Philosophy 5340 – Epistemology
Topic 6: Theories of Justification: Foundationalism versus Coherentism
Part 3: Foundationalism Versus Foundherentism

Introductory Remarks

Comparing foundationalism with Susan Haack's 'foundherentism' is a slightly tricky matter. First of all, foundationalism comes in significantly different varieties. In particular, there are some very significant differences between the type of foundationalism associated with indirect realism, and the type of foundationalism that Mike Huemer advances in his defense of direct realism. Secondly, Haack's account of foundherentism is not as clear and precise at crucial points as it could be.

To handle the first problem, I shall compare foundherentism with both types of foundationalism whenever necessary.

1. Is there a Privileged Class of Beliefs that Can Be Non-Inferentially Justified?

Foundherentism

1. Haack says that foundherentism does not involve any privileged class of beliefs that can be non-inferentially justified.

2. The reason for this denial is that certain states are part of a person's experiential S-evidence – namely, one's present perceptual experiences, introspective awareness of one's own mental goings-on, and memory traces of one's earlier perceptual and introspective states – and their being part of one's experiential S-evidence does not depend upon one's having any beliefs about those states. Because of this, any propositions that are sufficiently supported by such propositions to be justified will be non-inferentially justified, since there will be no justified beliefs at earlier stages in the causal process that leads to the beliefs in question.

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. There is a privileged class of beliefs that can be non-inferentially justified.

2. These will include beliefs about one's own present experiences and sensations.

3. If skepticism is to be avoided, this class will also have to include at least beliefs about one's own present beliefs.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. Given the principle of phenomenal conservatism, absolutely any coherent belief at all could be non-inferentially justified.

2. Unlike Haack's foundherentism, a belief that is non-inferentially justified need not stand in any appropriate causal relations to what Haack calls experiential S-evidence.

3. So Huemer's foundationalism is more liberal than foundherentism in this regard.

2. Is the Relation of Support a One-Way Relation Going from Non-inferentially Justified Beliefs to Inferentially Justified Beliefs?

Foundherentism

1. Haack says that it is not a one-way relation. Beliefs that are initially non-inferentially justified can have their support either increased or decreased by their relations to inferentially justified beliefs.

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. Traditionally, it was often thought that non-inferentially justified beliefs were certain, and could not be mistaken. So relations to other propositions could not raise the level of justification, or lower it.

2. If the class of non-inferentially justified beliefs includes beliefs about one's own present beliefs, it does not seem plausible that there is no possibility of being mistaken.

3. But even in the case of beliefs about one's own present experiences and sensations, there are arguments that support the claim that errors are possible:

(1) One might form a belief about one's experience in a casual way, not fully attending to the experience, and when one does that the belief could be false.

(2) One can be mistaken about complex properties of one's experience. Imagine that one is looking at nine white balls against a black background. Mightn't one believe that the experience one was having was of the 'ten white spots against a black background' type of experience, rather than of the 'nine white spots against a black background' type of experience? But if beliefs about complex properties of experiences can be mistaken, can one be confident that this is not so with regard to beliefs about simple properties of experiences?

(3) There is Armstrong's objection, based on the intransitivity of the looks the same as relation: Color samples A, B, and C are such that A looks to be the same color as B, and B to be the same color as C, but A does not look to be the same color as C. When one looks only at A and B, mightn't one very well believe that the same color is present in the relevant two parts of one's visual field? But, given this case, mightn't one then argue that that belief is, as a matter of fact, false. (Frank Jackson disagrees with the claim that the color properties of the two parts of one's visual field are different. Perhaps Jackson is right, though I'm inclined to think that he isn't. In any case, my point here is simply that it is unclear what the right answer is here, and that one answer entails that one can be mistaken even about simple properties of experiences.)

4. But if mistakes are possible, then it would seem that relations to other justified beliefs, including inferentially justified beliefs, should be able to rise or lower the level of justification associated with a given non-inferentially justified belief about one's present experiences.

5. It might be argued, however, that there are at least some inferentially justified beliefs that could not possibly be mistaken – such as the belief that one is having experiences, or the belief that one's present experiences involve a number of different properties.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. Mike Huemer does not discuss this issue in any extended way. But he does hold that its seeming to someone as if p only renders p prima facie credible. If there are defeaters, then the belief that p will not be non-inferentially justified.

