

Beliefs Can be Justified by Experience

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Foundationalists distinguish basic from nonbasic beliefs. To say that a belief of a person is *basic* is to say that it is justified and that it owes its justification to something other than (i) her other beliefs or (ii) any features of the relations between them. (For simplicity's sake, I will leave (ii) aside in what follows.) To say that a belief of a person is *nonbasic* is to say that it is justified and not basic. Two theses constitute *Foundationalism*:

- a. *Minimalism*. There are some basic beliefs.
- b. *Exclusivism*. If there are any nonbasic beliefs, that is solely because they (ultimately) owe their justification to at least one basic belief.

Minimal Foundationalism affirms Minimalism but not Exclusivism. *Experiential Foundationalism* affirms that experience can justify basic beliefs.

In this chapter, I will do three things: (i) clarify the terms and theses that I just introduced, (ii) argue for Foundationalism, and (iii) assess four famous objections to Experiential Foundationalism.

Preliminary Clarifications

First, Foundationalism is about the *epistemic justification* of belief. What is epistemic justification? Some philosophers say that (i) for a belief of a person to be epistemically justified is for it to be held in such a way that, by virtue of holding it in that way, the belief is likely to be true. So, for example, people tend to think that most of the beliefs that help them navigate their immediate environment are based on something, e.g., perceptual or sensory experiences of the objects around them, and by virtue of being based on such experiences, those beliefs are likely to be true. Others say that (ii) for a belief of a person to be epistemically justified is for it to be held responsibly, i.e., without the person violating any *epistemic obligations* with respect to acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false ones (e.g., *Believe something only if you have considered all the evidence that is available to you*, and the like). Yet others affirm both (i) and (ii). You can be a foundationalist and endorse any of these views.

Second, Foundationalism is a theory about the *structure* of a system of justified beliefs, i.e., how the beliefs in a system of justified beliefs must be related to each other. It does not specify how a belief is justified. It only specifies how a system of justified beliefs is structured. Notably, it says that such a system must have basic beliefs (Minimalism), and any nonbasic beliefs will, ultimately, owe their justification solely to basic beliefs (Exclusivism).

Third, Foundationalism is not a theory about the *activity* of justifying beliefs, i.e., *showing* that they are justified. Rather, Foundationalism is a theory about beliefs having the *property* of justification, their *being* justified. It is easy to see the difference between the activity and the property of justification. Consider an analogy. Suppose you challenge me with respect to how I have raised my children over the years. I would justify my past behavior by showing how it was morally justified. That is, I would try to show how my child-rearing behavior was morally justified; I would display a property that my behavior had prior to your challenge and prior to my justifying it. Similarly, suppose you challenge me with respect to my long-standing belief that God exists. I would justify my belief by showing how it was epistemically justified; I would try to display a property that my belief had prior to your challenge and prior to my justifying it. Just as the actions of a person can be morally justified without their having shown that those actions are morally justified, a person's beliefs can be epistemically justified even if they have not shown that those beliefs are epistemically justified. Why is this important? Because sometimes people criticize Foundationalism for failing as a theory about the *activity* of justifying beliefs, and then they infer that it fails as a theory about the *property* of being justified.¹ This is a mistake. Foundationalism is not about justifying; it's about being justified.

Finally, you might ask: if a person's basic belief does not owe its justification to other beliefs they have, to what, then, does it owe its justification? Foundationalists offer different answers. One popular answer is that basic beliefs owe their justification to *experience* (Experiential Foundationalism). For example, its *looking* to you as though you have a bellybutton can justify your belief that you have a bellybutton, and its *sounding* to you as though there's a crow cawing can justify your belief that there's a crow cawing. And the same goes for other perceptual or sensory experiences.

