

Phil. 3340
Notes #9: The Infinite Regress Problem

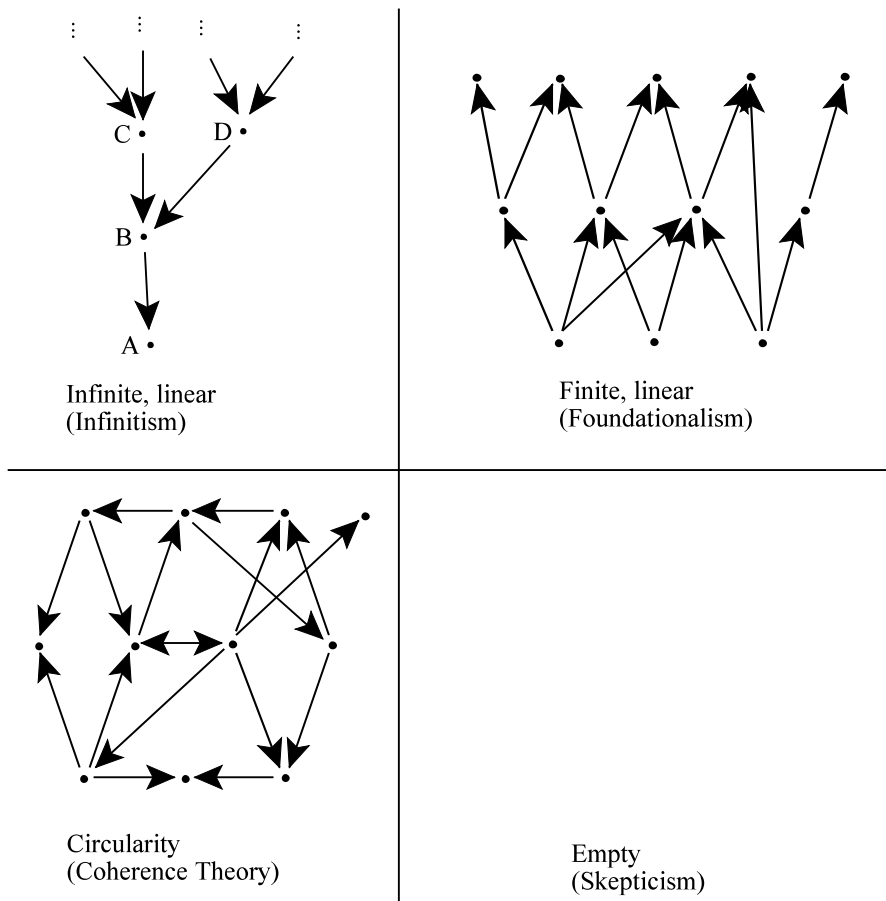
I. The Infinite Regress Problem: Introduction

Basic Ideas:

- Sometimes we believe things for *reasons*.
- This is one (alleged) way a belief can be *justified*.
- Justificatory dependence: $Jp \text{ dep } Jq$
 - This means you would need to be justified in believing q *in order* to be justified in believing p . Jq is a precondition for Jp .
 - This is true if q is your reason for believing p .
 - It may be true even if q isn't your actual reason for believing p , but is somehow presupposed or required by your belief that p . (Examples below.)
 - JP means you have justification for P. Does not entail that you actually believe P.
- Properties of Just. Dep.: Asymmetric & Transitive?

The Structure of Justification

Our justified beliefs may have one of four structures:



II. The Infinite Regress Argument for Skepticism

1. S knows (has a justified belief) that P only if S has some reason for believing that P. (Premise.)
2. S's reason for believing that P must also be known. (Premise.)
3. There are only 3 possible kinds of series of reasons:
 - a. circular series,
 - b. infinite regress, and
 - c. the foundationalist structure. (Premise.)
4. A circular series of reasons does not generate knowledge (justification). (Premise.)
5. No one can complete an infinite series of reasons. (Premise.)
6. The foundationalist structure cannot yield knowledge (justification). (From 1, 2)
7. Therefore, we have no knowledge (justified belief). (From 3-6)

See following sections for arguments for (1), (4), (5).

III. Against Foundationalism

Candidates for foundational beliefs:

Perceptual beliefs

P = There is a white piece of paper before me.

This depends on:

Q: I have the capacity to discriminate white pieces of paper.

U: There are no factors present that would probably cause me to make mistakes about P.

Beliefs about immediate experiences

P = It appears to me that something is blue.

