

“Outline and assess foundationalism as a response to the regress issue”

Epistemology, also known as the study of knowledge, has had numerous different ways of viewing it, and in their own way try to ‘solve knowledge’. I will be assessing one of these views, which is known as Foundationalism (Which is embodied well in the work of Decartes), and how good of a response it is to the regress issue.

The regress issue is part of an argument attributed to Agrippa, which is referred to as Agrippa’s Trilemma, which is an argument that gives three options for how belief is justified. These three options are as follows: A belief is justified by another belief, continuously, which continues infinitely, A belief is justified by a belief which eventually reaches a single foundational belief that is self evident and requires no further justification, and a belief is justified by another belief, which is justified by the first belief, creating a circle of belief. I will only be covering the first two in regards to foundationalism, as they are the two relevant arguments put forth within foundationalism.

Foundationalism is the epistemological belief that we can have true knowledge, so long as that knowledge is based on a foundational belief that is justified in and of itself. This belief does not need to be justified, and so this circumnavigates the argument of infinite regression which is present within Agrippa’s Trilemma. Foundationalism supports the finite regression of Agrippa’s Trilemma, as once a foundational belief is found, it no longer needs to be justified. An example of such a foundational belief comes from Descartes, which is “I think, therefore I am.” This belief is considered foundational, as simply trying to disprove the claim proves it, as you cannot even begin to attempt to argue against it unless you think, and the act of thinking requires that you must therefore exist.

The specific brand of foundationalism that Descartes supported in his breaking down of a metaphorical building of knowledge to reach a self justifying foundation is known as ‘classical foundationalism’, which is distinct in the fact that the foundational beliefs within must be completely self justifying. In *What is this thing called knowledge* by Duncan Pritchard, an argument is made against classical foundationalism which is that there are not enough of these infalible, foundational beliefs to base a world view on, as the beliefs that we hold are too numerous for such a small number of beliefs to justify. Pritchard argues that we are either to live with a limited pool of knowledge due to this or to “weaken requirements one sets on foundational beliefs.” This would allow for more knowledge, however these foundational beliefs would not be entirely infallible, which I believe defeats the entire point of foundationalism, though I suspect that was the point that Pritchard was making with that statement.¹

However for the sake of argument, I am going to assume that this was a genuine suggestion, as opposed to bringing light to an argument against foundationalism. I would argue that the idea of weakening requirements for foundational beliefs would overall weaken the position of foundationalism because the only reason that it could work is the concrete, self-evident justifications are used to justify the next beliefs, while if foundational beliefs are not completely self-evident then it would make it possible to completely topple this ‘tower of belief’, and so would make the entire endeavour as pointless as if they had never sought to build a system of justified knowledge in the first place.

¹ Duncan Pritchard, *What Is This Thing Called Knowledge?*, 3rd edn (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2014), p. 37-38.

Foundationalism has two distinct schools, which are the empiricists, and the rationalists. The empiricists base their foundational beliefs on experience in the physical world, such as what is perceived through their senses, while rationalists use logic to find self justifiable truth. I believe that only one of these two methods for devising foundational beliefs is able to actually do so, as empirical evidence can be wrong in the way that our senses could theoretically be deceiving us at all times, as people are deceived by their senses all of the time. Logic however is constant, and doesn't require our easily deluded senses. This fallibility of our senses is mentioned by Descartes when he makes the point that while we are dreaming, we do not know that we are dreaming, and so we have no way of knowing that we are not currently dreaming, and so we cannot truly believe anything that we see.²

I am now going to move my attention towards the third aspect of Agrippa's Trilemma, which is the form of justifying belief by justifying another belief that will then justify the first belief in a loop.

Foundationalism absolutely rejects this circular form of justification. This form of justification is found within coherentism, though coherentism describes it as more of a web, with each justifications branching together to create a coherent worldview. In the mind of a coherentist, coherence is the most important aspect of viewing the world, because if beliefs are consistent, then they create a usable idea of the world.

The problem with this, that empiricists would use is that this system of coherence is able to operate completely without any outside input. The argument is that even if you can create a coherent worldview in your mind, that worldview couldn't be put into practice if it has no basis in reality. For example, there are people with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia who's delusions make perfect sense within their own view of the world, though to those who allow the outside world to impact their world view it is completely incorrect. This argument alone leads me to the conclusion that foundationalism is the superior method of studying knowledge, as it must have at least some basis in reality by definition, while is it theoretically possible that coherentists can have completely ludicrous perceptions of knowledge simply because they have not taken the real world into account.

Though this doesn't leave Classical Foundationalism without any obvious criticisms, and it is able to be critiqued in the same way as empirical foundationalism. This is because despite it being based on logic and reasoning, it is still possible that our perceptions of reality are warped in a way that prevents us from making clear reasonings. Descartes explores this argument in his meditations in the form of the 'Evil Demon' argument, which entails an all powerful demon who employs "utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me."³ This is not to be taken seriously, however we still cannot prove that there is not some entity that is purposefully warping our perception of reality in a way that is preventing us from concluding any true foundational beliefs. The evil demon argument could be switched with any number of other arguments, such as the 'brain in a vat' argument which was created by Gilbert Harman.

² Rene Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxfordshire: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³ Rene Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxfordshire: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Though a problem with this idea of the evil demon could also apply to classical foundationalism's foundational beliefs, as our logic could be being deceived by some greater power, such as an all powerful demon, or a scientist prodding our minds with different stimuli. The idea of "I think, therefore I am" could be subject to this higher power's deception of us, forcing us to believe that this is a perfectly logical statement, and making us believe that it is self justifying. Though this argument means that it is impossible for any form of knowledge to be known because of this evil demon fooling us. As this argument is unfalsifiable however, I would still argue that classical foundationalism is stronger than empirical foundationalism and coherentism simply by its nature of still having a more justified argument than the other two even if the idea of the evil demon or brain in a vat are correct.

To conclude, I would like to state that I believe that while having the smallest pool of justified knowledge to draw on, classical foundationalism is the strongest of the forms of justifying belief that I have covered, as it is the only one that uses justifications that are true without any doubt. This is in contrast with empirical foundationalism, which relies on flawed senses that cannot be proved to be true because of the evil demon and brain in a vat arguments. Coherentism is also far weaker than classical foundationalism, as it doesn't take enough of the physical world into consideration, and just focuses on being consistent within itself, and so both of these two systems appear to both be overcompensating in either direction. In light of this, classical foundationalism appears to be a rather strong response to the regress issue.

Bibliography

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