

## 1 The Structure of Knowledge and Justified Belief

This Element explores questions about the *structure* of knowledge and justified belief. Foundationalism is the view that if there is any knowledge or justified belief then that knowledge or justified belief rests on a “foundation” of knowledge and justified belief that does not depend on *inference* from anything else known or justifiably believed. Foundationalists need to tell us what would make a belief foundationally known or justifiably believed, and which beliefs, if any, should be included in the relevant foundation. Before we address these questions, however, we should begin by saying a bit more about the knowledge and justified belief that are the subject of the foundationalist’s claims.

### 1.1 Knowledge

Epistemology has always been concerned with the nature of knowledge. Some philosophers have argued that discussion of justified belief arrived on the epistemological scene rather late.<sup>1</sup> There is also a great deal of debate over whether it is knowledge or justified belief that is the more *fundamental* epistemological concept. Some think that our understanding of knowledge is parasitic on our understanding of justified belief. Others, those in the “knowledge first” camp, believe precisely the opposite.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the kind of knowledge that concerns epistemologists is *propositional* knowledge – knowledge *that* such and such is the case, where what is known is the kind of thing that is true or false.<sup>3</sup> But we also talk about knowing places and people, knowing when certain things have happened, knowing why certain things have happened, and knowing how to do certain things. Perhaps one can “translate” talk about knowing places and people into talk of knowing truths. One knows Paris when one knows *that* the Eiffel Tower, the Champs-Élysées, the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and so on are in such and such a place, although one might also insist that the knowledge in question must be in some sense “first hand” (as opposed to knowledge gained through books, for example). Similarly, it seems entirely plausible to suppose that if I know when something happened then I know that it happened at such and such

<sup>1</sup> Most notably Plantinga (1992).

<sup>2</sup> The most influential philosopher who holds this view is Williamson (2000).

<sup>3</sup> It is known as propositional knowledge because at least some philosophers identify the kind of thing that is most fundamentally true or false as something they call a proposition. There is much disagreement about what kind of thing a proposition is. The English sentence “The table is brown” (whether true or false) makes the same assertion as the French sentence “La table est brun.” We might use the term “proposition” to refer to what is asserted by both sentences (the proposition that the table is brown). Some (although by no means most) would argue that propositions expressed by sentences are thoughts. But this claim raises issues that go far beyond the scope of this Element.

a time, and if I know why something happened, I know that such and such explains it. More controversially, one might suppose that one knows how to play golf when one knows *that* the most effective way to grip a club and hit a ball is such and such. But again, this sort of translation is elusive. I know a lot of people who have extensive propositional knowledge about golf swings and who can't play golf well at all. I also know people who know how to play golf very well and who don't seem to know many truths describing how they are hitting the ball the way they do. It is not tried as often (and it is not really plausible) but one might also entertain the possibility that one can reduce (translate) talk about knowing *that* to talk about knowing *how*. One might assert, for example, that one knows *that* the animal that made the tracks is a deer just insofar as one knows *how* to read those tracks.

We won't try to settle here questions about whether one can identify one sort of knowledge with another. We will simply assume, without argument, that the tradition is correct in thinking that philosophers curious about *truth* are primarily interested in questions concerning propositional knowledge (knowing that . . .).

### 1.2 Justified (Rational) Belief

It is harder to find historically important philosophers who talked explicitly about the distinction between justified and unjustified belief. In his dialogue *Theatetus*, Plato raised the question of what must be added to true belief in order to get knowledge. The answer he seemed to suggest is often translated as "true belief with an account." It is not clear precisely what he meant, but many twentieth-century philosophers argue that he had in mind something like *justified* true belief.

What is the difference between knowledge and justified belief? One obvious point of contrast is that almost everyone agrees that one can only know that P when P is true.<sup>4</sup> But one can be justified in believing that P (one can rationally believe that P) even if P is false. So if I meet you at a party and you introduce yourself as Harry, most would agree that I would be quite justified in believing (it would be rational for me to believe) that your name is "Harry." And that is so even if it turns out that you are a pathological liar who thinks that it is funny to mislead people with respect to your name. I couldn't *know* that your name is

<sup>4</sup> It's not as if people won't sometimes say that they knew something that turned out to be false. The irate bettor who lost the kitchen sink on a horse race might complain: "But I just *knew* Crazylegs was going to win – I don't know what happened." And there is a new movement afoot (Littlejohn, forthcoming, and Williamson, forthcoming) to deny that there *can* be justified false belief. (Although proponents of the view will concede that someone can have a false belief and be "excused" for the mistake.)

