

Foundationalism and the Coherence Theory

THE SOURCES OF JUSTIFICATION

According to the concept of knowledge that has been developed here, the epistemic status of an empirical belief is a function of three different things.

(1) The object of a belief may be self-presenting. In such a case, the belief may be called a *basic apprehension*.

(2) Some beliefs have a kind of *prima facie* probability. If I accept a proposition, and if that proposition is not disconfirmed by my total evidence, then it is that proposition is probable for me.

And, finally, (3) a belief may derive its epistemic status from the way in which it logically *concurs* with the other things one believes. As we have seen, these relations may raise the level of the proposition believed from that of being merely probable to that of being evident.

The present account of knowledge is appropriately called *foundational*, since it includes basic apprehensions among the sources of epistemic justification.¹ And it may also be called *coherence theory* since it includes mutual

¹The "common sense" aspect of the present view—namely, its emphasis upon *prima facie* probabilities—has also been called "foundational." But if we use "foundational" in this broader way, we should take care not to confuse *prima facie* probabilities with basic apprehensions. The fact that a religious belief, for example, is *prima facie* probable should not be taken to mean that the belief is a basic apprehension. This point is relevant to the questions discussed by Alvin Plantinga in "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16–93. Compare Robert Audi, "Psychological Foundationalism," *The Monist*, Vol.

support among the sources of epistemic justification. It would be a mistake, therefore, to say that foundational theories and coherence theories of epistemic justification must be incompatible. (This is not to deny, of course, that different theories may place different emphases on the roles to be placed by basic apprehensions and by mutual support.)² Yet it has been contended (1) that no foundational theory is possible and (2) that coherence theories need not be foundational.

Let us consider these contentions in turn.

IS FOUNDATIONALISM IMPOSSIBLE?

One could prove that foundationalism is impossible if one could prove that basic apprehensions are impossible. Laurence Bonjour has constructed the following argument to prove that basic apprehensions—in his terms, “basic empirical beliefs”—are impossible.³

- (1) Suppose that there are *basic empirical beliefs*, that is, empirical beliefs (a) which are epistemically justified and (b) whose justification does not depend on that of any further empirical beliefs.
- (2) For a belief to be epistemically justified requires that there be a reason why it is likely to be true.
- (3) For a belief to be epistemically justified for a particular person requires that this person be himself in cognitive possession of such a reason.
- (4) The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe *with justification* the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.
- (5) The premises of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely *a priori*; at least one such premise must be empirical.

“Therefore”

- (6) The justification of a supposed basic empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1).

Therefore

- (7) There can be no basic empirical beliefs.

61 (1978), pp. 592–610. I believe that the view I have defended in the present book is what Audi would call “Modest Epistemic Psychological Foundationalism”; see pages 597 and 600 of his paper.

²Compare Ernest Sosa, “The Raft and the Pyramid,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. V (1980), pp. 3–25; and Susan Haack, “Theories of Knowledge: An Analytic Framework,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 83 (1983), pp. 143–157.

³Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 32. (I have altered the numbering of the final steps in the argument.) Compare Keith Lehrer’s criticism of foundationalism in “The Coherence Theory of Knowledge,” *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. XIV (1986), pp. 5–26; esp., pp. 20–21.

It is clear that the conclusion follows from the premises. Hence, if we reject the conclusion, we must find a problem with at least one of the premises. And this is not difficult, for we do not need to go beyond premise (2).

The word "likely" is an alternative to "probable." And the word "probable," as we have seen, may be taken either externally or internally. Taken externally, "probable" tells us something about statistical frequencies or numerical proportions. Taken internally it tells us something about epistemic justification. We have said that a proposition is probable for a given subject S provided only that S is more justified in believing the proposition than he or she is in believing its negation. How, then, are we to take "likely" in the above argument?

If we take "likely" in its *external* sense, then premise (3) is false. A belief may be epistemically justified for a person even though that person is not "in cognitive possession" of any proposition about statistical frequencies. And if we take "likely" in its *internal* sense, then premise (2) is false. A belief in what is self-presenting may be justified even though no *other* belief constitutes a reason for thinking it to be true.

IS A NONFOUNDATIONAL COHERENCE THEORY POSSIBLE?

To see the difficulties involved in developing a nonfoundational coherence theory of epistemic justification, let us consider once again the nature of mutual support.

