

Foundationalism, Reliabilism, Coherentism

	Foundationalism	Coherentism	Reliabilism
a) Definition: the formal definition of this theory of epistemic justification	<p>Knowledge should be built on basic, secure (indubitable or incorrigible) pieces of knowledge.</p> <p>In other words, justification for all of our beliefs is ultimately derived from the basic beliefs that act as the foundation for all that we know.</p>	<p>Knowledge should not contradict existing pieces of knowledge. Knowledge should lend mutual support. And a set of knowledge should have as wide a scope as possible.</p> <p>In other words, whole systems of beliefs are justified by their coherence. Some beliefs are better supported than others (centre vs peripheral), but none completely justified and indubitable.</p>	<p>Knowledge should be constructed through reliable means. Reliable here means most likely to produce a true belief.</p> <p>In other words, a belief is justified based on how it is formulated, rather than by being based on good reasons per se; it is justified if it can give us the results.</p>
b) Illustration: draw how such a structure of knowledge would look like			
c) Examples: Any disciplines / areas of knowledge that exemplify such a structure?			
d) What are some advantages of structuring knowledge in this			

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way? How might it be better than the other 2 theories? Make sure you give reasons for the advantages.			
e) What are some drawbacks of structuring knowledge in this way? Give reasons for the disadvantages.			
f) Criticisms of this theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idea of basic belief doesn't make sense. • Sense data is corrigible. • A priori beliefs can't really support a useful belief set. • The choice of basic beliefs seems arbitrary. • Direction of justification not one way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some beliefs should not be revised. Doesn't account for a priori truths. Eg – math? • Plurality: what happens when we are faced with 2 equally justified sets of beliefs? Coherentism doesn't tell us which to choose. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to apply reliability consistently. What works for one person may not for another. • May be too loose a requirement for justification – a method could seem reliable repeatedly by luck. We may not be so lucky in the future. • A method may be reliable but false.

Supplementary Notes on the Structure of Knowledge: Epistemic Justification

Justification, according to the tripartite theory of knowledge (JTB), is the difference between merely believing something that is true, and knowing it. To have knowledge, on this account, we must have justification. How our beliefs are justified is among the central questions of epistemology.

Three rival theories of justification are set out here: foundationalism, coherentism, and reliabilism. They are often also referred to as theories of the structure of knowledge (how pieces of knowledge can be connected and built upon each other).

Foundationalism

If we think of justification in inferential terms, i.e. in terms of a belief being justified by being inferred from other justified beliefs, then we face a problem: on this account, for every justified belief there must be at least one other justified belief on which it is based, which must in turn be based on at least one other justified belief, and so on. If all of our beliefs are justified in this way, therefore, there must be an infinite regress of justified beliefs.

This implication of the idea that all of our beliefs are inferentially justified has struck many as implausible, if not incoherent. The problem of avoiding this implication has become known as the regress problem of justification. Foundationalism is a response to this problem, an attempt to halt the regress of justification.

The foundationalist seeks to avoid the regress problem by positing the existence of foundational or "basic" beliefs. Basic beliefs are non-inferentially justified, i.e. they are justified without being inferred from other beliefs. As basic beliefs are justified, they are able to confer justification onto other beliefs that can be inferred from them. As basic beliefs are non-inferentially justified, however, they halt the regress of justification; we need not posit an infinite series of justified beliefs on which basic beliefs are based, because basic beliefs are self-justifying, and so need no such series.

According to foundationalism, the justification for all of our beliefs is ultimately derived from the basic beliefs that act as the foundation for all that we know.

Coherentism

Coherentism is a rival theory of justification to foundationalism. Unlike foundationalists, coherentists reject the idea that individual beliefs are justified by being inferred from other beliefs. Instead, according to coherentism, whole systems of beliefs are justified by their coherence.

What is Coherence?

Coherence consists of three elements. A belief-set is coherent to the extent that it is consistent, cohesive, and comprehensive.

Consistency

A belief-set is consistent to the extent that its members do not contradict each other. Clearly a belief-set full of contradictory beliefs is not coherent. Consistency, however, need not be an all or nothing affair; beliefs may be in tension with each other, without being strictly speaking contradictory. Tensions of this kind, like contradiction, reduces the coherence of a set of beliefs.

Cohesiveness

Mere consistency is not enough for coherence. For a belief-set to be coherent, the beliefs that it contains must not only be mutually consistent, but must also be mutually supportive. A set of beliefs that support each other, where one belief makes another more probable, is more coherent than a set of unrelated, but consistent beliefs.

Comprehensiveness

Finally, coherence involves comprehensiveness. Comprehensiveness, of course, is not a part of the meaning of coherence in the ordinary sense. In the context of coherentist theories of justification, however, a belief-set increases in coherence as it increases in scope; the more a belief-set tells us about, the more coherent it is.

Reliabilism

Reliabilism is an alternative theory of justification to foundationalism and coherentism. According to reliabilism, whether or not a belief is justified is not determined by whether or not it is appropriately related to other beliefs. Rather, according to reliabilism, a belief is justified based on how it is formed.

