Epistemology

Lecture 1: Foundationalism and Coherentism
Dr. Ioannis Votsis

ioannis.votsis@nchlondon.ac.uk
www.votsis.org

Course Overview

Michaelmas Term: Epistemology

Week 1: FOUNDATIONALISM AND COHERENTISM

Week 2: WAYS OF KNOWING – Perception

Week 3: WAYS OF KNOWING – Testimony

Week 4: KNOWLEDGE ANALYSIS – Inferences & Defeaters

Week 5: KNOWLEDGE ANALYSIS – Causes and Reliability

Week 6: KNOWLEDGE ANALYSIS – Tracking the Truth

Week 7: READING WEEK

Week 8: INTERNALISM VS. EXTERNALISM

Week 9: SCEPTICISM

Week 10: NATURALISM

Week 11: CONTEXTUALISM

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Chapter I:
What is Epistemology?

What is epistemology?

- One of the core areas of philosophy.

- Also known as 'the theory of knowledge'.

- It is the study of the nature, sources and limits of knowledge and justification.

- Primarily concerned with propositional knowledge, i.e. knowledge *that* such-and-such is the case (vs. knowledge *how*).

The key concepts

- **Beliefs** (not ideas, thoughts, etc.) – these have a propositional form: For example, I believe that P_1.

- **Truth-values –** these are properties we ascribe to propositions/beliefs. P_1 is true/false, B_1 is true/false.

- **Knowledge** – typically construed as some form of *true believing* that may or may not require some form of *justification*.

- **Justification** – that which is alleged by many to be the thing that makes true beliefs knowledge.

Three prominent projects

(1) Giving rules for 'good believing' or justification

   - What does it take for a belief to be justified?

(2) Defining/understanding knowledge

   - How, if at all, can the concept of knowledge be analysed?

(3) Defeating the sceptic

   - How can we best answer sceptical scenarios?

Chapter II:
The Nature of Justification

Why seek justification?

- **A general rule of good believing**:

  Only believe *P* when you have justification for *P*.

- Q: Why not just believe something without justification?

  A: Randomly believing would lead us astray in our worldly dealings.

- **Examples**:

  * Whether or not there is food in the fridge.

  * Whether or not I would survive a fall from the Shard.

  * ...

When is a belief justified?

- **Proposal**: A belief is *justified* if and only if it is inferred from one or more beliefs which are themselves justified.

  <u>NB</u>: This proposal is implicit in Agrippa's trilemma.

Agrippa's trilemma

(1)   A belief can only be a justifier if it is itself justified.

(2)   A belief can only be justified inferentially by other belief(s).

Suppose: (3) There are some justified beliefs.

(4)   Such beliefs must be supported by a chain of justifiers that EITHER:

a. has an end; b. goes on *ad infinitum*; c. loops back on itself

<u>BUT:</u>

(5)   i. no 'terminal' belief can justify for it lacks justification itself.

ii. an infinite chain deprives our ability to say that a belief is justified.

iii. loops cannot justify as they beg the question.

<u>THUS:</u>

(6)   None of these beliefs are justified.

HENCE:

(7)   NOT-(3) via *Reductio ad absurdum* 3, 6

Attempts to overcome trilemma

- These originate in two different traditions:

  Foundationalism rejects 5i. In fact, it also rejects 2.

  Its advocates try to establish that some beliefs are either self-justifying OR justified by things other than beliefs.

  Coherentism rejects 5iii. Its advocates try to establish that not all circular reasoning is bad; rather, some of it justifies.

- Let us take a closer look at each of these traditions in turn.

Agrippa's trilemma relies on the view that a belief is justified if and only if

it is inferred from another belief that belongs to a circular chain of justification.

it is inferred from a basic belief.

it is inferred from one or more beliefs which are themselves justified.

it belongs to a chain of justification that goes on ad infinitum .

Chapter III: Foundationalism

Foundationalism

- Foundational or basic beliefs are either (i) **self-justified** OR (ii) **justified by something other than beliefs**.

