

Outline and assess Foundationalism as a response to the regress issue.

In order to discuss foundationalism as a response to the regress issue we must first look at what both of these things are. Foundationalism and the 'Regress issue' are two contrasting philosophical ideas. Each idea differs in the way it sees what are thought to be 'basic true beliefs' being justified. The need for foundationalism and other ways of justifying a belief comes from the need to answer the issue of infinite regress, which is the idea that A justifies B which justifies C and so on ad infinitum. It is on going and many are dis-satisfied with there not being a true end to the chain and in turn not having a final and true justification; which, could be argued, means that the original statement is not meaningful.

Foundationalism is the idea that basic true beliefs do not need to be justified by a different belief; that these basic true beliefs are what forms the basis for knowledge to rest on. These beliefs formed are meant to be self-justifying. In contrast, the Regress issue follows the idea that if we use one belief to justify another, there will always be 'infinite regress', meaning that the disproving of one belief will inherently disprove another, meaning that no belief can ever be justified. There is also the question of whether there is a final belief which will justify those before it, or whether the cycle is continuous.

"If knowledge requires justification, then it would seem that every particular belief requires reason, and these reasons themselves will require reasons and so on ad infinitum."¹

Agrippa's Trilemma involves three separate questions or ideas about how a belief may be justified; Foundationalism and the Regress issue are both involved in the idea, along with the concept of Coherentism. Agrippa's Trilemma looks at the three ways in which a belief could be justified:

The first justification of a belief is the Regress issue, in that it states out how one belief is justified by another, which is also being justified by a different belief. This cycle of justification will continue on forever, with beliefs always being justified by another.

Belief A is justified by Belief B; Belief B is justified by Belief C; C and D, D and E, and continuous. It proposes issues as it cannot truly be answered, as there is no true end.

The second justification is the Coherentism idea, with beliefs justifying one another but in a circular fashion. Unlike with the Regress issue, with Coherentism, there are not infinite beliefs which are used in justifications, but rather a set few. Many believe that the issues with coherentism is that if A justifies B and B to C and C is in turn justified by A then there is no true justification for A because the only way to justify it is with itself.

Belief A is justified by Belief B; Belief B is justified by Belief C; Belief C is justified by Belief A..

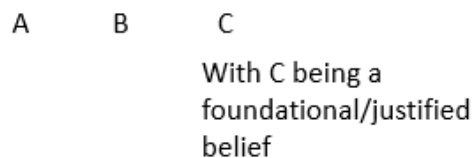
The third is that of the Foundationalism idea, where one belief is justified by another, with the second belief being justified by a 'foundational belief' (one that requires no justification from anything else). A problem arises when we debate what is seen to be a definite answer, what one may see as a justification in itself another may not due to the possible infallibility of people, there is no value consensus in our beliefs or our knowledge.

Belief A is justified by Belief B; Belief B is justified by Belief C; Belief C requires no justification.

¹ Alcock, 'Epistemology: The Big Questions', Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, pg165

Foundationalism and the Regress Issue are very different ideas of how to justify a belief, as seen by the Agrippa Trilemma. Foundationalism believes in basic true beliefs that do not need to be justified by others and can be used to justify beliefs. This will stop regress and form the basis of what knowledge rests on. Within Foundationalism there are two other ideas: Empiricism and Rationalism. Empiricism is the idea that basic beliefs are grounded in experience; while Rationalism states that basic beliefs are grounded in self-evidencing truths.

Foundationalism does have its drawbacks and scepticisms surrounding it. One of which is that the beliefs which we believe to be justifiable, are not based on any self-evident truths. This disproves the Foundationalist idea because it removes the guaranteed 'foundational belief' which the theory is based on; the idea that A being because of B and B being because of C is taken away if C is not a guaranteed true belief. Also, the ideas which are put forward with the Empiricism idea are subject to debate and doubt, because data derived from experiences can be argued and disproved.



The Foundationalist idea of belief justification (Finite system)

Coherentism (the circular theory of the Agrippa Trilemma) is the idea that beliefs are justified by being a part of a set of beliefs, or a "web of belief"² (a term used by J.S Ullian and W.V Quine in their book of the same name). The difference between the Coherentist idea and that of the Foundationalist and the Regress issue is that rather than the justification of beliefs being linear, Coherentism shows the justification as being circular. Where A is because of B, B because of C, etc. in the Foundationalism and Regress ideas, Coherentism sees it as A being justified by B, B justified by C and C justified by A. The beliefs that are being justified using the Coherentism idea overlap with one another and are interwoven in order to help make a belief justifiable.

