

Handout 4: Foundationalism and Its Discontents

A. Roderick Chisholm, “The Myth of the Given”

1. The Pyrrhonian Problematic

Suppose S is inferentially justified in believing P. Then: (a) S must believe some proposition Q such that $Q \neq P$, (b) Q is good evidence for P and (c) S is justified in believing Q. If S is inferentially justified in believing Q, then (a') S must believe some proposition R such that $R \neq Q \neq P$, (b') R is good evidence for Q, and (c') S is justified in believing R. If we suppose S is inferentially justified in believing R, a regress looms.

The Basing Relation: When: (a) S believes some proposition Q such that $Q \neq P$, (b) Q is good evidence for P, (c) S is justified in believing Q, (d) S's believing Q explains why she believes P (and/or S is caused to believe P by her believing Q), we will say that S believes P *on the basis of* believing Q.

The Four Classical Responses to the Pyrrhonian Problematic:

(1) **Foundationalism**: there are non-inferentially justified beliefs that serve to justify our inferentially justified beliefs.

S is justified in believing P but she does not believe P on the basis of believing some proposition $Q \neq P$ such that S is justified in believing Q.

(2) **Coherentism**: S can be justified in believing P on the basis of believing further propositions at least some of which she is justified in believing on the basis of believing P itself.

S can be inferentially justified in believing P1 on the basis of believing some proposition $P2 \neq P1$, where S is inferentially justified in believing P2 on the basis of believing $P3 \neq P2$...where S is inferentially justified in believing Pn-1 on the basis of believing $Pn = P1$.

(3) **Infinitism**: S can be inferentially justified in believing P1 on the basis of believing some proposition $P2 \neq P1$, where S is inferentially justified in believing P2 on the basis of believing $P3 \neq P2$...where S is inferentially justified in believing Pn on the basis of believing Pn+1 and so on. ...

(4) **Skepticism about Justification**: No one is ever justified in believing anything.

A Fifth Reply that Chisholm Considers: **Quietism**—there are certain purported questions about the justification of our beliefs that “cannot be (meaningfully) asked.”

2. Varieties of Foundationalism

Suppose S's belief in P is **foundational**: S is justified in believing P but she does not believe P on the basis of believing some proposition $Q \neq P$ such that S is justified in believing Q. We can say:

- (A) S is justified in believing P on the basis of something that is not a belief: e.g. an experience or the apprehension of an appearance.
- (B) S is justified in believing P on the basis of believing some proposition Q where S is unjustified in believing Q.
- (C) S is justified in believing P on the basis of believing some proposition Q where S is neither justified nor unjustified in believing Q.
- (D) S is justified in believing P on the basis of believing some proposition Q where S's belief in Q is self-justified (i.e. based on itself).

Note: Notice that I've "cleaned up" Chisholm's discussion to compensate for mistakes he makes by talking indifferently of "claims" and "beliefs." As Chisholm rightly points out (but fails to take proper notice of) a claim is a linguistic entity—e.g. a sentence or utterance—whereas a belief is a psychological entity. One might use 'claim' to mean *proposition*—in which case claims would not be concrete linguistic tokens (particular utterances or inscriptions), nor types of these tokens (sentences), but they still wouldn't be beliefs; instead, we'd be using "proposition" in an abstract way to refer to the meanings assigned to an utterance or inscription of a sentence by a speaker or her audience, where we assume that these entities are the kinds of **things that we believe**. (This will be important in what follows.)

The Basing Relation (extended): If S believes P and: (a) S is in some distinct mental state M, and (b) S's being in M explains why she believes P (and/or S is caused to believe P by her being in M), and (c) the *existence* of M either entails or makes it probable that P is true (relative to S's background knowledge or background beliefs), we will say that S believes P *on the basis of* being in M.

Phenomenal Foundationalism: (1) The justification of every belief can be traced back to foundational beliefs. (Every justified belief is held on the basis of some foundational beliefs.) (2) Our foundational beliefs are all held on the basis of *appearances*: items we directly apprehend but which are not "fit" for justification (because they are not beliefs and are insufficiently belief-like).