  NB: Option (ii) means that foundations are non-inferentially justified.

- Non-foundational beliefs:

  A non-foundational belief is justified *if and only if* it EITHER rests (1) directly on a foundational belief OR (2) on one or more beliefs whose chain of justifiers ends with a foundational belief.
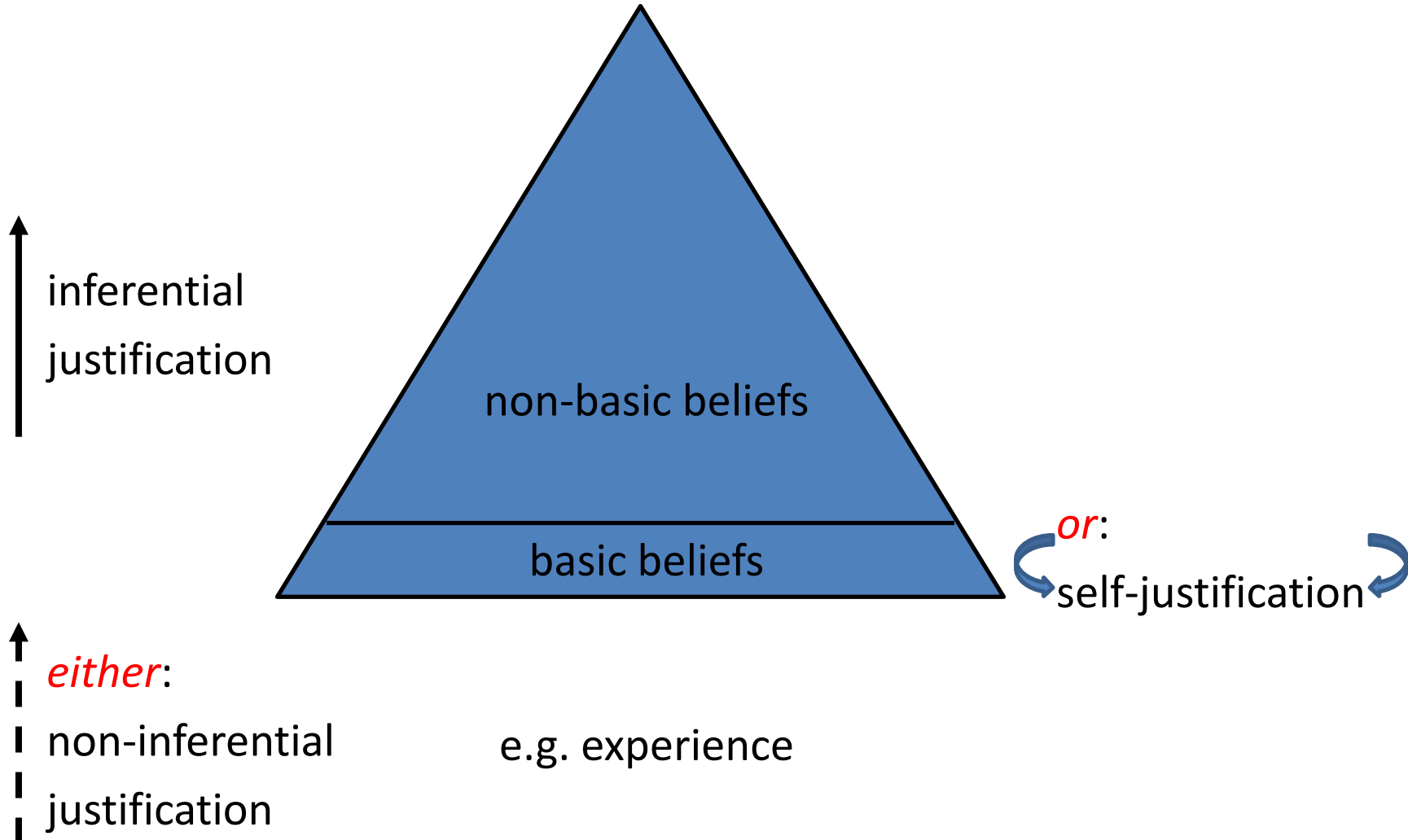
- Candidates for foundational beliefs are those:

