A COHERENT FOUNDATION

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ABSTRACT

In the field of epistemology, two theories about how belief justification occurs compete with each other for prominence. Foundationalism holds that there are a few basic beliefs upon which all subsequent knowledge and justification rest. Coherentism, on the other hand, claims this is impossible because all beliefs are justified only in context with other beliefs. This paper examines the basic characteristics of each theory, pointing out their respective strengths and weaknesses. It then seeks to create a plausible compromise between the theories by combining their respective strengths, enabling them to avoid common pitfalls.

As competing theories, coherentism and foundationalism each have strengths and weaknesses relative to each other. While studying the various arguments supporting or opposing either theory, I have often found myself vacillating between the two, wondering to which I should finally subscribe. It occurred to me that it might be reasonable to resist the urge to dogmatically cling to one at the exclusion of the other; after all, both theories simultaneously offer worthwhile features and suffer similar flaws. What follows, then, is what I hope will be a reasonable compromise in which I will attempt to dovetail the strongest features of each theory with those of the other. I will begin by briefly reviewing the fundamental concepts and inherent conflicts embodied in each theory. I will then introduce my own solution and explain how it attempts to resolve the differences.

Foundationalism is the belief that there is a foundation that all knowledge and justified beliefs are based on. According to Matthias Steup, foundationalism is structured as follows:

1) Many of our beliefs are basic;
2) Every justified inferential belief ultimately receives its justification from one or more basic beliefs.

Steup’s work in the field of epistemology is well known: He is often cited in influential works on the topic, including The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. His book, An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology, provides an overview of the field of epistemology, the branch of philosophy dealing with the study of knowledge and justified belief. Steup’s in-depth work in the field of epistemology is well known: He is often cited in influential works on the topic, including The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. His book served as the text for Dr. Andrew Naylor’s Topics in the Theory of Knowledge philosophy course, for which this paper was originally written.

Beyond this perfunctory definition the waters of understanding get muddled quickly: there are multiple versions of foundationalism. I will keep it as simple as possible, beginning with the concept of basic belief.

There are three essential characteristics of basic beliefs. First, they are noninferential: not inferred from other beliefs. Second, they are themselves justified because they play the role of justifiers for nonbasic beliefs. Finally, they are justified nondoxastically: meaning they are justified without receiving their justification from any other beliefs (Steup 89-91). This third characteristic includes perception, introspection, and memory within one’s belief system.

With the characteristics of basic beliefs in place we are now prepared to advance to a core definition common to all versions of foundationalism:

1) Many of our beliefs are basic;
2) Every justified inferential belief ultimately receives its justification from one or more basic beliefs.

With this theoretical structure of belief systems in place, the sharp-eyed observer can readily spot the Achilles’ heel of foundationalism: if, according to this theory, many of our beliefs are basic, upon what grounds can "foundationalists maintain that there are beliefs that are justified without
receiving their justification from other beliefs?" (Steup 93). There are at least two difficulties that must be addressed when answering this question. The first deals with the potential problem of an infinite regress, while the second deals with the regress argument itself.

The problem of an infinite regress is fairly straightforward and is dealt with relatively simply: one may have a belief B1 that is justified. If B1 is nonbasic it must rely in turn upon a belief B2 for its justification. If B2 is nonbasic it must then rely on B3 for its justification. Either this regress eventually terminates or it continues ad infinitum. "However, an infinite regress of justifying beliefs cannot justify anything. Thus, given our assumption that B1 is justified, the regress must terminate in a basic belief" (Steup 94). Steup refers to basic beliefs as "regress terminators."

The second difficulty is a bit thornier, for it questions the validity of basic beliefs themselves. Foundationalists rely on B1 being justified to demonstrate that an infinite regress is impossible. However, skeptics might deny this assumption by asking how we ever come to justify a basic belief in the first place. In other words, the moment we assign a definition, such as "regress terminator," to a basic belief we have just violated the concept embodied in a basic belief and we jump back on the merry-go-round of circularity. We will come back to this presently. However, a short reply to the skeptics' regress argument goes like this: "If there are justified beliefs, then there must be basic beliefs" (Steup 96). This answer carries weight by virtue of the fact that the idea of no justified beliefs is intolerable.

