply do not go through exercises like Descartes' *Meditations* in our ordinary lives.

It would seem that trustworthiness in practice requires a lower standard of circumspection. Moreover, it would be extraordinary if anyone applied a single standard consistently. Given that this is the case, it is best to look at a range of degrees of circumspection, beginning with some point at which one is, so to speak, "circumspect enough" in trying to fulfill the epistemic purpose. To put it another way, one's methods for arriving at the truth are good enough as means

to fulfill the epistemic purpose.

Competence and methodological circumspection should be closely related in a plausible account of reasonableness. If an epistemic agent accepts that his methods for fulfilling the epistemic purpose are good enough, this seems to imply that he accepts that he is competent in accepting what he does. A method is not adequate for the fulfillment of a purpose unless it confers competence on the agent exercising it. If the virtue of the method is circumspection, then circumspection should not be divorced from competence. A good-enough method, then, is one which involves both the normative element of circumspection and the descriptive element of competence.

To get a feel for why this is so, suppose the demon victim accepts that she has done her very best to fulfill the epistemic purpose. Should she, on that basis alone, accept that she is trustworthy? It would seem not, but rather that she should also accept that her most circumspect efforts are the sort of thing that will help her fulfill the epistemic goal: in short, she needs to accept that she is competent in accepting what she does. One must not isolate the acceptance of one's trustworthiness from one's other acceptances.[19]

If trustworthiness requires competence as well as circumspection, we should concede, *pace* Lehrer, that the victim is not trustworthy but only falsely accepts that she is. This seems a superior way to handle the case, in that it accords more closely with our ordinary notion of trustworthiness. All Lehrer really needs to say is that the victim is epistemically blameless in a way that can allow her acceptance to be reasonable, if not justified. And this can be handled if it is allowed that she reasonably, albeit falsely, accepts that she is trustworthy in what she accepts.

There is one further complication in understanding principle *(T)*. The principle is simple enough on the surface, stating that I am trustworthy in what I accept to fulfill the epistemic purpose. But Lehrer considers it as "a statement of a capacity and disposition to be trustworthy" ([6], p. 139). This qualification is due to the fact that one may fail to follow good-enough procedures in specific cases of acceptance, though one is generally disposed to follow them. In what follows, then, we shall take it that it is the disposition to be trustworthy that is supposed to account for the reasonableness of acceptance.

How does it do so? Our original account of reasonableness was based on the "broad concurrence" approach, which regards the reasonableness of any acceptance to be a function of the reasonableness of all other acceptances. It can now be expanded to incorporate the elements that contribute to trustworthiness. A crucial class of acceptances in this regard is that of acceptances about our competence to accept all and only what is true in specific areas of investigation and in general. These acceptances about our competence are supported by acceptances about our success in fulfilling the epistemic purpose, and these in turn are supported by our particular acceptances.

Another crucial class of acceptances is that of acceptances about our integrity

[19]Since following good-enough methods requires evaluation of our own competence, we will hereinafter describe trustworthiness in terms of methods only.

and circumspection in accepting what we do in specific areas of investigation and in general. Such acceptances will be supported by observation of the way in which we go about accepting what we do, as well as acceptances about what constitutes the best means to fulfill the epistemic goal. Most importantly, they will be based on what we accept about the way we respond to objections and to new information.

Principle *(T)* should be taken as summarizing these acceptances about many facets of the acceptance system. Trustworthiness helps to make other acceptances reasonable only because of its concurrence with many elements of the acceptance system. Lehrer does not, however, always describe the relation between principle *(T)* and reasonableness in terms of "broad concurrence." Instead, he relies mainly on what he calls the "trustworthiness argument" to make the connection in a way that appears to be more direct. This, it will be seen, leads Lehrer in the direction of foundationalism.

4 The Trustworthiness Argument

The "trustworthiness argument" consists of two inferences. The first consists of two premises and a conclusion, and the second is a direct inference from the first conclusion. The first premise asserts my trustworthiness and the second my acceptance of some information as true. It runs *verbatim* as follows.[20]

> *T*. I am trustworthy (worthy of my own trust) in what I accept with the objective of accepting something just in case it is true.
>
> I accept that p with the objective of accepting that p just in case it is true.
>
> *Therefore*, I am trustworthy in accepting that p with the objective of accepting that p just in case it is true.
>
> *Therefore*, I am reasonable in accepting that p with the objective of accepting that p just in case it is true. ([6], p. 139)

Since there is no restriction on the value of p, the conclusion must be taken to be generalizable to all acceptances.