  - acquired via sensory organs
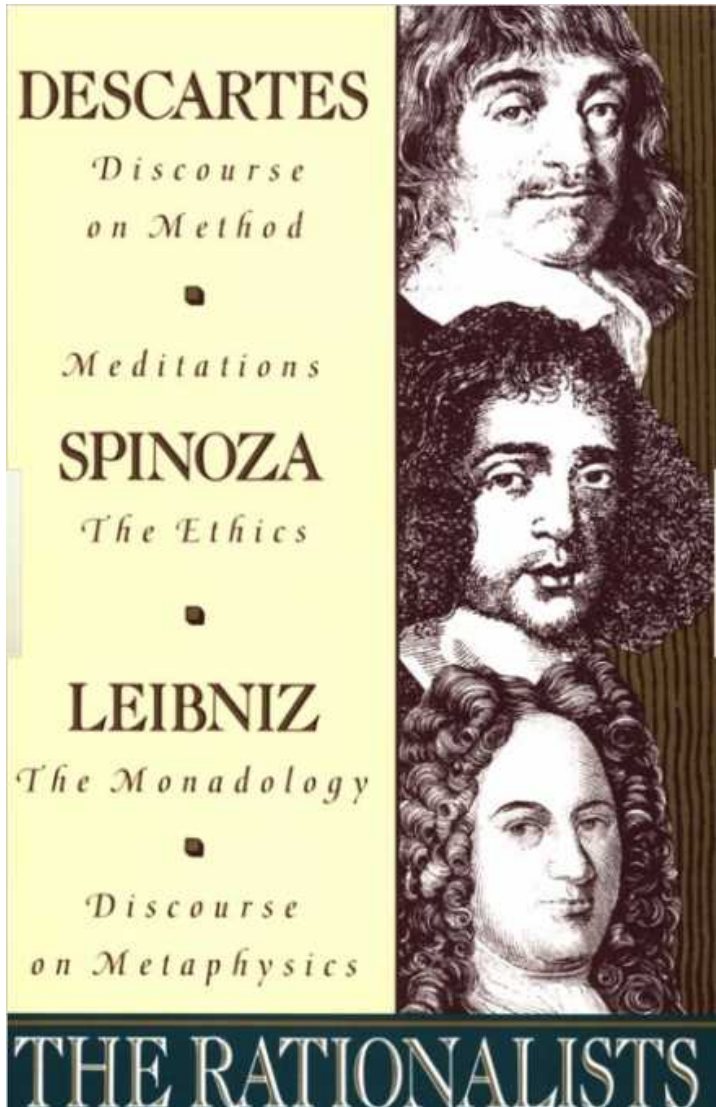 - acquired via pure reasoning
  - acquired via introspection
  - that are innate

