

Philosophy 3340 - Epistemology

Susan Haack's Foundherentist Theory of Empirical Justification

1. Foundherentism: Basic Concepts and Distinctions

1. S-beliefs versus C-beliefs:

"A's **S-belief** that p ": A mental **state** of A's that is A's believing that p .

"A's **C-belief** that p ": The **content** of A's S-belief that P - namely, the proposition that p .

2. Evidence for p can be divided into S-evidence and C-evidence:

A's **S-evidence with respect to p** consists of the "set of states of A causally related to his S-belief that p ."

A's **C-evidence with respect to p** consists of "a set of propositions capable of standing in logical or quasi-logical relations to the C-belief that p ."

3. Not just any type of state can be part of a person's **S-evidence**:

"A's S-evidence with respect to p ' will refer to those experiential and belief-states of A's which belong, at the time in question, to the causal nexus of A's S-belief that p ." (421)

4. Haack divides S-evidence with respect to p up into **two components**:

(1) A's **S-reasons** with respect to p is that part of A's S-evidence with respect to p that consists of other **beliefs**.

(2) A's **experiential S-evidence** with respect to p is that part of A's S-evidence with respect to p that consists of A's "perceptions, his introspective awareness of his own mental goings-on, and memory traces of his earlier perceptual and introspective states." (421)

5. Next, Haack describes what determines the C-evidence:

"The two aspects interlock: A's C-evidence with respect to p will be a set of propositions, and how good it is will depend on those propositions' logical or quasi-logical relations to p ; but *which* propositions A's C-evidence with respect to p consists of, depends on which of A's S-beliefs and perceptual, etc. states belong to the causal nexus of the S-belief in question." (422)

6. Haack now divides C-evidence with respect to p up into **two components**:

(1) A's **C-reasons** with respect to p is that part of A's C-evidence with respect to p that consists of his **C-beliefs** – that is, the propositions that are the contents of his S-reasons.

(2) A's **experiential C-evidence** with respect to p is that part of A's C-evidence with respect to p that consists of "propositions to the effect that A is in the perceptual/introspective/memory states that constitute his experiential S-evidence with respect to p ." (422)

Note: Haack uses the term "evidence" in an unusual way, since, first, **propositions** can be part of one's experiential C-evidence **even if one does not believe them**, and, secondly, one's experiential S-evidence consists of **mental states that need not be beliefs**.

7. Haack then goes on to note two things concerning the propositions that belong to one's experiential C-evidence with respect to p :

(1) "Since a perceptual, etc., state cannot be part of the causal nexus of A's S-belief that p unless A is *in* that state, these propositions are all true."

(2) "But they need not be propositions that A believes." (422)

8. Haack says that the incorporation of these true propositions into the experiential C-evidence is "the foundherentist way of acknowledging that the ultimate evidence for empirical beliefs is experience – very different from the forced and unnatural way in which foundationalism tries to acknowledge it, by requiring basic *beliefs* justified by experience alone." (422)

2. Foundherentism: Basic Theses

1. Experiential C-evidence consists of **propositions** about perceptual experiences, introspective experiences, and memories, but, in contrast to foundationalism, one does not have to have **beliefs** about these states for them to count as **experiential C-evidence**.

2. Because perceptual experiences, introspective experiences, and memories can count as experiential C-evidence **even if** one does not have **beliefs** about such states, other types of beliefs – such as perceptual beliefs about physical objects – can be **noninferentially** justified on the basis of the relevant **propositions**.

3. It is because of this that, according to foundherentism, there is **no privileged class of noninferentially justified beliefs**.

4. **Relations of mutual support** can serve to justify beliefs.

5. But, in contrast to coherentism, relations of mutual support cannot serve to justify beliefs on their own: there must be **experiential C-evidence** for any justified belief.

6. The experiential C-evidence for a given belief can, however, be **indirect** evidence, rather than direct evidence. So a proposition p may be experiential C-evidence for the belief that r because it is direct evidence for the belief that q , and q supports r .

7. There are three factors that are relevant to the justification of beliefs: (1) **supportiveness**, (2) **independent security**, and (3) **comprehensiveness**.

"How justified A is in believing that p , analogously, depends on how well the belief in question is supported by his experiential evidence and reasons [supportiveness]; how justified his reasons are, independent of the belief in question [independent security]; and how much of the relevant evidence his evidence includes [comprehensiveness]." (423)

3. Some Objections to Foundherentism

1. Justification and Evidentially Isolated Beliefs

One important argument for foundationalism is that there can be beliefs that are justified, and that are not supported by any other beliefs at all. An example is any belief about **one's own present sensations**.

