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The grounds of justification and the epistemic structure of rationality

This book presents my overall conception of justification, a related view of knowledge, and detailed positions on a number of the major issues in epistemology. These issues include the debates between foundationalism and coherentism, internalism and externalism, naturalism and normativism, rationalism and empiricism, skepticism and common sense, and causal versus acausal accounts of the relation between justifying grounds and the beliefs they warrant. The book also connects theoretical reason, which is the chief focus of epistemology, with practical reason, which is a central element in the foundations of ethics.

   This essay introduces the chapters, interconnects them, and, in some cases, extends what they say. For the most part, they exhibit a series of developing and mutually supporting epistemological positions. This is one reason for their chronological placement in each of the four parts. I will indicate, quite briefly, some of the developmental lines and many of the connections. In places, moreover, I make points not in the chapters themselves, sometimes by way of clarification and in other cases by replying to some criticism I have not previously answered.[1]

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1. Not all of my epistemological papers are included, and there is much in my *Belief, Justification, and Knowledge* (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1988) that is not included, particularly the chapters on the four classical basic sources of that triad: perception, memory, introspection, and reason. I have omitted, e.g., "Justification, Deductive Closure, and Reasons to Believe," *Dialogue* XXX (1991); "Moral Epistemology and the Supervenience of Ethical Concepts," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* XXIX Supplement (1991); "Scientific Objectivity and the Evaluation of Hypotheses," in Merrilee H. Salmon, ed., *The Philosophy of Logical Mechanism* (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer, 1989); "Foundationalism, Coherentism, and Epistemological Dogmatism" (though Chapter 4 incorporates its main points); "Believing and Affirming," *Mind* XCI (1982); and "Epistemic Disavowals and Self-Deception," *The Personalist* 57 (1976).

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Parts I through III are squarely in epistemology; Part IV carries the general epistemological position into action theory in particular and the theory of rationality in general. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the kind of account of justification I offer has broad features that make it readily extendable from belief to action and the non-cognitive propositional attitudes. Indeed, I suggest that an account of justification for beliefs that is not to a significant degree extendable is likely to be deficient even in the cognitive domain. Second, I have tried to produce an account of justified belief that is realistic from the point of view of what belief *is*, understood from the perspective of psychology and the philosophy of mind. Beyond this, I am convinced that there are important analogies, both structural and normative, between action and belief and between belief and the conative propositional attitudes, especially desire and intention – the conative attitudes most important for understanding practical rationality. Some of these analogies run through all four parts.

I. THE FOUNDATIONALISM–COHERENTISM CONTROVERSY

Despite its venerable age, foundationalism is one of the most widely misunderstood positions in philosophy. Coherentism is only slightly better understood. A major purpose of this section – and, indeed, of the book as a whole – is to transcend stereotypes of both. Foundationalism need not be understood along Aristotelian, Cartesian, or classical empiricist lines, any more than coherentism must be taken to be a kind of idealism. Both are rooted partly in these traditions, but each has outgrown its initial confines. Moreover, each is best understood in the context of the associated psychology of the epistemic agent. This is where the first chapter begins.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF COGNITION

If knowledge is constituted by a kind of belief – or indeed of any psychological materials – then a person who has it must have at least one belief (or other psychological element) for each item of knowledge. ''Psychological Foundationalism'' (Chapter 1) explores

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how we must be structured psychologically if foundationalism gives a correct account of our knowledge. The chapter does the same sort of work for coherentism and thereby provides a comparison of the two theories that differs from the comparisons standard in epistemology. On the assumption that a good epistemological theory should not imply an implausible psychological one, this proves instructive.

