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Foundationalism, Sense-Experiential Content, and Sellars's Dilemma

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1. Foundationalism and Propositional Content

A foundationalist account of the justification of our empirical beliefs is committed to the following two claims:

- (1) Sense experience is a source of justification.
- (2) Some empirical beliefs are basic: justified without receiving their justification from any other beliefs.

In this paper, I will defend each of these claims against an objection. The objection to (1) that I will discuss is due to Donald Davidson. He writes: The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified.

[1]

There are two important thoughts in this passage. The first of these is explicitly expressed, the second implied:

- (3) Sense-experiential states are devoid of propositional content.
- (4) Necessarily, if a mental state can play the role of a justifier, it has propositional content.

(3) and (4) entail that a sense-experiential state cannot play the role of a justifier. If that is true, then (1) is false. This, in any case, seems to me to be Davidson's argument. In response to it, I accept (4) but reject (3). This is an unusual move for foundationalists, who tend to accept (3) and deny (4). Nevertheless, it is what I take to be the right move.

Now, I accept (4) because I don't see how sense experience without propositional content can function as a justifier. Consider as an example the belief:

B1 This object is blue.

Suppose what justifies it is a visual sense experience E. Suppose further that E does not have any propositional content at all. Well, in that case we might wonder why E doesn't justify instead the belief

B2 This object is white

or, let's say, the belief

B3 This object is yellow.

Externalists have a ready answer to this question. They would say that, if E is indeed a justifier for B1, then there obtains a reliable causal relation between that E and B1, but not between E and B2, or E and B3. However, for reasons I cannot address here, the kind of foundationalism I wish to advocate is internalist. Thus the externalist answer I just considered is not available to me. Now, is there

any alternative answer that is acceptable from the internalist point of view? A satisfactory discussion of this question would demand more space than I have available here, and thus I will merely register my suspicion that there is no such alternative answer. [2] Consequently, I reject the assumption that E is without propositional content. However, once we agree that E has propositional content, an answer to the question of why E justifies B1, but not B2 or B3, is immediately forthcoming: it does because E has as its content the proposition that this object is blue, but neither the proposition that it is white, nor the proposition that it is yellow.

Now, to defend (4) I have considered just this one example. However, I would hope that the example is representative of the types of beliefs that, according to foundationalism, can be justified directly through sense experience. Though more discussion of this issue is no doubt desirable, the argument for (4) as just presented will have to suffice as an explanation of why I accept (4). Next, I will explain why I reject (3). Well, if we compare (3) with its negation and ask where initial plausibility lies, I would say the clear winner is the negation of (3). Consider a number of sense experiences. You are having a cup of coffee. It looks black. It tastes sweet and feels hot. Isn't it plausible to say that what we are considering here are three distinct sense experiences that have the following propositions as their content: that the coffee is black, that it is sweet, and that it is hot? Of course, the view that our sense experiences have propositional content is nothing new. John Searle defended it in his book *Intentionality*. Here is a passage from that book:

I want to argue for a point that has often been ignored in discussions of the philosophy of perception, namely that visual (and other sorts of perceptual) experiences have Intentionality. The visual experience is as much directed at or of objects and states of affairs in the world as any of the paradigm Intentional states . . . such as belief, fear, or desire. [3]

And here is another passage:

The content of the visual experience, like the content of the belief, is always equivalent to a whole proposition. Visual experience is never simply of an object but rather it must always be that such and such is the case. [4]

I agree with Searle, and thus disagree with Davidson's claim that sense experience (sensations, in his terminology) is devoid of propositional content. Rather, what seems true to me is

(5) Sense experience is propositional to a significant extent.

This claim is compatible with the further claim that

(6) Some sense-experiential states do not have propositional content.

which some epistemologists take to be true. [5] I am not, then, making a case for the claim that sense experience is necessarily propositional. Rather, the version of foundationalism I am presenting rests on the weaker claim that, although a signification portion of sense experience does have propositional content, there might also be sense experiential states without it.

