**PHL232 Handout 2: Foundationalism and Coherentism**

**§1 The Structure of Justification?**

Recall the JTB account of knowledge:

> S knows that p if and only if
>
> 1. p is true
> 2. S believes that p
> 3. S's belief that p is justified
>
> 1-3 are meant to state conditions that are individually necessary but jointly sufficient for knowledge.

Today we will discuss two ways philosophers have developed the JTB account.

**§2 Foundationalism vs. Coherentism**

*Foundationalism*: foundationalists accept versions of the following two claims:

1. Some beliefs – the 'basic' beliefs – are such that their justification does not depend upon whether any other belief is justified
2. A belief is justified iff either it is a basic belief or is suitably related to basic beliefs (e.g. a belief is derived from some basic beliefs through a chain of valid logical inferences).

*Obvious Questions*: What could it be for a basic belief to be justified? Which of our beliefs might plausibly serve as basic beliefs? Can the class of basic beliefs identified by the foundationalist justify a sufficient number of our non-basic beliefs? The last problem stymied Descartes.

Coherentism is much harder to define. Sosa glosses the view as follows:

> 'By coherentism we shall mean any view according to which the ultimate sources of justification for any belief lie in relations among that belief and other beliefs of the subject: explanatory relations, perhaps, or relations of probability or logic.' (p. 18)

*Coherentism (alternative gloss):* A belief is justified iff a subject who adds it to her stock of beliefs thereby increases the coherence of her system of belief.

> *Obvious questions*: What sort of 'explanatory relations' must hold between beliefs for them to count as coherent? Mere consistency – namely absence of contradictory beliefs – is too weak a requirement.

**§3 Regress Argument for Foundationalism**

*§3.1 The Argument* (cf. §5 of Sosa)

1. S knows that p iff S has a justified true belief that p [*JTB account of knowledge*]
2. Suppose that a belief that p is justified only if a subject has an argument whose conclusion is p [*Inferentialist Account of Justification*]
3. An argument justifies belief in its conclusion for a subject only if prior to the argument she already possessed justification to believe the argument's premisses [*Inferential Justification is Linear*]
4. So there are no justified beliefs [from 2 and 3]
5. Thus there is no knowledge [from 1 and 4]

The foundationalist rejects 5 on anti-sceptical grounds, and so concludes that we must reject 2. But to reject 2 is to accept that there must be beliefs that are non-inferentially justified (i.e. a variety of basic belief).

Why does 4 follow from 2 and 3?

> 2 and 3 together generate a regress. Suppose S has a justified belief that p. From 2 it follows that S has an argument whose conclusion is p. But given 3, the argument justifies S's belief that p only if S already possessed justification for belief in its premisses. But (given 2) to have justification to believe these premisses, S must have arguments whose conclusions are the premisses. And then (given 3) she needs other arguments that establish the premisses of her new arguments. And so it goes *ad infinitum*.

BUT not all regresses are vicious. For example, if p is true, then it is true that p is true, and it is true that it is true that p is true, and so on. So to get from the regress generated by 2 and 3 to 4 requires a further (hidden) premiss: the claim that linear justification must terminate.

*Question*: why should we accept this hidden premiss? In §5(c) of his paper Sosa canvases and rejects a number of arguments for this premiss.

*§3.2 Evaluation*

- The regress argument goes through even if we deny that the JTB conditions are jointly sufficient for knowledge (i.e. all we need is the 'only if' version of 1).
- To deny 2 does not entail that there are beliefs whose justification does not depend on the justification of any other beliefs. It merely entails that there must be beliefs whose justification is non-inferential. So the regress argument does not directly determine what form foundationalism must take.
- The foundationalist still owes us positive accounts of both basic beliefs and how they can justify non-basic beliefs.

**§4 Why be a Coherentist?**

Coherentists offer a different response to the regress argument: they reject 3.

One reason to be a coherentist is an antecedent attachment to 2 – the Inferentialist Account of Justification.

Why might we be tempted by inferentialism? Many adhere to the view because they cannot see a plausible alternative. Sosa pushes back against this line of thought on pp. 7-8 (note: he calls inferentialism the 'Intellectualist Model of Justification').

