

“Can justification of our beliefs be provided by an infinite chain of reasons?”

Agrippa’s trilemma is the problem of justification of beliefs due to the only three theories of justification being unsatisfactory. The theories of Coherentism and Foundationalism have been the most extensively argued for, and indeed, since few people will accept that we cannot justify any of our beliefs (since from this it follows that we cannot have knowledge), philosophers have fought hard to demonstrate that the trilemma is not the problem it claims to be, with one or the other of these theories. In this essay however, I am going to argue not only that justification can be provided by an infinite chain of reasons, but that it seems to be the only solution to the trilemma. I shall do this first by showing the inadequacies and highlighting the problems with foundationalism and then coherentism, which in itself will show infinitism to be the only path left. However, adopting a theory by default needn’t be sufficient; thus, I shall then show how the theory of infinite regress satisfies the requirements of justification. I shall also lay out its benefits and respond to some objections to the theory.

Before proceeding with my argument, I would like to expand upon its context. Philosophers and human beings alike are rational beings. This can either be seen in the light that this rationality requires us to have, and furthermore depends upon us having, reason, or that the possession of this rationality means we are endowed with the capacity to reason which in turn means we provide reasons (for beliefs, opinions, actions). Both explanations essentially denote the same thing: a rational being has reason and employs reasons; humans are rational beings; humans have reason and therefore we have reasons for our beliefs (and opinions and actions). The point of the subtle distinction is that one option suggests we may not always use our reason even if we possess it. Sometimes we act or believe something apparently without reason, but consider the following example:

When I said I wanted to know more about the architecture of the ancient Romans, I believed whoever told me that the current capital of Italy would provide me with the best examples of ancient Roman constructions and buildings to view, as well as who or whatever has told me that the current capital of Italy is Rome, and whatever told me/led me to believe that if I type in my details, click on some buttons on a website and follow its instructions by getting on the plane it indicates, I can end up in Rome.

In following these actions, I did not consciously provide reasons for believing the things stated. However, if asked to give reasons why I consequently got on a flight to Rome, I could easily provide reasons. These reasons would, for example, refer to the reliability of a source of information as an authoritative source (e.g. an up-to-date atlas). Similarly, if the first source had told me that it is not the case that the capital of Italy has the best examples of ancient Roman architecture, I would cite the same reason for believing that this is not the case as I would in the example. Thus, to be rational, there is some necessary causal thing for holding a belief that something is (or isn’t) the case rather than not holding that belief. This something is a reason, and it is upon this basis that I shall present my argument.

Foundationalism advocates that there are basic and non-basic beliefs. Basic beliefs are self-evident and need no further justification, while non-basic beliefs can be justified by other beliefs proceeding down a chain until a basic belief is reached, of which the justification does not depend upon our acceptance of any other propositions. In this section I will argue that foundationalism is flawed and not an acceptable theory of justification.

My first objection is the difficulties in defining a basic belief. A belief *the grass is green (p)* is potentially a non-basic belief. The first justification would be *I can see that the grass is green (q1)*. In turn this can be justified by the proposition *when I look at the grass, I receive the sense-data for the colour I call green (q2)* and *(when I receive sense-data from something, that denotes that that thing possesses the quality the sense-data describes (q3)*. Further justifications are still needed, for example: *what I am looking at is grass (q4)* and *the natural, green-appearing substance with the texture and shape I can currently see is grass (q5)*. These justifications are becoming increasingly tedious and a foundationalist would stop somewhere around here if not earlier. A common definition for a basic belief is one which is 'clearly and distinctly perceived to be true'. The foundationalist seems to take as granted that 'clearly and distinctly perceived to be true' is a universal, objective description, but while someone may quite reasonably say they perceive the grass clearly and distinctly as green, I have already demonstrated that there are numerous reasons for such a belief. Since the theory of foundationalism relies upon a set of foundational beliefs upon which to build the rest of our beliefs it is necessary either for an unambiguous, specific and explicit criterion to be established or for a list of the basic beliefs to be arbitrated. Nonetheless, to have such a list, would entail a criterion and the current criterion of self-evidence or clear and distinct by perception are, quite frankly, vague.