2. But this leaves it an open question whether, for any belief that p, there could always be defeaters for that belief.

3. What Is the Role of Experience and Beliefs about Experience in the Justification Beliefs?

Foundherentism

1. According to foundherentism, there can be no justified beliefs without at least some experiences, or memory traces, or cases of introspective awareness.

2. It is not necessary, however, to have any beliefs about experiences, or memory traces, or cases of introspective awareness.

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. According to this version of foundationalism, there can be no justified beliefs without at least some experiences, or some beliefs.

2. It is also necessary, however, to have beliefs about the experiences or beliefs in question.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. According to Mike Huemer's version of foundationalism, it is seemings that generate justified beliefs. But what sort of states are seemings? Mike is not explicit on this, but it appears that seemings are not experiences (nor any conscious state), and Mike says that they are not beliefs.

2. On this version of foundationalism, then, neither experiences nor beliefs seem to play any role in the justification of beliefs.

4. Does Justification Have Both a Causal and a Logical Side?

Foundherentism

1. Haack stresses the distinction between, for example, S-evidence and C-evidence.

2. S-evidence consists of mental states – such as experiences and beliefs – that can stand in causal relations to other belief states. C-evidence, on the other hand, consists of propositions, and thus of things that can stand in logical relations to beliefs.

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. Justification also has both a causal and a logical side on this foundationalist account.

2. First, as regards beliefs that are of the right sort to be non-inferentially justified – such as a belief about one's own present experience – although such a belief is made potentially justified by being in the corresponding mental state, it will not be justified unless the belief was caused by the mental state in question. (Consider a person who sometimes believes he is having an experience of a certain qualitative character when he

is not having such an experience. Such a belief might be accidentally true. It would not then be justified.)

3. Similarly, in the case of beliefs that are rendered probable by one's non-inferentially justified beliefs, such beliefs will not be inferentially justified unless there are causal connections to one's non-inferentially justified beliefs that correspond to evidential relations that one is aware of.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. In the case of non-inferentially justified beliefs, no causal relation appears to be needed, since it might seem to S as if p either without its being the case that p, or with its being the case that p, but the fact that p playing no causal role in generating the seeming.

2. In the case of inferentially justified beliefs, I think that Mike Huemer would hold that the beliefs in question are appropriately caused by beliefs that are non-inferentially justified.

5. Is the Theory Internalist or Externalist?

Foundherentism

1. On Haack's Foundherentist approach, propositions about one's present experiences can play a role in justifying beliefs about other things – such as perceptual beliefs – even if one is not aware of the experiences.

2. So foundherentism appears to be partially externalist.

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. In contrast, on the indirect realist version of foundationalism, propositions about one's present experiences cannot play any role in justifying beliefs about other things – such as perceptual beliefs – unless one is aware of the experiences, and has non-inferentially justified beliefs about those experiences.

2. So this version of foundationalism appears to be an internalist account of justification.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. In the case of Mike Huemer's version of foundationalism, the answer will turn on whether one can have seemings that one is not aware of.

2. This will depend on what sorts of states seemings are. That they are intentional and representative states is clear. What is not clear is whether they are also states of consciousness, or, if they are not, whether the corresponding belief would only be justified if one has potential access to the seeming in question.

6. In the Case of Inferentially Justified Beliefs, What Factors are Relevant to Justification?

Foundherentism

1. On Haack's Foundherentist approach, whether a belief is inferentially justified depends upon three factors:

"How justified A is in believing that p, analogously, depends on how well the belief in question in 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)

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. In contrast, on the indirect realist version of foundationalism, provided the levels of justification for relevant non-inferentially justified beliefs are somehow fixed, whether a belief is potentially, inferentially justified will then be logically determined by those levels together with the logical probability of the belief in question relative to the beliefs that are non-inferentially justified.

2. To be actually justified, there have to be, as noted earlier, the right sorts of causal relations between the belief in question and the evidentially relevant non-inferentially justified beliefs.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. I think that Mike Huemer's version of foundationalism is also a one-factor theory with regard to inferentially justified beliefs.

7. But Isn't Foundherentism Right in Assigning Weight to Other Factors in the case of Inferentially Justified Beliefs?

1. In particular, isn't something like explanatory coherence relevant to justification in the case of inferentially justified beliefs?

2. Consider, for example, two people, A and B, who have precisely the same sorts of experiences and memory beliefs. Suppose A has a single, isolated, theoretical belief, N – say, the belief that there are neutrons – while B also has that belief, but along with a wide range of other theoretical beliefs – T – about protons and electrons, about atoms, and molecules, about electromagnetic theory, etc. Then doesn't foundationalism entail the view that A's belief that N is precisely as justified as B's belief that N? But surely that is not the case.

