

THE CONCEPT OF BASIC BELIEFS

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In the area of epistemological justification, there are two major opposing views on the issue of basic beliefs and self-justification. On one side there are foundationalists. Foundationalists, such as Descartes, believe in the fact that there are self-justifying basic beliefs that have the authority over other beliefs, and do not depend on any other beliefs for justification. On the other side stand coherentist philosophers, such as Sellars, who believe there is no such thing as basic beliefs. They believe that all the beliefs are a part of an interconnected web of beliefs; hence, each belief is justified by one or more beliefs in the same system. However, based on some of the premises and examples that construct the concept of foundationalism and basic beliefs, it appears that foundationalism is more strongly justifiable.

Foundationalism admits that there are some propositions that we are justified in believing but for which we lack reasons in the form of further propositions.¹ Foundationalists say that some version of their position has to be true if there is to be any knowledge at all about anything, because it is the only way to escape the circular system of beliefs. They believe there has to exist some basic self-justifying beliefs, or else we will either find ourselves trapped in an infinite regress of justification or a circular regress of justification.² Foundationalists look for the kinds of knowledge that do not require premises as proofs. For instance, if body of knowledge is called K, foundationalism implies that K could be divided into parts K1, K2...in a way that there is a nonsystematic relation, hence there would be no need to define those parts.

¹ Sosa, Ernest and Kim, Jaegwon, *Epistemology and Anthropology*, 2001

² Partial restatement of question.

Coherentists, including Sellars, however, attack the concept of foundational basic beliefs. Sellars argues that it is impossible for anything to serve as any kind of basic beliefs that foundationalists describe. If something were to serve as a basic belief – for instance, a report about human sense-impressions – then it would have to have a certain authority to it that would make that belief independent from one or more beliefs for justification. Sellars are arguing that even in the case of most simple beliefs, there are still terms that need to be defined. For example many foundationalists use the “a square has four sides” example as a kind of basic belief. Coherentists argue against this by asking for the definition of “sides” or what it means to have “four” things. Answers to those questions would raise new beliefs, and therefore coherentists argue that even the most seemingly simple beliefs are a part of a larger system of beliefs. Coherentists attempt to break down the simplest basic beliefs of foundationalists into pieces of smaller terms, and then question the definition of those terms since answer to those questions raise new beliefs, and that concludes that the original belief was not epistemically independent.

Even though Sellars’s argument might seem compelling, foundationalists have been able to find some unchallenged foundational basic beliefs, one of which is the human feelings. Human feelings are one of the categories of beliefs that have not been successfully challenged by coherentists. An example would be the belief “I feel sad.” Foundationalists acknowledge coherentists’ argument that the word “sad” is defined, and definition of which raises a new belief, making the initial belief no longer a basic one. But foundationalists argue that “sad” is just a word used to describe a certain feeling one feels at a specific time. In other word, the word “sad” is just used to *express* how one

person feels. Another way of stating that sentence would be “ I feel the way I feel right now.” Even though the second person would not know how the speaker feels, the speaker himself precisely knows the feeling. In addition to that, the speaker cannot be wrong about feeling a certain way at a point in time because that is exactly how he feels. Foundationalists argue that words like “sad, happy, mad...” are just means of communication by which one person expresses how he feels. But there is no need in using words in order for one person to know how he feels at a certain time. Since he would not use any words, he knows for certain that he feels the way he feels at a specific time without depending on the concept of specific words, which makes that awareness a basic belief.

There is a second category of basic beliefs that has not been proven false by coherentists and that is the knowledge of knowing something. An example for that kind of beliefs would be “I know that I know the weather is cold.” Once again the second part of that belief is usually a subject of disagreement by coherentists. They claim their lack of knowledge on the definition of words such as “weather” or “cold.” But the main idea behind this belief is not to express how the weather is, but rather expressing awareness on one’s knowledge about the weather. In other words what is counted as a belief in this statement is the fact that someone knows about his knowledge of the fact that the weather is cold. Similar to the reason in the previous argument, having considered its dependency on the definitions of the words “weather” and “cold,” the second part of the statement could not be counted as a basic belief. However one cannot be mistaken in knowing that he knows something, regardless of what that knowledge is really about.

The third and one of the most important arguments that foundationalists make to

prove their system of thoughts is by distinguishing different ways for a belief to depend on other beliefs. For example, assume that “grass is wet” is a basic belief. Obviously, our having this belief depends on our having many other beliefs about water, about grass, and what it is like for something to be wet. We would not have this particular belief unless we possess these concepts and associated beliefs. Foundationalists do agree that having any particular belief requires having a range of concepts and the ability to apply those concepts appropriately. However, according to foundationalists, these other beliefs are not what justify my belief. Rather in this sense our belief is *psychologically dependent* without being *epistemically dependent*. In other words, these other beliefs do not explain why my belief about the wetness of the grass is likely to be true. This may suggest that epistemically basic beliefs are in some sense psychologically nonbasic.³

In some cases, coherentist philosophers make strong arguments against foundationalists’ basic beliefs. But in some cases, such as the ones mentioned in previous paragraphs, foundationalists are able to make their point by describing the role of language and words as a tool to express the knowledge. Between foundationalists and coherentists, based on the arguments that foundationalists have made, they present the more compelling picture of justification.

³ Crumley, Jack, *An introduction to epistemology*, 1998.