

John L. Pollock and Joseph Cruz's "Foundations Theories" Chapter Two of *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge, Second Edition*

I. MOTIVATIONS FOR FOUNDATIONALISM

The regress argument: The only way for beliefs to be justified is to see them as having foundations. This is the only structure from which we can see some of our beliefs as being justified.

- The problem with the *circular* view is this: It claims that some beliefs ultimately depend for their justification on *themselves*, but that seems counterintuitive.
- The problem with the *infinite regress* view is this: We cannot reconstruct an infinite regress of justified beliefs. It seems unlikely, then, that any belief could be justified if it required for its justification an infinite series of justified beliefs.
- The problem with the *skeptical* view is this: This view, of course, does not allow for beliefs to be justified.
- We are left with the *foundational* view, according to which some beliefs are *foundational*, or *basic*.

BASIC BELIEF: A belief is basic if (a) it is justified [i.e., it has a secure epistemic status] and (b) it does not depend for its justification on any other (justified) belief.

II. ARE FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS PERCEPTUAL BELIEFS?

1. The only beliefs that aren't held on the basis of reasoning are those held directly on the basis of perception.
2. A belief is justified through reasoning only if its being justified depends on the justification of the beliefs from which the reasoning proceeds (and hence only if it is not a basic belief).
3. Thus, basic beliefs are beliefs held directly on the basis of perception (i.e., perceptual beliefs).

III. TWO SORTS OF PERCEPTUAL BELIEF

1. Ordinary perceptual beliefs, for example, my belief that there's no mail in my mailbox.
 - A. We might deny ordinary perceptual beliefs the status of basic beliefs for this reason: our ordinary perceptual beliefs can be false, and basic beliefs are supposed to have a *very secure* epistemic status.

2. Appearance beliefs, for example, my belief that *it now appears to me as if* there's no mail in my mailbox.

IV. THE NATURE OF BASIC BELIEFS

1. Pollock & Cruz (henceforth, P&C) say that basic beliefs must have a secure epistemic status that does not require them to be justified by appeal to other (justified) beliefs. P&C say that when a belief has this status, it is *self-justifying*; and they suggest that the epistemic status of basic beliefs should be so secure as to preclude mistake.
2. The possibilities
 - A. S's belief that p is basic if S lacks evidence in favor of the falsity of p (i.e., evidence in favor of $\sim p$). [**PRIMA FACIE JUSTIFIED**]
 - But some *unjustified* beliefs seem to meet this requirement. For example,
 - my belief that Goldbach's Conjecture is true. (Goldbach's Conjecture is the claim that every integer greater than 5 is the sum of three primes (or, as re-expressed by Euler, all positive even integers greater than or equal to 4 can be expressed as the sum of two primes.))
 - my belief that Dick Cheney is now in The Bunker.
 - B. S's belief that p is basic if S's holding the belief guarantees its being justified (i.e., if S's belief that p is justified in virtue of being held). [**SELF-JUSTIFYING**]
 - But there aren't very many self-justifying beliefs at all. (Ordinary perceptual beliefs, for example, seem not to fit the bill.) *Maybe* appearance beliefs work here.
 - Suppose that we have a Super EEG that can monitor the brain and reliably determine whether a subject is being appeared to redly (for example). Now suppose that I'm wearing the machine and that I form the belief that I'm being appeared to redly. The machine indicates, however, that I'm *not* being appeared to redly, and the scientists who are monitoring the machine's readings assure me that I'm mistaken. My belief in this case fails to be justified. Its justification, which I have in virtue of its seeming to me as if I'm being appeared to redly, is defeated.