“Harry” if it isn’t, but I could be justified in believing that that is your name even if it isn’t.

We may need to make more distinctions, however, in order to identify the kind of justification or rationality that is of primary interest to the epistemologist. *Epistemic* justification is supposed to have something to do with the likelihood of a belief’s being true. If one is epistemically justified in believing that P then one’s belief has some feature that makes it likely that what is believed is true (and not by *causing* the world to change in such a way that one’s belief is true). By contrast, one might have another sort of reason to believe that P that has nothing to do with its being likely that P is true. I might live with a paralyzing fear that I will die someday, and I might decide that I would be better off all things considered if I could somehow get myself to believe that I am immortal. Or to take another example often used, I might be told that, although I have an illness that will almost certainly kill me, my odds of survival will go up ever so slightly if I can just get myself to believe that I will recover. These considerations might give me *prudential* reasons to believe that I am immortal and to believe that I will recover from my illness even if I don’t have the sort of reason that makes likely the truth of what I believe.

Others have argued that one might even have *moral* reasons to believe something that is epistemically irrational to believe. Firth (1959) once argued that one might have a moral reason to believe in one’s son’s innocence even if there is strong epistemic justification to believe that he is guilty of a crime. One might even be able to imagine a dystopian future in which society tries to make it legally obligatory (and thus create legal reasons) to form certain beliefs.

### 1.2.1 Epistemic versus Propositional Justification

It is *epistemic* justification with which epistemologists are primarily concerned. But we still need to make one more distinction – the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification. There might be good epistemic reasons for you to believe P even if you don’t believe P at all or the cause of your belief has nothing to do with the epistemic reasons available to you for believing P. In such a case, some epistemologists will say that there is *propositional* justification for you to believe P. But we also talk about someone’s belief that P having the property of being epistemically justified. On one view, your belief is *doxastically* justified when you believe that P and the belief is *based on* the propositional justification that there is for you to believe that P. And on *one* view about basing, your belief is based on the propositional justification J you have

for believing that P when your belief that P is caused (in the right sort of way)<sup>5</sup> by the existence of J. Later in this Element I'll emphasize that the most important sort of epistemic justification that is of concern to philosophers is *propositional* justification.

### 1.3 Knowledge or Justification – Which, if Either, Is More Fundamental?

You will recall that some epistemologists suggested that we should try to understand knowledge as (doxastically) justified true belief. Almost everyone these days agrees that even if knowledge is *partially* constituted by justified true belief, one needs to add some further condition. Although Russell gave examples that made a similar point, Gettier (1963) most clearly illustrated the problem with identifying knowledge as nothing more than justified true belief. He asked you to imagine various situations in which you will realize that someone has a justified true belief but doesn't have knowledge. Consider an example from Russell (1949, 170–71). Suppose you reach a conclusion about the time by looking at a clock that (unbeknownst to you) is broken. As the old saying goes, even a broken clock tells the right time twice a day, and if you get lucky you might form not only a justified, but also a true belief about the time by looking at the clock. But this sort of “lucky” true belief doesn't count as knowledge, does it?

Among those convinced that they were still on the right track with their justified-true-belief account of knowledge, the search began for additional conditions that would get us the right result. Entire books have been written evaluating various proposals, and it is an understatement to suggest that the additional requirements for knowledge have been elusive. Convinced that the search is futile, Williamson (2000) argued in his highly influential work *Knowledge: Its Scope and its Limits* that one should give up the attempt to break down knowledge into constituent parts, one of which was doxastically justified belief. Rather, he suggested, we should reverse course, and try to understand justified belief in terms of an unanalyzed concept of knowledge. Put crudely, the idea is that a justified belief is a belief supported by evidence, where one's evidence should be identified with what one knows.

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<sup>5</sup> Causal theories of just about anything always face the problem of *deviant* causal chains. I could probably conjure up some really roundabout way in which the fact that you have propositional justification for believing that P causes you to believe that P, but you won't think of the belief as *based* on that justification. The existence of the justification might, for example, cause a hypnotist at the party to worry that you haven't formed a belief based on that justification, which, in turn, causes the hypnotist to use hypnosis to get you to form the relevant belief.