We now turn to coherentism. Where foundationalists hold that there must be basic beliefs for justified beliefs to exist at all, coherentists "maintain that it is impossible for a belief to be basic on the ground that what justifies a belief must always be one or more other beliefs" (Steup 114). This immediately makes them targets of the foundationalists' guns, for coherentists "must somehow make sense of the idea of circular justification: of beliefs justifying each other without there being any foundation...in which the process of justification can be grounded" (Ibid).

However, there may be a way to skirt the problem inherent in this apparent circular reasoning process. Steup points out that "to give coherence a fair hearing, we must replace the linear conceptual framework within which the regress problem arises with a holistic conception of justification" (Steup 116). I see this as a matrix, in which all of the beliefs in the system stand "in relations of mutual support," with "none being epistemically prior to the others" (Craig, vol.5, 255). What this amounts to is a system with complete internal integrity in which individual components derive their justification by virtue of their membership and appropriate placement within the overall system. Three putative elements are identified in such a systems' constitution: entailment relations, logical consistency, and explanatory relations (Steup 117).

I have already noted the circularity objection leveled by critics of coherentism and briefly noted the holistic conception. I will return to this shortly. In the meantime, I would like to address two other difficulties within the coherentist perceptual framework.

The first arises from the coherentists' argument that justification of a belief must arise from the network of beliefs already in place, rather than from external sources. This virtually assures that a coherentist must assume an internalist position. The difficulty here, then, is to figure out what to do with new information as it is made available (from sources external) to the believer. All internal beliefs, with the possible exception of introspective beliefs, originate externally. It is only through time and interaction with the world that internalization occurs. Some of it occurs selectively, but most is through the background of experience. Virtually no one would hold that introspection is the only legitimate form of belief. Therefore internalism provides poor ground upon which to build a robust theory of justification, at least if an individual is interacting with her/his world (as opposed to, say, a brain in a vat). In the case of coherentism, it might lead to a condition in which an individual's personal perceptual framework has perfect internal integrity. This could, in turn, lead that person to conclude s/he is perfectly justified in all of her/his beliefs when, in reality, that individual could be completely out of sync with the world. This is known as the isolation objection.

The other major difficulty with the coherentist perspective is related to the role played by time in belief formation. For instance, how does the coherentist deal with cognitively spontaneous observations or perceptual beliefs—those that "simply strike the observer in an involuntary, coercive, non-inferential way, rather than as a product of any sort of inference or other discursive process, whether explicit or implicit" (Craig, vol.5, 256)? Recalling Steup's three putative elements of coherence (entailment relations, logical consistency, and explanatory relations), it becomes apparent that justification occurs over a period of time in a coherentist perceptual framework, rendering it difficult (if not impossible) to adequately handle momentary justification situations, such as hunches and irrational spontaneous convictions.

So here is the basic problem: foundationalists complain that coherentism cannot work because it collapses into the tail-chasing circularity of self-justification, while coherentists hold that the foundationalists' reliance upon basic beliefs also fails because basic beliefs themselves must be described in non-basic language, ultimately drawing them into a similar problem of circularity. Given this difficulty, I am proposing a possible compromise solution in which both sides might be able to score points and walk away feeling good about the outcome. It will require that both sides give up something as well. I call my solution a coherent foundation.

I arrived at my solution by comparing the arguments for and against the two competing theories with, among other things,
my experience as a parent and my long-standing subscription to Taoist philosophy. The result plays out below.

Let us first consider our way of understanding reality, a way that is so deep and pervasive, so seemingly self-evident, that most of us are not even conscious of it. Here in the West we generally view reality as consisting of objects or items (including people), each with its own identity. As such, causality plays a prominent role: these objects were created by some power other than themselves. Hence, Westerners have developed entire philosophical systems involving first causes (i.e. divine creation or "big bang" theories). The logical conclusion of such a perspective is that relationships between objects are external: entering into or breaking a relationship does not change the object's reality or identity. The central problem in such a perspective is that of establishing relationships among preexisting objects. This seems more or less parallel to foundationalism's apparent inability to distinguish how the relationship between basic beliefs works without slipping into a linear circularity.

