

What makes a belief an epistemically justified belief?

by Peter Gibson

This question concerns the most important issue in epistemology – perhaps the only important question, as far as practical living is concerned. It makes no explicit mention of the concept of ‘knowledge’, and it does not invite an ‘analysis’ of anything. What matters in human life and society is the status that we accord to people who claim to ‘know’. Relativists are inclined to see conspiracies here, and take it that epistemic status is a privilege of the powerful. If, however, it can be shown that epistemic status is deserved, because some beliefs really are better justified than others, then human beliefs might begin to converge on agreed truths, under the guidance of experts, and the world might just possibly be a better place.

However, this very practical question is unlikely to be answered persuasively if the underlying metaphysics is confused. Some degree of clarity will be needed about a substantial cluster of concepts, including truth, belief, reasons, evidence, error, knowledge, coherence, validity... For the purposes of this essay it will be taken that **truth** is something like a good match between the contents of some mental events and the reality which that content represents. A **belief** will be taken to be a state of mind which is committed (to a reasonable degree) to the truth of a thought. It will be assumed that there exists something like ‘pure’ **reason**, which tracks truth, and is typically found in the practices of mathematics and formal logic.

The earliest surviving work of true epistemology is Plato’s *Theaetetus*, which makes amazing progress in addressing our question. The upshot is that a belief is epistemically justified if it is supported by *logos*, which means something like reasons, understanding, or good explanation. A nice illustration (at 207b) is that while everyone has beliefs about what a common cart is, someone who fully knows the hundred parts which make up a cart is much better justified in any claims they make about it. However, Plato also realises (201e) that it may not be possible to explain the hundred parts, but only to name them. We are already beginning to confront Agrippa’s Trilemma, which spells out the difficulty of where justifications terminate.

Agrippa’s Trilemma can be summarised as the problem that when one justification is supported by another justification, there are only three ways that this process can go: either it goes on forever, or it ends with something which is unjustified, or it circles round to rejoin earlier justifications. Justification is endless, or arbitrary, or circular. One can immediately challenge this picture, by pointing out that there are at least two further possibilities: that the train of justifications stops when no one can think of any further justifications, without making any claims about whether the step last thought of is either special or terminal; or that the justifications are not linearly arranged, but simply accumulate independently, like witnesses to a bank robbery, making occasional references to one another.

At the heart of most Enlightenment thinking is the dream that everything (politics, science, ethics, mathematics) might be totally justifiable, and that complete certainty is at least a theoretical possibility. This hope seems to need solid foundations, and so we have two sorts of foundationalism: that of Leibniz, which offers the rationalist concept of a priori foundations (“all thoughts are resolved into those which are conceived through themselves” 1679:1) or Hume’s empiricists view (your reasons “must terminate in a fact which is present to your memory or senses” 1748:46). If either of these views (or a happy combination) is correct then our problem is solved, so the possibility of foundations is the inevitable beginning of the discussion.

Modern foundationalism requires that we identify a group of ‘basic beliefs’, which have a different epistemic status from other beliefs. They terminate the regress, by being justifications which require no further justification. There seem to be two alternatives, following the Leibniz/Hume pattern: either the basic beliefs are primitively ‘self-evident’ to reason, or they are primitively ‘given’ in experience. Bonjour (in his second incarnation) is the best champion of the first view, and Chisholm and McDowell are the keenest champions of the second. Notable critics of both views have been Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Sosa, Lehrer and Michael Williams. All of these critics present foundationalists with a dilemma – either their basic beliefs are so thin in content that they cannot do the job required of them, or they are so thick in content that they can no longer be considered basic. The clearest statement of the former criticism is Sosa’s claim

that if basic beliefs are not propositional, then they cannot justify because they are “logically dumb” (1980:148), the latter criticism is caught in Davidson’s slogan: “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (1983:156).

