Can Foundationalism Survive Revision?

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Abstract

It is typically assumed that foundationalism as a theory of epistemic justification is distinct from coherentist and infinitist positions. Moreover, it is accepted that foundationalism can be further distinguished into "classical" (or strong) and "modest" varieties. However, in this paper, I outline an argument that purports to show that there are no classical foundationalists and that modest foundationalism ultimately reduces to a form of coherentism or infinitism. Specifically, I argue that current approaches to foundationalism are insufficient for dealing with the notion of revision, or how we *actually* go about believing things.

1. Foundationalism, Coherentism, and Infinitism

Defining the justification relation between beliefs and perhaps sometimes non-doxastic elements like experiences is notoriously difficult.[1] The problems of justification in epistemology can be (loosely) cut up into two main "questions:" (1) when are our beliefs justified and (2) what does it mean for a belief to be justified? The former is a standard epistemic question, whereas some philosophers may call the latter a meta-epistemic question. Those said philosophers will also usually agree that it is ultimately a metanormative question, since we usually will say "P justifies belief in Φ" is true when P gives reason to believe in Φ, and we are back to simple normative discourse—discourse nonetheless about beliefs.[2] The former question is a more classical question in epistemology and epistemologists typically divide up approaches into three camps: foundationalist, coherentist, and infinitist approaches.

Once again, demarcating between and defining these categories is excruciatingly difficult. A simple account of a foundationalist thesis is one which claims that there are some foundational beliefs which are positively justified and these beliefs do not depend in any profound sense on other beliefs for their positive justification.[3] We may appeal to some illustrative geometric intuitions, such as knowledge being like an inverted "pyramid" that builds "upwards" from a small set of foundational beliefs and many inferentially justified, non-foundational beliefs.[4] Then, and perhaps as a more recent solution to some of the many problems plaguing epistemology, there is coherentism. Certain popular brands of coherentism have some difficulty distinguishing themselves from foundationalism because they tend to privilege certain sources of justification or certain beliefs, and it is difficult to fit these into a "web of belief" without falling back into some (perhaps fallible, but still) foundational structure of knowledge.[5] Then there is infinitism, which is the least popular choice of the three, which proposes that our knowledge is an infinitely extending series of justifications where each belief is justified by some other belief all the way down. In part, the seeming impossibility of *actually* having infinitely many beliefs to justify at each step suggests that infinitism in an extremely primitive sense is incoherent. Famously, Charles Sanders Peirce accepted infinitism during a certain duration of his career, but this view is different from the aforementioned naive account.[6] Indeed the defense of infinitism given by Peter Klein accepted

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[1] Erik Olsson, "Coherentist Theories of Epistemic Justification," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023), eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/justep-coherence/.

[2] Matthew Chrisman, "Metanormative Theory and the Meaning of Deontic Modals," in *Deontic Modality*, eds. Nate Charlow and Matthew Chrisman (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[3] Paul K. Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[4] I leave other problems, such as whether such foundational beliefs are incorrigible outside of the scope of defining foundationalism.

[5] Laurence BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Harvard University Press, 1985).

[6] Scott F. Aikin, "Prospects for Peircean Epistemic Infinitism," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 6, no. 2 (2009): 71–87, https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-90000117.

infinitism as a view about *possible* justification.[7] These are still left with the issue that at any given point, the infinitists' set of beliefs must actually be finite, and therefore the infinitist distinguishes herself only from the foundationalist in the sense that she would (ideally) have no foundational beliefs—all her foundational beliefs are incidentally foundational.

So, we are left in the depressing position that almost all views are (practically) identical to some form of foundationalism, or at the very least are very difficult to distinguish from various different brands of foundationalism. Yet very clearly these views are distinct—coherentists approach epistemology very differently from foundationalists, likewise foundationalists approach epistemology differently from infinitists, and so on. What, then, is the difference?

2. Justification and Inference

It is obvious that we sometimes revise our beliefs about things. However, many problems in keeping with our definitions of knowledge come when we must deal with the problems of revising beliefs.

For now, we may take the perspective of a classical foundationalist, letting us have a set of true, infallible, incorrigible, non-inferentially justified beliefs $\Phi_0,\Phi_1,...,\Phi_n$. From these beliefs we may derive some non-basic, inferentially justified beliefs $\Pi_1,\Pi_2,...,\Pi_n$. It follows from the incorrigibility of our basic beliefs that no Π_i can imply the negation of any Φ_i or the need to revise—our basic beliefs hold come what may. Yet, there is nothing physically stopping a foundationalist from simply rejecting or revising some Φ_i, or making an error in deduction (as we humans regularly do) from the basic beliefs to derive some belief Π_i from which she derives the negation of (and thereby the need to revise) one of her basic beliefs. The situation becomes even worse if we weaken our requirements for basic beliefs and allow them to be fallible, since now it is possible to (ideally) derive from a set of basic, non-inferentially justified beliefs their negation! In either of these scenarios, there is nothing in reality which prevents a foundationalist from merely tossing some of her beliefs and revising or mistakenly concluding one of her beliefs is incorrect! When this occurs, she is forced to revise her beliefs accordingly. She has two options: either she can modus ponens and simply reject her basic belief Φ_i, or she can modus tollens and discard as many non-basic beliefs as she can until she can no longer derive a contradiction. For the classical foundationalist, the choice is clear: because her basic beliefs are incorrigible, she should toss her inferentially derived beliefs until all her basic beliefs are preserved. But there are no *actually* incorrigible beliefs! Yet again we are in a dismal situation, only this time we have discovered there are no actual classical foundationalists (only perhaps, ideal ones).