Questions: The foundationalist might say that perceptual experience justifies perceptual belief (and introspective belief as well), but that *experience* is not the kind of thing that can be justified. What sense can be made of asking whether an experience or the apprehension of an appearance is or is not justified? Is a pain justified or unjustified? It doesn't make sense to say that you should or shouldn't feel pain if pain is essentially passive and not the kind of thing that is responsive to argument or evidence. But mightn't a richer experience lack this kind of passivity? Suppose S looks ugly or stupid or dangerous to R. Mightn't we criticize R for this if we think S isn't ugly or stupid or dangerous and only looks this way to R because of R's prejudices? How much control do we have over our experiences when they are conceptualized in this rich way?

Chisholm's Main Thesis: Phenomenal Foundationalism is false, but some other version of foundationalism must be true.

3. What is Justification?

Chisholm says:

(a) justification ≠ items or processes that mitigate or eliminate psychologically real doubt (one may be justified in believing propositions one cannot doubt).

- (b) justification ≠ methods of verification or experimentation.
- (c) justification ≠ actual or possible responses to (verbal) challenges to one's beliefs.

Justification is that which “makes it the case” that one is rational or reasonable in holding a belief. It is whatever makes it that case that it is not the case that one should not hold a given belief (in the relevant sense of ‘should’). I.e., justification for a belief renders that belief “permissible.” Our pre-theoretical conception of justified or rational belief is difficult to articulate, but, according to Chisholm, we have it in mind prior to any explicitly epistemological inquiry.

4. Reichenbach's Argument against Foundationalism

1. To be justified in believing P=that this G is F, one must be able to show Q=that it is probable that this G is F.
2. To show that Q=it is probable that this G is F, one must show R=that some high number n of the Gs are Fs.
3. But to show R=that n of the Gs are Fs, one must show T=that it is probable that n of the Gs are Fs.

Now let us suppose we identify T as ‘this Hish proposition’.

4. To show T=that it is probable that some high number of the Gs are Fs, one must show Z=that some high number n of Hish propositions are true.

If we suppose that we identify Z as ‘this Bish proposition’, a regress looms.

Chisholm's Response: reject premise (1).

5. Return to the Myth of the Given

Recall the varieties of foundationalism we introduced above:

- (A) S is justified in believing P on the basis of something that is not a belief: e.g. an experience or the apprehension of an appearance.
- (B) S is justified in believing P on the basis of believing some proposition Q (e.g. some proposition about S's experience) where S is unjustified in believing Q.
- (C) S is justified in believing P on the basis of believing some proposition Q where S is neither justified nor unjustified in believing Q.
- (D) S is justified in believing P on the basis of believing some proposition Q where S's belief in Q is self-justified (i.e. based on itself).

Chisholm's Secondary Theses: (1) (A) and (B) “collapse” into (C) or (D). (C) and (D) are equivalent (i.e. two ways of saying the same thing). (2) Both (C) and (D) require accepting the myth of the given.

Task: Explain and evaluate Chisholm's reasons for accepting these secondary theses.

Observational Beliefs

What justifies me in believing that there is a key in front of me?

Answer 1: I see a key.

Answer 2: I see something that is shaped like a key, that is located in a given lock, and I remember that a key is usually there.

Answer 3: It appears or seems to me as though there is a key in front of me.

Answer 4: I see that there is a key in front of me.

Questions: Why does Chisholm think my belief that I see a key cannot be entirely justified by my seeing a key (as Carnap suggests), but that it must be based on something like the more complex state described in answer 2? Why doesn't Chisholm consider answers 3 or 4?

Chisholm says, "If the key were so disguised or concealed that the man who saw it did not recognize it to be a key, then he might not be justified in [believing that there is a key in front of him]."

Extensional and factive constructions:

If S sees x then x exists. ('S sees x' entails 'There is *something* that S sees'.)

If S sees that x, then it is true that x. ('S sees that x' entails 'There is some *fact* that S sees'.)