Lehrer notes that the first inference is meant not to be deductive, but rather inductive. That is, the first premise is not intended to be a universal generalization "to the effect that I am always trustworthy in what I accept" ([6], p. 139). Instead, it is supposed to be taken as a claim to the effect that I am generally trustworthy in what I accept.

> It is like the inference from the premise that my lawyer is trustworthy to the conclusion that he is trustworthy in the way he has constructed my will or from the premise that a city water supply is trustworthy to the conclusion that the water supplied in my glass is trustworthy. ([6], p. 139)

[20] Similar versions appear in [4], pp. 6-7 (called "the acceptance argument" there) and [5], p. 136.

This is why he understands the principle of trustworthiness to be about a capacity or disposition. His lawyer may be disposed to act in a trustworthy way but fail to do so, perhaps due to weakness of will. Similarly, epistemic agents can be subject to "doxastic *akrasia*" ([6], p. 142).

The second inference is an enthymeme. It depends on the conditional: if I am trustworthy in accepting that p with the objective of accepting that p just in case it is true, then I am reasonable in accepting that p with the objective of accepting that p just in case it is true. In [4], a variant of the implicit conditional is made explicit: "If I am reasonable to trust my acceptance of p, then I am reasonable to accept that p" ([4], p. 7).

Having elucidated the structure of the argument, we may now examine its premises. As already noted, the first premise is not to be taken as strictly universal, but only as a description of a "capacity and disposition to be trustworthy." In terms of the way Lehrer understands trustworthiness, to say that I am generally trustworthy is to say that in accepting what I accept, I generally, though perhaps not always, proceed according to good-enough methods. In the same way, a city's water supply might be generally trustworthy because its operators generally follow, well-enough, standard methods to keep the water safe, even though they may fail to follow those methods from time to time.

The second premise, I accept that p, is ambiguous and could describe the act of accepting that p or the fact that p is already being accepted. The most plausible reading is that it describes what is already accepted. Otherwise, the argument would be limited in its scope to what is presently being accepted. Lehrer's goal in advancing the argument is clearly to provide support for the reasonableness of everything that a person has accepted. Moreover, the argument itself can apply only to what a person has already accepted, not to a person's act of accepting that p. If p has not yet been accepted, then the second premise is false.

The premise might be taken as describing an act of acceptance because of a remark Lehrer makes in the second edition of *Theory of Knowledge*, just after introducing principle *(T)* and before giving the "trustworthiness argument."

> If someone else accepts that I am trustworthy in this way, then my accepting something will be a reason for her to accept it. Similarly, if I accept that I am trustworthy in this way, then my accepting something will be a reason for my accepting it. ([6], p. 138)

The most plausible construal of the description of the other person's acceptance of my trustworthiness is that she uses it, along with the fact that I accept some information, as a factor in evaluating that information and making a decision to accept it. But in that case, the analogy breaks down, since I cannot make what I already accept a factor in my deciding to accept it. My acceptance of my own trustworthiness can play a role in my deciding what to accept, in that without it, I might be disposed to withhold judgment rather than accept any information at all. It will be argued below that this generic way in which trustworthiness makes accepting reasonable is also the only way in which it makes what is already accepted reasonable.

Given the interpretations of the two premises, the first conclusion must be read in this way: I have accepted that p on the basis of good-enough methods for obtaining truth and avoiding error in the acceptance of p. In the context of the trustworthiness argument, what those methods are is immaterial. Since I am trustworthy, the fact that I accept that p means that I have (most likely) relied on those methods I deem fit to make my acceptance a correct one.

Now we can see how the first conclusion supports the second one: why trustworthiness entails reasonableness. It has been noted that Lehrer assumes that one can tell how reasonable it is to accept a given piece of information, relative to one's evaluation system. Presumably this means that one can determine how suitable its acceptance is to advance the epistemic purpose. Then the idea would be that if I use the methods I deem to be good enough for fulfilling the epistemic purpose in accepting that p, then I should regard the purpose as being fulfilled. Lehrer states the relation this way: "My trustworthiness serves the objectives of reason, and if I am trustworthy in the way I serve the objectives of reason in what I accept, then I am reasonable to accept what I do" ([5], p. 136).

