

The Structure of Justification:

Foundationalism and Coherentism

‘The question of the structure of knowledge of closely related to the problem of epistemic justification; however, it may not become apparent when we only consider how to justify particular beliefs or even classes of beliefs. The question of structure arises when we consider our knowledge as a whole. If knowledge requires justification, then it would seem that every particular beliefs requires reason, and these reasons themselves will requires reasons, and so on ad infinitum’ (Alcoff, 1998, p.165).

The Regress Issue

How does justification work?

Many of our beliefs derive their justification from other beliefs.

But consider the following:

Suppose that we give the justification of belief A by appealing to belief B, so that belief B justifies belief A. Many would claim that B can only justify A if B itself is justified. But what justifies B? We could appeal to another belief, C. But then the problem will recur. If every belief is only justified on the basis of some other belief, we have an infinite regress. The first belief in the series is not justified unless the last one is: but will there ever be a last justified belief in the series? If there is not, how am I ever justified in believing or knowing anything at all?

Agrippa's Trilemma

How is a belief justified?

1. A belief is justified by another belief, which is justified by another belief, which is justified by another belief, and so on ad infinitum.
2. A belief is justified by another belief, which is justified by another belief, which is justified by another belief, which is justified by the first belief. (This is a case of circular reference.)
3. A belief is justified by another belief which is justified by another foundational belief ... and that belief requires no justification.

We will discuss difficulties arising from (1), (2), and (3).

Foundationalism

Foundationalism claims that there are basic true beliefs that do not have to be justified by appeals to other beliefs. These basic beliefs are capable of stopping the regress, and form the foundations upon which all knowledge rests.

But how are basic beliefs justified? One answer to this is that basic beliefs are justified by their source:

- Empiricism - grounds basic beliefs in experience.
- Rationalism – grounds basic beliefs in rational, self-evident truths

Problems:

- Sceptical challenges:

- Many of our beliefs that we consider to be justifiable do not appear to be based on self-evident truths.
- Sense data are not infallible. The very beliefs that the empiricist proposes as foundations are subject to doubt.
- Other problems.

Coherentism

A belief is justified if it forms part of a coherent total set of beliefs. The structure of justification is like a web; our beliefs are part of a ‘web of belief’ (Quine and Ullian, 1970).

For coherentists, the problem of regression assumes that justification is linear, so that to justify individual belief A, we need to appeal to another belief (say, B), and then we need to appeal to another belief (say, C) to justify B, and so on. For coherentism, justification is nonlinear; neither A, B nor C are in some way prior to each other. A belief is justified by virtue of its coherence with other beliefs. A coherent network of beliefs will contain many overlapping and interwoven chains of belief.

But what exactly *makes* a belief system coherent? Catherine Elgin has argued that beliefs must be ‘mutually consistent, cotenable, and supportive. That is, the components must be reasonable in light of one another. Since both cotenability and supportiveness are matters of degree, coherence is too’ (2005, p.158).

Problems:

- The isolation objection:

‘Coherence is purely a matter of the internal relations between the components of the belief system; it depends in no way on any sort of relation between the system of beliefs and anything external to that system... [But] a system of empirical beliefs might be adequately justified, indeed might constitute empirical knowledge, in spite of being utterly out of contact with the world that it purports to describe. Nothing about any requirement of coherence dictates that a coherent system of beliefs need receive any sort of input from the world or be in any way causally influenced by the world’ (BonJour, 1985, p. 108).

Consider the possibility of one having a coherent belief system without the beliefs in that system being true. It may be possible for a person to construct a coherent (and thus justified) system of beliefs even if that system of beliefs does not correspond to the actual world or does not track truth.

Bibliography

- W. Quine, and J. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1970).
- Laurence BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- Catherine Z. Elgin, ‘Non-foundationalist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability’, in Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 156-67.
- Linda Alcoff (ed.), *Epistemology: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

Reading for students

Essential reading

- Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London and NY: Routledge, 1998), pp. 177-208 (sec. on 'The Architecture of Knowledge').

Recommended reading

- Duncan Pritchard, *What is This Thing Called Knowledge?* (London and NY: Routledge, 2006), ch.4.

Further reading

- For consolidation reading, choose from the following chapters in Jonathan Dancy's *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985):
 - ch.4 ('Foundationalism').
 - ch.8 ('Coherence Theories').
 - ch.9 ('Coherence, Justification and Knowledge').

For a more challenging read, see the following items:

- Catherine Z. Elgin, 'Non-foundationalist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability', in Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 156-67.
- Carl Ginet, 'Infinitism Is not the Solution to the Regress Problem', in Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (eds.),

Contemporary Debates in Epistemology (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 141-49.

- Susan Haak, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), ch.1 ('Foundationalism versus Coherentism: a dichotomy disclaimed').