Sosa develops a model he borrows from ethics (for the details, see §4 and §11).

1. A practice or custom may be justified in virtue of its consequences – its tendency to produce better outcomes than alternative practices
2. These consequences are not themselves beliefs (or, more generally, propositional attitudes). So the justification of a practice need not conform to inferentialism.
3. But we can think of particular acts of belief formation as akin to particular moves in a more general practice of intellectual inquiry (in Sosa's terminology, a stable disposition for belief acquisition) [*Sosa's proposal*]
4. A practice of intellectual inquiry may be justified by its consequences – in this case by its tendency to reliably produce true beliefs [from 1]
5. As acts of a more general practice, a belief is justified just in case it arises from a justified practice [from 3 and an intuitive claim about practices]
6. So justification for a belief need not conform to inferentialism [from 2, 4, and 5]

*Note*: Sosa uses the notion of an 'intellectual virtue' in his positive account, but the general picture goes through even if we stick to the more neutral notion of an intellectual practice.

*Good question*: does Sosa's virtue-theoretic conception of justification help the foundationalist? Can it plausibly be restricted to a class of basic beliefs, or does the account generalize to all beliefs?

We will revisit this sort of 'reliabilist' account of justification when we read Alvin Goldman.

*Problems for Coherentism* (cf. §9(b) of Sosa)

i. Alternative coherent systems of belief
ii. Coherent systems of belief do not have genuine empirical content
iii. To escape (i) and (ii) coherentism about justification must endorse coherentism about truth, and that view of truth is crazy.

**§5 Truth and Justification**

Justification enjoys a close tie to truth: to figure in knowledge justification must be truth-conducive.

*Intuitively*: To believe that p is to adopt a commitment to the truth of p. So when we choose what to believe, at least from an epistemic point of view, what we really care about is which beliefs are likely to be true. Furthermore, we adopt justified beliefs because this is a means to this end (i.e. the formation of true beliefs). Thus we care about justification because a justified belief is more likely to be true. More generally, the greater the justification for a belief, the more likely it should be that the belief is to be true.

Given this rather sketchy line of thought, we should expect of any right account of justification that it preserve this link between justification and truth.

To see why the link between justification and truth poses problems for both coherentism and foundationalism, we need to equip ourselves with a pair of views about the nature of truth:

*Correspondence Theory of Truth*: p is true iff p corresponds with the facts

Obvious questions: what is correspondence? What are facts?

*Coherence Theory of Truth*: p is true iff p coheres with a specific system of beliefs

Obvious questions: what is coherence? And which system of beliefs determines truth?

Some candidate systems of belief: (1) the beliefs of an ideal scientific inquirer at the end of inquiry; (2) our current beliefs; (3) a particularly important subset of our current beliefs

If coherentists about justification accept a suitable version of the coherence theory of justification they dodge the problems raised by alternative belief systems and the threat of empirical emptiness. But at what cost? Coherentism about truth seems bizarre: surely truth depends upon how things stand out in the world, not simply upon the structure of a system of beliefs.

*Argument Against the Correspondence Theory*

The correspondence theory of truth causes its own problems. Here is one of them:

1. If the correspondence theory is true, a belief's truth will be independent of any justification we might possess
2. So if the correspondence theory is true, we could have the best possible justification for a belief that p yet p might nevertheless be false [from 1]
3. But to know that p requires that a subject's justification for her belief that p rule-out all not-p alternatives [*Infallibilism about Knowledge*]
4. So if the correspondence theory is true, no amount of justification will be sufficient for a belief to constitute knowledge [from 2 and 3]

4 entails that adoption of the correspondence theory of truth leads to scepticism. And insofar as foundationalism and the correspondence theory go hand-in-hand, this argument also undermines foundationalism.

*Potential replies*: either reject the move from 1 to 2, or deny 3. To deny 3 is to accept *fallibilism* – the view that knowledge is compatible with the possibility of error. We'll revisit this when we talk about Lewis's paper 'Elusive Knowledge'