While I can't defend the view here, I count myself as among those who think that the concept of justified belief is more fundamental than the concept of knowledge. The foundationalist's thesis can be stated as either a claim about knowledge or as a claim about justified belief. In what follows, I'll talk mainly about justified belief, although most of what I say about justification will apply *mutatis mutandis* to knowledge. I'll also try to make clear that there are views about the foundations of justification that are hospitable to the idea that the foundations of justification are identical with foundational knowledge.

#### 1.4 The Distinction between Inferential and Noninferential Justification; Inferential and Noninferential Knowledge

Foundationalism is a view about the *structure* of justification and knowledge. It seems almost obvious to many that the justification we have for some of our beliefs depends on our having other *different* justified beliefs. Put another way, it seems obvious to many that much of our justification is *inferential*. I justifiably believe that a newspaper reported that there was an earthquake this morning in California, and from this (and perhaps my justified belief that the newspaper is reliable) I *infer* that the earthquake took place. Notice that getting a justified belief through inference of this sort does require that I have *justified* beliefs about the paper. The epistemological slogan – garbage in; garbage out – seems right. I can't get justified beliefs about the evil deeds of world leaders if I base those beliefs solely on outlandish, wildly irrational conspiracy theories.

Just as justification for a belief might involve inference, so also might knowledge. Indeed, if I *know* what the headlines of the paper are and that the paper is highly reliable, you might think that through legitimate inference I can acquire *knowledge* that the earthquake rocked California. But again I couldn't get knowledge that C when my sole reason for believing C was E unless I know that E – no knowledge in; no knowledge out.

If we have the ideas of inferential justification and knowledge, we can define negatively the ideas of noninferential justification and knowledge. Noninferential justification for believing P is justification for believing P that is *not* inferential. Noninferential knowledge is knowledge that is *not* inferential. Philosophers who believe that there is noninferential knowledge will also sometimes refer to that knowledge as *direct*, and refer to what is known as that which is *self-evident*. As we will see later, the concept of what is known directly is also sometimes associated with the idea of some aspect of reality simply being *given* to one.

## 1.5 Regress Arguments for Foundationalism

Although I can't argue for this here, I do think that in the history of philosophy almost all philosophers just took for granted that some version of foundationalism is true. But the most famous of the *arguments* for foundationalism are regress arguments. In the opening paragraph of this Element, I characterized foundationalism about justification and knowledge by employing a *conditional*: *If* there is any knowledge and *if* there are any justified beliefs, *then* there is noninferential knowledge and there are noninferentially justified beliefs. With the ideas of inferential knowledge and justification, we can state these views about justification and knowledge in a slightly different way:

*The Conditional Foundationalist Claim about Justification*: If there are any justified beliefs then those beliefs are either noninferentially justified beliefs or they are beliefs involving inferences that can be traced back ultimately to beliefs that are noninferentially justified (the *foundations* of justification).

*The Conditional Foundationalist Claim about Knowledge*: If there is any knowledge then that knowledge is either noninferential knowledge or it is knowledge that involves inferences that can be traced back ultimately to knowledge that is noninferential.

While the conditional claims are accepted by all foundationalists, *almost all* foundationalists also accept the *unconditional* claims that there are justified beliefs and there is knowledge. That together with the conditional claims entail that there are noninferentially justified beliefs and there is noninferential knowledge. The most well-known regress argument for foundationalism, the *epistemic* regress argument, takes it to be obvious that there are justified beliefs and that there is knowledge. In what follows, I'll talk mainly about the structure of justification, but exactly analogous arguments would apply to the structure of knowledge.

### 1.5.1 The Epistemic Regress Argument for Foundationalism

We have already had occasion to note that the foundationalist takes it to be obvious that J) Someone S acquires justification for believing P by inferring P from something else E, only if that person S is justified in believing E. Some foundationalists also believe that IJ) S acquires justification for believing P by inferring P from E only if S has some sort of access to the fact that E (at the very least) makes *probable* that P.