Foundationalism *as such*, taken as common to the various theorists who hold it, is above all a structural view. It says that a person's knowledge (or justified belief) has a foundational structure, but not what sorts of content the constitutive cognitions must have. In outline, the idea is that if one has any knowledge or justified belief, then, first, one has at least some knowledge or justified belief that is foundational, in the sense that it is not (inferentially) based on any further knowledge or belief and, second, any other knowledge or justified belief one has in some way rests on one or more of these foundational elements. This view does not imply that such foundational beliefs are, e.g., epistemically certain, or not themselves *grounded* in something else, such as perceptual experience. Thus, it is left open that, psychologically, the presence of these elements can be explained, and, epistemically, an answer can often be given to the question of what justifies them. What is ruled out is simply that they are justified, *inferentially*, by other beliefs. If they were, those beliefs would raise the same question, and we would either have to posit foundational ones or suppose – what psychological foundationalism argues is at best unlikely – that our cognitive systems contain inferential circles or infinite regresses.

This brings us to the question of psychological coherentism. For epistemological coherentism, inferential justification is crucial. Knowledge and justified belief possess their epistemic credentials by virtue of their relations to other cognitions; and the paradigms of such inferential relations are those connecting the belief of the conclusion of a good argument with the belief(s) of its premise(s). But what kind of psychology does this give us? On the plausible assumption that I have a finite set of beliefs,[2] I cannot have beliefs of premises for my premises, and beliefs of premises for those in turn, ad infinitum. It might seem that a solution would be *circular*

2. An assumption for which I have argued in "Believing and Affirming," *Mind* XCI (1982).

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epistemic chains, finite sets of beliefs the first of which is (inferen-
tially) based on the second, the second of which is based on the
third, and so on until we come full circle, with the nth belief being
based on the original one. This, however, does not make good
psychological sense. One problem is that we do not seem to have
any such chains, especially for our justified beliefs or our knowl-
edge. But there is an *internal* and conceptual problem (one that to
my knowledge is first introduced into the literature in this essay).
On the plausible assumption – defended especially in Chapters 2,
7, and 14 – that if my belief that p is based on my belief that q,
there is a partial causal sustaining relation between the latter belief
and the former, we get a prima facie incoherence. For imagine the
inferential circle again. Causation seems to be carried all the way
through: if my belief that p is based on my belief that q and the
latter belief is based on my belief that r, and this belief in turn on
my belief that p, it seems that the belief that p sustains the belief
that r, the belief that r sustains the belief that q, the belief that q
sustains the belief that p – and hence the belief that p sustains itself,
by virtue of the transitivity of the (partial) sustaining relation. Leav-
ing aside the problem of how a belief can derive any justification
from a chain going from it back to itself – something that sounds
like the "self-justification" foundationalists have been accused of
relying on – it is doubtful that anything *can* causally sustain itself.

Chapter 1 also explores other psychological models of coherence
but notes that they raise serious difficulties. I conclude that, viewed
psychologically, foundationalism can be seen not to suffer from a
number of the difficulties brought against it, whereas coherentism,
in one major form, has a serious internal problem. The kind of
justificatory circle it would rely on cannot be virtuous.

THE FOUNDATIONALISM–COHERENTISM
CONTRAST IN THE THEORY OF VALUE

The conclusion just stated is developed further in later chapters,
beginning with "Axiological Foundationalism" (Chapter 2). Let me
explain. Justified belief is only one among many normative do-
mains. Our values – in the psychological sense of *valuations* – may
also admit of justification (and rationality). Once it is realized that,
understood generically, foundationalism and coherentism are
mainly structural positions, we can see that the contrast between

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them should also arise in the domain of value. I do not mean the domain of intrinsic value – of objective value as a property of, say, enjoyable experiences. We *can* talk of foundationalism here, as we can speak of it for truths: the idea would be that just as some truths might be foundations of others, certain things of value, for instance pleasures, might be the basis of other valuable things. The chapter bears on these objective structures, but the issue is valuations taken as propositional attitudes analogous to beliefs. I note that valuations may be called sound when the thing valued really has intrinsic value, just as a belief is called true when its propositional object is true; but my concern is neutral with respect to such objectivism, just as psychological foundationalism is neutral with respect to skepticism. The foundations–coherence problem arises whether or not skepticism is correct.