Still, S can see an F without seeing that it is an F. (Chisholm's example: S can see a thief without seeing that he is a thief.)

Further Questions: Suppose S sees that there is a key in front of him. Why can't we say that his seeing that there is a key in front of him justifies him in believing that there is a key in front of him? Let P=the proposition that there is a key in front of S. Why can't we say that S's seeing that P justifies his belief that P? Must Chisholm be assuming that our observational beliefs must be based on beliefs or experiences that we could have even if our observational beliefs were false? Is he assuming the "Cartesian" intuition the skeptic uses to support premise D'? What role do experiences play in justifying our observational beliefs?

Hempel, "When an experiential sentence is accepted 'on the basis of direct experiential evidence,' it is indeed not asserted arbitrarily; but to describe the evidence in question would simply mean to repeat the experiential statement itself. Hence, in the context of cognitive justification the statement functions in the manner of a primitive sentence."

Questions: Do experiences just *cause* our beliefs or do they play a role in *justifying them* or making them rational? What are the differences in similarities between a belief being directly based on an experience, and a belief being based on another belief? What is the context of "cognitive justification" of which Hempel speaks? Is he rejecting Chisholm's distinction between justification of belief and the capacity to argue for or supply evidence for the truth of what one believes? Is Hempel confused or is it okay to identify what justifies someone in holding a belief with the arguments she can give (verbally) to justify her belief?

6. Knowing One's Own Propositional Attitudes

Two Kinds of Introspective Beliefs: (1) *Propositional Attitudes:* S's belief that she has a certain belief. S's belief that she hopes that p, S's belief that she prefers that p, etc.; (2) *Sensations and Experiences:* S's belief that she is in pain; S's belief that she is imagining flying above the clouds; S's belief that there appears to be something red in front of her.

Two models of our introspective knowledge of our propositional attitudes: (1) When S knows via introspection that he believes that p *the very fact that he believes that p* justifies him in believing that he believes that p. S's belief that he believes that p is based_c on his belief that p. (2) When S knows via introspection that he believes that p his belief that he believes that p is *self-justifying*.

Chisholm's claim: There is no real difference between these two models.

Three questions: (1) What is S's belief that she believes that p based (or based_c) on? (2) What are S's **reasons** or **evidence** for believing that she believes that p? (3) How can one's reasons or evidence come apart from that on which one's beliefs are based?

Suppose that S believes Q because she has inferred it from P and if P then Q. Then P and if P then Q—**the propositions**—are S's reasons or evidence for believing Q. (If we join Chisholm in distinguishing *being justified* in holding a belief from *justifying* that belief, we should add that "P" and "Q" are what S will assert to defend her belief, so long as the context is not one in which S realizes that the evidence that convinces S of Q is insufficient to convince her audience so that she searches around for distinct grounds or arguments to persuade her audience.) But S's belief that Q is *based on* her belief that P and her belief that if P then Q—**the states of her mind**. The fact that she has a certain belief should be distinguished from the fact (or proposition) she endorses in virtue of holding that belief.

Questions: Can one falsely believe that one believes P? (For instance, can S believe that she believes that women and men are equally intelligent, when S doesn't in fact believe this?) If one can be wrong about what one believes, can one be *justified* in falsely believing that one believes P? What would one's justification be in such a case?

Chisholm: Two functions of facts about our own propositional attitudes in virtue of which we should say that they are elements of "the given": (1) we may appeal to them in justifying other beliefs. (E.g. I justify my belief that you and I disagree by appealing to my belief that P and your belief that not-P. I have inferential knowledge that you believe that not-P, but I have direct, non-inferential knowledge that I believe that p. Facts about my beliefs are part of "the given.") (2) Facts about what I believe stop the regress of justification. I justify believing Q on the basis of believing P. If asked what justifies me in believing P I can, in certain cases, cite the fact that I believe R. My belief that I believe R is self-justified, or justified by the fact that I believe R. Either way, it ends the regress.

According to Chisholm, the phenomenalist theory of the given is falsified by the fact that facts about what we believe are not facts about how things appear to us.

