

EPISTEMIC COMPATIBILISM

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I. Introduction

The debate between defenders of 'foundational' views of justification and their critics is of current and wide interest among epistemologists. Many have declared foundationalism to be defunct or at least seriously discredited, and there has been a corresponding increase of interest in 'coherentist' epistemologies. Others have maintained that reports of the death of foundationalism have been greatly exaggerated; often such writers claim that 'minimal' or 'modest' foundational views do not succumb to common anti-foundational attacks. What I wish to argue here is that the distance between foundationalism per se and coherentism per se is not as great as it is often played-up to be, and that in fact some varieties of these two sorts of view are entirely compatible.

II. Foundationalism

I take 'foundationalism' and 'coherentism' to be names for different kinds of theories concerning the structure of doxastic justification.¹ In the main, contemporary writers tend to see foundationalism as motivated² and supported by the so-called 'regress argument'.² Roderick Chisholm provides us with a classic formulation of this argument:

In many instances the answers to our questions will take the following form: "What justifies me in thinking that I know that a is F is the fact that it is evident to me that b is G." . . . This type of answer to our Socratic questions shifts the burden of justification from one claim to another. For we may now ask, "What justifies me in counting it as evident that b is G?" or "What justifies me in thinking I know that b is

G?" And possibly we will formulate once again, an answer that b is G is the fact that it is evident that c is H." . . . We might try to continue ad infinitum, justifying each new claim that we elicit by still another claim. Or we might be tempted to complete a vicious circle: in such a case, having justified "a is F" by appeal to "b is G," and "b is G" by reference to "c is H," we could then justify "c is H" by reference to "a is F." But if we are rational beings, we will do neither of these things. For we shall find that our Socratic questions lead us to a proper stopping place.³

Of course, Chisholm's formulation of the argument is by no means complete, for he does not tell us why it is that rationality forbids us to accept an infinite regress or a circle of justifiers. In a recent discussion of the regress argument, William Alston invites us to think of the structure of the justification of a 'mediately justified belief' (i.e., a belief that is justified by some other belief or beliefs) as

. . . a more or less extensive tree structure, in which the original belief and every other putatively medially justified belief form nodes from which one or more branches issue, in such a way that every branch is a part of some branch that issues from the original belief.⁴

Now, Alston proceeds to tell us, as the tree branches upward from the 'trunk' (i.e., from the original belief), there are only four possible courses that any given branch might take:

- (1) The branch might terminate in an 'immediately justified' belief (i.e., a belief that is justified by something other than another belief).
- (2) The branch might terminate in an unjustified belief.
- (3) The branch might form a loop.
- (4) The branch might continue infinitely.

It is not part of our present task to conduct a critical study of the details of this argument; suffice it to say merely that the point of the argument is that since, for various putative reasons we shall not pause to examine, options (2) - (4) must be ruled out. Hence, we may view every mediately justified belief as the trunk of a tree of justification, each branch of which terminates in an immediately justified belief. We can see that what the regress arguments demands is that a theory of₅ doxastic justification conform to the following:

- (A) There are immediately justified beliefs.
- (B) All mediately justified beliefs (ultimately) derive their justificatory support from immediately justified beliefs.

Now it will certainly not have escaped the attention of anyone familiar with the literature that most ('traditional') foundational theories incorporate yet a third tenant, namely:

- (C) Immediately justified beliefs enjoy some such privileged epistemic status as incorrigibility, infallibility, or indubitability.

Indeed, Keith Lehrer has called something like (C) "the fundamental doctrine of foundation theories", and F. L. Will tells us that his recent anti-foundational polemic "is essentially a case against incorrigibility".⁶ However, it would be a mistake to regard (C) as an essential component of foundational views for the following two reasons: first, the regress argument itself does not demand that immediately justified beliefs enjoy any such feature as incorrigibility, and so forth--when foundationalists have maintained that the 'foundations' must be, e.g., incorrigible, they have done so primarily due to considerations independent of the regress argument; and second, there have been foundational theories, e.g., that of Thomas Reid, that do not require any incorrigible (etc.) beliefs. Thus, we may take (A) and (B) alone as constituting what is essential to foundational theories of doxastic justification as such. In recent literature, writers have referred to foundational views that include only (A) and (B), and that do not include (C), as 'minimal' or 'modest' foundational views; some refer to views that also include (C) as 'radical'

foundationalism. We shall adopt their terminology here.