The starting point of the axiological foundationalism constructed here is an analogy between non-inferential belief – the kind that is a candidate for foundational status – and intrinsic valuation: valuing something for its own sake, and not (wholly) on the basis of something further. The latter, instrumental valuation depends for its justification on its relation to the valuation(s) it is based on, much as an inferentially justified belief depends for its justification on the belief(s) it is based on. In both cases, two points are crucial. First, for the superstructure element to be justified, the foundational element must be also; second, the former must be suitably related to the latter, e.g. by an instrumental relation between valuations, as where my believing a film would please my daughter justifies my valuing the film on the basis of an intrinsic valuation of pleasing her. Plainly, then, we can formulate various foundationalist and coherentist theses for valuations as for beliefs.

A moderate version of axiological foundationalism would represent our cognitive structure as two-tiered. If we have any justified valuations, then, first, we have some directly justified ones (e.g., justified intrinsic valuations of enjoyable activities), and, second, any other justified valuations we have are based on one or more of these, say through being produced by one of the latter by our rationally believing that if we realize the object of one of these superstructure valuations (getting the film), we will thereby realize the object of some foundational one (pleasing the child).

In the case of coherentism, there is again the self-sustenance problem: the difficulty of representing a finite set of elements as cohering in a way that produces justification but does not imply

that some element in part causally sustains itself. Can we formulate coherentism so as to avoid the problem? One major suggestion is that the coherentist can, in the interest of psychological realism, allow that some elements are *psychologically* foundational but deny that they are justificationally so. This applies to valuations as well as to beliefs and other propositional attitudes. Axiological coherentism, then, would be to the effect that, first, any justified valuation derives its justification from a justificatory relation to one or more other valuations with which it coheres and, second, if any justified valuation is psychologically direct (roughly, intrinsic as opposed to instrumental) and so not based wholly on another such element, the agent has available some further element that can be appealed to as providing a coherence justification for the direct valuation.

This avoids the self-sustenance problem, but at least two others remain. First, the formulation will apply to many foundational valuations (perhaps even to all in certain kinds of people); for assuming that foundationalism is committed only to unmoved movers and not to unmovable movers, it is left open that one can, if one wishes (e.g., in replying to skeptical queries), appeal to yet deeper foundations in shoring up those one has at a given time. Second, without a causal requirement on justificatory relations, we cannot adequately distinguish justification from *rationalization*. If, for instance, I do not value the film (in part) *because* I believe it will please my daughter, that instrumental belief may merely rationalize my valuing it – which is certainly what we would say it does if we found out that the reason for which I value the film is that I myself believe it will give *me* pleasure. Granting that I *have* an altruistic justification *for* valuing it, what justifies my valuing *of* it, if anything does, is egoistic. This issue is not fully resolved here and is dealt with in more detail in Chapters 7 and 14.

Before concluding this section, I want to sketch an interesting objection I have encountered more than once but have not answered in print.[3] A coherentist wishing to vindicate circular epistemic chains might claim that partial sustaining relations are *not* irreflexive: a thing can in part sustain itself. For consider the sticks of a tepee. One leans on another, which in turn leans on it, so by the transitivity of causal sustenance the first stick partly sustains itself. Now there is no need to deny that such a structure is in