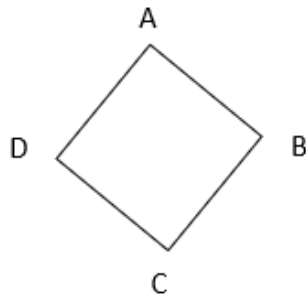
In Coherentism, beliefs have to be "mutually consistent, tenable and supportive. That is, the components must be reasonable in light of one another. Since both tenability and supportiveness are matters of degree, coherence is too."³

The issue, however, with Coherentism is that it relies on the interlinking of the components in a belief system, rather than anything external to the system or the system itself. There does not need to be any external input involved in the system of beliefs, as it relies only on internal factors.⁴

² Quine and Ullian, 'The Web of Belief', McGraw-Hill Education, 1970

³ Elgin, 'Non-Foundationalist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability', in Steup and Sosa 'Contemporary Debates in Epistemology', Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pg158

⁴ Bonjour, 'The Structure of Empirical Knowledge', Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985



The Coherentist idea of belief justification (Circular belief)

The Regress idea follows the belief that there is an infinite amount of beliefs which are used to justify each other. The first belief in the series cannot be fully justified until the last belief in the series is too. However, because there is an infinite number of beliefs involved in the system, there is no way of finding out which beliefs can be justified and no way of knowing which beliefs have been proven, because of the unknown number of beliefs involved in the system. This system raises the question of whether we will be able to have true knowledge or properly justify any of our beliefs, because the series of beliefs does have an infinite number involved and no clear end.

A B C D ...

The Regress Issue (infinite system)

Looking at the Foundationalist idea compared to the Regress Issue shows that there are issues with both, but overall, the Foundationalist idea seems to work more clearly when trying to justify a belief. The Foundationalist idea has its drawbacks, such as the need for self-evident truths justifying a belief, but beliefs can be justified and explained much easier than the Regress issue makes them. Not having the infinite number of beliefs needed and involved in a justification helps to come to a conclusion much easier. The infinite number makes it virtually impossible to come to a justification, as there will always need to be another belief involved to prove the belief. There is no end to the Regression, which makes the idea more difficult and complicated.

For example, if a Philosopher was trying to prove a belief, using the Foundationalist idea would be much easier than looking at Regress. Because the infinite number of beliefs involved in proving a single belief using the Regress issue would affect the ability of proving a belief. The Foundationalist idea, while having its own flaws, will get to a justification at the end of the series, because there is a clearly laid out end of the system, the use of the 'foundational belief', whereas with Regress there is no laid out end.

Compared to both the Foundationalism idea and the Regress issue, the easier way of justifying a belief would come from the Coherentism idea. The circular system of justification would be more effective than the infinite system of Regress, as it would eliminate the possible introduction of beliefs which can alter and change the original belief that needed justification. Compared to the Foundationalist idea, the Coherentism idea removes the 'foundational belief' and empiricism from the system; both of these are seen as drawbacks of the Foundationalism idea because of they are not infallible.

None of these methods of justification, however, are infallible, as all have their own drawbacks which can affect the justification of a belief.

In conclusion, when looking at the Foundationalist idea of justifying a belief, it is more effective, being that it is a finite system of justification, than the Regress issue, with its infinite system. With Regress, the system would be never ending and would take every single one of the beliefs involved to be justified and believed in order for something to be justified; this would not work as there are too many beliefs involved, all needing a separate belief to justify them. A cannot be justified without B, but B cannot be justified without C; C without D, D without E and so on for an infinite number of beliefs. While it is not infallible, the Foundationalism idea of justification is the more sound of the two, being that there is not an infinite number of beliefs needed for a belief justification to be made. In my opinion, the Foundationalism idea is the more sound of the two, however, the most useful and sound would be the Coherentism idea of justifying a belief. Although I have outlined and explained which theories seemingly work better than others, I do believe that there is no answer as to which one is the one that we should be using. This is because of two primary reasons; the first is that everyone holds different beliefs and that we will never be able to achieve a value consensus on what holds enough knowledge to be a justification and the second is that it would be very difficult to attempt and give a finite answer to such a deep philosophical question.