

Outline and critically assess foundationalism.

Foundationalism is a key epistemological theory that aims to explain the structure and justification of our beliefs. This essay will outline and explain the main theory of foundationalism, the motivation, the types of belief and the difference between the two types of foundationalism; classical and moderate. Before moving onto an in-depth critical assessment of the doctrine, highlighting the strengths before analysing the weaknesses with particular focus on Rene Descartes classical foundationalism and with reference to philosophers such as Peter Unger and Wilfrid Sellars.

Foundationalism proposes a structure of knowledge that is founded upon basic truths which do not need to be questioned but can support other beliefs which require support to be justified. The structure of knowledge has been a long argued topic within the philosophical world, dating as far back as Aristotle. The motivation of the theory stems from the problem of infinite regress, specifically in regards to the structure of knowledge and beliefs.

Infinite regress is when the process of solving a problem, requires solving another first, and then another, and another and so on, creating an neverending chain of problems that need solving in order to solve the initial problem. In the case of knowledge, infinite regress is when the justification of the belief is required from another belief which in turn seeks that same justification from another and so on and so forth. Aristotle sought to put a stop to this regress problem. In his attempt, he found a couple of alternatives other than foundationalism: either we would have to endorse circular reasoning or land in an infinite regress of reasons. When faced with these alternatives, Aristotle determined that neither of them were plausible, therefore foundationalism was the clearest solution, via process of elimination.

Foundationalism attempts to stop the regress by creating a starting point, or in other words creating foundations for other beliefs to stand on. These foundations are known as justified true beliefs, or basic beliefs. These are beliefs that don't need to be supported by other beliefs to be justified. '*Such beliefs are able to stand on their own feet, without support from others.*¹', hence the regress stops. These basic beliefs then go on to support and justify what are known as non-basic beliefs. Non-basic beliefs require the justification from the basic beliefs as they are unable to be self-evident. To explain the idea of basic beliefs in a simpler format and to fit it to a real world scenario, epistemologist Noah Lemos presented the analogy of a detective;

¹Jonathan Dancy, 1994. *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 53

*A detective is justified in believing that Smith is a thief. His belief is justified on the basis of certain other things he believes, e.g. that Smith's fingerprints were found at the crime scene, that witnesses saw Smith in the area at the time of the crime, that the stolen object was found in Smith's room.*²

In this case of the detective, the belief that Smith is a thief is justified from other factors, or to apply the analogy to foundationalism, basic beliefs. Without the other beliefs to justify the detective's belief then his final conclusion that Smith is a thief is unjustified and therefore he has no evidence, making his conclusion invalid. In the same way, without the justification from a basic belief, a non-basic belief is not able to stand on its own.

The question of what beliefs are basic beliefs is quite difficult to determine as different philosophers provide different answers. However, there are common answers which are often accepted as being '(1) Beliefs about simple logical or mathematical truths and (2) beliefs about our mental states'³. Such beliefs consist of the following; sensory experiences, such as feeling pain, self evident truths, such as $2+2=4$ and finally introspective beliefs, a famous example of one being Rene Descartes cogito, 'I am, I exist...For as long as I am thinking.'⁴ or otherwise known as I think therefore I am. These three types of beliefs are often agreed upon as being what constitutes foundational beliefs. This essay will explore the validity of some of these types later in the critique.

Now that the existence and definitions of justified true beliefs have been determined, it is important to determine how the beliefs are structured. The beliefs are organised in a linear structure, a simple one that goes as follows; Basic belief → support → non-basic belief. Foundationalists compare this structure to that of a building. The foundations of the building are the self-evident basic beliefs, which support the upper floors which are the non-basic beliefs. Without the foundations, the upper floors would collapse as they are unsupported, just as the detectives' theories of Smith being a thief would without the justification and how without the basic beliefs, the non-basic beliefs would be unjustified and prove invalid. In this structure '*all our beliefs will be securely justified in terms of the basic ones and so we would have a system of beliefs free from error*'.⁵ This analogy highlights the importance of the basic beliefs being the starting point as they not only stop infinite regress, but also build up a system of error free beliefs.

