

Laurence Bonjour's "Externalist Theories of Empirical Justification"

I. BONJOUR'S STRATEGY

BonJour argues that foundationalism cannot solve the epistemic regress problem because so-called foundational beliefs are not in fact foundational. One response to BonJour's argument can be formulated in terms of externalist (foundationalist) theories of justification. BonJour replies, however, that such theories are in general defective, and thus that no externalist theory can support a foundationalism that solves the epistemic regress problem.

II. BONJOUR'S ANTI-FOUNDATIONALIST ARGUMENT

1. My foundational belief B has a feature ϕ (e.g., it is certain and indubitable) in virtue of which it is justified (and foundational).
2. B cannot be justified unless I *have* some argument for, or *possess* some reasons in favor of, the claim that it is.
3. Any such argument will include a premise of the following sort: Beliefs having feature ϕ are justified. For example,
 - i. B has feature ϕ .
 - ii. Beliefs that have feature ϕ are justified.
 - iii. Therefore, B is justified.
4. Each and every premise that appears in such an argument – and hence premise (ii) – must be justified if the argument is to be a good one.
5. Thus, B cannot be justified unless I am justified in believing that beliefs having feature ϕ are justified.
6. Thus, B is *not* a foundational belief, for its justification depends on another justified belief, namely, the justified belief that beliefs having feature ϕ are justified.

III. THE EXTERNALIST RESPONSE TO THE ANTI-FOUNDATIONALIST ARGUMENT

"... though there must in a sense be a reason why a basic belief is likely to be true [i.e., a reason why it's justified], the person for whom such a belief is basic need not have any cognitive grasp of this reason. On this view, the epistemic justification or reasonableness of a basic belief depends on the *obtaining* of an appropriate relation, generally causal or nomological in character, between the believer and the world" (pp. 180-1; my emphasis).

- ⇒ This amounts to a denial of the second premise of BonJour's Anti-Foundationalist Argument.

IV. BONJOUR'S CASE IV

Case IV. Norman, under certain conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power, under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

V. THE OBJECTION SUGGESTED BY CASE IV

“Norman’s acceptance of the belief about the President’s whereabouts is epistemically irrational and irresponsible and thereby unjustified, whether or not he believes himself to have clairvoyant power so long as he has no justification for such a belief. Part of one’s epistemic duty is to reflect critically upon one’s beliefs, and *such critical reflection precludes believing things to which one has, to one’s knowledge, no reliable means of epistemic access*” (p. 189; my emphasis).

Here’s an argument grounded in Bonjour’s comments in the above-quoted passage:

BONJOUR’S ARGUMENT FROM DUTY

- (1) If S’s belief that P is to count as justified, then S must discharge a certain duty, namely, the epistemic duty to engage in the sort of critical reflection that could lead to the justification of her belief that beliefs formed in this way (i.e., in the way that her belief that P was formed) are justified.
- (2) S can discharge this duty only if she has a cognitive grasp of the reasons why beliefs formed in this way are justified.
- (3) Thus, if S’s belief that P is to count as justified, she must have a cognitive grasp of the reasons why beliefs formed via the relevant means are justified.

Since the condition expressed in (3) is an internalist condition, and since internalist conditions are incompatible with externalist conditions, this argument is in effect an argument for internalism.

VI. THE FIRST EXTERNALIST REPLY TO BONJOUR’S ARGUMENT

Contrary to Bonjour’s claim, Norman is in fact justified in believing, on the basis of his completely reliable powers of clairvoyance, that the President is in New York City.

VII. THE SECOND EXTERNALIST REPLY TO BONJOUR’S ARGUMENT

Let’s grant, as least for the sake of the argument, that Norman is *not* justified in believing that the President is in New York City. There are, in fact, some thoroughly externalist theories that yield this result. Take, for example, Goldman’s (10):

- (10) If S's belief in p at t results from a reliable cognitive process, and there is no reliable or conditionally reliable process available to S which, had it been used by S in addition to the process actually used, would have resulted in S's not believing p at t, then S's belief in p at t is justified.

We must grant, first of all, that Norman's belief that the President is in New York City *results from a reliable cognitive process*, viz., from his completely reliable powers of clairvoyance.

However, we get the desired result when we notice that there *is* a reliable (or conditionally reliable) process available to Norman which, had it been used by Norman in addition to his powers of clairvoyance, would have resulted in his not believing that the President is in New York City.

What is this process? We can thank BonJour himself for suggesting it. The process is this: *critical reflection that precludes Norman's believing things to which he has, to his knowledge, no reliable means of epistemic access.*

- Norman does not know whether he has, in the circumstances described in Case IV, a reliable means of epistemic access to the President's whereabouts.
- Furthermore, critical reflection would reveal this to Norman, and would keep him in this case from forming beliefs about the President's whereabouts (and would therefore preclude his believing that the President is in New York City).
- It follows that the externalist conditions for justification that are prescribed by Goldman's (10) are *not* satisfied in this case.
- Hence, the externalist can perfectly well explain, if called on to do so, Norman's not being justified in believing that the President is in New York City.
- Moreover, since Norman has engaged in this sort of critical reflection, he has discharged (what BonJour take to be) his epistemic duty. Yet he has done so without grasping the reasons why his beliefs—those he forms via clairvoyance—are justified. It follows from this that the second premise of BonJour's Argument from Duty (in Section V above) is *false*.