This depends on:

U: There are no factors present that would probably cause me to make a mistake about P.

About the argument here:

- Similar points could be made about any allegedly basic belief.
- Oakley is not claiming that we infer P from U in the above examples. He is claiming that JP depends on JU.
- Argument for this: If U were not justified, then P would not be justified.
Think about: Is this sufficient for (JP dep JU)?
- Two foundationalist responses that Oakley preempts:
 1. U just has to be true, we don't have to justifiedly believe it.
⇒ But in Oakley's cases, U is true.
 2. U isn't part of the justification for P, but $\sim U$ would be a defeater for it.
⇒ But in Oakley's cases, $\sim U$ is not justified, so no defeater is present.

IV. Against the Coherence Theory

A. Intuition: circular reasoning is vicious.

Coherentist says: "big circles are okay; only little circles are bad". This seems arbitrary.

B. The alternate-coherent-systems objection:

- Possible to construct alternative coherent systems of beliefs, one including P, one including $\sim P$.
- Thus, both P and $\sim P$ would be justified.
- This means neither is justified.
- So nothing is justified (by coherence).
- Reply: Only actually held beliefs count.

C. Justification too easy to generate:

1. Coherence theory implies that if S has a coherent set of beliefs, then any arbitrary belief can easily be justified.
 - Assume P, Q, R, and S are coherent. T is an unrelated belief.
 - The following is also coherent: (P&T), (Q&T), (R&T), (S&T).
 - Therefore, (P&T), etc., would be justified.
 - Therefore, T is justified.
 - So any arbitrary belief may easily be justified.
2. But one cannot easily render any arbitrary belief justified (even if one has a coherent system).
3. So the coherence theory is false.

V. Against Infitism

Problems:

1. How to distinguish infinite series of justified beliefs from infinite series of unjustified beliefs?
2. How to know that we have an infinite series?
3. Difficult to articulate even a few stages of the series.
4. If P is justified by an infinite series, $\sim P$ could equally well be justified. Perhaps any belief could be justified, by finding some infinite series?
5. Too easy to have justified beliefs according to infinitism. Suppose I believe:
 - There is a carpet, the first foot of which is red.
 - There is a carpet, the first 1.5 feet of which is red.
 - There is a carpet, the first 1.75 feet of which is red.

...

Surely this isn't enough for all those beliefs to be justified.

6. Any arbitrary belief can be justified. If the first series is justified, then the second one is:
 - P1 ← P2 ← P3 ← ...
 - P1&T ← P2&T ← P3&T ← ...

VI. Objection: Skepticism Self-Defeating

“[T]he above discussion provides the basis for a suitable rejoinder to the critic who would

turn the conclusion against itself, remarking that if it is true, we cannot be justified in believing it, or indeed the premises from which it is drawn. The convinced skeptic will of course embrace this conclusion, kicking away his ladder along with everything else. But in any case, I will regard my current purpose as fulfilled if my reader accepts that the conclusion is derivable from the currently unquestioned.” (385-6)

Is this a response to the objection?

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Notes #10: The Coherence Theory of Justification

I. Problem for Foundationalism

- Function of Justification: Means to truth.
- Therefore, justified beliefs should be thereby likely to be true.
- Let B be a foundational belief.
 - B has some feature F that renders B foundational.
 - ☞ F distinguishes foundational beliefs from arbitrary beliefs.
 - Beliefs with F should be thereby likely to be true.
 - The believer should be aware of these facts: (a) that B has F, and (b) that beliefs with F are likely to be true.
 - Therefore, B is not foundational.
 - By reductio, no belief is foundational.

II. The Coherence Theory

A. Basic idea

- Alternative views are bad: Skepticism, foundationalism, infinite regress.
- Justification is circular.
- This is not a theory of truth.

B. Nonlinear conception of justification

- Overall belief system justified by its coherence.
- Individual belief justified by its connection to that system.

C. Coherentist observation

- How can a coherentist accommodate observation?
- We have “cognitively spontaneous beliefs”.
- These are initially unjustified. (See arguments against foundationalism.)
- They become justified when many of them fit together into a coherent system.
- The Observation Requirement: A coherent belief system is justified only if it includes a variety of cognitively spontaneous beliefs, and beliefs attributing high reliability to them.

