**Does all knowledge have an epistemic foundation? If so, then explain what such foundations must be like and evaluate how extensive our knowledge is in the light of this requirement. If not, then explain why.**

By Michelle Hogan

The question of epistemic foundations is about the structure of knowledge, and the justification of our empirical beliefs. The three options which Agrippa's trilemma presents us with regarding justification are that our beliefs are: (i) unsupported; (ii) supported by a circular chain of justification, or (iii) supported by a non-repeating infinite chain of justification. Epistemic foundations are concerned with the unsupported beliefs which are deemed to be non-inferential, and this theory is known as foundationalism. In this essay, I will consider the strengths and weaknesses of foundationalism, and contrast them with those of circular chains of justification, known as coherentism. I will also discuss the merits of Susan Haack's 'foundherentism', which is a combination of these two views. There is, obviously, no end to the infinite chain of justification, known as infinitism, which is problematic, because its completion looks impossible, and it is difficult to see how knowledge could thereby be acquired.

In his Theaetetus, Plato was concerned with determining what knowledge is, and said that it could be regarded as 'true judgement with an account'. This is often taken now to be justified true belief (JTB) and if we exclude Gettier cases, in which someone might have a JTB but not knowledge – such as by a stroke of luck – then we have a workable definition. Descartes, regarded as a classical foundationalist, provides an example of a foundational or basic belief. His method of doubt led him not to scepticism, whereby knowledge is not possible, but to the fundamental, indubitable belief that because he was doubting and therefore thinking, then his existence was definite: 'I think, therefore I am'. However, the level of certainty this 'first principle' of philosophy provides is debatable, especially with regard to the external world. Descartes' cogito might be indubitable, but it does not tell us much, apart from his belief that he exists. Although Descartes claims that he can establish a general rule 'that all the things we conceive very clearly and distinctly are true', this does not logically follow from the cogito (or any other standpoint), so the justification involved is questionable. There is also the suggestion that this only lasts during the time that he is thinking – maybe only while he is thinking of his existence.

One advantage of foundationalism is that a possible regression of justification terminates at a basic empirical belief, but it is not easy to ascertain how such a belief would be different from other, contingent, empirical beliefs which derive from it, and is therefore not in need of justification itself. Alternative types of foundationalism consider internalism, whereby justification is determined by factors internal to a person, and externalism, where such factors are external. According to externalism in foundationalism, asserts Laurence BonJour, the justification for a basic belief derives from the relation which obtains between the believer and the world, so the believer need not 'have any cognitive grasp' of the reason why a basic belief is likely to be true. Even if such beliefs are reliable, this raises questions about the nature of justification, epistemic rationality, and the subjective experience of cognitive achievement. The internalist view, on the other hand, raises different problems. The demand for first-person access to supporting grounds for a belief, access internalism, requires that we have actual or potential access to the property of a belief, $\varphi$, but this itself needs justification, so it 'is not a non-inferential warrant-increasing property after all'. BonJour noted that if there is no justification, then basic beliefs are rendered epistemically arbitrary, while a justification which appeals to further premises threatens to reinstate the regression, but the point of foundationalism is to avoid this.

The chain in coherentism needs to be large enough to fulfil its justification function, although it is difficult to determine the actual size it needs to be, and how it produces knowledge, even if the beliefs within it cohere well with each other. BonJour has been an advocate of coherentism and in his analysis of epistemic justification, points out that 'the goal of our distinctively cognitive endeavors is truth.' He also wants to provide a metajustification to show that the proposed standards are truth-conducive. In order for coherence to be indicative of truth, some theorists claim that it needs a connection to experience, and they assign some beliefs close to experience a special role, called "supposed facts asserted" by C. I. Lewis, and "cognitively spontaneous beliefs" by BonJour, for example. However, these theories might be 'classified as versions of weak foundationalism than as pure coherence theories'. Indeed, BonJour concedes that a cognitive system which contains empirical knowledge due to input from the world means that the purest sort of coherence theory turns out to be unacceptable. He is concerned that without attributing reliability to beliefs through observations, such a system might be constructed arbitrarily. Further, he recognises the value of scepticism, claiming that it needs to be considered in order to 'understand and delineate the nature and degree of our justification for the beliefs that we hold.'

Susan Haack's "foundherentism" is an attempt to address the problems with the foundationalism versus coherentism dichotomy, and she maintains that these two theories have come closer together. Haack points out some of the main problems in both theories, and puts forward her view, which aims to overcome them. Although foundationalism acknowledges that a person's experience is relevant to how justified he is in his beliefs, its drawback is that it 'ignores the pervasive interdependence among a person's beliefs'. Conversely, coherentism acknowledges that pervasive interdependence and requires no distinction of basic and derived beliefs, but its drawback is that 'it allows no role for the subject's experience.' After mentioning some moderated forms of both theories, Haack notes that they 'tend to be ambiguous and unstable', and that we need a new approach. She asserts that her foundherentist account will give 'a role both to sensory experience, and to introspective awareness of one's own mental states'.

Haack tells us that her version of foundherentism relies on an analogy between the structure of evidence and a crossword puzzle, which avoids the potential vicious circularity of coherentism, but allows 'legitimate mutual support'. She points out, though, that her analogy of a crossword puzzle – where the clues are the analogue of experiential evidence, and completed intersecting entries the analogue of reasons – is not an argument. Nevertheless, the analogy indicates that 'how justified an empirical belief is depends on experiential evidence and reasons working together'. She also maintains that foundationalists 'often think of the structure of evidence on the model of a mathematical proof', which makes them wary of the idea of mutual support. According to Haack, 'justification is a double-aspect concept, partly causal as well as partly logical in character'. If this is so, then it might go some way to overcoming the weaknesses of these rival theories. Another disadvantage of foundationalism involves determining the linear order of derived beliefs, when it is more likely that they are mutually supportive. The circularity of coherentism does not seem particularly realistic, either, and might need to be moderated if it is to avoid being merely circular, and potentially arbitrary.

One significant drawback of foundationalism is identifying which beliefs would be basic, as the demand for them to be indubitable or infallible might be too strong, especially when taking the advancements of science into consideration, for example. I have highlighted some of the strengths and weaknesses of both foundationalist and coherence theories, taking the implications of externalism and internalism into consideration, and I have noted the difficulties of infinitism. I have also argued against the idea that all knowledge has an epistemic foundation, and agreed with the foundherentist approach propounded by Haack. If we regard knowledge as justified true belief, then

it looks as though foundherentism, which includes a person's experience and interdependent beliefs, might be more pertinent with regard to justification and therefore knowledge.

Bibliography

BonJour, L., The Structure of Empirical Knowledge, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985

Descartes, R., A Discourse on Method Meditations and Principles, Veitch, J., (trans), London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1986

Hasan, A., (2016) 'Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification', Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-foundational/, accessed 22/3/2020

Huemer, M., (editor), Epistemology Contemporary Readings, Oxon: Routledge, 2002

Olsson, E., (2017) 'Coherentist Theories of Epistemic Justification', Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-coherence/, accessed 20/3/2020

Plato, Theaetetus, McDowell, J., (trans), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014

Pritchard, D., What is this thing called knowledge?, Oxon: Routledge, 2006

Steup., M., (2017) 'The Analysis of Knowledge', Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/, accessed 16/3/2020