So the thrust of the whole argument is this. If I am disposed generally to use good-enough methods in accepting what I do, and I accept some piece of information p, then I can conclude inductively that I have used good-enough methods in accepting that p. If I have used good-enough methods for accepting that p, then my acceptance that p is reasonable, to some degree.

Ordinarily, when we evaluate the reasonableness of acceptance, we take into account the specific methods which are applicable to the specific information in question. The statement "I am reasonable in accepting that p" can be understood in two very different ways. It can be, and ordinarily is, read as a statement about the reasonableness of accepting the specific information p. Or it can be read as a statement about accepting any information at all, regardless of its specific content. It is only the latter sense that could possibly be established by the "trustworthiness argument." It is only in this sense that Lehrer could be entitled to assert that, "A consequence of adding principle *(T)* to my evaluation system is that I may reason from it and the acceptance of some target acceptance that p to the conclusion that the target acceptance is reasonable" ([6], p. 139)

A more specific counterpart to the generic "trustworthiness argument" might be one to the effect that one is disposed to be circumspect one's investigations and that those methods of investigation sanction the acceptance of the specific information p, so that it is reasonable to make a commitment to the truth of p. One would expect that the first premise would be established inductively. The second premise would be established by appeal to the specific evidence in favor of accepting that p. The original "trustworthiness argument," on the other hand, says nothing about what makes it reasonable specifically to accept that p rather than some other information. So whatever degree of reasonableness it establishes is minimal compared to that established by the counterpart argument.

Suppose an ordinary person were to ask me why it is reasonable for me to accept that the water in my glass is safe to drink. If I were to respond, "Because it is something that I accept, and I use good-enough methods to accept what I

do," my response would most likely be met with bewilderment. On the other hand, if a foundationalist like Chisholm were to ask this question in the context of his epistemological investigations, the answer would make sense, since he then would be concerned with the source of reasonableness as such.

The "trustworthiness argument" is really appropriate only in the context in which Lehrer raises it, i.e. as a response to a foundationalist objection. Justification depends on the reasonableness of what one accepts, and reasonableness depends on the acceptance of trustworthiness. "The foundationalist will surely note that everything now depends on the claim that my acceptance is a trustworthy guide to truth and that I am trustworthy, as I aver. She will inquire how that claim is itself justified" ([6], p. 138).

The foundationalist inquiry can be extended to the issue of reasonableness: what makes it reasonable for me to accept that I am trustworthy? What gives that acceptance what Chisholm called "substance and rigidity?" Though appeal may be made to competence and success, the following response has to be given: "when I accept something, that is a good enough reason for thinking it to be true, so that it is reasonable for me to accept it" ([6], p. 138). Again, "If I accept that I am trustworthy in this way, then my accepting something will be a reason for me to accept it" ([6], p. 138).

This generic approach has the advantage of being able to confer reasonableness in one fell swoop, rather than requiring that each acceptance be shown to be reasonable on its own. In that case, it looks as though Lehrer is making a concession to the foundationalist by not resting with the "broad concurrence" approach outlined above. That is, he is singling out one particular acceptance as supporting the reasonableness of all the others. Moreover, he holds that principle *(T)* makes itself reasonable, since it applies to itself if it is accepted. This is structurally akin to self-justifying acceptances in a foundationalist theory of justification, where there is a narrow, rather than a broad, circularity. The self-application of principle *(T)* draws on the foundationalist model of self-justifying acceptances, such as "I accept something," which exploits the self-referential character of what is accepted.[21]

Lehrer acknowledges a measure of foundationalism in his account of justification: "To be personally justified one must accept some principle of trustworthiness that is in part self-justified" ([6], p. 202). This is on the grounds that "Part, but not all, of what makes us personally justified in accepting that we are trustworthy is that we do accept that we are" ([6], p. 202). Reasonableness is treated in a parallel way, though not explicitly. The question that remains is whether this foundationalist turn is well-motivated.

[21] Lehrer allows that it is plausible that "I believe something" is a self-justified belief. See [6], p. 54. See also p. 67-8, where he writes that "fallibility infects *almost* all our beliefs" (emphasis added).

5 The Reasonableness of the Principle of Trustworthiness

Lehrer offers two accounts of what makes principle *(T)* reasonable, both of which require that it contribute in some way to its own reasonableness. On one account, the contribution is indirect; on the other it is direct. The first account will not be plausible to someone who rejects all circularity in the relation of evidential support. The second account is burdened with its own variety of circularity and has additional problems of its own.