Eastern thinkers have a very different perspective. From their vantage point, reality is a field or matrix in relation to which an individual (or thing) is a locus. Individuals (or things) continuously emerge from the matrix of relationships as manifestations of it (as a representation of its totality) and then merge back into it. The logical conclusion of this perspective is that relationships between things are internal: a thing's particular point of focus is defined relative to its position to other things. (Unlike the West, creation stories are virtually nonexistent in the East—there are no external causes.) A great challenge found in this perspective is how to move from potentiality to actuality. Here we find parallels to coherentism.

Beliefs are not formed in a vacuum. Our everyday experiences confirm this. The difficulty for a foundationalist is how to deal with basic beliefs, for foundationalism treats them as isolatable independent variables and, in the process, strips them of their contextual value. I would ask the foundationalist to relinquish this cherished belief (no pun intended). Here is why. Consider how a child develops. When my son was born he was incapable of doing anything beyond instinctual things such as sucking, wetting, and crying. I do not know what was the very first perception he experienced in this life. I recall, however, that when he was born he looked directly into my eyes. For the sake of argument we'll call this his first perception. From all indications, that perception had little, if any, personal meaning for him. In fact, he and I looked at each other hundreds of times in the following weeks with no indications that he recognized me. Yet, if I understand the foundationalist argument, each time he looked at me he experienced a perceptual input of data and a basic belief was formed. Without delving into a lengthy discourse on child development psychology, I will simply say my son "came into living" over a period of time. He wasn't just born "on." Rather, he "turned on" in stages. If we look to the Eastern model it all makes perfect sense: when enough causal connections were in place he emerged from the field of potentiality. He still is emerging. All of us are. It seems to me that each of us has at our respective cores a set of basic concepts upon which future beliefs and developments are based. I cannot precisely define what constitutes a coherent foundation, but I would suspect it includes (but is not limited to) such things as shapes, colors, and sensory impressions, in conjunction with all the context-sensitive interactions that occur between them. These interactions provide them with a comparative base from which they produce the meanings that we in turn derive. As an example, the visual impression commonly known as "red" is meaningless until it is compared to other visual impressions of both similar and dissimilar natures. Only once "red" is experienced in context does it seem to impinge any value to a belief structure. To put it in Taoist language, "Is and Isn't produce each other" (Addiss #2).

If we accept a coherent foundation, many of the problems associated with foundationalism dissipate. The coherent foundation serves as a system of basic beliefs, which in turn function as the regress terminators so valuable to the foundationalist perspective. The difference in this conceptual framework is that by "matrixing" the basic belief structure, basic beliefs no longer suffer the difficulties that arise when regress terminators are treated as isolatable independent variables. This solution avoids the linear circularity objection.

There is a circularity of sorts, but it is holistic, confined exclusively to the internal matrix of underlying basic beliefs. The result is that whenever a regress gets started in the superstructure, it finds its termination when it bumps into the coherent foundation. Whatever item or items in the coherent foundation structure are appropriate to the work of terminating the particular regress emerge to do their work, but do so with the contextual support of the entire set of foundational beliefs. Once the regress has been successfully terminated, the terminating contextual support of the entire set of foundational beliefs. Once the regress has been successfully terminated, the terminating loci recede into the field of coherent beliefs (in a sense, lose their "identity"). They then resume the more generic task of providing a coherent foundation for the overlying superstructure of nonbasic beliefs.