Before moving onto a discussion of coherence views, I want to point out some of the many issues regarding what we might loosely refer to as the content of a theory of doxastic justification that have been left entirely undecided or unprejudged even by accepting (A) and (B) as defining the form of such a view. Here are some examples: (a) In exactly what way or ways can a belief come to be justified by something other than its relations to other beliefs? (b) In exactly what way or ways can one belief confer warrant upon another? (c) In order for one belief to justify another, must the former be true or merely justified itself? (d) If, for some person S, S's belief that p is justified by his/her belief that q, must S infer p from q? (e) If, in order for one of S's beliefs to justify another must the former be justified (or true)? and so forth. Different answers to such questions would generate different theories of doxastic justification, but they would all be foundational theories.

III. Coherentism

Traditionally, coherence theories have been seen by foundationalists and their critics alike as the leading, and perhaps the only, alternatives to foundationalism. Much of the work on coherentism purports to deal with the so-called 'coherence theory of truth', which is offered as an alternative to the venerable correspondence theory of truth. However, very often writers who espouse such a view not only wish to define truth, but also to offer a criterion for the truth of statements. Such a 'criterial' theory of truth according to one recent writer, aims at specifying "the test-conditions for determining whether or not there is warrant for applying the characterization 'is true' to [statements]." In other words, these views are theories of doxastic justification, in that they supply us with criteria that we can employ to determine whether we are justified in believing a statement (to be true).

The fundamental claim of the coherentist is that justified beliefs are always justified by virtue of their relationships to other beliefs. Is there an argument or line of reasoning that is primarily responsible for the acceptance of this claim, in the same fashion that the regress argument supports the

main claims of the foundationalist? Although a perusal of traditional coherentist literature can prove bewildering, I believe that such an argument can at least be 'rationally reconstructed'. One theme that can be found in almost all non-foundational epistemologies is that there are no beliefs (statements, propositions, judgments, etc.) that enjoy any such privileged epistemic status as infallibility, indubitability or incorrigibility. As I mentioned above, arguments supporting this common theme are often given as though they are straight-forward arguments against foundationalism, no doubt because so many foundational views do maintain that some beliefs (etc.) are indeed infallible (etc.). However, in view of what was said above, it is obvious that attacks on notions such as incorrigibility or infallibility do not constitute attacks on foundationalism. (Indeed, it would seem that a coherentist's taking arguments against, say, infallibility, as arguments against foundationalism proper is on a par with a foundationalist's taking coherence to amount to nothing more than consistency.) Nonetheless, as I shall claim, such arguments are relevant to the more general anti-foundational cause. How so? Another common theme throughout much ('traditional') coherentist literature is that the possibility of error entails the presence of inference; that is, if it is possible for some belief (statement, etc.) to be in error, this shows that that belief (statement, etc.) was inferred, perhaps 'unconsciously', from others. Now this claim, combined with the one mentioned just above, does produce an argument for the coherentist's major thesis:

- (1) Any belief that is prone to error is inferred from other beliefs. (This is the second claim just discussed.)
- (2) No beliefs are immune to error. (This is one way of putting the first claim discussed above.)
- (3) All beliefs are inferred from other beliefs.

(I shall refer to this as the argument for the 'inference-ladenness' of belief.) Now, on the assumption that, if one belief is inferred from another, then the latter must count as a reason for the former (as well, that is, as a cause), then this seems to follow from (3):

- (D) All justified beliefs are mediately justified beliefs.

Furthermore, it is part and parcel of the coherence view that there is a single relationship (that may hold between beliefs) that suffices to justify all of one's justified beliefs. This relationship goes by the name 'coherence'. Here I shall adopt a general schema from Keith Lehrer for coherence theories of justification:¹⁰

- (E) S's belief that p is justified if, and only if, S's belief that p coheres with other beliefs belonging to a system of beliefs of kind k.

Of course, it is evident that an explication of the relation of coherence, as well as an exact specification of what kind of system of beliefs kind k is, are needed in order to fill out this schema; different conceptions of these two crucial notions would produce different versions of the coherence view.

It would take us too far afield here to survey the ways in which various writers have filled out this general schema for coherence views. What is really essential for present purposes is the coherentist's commitment to (D). Just as we proposed (A) and (B) as essential to any foundational view, so, too, are we claiming that (D) is the defining characteristic of all non-foundational views (of which almost all are coherence theories).

IV. The Relationship Between the Two Views

It will be recalled that, because of the demands of the regress argument, the foundationalist insists upon the existence of immediately justified beliefs:

- (A) There are immediately justified beliefs.

The notion of an immediately justified belief can be more explicitly spelled out by saying that such a belief is one that is justified by something other than any other belief or beliefs. Now this can be understood in either a strong or a weak sense. Understood in the strong sense, an immediately justified belief is one that is solely justified by (i.e., that receives all of its justification from) some source other than some other belief or beliefs.