The epistemic regress argument relying on J) goes as follows:

- 1) If all justification were inferential, then, given J, S justifiably believes P only if S infers P from something else E1 that S justifiably believes. But if all

justification were inferential then S justifiably believes E1 only if S infers E1 from yet another proposition E2 that S justifiably believes, a proposition that would need to be inferred from still another proposition E3 that S justifiably believes . . . , and so on, ad infinitum.

- 2) From 1) it follows that to justifiably believe any proposition P S would need to complete infinitely many inferences, and *that* no finite being can do.
- 3) There are justified beliefs.

Therefore,

- 4) Not all justified beliefs are inferentially justified – there are noninferentially justified beliefs that ground all inferentially justified beliefs.

If one also thinks that IJ) is true, and that access to E's making probable P involves justifiably believing that E makes probable P,<sup>6</sup> the thesis that all justification is inferential would require one to complete not only one but infinitely many infinitely long chains of reasoning to have a justified belief. To justifiably believe that P one would need to infer P from E1 *and* infer that E1 makes probable P. This last claim one would need to infer from some other proposition F1 that one justifiably believes on the basis of some other proposition F2 that one infers from . . . , and so on ad infinitum. But one would also need to justifiably believe that F1 does makes likely that E1 makes likely P, something that one would need to infer from G1 that one would need to infer from G2 . . . and so on. And one would also need to infer that G2 makes likely that G1 makes likely that E1 makes likely P, and . . . . The regresses are generated in infinitely many directions.

It is worth emphasizing that to get the conclusion that there actually *are* noninferentially justified beliefs one needs the premise that there *are* justified beliefs. Without that premise, one is left choosing between the existence of foundational justification and the most radical form of skepticism – the view that we have no justification for believing anything at all. This radical form of skepticism is often rejected as epistemically *self-refuting* in that it entails that no one could justifiably believe *it*. It is not clear, however, that a skeptic this extreme would be fazed by this charge. The skeptic might put the argument out there and tell you that the ball is now in your court. If you don't like the conclusion, figure out what is wrong with the argument. If forced to choose between accepting this extreme skepticism and embracing foundationalism, however, almost all philosophers will do the latter.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> We'll talk later about whether we can construe the access in question in some other way.

<sup>7</sup> Although I'm not suggesting that all foundationalists embrace their view *because* they want to avoid skepticism.



### 1.5.2 The Conceptual Regress Argument

As I will suggest later, the *conceptual* regress argument for foundationalism might be stronger than the epistemic regress argument. In short, the conceptual regress argument purports to establish that the very *idea* of epistemic justification is built on the *idea* of noninferential justification. The argument relies again on that distinction we drew earlier between inferential and noninferential justification. We have the idea of a justified belief and the idea that *one* way a belief might be justified is through inference. But if we try to explain the idea of inferential justification for believing P in terms of the idea of a legitimate inference from some other proposition *justifiably* believed, our account hasn't yet explained the more general concept of a justified belief. Our account of inferential justification presupposes an understanding of justified belief. Put another way, when we think only about inferential justification, we haven't yet located in thought the *source* of justification.

Consider an analogy. One of the earliest distinctions made in ethics is the distinction between different ways in which something can be good. Some things, like taking blood-pressure medication, are good only as a *means* to something else that is good (perhaps health or the happiness that comes from being in good health). But, one might argue, it can't be the case that *everything* that is good is good only as *means* to something else that is good. While we can (partially) define being good *as a means* in terms of having good outcomes, we can't *complete* our definition of goodness this way. To find, even in thought, the *source* of goodness, we need to form the thought of something that is good *in itself* (intrinsically good, good just in virtue of what it is).

The suggestion here is that inferential justification stands to noninferential justification as being good as a means stands to being good in itself. Put more formally, many foundationalists explicitly or implicitly adopt a *recursive* analysis of justification. The basic idea of a recursive analysis is relatively straightforward. We have, for example, the idea of being a descendant of someone. What is that idea? Well, it clearly has something to do with the idea of being a child of someone. Am I the descendant of X just when I am the child of X? No. I might be the child of a child of X, or the child of a child of a child of X, and so on. We understand the "and so on" (we understand the recursion) and so we grasp the concept of being a descendant. We build that recursive idea on the *base* clause (the conceptual building block) of being a child of someone.