On Behalf of Foundationalism

What might be said on behalf of Foundationalism? At least two things, I submit. First, according to commonsense, at least some of our beliefs are justified, but not by our other beliefs. Suppose I just spent the last three days hiking the 70 miles from Rainy Pass to Manning Park on the Pacific Crest Trail in the North Cascades. I ache all over and I

¹ E.g. Kvanvig 2007.

feel hungry. I justifiably believe that I feel achy and hungry. Are there some other beliefs of mine from which I infer these things? Not so far as I can tell. Rather, I feel achy and hungry, and so naturally I believe that I feel achy and hungry. Now: have I done something *wrong* in believing that I feel achy and hungry on the basis of my feeling achy and hungry? No. Have I believed that I feel achy and hungry on the basis of something that makes it *likely* that my belief is true? Yes. It seems, then, that however we fill in the details, my belief that I feel achy and hungry is justified and my belief owes its justification to something other than my other beliefs, namely my *feeling* achy and hungry.

And the same goes for other sorts of beliefs, not just beliefs about how I feel. Suppose that at Hart's Pass I hitch a ride to Mazama in order to resupply. As I stand by the side of the road with my thumb out, I justifiably believe that I am hitching a ride to Mazama in order to resupply. There seem to be no other beliefs of mine from which I infer that I am hitching a ride to Mazama in order to resupply. Moreover, it seems that what justifies my belief is its *introspectively seeming* to me that that is my reason for hitching a ride. That is, I look within my mind, so to speak, and *see* what my reason for hitching a ride is: in order to resupply. Or suppose that, near the end of my hike, I imagine eating a huge, juicy steak and a crisp green salad, and drinking several pints of IPA. (Reportedly, food is the most popular thing that long-distance hikers fantasize about. Can you guess what the second is?) While I am imagining this feast, I justifiably believe that I am imagining a feast. There seem to be no other beliefs of mine from which I infer that I am imagining this feast. Moreover, it seems that what justifies my belief that I am imagining this feast is its *appearing* to me, in my imagination, as if I'm having a feast. Or suppose the sign in front of me says, "Canadian Border: 60 miles." I justifiably believe that the sign says this. Are there some other beliefs from which I infer that the sign says this? It seems not; I believe it simply because of the way it *looks* to me and the way it looks to me seems to be what justifies my belief that this is what the sign says. When my wife dropped me off at the trailhead this morning, she said she was driving to Winthrop. Much later, I justifiably believe she said this. There seems to be no other belief of mine from which I infer that she said this. I simply recall her having said it, and my difficult-to-describe experience of recalling it seems to justify my believing that she said she was driving to Winthrop.² In each of these cases, I am doing nothing wrong in holding the belief in question on the basis of the experience in question; moreover, I hold the belief on the basis of something that makes the belief very likely to be true: experience.

Of course, what I have just said is the epitome of commonsense. Yet, commonsense is not always a reliable guide to truth. So despite what commonsense suggests in the cases I have described, *perhaps* there is some hidden belief to which these seemingly experience-based beliefs owe their justification. Even so, we can't simply neglect how things seem. And things seem congenial to both Minimal Foundationalism and to Experiential Foundationalism.

Second, Foundationalism arguably provides a satisfying solution to *the regress problem*. Suppose Frances is one of us, a typical human adult; and suppose that her belief that it is cloudy outside is justified. Furthermore, suppose Frances believes that *it is cloudy outside* on the basis of an inference from two other beliefs of hers, her belief that *if it is raining, then it is cloudy outside* and her belief that *it is raining outside*. Finally, suppose her belief that *it is cloudy outside* owes its justification to these other two beliefs of hers via this inference. A simple question arises: How can this be? How can Frances's belief that it is cloudy outside owe its justification to her other two beliefs via her inference? How is inferential justification possible?

Could it be that her belief that it is cloudy outside owes its justification to her inference from those other two beliefs of hers even though neither of them is justified—*the unjustified justifier option*? Or could it be that her belief owes its justification to them since they are justified and they owe their justification to some further beliefs of hers, and those further beliefs owe their justification to some other beliefs, and so on, so that her belief that it is cloudy outside eventually owes its justification to itself—*the circular justification option*? Or could it be that her belief owes its justification to those two beliefs since they are justified and they owe their justification to some further beliefs of hers, and they in turn owe their justification to some other beliefs of hers, and so on, for infinitely many non-repeating beliefs of hers—*the infinite regress option*? Each of these three options seems untenable. The unjustified justifier option seems untenable because no belief can owe its justification to other beliefs from which it is inferred unless the other beliefs are justified. The circular justification option seems untenable because no belief can owe its justification to itself. The infinite regress option seems untenable because none of us can hold infinitely many beliefs of the required sort.³ That leaves exactly one option: Frances's belief that it is cloudy outside owes its justification to her inference from her other two beliefs, both of which are justified, and they in turn owe their justification, ultimately, to something other than her other beliefs—*the basic belief option*. This conclusion is congenial to Exclusivism.