III. Objections

A. Knowledge of one's own beliefs

- Such knowledge is required by the theory.
- This is empirical knowledge.
- It looks foundational. Must know what one's belief system is, before one can judge it to be coherent.
- Reply: “[N]o claim is being made that these metabeliefs possess any sort of intrinsic or independent justification Rather, the approximate correctness of these beliefs is an

essential presupposition for coherentist justification, and ... such justification ... must be understood as relativized to this presupposition.” (400)

B. Mustn't Cognitively Spontaneous Beliefs Have Some Degree of Justification?

- Why are coherent systems likely to be true? The Witness Scenario:
 - Several witnesses to a crime are interviewed, with no opportunity to collaborate. The witnesses independently tell highly coherent stories.
 - Coherence of false stories is highly unlikely.
 - So this is evidence of the truth of the stories.
 - This is true even if no witness has any initial degree of credibility. “For as long as we are confident that the reports of the various witnesses are genuinely independent of each other, a high enough degree of coherence among them will eventually dictate the hypothesis of truth telling as the only available explanation of their agreement—even, indeed, if those individual reports initially have a high degree of negative credibility, that is, are much more likely to be false than true” (401)
- Note: Bonjour's last claim is false.

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Notes #11: An Indirect Realist Foundationalism

I. Basic Theories of Perception

- Realism: The view that (i) there is an external world, (ii) perception gives us some kind of awareness and knowledge of it. Two forms of realism:

- Direct realism: We have (i) direct awareness and (ii) foundational knowledge of the external world.

Important concept: Indirect awareness: awareness of x dependent upon awareness of y.

Direct awareness: awareness of x not dependent on awareness of y. Examples: Thermometer, hand in water.

- Indirect realism: (i) We are directly aware of mental representations (ideas, impressions, sense data) in perception, and only indirectly aware of external objects. (ii) We have foundational knowledge about mental representations, and inferential knowledge of the external world.

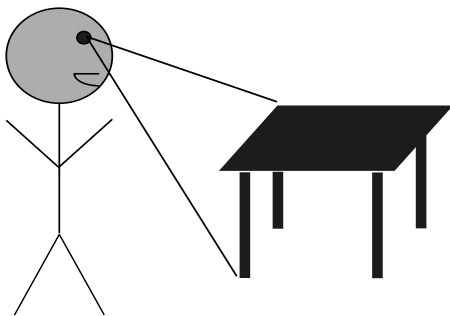
“Sense Data”: The supposed mental things that (i) we are directly aware of in perception, and (ii) have the properties that perceptually appear to us (color, shape, etc.)

- Anti-realism: The denial of realism. Two versions:

- Skepticism: We know nothing about the external world.

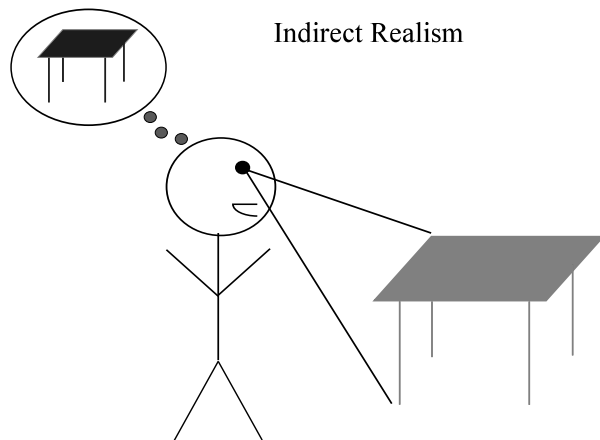
- Idealism: There is no external world (i.e., external to all minds). There are only minds and “ideas” in the mind.

Direct realism



A person being directly aware of a table.

Indirect Realism



A person have a mental image of a table caused by a table.

II. Arguments against DR

A. Argument from Perspective:

1. The table you see seems to diminish as you move away from it.
2. The real table does not diminish at this time.
3. Therefore, the table you see \neq the real table.

Objections:

- (1) is false. The table appears farther away, not smaller.
- Argument is invalid, since “seems to diminish” does not imply “diminishes.” The argument is thus of the form:

Fa.
~Gb.
∴ a≠b.

B. Argument from Hallucination:

1. When you hallucinate a pink rat, you’re aware of a pink, rat-shaped thing.
2. There is no pink, rat-shaped physical object.
3. Therefore, you’re aware of a sense datum.
4. The proximate causes of this sense datum can be duplicated in a case of normal perception.
5. Whenever proximate causes are duplicated, so are effects.
6. Therefore, sense data also occur during normal perception.

Problem/question for DR: What is the object of awareness in a case of hallucination?