3. For suppose that one thinks in terms of inference to the best explanation, or in terms of hypothetico-deductive method. N, on its own, will explain virtually nothing, and it will generate virtually no predictions whose accuracy could serve to confirm N, whereas N, if embedded within theory T, may be a crucial part of the best explanation of various observations, and may, together with the rest of T, generate many accurate predictions. Consequently, it seems plausible that A's belief that N will be much less justified than B's belief that N.

4. The logical probability of N relative to the propositions that one is non-inferentially justified in believing is, however, the same for A as for B, since, by hypothesis, they are non-inferentially justified in believing the same things. But B, because of the embedding of N in a wider theory, will be able to see the relevant connections, and thus will be justified in assigning a probability to N that A, not seeing those connections, will not be justified in assigning. B will be able to see, for example, that various true predictions result from having N in one's system of beliefs.

5. The answer, in short, is that a proposition may have a high probability relative to one's non–inferentially justified beliefs without one's being justified in accepting that proposition. As noted earlier, what one is justified in believing also depends upon the causal connections between one's beliefs. Causal connections are needed that parallel evidential relations that one is aware of.

6. Illustration: Consider whether one is justified in accepting a generalization that involves an infinite number of instances. As we saw earlier, such a belief may be justified only if it is arrived at via a justified belief in the existence of a corresponding 'strong' law of nature – that is, a law that entails the relevant cosmic regularity, but that does not logically supervene upon that cosmic regularity.

8. Is there a Quantitative Measure of the Level of Justification in the Case of Inferentially Justified Beliefs?

Foundherentism

1. Since, according to Haack's Foundherentist, whether a belief is justified depends upon three factors, and there appears to be no non-arbitrary way of weighting those three factors, it would seem that there is no quantitative measure of the level of justification in the case of any belief.

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. Whether there is a quantitative measure of justification for inferentially justified beliefs depends on whether the level of justification for the relevant non-inferentially justified beliefs is fixed. If it is, then the logical probability of any inferentially justified belief relative to those non-inferentially justified beliefs will logically determine the probability that the inferentially justified belief is true.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. Similarly, in the case of Mike Huemer's version of foundationalism, the crucial question is whether the principle of phenomenal conservatism can be given a quantitative formulation that specifies how justified one is in believing that p if it seems to one as if p is true.

9. Can Epistemically Isolated Beliefs Be Justified?

Foundherentism

1. 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.

2. Haack, however, says, "A third necessary condition is that A's C-evidence with respect to p should meet minimal conditions of supportiveness, independent security, and comprehensiveness . . .." (426). She does not specify what the minimal condition with regard to comprehensiveness is, but if it requires anything at all, then this requirement can be seen to be mistaken in view of the case of epistemically isolated beliefs.

3. It seems, then, that foundherentism does not allow for the justification of epistemically justified beliefs.

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. In contrast, on the indirect realist version of foundationalism, beliefs about one's present experiences can be justified even if no other beliefs at all are justified.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. Similarly, Mike Huemer's version of foundationalism allows for the justification of evidentially isolated beliefs, in view of the principle of phenomenal conservatism: if it seems to S as if p, then S is justified in believing that p, as long as there are no defeaters. No other seemings are needed, and so no other justified beliefs are needed.

2. On this version of foundationalism, however, the belief in question can be any belief at all: it is not restricted to a belief about one's own present experience.

10. Does the Theory of Justification Rest upon Contingent Facts?

Foundherentism

1. Haack's foundherentism assigns a different status to perceptual experiences than, for example, to ESP experiences, and a different status to memory beliefs than to ESP beliefs. Thus, she raises the question why sensory states are treated differently than extrasensory states, and 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)

2. The upshot is that if one lived in a world where people had, say, telepathic powers, Haack's foundationalist account would need to be modified.

3. An account of justification that depends upon contingent truths about the world seems misguided: one should aim at a theory of justification that will generate the correct answers regardless of what the world is like.

Foundationalism – Indirect Realist Version

1. The indirect realist version of foundationalism does not incorporate any factors that depend upon the way the world is.

Foundationalism – Mike Huemer's Direct Realist Version

1. The same is true in the case of Mike Huemer's version of foundationalism.