² Cf. Ginet 2005, 142-43, and Pryor 2005, 184-85.

³ For a defense of Infitism, see Klein 1999, Peijnenburg and Atkinson 2014, Turri and Klein 2014. For criticism, see Howard-Snyder and Coffman 2006.

Epistemological nihilists will reject this argument because it presupposes that some beliefs are justified and, says *Nihilism*, no beliefs are justified. Epistemological coherentists will reject this argument because it presupposes that some beliefs are justified on the basis of an inference from other beliefs and, says *Coherentism*, no belief is justified on the basis of an inference from other beliefs; a belief is justified *solely* because of its membership in a coherent system of beliefs.⁴ Elsewhere, I explain why neither of these options is plausible.⁵

Notice that Foundationalism's solution to the regress problem leaves us with a question: what makes basic beliefs justified, and why does it end the regress of justification? One popular view is that perceptual or sensory experience can justify basic belief and it can end the regress of justification. Moreover, recall that the first consideration in favor of Foundationalism (the appeal to commonsense) says that experiences of various sorts can justify basic belief. Some people, however, object. No experience can justify belief, they say; nor can an experience stop the regress of justification. Let's assess some famous objections along these lines.

Davidson on Experiential Foundationalism

Donald Davidson gives two arguments for concluding that experience cannot justify belief.⁶

First argument. Experience causes beliefs; but a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why it is justified; so experience cannot justify belief.

The problem with Davidson's first argument is that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. Sure enough, the fact that experience causes belief cannot all by itself explain why experience justifies belief; but no one ever said it did. Rather, experience justifies belief *only when certain additional conditions are satisfied*, e.g., one would not have the experience if the belief were false, or the experience makes the belief likely to be true, or one has no good reason to think that the experience is illusory, or one satisfies the relevant epistemic duties, or the experience is the input of a reliable belief-forming process, or one exhibits intellectual virtue in holding the belief on the basis of it, or.... The list goes on and on. Naturally, foundationalists disagree over what's on the list. But the point remains: experience does not justify belief unless some additional condition is satisfied. So we can't draw Davidson's conclusion from his premises.

Second argument. If an experience can justify belief, then the experience makes it likely that the belief is true. An experience makes it likely that a belief is true only if the experience has propositional content. But experience lacks propositional content. So experience cannot justify belief.⁷

To assess this argument, two clarifications are in order. First, suppose it looks to you right now as if there is a page of words in front of you. Its *looking* to you as if there is a page of words in front of you is a visual experience. Naturally enough, you also *believe* that there is a page of words in front of you. Now notice: your visual experience is not the same thing as your belief. That's because you can have the one without the other. For example, you can have the experience without the belief when you know that you are hallucinating, and you can have the belief without the experience when someone tells you that there is a page of words in front of you but you have your eyes closed. Second, notice also that what you believe is the proposition that *there is a page of words in front of you*. We call that proposition the *propositional content* of your belief. That's what your belief is about. It's about there being a page of words in front of you. And the same goes for beliefs more generally.

Now let's return to Davidson's second argument. Many people disagree with the third premise: just as belief has propositional content, so does experience. You see that there is a page of words in front of you and so, naturally, you believe that there is a page of words in front of you. What you see is what you believe. In experience, you "take in" the fact that there is a page of words in front of you; in belief, you affirm that there is a page of words in front of you. Your experience and your belief have the same propositional content.⁸

Many other people disagree with the first premise: an experience *can* justify belief even if the experience does not make the belief likely to be true. In this connection, they ask you to imagine that it *looks* to you as if there is a page of words in front of you but, unbeknownst to you, you're in the Matrix, stuck in a pod with your brain being directly manipulated so that it looks to you as if there is a page of words in front of you when in fact there isn't. You aren't doing anything wrong to hold that belief. After all, you have no reason to be suspicious; so what else could you do? In that case, your belief is surely justified.⁹

But even if the first and third premises are both true, the second seems surely false. Experience can make a belief likely to be true even if it lacks propositional content. To see why, note that pains, tickles, itches and other *purely qualitative states*, as philosophers call them, lack propositional content. They are not about anything in the

⁴ For a defense of Coherentism, see Bonjour 1985, Haack 1993, and Poston 2014.