Does Haack's foundherentism allow for the possibility of evidentially isolated beliefs? The answer is not entirely clear, since it is not clear whether a belief needs to enter into relations of **mutual support** in order to be justified. Perhaps beliefs that involve propositions that are part of one's experiential C-evidence do not need to do so.

The crossword-puzzle analogy, in which every word intersects at least one other word, suggests that every justified belief must stand in a relation of mutual support with at least one other justified belief. But perhaps the crossword-puzzle analogy is misleading at this point.

2. "Accidentally Justified" Beliefs

One objection to foundherentism is that there could be causal connections that did not in general lead to beliefs that are justified **according to this account**, but that might do so **by accident**. For consider the following:

- (1) Suppose that whenever a person has two experiences involving qualitative properties that are either identical, or very similar, those two experiences are **phenomenologically indistinguishable** for the person, and that that causes him to believe that precisely the same property is present in both cases.
- (2) It might be that that belief is almost always false, since the properties are **very similar, but not identical**.
- (3) Indeed, one might be able to argue that it is **very likely** that such a belief is false, since continuity considerations seem to suggest that there may be an **infinite** number of different qualitative properties that are phenomenologically indistinguishable from one another.
- (4) The experiential C-evidence in the case where the properties are different will, then, not justify the belief that the properties are the same.
- (5) But in the rare case where the properties **are** identical, the experiential C-evidence will contain the proposition that the properties are identical, and so, on Haack's account, that belief will be justified.

Is this right? When one is right by accident, and where the situation is one where it is much more likely that one's belief would be false than that it would be true, does one want to say that the belief in question is a (noninferentially) justified one?

3. The Problem of the Possibility of an Indirect Justification of False Beliefs about one's own Present Experiences

According to Haack's foundherentism, the C-evidence for a belief could all be **indirect** – that is, it could be C-evidence for other beliefs that are appropriately related to the belief in question.

This has an important consequence that seems to me undesirable, since if the C-evidence for a belief can be indirect, it appears to follow, given to Haack's account of justification, that one could have good C-evidence for the belief that **one is presently having an experience of type E even though one is not having an experience of type E**.

Here is the argument for this claim:

- (1) Suppose that one has good evidence that whenever one is in a brain state of type B, one is having an experience of type E. (This might consist of justified beliefs about **past conjunctions** of being in a brain state of type B and having an experience of type E.)
- (2) Suppose, also, that one has good evidence that one is now in a brain state of type B.
- (3) Then one may very well thereby have good evidence that one is now having an experience of type E.
- (4) All of this is compatible with its being **false** that whenever one is in a brain state of type B, one is having an experience of type E: perhaps it is not brain states of type B that always give rise to experiences of type E, but brain states of a slightly different type B*.
- (5) But, then, if one were in a brain state of type B, but not in one of type B*, one could have good evidence, on Haack's approach, that one was now having an experience of type E, even though one was **not** having an experience of type E.

It follows from this that one could be **justified** in believing that one is presently having an experience of type E even though one is **not** having an experience of type E.

How can this be, given that if one is not having an experience of type E, then one will necessarily be justified in believing that one is not having an experience of type E, since the proposition that one is not having an experience of type E will be part of one's experiential C-evidence for the belief that one is not having an experience of type E?

The answer is, first, that the fact that one is not having an experience of type E does not entail that one **believes** that one is not having an experience of type E, and secondly, that since one's not having an experience of type E is not part of the cause of the belief that is inferred from the information that one is in a brain state of type B – namely, the belief that one **is** having an experience of type E – the proposition that one is not having an experience of type E is **not** part of one's **experiential C-evidence with regard to the belief that one is having an experience of type E**.

4. The Superiority of a Type of Foundationalism in this Regard

Contrast how things are on a certain type of foundationalist approach. First, recall Alston's idea of **minimal foundationalism**:

- (1) Beliefs can be noninferentially justified.
- (2) Any inferentially justified belief is justified on the basis of noninferentially justified beliefs.

Second, consider the following two-part, **privileged class thesis**:

(PCT) There is some type, T, of beliefs, such that, first, a belief can be non-inferentially justified only if it is a belief of type T, and, secondly, a belief of type T can be justified only if it is noninferentially justified.