The following is a set of propositions that mutually support each other:

- (e) Most of those who have read this book are philosophers; and David has read this book if and only if John has read this book
- (h) David has read this book and is a philosopher
- (i) John has read this book and is a philosopher

Any two of these propositions together confirm the third; in other words, each of the three propositions is probable in relation to the conjunction of the other two. Thus e&h, for example, confirms i: if e and h were the only evidence you had that was relevant to i, then i would be probable for you (you would be more justified in accepting i than in accepting not-i). Similarly, e&i confirms h, and h&i confirms e. Here, then, we have a clear case of that *logical* relation that we have called the "mutual support" of propositions—a relation that could also be called the "mutual coherence" of propositions.

How are we to *apply* the relation to the beliefs of a particular subject S? The coherence theorist may wish to say that, if a person S accepts three propositions that are thus related by mutual support, then the three propositions mutually support each other *for S*. The theory would thus be some-

what latitudinarian at the outset, just as our theory was somewhat latitudinarian at the outset. The coherence theorist may then hope to tighten up his or her requirements at a later stage.

But it is very difficult to see where the coherentist could go from this point. To understand the difficulty, we should consider two facts about the confirmation relation, "h is probable in relation to e (e confirms h)." One is that, if the confirmation relation is to be *applied* to the epistemic situation of a particular subject S, then the *confirming* proposition e must be *evident* for S. And the other is that application of the confirmation relation allows us to say, of the *confirmed* proposition h, only that it is *probable* for S. How, then, is the coherentist to proceed if he or she does not appeal to basic apprehensions? What will his or her *next* step be?

These are not easy questions to answer.

Many coherent theorists seem to believe, nevertheless, that they can develop a nonfoundational coherence theory of epistemic justification—even though no one has ever shown just *how* this might be done.⁴ Possibly these coherentists are making a move like the one that we had made when, in the first chapter of this book, we considered what to say about the skeptic's objection: they are *withholding* commitment to the proposition that they can succeed. And so, for the moment, let us also withhold belief with respect to the proposition that they can succeed.

We will suppose, then, that some of the confirming propositions that are probable for S can make *other* propositions probable for S. Is the coherentist now entitled to go on and say that those other propositions, in turn, can then go on to make still *further* propositions probable for S?

To see that he or she is not entitled to do this, we have only to note that the confirmation relation—the relation expressed by, "h is probable in relation to e"—is not transitive.⁵ That is to say, from the facts that (i) B is probable in relation to A, (ii) C is probable in relation to B, and (iii) D is probable in relation to C, it does not follow that (iv) D is probable in relation to A.

To see that this is so, consider the following propositions:

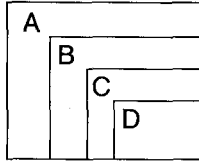
- (1) Most A's are B's; most B's are C's; most C's are D's; and x is an A
- (2) Most A's are B's; most B's are C's; most C's are D's; and x is a B
- (3) Most A's are B's; most B's are C's; most C's are D's; and x is a C
- (4) Most A's are B's; most B's are C's; most C's are D's; and x is a D

⁴Bonjour concedes that a coherence theory should satisfy an "Observation Requirement": the theory must contain "laws attributing a high degree of reliability to a reasonable variety of cognitively spontaneous beliefs (including in particular those kinds of introspective beliefs which are required for the recognition of other cognitively spontaneous beliefs" (*The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, p. 141). But Bonjour gives no indication as to how his program might be carried out without basic apprehensions.

⁵In this respect, the confirmation relation differs from the *tending-to-make-evident* relation ("e tends to make h evident") and from the applied *making-evident* relation ("e makes h evident for S").

We may say that (1) confirms (2), that (2) confirms (3), and that (3) confirms (4). But we may *not* say that (3) confirms (4).

An example may be clearer. A is the surface of a chessboard and thus contains 64 squares; B is a subsurface of A that contains 36 squares; C is a subsurface of B that contains 25 squares; and D is a subsurface of C that contains 9 squares. Clearly, most of the squares in A are in B, most of the squares in B are in C, and most of the squares in C are in D. But it is not the case that most of the squares in A are in D.



The accompanying diagram may be more intuitive.

Constructing a coherence theory of justification without making use of basic apprehensions is not unlike recording your new song by taping other recordings and without ever having given a live performance. I think we may safely conclude that any adequate theory of knowledge and epistemic justification requires basic apprehensions as well as mutual support.