Metaphysics & Epistemology

Justification of Beliefs

Beliefs

- It may be that someone believes that p and her belief is justified and someone else also believes that p but his own belief is not justified.

- And it may further be that a person's belief that p is initially unjustified but becomes justified later on (when she finds evidence supporting it).

- Now, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions in order for a belief to be justified (and not arbitrary or based on insufficient reasons)?

Internalist vs externalist views

- Answers to that question are classified into *internalist*, according to which the relevant conditions concern the inner world of the subject who has the belief, and *externalist*, according to which the relevant conditions concern, at least partly, the external world.

More precisely, the distinction is the following:

- On the internalist views, the conditions under which a belief is justified are such that the subject who has the belief can become aware of whether they are satisfied, and she can become aware of that by examining her inner world introspectively.

- On the externalist views, the conditions under which a belief is justified are such that the subject who has the belief cannot become aware in that way of whether they are satisfied.

Foundationalism

- A usual internalist view on justification is *foundationalism*.

- According to it, a belief is justified iff it either is basic or relies on basic beliefs. A basic belief is one that needs no justification by other beliefs.

- Foundationalism divides justified beliefs into two kinds: either they are basic or the subject derives them from basic beliefs through a short or long series of inferential steps. Basic beliefs are the foundation of the other justified beliefs.

Versions of foundationalism

- There are various versions of foundationalism. These differ mainly in what sort of beliefs they recognize as basic.

- One form of foundationalism is found in the so-called rationalist philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries (Spinoza, Leibniz, etc.). In their view, basic beliefs are mostly beliefs in obvious and necessary truths, such as my belief that everything is identical with itself or my belief that whatever causes something exists (Descartes).

Versions of foundationalism

- On the other hand, the foundationalism that was developed in the context of analytic philosophy was empirically oriented. According to it, basic beliefs are mostly beliefs about the current sensory experience of the subject, such as my belief that right now I see something blue or my belief that right now I hear a noise on my left.

- A typical representative of that foundationalism was C. I. Lewis (American, first half of the 20th century).

Versions of foundationalism

- We can also distinguish a kind of foundationalism according to which basic beliefs are infallible (that is, if B is a basic belief, there is no question of B being false) and a kind according to which basic beliefs are not, or are not all, infallible.

- The first kind is called strong foundationalism, and C. I. Lewis was a representative of it. Strong foundationalism has been abandoned. It is now accepted that even if B is a belief about the subject's current experience, B may be false. For the subject may have applied to their experience some concepts that do not exactly fit it.

Versions of foundationalism

- E.g. John feels a little discomfort in the arm.

- The discomfort is not a pain; it does not come under the concept expressed by the word 'pain' in our common language; nor is it the case that, in John's speech and thought, the word 'pain' expresses a somewhat different concept that subsumes the specific discomfort. Still, out of either momentary nervousness or insufficient attention, John overestimates the discomfort by applying the concept of pain. Thus he wrongly believes that right now he is in pain.

Foundationalism and Agrippa's trilemma

- Foundationalism is often presented as a solution to Agrippa's trilemma.

- The trilemma ends with the sceptical conclusion that no belief is justified. It concerns a series of beliefs b1, b2, b3, … where b2 is supposed to justify b1, b3 is supposed to justify b2, and so forth. If we reject the sceptical conclusion, the question arises where we should detect the mistake in the argument leading to that conclusion.

- According to foundationalists, the mistake lies in ignoring a fourth possibility about the series b1, b2, b3, …. The series may stop at a belief, e.g. b8, which does not remain unjustified; b8 may be a basic belief that needs no justification by any further belief.

Problems for foundationalism

- One problem for every foundationalist is to explain how basic beliefs are justified.

- If a basic belief concerns an obvious and necessary truth, then foundationalists often say that the mere grasp or understanding of that truth justifies accepting it.

- If, on the other hand, a basic belief concerns the current sensory experience of the subject, then foundationalists usually say that the experience justifies the belief.

Problems for foundationalism

- Another problem for every foundationalist is to show that the various justified beliefs we have can be derived through a series of inferential steps from beliefs she considers to be basic.

- The inferential steps do not need to be valid in the strict sense of 'valid' that we find in logic (that is, an inference from some premisses to some conclusion is valid iff it is logically impossible that the premisses should be true without the conclusion also being true).

Problems for foundationalism

- Yet it is necessary that, in every inferential step, the premisses should render the conclusion so reasonable that if one agrees with them, then it is permissible (acceptable, rational, etc.) to agree with the conclusion too. This happens when the inferential step is valid in the strict sense, but also when the inferential step is an induction of the kind that occurs in science.

- Whatever beliefs we may consider to be basic, it is not at all obvious that all our other justified beliefs can be inferred from those.

Arguments against foundationalism

Here are now some arguments against foundationalism:

- (a) This argument, as well as the next one, is opposed to the most usual form of foundationalism in the 20th century. According to it, basic beliefs concern our current sensory experiences and are justified not by other beliefs but by the experiences themselves.