²Noah Lemos. 2007. *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press), p .45

³ Noah Lemos, 2007. *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press), p. 45

⁴ [Rene Descartes. . \[n.d.\]. Meditations on First Philosophy in Which Are Demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction between the Human Soul and Body René Descartes. p. 5](#)

⁵ Daniel Cardinal, Jeremy Hayward, Gerald Jones, and Stephen Law. 2004. *Epistemology : The Theory of Knowledge* (London: Hodder Education), p 37

There are two types of foundationalism, known as classical and moderate. Both types hold the aforementioned notion of basic beliefs and linear structure. However they differ from one another in their degrees of strictness when it comes to the basic beliefs.

Classical foundationalism developed by one of the most recognisable foundationalists, Descartes, uses the process of methodical doubt to arrive at the indubitable. This means that classical foundationalism holds the idea that basic beliefs are infallible, they cannot be wrong. Whereas moderate foundationalism allows for more flexibility in the basic beliefs, they are fallible but are still justified, hence they can still support non-basic beliefs. Senses can be wrong but they are still reliable. This flexibility has much more appeal and is one of the main reasons that many foundationalists support the moderate version as opposed to the stricter classical version of the doctrine.

Now that foundationalism has been fully outlined, the focus of this essay will move onto the critical assessment focusing first on the strengths of foundationalism before diving into the critiques.

First and foremost, foundationalism does succeed in its attempt to stop infinite regression, by having basic beliefs that do not require justification via another belief, the problem of infinite regress becomes null as foundationalism provides a starting point in the basic beliefs, therefore the regress does not occur as there is no need for the basic beliefs to be justified by another. Hence foundationalism does deserve some degree of merit for succeeding in its motivation.

Another aspect in which foundationalism succeeds is that it gives structure, creating a linear format for justification. This neat and simple structure provides a source to where justification comes from and serves as a format that makes analyzing arguments easier. This structure has also been proven useful in the world of science as observations and facts are often the starting points and are then later developed into more complex hypotheses and theories, similarly to how basic beliefs act as a starting point to later be developed into non-basic, more complex beliefs. Therefore to some degree science can be interpreted as supporting foundationalism's structure as evidence comes first and then theories are built upon it after.

Finally, the notion of foundationalism matches our intuition. The basic beliefs such as our senses, introspective beliefs and self-evident truths align with how we naturally think. We trust our basic sense experiences: if you pet a dog, you can trust that you are feeling the fur beneath your fingers. You are then able to build off of that basic belief to form a more complex belief, in this case of petting the dog, the belief may grow more complex in the sense that you feel that the dog is soft or that they are fluffy. By foundationalism matching our intuition, the doctrine becomes that much more plausible in our minds, as it is continuous with our common sense and experiences.

Despite these strengths and successes of foundationalism, the doctrine is still flawed. This essay will now move its focus over to the critique, focusing on the flaws with the basic beliefs and structure that foundationalists believe in.

The main problem with foundationalism is known as the justification problem. In foundationalism basic beliefs are seemingly justified with no need for support. If basic beliefs are simply justified without support then it becomes arbitrary. This essay has already touched upon the justification problem, in the outline of infinite regression, however to critique the foundationalist solution this essay will explore the problem in more depth.

An example of the justification problem is that an individual believes that it is snowing, this belief is justified as they can see the snow falling from the sky outside. But then, the question of whether you can trust what you are seeing is raised. Now, that question can be answered quite simply, the individual's eyesight is reliable, they trust what they are seeing to be true. But this can be further questioned, asking why they have trust; they may have it from past experiences but once again this trust can be called into question. Ultimately this chain of questioning the justification has become neverending, falling victim to the problem of infinite regress. There are three options to the justification problem; it remains in an infinite regress, circular reasoning occurs where beliefs justify one another in a constant loop or finally the justification just stops. Foundationalists believe in the latter option, arguing that basic beliefs do not require the justification, and they support all other beliefs. Foundationalists believe this theory works as infinite regress disappears due to basic beliefs not needing justification.

But this brings to question one major flaw. Why should we trust these basic beliefs if they aren't justified by anything else? If a basic belief is wrong, then that in turn could cause all other non-basic beliefs which are based upon or supported by it, to be wrong or invalid and if an individual were to just blindly trust the basic belief then that could lead to error. This blind belief is seemingly just accepted amongst foundationalists however one could argue the belief is not blind but based upon interpretation, we can trust our beliefs due to our past experiences, however the basic beliefs are often seen as being given, rather than being based on interpretation as if they were, they would no longer be objective but subjective instead. Therefore meaning that everyone would likely have different basic beliefs rather than universal ones. This leads to a new problem, are basic beliefs just simply given? Most outside of foundationalism would say no, as beliefs would always be influenced to some degree, they won't necessarily be subjective but beliefs are most certainly influenced by experience and circumstances. One philosopher, who looked into the flaws of 'given' beliefs was Wilfrid Sellars, who argues from the perspective of the myth of the given.