In the weaker sense, an immediately justified belief is one that receives at least some, but not necessarily all, of its justification from some source exclusive of other beliefs.

At this point, let us recall that the fundamental insight behind the coherence view of doxastic justification is that justified beliefs are always justified by virtue of their relationships to other beliefs:

- (D) All justified beliefs are mediately justified beliefs.

The notion of mediately justified belief, like that of immediately justified belief, can be understood in a strong or a weak sense. In the former, a mediately justified belief is a justified belief that receives all of its justificatory support from some other belief or beliefs, while, according to the weaker sense, such a belief is one that receives at least some of its justification from other beliefs.

As we are employing the term 'justified belief', a belief is justified by virtue of its possessing certain properties; that is, we suppose that if a given belief possesses some special property (e.g., it's 'coherence' with certain other beliefs, or it's incorrigibility, etc.), then it is rational (reasonable, etc.) for the person holding the belief to do so. In accordance with the distinctions drawn just above, then:

An immediately justified belief (strong sense) is solely justified by virtue of possession of some property P that is not a relational property involving any other justified belief.

A mediately justified belief (strong sense) is justified solely by virtue of possession of some property R that is a relational property involving another justified belief.

An immediately justified belief (weak sense) is justified at least in part by virtue of possession of some property P that is not a relational property involving any other justified belief.

A mediately justified belief (weak sense) is justified at least in part by virtue of possession of some property R that is a relational property involving another justified belief.

Now it should be clear just in what sense it might be claimed that foundationalism (per a se) and coherentism (per se) are compatible; they are compatible in that given view of doxastic justification might be both foundational and coherentist according to the way we have defined these two sorts of views. And this is entirely within the realm of possibility, as long as (A) is understood in the light of the weaker sense of immediately justified belief, and (D) is understood in terms of the weaker sense of mediately justified belief.¹¹ And this, of course, is because the weaker versions of these two principles are perfectly compatible. These versions are compatible because it is quite possible for a given belief to have two warrant-conferring properties, P and R, such that R is a relational property involving another justified belief and P is not. But I wish to claim more than that such a view is possible, for there are many things that are possible in any of the various senses of 'possibility'; I want to argue that the weaker interpretations of (A) and (D) are more plausible than are the stronger ones.

In order to make good this claim, let me begin by bringing the regress argument back under consideration. Speaking in very general terms, the reasons why all of the alternatives other than the existence of immediately justified beliefs are rejected amount to this: unless there is some justification in a system of beliefs that is not itself internal to the system, then there is no reason to suppose that any of the beliefs belonging to that system are justified. For example, to consider only the possibility of circular justification for the moment, suppose we allow belief X to be justified by belief Y, and this belief to be justified by belief Z, and Z, in turn, to be justified by belief X. Now accepting the principle that one belief can justify another only if the former is itself justified, all that we know is that X is justified only if Y is, that Y is justified only if Z is, and that Z is justified only if X is. But we do not thereby know whether any of these beliefs are, indeed, justified. We might think in terms of the following analogy: picture, if you will, three glass spheres (x, y and z), connected by three pipes (so as to make a triangle) such that liquid can flow from one sphere to the next. Now, liquid will flow through the system, but only if (at least) one of the spheres comes with liquid already in it (i.e., is 'self-justified') or receives liquid from some source outside the system (i.e., is immediately

justified in some mode other than self-justification). And if one of the spheres does come with liquid already in it (or gets liquid from some source other than the other two spheres), then there will be liquid available to move through the system. Now suppose that two of our three spheres come to the system with liquid already in them: each stands to gain liquid from the other (i.e., each is mediately justified) even though each contained some liquid before entering the system (i.e., each is immediately justified). These kinds of considerations should suffice to show that all that is needed to meet the demands of the regress argument are immediately justified beliefs in the weaker sense.

Furthermore, if we reflect a moment on the argument for the inference-ladenness of belief, we can see that it supports (D) only under the weaker interpretation of 'mediately justified'. For, what the argument proves (if it is sound) is that all beliefs receive justificatory support from other beliefs. But surely much more would be required in order to show that no beliefs receive any justificatory support from sources exclusive of any other beliefs; one would have to examine and refute, for example, all proposed modes of immediate justification (and there are several).¹² Thus, if what I have said in this and the preceding paragraph is correct, then the weaker version of (A) is the most plausible version, in that it, and not the stronger version, is supported by the regress argument. And similarly, the weaker version of (D) is the most plausible version because it, and not the stronger version, is supported by the argument for the inference-ladenness of belief.