- E.g. my belief that right now I see something blue is justified by my present visual experience.

Arguments against foundationalism

- The argument (which has also been espoused by D. Davidson) is the following. A belief, a judgement, and the like consist in endorsing a thought, and each thought is made up of concepts. E.g. the thought that there exist hippopotami is made up of the concept of existence and the concept of a hippopotamus.

- But an experience is not made up of concepts; it may consist of shapes, colours, sounds, but not concepts.

- For this reason, we cannot infer something from an experience; only thoughts can be the premisses of an inference in our minds.

Arguments against foundationalism

- Consequently, an experience cannot be the reason supporting a view we have. An experience cannot justify a belief.

- Of course, an experience often causes a belief. E.g. my visual experience causes my belief that I see something blue, or perhaps it directly causes my belief that a blue object lies in front of me.

- But the relation between cause and effect is not the relation between what justifies and what is justified.

Arguments against foundationalism

- (b) This argument is mainly due to W. Sellars.
- If my visual experience justifies my belief that I see something blue, the experience must have a certain character thanks to which it justifies that belief and not e.g. a belief that I see something green.
- Moreover, I must be aware of that character of the experience. For if I am not aware of it, then I am not justified in having the belief: the belief remains unjustified, even if it correctly describes the experience I have.
- But now a dilemma arises for the foundationalist.

Arguments against foundationalism

- (i) She may say that the awareness of the character of the experience is a belief, my belief that the experience has the feature so-and-so. If the awareness is a belief, there are two problems.

- First, the initial belief (that I see something blue) is not basic, since it needs justification not only by something that is not a belief (the experience), but also by something that is (the awareness of the character).

- Second, the question arises how this belief that the experience has the feature so-and-so is justified.

Arguments against foundationalism

- Thus we are essentially at the same point where we also were initially: we have an experience and a corresponding belief and are wondering whether and how the former justifies the latter.

- In this case, foundationalism, instead of answering the initial question, simply replaces it with a similar one.

Arguments against foundationalism

- (ii) Alternatively, the foundationalist may say that the awareness of the character of the experience is not a belief; it is a mental state that is not made up of concepts.

- But then we have the problem pointed out in argument (a). A mental state that is not made up of concepts is not a thought, cannot be a premiss in an inference, and does not constitute a reason for or against a belief; that is, it lacks the potential to justify.

Arguments against foundationalism

- (c) The way in which the foundationalist analyses the concept of justification is circular. For she tells us that a belief is justified iff it either is basic or relies on basic beliefs.

- Let's accept that, at this point, the foundationalist can tell us, without using the concept of justification, what beliefs are justified.

- But what does 'relies on basic beliefs' mean?

Arguments against foundationalism

- The foundationalist tells us that in order for the belief that p to rely upon the belief that q, the subject must infer the conclusion that p from the premiss that q, and, in addition, this inference must be such that if one agrees with the premiss, then it is permissible, acceptable, etc. to agree with the conclusion.

- In other words, if one agrees with the premiss, then it is justified to accept the conclusion.

- Thus, in the end, the foundationalist resorts to the concept she is analysing.

Coherentism

- Another usual internalist view about justification is coherentism.
- According to it, a belief B of a subject S is justified iff B is a member of a justified set of beliefs that S has. And a set of beliefs is justified iff it is coherent.
- Coherentism about justification must be distinguished from coherentism about truth. The former concerns the conditions under which a belief is justified, whereas the latter concerns the conditions under which a belief is true. But historically, the supporters of the two coherentisms were mostly the same (e.g. neo-Hegelians like Bradley and some logical positivists, such as Neurath).

Coherentism

- Coherentism too (that is, coherentism about justification) is put forward as a solution to Agrippa's trilemma.

- Coherentists argue as follows: Since the sceptical conclusion of the trilemma is unacceptable, where does the mistake in the reasoning lie? The trilemma presupposes that if a belief B is justified, then what justifies it is one or more other beliefs, from which B is inferred.

- In other words, the trilemma presupposes a linear conception of justification.

Coherentism

- In fact, in its typical version, the trilemma presupposes that what justifies B is just one belief.

- This typical version, however, is due to simplification. We can reformulate the trilemma if we accept that a justified belief may be supported by many others.

- Then, justification will have the form of a tree rather than the form of a line, but the sceptic can say that, for each branch, there are three possibilities, as in the original version.

Coherentism

- In fact, though, justification may be holistic.

- In other words, a belief may be justified because it is a member of a justified set of beliefs, and the set may be justified thanks to certain relations between its members, particularly the relation of coherence.

- Coherence lends persuasiveness to the set, and so accepting it is justified. Indeed, Agrippa's trilemma itself, in combination with the failure of foundationalism, shows that justification can only be holistic.

Coherentism

- Irrespective of how convincing that argument is, coherentists ought to clarify what it means for a set of beliefs to be coherent.

- Certainly, in order for the set to have coherence, the beliefs must be compatible, that is, it must be logically possible for all of them to be jointly true.