Just as one can recursively define the concept of being a descendant of S relying on the idea of being a child of X, so also one might argue that one can recursively define being good in terms of the "base clause" of being good in itself. To be good is to be good in itself, *or* to be something that brings about



something that is good in itself, or to be something that brings about something that brings about something that is good in itself . . . , and so on. Analogously, the *foundationalist* in epistemology might argue that we can define justified belief as belief that is either noninferentially justified, *or* is inferred legitimately from some proposition that is noninferentially justified, *or* is inferred legitimately from some proposition that is inferred legitimately from something that is noninferentially justified, and so on. On this view, we need the idea of non-inferential (foundational) justification to form the idea of justification. The idea of being noninferentially justified in believing something is the conceptual building block on which we build the idea of justified belief.

### 1.6 A Foundationalist “Argument” for Foundationalism

The regress arguments for foundationalism are abstract arguments. As we shall see, their premises have been challenged by those who reject foundationalism. There is a more blunt reason for embracing foundationalism, one that its critics are likely to reject as question begging. If foundationalism *is* a correct account of justification, and there *are* noninferentially justified beliefs, there would be no reason in principle why foundationalists might not claim that we have noninferentially justified beliefs that foundationalism is true – we have noninferentially justified beliefs that we have noninferentially justified beliefs (at least once we possess the concept of having a noninferentially justified belief).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I would argue that this is precisely the attitude that many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistemologists implicitly had. When you stub your toe and experience that familiar searing pain, ask yourself what *evidence* you have for believing that you are in pain. From what do you *infer* that you are in pain? The question invites an incredulous stare. You don’t *need* to infer that you are in pain when you are immediately aware of the pain. The pain is simply *there* before your consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Something like this, I will argue, is precisely right. But here, I’m just pointing to the oddity of supposing that you *infer* that you are in pain from something else that you believe.

Or consider a quite different example. Euclid developed an impressive geometry, one that rests on axioms for which he didn’t argue. If a precocious student of Euclid demanded an argument for the axioms before agreeing to reach any conclusions based on those axioms, Euclid would presumably have impatiently answered that we don’t need a proof to “see” that the axioms are

<sup>8</sup> It may be that it requires a fair bit of philosophical sophistication to acquire the idea of a noninferentially justified belief.

<sup>9</sup> And contrast this with our judgment about another person’s being in pain. We do infer the pain of another from truths about how they are behaving (including their verbal behavior).

true. If we think clearly about the axioms, their truth will simply be evident to us.

Again, I'm not suggesting that the foundationlist's critics will be moved by these appeals to the alleged fact that we have, without any sort of inference, justified belief in (and knowledge of) these truths. One who doesn't think that there is noninferential justification won't be impressed by an assertion that we have noninferential justification for believing that the foundations exist! But neither should the foundationalist be seduced into conceding that the only justification one could have for thinking that there are noninferentially justified beliefs is justification that requires a legitimate inference from other truths justifiably believed. Foundationalists should not apologize for being foundationalists.

### 1.7 Alternatives to Foundationalism and the Foundationalist's Responses

Foundationalism has its critics. Some don't understand what could possibly justify a belief but another belief. It is difficult to assess such claims until one has a positive account of what would make knowledge or justified belief noninferential, and we haven't done more than hint at such an account yet. The most we can do here is critically evaluate alternative views, views that reject one or more of the premises of the foundationalist's arguments.

#### 1.7.1 *The Coherence Theory of Justification*

One of the most historically significant alternatives to foundationalism is the coherence theory of justification. Convinced that there is no escaping the "circle of beliefs," the coherentist rejects the foundationalist's presupposition that it is only an *already* justified belief that can give support to other beliefs one has. The basic idea, as the name of the theory implies, is that a given belief enjoys justification when it *coheres* (in the right sort of way) with other beliefs. Proponents of the view sometimes explain their view by suggesting that they reject the foundationalist's presupposition that justification is *linear* – the idea that to be justified in believing P through inference one needs *first* to be justified in believing some proposition other than P. Instead, we should think that we form beliefs in order to complete a nice, clear "picture" of reality, the way a successfully completed jigsaw puzzle gives us a nice picture of something. Each belief contributes to our representation of reality, the way the placement of each piece in the puzzle contributes to the completion of the puzzle's picture.

Coherence theorists need to tell us how they understand coherence, and what they think a belief must cohere *with* to enjoy the status of justified belief.