⁵ See my response to Kevin McCain and Ted Poston in this volume (pp.???)

⁶ Davidson 1986, 311; "the relation...is justified".

⁷ Cp. Everitt and Fisher 1995, 84.

⁸ McDowell 1994; for critique, see Le Morvan 2008.

⁹ Foley 1985.

way that beliefs are about the propositions that are their contents. So then: the pain I now feel lacks propositional content. Nevertheless, it makes it extremely likely that my belief that I am in pain is true. Likewise, even if its looking to me as if the wall is white lacks propositional content, that visual experience makes it very likely that my belief is true. Perceptual and sensory experiences can confirm beliefs.

The Sellarsian Dilemma

Davidson targeted the claim that experience can justify basic belief. Wilfred Sellars targets the claim that experience can stop the regress of inferential justification discussed above. We can put Sellars' argument succinctly like this:

Sellarsian Dilemma

1. Either an experience has propositional content or it doesn't.
2. If it does, then it is in need of justification itself.
3. If it doesn't, then it cannot contribute to the justification of a belief.
4. An experience can end the regress by justifying a belief only if (i) the experience is *not* in need of justification itself, and (ii) it *can* contribute to the belief's justification.
5. So, an experience cannot end the regress by justifying a belief.¹⁰

The argument is logically valid, but what about the premises, especially premises 2 and 3? Let's begin with premise 3. Two popular ways to defend it appeal to arbitrariness and articulability.

The Problem of Arbitrariness

Some people argue that if an experience lacks propositional content, then it's arbitrary whether it contributes to the justification of one belief rather than another. For example, suppose the wall's visually appearing white to me lacks propositional content. In that case, there is nothing about my visual experience that renders it fit to justify my belief that the wall is white rather than my belief that the price of gold in the US is currently \$1258 per ounce. It's just arbitrary to pick one over the other.¹¹

We may well puzzle over how it is that an experience without propositional content can be nonarbitrarily "matched," so to speak, with a belief that has a particular content. But perhaps foundationalists can develop a couple of suggestions. For example, they might develop that idea that because there is a lawlike connection between my visual experience and my wall belief, but no such connection between my visual experience and my gold belief, my visual experience makes my wall belief very likely to be true, but it does not make my gold belief very likely to be true. Alternatively, they might develop the idea that, although my visual experience lacks propositional content, it represents the propositional content of my wall belief in a way *analogous* to the way in which a photo represents a scene or a map represents a terrain. No photo or map has propositional content. Nevertheless, a photo of your face represents your face better than a steam engine, and a map of Mt. Adams represents Mt. Adams better than the sole of your shoes. Provided that my visual experience of a white wall represents the wall I'm looking at better than the price of gold in China and other arbitrarily chosen things, there might be a way to "match" it with my wall belief in a nonarbitrary fashion.¹²

The Problem of Articulability

Some people argue that if an experience lacks propositional content, then it cannot provide an articulable reason for holding a belief. (A reason for a belief is articulable just when one can say it. So, for example, if my reason for believing that there are some hands is the fact that I have hands, then I can say "I have hands".) But if experience cannot provide an articulable reason for holding a belief, it cannot contribute to the justification of the belief. Thus, if an experience lacks propositional content, it cannot contribute to the justification of the belief.¹³

What should we make of this argument? Well, which premise deserves our attention depends on what sort of thing we take a reason for holding a belief to be. In common parlance, a reason for holding a belief is *anything* offered on its behalf, where it's left open what sorts of things might be so offered. In academic philosophy, however, it's often not left open: only *propositions* are reasons, we are told. Let's consider each option in turn.