Reply:

- Nothing, because hallucination is not awareness. “Aware of” and “perceive” are factive.
- (1) is false. Compare: what is one aware of (what does one know) by having a false belief?
- Note: DR holds that perception is direct awareness of external reality; it does not hold that hallucination is.

C. Argument from The Illusoriness of Colors:

Main argument:

1. The only thing one ever sees are colors/colored things.
2. Physical objects have no color. (Only mental images do.)
3. Therefore, one does not see external objects. (One only sees mental images.)

Arguments for premise 2:

a. The argument from particles:

1. If an object is composed entirely of colorless parts, then it is colorless.
2. Elementary particles are colorless.
3. Physical objects are composed entirely of elementary particles.
4. Therefore, physical objects are colorless.

b. The argument from relativity: other species

1. Different species have different (incompatible) color perceptions. (Dogs, birds, etc.)
2. If physical objects have color, then (at most) one species is “right,” and the others are “wrong.” (From 1)
3. It is false that one (or no) species are right while the others are wrong.
4. So physical objects do not have color.

c. The argument from relativity: other people

As above, except that (1) Different people have different (incompatible) color perceptions: normal variations between people; color blindness; variations in lighting conditions.

III. How We Know of the External World

- *Best explanation* for patterns in our sense data.
- Enables successful predictions of sense data. (Cat example)
- Objection: What about the evil demon / BIV / dream hypothesis? Must rule out these explanations.
 - Reply: Silliness. No one considers such alternatives for scientific theories.

IV. Objections to IR

A. *The problem of spatial properties*

Main argument:

1. What we are directly aware of in perception has spatial properties.
2. Only physical things have spatial properties (not mental things).
3. So what we are aware of is physical (not mental).

Question: Where could sense data be located?

5 possible answers:

Problems

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Nowhere | a. In perception, we are aware of things with spatial properties.
b. Whatever has spatial properties has a location.
c. ∴ The objects of awareness have locations. |
| 2. In your head | • There are no little brown tables in your head when you see a table. (Wouldn't they get in the way of the brain material that's already there?)
• Perhaps sense data = brain states? But brain states do not have the <i>right</i> spatial properties to be what we perceive. |
| 3. Wherever the distal object is. | • What about dreams, hallucinations?
• Conflict with the theory of relativity (non-local causation) |
| 4. Wherever the object <i>appears</i> to be. | • More conflict with relativity. (non-local causation)
• What about dreams of non-existent places?
• Problem with the brain-in-a-vat case. |
| 5. In an alternate space ('phenomenal space') | • More conflict w/ relativity (requires separation between space & time)
• How can things in different spaces interact?
• General bizarreness. |

B. *The Argument from Indeterminacy*

1. In perception, some appearances are indeterminate. (Examples: shades of color; apparent distances of objects; inability to read far away writing)
 - x has an indeterminate *appearance* = x appears to be $(A \vee B)$, but x doesn't appear to be A and x doesn't appear to be B . Or: x appears to have a determinable D , but there is no

determinate of d of D such that x appears to have d .

- x has indeterminate *properties* = x is $(A \vee B)$, but x isn't A and x isn't B . Or: x has a determinable D , but x has no determinate of D .

2. If sense data exist, then they have all and only the properties they appear to have. (Asserted by most advocates of sense data. Implied by traditional arguments for sense data.)
3. Nothing can have indeterminate properties. (This would be a contradiction.)
4. So sense data do not exist. (from 1-3.)

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Notes #12: A Direct Realist Version of Foundationalism

I. Foundationalism

(i) Some knowledge is foundational, and (ii) all other knowledge is based on foundational knowledge.

Foundational belief/knowledge: Belief/knowledge that has foundational justification.

Foundational Justification: non-inferential justification; justification that does not depend on further beliefs.

II. Traditional Arguments for Foundationalism

A. *The Infinite Regress Argument*

1. A series of reasons must have 1 of 3 structures:
 - a. Circular structure
 - b. Infinite regress
 - c. Foundationalist structure.
2. Circular reasoning cannot yield knowledge/justified beliefs.
3. No one has an infinite series of reasons.
4. Therefore, (1c) is the only possible structure of knowledge/justified beliefs. (From 1, 2, 3.)
5. There is knowledge/justified belief.
6. So foundationalism is true. (From 4, 5.)

B. *The Appeal to Examples*

- a. I know that I am thinking.
- b. I know that $A = A$.