2. Bonjour's Objection

Before moving on, I will briefly discuss an argument of Laurence Bonjour's in support of the Davidsonian view that sense experience is devoid of propositional content. Here is how Bonjour defends this claim:

At least part of the point is that the content of, for example, the visual experience that I am having as I look out of my window is far too specific, detailed, and variegated to be adequately captured in any conceptual or propositional formulation---or at least in any that I am presently able to formulate or even understand. [6]

I do not think that this argument supports Davidson's claim. To explain why not, I will distinguish between two kinds of sense-experiential content: *de re* and *de dicto*. Suppose Harry is a mountain man who has spent most of his life in the wilderness in Alaska. He has never seen a microwave oven in his life. Now, however, we find him in a typical American kitchen, and he happens to be looking at a microwave oven for the first time in his life. How are we to describe his sense-experience? I suggest that an adequate answer to this question calls for the distinction I just mentioned. Since Harry has never before seen a microwave oven, does not know what such an oven looks like, and indeed does not even possess the concept of one, I think it is clear that the object he is looking at does not appear to him as a microwave oven. Thus I would say that his sense-experiential state does not have as its *de dicto* content the proposition that there is a microwave oven on the counter. On the other hand, it is true that Harry sees a microwave oven. It is also true that, if you were standing next to him, and both of you were to paint (in a realistic fashion) what is visually appearing to you (we are assuming that both of you can do that), then both you would produce (more or less) the same painting. After all, you both visually perceive the same object. What I wish to suggest, then, is this. Both Harry and you have a sense-experience with the same *de re* content: both of you visually perceive a microwave oven. However, the *de dicto* content of your sense-experiential states is different. The object appears to you, but not to Harry, as a microwave oven. Consequently, your sense experience, but not Harry's, has the *de dicto* content that there is a microwave oven on the counter.

I will now return to Bonjour's argument. The premise to which he appeals, I take it, is that our sense experiences are specific, detailed, and variegated to such an extent that they vastly outstrip our conceptual resources. What follows from this premise is that the *de re* content of a typical sense experience is vastly larger than its *de dicto* content. What does not follow from it is that the *de dicto* content of our sense experiences is not propositional. [7] But it is the latter kind of propositional content that I think foundationalists ought to appeal to in order explain how basic beliefs are justified. I do not think, therefore, that Bonjour argument provides sufficient support for Davidson's view that sense experience does not have the kind of propositional content they would have to have if they are to serve as justifiers.

Let me briefly sum up where we are. In response to Davidson's argument that sense experience cannot play the role of a justifier because it does not have propositional content, I have argued, and thereby deviated from foundationalist tradition, that sense experiential states do have propositional content. Next, I will defend the second foundationalist thesis, the claim that

there are basic beliefs, against a well-known objection that is due to Wilfrid Sellars.

3. Sellars's Dilemma

To the critics of foundationalism, the claim that some of our beliefs are basic is part of a myth: the myth of the given. Most prominently, it was Wilfrid Sellars who viewed foundationalists as the purveyors of mythology. In his seminal paper "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," he supported this view by confronting foundationalists with what I will refer to as the "Sellarsian dilemma." [8] During his coherentist period, Laurence Bonjour has made this dilemma a key element of his rejection of foundationalism. These days Bonjour is a foundationalist himself, but he is still very much concerned with the Sellarsian dilemma, and I believe rightly so. The dilemma concerns the very question I just asked: How can a sense-experience play the role of a justifier? Here is a passage in which Bonjour sums up how he conceives of the dilemma:

[T]he problem is to say how the specific character of the experience is itself apprehended in a way that makes it possible to appeal to it for justification within an internalist view. If that character is apprehended in an apperceptive belief (or belief-like state), the belief that I have such-and-such a specific sort of experience, then the original, supposedly basic belief appears to have lost that status, since its justification now depends on this further belief . . . Whereas if the apprehension of the specific character of [the] experience does not take the form of a belief or belief-like cognitive state . . . then any further issue of justification is perhaps avoided, but at the cost of making it difficult to see how such an apprehension can confer justification on the original, supposedly basic belief. [9]