3. Laurence BonJour is one of the people to mention this objection to me.

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some sense "self-sustaining"; it is not, e.g., bolstered by stones at
its base. But the example needs analysis. If we reflect on the phys-
ical forces, we can see that there really is no sustaining *simpliciter;*
rather, each stick exerts a force *in a direction.* Indeed, one cannot
properly describe the forces exerted without specifying their di-
rection. As I see it, then, the first stick bears to the second a relation
like *sustaining northwardly;* the second bears to the first a relation
like *sustaining southwardly*. Each of these relations is transitive and
irreflexive; but because they are different relations, there is no
question of literal self-sustenance. What we have is a balance of
opposite forces between the sticks, with each placed in the ground,
and the ground sustaining the entire structure – a foundational
picture. The self-sustenance turns out to rest squarely on the
ground. One might say that the cognitive case lacks any analogy
to the physical case of indexed forces: Among cognitions there is
only sustaining simpliciter, which is not irreflexive. But there is an
analogy. For one thing, a foundational belief sustains a belief based
on it with respect to argumentative opposition to the latter, because
it supplies a premise for support against the relevant objections,
and with respect to conviction, because (other things equal) it adds
to the strength of the belief it sustains. Thus, invoking a finer
conception of sustenance in defense of the objection to circular
(causal) coherence accounts does not undermine its use in the
foundationalist framework. We can index the relevant forces there,
too, and refine our cognitive psychology in doing so.[4]

The chapter closes with a sketch of what axiological foundation-
alism might actually look like in an Aristotelian interpretation,
based on the *Nichomachean Ethics.* First, we take the valuation of
one's own happiness as psychologically foundational – and pre-
sumably justified. Then other justified valuations can be seen to
be based on it by virtue of *valuational chains*, the analogue of in-
ferential chains of beliefs. This view need not be näively monistic

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4. Other models may seem more appropriate to coherentism, e.g. an *agglutinative
model* such as a geodesic dome floating in empty space. Each part cleaves to its
neighbors, to which it is bolted; but the relation of cleaving is symmetric, and
there is no gravitational force sustaining the dome. One trouble is that this
leaves unclear how justification is supposed to come in. What, e.g., is the
counterpart of inferential relations, which are crucial for both coherence and
justification and are, in their psychological realizations in our belief system,
causal and hence (I argue) asymmetrical? More must be said, but these points
suggest that models of this sort do not circumvent the self-sustenance
problem.

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about valuation, since there are so many kinds of happiness; nor need it be psychologically näive, since things can be justifiedly valued for their contribution to happiness even if only indirectly, say where one values exercise as a means to relaxation, and that as a means to health and health as a means to happiness, but does not connect exercise directly with happiness.[5] The valuation of happiness is then the ultimate normative foundation of one's valuing of exercise but not its immediate motivating basis.

TWO TYPES OF EPISTEMIC DEPENDENCE

A major source of support for coherentism comes from the sense that whereas foundationalism cannot account for the apparent dependence of all justified beliefs on other beliefs, coherentism makes this dependence expectable. The most salient cases are inferential beliefs. These typically depend for their justification on beliefs they are based on.[6] But the latter are not the problem: it is *non*-inferential beliefs that anti-foundationalists have thought foundationalism must take to be "independent" of others, including beliefs the person *would* form upon gathering new evidence. This, however, is a mistake. A foundationalist need not posit any indefeasibly justified beliefs, and moderate foundationalists countenance at most a few such (e.g. beliefs of simple logical truths). Their point is not that other beliefs are *irrelevant:* some might strengthen, others destroy, the justification of foundational beliefs. The point is that the *source* of the justification of foundationally justified beliefs is not other beliefs.[7] How, then, could foundationalism be so misunderstood?

5. Aristotle has been criticized on this point – undeservedly, I think, for reasons given in my *Practical Reasoning* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), ch. 1.
6. Typically, because a belief could be directly justified, e.g. through perception, yet based on inferences, say from testimony. Directness of the justification does not entail directness of the belief. Note that direct justification does not imply *self*-justification – a notion foundationalists need countenance, if at all, only for very special cases, such as beliefs of luminously self-evident propositions.
7. Except in special cases, most notably that in which one non-inferentially believes that, e.g., one believes people are fascinating. But here the basis belief does not express a "premise." This is belief on a ground of a kind that is the right sort to express a premise but does not function epistemically to supply one.