This section will demonstrate how no belief in a proposition can stand on its own as a basic belief. This argument has been laid out well by Sosa in his coherentist critique of foundationalism¹ and so, having defined his terms I shall present the premises and conclusion of this argument as he writes it. Firstly, this argument requires the distinction between a proposition with a propositional attitude and a proposition without a propositional attitude. A propositional attitude is the term we shall use for the mental state which has a proposition as its object. There is a relation between the mental state and the proposition. For example, beliefs, hopes, fears and desires are some common propositional attitudes. One might say 'I *hope that* there is a God' or 'I *believe that* there is a God' and these would be propositional attitudes, unlike 'There is a God'. With this distinction between the two types of propositions, Sosa's argument refutes foundationalism by showing that neither type can hold as a foundational, basic belief:

- “ a. (i) If a mental state incorporates a propositional attitude, then it does not give us direct contact with reality, e.g., with pure experience, unfiltered by concepts or beliefs.

¹ Sosa, Ernest; *The Raft and the Pyramid*; 4

(ii) If a mental state does not give us direct contact with reality, then it provides no guarantee against error.

(iii) If a mental state provides no guarantee against error, then it cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge.

(iv) Therefore, if a mental state incorporates a propositional attitude, then it cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge.

b. (i) If a mental state does not incorporate a propositional attitude, then it is an enigma how such a state can provide support for any hypothesis, raising its credibility selectively by contrast with its alternatives. (If the mental state has no conceptual or propositional content, then what logical relation can it possibly bear to any hypothesis? Belief in a hypothesis would be a propositional attitude with the hypothesis itself as object. How can one depend logically for such a belief on an experience with no propositional content?)

(ii) If a mental state has no propositional content and cannot provide logical support for any hypothesis, then it cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge.

(iii) Therefore, if a mental state does not incorporate a propositional attitude, then it cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge.

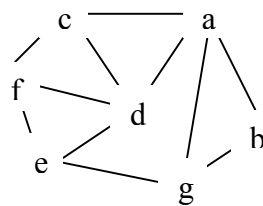
c. Every mental state either does or does not incorporate a propositional attitude.

d. Therefore, no mental state can serve as a foundation for knowledge.

(From a(iv), b(iii), and c.) ”

From this argument I think it is clear that even if it were possible to define basic beliefs, no proposition can hold on its own. The *hope* or *belief that* there is a God is merely conceptual and not about whether *there is* a God. However, to simply say ‘there is a God’ is useless on its own or to support other propositions unless you *believe* the proposition that there is a God.

Now the coherentist has helped us eliminate foundationalism, I shall now take the opportunity to undermine his own theory. Coherentism requires a rather holistic approach to beliefs as a set which mutually entail and explain each other. Remove one belief and the web falls apart and no belief is justified. This in itself, then, highlights the required strength of the relations between beliefs. For this section I shall present a very simplified diagram of a coherentist’s belief system, each letter representing a belief and each line illustrating their justificatory relation to each other.



In a similar critique to that of foundationalism earlier with the difficulties of defining basic beliefs, we can question the criteria for forming a coherent set of beliefs which are justified. As it stands, these seem to be, that the beliefs cohere as a set through mutual justification and are consistent and comprehensive. Yet this is clearly not specific enough either. For if these criteria were sufficient, then I could construct a system of (hypothetical) beliefs which all supported each other. Thus for the set of beliefs [a-g], I could substitute for a set [a`-g`] which is equally coherent but consists of different beliefs and according to the coherentist each belief would be justified. What's more is that I could substitute my set of beliefs [a-g] for a set which includes the precise negation of that set [\neg a- \neg g] and potentially have a coherent set of beliefs. The problem here is the lack of connection between the beliefs and reality. By reality, I refer to the external, actual world, however it may be, that we are trying to form beliefs about. A coherent set of beliefs is internally perhaps quite demanding and complex, yet, viewed from the outside, it is merely an independent floating structure without any determination of truly justifying itself to be true to anything/one outside of itself. Therefore, ironically it appears incoherent to provide justification with coherentism for the different sets of beliefs which can be and are held by different people, themselves may not cohere with each other and to the outside world itself.