7. Introspective Knowledge of How Things Appear to You

Two senses of 'appears' ('seems', 'looks', etc.): (1) Doxastic (i.e. means *believe*): 'It appears to me that General de Gaulle was successful', 'General de Gaulle seems to have been successful'. (2) 'This appears white to me', 'This looks white to me', 'This tastes bitter to me'.

Question: If x appears white to me must x exist? Suppose that I am hallucinating a cookie. Is it true to say that a cookie appears to be before me? Is it true to say that there *exists* something that appears to me to be a cookie and that it appears to me to be in front of me?

The Sense Data Inference: If there *appears* to S to be some F, then there *is* something (if only an appearance) that *is* F.

If I am hallucinating something white in front of me, then there is something, an appearance, that is white (and is in front of me?). The Sense Data inference is **bad**.

Chisholm's grammatical "fix": Instead of saying 'There appears to be something white in front of me' (which suggests the doxastic reading) or 'There is an appearance of something white in front of me' (which suggests the existence of a sense datum with an "external" location) we should say, 'I am appeared to white'. Not 'There appears to be a cookie in front of me', nor 'There is an appearance of a cookie in front of me', but, instead, 'I am appeared to cookiesh'.

Question: How plausible is it that this is what we mean to say when we use 'appears', 'looks' etc.?

Chisholm's 2nd Thesis: We can have direct knowledge of how we are being "appeared to". Facts about how we are being appeared to constitute part of "the given."

The Relationalist Objection: "To think about a thing, or to interpret or conceptualize it, and hence to have a belief about it, is essentially to relate the thing to other things, actual or possible, and therefore to 'refer beyond it.'" **So the fact that I am appeared to white cannot justify my belief that I am appeared to white. My belief that I am appeared to white cannot be based on my being appeared to white. Instead, my introspective belief must be inferential in nature. My belief that I am appeared to white must be based on my belief that I am appeared to in "this certain way" and my belief that being appeared to in "this certain way" is similar to the past (and perhaps future) ways I was appeared to when believing myself to be appeared to white (and, perhaps, calling these ways of being appeared to 'white').**

Chisholm's Responses: (1) The Relationalist objection would apply equally to our knowledge of our own propositional attitudes. But it cannot account for that knowledge. (2) The Relationalist cannot stop the regress of justification that is generated by the Pyrrhonian Problematic. Relationalism yields skepticism.

B. Bonjour's Arguments Against Foundationalism

1. Wittgensteinian (Brute) Foundationalism

A person's reasons for holding a belief are supposed to stop when she can no longer give a (verbal) justification for believing the proposition in question. If she stops giving reasons at a point acceptable to the community in which she finds herself then she is justified in holding the belief in question. (This makes the justification or rationality of a belief a community-relative property of it.)

S's belief that P is **justified** relative to a community c iff S can provide an argument or rationale for his believing P that is satisfactory according to the social norms (rules or conventions) in play in c.

But will any social standards do? Reflection on particular examples (e.g. dogmatic religious belief based on the authority of scripture alone) might lead us to think not. What then can we say about conditions of adequacy on a set of social standards?

2. Bonjour's Reply

Bonjour claims that foundational or basic beliefs must have some special property if they are to transmit justification to beliefs based on them. Moreover, this property must have some relation to truth. A basic belief must be foundational in virtue of possessing some property Φ and beliefs that have Φ must be more likely to be true than not.

- (i) Belief B has feature Φ .
 - (ii) Beliefs having feature Φ are highly likely to be true.
- Therefore,
- (iii) B is highly likely to be true.

An important question: Suppose Bonjour is right in thinking that (i) and (ii) must be true if B is to qualify as a basic or foundational belief. Is Bonjour also right to insist that S must know or be justified in believing that (i) or (ii) is true in order to be justified in holding B? This requirement immediately entails that B is not foundational as one's justification for holding B will consist (at least in part) in further beliefs: (a) the belief that B has feature Φ and (b) the belief that beliefs having feature Φ are highly likely to be true.