The pyramid metaphor

inferential
justification

non-basic beliefs

basic beliefs

or:
self-justification

either:
non-inferential
justification

e.g. experience

Foundationalism: Two flavours

DESCARTES
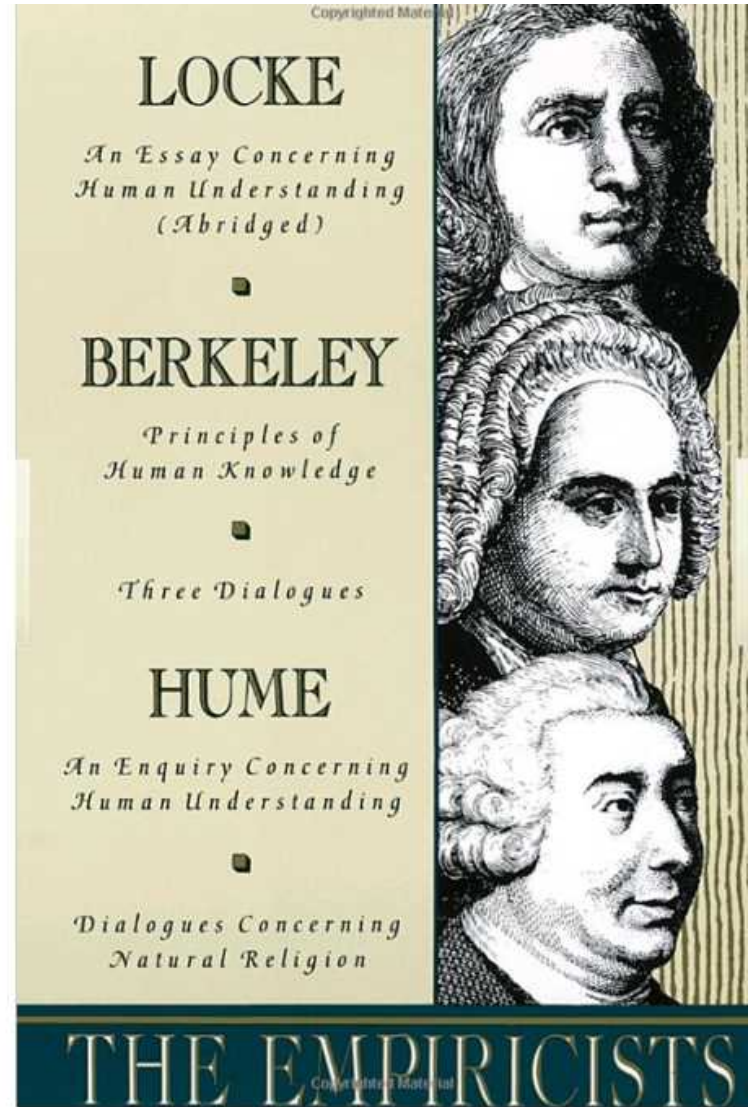Discourse on Method
■
Meditations

SPINOZA
The Ethics
■

LEIBNIZ
The Monadology
■
Discourse on Metaphysics

THE RATIONALISTS

Versus

LOCKE
An Essay Concerning Human Understanding
(Abridged)
■

BERKELEY
Principles of Human Knowledge
■
Three Dialogues

HUME
An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding
■
Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion

THE EMPIRICISTS

Empiricism

- **Main idea**: Foundational beliefs are all and only those acquired via the senses (vs. via reasoning, intuition, divine revelation, etc.).

- Similar claims are also being made about the source of concepts.

- Some prominent empiricists:

  * British Empiricists: Locke, Berkeley and Hume

  * Logical Positivists: Carnap, Ayer and Hempel

  * Constructive Empiricists: Van Fraassen

Rationalism

- **Main idea**: Foundational beliefs are all and only those (alternatively: at least some such beliefs are) acquired via pure reasoning.

  Contrast: Impure reasoning, the senses, etc.

  <u>Example</u>: The Cartesian belief 'I think (therefore I am)'

- Rationalists claim that our knowledge comes through intuition or intuition-plus-deduction.

- They also claim that, qua rational beings, we have innate concepts and knowledge.

- Some prominent rationalists: 16th-18th centuries: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz; more recently, Bonjour, Bealer and Audi.

Problems: Self-justifying beliefs

- It seems difficult, if not impossible, to motivate why any belief counts as self-justifying.

- Some beliefs seem to be hard to resist. But that surely can't be good criterion for what counts as self-justifying.

- Even mathematical axioms, the paradigm cases of self-evident 'truths', can be contested with alternative axiomatic systems.

Problems: Empirical beliefs

- One idea is that there exists a form of pure sensory experience, e.g. 'sense data', that's not belief-like but that justifies foundational beliefs.

- **The myth of the given**: Sellars argues that such entities are extra-scientific and must be expunged from our philosophical theories.