Suppose that a reason for holding a belief is anything offered on its behalf. Then the premise that if an experience lacks propositional content, then it cannot provide an articulable reason for holding a belief is better understood as the claim that *if experience lacks propositional content, it can provide nothing articulable for holding a belief*. This understanding of the first premise might be thought to be dubious. Consider my belief that I now feel

¹⁰ Sellars 1956 and BonJour 1985, chapter 3.

¹¹ Pryor 2005, 192-93.

¹² And there other avenues to explore as well; see Alston 1999, 198-201.

¹³ McDowell 1994, 165-66; cf. Pryor 2005, 193-94.

pain in my right shin. Suppose you ask me what reason I have to hold that belief. I answer: “My reason is the pain I feel in my right shin.” If our current understanding of the first premise (in italics) is true, I have provided nothing articulable for holding my belief. But surely I have. For although I have not expressed a proposition but only used a noun clause to identify my reason, that suffices for providing something “articulable” for holding my belief—I did use words to refer to it, after all. We can say something similar for beliefs about sensory experience, for example my belief that the wall before me *appears* white. Suppose you ask me what reason I have to hold it. I answer: “My reason is its appearing white.” Again, I have provided something articulable for holding my belief. What about my belief that the wall *is* white? Suppose you ask me what reason I have to hold it. My answer is the same as before: “My reason is the wall’s appearing white.” Once again I have provided something articulable for holding my belief. It seems, then, that the premise under discussion is false if it is understood in the way indicated above (in italics).

Now let’s turn to academic philosophers, many of whom insist that only propositions can be reasons. In that case, the premise that if experience cannot provide an articulable reason for holding a belief, then it cannot contribute to the justification of the belief, is better expressed as the claim that *if an experience cannot provide an articulable proposition for holding the belief, it cannot contribute to the justification of the belief*. This understanding of the second premise might be thought to be dubious also. That’s because even if the pain I now feel in my right shin cannot provide an articulable proposition for holding my belief that I feel pain there, it can contribute to my belief’s justification by virtue of making the content of my belief vastly more likely than its denial. Likewise, even if the wall’s appearing smooth cannot provide an articulable proposition for holding my belief that it appears smooth or holding my belief that it is smooth, it can contribute to the justification of both beliefs by virtue of making the content of each belief much more likely than its denial. That’s not to say that nothing more is needed for these beliefs to be justified; but it certainly seems that, if an experience makes a belief much more likely than its denial, then it counts as a contribution to a belief’s being justified, and a significant one at that.

We might also worry about premise 2 of the Sellarsian Dilemma, the claim that, if experience has propositional content, then it is in need of justification. Here’s why. It goes without saying that something is in need of justification only if it is the sort of thing that can be justified or unjustified. That’s why dogs and donut holes are not in need of justification; they aren’t the sorts of things that can be justified or unjustified. So then: if experience is in need of justification, then it’s the sort of thing that can be justified or unjustified. It follows that, *if premise 2 is true, then, if an experience has propositional content, it is the sort of thing that can be justified or unjustified*.

And therein lays the trouble: it’s false that *if an experience has propositional content, it is the sort of thing that can be justified or unjustified*. That’s because having propositional content is not enough to make something justified or unjustified. For example, my imagining how my life will be after retirement has all kinds of propositional content; I imagine that I will hike in the woods more, that I will make new friends, that I will see new places, etc. But my imagining these things is not the sort of thing that is either justified or unjustified; and so my imagining these things is not in need of justification. The same goes for wondering, entertaining, etc. These *mental states*, as philosophers call them, have propositional content, but that’s not enough to make them be the sort of thing that can be justified or unjustified, and so having propositional content is not enough to make them be in need of justification. The same goes for perceptual and sensory experience. An experience’s having propositional content is not enough to make it the sort of thing that can be justified or unjustified, and so its having propositional content is not enough to make it be in need of justification.

The upshot is that the Sellarsian Dilemma gives us little reason to deny that experience can contribute to the justification of a belief, and do so in a way that solves the regress problem in the experiential foundationalist’s favor.

Conclusion

I am under no illusion that I have defended Foundationalism adequately in this chapter. That would take quite a bit more work. I hope, however, to have taken a significant step toward exhibiting its attractiveness and resilience.¹⁴

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