Now define **privileged class foundationalism** as follows:

**Privileged class foundationalism =
Minimal foundationalism + the privileged class thesis**

Third, consider the following **thesis of direct acquaintance**:

(DA) A belief that p can be noninferentially justified only if one is directly acquainted with a state of affairs that makes it true that p .

Now define **direct acquaintance foundationalism** as follows:

Direct acquaintance foundationalism =

Minimal foundationalism + the privileged class thesis + the thesis of direct acquaintance

Suppose, finally, that the privileged class, T , consists of beliefs about **one's own, present, mental states, including experiences**. Then according to the privileged class thesis, one's belief that one is now having an experience of type E cannot be justified unless it is noninferentially justified. But according to the thesis of direct acquaintance, one cannot have a noninferentially justified belief that one is now having an experience of type E unless one is directly acquainted with some state of affairs that makes it true that one is now having an experience of type E .

The upshot is that, according to direct acquaintance foundationalism, it is impossible to be justified in believing that one is now having an experience of type E if one is **not** now having an experience of type E .

Haack's Foundherentist approach, by contrast, certainly appears to entail that it is possible to be justified in believing that one is now having an experience of type E even if one is **not** now having an experience of type E .

5. The Lack of Clarity about When Experiential C-Evidence is Necessary for Justification

Haack holds that no belief can be justified unless it is supported, at least indirectly, by **experiential C-evidence**.

But **how much** experiential C-evidence is needed in order to have a system of justified beliefs? Consider, here, Haack's crossword-puzzle analogy. All ordinary crossword puzzles have clues for **every** entry. A system of justified beliefs need not be like that, since it is not necessary that there be experiential C-evidence **directly** associated with every one of the justified beliefs. So consider, then, crossword puzzles where **some** of the entries have no clues. If there were **no clues at all**, the puzzle would be analogous to a coherentist view of justification, where there is no experiential C-evidence. Such a system of beliefs is, on Haack's view, not a system of justified beliefs. But what about a system of beliefs that was like a massive crossword puzzle in which **only one entry** had a clue? Could there be a system of justified beliefs in which **only one** of the beliefs had a direct connection with experiential C-evidence?

Haack's account does not provide, as far as I can see, any answer to that question.

6. Arbitrariness in the Foundherentist Foundations

Perceptual experiences, introspective experiences, and memories occupy a privileged place in Haack's foundherentism. First, it is only states of these three sorts that are **experiential S-evidence**. Secondly, propositions about these experiential S-states are the only propositions that constitute the **experiential C-evidence**. Why do perceptual experiences, introspective experiences, and memories have this privileged status?

Notice that the problem of arbitrariness is aggravated once one realizes that memories cannot be equated with occurrent memory **images** plus memory **thoughts**, since memories, so understood, together with one's present perceptual experiences, will not provide a sufficient basis for the justification of anything more than a small fragment of one's beliefs about the external world. If something other than a **very extensive skepticism** is to be possible, memory must be understood to include memory **beliefs**. But now the question is this: If **memory beliefs** are included in the **experiential S-evidence**, why aren't **other types of beliefs** also included?

Note that **direct acquaintance foundationalism** does not suffer from any such arbitrariness, since it advances **a clear criterion** concerning what beliefs can be noninferentially justified – namely, beliefs about any states of affairs with which one can be **directly acquainted**. If, as needs to be the case if one is to avoid very serious skepticism, one can be directly acquainted with one's present **beliefs**, there will be **no restriction on the types of beliefs**: memory beliefs can be the object of noninferentially justified beliefs, but so can any other types of beliefs.

7. Theories of Justification and Necessary Truths

In setting out an account of the justification of beliefs, one should set out an account that applies to **any possible believer**, regardless of its cognitive abilities, in any possible world. Such an account will consist of **necessary** truths only.

Haack does not attempt to construct such an account. This emerges when she asks why sensory states are treated differently than **extrasensory** states. Her answer is that ESP is "excluded because – unlike sensory experience – it has no role in the implicit conception of evidence I am trying to make explicit." (423)

What Haack is offering, accordingly, is an account that incorporates, in effect, contingent truths about the cognitive abilities that humans actually possess. One consequence of doing this is that if – contrary to what seems very likely, given our current experimental knowledge – humans had paranormal abilities, Haack's account would be unsatisfactory by her own lights.

Foundationalist approaches, by contrast – such as direct acquaintance foundationalism – do not incorporate any assumptions about what the world is like. The principles that they involve attempt to provide an account of when a person's beliefs are justified that would be correct **in any possible world**.