Supervenience and Meta-Justification

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The central coherentist critique of foundationalism brings forward a requirement of meta-justification for putative basic beliefs, which means that the beliefs are not basic after all. The foundationalist response denies this requirement, because it is in conflict with the doctrine of supervenience. Recently, one of the principal members of the coherentist camp, Keith Lehrer (1997, 60-77), suggested coherentists should reject this doctrine in order to maintain their advantage over foundationalist theories of justification.

I will argue that coherentists need not go so far as to reject the doctrine of supervenience. The denial of this very plausible doctrine would, on the contrary, decrease the attractiveness of coherentism. Even if we assume that such a doctrine is true, and that justification does not in itself require meta-justification, there is still a need for meta-justification when we try to determine which beliefs really are justified, and what the non-epistemic base is on which justification supervenes. I will argue that coherentism provides us with a better account of this meta-justification. In other words, I will argue that the resolution of the problem of the criterion requires coherentism, but that this sort of meta-epistemic coherentism is in fact compatible with epistemic foundationalism. There is room for a compromise in the debate between foundationalism and coherentism.

1. The Need for Meta-Justification

The strongest coherentist critique of foundationalism is directed against the possibility of basic beliefs – beliefs that are justified independently supporting reasons. It is claimed to be irresponsible, dogmatic, or arbitrary to adopt beliefs without reasons. Laurence BonJour (1985, 30-33), for example, used to argue that, in order to be basic, S's belief must have a feature in virtue of which it qualifies as basic, and this feature must also constitute a good reason for thinking that the belief is true. In other words, there must be the following justificatory argument:

(1) S's belief that p has feature F.

(2) Beliefs having feature F are highly likely to be true.

Therefore, S's belief that p is highly likely to be true.

But it is not enough that this sort of meta-justification exists in the abstract. In order to be justified in believing that p, S must also believe the premises of the argument and must be *justified* in believing them. This means that S's belief that p is not basic after all, because S's being justified in believing that p depends on other justified beliefs.

The foundationalists respond that such an argument violates the doctrine of supervenience, which says that, for any justified belief, there must be non-epistemic conditions that are sufficient for its being justified. The premises of this argument entail that there cannot be such sufficient conditions of justification, because all sufficient conditions include as a necessary component some justified beliefs (Sosa 1991, 183). Therefore, there must be something wrong with the argument. Perhaps it is sufficient for justification that S's belief simply has a feature that makes it probably true. S need not have additional justified beliefs

about the matter. This, at least, is the position of a reliabilist foundationalist.

Another line of coherentist critique focuses on epistemic principles rather than reliability. It is argued that, in order to have justified beliefs, one must be justified in accepting the relevant epistemic principles, which implies that there cannot be basic beliefs. Yet, once again, this cannot be so if the doctrine of supervenience is true. (Van Cleve finds such a critique in Sellars and Lehrer. See Van Cleve 1979, 76.)

If the doctrine of supervenience is true, there are epistemic principles of the form "If ... then S is justified in believing that p", in which the antecedent specifies some non-epistemic condition. They say that the obtaining of the non-epistemic condition is sufficient for justification. It is thus unnecessary for S to be also justified in believing in the principle. Neither is it necessary for S to be justified in believing that the antecedent obtains. (Van Cleve 1979, 77-78.)

William Alston (1989, 153-171) argues that these sorts of coherentist critiques suffer from a level confusion. The requirement of meta-justification is raised at the wrong level. To have a justified belief about non-epistemic matters does not require justified beliefs about epistemic principles or the obtaining of their antecedents. Yet, to have a justified belief that a belief is justified does require this. Alston claims that adopting a basic belief is not arbitrary, because one can have this sort of inferential justification for the higher-level belief that the lower-level basic belief is justified.

Alston accepts one type of meta-epistemic foundationalism. There are other types as well. But they should all be rejected, because they are unable to solve the problem of the criterion – or so I will argue.

2. The Problem of the Criterion

The debate between foundationalism and coherentism concerns the conditions of justification. Yet, there is also the question of *which particular beliefs* satisfy the conditions, and are, therefore, justified. The problem of the criterion, as Roderick Chisholm (1982, 61-75) describes it, is the problem of how to answer both of the following two questions:

(A) Which beliefs are justified? What is the extent of justified belief?

(B) What makes beliefs justified? What are the criteria or conditions of justification?

The problem is that we do not seem to be able to answer question A unless we have already answered question B – and we do not seem to be able to answer question B unless we have already answered question A. So we do not seem to be able to answer either question.

According to Chisholm, there are only two ways of avoiding this problem: We answer question A first, and then use this answer to figure out the answer to question B. Or we answer B first, and then use this answer to figure out the answer to A. Chisholm calls the former alternative

particularism, because in this case we begin with particular cases. He calls the latter one methodism, because it suggests we start instead from a general method, criterion, or principle.

There are two sides to this problem: one is psychological, the other epistemic. The psychological side concerns the temporal order in which we arrive at our answers to the two previous questions. The particularist strategy is to begin with our beliefs (or intuitions) concerning particular cases, and then to reason from them to beliefs about principles. The methodist one is to start from beliefs (or intuitions) about right principles, and then to reason to beliefs about particular cases.

The epistemic side of the problem concerns the justification of results. Of course, we do not want the results of our epistemological inquiry to be arbitrary. We want results that we can be justified in accepting. It seems clear that both particularists and methodists would give foundationalist answers to this question of meta-justification. Their answer to one of Chisholm's questions is not only causally but epistemically dependent on their answer to the other. The epistemic order reflects the temporal order of inquiry, or at least, this is what I take to be the position of meta-epistemic foundationalism.