In the first account, the claim that one is generally disposed to be trustworthy in acceptance is supported by an inductive generalization. The starting-point is the trustworthiness of most of one's specific acceptances and the conclusion is that one is generally disposed to be trustworthy in acceptance.

> What defense should [a person] offer in favor of *(T)* itself? She may, of course, appeal to the character of what she accepts, to the various things she accepts, and reason inductively from premises concerning the trustworthiness of individual acceptances in support of her conclusion that *(T)*. She might reflect on what she has accepted and her fine track record of mostly accepting what was worthy of her trust to accept. This argument would establish that the trustworthiness of her acceptances manifests her disposition to be trustworthy in what she accepts. ([6], p. 142)

The reasonableness of principle *(T)* in that case depends on the reasonableness of the acceptances that comprise the information invoked in the defense. For example, it must be reasonable, to some degree, for the person to accept in any given case that she has accepted what she has in a trustworthy way.

What makes these acceptances reasonable to the degree they are will have to involve the acceptance of principle *(T)*, as was noted above. Lehrer claims that it is the "trustworthiness argument" that connects *(T)* with the more specific acceptances. So the principle makes an indirect contribution to its own reasonableness, engendering a circle.

> There is obviously a circularity in the trustworthiness argument when we use the principle *(T)* as a premise to support the conclusion that other acceptances are reasonable and then use those acceptances and the principle itself to conclude that it is reasonable to accept it. ([6], p. 143)

The circularity to which Lehrer refers is a version of "broad concurrence," with principle *(T)* playing a crucial role by conferring on everything one accepts the reasonableness it has.

Lehrer recognizes that principle *(T)* cannot be used to defend its own reasonableness in the face of a skeptical objection.

> But to explain why it is reasonable to accept what we do, the circle may be virtuous. If we have a principle that explains why it is

> reasonable to accept what we do, it is a virtue rather than a vice that it should at the same time explain why it is reasonable to accept the principle itself. ([6], p. 143)

The crucial difference between responding to a skeptical objection and giving an explanation is that in the latter case, the *datum* is taken for granted. So we assume that it is reasonable to accept principle *(T)* and ask why this is the case. Since it is not meant as a response to a skeptic, at most it shows to a person already committed to the reasonableness of what he accepts what it is that is supposed to make those acceptances reasonable. It does so by appeal to a notion of mutual support that many would find suspect.

Perhaps the appeal to mutual support can be avoided if the reasonableness of principle *(T)* is explained by a direct application of *(T)* to itself. "If a person accepts *(T)*, then her acceptance of *(T)* itself will have the result that it is reasonable for her to accept *(T)* by the application of the trustworthiness argument to *(T)* itself as the target acceptance p" ([6], p. 142). He takes this direct self-application to be "natural," apparently since *(T)* is applicable to all other acceptances ([6], pp. 142-3).[22]

But the direct self-application of *(T)* in the "trustworthiness argument" once more opens up the issue of circularity, where the circle is now as small as it can be. As Lehrer describes them, foundationalist theories of justification appeal to self-justifying acceptances.[23] These acceptances are said by the foundationalists to guarantee their own truth. The use of principle *(T)* to explain its own reasonableness appears to allow a similar sort of "bootstrapping" operation. But the circularity here is different, since the acceptance of one's trustworthiness does not in any way guarantee the truth of that acceptance in the way that the acceptance of one's existence guarantees that one exists.

In his 1999 article "Knowledge, Scepticism and Coherence," Lehrer gives the following account of the explanatory role played by principle *(T)*.

> I accept that I am trustworthy in what I accept, and if I am trustworthy in what I accept, then I am reasonable in accepting that I am trustworthy in what I accept. My trustworthiness in what I accept explains why I am reasonable in accepting that I am trustworthy in what I accept. ([5], p. 136)

He opts for this small circle over the larger circle because it allows him to avoid a regress in explanation. "I could argue for my trustworthiness by consideration of other things I accept and my success in attaining truth, but that way a regress threatens, whatever the merits of such arguments in supporting the principle" ([5], p. 136). But there is no regress when the other things one accepts are made reasonable in part by the acceptance of one's trustworthiness, so we are not forced to apply the principle to itself to account for the reasonableness of

[22] In the first edition of *Theory of Knowledge*, Lehrer had called the self-application of *(T)* "more natural" than trying to avoid the self-application for fear of self-referential paradox (p. 123).

[23] See [6], Chapter 3.

acceptance. Whether the small circle actually explains anything remains to be seen.