I don't know either of these by giving 'arguments' for them.

III. Question for Foundationalism

What, if anything, *differentiates* foundational beliefs from arbitrary beliefs?

A Principle of Foundational Justification:

Phenomenal Conservatism: If it seems to S that P, then S thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that P.

"It seems to S that P":

- This is a sui generis propositional attitude.
- Reported in English by "it seems that P," "it appears as if P," "P is obvious," "P is plausible," etc.
- Not a belief.
- Not under voluntary control. Often unaffected by beliefs.
- Includes perceptual experiences, quasi-memories, intuitions

Justification: This is read in an *internalist* sense. It addresses questions like:

What am I to believe? (Foley) More elaborately:

What does it make sense for S to believe, from the standpoint of his desire for true beliefs

and the absence of false beliefs, and given his present internal state?

Prima Facie Justification is

- a. Foundational, but
- b. Defeasible.

IV. Why accept PC?

PC is foundationally justified

- a. PC is self-evident. Bear in mind
 - The internalist sense of justification.
- b. All beliefs based on appearances.

All arguments against PC are self-defeating.

1. To make an argument for/against anything, we must be able to distinguish between serious arguments & pseudo-arguments.

Serious Argument:

- (A)
1. To know that P, one must have a reason for believing that P.
 2. One's reason must also be known.
 3. One cannot have circular reasons.
 4. One cannot have an infinite regress of reasons.
 5. The only structures of a series of reasons are (a) circular, (b) infinite regress, or (c) starting from something there is no reason for.
 6. Therefore, one can never know anything.

Pseudo-Arguments:

- (B)
1. $7=9$.
 2. Therefore, one can never know anything.
- (C)
1. There are 17 inhabited planets in the Andromeda galaxy.
 2. If there are 17 inhabited planets in the Andromeda galaxy, then skepticism is false.
 3. Therefore, skepticism is false.

2. We distinguish serious arguments & pseudo-arguments on the basis of what *appears* true/valid on its face.
3. Therefore, our way of distinguishing serious arguments & pseudo-arguments presupposes PC. (From 2.)
4. Therefore, all argumentation presupposes PC. (From 1, 3.)
5. Therefore, all arguments against PC are self-defeating. (From 4.)

More generally:

1. (Nearly) all beliefs, including relevant epistemological beliefs, rest on appearances.
2. A belief is justified only if what it is based on is a source of justification for the proposition believed.
3. If PC is false, appearances are not a source of justification for beliefs.
4. If PC is false, (nearly) all beliefs, including relevant epistemological beliefs, are unjustified. (From 1, 2, 3)
5. So alternative epistemological theories to PC are self-defeating: if such a theory is true, our belief in it would be unjustified. (From 4)

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Notes #13: Moral Knowledge

I. The Problem of Moral Knowledge

How do we know evaluative truths? Several theories:

1. Non-cognitivism: There are no evaluative truths or falsehoods. There are no evaluative propositions.
2. Skepticism: There are evaluative propositions, but we can't know any of them.
3. Ethical naturalism: Evaluative knowledge is empirical.
4. Ethical intuitionism: Evaluative knowledge is a priori.
 - a. Some evaluative truths are self-evident and known by 'ethical intuition.'
 - b. All other evaluative knowledge depends on those.

II. The Concept of Intuition

Initial intellectual appearances:

- *Appearance*: the mental state you are in when you say, "it seems to me that P" (where P is some proposition).
- *Intellectual appearances*: appearances that depend on just thinking & understanding (as opposed to sense perception, memory, or introspection).
- *Initial appearances*: the way things appear prior to reasoning.

Examples:

- The shortest path between two points is a straight line.
- No object can be red and blue at the same time.
- If A is inside B, and B is inside C, then A is inside C.

Examples from ethics:

- Suffering is bad.
- Other things being equal, one should bring about good things, rather than bad things.
- If A is better than B, and B is better than C, then A is better than C.

III. Phenomenal Conservatism

- If it seems to S that P, then S thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that P.
- The self-defeat argument for PC:
 1. (Almost) all beliefs are based on appearances. (Exceptions: faith, self-deception.)
 2. So if PC is false, then all beliefs are unjustified.
 3. So one cannot be justified in believing an alternative view to PC.

IV. Important Points about Intuition

- Intuitions are not merely beliefs. Examples:

Organ Harvesting: A doctor in a hospital has five patients who need organ transplants; otherwise, they will die. They all need different organs. He also has one healthy patient, in for a routine checkup, who happens to be compatible with the five. Should the doctor kill the healthy

patient in order to distribute his organs to the five others?