Basic beliefs for rationalists will be found in the simplest logic and mathematics; for example, that relative magnitude is transitive ($a > b$, $b > c$, then $a > c$), that $3+2=5$, or that a diagonal divides a square into two equal areas. Occasional attempts (e.g. by logicians) have been made to prove basic arithmetic, but logic itself seems to resist all attempts at proof, and the great logician Saul Kripke rests on the statement about intuition that “I really don’t know what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything” (1980:42). So the transitivity of relative magnitude is the sort of belief that Bonjour offers as basic. The difficulty here is that theorists about logic seem divided between a bold platonism and an austere conventionalism. Is the transitivity of relative magnitudes an insight into reality, or merely an explanation of how we use the word ‘greater’? If three trees are arranged in order of size, does that embody a *logical* truth, as well as a contingent practical truth? It is tempting to say that in all possible worlds, objects will have to exhibit transitivity of relative magnitude, but that may be because we are unable to imagine the weird distortions of time and space needed to make it false. Let us (swiftly) conclude that rationalist foundationalism could be correct if Plato is correct that there are eternal logical truths, and that humans have a faculty for directly discerning them. Bonjour helps us towards that view by allowing (following Russell) that basic a priori intuitions might nevertheless be fallible. However, while the powerful case for the conventionalist view of logic, and the Formalist and Constructivist views of mathematics, are still squarely on the table, it is not a view that can be wholeheartedly embraced.

Empiricist foundationalism is the more popular version, but it also seems an easier target. Its proponents fall roughly into three groups: those (like Russell) who build knowledge on atomic sense-data, such as a small patch of redness, those who (like McDowell) say that sense experience has intrinsic content of some kind, and those (famously exemplified by G.E. Moore) who claim that full-blown propositions, such as “this is my hand”, are basic. The two extreme views look implausible. A patch of red has presumably not yet been identified as either a ‘patch’ or a ‘colour’, never mind as a symptom of a tomato; it could be generated by the retina or the brain instead of by the tomato. Without interpretation it is hard to see how it could be offered as evidence of anything, since it cannot be connected to anything before it has been conceptualised, and it certainly cannot be critically evaluated as evidence. Fans of Moorean certainties seem to be disregarding the host of accompanying truths needed to successfully assert that “this is my hand”. Since we can quite reasonably ask ‘what makes you think it is your hand?’ and expect clear answers, it cannot possibly be basic.

This leaves the supporters of empirical foundations with an extremely elusive middle ground, where basic beliefs have enough content to be proper beliefs, which assert something, and can act as support to other things, while needing no presuppositions in their construction, and offering no possibility of error or critical doubt. We might offer a fallibilist version, in which the basic beliefs are fairly certain, but might possibly be rejected in the face of rivals, but what would be the source of the criticism and rejection? It could only be some higher authority in the system (such as the rational Self), which would totally undermine the authority of the basic experiences. Fans of the middle ground hover between claiming that basic empirical beliefs are ‘conceptual’, or, more boldly, that they are (in a more limited way than the Moorean approach) ‘propositional’. The key difficulty here is simple: if foundations are going to work, they must not just be ‘basic’ – they must also be ‘beliefs’. This means they aim to be ‘true’. But, as Russell insists, truth is not a meaningful assertion if error is not even a possibility. A pebble is not true, and nor is a sense-datum of a red patch. So these foundational beliefs need to be open to criticism, or (placing them in a broader epistemological context) they need to be ‘defeasible’. But merely containing isolated concepts such as ‘red’ won’t do that, because only propositions are truth-evaluable. Even the identifying of a patch as ‘red’ implies knowledge that it is a colour, and the ability to identify another colour as ‘non-red’. This is Sellars’s point, that the Given actually requires a vast body of supporting beliefs before it amounts to anything at all. So the

basic empirical beliefs are either propositional and open to criticism, or their only empirical value is as evidence in an evaluation system. Pure empirical foundationalism appears to be false.

This leaves us with a very important question: is the Enlightenment Project doomed? One live option seems to be Bonjour's fallibilist rationalist approach, though that seems to need a metaphysic which is a long way from the modern scientific world view which the Enlightenment led us to. A pressing alternative is to face up to the doom – a picture built from a multitude of shifting conventions at many levels, which is essentially a story of cultural relativism, and a denial of epistemic authority, and hence of any possibility of humans converging on an agreed understanding of the world.

We can, though, briefly explore the alternative accounts. One strategy is externalism, developed most clearly by Goldman. This might take a foundationalist form, if the regress of justification was held to extend beyond the mind of the epistemic subject, and to terminate in the actual facts. This, however, has many problems. It might work for facts about particular trees, but it won't work very well for generalisations about the size of trees, or the arithmetic of trees. If we pursue those externally, they seem to peter out in the communities of logicians and mathematicians, and hence suit the conventionalist view of things. And if the justification of propositions about particular trees is the trees themselves, this means that all true propositions are, by definition, justified (by the facts), which is an odd view of justification.