There are good and bad ways to go about forming beliefs. Beliefs based on reliable belief-forming mechanisms are likely to be true. Beliefs based on unreliable belief-forming mechanisms are not. The reliabilist holds that a belief's justification depends on whether it is formed using a reliable or an unreliable method. If perception is a reliable method for forming beliefs, then beliefs based on perception are justified. If wishful thinking is a reliable method for forming beliefs, then beliefs based on wishful thinking are justified. Conversely, if either of these methods of belief-formation is unreliable, then beliefs based on them will be unjustified.

Adapted from Dr Charlene Tan (NIE) and <http://www.theoryofknowledge.info/justification.html>

Basic Beliefs Don't Make Sense

The concept of a basic belief is key to foundationalism. Foundationalists hold that there are basic beliefs that are non-inferentially justified. These beliefs are supposed to halt the regress of justification, and act as the ultimate source of justification for everything else that we believe. Some critics of foundationalism, however, have argued that the idea of a basic belief makes no sense.

For a belief to be justified, there must be some reason to think that it is true; this is what justification is all about. Basic beliefs, therefore, as they are justified, must possess some feature that makes them likely to be true.

For a person to be justified in accepting a belief, they must have access to this reason. For a basic belief to be justified, therefore, the believer must know that it possesses this feature, and that this feature increases the likelihood of it being true.

In that case, though, the belief would not be basic, for it would be inferentially justified by the further beliefs that it possesses this feature and that beliefs that possess this feature are likely to be true. The regress of justification that basic beliefs were supposed to halt, then, would

recommence. If this is correct, and there can be no basic beliefs, then foundationalism must be rejected.

Basic Beliefs No Use

Rationalist foundationalism suggests that all of our beliefs are ultimately justified by truths of logic and mathematics, such as " $2+2=4$ " and "Nothing is both red and green all over".

Empiricist foundationalism suggests that all of our beliefs are ultimately justified by experience, such as patches of colour in our visual field, or immediate awareness of our own thoughts.

In either case, this is simply not enough of a foundation to support anything like the belief sets that most of us possess. We have beliefs about the location of the Eiffel Tower, about the History of Britain, and about the structure of the atom; none of these follows from the foundationalist's basic beliefs. The fact that I have an experience of redness and all the truths of maths and logic put together do not entail that there is anything red in the world at all. All that can be justified by the basic beliefs of the foundationalist are the very beliefs that are said to be basic.

Objections to Coherentism: Coherent Alternatives

Coherentism holds that beliefs are justified by belonging to coherent belief sets. There are many possible coherent beliefs sets, however, and coherentism provides no way of deciding between them. Fictional worlds such as Narnia, the Matrix, and the Discworld are as coherent (or at least could be made as coherent) as the actual world. If coherence is the standard of justification, therefore, then we are as justified in believing in the Discworld as we are in believing in Earth, so long as we are willing to make the necessary adjustments to our other beliefs. This, though, is absurd.

Moreover, many of these belief sets contradict each other; there are coherent belief sets that contain the belief that the world is round, and there are other equally coherent belief sets that contain the belief that the world is flat. In order to decide whether the world is round or flat, therefore, I must use some other standard of justification than coherence. In fact, for every belief there is a coherent belief set that contains it, and so coherentism fails to recommend any belief over any other. It can't help us at all in deciding what to believe.

Objections to Coherentism: Coherence and Truth

A belief-set can be coherent even if all of its members are false. The belief that your parents are aliens coheres very well with the belief that they keep a flying saucer in the garage, which coheres very well with the belief that the FBI have dispatched agents to investigate, etc. Despite the coherence of this belief set, however, none of these beliefs is true.

Justified beliefs, because they are justified, are more likely to be true; the whole point of seeking justification for our beliefs is that justification is truth-conducive. The mere fact that a set of beliefs is coherent does not imply that its members are true. In fact, there are more false coherent belief sets than there are true coherent belief sets. As justification is truth-conducive, though, while coherence is not, justification and coherence must be two separate matters. Coherentism is false.

Objections to Reliabilism: Multiple Methods of Belief-Formation

Suppose that you are walking home at dusk. As you approach your house, you see a distant figure walking towards you. Recognising who it is, you form the belief that your father has come to meet you. By what method did you arrive at this belief?

On one level, the method that you used was sense-perception. On another level, the method used was sight. On yet another, it was night-vision, or night-vision at a distance. Factor in your use of memory, and it is clear that there are many different ways of labelling the process by which you arrived at your belief.

It may well be, though, that some of these methods are reliable but that others are not. Perhaps night-vision is reliable, but not at a distance; perhaps vision is reliable, but our sense in general lead us astray. There are only arbitrary answers, then, to the question as to whether the method that you used to form the belief is reliable, and so reliabilism cannot provide a definitive answer to the question as to whether or not your belief is justified.

From www.theoryofknowledge.info/justification.html

Reading:

After this exercise, you should read Chp 3 of your TB, especially pages 71-82.