Trolley Car Problem: A runaway trolley is heading for a fork in the track. If it takes the left fork, it will collide with and kill five people; if it takes the right fork, it will collide with and kill one person. None of the people can be moved out of the way in time. There is a switch that determines which fork the trolley takes. It is presently set to send the trolley to the left. You can flip the switch, sending the trolley to the right instead. Should you flip the switch?

- Some intuitions are universal. Example:
Easy Trolley Car Problem: As in Trolley Car Problem, except that there is no one on the right fork; if the trolley goes down the right fork, it will run into a pile of sand which will safely stop it. Should you flip the switch?
- Not all intuitions need be true. But intuitions are *presumed* true until proven false.
- Not all moral judgements are “intuitions.”

V. Common Objections

A. “We need arguments for believing intuition to be reliable.”

Response:

- This is a *global skeptical argument*: It entails that no one can know *anything* whatsoever.
- Global skepticism not relevant here. Besides its being absurd, we’re interested in what might make ethics different from other fields, like science.

B. “Intuitionists cannot explain disagreement.”

1. Moral disagreements are common.
2. Intuitionism can’t explain why moral disagreements occur.
3. Anti-realism can.
4. So anti-realism is better than intuitionism.

Responses:

- a. The prevalence of non-moral disagreements. Examples:
 - Who shot JFK?
 - The Mead/Freeman controversy
 - Sports controversies
 - Einstein/Bohr debate

No one thinks that any of these things are “subjective.”

- b. The fallibility of human beings. Humans have numerous sources of error: Confusion, ignorance, oversight, misunderstanding/incomplete understanding, bias, miscalculation, etc.
- c. Disagreements are especially common in 4 kinds of cases:
 - i) When people have strong personal biases, esp. self-interest.
 - ii) When people defer to their culture.
 - iii) When people defer to religion.
 - iv) All philosophical issues.

C. “Intuitionists cannot resolve disagreement”

1. If two people have differing intuitions, the intuitionist can give no way to resolve the disagreement.

2. If a meta-ethical theory provides no way of resolving (some?) disagreements, then the theory is false.
3. So intuitionism is false.

Responses:

- a. Some ethical disagreements can be resolved by appeal to ethical arguments.
- b. What's the justification for (2)?
- c. No other theory provides a way of resolving all ethical disagreements.

D. "Intuitionism is weird"

1. Intuition is weird.
2. Objective moral values are weird.
3. If something is weird, it doesn't exist. (?)
4. So, intuition and objective moral values don't exist.

Responses:

Is there objective weirdness?

- a. If there is no objective weirdness, then "weirdness" isn't evidence of non-existence.
- b. If there is objective weirdness, what is it?
 - i) "Weird" = "very different from most other things"?
 - Why think that weird things in this sense don't exist?
 - ii) "Weird" = "counter-intuitive"?
 - Intuition is not counter-intuitive. Nor are moral properties.
 - iii) "Weird" = "poorly understood"?
 - Why think weird things in this sense don't exist?

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Notes #14: Review of Unit 2

Know these terms/concepts:

Direct realism

Indirect realism

Idealism

Skepticism

Sense data

Indeterminacy:

‘indeterminate appearances’

‘indeterminate properties’

Foundationalism, foundational knowledge

Prima facie justification

Phenomenal Conservatism

Coherentism

Cognitively spontaneous beliefs

Intuition

Know these people's positions:

Oakley

BonJour

Russell

Jackson

Huemer

Know what these arguments are & what they support:

Argument from perspective

Argument from hallucination

Argument from the illusoriness of colors

Russell's argument for external world

The 'problem of spatial properties', incl. at least one reason:

- Why sense data must be somewhere
- Why they aren't in your head
- Why they aren't wherever the distal object is
- Why they aren't wherever they appear to be
- Why they aren't in 'phenomenal space'

The argument from indeterminacy

Infinite regress argument for foundationalism, or skepticism

Self-defeat argument for phenomenal conservatism

Oakley's objection to foundational beliefs:

& what he thinks perceptual beliefs depend on

& what he thinks introspective beliefs depend on

BonJour's objection to foundationalism

BonJour on why coherent beliefs are likely to be true

Objections to coherentism

Circular reasoning objection

Alternate coherent systems

Objections to intuitionism

Reliability objection, & intuitionist response

Explanation of disagreement