What is Epistemology? and The Nature of Justification
Phil 20009: Epistemology

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What is Epistemology?

• One of the core areas of Philosophy

• A.K.A. Theory of Knowledge

• Concerned with nature, sources, and limits of knowledge and justification.

• Primarily concerned with propositional knowledge, i.e. knowledge *that* such-and-such is true. (Compare this to know-how, i.e. knowledge *how* to such-and-such).

• Other related topics:
  - Rationality
  - Evidence

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What is Epistemology? (2)

- Some central epistemological questions:
  Question: What is Knowledge?
  An answer: Knowledge is true beliefs acquired by reliable methods
  Question: Are there limits to knowledge?
  An answer: Scepticism about unobservables.
  Question: What is the nature of justification?
  An answer: The nature of justification is foundational.

- Three prominent projects in Epistemology:
  1) Giving rules for good believing
  2) Defining knowledge
  3) Defeating the Sceptic
Justification

• A general rule of good believing:
  Only believe X when you have justification for X.

• Indeed the traditional answer to the question
  ‘When do we know that something is the case?’ is
  ‘When: (a) we believe it,
    (b) it is true and
    (c) we are justified in believing it’.

• One idea: A belief is justified if and only if it is inferred from one or more beliefs which are themselves justified.

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Agrippa’s Trilemma

1. A belief can only be justified by another belief.
2. A belief can only be a justifier if it is itself justified.
3. If there is a justified belief, it must be supported by a chain of justifiers that EITHER:
   a. never ends
   b. ends in a basic or self-justifying belief
   c. goes in a circle

BUT:

4. a. an infinite chain of beliefs does not justify
   b. there are no basic or self-justifying beliefs
   c. circular chains of beliefs do not justify

THUS:

5. There are no justified beliefs.

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Two Answers to the Trilemma

- Two Answers from Two Traditions:
  - Foundationalism
  - Coherentism

- Foundationalism rejects 4b (also rejects 1)
  In particular, Foundationalists claim that some beliefs are basic.

- Coherentism rejects 4c
  In particular, Coherentists claim that not all circular reasoning is bad; some circular reasoning justifies.

- Let’s look at each of these traditions in turn…
Foundationalism

- Foundationalism: A belief is *justified* iff it rests EITHER on basic beliefs OR on beliefs that eventually rest on basic beliefs.

- Basic or ‘foundational’ beliefs are a.k.a. ‘self-justified beliefs’.

- Candidates for foundational beliefs:
  - acquired via sensory organs
  - acquired via pure reasoning
  - acquired via introspection
  - innate

- Two main flavours of Foundationalism:
  (1) Empiricists
  (2) Rationalists

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Foundationalism (2)

Pyramid Structure

highest level

lowest level

basic beliefs

Justification

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Empiricism

• Main idea: Basic beliefs are *all and only those* acquired via the senses.

As opposed to… beliefs acquired via reasoning, intuition, divine revelation, etc.

• Some Prominent Empiricists:
  - British Empiricists: Locke, Berkeley and Hume.
  - Logical Empiricists: Carnap, Ayer and Hempel.
  - Constructive Empiricists: Van Fraassen *et al.*

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Rationalism

• Main idea: Basic beliefs are *all and only those* acquired via pure reasoning.
  As opposed to… beliefs acquired via blind faith, guesswork, gullibility, obedience to authority, etc.

• NB: Most Rationalists take a softer approach, namely *at least some* basic beliefs are acquired via pure reasoning.

• Some Prominent Rationalists:
  - Continental: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz.
  - Moderate: Bonjour, Bealer and Audi.
Problems for Foundationalism

- It is contestable whether basic beliefs are rich enough (in content and number) to serve as a foundation.

  NB: The severity of the problem depends on how much can reasonably be included under basic beliefs.

- How do foundational beliefs gain their special epistemic status?

  Empiricist Reply: By appeal to sensory and introspective experience.

Dilemma:

a) If a special kind of belief justifies foundational beliefs then the latter are no longer basic. Also, what justifies the new beliefs?

b) If no special kind of belief is involved, how does experience translate into reasons for thinking foundational beliefs true?
Coherentism

- **Coherentism**: For a belief to be justified it must stand in certain relations to a coherent set of beliefs.

- Coherentism denies the claim that there are basic beliefs.

- On some accounts the unit of justification is the whole system; on others the specific relations between subsets of beliefs.

- Main types of coherence:
  - logical consistency (necessary but not sufficient)
  - other deductive relations
  - explanatory relations
  - evidential relations (inductive, abductive, etc.)

- Some Prominent Coherentists: Bonjour (was), Bosanquet, Quine (of sorts), Davidson.

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Coherentism (2)

Web Structure

Red arrows denote the direction of the relevant relations.

All beliefs have at least one arrow pointing at them.

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Problems for Coherentism

• Desideratum: Justification must connect to the truth.
  Problem: There is no guarantee that a coherent system will contain a single true belief.

• Desideratum: Justification takes input from the external world.
  Problem: Coherentism makes such input irrelevant.

• Desideratum: We want clear answers.
  Problem: How can we get such answers, if there are indefinitely many rival sets of belief that are internally coherent?

• NB: The concept of coherence is an indispensable ingredient in all foundationalist theories.
Food for Thought

• In what way, if any, could we bridge the gap between Foundationalism and Coherentism?
Reading