Let us take a moment to make sure the distinction between concept formation and belief justification is clear, and to see how these two features of a belief system fit into the coherent foundation paradigm. Previously I used the example of my son's early development to show how a coherent foundational structure might come to be. This theory certainly might be used to explain how concepts are formed. However, it may not be so clear how belief justification fits in the picture. We need to distinguish between the activity of justifying a belief and a belief's property of being justified. A belief "can have the property of being completely justified even if [one has] not engaged in the activity of justifying it" (Steup, 10). Furthermore, "it is possible for you to have no idea how to justify a certain belief although that belief is, as a matter of fact, justified" (Ibid.). This is important.
Consider the recognized sources of evidence for justification: perception, introspection, reason, memory, and reliable authorities (Steup 10). Of these five, only perception does not require a higher order of mental activity—that is, perceptual evidence is information that gets "imposed" upon us from sources external. It is also, as noted earlier, the first kind of information we as humans ever encounter. Throughout our lives perceptual evidence constitutes our main source of belief formation. The other sources—introspection, reason, memory, and reliable authorities—will serve as secondary agents. I am not implying that they are any less important. We do, however, have a generally greater degree of control over them, and it is they that provide the filters through which perceptual evidence is sifted and interpreted. Considering the distinction between perceptual evidence and the other four agents of evidence, and applying this to our model of concept formation in early childhood, it seems that justification as an activity does not occur at the coherent foundation level. Rather, justification at this level emerges as a property of the coherent foundation based on the way the fundamental evidential pieces fit together to form a holistic system. In other words, at the coherent foundation level, justification is a quality arising from the causal interconnections of the foundational matrix.

On the other hand, justification as an activity occurs at the nonbasic, superstructure level. At this level, "thinking-about" occurs. Introspection, reason, memory, and reliable authorities all combine their efforts to filter new packets of perceptual evidence, molding them into the schema that rests upon each individual's coherent foundation. It is here that nonbasic beliefs connect in novel ways to comprise the foundationalists' superstructure model and, in turn, generate the unique personality of each individual. There is a continuum: the foundationalist model becomes increasingly appropriate the farther out we go and, conversely, the coherentist model becomes more tenable the deeper in we go. The sophistication of this process is what differentiates an infant from a grade-school child from an adult. As the individual grows and matures s/he "turns on" to the fullness of life's possibilities. Various prospects are then realized according to the amount of evidence amassed, the number of beliefs formed, and the degree to which active justification of those beliefs occurs.

By granting a coherent structure the foundationalists are now free to build whatever superstructure of nonbasic beliefs they desire. The coherentists can also relax because they are able to maintain the circle-of-beliefs thesis down at the epistemic core (where it really counts), but are no longer subject to the objections that arise at higher levels. For instance, the virtual requirement for an internalist perspective is no longer in force. By allowing for externalism, coherentism's problems with the isolationist objection also melt away. Furthermore, by allowing for a foundationalist-style superstructure, the problem with cognitive spontaneity is apparently resolved: the "time objection" is handled down at the coherent foundation level, freeing the higher levels of consciousness to deal with such things as hunches and irrational spontaneous convictions in a context-appropriate fashion (perceived emergency situations, for example). It is conceivable that various grades of supervenience might also come into play at the superstructure level in these situations, depending, for example, on the level of perceived danger in an emergency situation. In a high-danger situation one responds almost instinctively, devoting little or no energy to evaluating the level of justification for one's actions. However, in a situation where the level of danger is not as high, one may have the luxury to make at least a perfunctory reference at the "library" of previous experiences down at the coherent foundation level. This allows comparison of the current experience with previous time-objection experiences in an effort to ascertain what is the most appropriately justified response.

By adopting a coherent foundation theory I believe we can escape the major problems faced by proponents who cling dogmatically to their respective theories and end up painting themselves into an epistemic corner. By accepting some compromises and getting East and West to shake hands, we can realize a much more practical approach to epistemic justification and experience the dynamism each theory seeks to exploit.

REFERENCES


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C. DAVID MILLER graduated in May 2001 with a degree in Philosophy. He served as an officer of the IUSB Philosophy Club since 1999. A portion of the work for this paper also appeared in his Honors thesis. He plans to return to IUSB in fall of 2001 to continue his Japanese language studies. "In my study of philosophy I have noticed that Western thinkers are generally under the influence of the Empiricists. Eastern thinkers, on the other hand, have evolved highly sophisticated holistic systems of thinking that preclude the scientific method. It occurred to me that the debate between foundationalism and coherentism parallels some of the essential cultural differences. I am interested in highlighting the commonalities in order to broaden cross-cultural understanding."