

Knowledge and Reality A: Lecture Three

1. Agrippa's Trilemma

Either:

- It goes on forever.
- Some of the beliefs *don't need* justifying on the grounds of other beliefs and we just hit 'rock bottom'.
- Some of the beliefs justify themselves.

With the first option We end up with an *infinite* regress. We have an infinite number of beliefs, each one justified by another one. The regress *never ends*. The problem is that surely this is *demonstrably* false – I never had time to learn an *infinite* number of things so *my* mind can't work like that. So I don't know anything!

2. Foundationalism

The Foundationalist believes that we need a core set of beliefs, a *foundation*, that all our other beliefs are built upon. Call these beliefs, those that are not inferred from other beliefs, *basic beliefs*. But we have to be careful here. As a matter of *descriptive* fact there are obviously people who take certain beliefs as basic, and then build up from there. But that won't always get us what we want.

Example: Crazy dude.

Example: The lazy hippy.

In each case the people have a foundationalist belief structure. The basic belief justifies the beliefs that stem from it but nonetheless we don't want to say they *are* justified in those further beliefs. Just that they *would* be justified if the basis were justified.

So there are people with basic beliefs. But we want an answer to the trilemma where we are justified in knowing things. We want basic beliefs that are *themselves* justified, and can act as justification for the beliefs we build upon them. Call such beliefs *properly basic*. So a properly basic belief is justified (in a way that crazy and lazy hippy beliefs are not). *But it's not justified on the basis of any other belief*. It's not *inferred* from any other belief. So non-basic beliefs are *inferentially* justified. Basic beliefs are *non-inferentially* justified.

3. Classical Foundationalism

The problem is what counts as a properly basic belief. Classical foundationalism says that we need to find a belief of which we are *absolutely certain* of. If we are absolutely certain of it, if it cannot be false, then it is justified without relying on any other belief.

But what kind of beliefs can we be absolutely certain of?

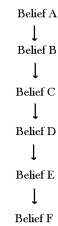
I am in pain? I exist? I have a sensory impression of first years?

And do those beliefs *justify* the rest of my beliefs?

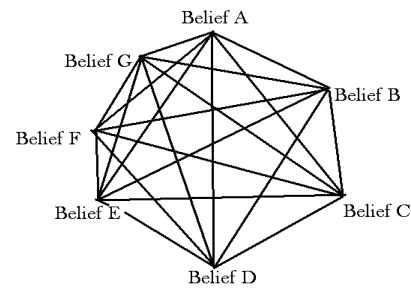
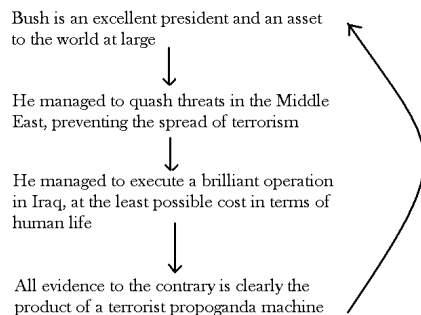
Is 'I've been shot' justified by 'I am in pain'?

Does 'I have a sensory impression of first years' justify 'There are first years in front of me'?

Other variations exist that aren't classical and think a properly basic belief needn't be certain. I leave you to look at them.



4. Coherentism



Note that here the justification runs *both ways*

The third option, if done naïvely makes justification circular. But a more sophisticated theory is *coherentism*. The problem is with thinking justification is *linear*. Coherentists think that justification is *non-linear*.

So to determine whether a belief is justified we have to *look at the system as a whole*.

Analogy One: Foundationalism as houses; Coherentism as wigwams

Analogy Two: Coherentism like filling in a crossword; each answer making you more justified that you've got the whole lot right.

So for the (caricature) Coherentist there aren't any basic beliefs. Everything is (partially) justified by another belief. So for the coherentist justification is analysed thus:

Agent *S* justifiably believes *p* iff *S*'s belief system is coherent and *S* believes *p*.

5. Problems with Coherentism

Problem One

What exactly *is* coherence? What conditions are there for a set of beliefs being coherent? In other words, what *analysis* can we give of coherence? You might think coherence has something to do with *consistency*. Two propositions are consistent iff it is possible that their conjunction be true.

Example: $2+2=4$ and $2+3=5$.

Example: Me being a lecturer and the moon being made of cheese.

Example of inconsistency: Charles Lindbergh as the first solo Transatlantic pilot and Charles Fern as the first solo Transatlantic pilot.

But imagine you believed just those things!

Problem Two: Competing coherent systems.

Example: The existence of fossils.

One coherent system takes the existence of the fossils along with evolution explaining their being there. But there are other coherent, if not justified, explanations. Indeed, for just about any belief we can imagine it contained within a coherent system. So, given that any belief could be justified, wouldn't it be *irrational* to think your belief was justified and true, whereas everyone else was wrong? Essentially, we seem to lose justification as a guide to *truth*. Whilst we admit that *sometimes* justified beliefs are wrong, surely *normally* they take us to true beliefs. But now any belief, even a false belief, can be justified. That *normative* element of justification is lost.