- **Poverty concerns**: Unclear whether such beliefs are rich enough (in content and number) to serve as a foundation for all beliefs.

  NB: The problem's severity depends on how much can reasonably be included under foundational beliefs and the inference rules allowed.

- **Mechanical concerns**: How does experience translate into something that is capable of justifying a foundational belief?

Can foundational or basic beliefs be justified by something other than beliefs?

Yes

No

What's the difference between empiricism and rationalism?

Chapter IV: Coherentism

Coherentism

- **Main idea**: A belief is justified purely by being part of a coherent system of beliefs, i.e. by standing in a relation of mutual support.

  <u>NB</u>: This view explicitly rejects the existence of foundational beliefs.

- How is this support conveyed? Through coherence relations.

- *Coherence relations*: logical consistency, deductive, probabilistic/ inductive, explanatory/abductive and other evidential relations.

- *Prominent advocates*: Bonjour (was but switched), Bosanquet, Quine (allegedly), Davidson.
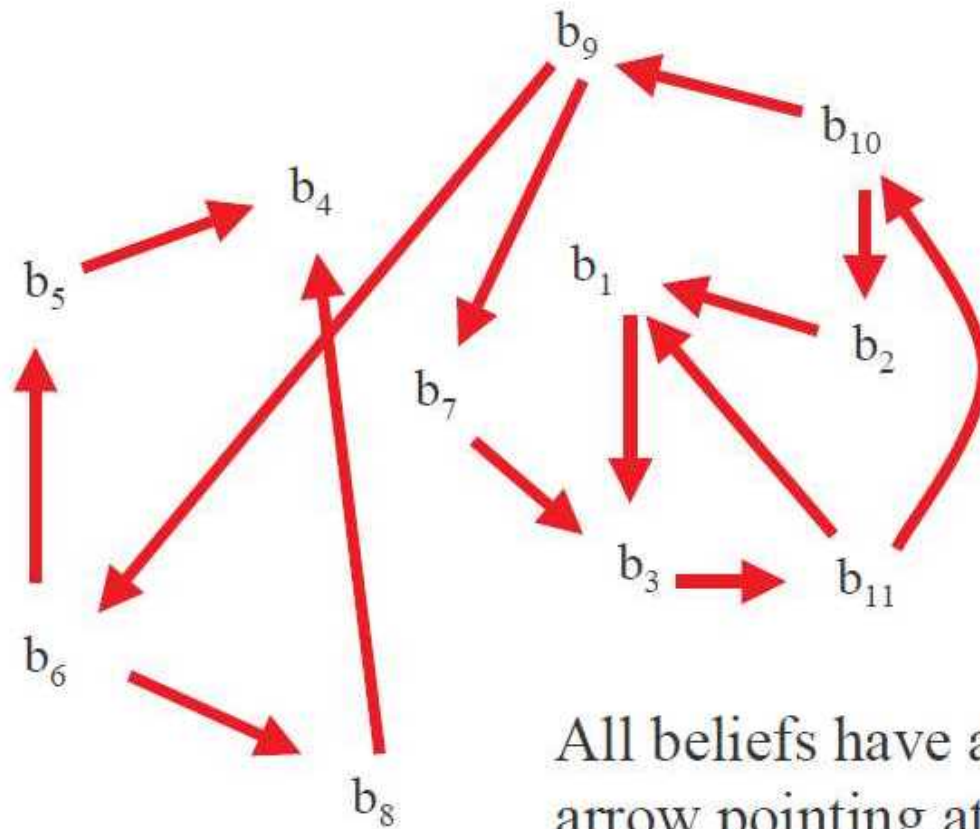
The raft metaphor

- The planks are arranged so as to hold the raft afloat. None of them is fully capable in isolation. It is their inter-connection that matters.

- In addition, it is often suggested that each and every plank is replaceable but only in a systematic way that preserves buoyancy.

The web metaphor

Red arrows denote the direction of the relevant relations.

All beliefs have at least one arrow pointing at them.