A theory that involves a dilemma presents its advocate with a choice between two horns. The choice is supposed to be a painful one because each of the horns is afflicted with a serious liability. What, then, is the choice with which the foundationalist is confronted, and what are the respective liabilities? The choice has to do with the nature of the sense-experiential state that is supposed to justify the basic belief. For ease of exposition, let "B" stand for the putatively basic belief, and "E" for the sense-experiential state that is its intended justifier. According to Bonjour, the choice with which the foundationalist is confronted is this one: E is either a belief-like state (if not even just a further belief), or it is not. However, what sort of thing would turn a sense-experiential state into a belief-like state, or even an outright belief? The worry, it seems to me, is that the possession of propositional content would have that effect. If a sense-experiential state has propositional content, then such a state becomes a propositional attitude, and, so goes the worry, turns into a belief-like state, or indeed another belief. I will, therefore, put the horns of the dilemma thus:

The Sellarsian Dilemma

Sense-experiential states either have propositional content (the first horn), or they do not (the second horn). [10]

The liability of the first horn is that, since (as it is assumed) the presence of propositional content turns E into a belief or a belief-like state, this belief or belief-like state itself is in need of justification. So the justificatory regress continues, and B---the putatively basic belief---cannot be basic after all. The liability of the second horn is that E, given that it has no propositional content, cannot function as a justifier for B. As I explained above, I accept that, if sense experience were devoid of propositional content, it would be inflicted with this liability. However, I consider sense-experiential states to have propositional content, and thus I will have to challenge the alleged liability of the first horn. I will argue that the presence of propositional content does not turn sense-experiential states into beliefs or belief-like states. For unlike beliefs or belief-like states, sense-experiential states, even if they have propositional content, do not admit of justification, i.e., are not the sort of things that can be justified or unjustified.

4. Sellars's Dilemma Resolved

The worry, then, that is connected with the first horn of Sellars's dilemma is that the presence of propositional content turns sense-experiential states into beliefs or belief-like states, which cannot function as justifiers unless they are justified themselves. I think that this worry is unfounded, for, as I will now argue, the presence of propositional content does not have the effect of turning sense-experiential states into belief like states.

If sense-experiential states have propositional content, then they are a species of intentional states: mental states that are directed toward a proposition. However, not all intentional states are capable of possessing justification---epistemic justification, that is, the kind of justification we are concerned with. For example, understanding p and contemplating p are intentional states, but they are hardly the sort of states that can be epistemically justified or unjustified. Furthermore, intentional states such as hopes, fears, and desires are not suitable objects of epistemic justification either. In any case, I have yet to encounter an epistemology paper in which the concept of epistemic justification is applied to such states. So let us agree that there are many intentional states that do not admit of epistemic justification.

Clearly, then, the following argument won't do: "Sense experiences, if they have propositional content, are intentional states. Therefore, just like beliefs and belief-like intentional states, they can be justified or unjustified, and thus can justify only if they are justified themselves." What's wrong with this argument is the assumption that a mental state's having propositional content is sufficient for that state's being eligible for the status of being epistemically justified. This assumption is false because, as I just pointed out, there are many intentional states--mental states that have propositional content--that are not eligible for that status because they simply are not the sort of states that can be justified or unjustified.

We might wonder whether there is a better argument for the alleged liability of the first horn. I know of none. As long as I am not confronted with one, I need

not view the alleged liability of the first horn of Sellars' dilemma as an obstacle to the kind of foundationalism I am defending here.

It would be nice, though, to have a positive argument in support of the claim that sense experiential states do not admit of justification even if they have propositional content. [11] Perhaps the following argument will do the trick. It seems to me that the following premise is true:

- (P) Necessarily, if a mental state X with p as its content admits of epistemic justification, then X is identical to either the state of taking p to be true, or taking p to be false, or suspending judgment about p.

Now consider an example of a sense-experiential state: the coffee I am drinking tastes sweet to me. Let's say the propositional content in question is that the coffee is sweet. As a result of my experience, I might take that proposition to be true. Or, being convinced my taste buds have gone haywire, I might suspend judgment, or even take that proposition to be false. But whatever attitude toward p I might take, I think it is clear that it is not identical to, but distinct from, the sense experience I have described by saying that the coffee tastes sweet to me. So the sense experience in question is not identical to any of the three attitudes listed in (P). Consequently, provided that (P) is true, that experience does not qualify as the sort of mental state that admits of epistemic justification. Now, there is nothing special about the example I just gave. It is representative of sense experience in general. Thus, if (P) is true, we are led to the conclusion that sense experiences are not eligible for the status of epistemic justification, and thus can justify without being justified themselves.