- Where J justifies S's belief that p , D **defeats** that justification if and only if the combination of J and D fails to justify S's belief that p .
- Two Sorts of Defeater
 - OVERRIDING (OR REBUTTING) DEFEATERS: D is an *overriding* defeater for S's justified belief that p if and only if D is justification for believing that p is false.
 - UNDERMINING (OR UNDERCUTTING) DEFEATERS: D is an *undermining* defeater for S's justified belief that p if and only if D gives us reason to question the grounds of S's belief (for example, D gives us reason to question the reliability of the source of those grounds).
 - See Pollock and Cruz, pp. 196-197; Pollock 1970; Pollock, 1974.
- Each and every appearance belief—for example, the belief that I'm being appeared to redly—requires for its justification that we be justified in believing that *there are no factors that would cause me to make mistakes in judgment about my immediate experiences* (i.e. about how I'm being appeared to). If this is true, then not even *appearance* beliefs will count as basic (on the present account) since the mere holding of an appearance belief would *not* guarantee its being justified. [See I. T. Oakley, "An Argument for Scepticism Concerning Justified Belief," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13: 226-237.]

C. S's belief that p is basic if S's holding the belief guarantees its being true. [INFALLIBLE]

- This is too permissive; if I believe that $72 + 41 = 113$, even if I do so on the basis of wishful thinking, it is nevertheless true that $72 + 41 = 113$. Thus, *any* belief in a necessary truth, no matter how we come to hold the belief, will count as basic.
- Won't something like the Super EEG argument work here, too? If so, then not even appearance beliefs are infallible; I can sometimes believe that I'm being appeared to redly while it is nevertheless false that I am appeared to in that way.

D. S's belief that p is basic if (a) necessarily, S believes that p only if p is true and (b) necessarily, S believes that $\sim p$ only if p is false.

[INCORRIGIBLE]

- This is not as permissive as infallibility since it eliminates beliefs in necessary truths. For example, it is true that the sum of 72 and 41 is 113 even if I believe otherwise.
- Nevertheless, appearance beliefs seem once again to fail to make the grade. For if appearance beliefs are not *infallible*, then they are not *incorrigible*: The conditions for infallibility, which appearance beliefs seem to fail to satisfy, are also conditions for incorrigibility. Hence, appearance beliefs are not incorrigible if they are not infallible.

E. S's belief that p is basic if its justification does *not* include S's possessing other justified beliefs. [IMMEDIATELY JUSTIFIED]

- Those who argue against foundationalism often do so by questioning whether any beliefs count as basic. In doing this, they provide a positive characterization of basic beliefs, and then try to show that nothing can correspond to that characterization. To avoid criticism of this sort, William P. Alston¹ provides a *negative* characterization of a basic belief.
 1. We can put (a version of) foundationalism in terms of immediately justified beliefs, and a belief's being immediately justified entails neither that it's *prima facie* justified, nor that it's self-justifying, nor that it's infallible, nor that it's incorrigible.
 2. Thus, even if there are sound arguments for the claim that no beliefs count as being either *prima facie* justified or self-justifying or infallible or incorrigible, such arguments do not impugn a foundationalism put in terms of immediately justified beliefs.
 3. Thus, foundationalism, at least in this minimal form, has not been refuted.

F. Basic beliefs can appeal for their justification to *something other than beliefs*, for example, to perceptual experiences.²

¹ In "Has foundationalism been refuted?" *Philosophical Studies* 29 (1976): 287-305.

² See Robert Audi, "Contemporary modest foundationalism," in Louis P. Pojman, ed., *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003); John L. Pollock and Joseph Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), especially Chapter 7; and James Pryor, "The skeptic and the dogmatist" *Noûs* 34 (2000): 517-549.

- Recall our definition of basic beliefs: A belief is basic if (a) it is justified [i.e., it has a secure epistemic status] and (b) it does not depend for its justification on any other (justified) belief.
- Notice that a belief can appeal for its justification to perceptual experiences (e.g.) and still be basic (since in such a case it depends for its justification on no other *belief*, but rather on an experience).
- Here's Pryor:
 - "...when it perceptually seems to you as if *p* is the case, you have a kind of justification for believing *p* that does not presuppose or rest on your justification for anything else..." (p. 519).
 - "...the *mere having* of an experience as of *p* is enough for your perceptual justification for believing *p* to be in place" (p. 519).
- Notice, too, that we've done away with the idea that basic beliefs are such that mistake about them must be impossible.