Problems for coherentism

- **Desideratum**: Justification must connect to truth.

  <u>Problem</u>: No guarantee that a coherent system will contain a single truth.

- **Desideratum**: Justification must connect to at least some sensorial input.

  <u>Problem</u>: No guarantee that a coherent system will contain a single belief that agrees with our sensorial input.

- **Desideratum**: Justification must be able to uniquely identify the right system of beliefs or at least significantly narrow down the rivals.

  <u>Problem</u>: This seems impossible with coherentism as there are *indefinitely many* rival systems of belief that are internally coherent.

The two views revisited

- Coherence relations are in fact an indispensable ingredient in all foundational theories.

- That is, no self-respecting foundational theorist denies that beliefs must be coherently connected to each other.

- After all, they assert that beliefs must be *inferentially connected* to other beliefs through a chain of justifiers.

- What's the difference with coherentism then?

- Foundationalists also claim that some beliefs are not justified through coherence but rather through other means, e.g. sensory experience.
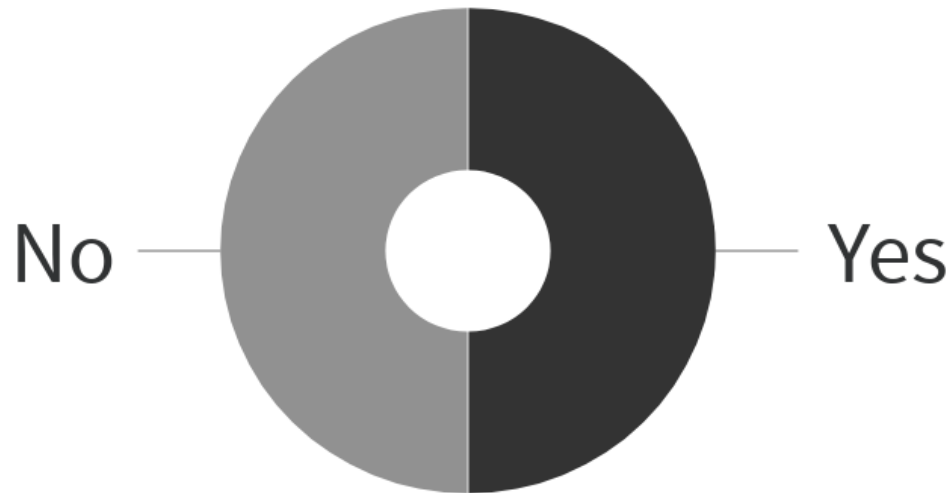
Coherentism: A belief is justified...

Top

Foundationalists reject the view that coherence plays a role in justification.

Yes **A**   No **B**

No — Yes

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34

Chapter IV (Special Topic): Necessary and Sufficient Conditions

Necessary Conditions

- A necessary condition for a state-of-affairs *X* is a condition that *must* be satisfied for *X* to obtain.

- Example: A necessary condition for driving a car from London to Dover is that the car has fuel in the tank. In other words:

  If the car has no fuel, then we cannot drive the car to Dover.

- Supposing that P: 'We can drive the car to Dover' and Q: 'The car has fuel' we can semi-formalise this proposition as follows:

   If not-Q then not-P

- This is equivalent to: '*If P then Q*'. But plugging in our interpretations this yields: 'If we can drive it to Dover, then the car has fuel'.

  Upshot: We can read necessary conditions from the *consequent* slot.

Sufficient Conditions

- A sufficient condition for a state-of-affairs *X* is a condition whose satisfaction **guarantees** that *X* obtains.

- Example: A sufficient condition for getting a first in a degree is that you get a first in six exams and you at least pass the rest.

  (i) If one gets a first in six of their exams and passes the rest, they get a first in their degree.

- Supposing that:

  P: 'One gets a first in six of their exams and pass the rest' and Q: 'One gets a first in their degree' we can semi-formalise this proposition as:

  If P then Q

  Upshot: We can read sufficient conditions from the *antecedent* slot.

The End