V. Conclusions

If the essence of foundationalism is captured by the weaker versions of (A) and (B), and if the essence of ('minimal') coherentism is captured by the weaker version of (D), then there would appear to be no essential incompatibility between the two sorts of view. This is not to claim, of course, that there is no incompatibility between say, Lewis' foundational theory and Bradley's coherence theory. What I am claiming, however, is that these views are not incompatible just because one is a foundational view and the other is a coherence view. The incompatibility arises because, among other things, Lewis' foundational view is 'radical', not 'minimal', and Bradley's

coherence view is also 'radical' (in subscribing to the stronger version of (D)) and not 'minimal'. I suggest that the proper way to view the relationship between foundational and coherentist theories of doxastic justification is this: such views form a continuum, with the 'radical' versions occupying positions at opposite ends, and with the 'minimal' versions meeting at the center.

So what is the importance of all this? First of all, if we think of various foundational and coherentist views of doxastic justification as falling somewhere on a continuum or spectrum of such views, then the tendency to think in terms of a simplistic foundationalist vs. coherentist dichotomy vanishes. The matter is much more complex than such a dichotomy indicates. Secondly, the continuum serves as a warning to those who would delve into the literature; it warns the researcher to be very careful to see just what it is that various writers mean when they throw around terms like 'foundationalism' and 'coherentism'. Most writers mean by the former what we've termed 'radical foundationalism', and hence the theories of writers like Lewis or Descartes are held up as paradigms of foundational thought, while more modest views (like Reid's) go unmentioned. Similarly, most writers use the term 'coherentism' to refer to the 'radical' views of the likes of F. H. Bradley or Brand Blanshard, while, again, more modest views (like Rescher's) go relative unnoticed.¹³

But most importantly, the upshot of my remarks is this. The point, of a significant portion of epistemological activity, should be to produce a correct theory of doxastic justification. Whether we decide to call this view 'foundationalist' or 'coherentist' is of relatively little importance. I've tried to indicate that the minimal versions of both types of view (the versions toward the center of the continuum) are the more plausible versions, for it is these that the regress argument and the inference-ladenness argument support. It just may be that the most plausible view is both foundational and coherentist in our sense; indeed, although I lack the space to argue the point here, it is my belief that some recent contextual theories of doxastic justification are the most convincing sorts of such views, and are, in fact, the sorts of views that count as both foundational and coherentist.¹⁴

NOTES

¹By a theory of 'doxastic' justification I mean a theory about how beliefs are justified.

²The regress argument is at least as old as Aristotle; see Posterior Analytics, Book I, Chapter 3. For some more recent discussions of the connection between foundationalism and the regress argument see: W. P. Alston, "Two Types of Foundationalism," Journal of Philosophy, vol. LXXIII (April 8, 1976); J. Cornman, "Foundational Versus Non-Foundational Theories of Empirical Justification," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 14; D. Annis, "Epistemic Foundationalism," Philosophical Studies vol. 31 (May 1977), pp. 345-52; A. Quinton, "The Foundations of Knowledge," in Chisholm and Swartz (eds.), Empirical Knowledge (Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 542-70.

³R. Chisholm, Theory of Knowledge, 2nd Edition (Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 19.

⁴Alston, "Two Types of Foundationalism," p. 172.

⁵Assuming, of course, that there are mediately justified beliefs.

⁶K. Lehrer, Knowledge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 78-79; F. L. Will, Induction and Justification (New York: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 225.

⁷C. I. Lewis, for example, adopts (C) due to considerations concerning the nature of probability, summed up by his claim that "if anything is to be probable, then something must be certain." See An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation (Open Court, 1946), p. 186.

⁸N. Rescher, The Coherence Theory of Truth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 1.

⁹See, for example, B. Blanshard, The Nature of Thought (George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1939), chapters II and XXV.

¹⁰Lehrer, p. 154.

¹¹There are, of course, stronger and weaker ways of reading (B) as well. However, it is generally intended in the weaker sense, in which mediately justified beliefs may receive justificatory support due to 'coherence' with other beliefs.

¹²William Alston provides an extensive list and discussion of various proposed modes of immediate justification in "The Justification of Perceptual Beliefs," unpublished.

¹³If one compares Rescher's "data" with Pollock's "prima facie justified belief", it will become evident that Rescher's view does incorporate immediately justified beliefs (in the weak sense). See N. Rescher, The Coherence Theory of Truth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), and J. Pollock, Knowledge and Justification (Princeton University Press, 1974).

¹⁴For example, see D. Annis, "A Contextual Theory of Epistemic Justification," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 15 (July 1978).