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It has apparently been easy for some philosophers to miss a distinction between positive and negative epistemic dependence. This distinction is perhaps the central contribution of Chapter 3, "Foundationalism, Epistemic Dependence, and Defeasibility." Consider an analogy. One's safety on a walk in Washington Square depends, in a positive way, on what is happening there – or relevantly near there – not on the absence of ruffians who are several miles away stalking Central Park but could have been on the Square. Yet, in a negative way, it also depends on them, for if they had been on the Square instead, one would have been in danger. The crucial epistemic difference is between dependence on one's *source* of justification, such as visual experience, and dependence on the absence of defeaters, e.g. reasons to think one has been merely hallucinating. The first is a kind of derivational dependence and looks backward (or downward) to a source of justification; the second is a kind of vulnerability and looks forward (or upward) to a threat. Positive dependence is on something present; negative dependence is on something absent.

Preoccupation with skepticism tends to invite conflation of positive dependence with negative dependence – defeasibility. For skepticism makes us tend to think of our beliefs as under attack; even perceptual beliefs may thus seem unjustified unless supported by other justified beliefs to the effect that there is no defeater. It is as if I could not be safe in an environment, even when it is free of hazards, without being justified in believing that none of the *potential* attackers will enter it to assail me. The stronger the skepticism, the greater the dependence on such beliefs; the greater the fear of injury, the greater the need for assurance that potential – or even just possible – attackers are far away.

The overall conclusion, then, is that a foundationalist need only claim that basic beliefs are justified independently of others in the sense that they do not positively depend on them. Any sensible foundationalist will grant that they typically exhibit negative dependence on other beliefs – at least hypothetical beliefs – because this is implicit in their defeasibility through the discovery of counterevidence. If one thinks that coherentism is implied by taking seriously the kind of *in*coherence that is a major source of defeasibility, one will tend to think that foundationalism cannot do justice to the epistemic role of incoherence. There is also a danger of misunderstanding coherentism as well; for (as Chapter 4 brings out) coherence is not the mere absence of incoherence, and a view

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that gives incoherence a significant place in understanding justi-
fication need no more be coherentist than anti-foundationalist.

Chapter 3 closes with two points. First, contrary to what many
have thought, reliabilism can be foundationalist. Defeat of justifi-
cation by the occurrence of "relevant alternatives" – e.g. defeat of
my justification for believing I see Joan when I discover that she
has a twin I did not know about and cannot visually distinguish
from the woman I take to be Joan – is a special case of negative
epistemic dependence, not a concession to coherentism. Moreover
– and this is the second main distinction the chapter introduces –
it is essential to differentiate between two kinds of naturalism in
epistemology: *substantive naturalism*, which (as in the case of Quine)
treats all the truths of epistemology as empirical, roughly as truths
of psychology; and *conceptual naturalism*, which simply uses no
irreducibly normative concepts, such as justification understood in
terms of *permissible* believing. Neither reliabilism nor any founda-
tionalist theory need be substantively naturalistic, and I leave open
whether the foundationalism sketched in the chapter is concep-
tually naturalistic.

MODERATE FOUNDATIONALISM, HOLISTIC
COHERENTISM, AND THE REGRESS PROBLEM

A major point emerging in the first three chapters is that when
coherentism is formulated so that it avoids the problem of self-
sustenance, and when foundationalism is understood so that it
accommodates the kind of epistemic dependence of foundational
beliefs that is really a kind of defeasibility, then the contrast be-
tween the two positions is less sharp. The contrast becomes still
less pronounced when we realize that epistemic as well as psy-
chological considerations favor a holistic coherentism over a linear
one: one in which justification emerges from coherent patterns and
not only from inferential chains, certainly not from circular ones.
The main business of Chapter 4, which addresses the foundation-
alism–coherentism controversy, is, first, to articulate the epistemic
regress problem in a way that brings out its role in motivating both
foundationalism and coherentism; second, to formulate both of
those positions in plausible forms likely to be acceptable to many
of their respective proponents; third, to assess the controversy