This invites a crucial distinction – are we interested in the proposition being justified, or the person being justified in believing the proposition? Our important question must concern the latter, since (as pragmatists insist) we act on beliefs, so it is people who seek justification. Goldman's refined externalist account is 'reliabilism', where good justifications come from reliable sources. We can quickly split that proposal into two parts: reliable external sources (such as instruments), and reliable internal sources (such as skill in reading instruments). The external part has a notorious problem – Russell's stopped clock: a highly reliable clock may have (on this rare occasion) stopped, but at a time which just happens to be the correct time. So we need a reliable reader of clocks (to notice that it is not ticking, and to wait a minute to see if it moves on). But this means that externalism is in danger of becoming internalist.

If we allow that we have routine knowledge of daily events, and that fairly limited animals have knowledge of simple immediate truths, then a reliabilist account (shading off into Quine's naturalised account of the epistemological machinery of brains) offers quite a good picture of knowledge. It breaks down dramatically, though, when life gets more complex. In dealing with abstractions, with a very deceptive environment, with controversial theoretical propositions, with truths that extend over long periods of time, it is not enough to have fairly reliable cognitive machinery, any more than having a good telescope makes you a good astronomer.

The objections to both foundationalism and externalism point us towards internal coherence as a promising alternative. This offers us a picture in which experiences and realisations are part of the justification game if they involve truth-functional propositions which are critically evaluable. It pictures the highest authority in a justification procedure to be the central control aspects of the mind ('Self' seems a useful label for this), rather than the peripheral and dumb sense organs. It takes Bonjour's fallibilist foundationalism, and asks where the critical evaluation of the possibly false a priori propositions will come from, if not from a higher authority. The only plausible picture that emerges is that justification will be arbitrated in something like the 'space of reasons' within a mind, and that epistemic authority will only accrue to those who can articulate their reasons, which means that the aspiring epistemic subject must 'know that they know', a traditional hallmark of internalism.

This will mean that small children and animals will probably not know anything, and that in the frantic activity of routine daily life even scientists and philosophers don't know anything either, but why would they need to? What is needed, which we almost always possess, is true belief. When circumstances, very unusually, make many of our routine immediate beliefs false, then the tough get going, apply critical reason, and sift out the elusive true beliefs which can be given the imprimatur of 'knowledge'. Their reward is epistemic authority.

There are many objections to this internalist and coherentist view. Goldman says we can achieve consistency by ignoring inconvenient evidence, and that coherence seems to require simultaneous consciousness of all your beliefs. Sosa says that the negation of all my beliefs about my actual headache would be just as coherent, and that a large set of falsehoods might be very coherent. Williams says that there are no coherentist reasons for accepting coherence itself, and that our genuine areas of knowledge might lack interconnections. Pollock and Cruz say that a coherence account isolates justification from the world, and can't give a privileged place in the system to sense experience.

Many components of this avalanche of objections can be swatted away individually. To take them in order, we could say to Goldman that it is obvious that there is more to coherence than mere logicians' 'consistency', and that a large body of beliefs is required; and that we can bring beliefs and evidence into consciousness when needed (or even look them up in books). To Sosa we could say it would be an unusual headache that had no impact on your belief system, just as it would be unusual for a traffic light to fail in that respect; and that a large set of coherent beliefs (such as the Ptolemaic solar system) might indeed be falsely believed, but widening the perspective will soon correct that. Williams can be told that every epistemological theory has to start somewhere, by taking something as primitive, and that an ideal of coherence is what we all apply when we try our hardest to establish difficult truths; and the lack of interconnectedness is a failing in great minds, which sometimes results in a physics genius believing in alchemy. Pollock and Cruz will have to acknowledge that areas where we seem to be linked fairly directly to the world are bound to have a privileged position as evidence in a coherent account of reality; and that our inability to control our own sense experiences gives them exceptional power as evidence of what is beyond us.

All of these replies, though, can be subsumed under a general account of what the 'space of reasons' consists in. It is not a vacuum where reasons float like flotsam; it is a law court, where reasons are ruthlessly interrogated. Probability, best explanation, logical consistency, natural consistency, reliability, and the broadest possible view of plausibility, are some of the standards that must be met. These are best labelled as the Intellectual Virtues, but as Aristotle understood them, rather than as externalist might hijack them to describe input systems that are to be labelled 'reliable'. Authority accrues to beliefs which can pass such tests, and to individuals who are good at applying them.

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