In the second edition of *Theory of Knowledge*, published in 2000, Lehrer does not mention the regress argument, and as seen above, he explains the reasonableness of accepting *(T)* by appeal to its concurrence with the whole acceptance system. Still, though Lehrer does not defend the use of principle *(T)* to explain its own reasonableness without appeal to any other information, he does endorse the direct application of *(T)* to itself. What reason is there for doing this, except as a formal exercise? Lehrer notes that the argument is "more direct" than one using an inductive argument from individual cases of trustworthy acceptance ([6], p. 142). This directness has the advantage of economy, but it gains this advantage at the expense of content.

It is useful to note that Lehrer recognizes that he is not making the stronger claim that principle *(T)* is completely self-justifying, though "the principle of our own trustworthiness contributes to its own personal justification" ([6], p. 202). It does not justify itself fully because it "must cohere with what we accept about our successes and failures in past epistemic employment" ([6], p. 202). In that case, one must ask why Lehrer restricts this requirement to justification. Can we plausibly say that it is reasonable to accept a piece of information without regard to whether it coheres (or "concurs") with information we have about our past record of success, among other things? The fact that reasonableness (to some unspecified degree) need not meet the standard of justification does not exempt it from the need for a comprehensive base of support.

This consideration raises the more general question of what kind of explanation could be provided by the direct self-application of principle *(T)*. I want to know why it is reasonable for me to accept that I am trustworthy in what I accept. In terms of the interpretation of trustworthiness developed thus far, the question is why it is reasonable for me to accept that I have a disposition to use good-enough methods in accepting what I accept. The obvious indirect explanation for this is on the basis of what I accept about how I have used good-enough methods in the past. The indirect loop is generated by adding that part of what makes those acceptances reasonable is the acceptance of my own trustworthiness.

The direct explanation is simply a vastly diminished version of the indirect explanation—one which omits all the details that enlighten me as to why it is reasonable to accept that I am trustworthy. The result is hardly edifying. Suppose I were testifying to a jury and averred that I am trustworthy in my testimony. When asked to explain why it is reasonable to accept that I am trustworthy, I answer that my original statement that I am a trustworthy witness is what explains why it is reasonable for me to accept that I am. Would I have explained, to anyone's satisfaction, anything at all?

Another way to put the point is by noting what kind of reasonableness is supposed to be explained. As was noted above, we can ask, for any given piece of information p, whether it is reasonable to accept that p as having a given content, or whether it is reasonable to accept that p in the sense that it is reasonable to accept what we accept in general. And as has been argued earlier,

the kind of reasonableness established by the "trustworthiness argument" is generic. So when principle *(T)* is the target acceptence, the most the application of the trustworthiness argument to *(T)* can explain is that it is reasonable for me to accept that *(T)* insofar as it is reasonable for me to accept anything at all. So the direct self-application of principle *(T)* does nothing to explain why it is reasonable to accept information with the specific content that I am trustworthy in what I accept.

Lehrer might respond to this description of the thinness of the explanation by claiming that any explanation is better than none. The principle itself is part of the account of the reasonableness of any acceptance, and so if it were not reasonable to accept principle *(T)*, there would be no explanation at all. In that case, principle *(T)* "should be a kind of unexplained explainer that explains why it is reasonable for us to accept other things we accept and then falls mysteriously silent when asked why it is reasonable to accept the principle itself" ([6], pp. 143-4). Lehrer states that he seeks to maximize explanation and leave nothing unexplained ([5], p. 137). If *(T)* does not explain itself, then it is a "kind of explanatory surd" ([5], pp. 136-7). Preference for maximizing explanation and avoiding the surd is "one I act upon in developing my philosophy" ([5], p. 137).

The surd can, however, be avoided with the broad account that explains specifically why it is reasonable to accept that I am trustworthy. It can also be said that this account provides a vastly more thorough explanation, and so it helps to maximize explanation. It explains something that would be left unexplained by the mere direct self-application of *(T)*, namely, why my acceptance of the specific information that I am trustworthy is reasonable.

As stated above, Lehrer's version of the broad account of reasonableness places principle *(T)* in the key role of explaining reasonableness on all acceptances. In view of the present discussion, it seems that this role is not as crucial as it first appeared. The principle can only explain the reasonableness of acceptances *qua* acceptances. The bulk, so to speak, of their reasonableness is explained by the specific concurring information that supports them. And as argued above, principle *(T)* itself is a summary of a complex of information about the methods one uses in fulfilling the epistemic purpose. All, or nearly all, of the reasonableness of accepting principle *(T)* itself stems from specific concurring information. So while it might be granted that *(T)* plays an important role in conferring reasonableness, that role is not foundational.