It might be objected that (P) is lacking in plausibility. I don't think so, but for those who think it does I will offer one further argument in support of my claim that sense-experiential states are not the sort of thing that admits of justification. Suppose you ask me: What justifies you in believing that your coffee is sweet? This is a sensible question, and it has a sensible answer. The answer would be: "It tastes sweet." But now suppose we were to ask: "But what justifies you in experiencing the coffee as tasting sweet, i.e., in having a sense experience that has as its content the proposition that the coffee is sweet?" Well, this is not a sensible question. If you were to ask me that kind of a question, I would have to reply that I don't know what you mean. Now, what this consideration suggests is this: the sort of mental states that are epistemically justified or unjustified are not sense experiences, but rather the doxastic attitudes we form in response to sense experiences. So I conclude once again that sense experiences with propositional content do not admit of epistemic justification, and thus can justify without being justified themselves.

Let me conclude. According to the kind of foundationalism that I am recommending, sense experiential states can play the role of justifiers because they have propositional content. The classic, Sellarsian objection to this move is to say that this kind of foundationalism does not stop the justificatory regress because, if basic beliefs receive their justification from mental states with propositional content, then these states in turn will be in need of justification. The reply to this objection is that experiential states simply are not the kind of

things that can be justified or unjustified. Yet they can play the role of justifiers: they can do so precisely because they have propositional content.

Notes

1. "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in Dieter Henrich, ed., *Kant oder Hegel*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1983, pp. 423-38.
2. For alternative versions of foundationalism that view sense experience as nonpropositional, see Laurence Bonjour, "The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism," in John Greco and Ernest Sosa (eds.) *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 117-143, and Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).
3. John Searle, *Intentionality. An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 39.
4. *Ibid*, p.40
5. William Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 90.
6. *Ibid*, p. 134.
7. Nor does it follow from it that sense-experiential de re content is not propositional. However, this is of little help to the view I am defending, since a sense experience with p as its de re content is unsuitable as a justifier for the belief that p. Consider again the example of Henry. His sense experience does have as its de re content the proposition that there is a microwave oven on the counter. But surely that doesn't mean that his experience can justify him in believing that there is a microwave oven on the counter.
8. See Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), p. 128f.
9. "The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, loc. cit.
10. In "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Sellars puts the dilemma as follows: Sensing (the having of sense-data) either is, or is not, a form of knowledge. With regard to putting the matter this way, the intended liabilities of the two horns are obvious. If sensing is a form of knowledge, then the knowledge that is based on sensings is not foundational but inferred. If, on the other hand, sensing is not a form of knowledge, the question arises of how sensing can play the role of a justifier. This particular way of construing the dilemma does not seem to me, however, to pose much of a challenge. It can easily and effectively be rebutted by pointing out that justifiers need not be instances of knowledge. In any case, an alternative way of construing the dilemma is to ask whether the kind of sense-experiential states that are supposed to function as justifiers are justification-bearers themselves. The dilemma, then, is this: Either appearances are capable of being justified, or they are not. If they are, the beliefs they justify cannot be basic. If they are not, they cannot justify at all. However, it seems to me that what is typically thought to turn appearances into justification bearers is the presence of propositional content. It is for this reason that I construe the dilemma as it is displayed in the text.
11. I used to think that the following argument does the trick: Beliefs---the paradigm states that admit of epistemic justification---necessarily involve assent to a proposition. But sense-experiences do not. For when we suspect our senses to deceive us, we do not assent to the proposition that is the content of our

sense-experiential state. Consequently, sense experiences are unlike beliefs, and thus do not admit of epistemic justification. Unfortunately, this argument is no good. After all, suspension of judgment admits of epistemic justification just as much as belief. Therefore, the point that sense experience does not always involve assent to a proposition does not establish that it does not admit of epistemic justification.