My argument for infinitism shall now truly begin in its own justification and yet, I think it shall be relatively simple. As granted, as rational beings we employ reason and must justify, i.e. provide reasons for the beliefs we adopt. The premises upon which the reasons are provided, in turn must be justified. And so on, *ad finem*. The paradoxical nature of justification should already be evident. There is no *finem*, for an end would merely be propositional reason in need of justification. The rule is that every belief needs a reason, and every reason (being itself a belief) needs a reason. Thus, even for the most fundamental beliefs, like the example of *the grass is green*, instead of choosing arbitrarily some stopping point which *seems* adequate, we can provide an endless string of reasons. You may respond that, as in my rebuff of foundationalism, an infinitist does in fact have an arbitrary stopping point, for indeed, did I not stop somewhere in writing out my reasons for the belief stated? This would render the infinitist no better than a foundationalist, for one cannot ever actually provide or demonstrate an infinite chain of reasons. The difference however, is simple. A foundationalist has taken the stopping point which is usually the last asked, to be granted for all things. This is too dogmatic as he fails to provide justification for the chosen stopping point. So when asked to give justification for why $2+2=4$ he will claim it is self-evident. The infinitist however, has the upper-hand for he will always be able to provide

another reason *if required*. Thus, the stopping point of the infinitist is contextual, but always extendable. He will state the laws of logic as justification for the sum above, for which he will provide justification with reasons for the laws.

A common reaction to the theory of infinite regress is a conceptual objection rather than a practical or theoretical objection. It is the theory of the finite mind being incompatible with infinite justification. I would respond with reference to other concepts of infinity which we hold, if somewhat abstractly, of numbers, space, time and indeed the mind itself (perhaps within biological limitations). Furthermore, of what relevance is it for the mind to have to be able to deal with an infinite concept if it never has to actually face it? The infinitist will provide justification not *ad infinitum*, but until contextually satisfactorily, with the view that the chain does, nonetheless, go on. Here it need be noted that *S* doesn't have to have thought of a reason for a justified claim in order to believe it. For example, if (1) *S* believes *Beijing is the capital of China* and is asked to justify why it is, it is probably the case that *S* had not questioned before why (1) must be so. However, when asked for justification *S* will go and check a source with this information, for example, the 'World Almanac', for which the justification will be that this source is a reliable source. (N.B. I am assuming reliability is not graded, for it is apparent that something is either reliable or not. So in this case, this is a superior source.) Thus, it is not necessary for the mind to comprehend the infinite chain of reasons in order to obtain a belief, but for one to be able to provide reasons upon request.

In response, to an objection commonly made by foundationalists I shall draw on what has been said by Klein. The protestation posed is one questioning how a chain with the belief in question as the end point can not have a starting point. The starting point proposed would be one based on empirical knowledge, for it seems acceptable to grant a direct experience as the basis of beliefs. Yet, if we can still ask '*why?*', as we can, then I reject that this is a viable possibility. Klein resolves this by claiming that justification is not a transferable property of a proposition but that a proposition is justified in being part of a set or (for fear of sounding like a coherentist) a 'chain' of propositions. It is not the case that once an initial proposition is justified –by empirical inference– that this "property" of justification can be transferred onto its succeeding beliefs. Furthermore, Peirce, though sometimes ambiguous in his view, phrases an alternative to the "beginning" of a chain of beliefs:

"[It is not the case] that because there has been no first in a series (of premises), therefore that series had no beginning... for the series may be *continuous*, and may have begun *gradually*..."²

I feel it is unnecessary to comment further on the obvious correlation between infinite regress and gradual beginning which seems to solve the problem of the lack of starting point.

² *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (5.327)

Thus, I shall conclude my argument that justification can and should be provided by an infinite chain of reasons on the premises that i) every belief requires a reason; ii) a reason is taken as a belief which in turn requires a reason (a point here could be raised about the causal relation between two propositions that makes one a reason, which perhaps is an assumed logic hinting at a form of foundationalism, but this essay was not the forum for this debate), iii) there can be no stopping point to this regress without an explicit unambiguous criterion iv) no satisfactory criterion has been or can be established and so the regress is infinite. Furthermore, it is not possible to establish a universal coherent set of beliefs and so individual coherent sets of beliefs cannot themselves cohere together. I have not mentioned every argument against the two more popular theories, but believe the sufficient conclusions have been met to favour infinitism. With that conclusion, by meeting the most significant objections that undermine its basis, I have shown that justification can be, on the assumptions laid out, provided by an infinite chain of events.

Bibliography

Aikin, Scott; *Prospects for Peircian epistemic infinitism*

Aikin, Scott; *Don't Fear the Regress: Cognitive Values and Epistemic Infinitism* (2007)
Western Kentucky University

Dodd, Dylan; *Klein's Infinitism*

Sosa, Ernest; *The Raft and the Pyramid*; from Paul K. Moser and Arnold vander Nat, eds; *Human Knowledge: Classical Approaches*; (2nd edition, OUP, 1995); 341-356

Turri, John; *Foundationalism for Modest Infinitists* (2008) Huron University College