The myth of the given is the idea that there is no such thing as completely uninterpreted, raw knowledge that we just seem to receive from the world. This argument goes against the idea of justified basic beliefs as they don't require any support or need to be justified, they are already simply justified due to being self-evident. Sellars argued in the

myth of the given that even perception involves prior factors, such as language or concepts of things such as colour and knowledge. This argues that the foundation of knowledge isn't just simply given or outside of interpretation, as it does rely on our prior knowledge and experiences of such concepts to create the foundations of beliefs. For example, with the concept of colour, we could come across a leaf and we would know from our perception that the leaf is green. According to the myth of the given, we are not just passively receiving the greenness of the leaf, we are using the concept of 'green' from our prior knowledge. Hence our perception has already been shaped by our prior understanding, we are not simply receiving raw knowledge, it is interpreted experience that shapes our beliefs.

However this argument on the topic of perceptual beliefs can be argued against as in his theory of classical foundationalism 'Descartes argued that such perceptual beliefs were not infallible. He suggested that it was possible that one is deceived in one's perceptual beliefs by a powerful evil demon.'⁶ If this deception were the case then we would have to hold perceptual beliefs separate from the infallible ones, making the myth of the given argument less valid if Descartes' approach was agreed. However in modern times, many philosophers and academics would not see reason in Descartes theory of a powerful deceiving evil demon, and instead see it as an attempt to deter the attention away from the flaw even if that was not the original intention from Descartes.

This leads nicely to the next criticism, which is that infallibility is unrealistic. Descartes Classical foundationalism is incredibly strict and pushes that the beliefs are infallible, they cannot be proved wrong. This notion is simply unrealistic, the majority of beliefs can be mistaken and even universal facts can be disproved over time. One such example is the once universal belief that the earth was flat, this has been disproven through advances in science. Even if that belief was a non-basic belief it stands as a testament that shows how beliefs can be mistaken. This idea is supported by scepticism, as certainty is not possible. One such sceptic who would agree is Peter Unger who argued '*that the attitude of certainty is always "dogmatic" or "irrational"*'⁷. If it is irrational to be certain then the whole structure of foundationalism may be at risk of collapse, for if a basic belief is not certain and is proven wrong, then all the non-basic beliefs that had been justified by the basic belief are likely to be errored also, this creates a major flaw for foundationalism and may cause many to move to follow the moderate approach.

The final criticism of this essay is about the structure itself. Some philosophers have taken a different approach to the structure of knowledge. Foundationalism outlines that the structure of knowledge is linear, in the format of a line, with self-evident basic beliefs which support the non-basic beliefs. But this structure does have some pretty major flaws, such as the problem of perception, the arguments surrounding the myth of the given and

⁶ Noah Lemos. 2007. *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press), p 51

⁷ [Barry Stroud, and Peter Unger. 1977. 'Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism.' The Journal of Philosophy. 74.4: p. 250](#)

the unrealistic nature of infallibility. This has led many philosophers and academics alike to seek a new way to structure knowledge, a way that is not as linear and basic beliefs are not simply just given. One such structure of knowledge focuses on beliefs being justified by coherence, instead of organised in a linear fashion, beliefs are structured in a web. By the beliefs being coherent, they do not contradict one another, they are able to support and explain each other and most importantly they are consistent. This structure has proved to be much more plausible as the beliefs are justified by each other they are not self-evident, therefore avoiding the problems of being just given and infinite regress.

Furthermore, foundationalism serves as a powerful argument that puts a stop to regress, provides a simple structure which aligns with science and matches our intuition. However it does have many flaws. Foundationalism fails to explain how basic beliefs are actually justified, which in turn has allowed other philosophers such as Sellars to pick apart the just 'given' nature of the beliefs with theories such as the myth of the given. Descartes' strict classical foundationalism presents an unrealistic infallibility with no room for flexibility, which would turn many to follow the moderate type or move to the likes of coherentism which provides a much more structured system in comparison to the simple foundationalist one. Overall, in my opinion foundationalism, especially the classical type is not a plausible system as the weaknesses outweigh the strengths, making it understandable why it is often rejected today.

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