We can gain a clearer picture of the foundationalist structure of meta-justification by distinguishing three kinds of beliefs:

(1)   Beliefs in singular epistemic propositions

(2)   Beliefs in non-epistemic propositions (including beliefs in the antecedents of epistemic principles)

(3)   Beliefs in epistemic principles

Singular epistemic propositions attribute justification to singular beliefs. Epistemic principles attribute justification to certain kinds of beliefs. And to infer one from the other, we need beliefs in the non-epistemic antecedents of epistemic principles. The particularist's suggestion is that we infer from 1 and 2 to 3. The methodist, in turn, suggests that we infer from 2 and 3 to 1. Let's assume that these inferences are indeed able to transmit justification from the premises to the conclusion. The central question remains: What justifies the premises?

If we rule out infinite regresses and circles as incapable of providing justification, some the premises must be accepted as basic. Both the particularist and the methodist may try to avoid postulating basic epistemic beliefs, and to derive their epistemic premises from non-epistemic propositions. However, this would require there to be definitions of epistemic concepts in terms of non-epistemic concepts, which may be dubious. Even if there were such definitions, they would still take the role of epistemic principles, which means that such a derivation cannot after all succeed. All such derivations would require some epistemic principle as a premise.

Thus, there seems to be no alternative to regarding either epistemic propositions or epistemic principles as basic. Coherentists, such as Keith Lehrer (1974, 143-144), object to this maneuver, because it makes the choice of epistemic premises arbitrary. James Van Cleve (1979, 86), who defends foundationalism, complains that this objection begs the question. It just presupposes that all justification is inferential, and that there cannot be basic beliefs.

The coherentist objection should be understood differently. It is not the question-begging claim that there cannot be basic epistemic beliefs, because coherentism is true. Coherentists may very well accept for the sake of argument that there can be such beliefs. They just want to raise the question: Which particular epistemic beliefs are basic? Foundationalists can hardly avoid this question, because these are the beliefs they intend to use as their starting point. Yet, when they ask the question, they confront the problem of the criterion again – raised on a higher level. They may supply a foundationalist response to this higher-level problem, but it simply raises the problematic on a still higher level, and so forth. There is no real way for foundationalists to stop the regress.

This regress is not the result of level-confusion. It is created instead by quite sensible questions about ourselves: Which of our beliefs are justified? What makes them justified? We may start answering them from what we believe about particular instances of justified belief, or about the criteria of justified belief. Yet, to avoid arbitrariness, we must first ask the same questions about these epistemic beliefs: Are they justified, and what justifies them? Yet, when we try to answer these questions, we face the same questions again on a higher level, and so on *ad infinitum*. We cannot answer the original questions satisfactorily, because this requires that we have already answered an infinite number of questions of increasing complexity.

For meta-epistemic foundationalists, the psychological starting point of epistemological reflection is the source of justification for the resulting epistemology. That is why they cannot avoid the question of the arbitrariness of the starting point, and once this question is raised, it cannot be satisfactorily answered.

3. Coherentism and Scepticism

Meta-epistemic coherentism avoids the problem of the criterion, because it allows the arbitrariness of its starting point. For coherentism, the psychological starting point of epistemological reflection is not the source of justification for its results. What justifies the results is their mutual coherence. The method used is often called the method of reflective equilibrium. According to it, we start from whichever beliefs we happen to have, and then try to put them into a state of reflective equilibrium.

When we follow this method and try to put our beliefs in (1) singular epistemic propositions, (2) non-epistemic propositions, and (3) epistemic principles into reflective equilibrium, we will most probably end up advocating some form of epistemic foundationalism. This is so for the simple reason that we lack beliefs about the overall coherence of our beliefs. So it is epistemic foundationalism rather than epistemic coherentism that should be in a state of reflective equilibrium. (See Lammenranta 1986.)

It is important to notice that the method of reflective equilibrium does not require us to have beliefs about the overall coherence of our view. Neither does it require that we have beliefs that our beliefs are at some point in a state of reflective equilibrium. It merely requires us to resolve conflicts among our beliefs when they occur. There are no guarantees that all of the conflicts will be resolved at some point, or that no new beliefs will be in conflict with the ones already acquired. It is the open-ended nature of the method that stops the level regress.

Because we are now endorsing two different (and even conflicting) theories of justification, we must accept them as theories of different concepts or properties. Perhaps it is better to say that foundationalism is the best theory of

epistemic justification, while coherence is the end we hope to achieve through philosophical reflection.

Yet, what does that say about the classical problem of coherentism: the multiplicity of incompatible but equally coherent systems of beliefs? Coherentism does not provide any means for choosing between them. This problem disappears when we take coherence itself to be the end of epistemological reflection. In so far as we set forward truth as the aim, and have realized that our methods at best ensure only coherence, we ended up with this problem. Yet, now that we have stopped worrying about truth and have settled for coherence, we do not have the problem any more.

To be sure, our position is a sceptical one – in the traditional Pyrrhonian sense. Having been unable to find criteria by which to distinguish truth from error, we subsequently settle for appearances. To live by appearances is to be guided by our native and acquired belief-forming dispositions. To be guided in this way is, among other things, to be guided toward revising our beliefs when they seem to contradict each other, and to replace less plausible beliefs with more plausible ones. It is thus nature itself that guides us towards reflective equilibrium and coherence.

In addition, the open-ended character of the method fits this brand of scepticism. A sceptic – in the original meaning of the word – is an inquirer. As inquirers, we should always be ready to revise our view. Our position can never be anything other than a provisional one.

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