- But compatibility is not enough. A set of disparate beliefs may display compatibility while the beliefs are evidently unjustified. Contemporary coherentists usually consider that in order for a set to have coherence, it is necessary that, apart from compatibility, there are multiple explanatory relations between its members. What does that mean?

Coherentism

- If we have a group of views (the view that p1, …, the view that pn) then there is an explanatory relation between that group and another view (the view that q) provided the question 'If it is the case that q, why is that so?' admits of the answer 'Because it is the case that p1, …, pn'.

- Each time there exists an explanatory relation between a group of beliefs and another belief, we can imagine an arrow leading from that group to the other belief.

- The idea of many coherentists is that if there are, in this way, many arrows within a set of compatible beliefs, then the set has coherence.

Coherentism

- A coherentist might say that a belief B of a subject S is justified iff the set of all of S's beliefs is coherent.

- But there is a problem with this, modified definition of justified belief. Often a person's beliefs are not compatible with one another; we have a great many views, so incompatibility is likely.

- Moreover, there are often no multiple explanatory relations within the total set of a person's beliefs; a person's beliefs do not resemble a well-structured theory in which each aspect explains the rest.

- Consequently (according to the modified definition) very often a person has no justified belief. This conclusion is excessive.

Arguments against coherentism

Here are some arguments against coherentism:

- (a) It is possible for a set of beliefs to be coherent, another set to be coherent too, but the two sets to be incompatible with each other. Then, it is not possible for both of them to be justified.

- This argument can be found in some authors, but (usually) it is due to a confusion between coherentism about justification and coherentism about truth. If two sets of beliefs are incompatible with each other, it is not possible for both of them to be true. It is, however, possible for both of them to be justified.

Arguments against coherentism

- (b) It is possible for someone (an insane genius) to have a set of beliefs which is coherent but does not agree with her sensory experiences, with what she sees and hears. It seems wrong to regard those beliefs as justified.

- Coherentists have tried to overcome the problem in various ways, often somewhat moderating the coherentist character of the view they hold.

- A relatively simple way is the following: When a subject S has a set of beliefs that include beliefs about things of which S has (or had) not sensory experience, then coherence does not suffice in order for the set to be justified. The set is justified provided, on the one hand, it is coherent and, on the other, it includes beliefs that have been caused in S by her sensory experience. The insane genius has no set of beliefs that satisfies both those terms.

Reliabilism

- A usual externalist view on justification is reliabilism.

- According to it, a belief is justified iff it has resulted from applying a reliable method. And a method of forming beliefs is reliable iff, as a rule, it leads to true beliefs.

- E.g. my belief that right now there are people opposite me is justified because it resulted from applying a reliable method. What is the method? Vision in normal lighting and conceptual processing, under normal conditions, of the visual experience.

Reliabilism

- Reliabilism is an externalist view because in order to find out if a certain method is reliable, we must check if the beliefs it leads to are true as a rule. And that we usually cannot check by introspectively examining our mental world. The beliefs will usually concern what is going on outside us.

- Reliabilism tackles Agrippa's trilemma by pointing out that if a belief is justified, it need not be justified by any other belief or any set of beliefs; the method through which it resulted may be a reliable cognitive process that involves no other beliefs.

Reliabilism

- Reliabilism emphasizes that, since reliability of a method admits of degrees (some methods are very reliable, and others are less so), for this reason we can talk about the degree to which a belief is justified.

- Reliabilism also explains why it is of some value for a belief to be justified: the reason is that it is of some value for a belief to be true. More precisely, since there is value in truth, there is value in reliable methods (which usually lead to truths) and so there is value in a belief resulting from a reliable method (it is then highly likely that the belief is true).

Arguments against reliabilism

- (a) Reliability of the method is not a necessary condition in order for a belief to be justified.

- Let's imagine that, as you are attending this class, some extraterrestrials kidnap you and take you away from the Earth, but simultaneously feed you with experiences that continue the experiences you had when attending the class, and so you believe that you are still in the university.

Arguments against reliabilism

- Then, your belief is justified, as it is supported by all the evidence and data you have at your disposal.

- But the method through which it resulted is not reliable, since feeding a brain with artificial experiences produced by extraterrestrials or others is not a method that as a rule leads to true beliefs.

Arguments against reliabilism

- Reliability of the method is not a sufficient condition in order for a belief to be justified.

- Let's imagine that you are in a room lit by a single bulb. You believe that the bulb is casting red light, and that red light makes objects not show their real color. You now see, inside the room, a ball that appears red. Although you believe what you believe about red light, you do not particularly deal with the issue of the ball (it is not the focus of your interest) and so you spontaneously form the view that the ball is red.

Arguments against reliabilism

- Finally, let's imagine that you are wrong about the bulb: it's a usual bulb and is not casting red light. Then, your belief that the ball is red is not justified; since you believe what you believe about red light, the right attitude would be to form no view about the colour of the ball.

- Still, the belief resulted from applying a reliable method; it resulted from vision in normal lighting.