Looking to the modest foundationalist for answers, we will notice two important details: (a) there is nothing wrong with rejecting basic beliefs, because they are fallible, and (b) when we

[7] Peter D. Klein, "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons," *Noûs* 33, no. 13 (1999): 297–325, https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.33.s13.14.

reject our basic beliefs, we have reason for revising our beliefs accordingly, namely the beliefs we use to derive our basic belief(s)' negation. However, (b) looks especially damning to our old account of foundationalism, because it implies both that our basic beliefs may, in fact, depend on other beliefs, and not just that they depend on our other beliefs, but our other beliefs may give reason for holding our basic beliefs, because they can both negatively justify negating a certain basic belief and positively justify a modification. So, we are now in a situation where perhaps all of our beliefs may depend, and be justified by, other beliefs, all without doing anything prohibited by the modest foundationalist! So modest foundationalists appear to be no different than coherentists. In the opposite direction for coherentists, there is nothing stopping us from simply choosing beliefs to "hold come what may." We could for whatever reason, perhaps because we are possessed by some nature of our psychology, find it extremely difficult to discard a set of beliefs $\Phi_1,\Phi_2,...,\Phi_n$ and simply modus tollens whenever such beliefs are implied to be false by auxiliary beliefs in our web. Note that at any given point, merely looking at the way in which our beliefs are justified in the web does not tell the whole story, because it does not tell us which beliefs we want or actually privilege. So, there is evidently something additional that we are losing if we require coherentism, infinitism, and foundationalism to be distinguished merely by the justification relation.

We may then observe that the structure of the beliefs for the modest foundationalist and the coherentist may end up looking the same, in that we may ultimately end up having justified our basic beliefs inferentially from other basic beliefs, but the modest foundationalist can always simply reject the inferential justification (which was a historical reason for their belief, but 3 not a epistemic-normative one) and take their newly acquired basic belief to be non-inferentially justified, while the coherentist will always be required to treat the historical reason as an epistemic-normative reason for their belief within a larger web of belief. This response is, however, extremely lacking. If there is no practical difference between modest foundationalists and coherentists, why do we draw the distinction at all? In fact, the modest foundationalist is merely pretending they did not infer their new basic be lief when in reality it was the inference from other beliefs which rationally compelled them towards their new basic belief. This charge takes the form of the following argument:

1. If all beliefs can ultimately be inferentially justified and then inserted into a belief system, then such a system is either coherentist or infinitist.
2. In modest foundationalism, all beliefs can ultimately be inferentially justified and inserted into the belief system.
3. Therefore, modest foundationalism is either coherentist or infinitist.

It is difficult to dispute either premise, 1 seems to be true by definition and given that rejecting (2) would require denying that the modest foundationalist can inferentially justify rejecting or revising an old basic belief into a new one, neither premise looks easy to reject. We may recall the following charge against infinitism, mentioned earlier: since nobody can actually hold infinitely many beliefs, (actual) infinitists are foundationalists (incidentally). Our charge against classical foundationalism is similar in that while we may be able to conceive of individuals with beliefs they do not ever reject, in practice there is no guarantee that a belief will be held forever. Thus, the coherentism–foundationalism distinction seems to be getting increasingly dubious and there is little hope of piecing it back together, or so it seems.

3. Revision

One immediate response to the objections raised in the previous section is that foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism are all views about what knowledge structures should ultimately look like. Then, however, they tell us nothing about what our beliefs (and their structure under the justification relation) actually look like! They may, however, tell us what revision will look like. This is apparent as when we revise our beliefs, we do so with the goal of approaching what we have deemed the ideal; the foundationalist will try to revise their beliefs such that they do not have any circularity or unjustified non-basic beliefs while minimizing loss to their basic beliefs, the coherentist will try to have their beliefs cohere under revision, and the infinitist will try to extend the chains of justification within the finite time and resources that restrict them. If, then, foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism are about revision as previously outlined, then we can reasonably conclude that it was a mistake to divide our views into three firm categories, as we are willing to revise certain views more than other views

An immediate consequence of the new approach is that certain beliefs are more basic than others in two distinct senses: some beliefs are more integrated into the belief network than others and some beliefs we are more likely to revise than others. We derive the following argument:

1. If what distinguishes a basic belief from a non-basic belief is ultimately a continuous property, then there are degrees of basicness.
2. What distinguishes a basic belief from a non-basic belief is a continuous property.
3. Thus, there are degrees of 'basicness.'

The premise in question is 2, but it is clear that either account (or perhaps a synthesis of the two) is continuous: if basicness is about justification within a web of belief, then some beliefs are more justified (integrated) within the web than others, and if basicness is about willingness to revise, some beliefs we are more willing to hold come what may than others. Recalling from

the previous section, we established that foundationalists do not want to ideally reject that their beliefs can be supported, at least in some historical (revision) sense, by other beliefs they may have or currently do hold. So, we are left finally in a position where the previous seemingly rigid distinction is dissolved, and we have now found out that, in actuality, we cannot appeal only to justification for understanding the distinction between foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, examining the way we *actually* believe things leads us to discover the crucial role of revision in our epistemic theories. If we accept that we routinely revise either falsely assumed basic beliefs, or simply wrong basic beliefs, this throws a serious wrench into any division between classical foundationalism, modest foundationalism, or coherentist/infinitist positions. Relegating such differences to an *ideal* realm which we strive to shows that such distinctions really become matters of how willing we are to revise different beliefs, creating degrees of basicness. Future work in epistemology can be done on examining which factors create relevant differences in how willing we are to revise beliefs.

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