Let B be an observational belief—e.g. the belief that I have hands. A reason for thinking that (i) and (ii) don't even have to be true (much less believed or justifiably believed to be true) in order for a subject to be justified in holding B: the intuition that were I a brain in a vat I would still be justified in believing that I had hands even though this belief (and all beliefs like it) would not be highly likely to be true.

3. Bonjour's Dilemma

“The givenist is caught in a fundamental dilemma: if his intuitions or immediate apprehensions are construed as cognitive, then they will be both capable of giving justification and in need of it themselves; if they are non-cognitive, then they do not need justification but are also apparently incapable of providing it. This, at bottom, is why epistemological givenness is a myth.”

Question: Can you apply this argument to the view that my belief that I am feeling pain is justified by my feeling of pain itself?

The Argument: To be justified in believing that I am in pain I must be aware of my pain. My awareness of the pain can either be “cognitive” or not. If it is cognitive then it must be justified in terms of something else: in which case my belief that I am in pain is not foundational or basic. If my awareness of my pain is not cognitive then it does not need justification but it is then incapable of justifying my belief that I am in pain. So in either case, my belief that I am in pain cannot be used to stop the regress of justification that starts when I am pressured to defend the belief.

Question: What does Bonjour mean by “cognitive”?

“The [foundationalist's] basic idea, after all, is to distinguish two aspects of a cognitive state, its capacity to justify other states and its own need for justification, and then try to find a state which possesses only the former aspect and not the later. But it seems clear on reflection that these two aspects cannot be separated, that it is one and the same feature of a cognitive state, viz. its assertive content, which both enables it to confer justification on other states and also requires that it be justified itself. If this is right, then it does no good to introduce semi-cognitive states in

an attempt to justify basic beliefs, since to whatever extent such a state is capable of conferring justification, it will to that very same extent require justification.”

Questions: When we described foundationalism above, we argued that it is the passivity of a mental state that frees it from the need for justification. You can criticize me for shouting loudly in the library because I have control over my voice. You say “You shouldn’t speak so loudly here. You have no justification for yelling in here. It’s not like we’re in a crowded bar where you need to shout to be heard.” Perhaps we assume that we have some control over our judgments when we criticize people for believing things on poor or insufficient grounds. “You have no reason to think that prayer will heal her cancer. You shouldn’t believe that. You are not justified or warranted in holding that belief. The evidence suggests otherwise. Seek a genuinely efficacious treatment.” Perhaps the person making this speech presupposes that her audience needn’t believe that prayer alleviates cancer. Perhaps the speaker presupposes that her audience can abandon that belief by attending to the evidence and “processing” it appropriately.

But his kind of criticism is inappropriate when leveled at our sensations. If I am in pain, it is wrong to say the pain is unjustified or unwarranted or that I oughtn’t to feel pain as I do. Why is this criticism wrong or inappropriate? Because I cannot abandon my pain in the way I can abandon an unwarranted belief. Of course, I can take aspirin, and I can be criticized for failing to take aspirin and therein criticized for feeling the pain I wouldn’t be feeling if I had taken aspirin. But this is criticism of an action (or a failure to take action) and is not a relevantly direct criticism of the state I could alleviate through that action.

Questions: What is the connection Bonjour implies between a state’s having an assertive content and its being active rather than passive? What is the connection between a state’s lacking an assertive content and its being passive? Might an actively acquired state lack an assertive content? Might a passively acquired state possess an assertive content? Might we cite a passively acquired mental state M, over which we lack all control, that nevertheless possesses an assertive content Q to justify a belief in P, while insisting that we cannot be justly asked to justify M (or our being in M) on account of M’s passivity?

A Problematic Example: Suppose that S seems dumb to R because S speaks with a southern accent and R associates that accent with stupidity. Suppose R believes S is dumb and justifies this on the grounds that S sounds dumb. Is S’s belief justified? Can S properly say that she needn’t justify her experience of S’s sounding dumb because experiences aren’t the kind of thing that can be justified?