A final consideration Lehrer advances in favor of the direct self-application of principle *(T)* is an appeal to analogies. The first of these is due to Reid: "just as light, in revealing the illuminated object, at the same time reveals itself, so the principle, in rendering the acceptance of other things reasonable, at the same time renders the acceptance of itself reasonable." ([6], p. 143). Notice that, in Reid's image, light "illuminates" other objects but "reveals" itself: it makes both other objects and itself visible. To make the analogy work, light would have to make itself visible in the same way that it makes the other objects visible. But it does not make itself visible by illuminating itself in the way it illuminates other objects. So this is not a good way of illustrating how the application of principle *(T)* explains its own trustworthiness.

The second analogy is that of a keystone.

> The keystone is a triangular stone inserted in the top of an arch. It supports the arch, for the arch would collapse were it removed; at the same time, it is, of course, supported by the other stones in the arch. We may think of the stones in the arch as the acceptances in the acceptance system and the principle *(T)* as the keystone. ([6], p. 143).

Lehrer might also have noted that the keystone would fall to the ground if the other stones were removed. The keystone supports itself only through its support of the other stones. A keystone is not a foundation stone. So this analogy, if it has any value at all, favors an account of the reasonableness of accepting the principle of trustworthiness in which the principle supports itself indirectly. In general, it favors the "broad concurrence" account of the reasonableness of acceptance.

In summary, there seems to be nothing favoring the direct application of *(T)* to itself other than the fact that it can be made and that it simplifies the response to a skeptical objection to the reasonableness of what one accepts. But in fact it is no response to a skeptic, and if it explains anything at all, it explains only how it is reasonable to accept to some extent, merely as something that is accepted in general. Even this explanation is largely incomplete and can only be completed by appeal to a large number of other acceptances. Finally, there is no explanation of why the specific content of *(T)* is reasonable to accept.

All of these deficiencies disappear when "broad concurrence" is invoked to explain what makes principle *(T)* reasonable to accept epistemically.[24] So the direct self-application of *(T)* appears to be a useless exercise. It might even do some harm by engendering the illusion that the principle of trustworthiness is foundational rather than a "first among equals." Given the argument of this paper, Lehrer has no reason to make his "ecumenical" concession to foundationalism ([6], pp. 201-3).

6 Conclusion

Lehrer's doctrine that reasonableness is based solely on acceptance leaves him open to a charge of broad circularity, a charge avoided by foundationalist accounts of reasonableness. It is only through a relation of mutual support that acceptances can make one another reasonable. Lehrer singles out a special acceptance, that I am trustworthy in what I accept, as playing a key role in providing that support. It has been argued here that acceptance of the principle makes the mere acceptance of a piece of information, including itself, reasonable to some extent, though in an entirely generic way. It does so in the context of the acceptance system as a whole.

[24] This is not to say that these advantages make "broad concurrence" a convincing alternative to foundationalism.

The principle of trustworthiness might also make itself reasonable by applying to itself directly, in which case it seems to be foundational and potentially to avoid the problem of broad circularity. But this direct application is narrowly circular and so holds no advantage in this respect over the indirect application. Because a direct application explains nothing that is not explained by the indirect approach, and indeed omits what ought to be included in any explanation of reasonableness, there is no reason to concede anything to the foundationalist. The essential ingredients in the explanation of reasonableness are to be found in the acceptance system as a whole, as is consonant with Lehrer's coherence approach to justification. The narrowly circular application of the principle of trustworthiness to itself is an aberration.*

*I am grateful to Lenny Clapp for several excellent suggestions for improving the presentation in this paper.

References

[1] Roderick Chisholm. *Theory of Knowledge.* Prentice Hall, 1966.

[2] Keith Lehrer. *Knowledge.* Oxford University Press, 1974.

[3] Keith Lehrer. *Theory of Knowledge.* Westview Press, first edition, 1990.

[4] Keith Lehrer. *Self Trust: A Study of Reason, Knowledge and Autonomy.* Oxford University Press, 1997.

[5] Keith Lehrer. Knowledge, scepticism and coherence. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13:131–139, 1999.

[6] Keith Lehrer. *Theory of Knowledge.* Westview Press, 2000.