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Science

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Agrippa’s Trilemma gives us the three possibilities when trying to justify a belief. The first is that our beliefs are unsupported; the second that there is an infinite chain of justification; the third being that there is a circular chain of justification. One theory that tries to deal with this is foundationalism, which suggests the first option of Agrippa’s Trilemma is true. Throughout this essay I will argue why although one of the more popular theories, it still has its flaws.

Foundationalism suggests that the first option of Agrippa’s Trilemma- that there are beliefs that can be unsupported- is correct for certain ‘ foundational’ beliefs. The epistemic regress argument, as explained well Richard Fumerton, shows how this is likely to be the case. It’s best to explain this with an example. Let’s say, a man comes up to you and tells you it is going to rain tomorrow, and as evidence he says ‘ because the winds are going to change direction’. You ask him why he thinks this, and he says he just ‘ has a feeling’.

Naturally you take this as nonsense, a poor justification for his claim, and don’t believe him. This shows us then that to be justified in believing something, P, because of E, you must be justified in believing E. However, let’s say his justification for believing E- that the winds were changing bringing rain- was that he saw it in a gypsy’s crystal ball. Though he may think this is a good justification because he believes in that sort of thing, you are sceptical and again dismiss his claim.

This brings us to expand our first principle to what is known as the Principle of Inferential Justification (PIJ): ‘ To have justification for believing P on the

basis of E one must not only have (1) justification for believing E, but (2) justification for believing that E makes probable P. ’ (Fumerton, 2002) From the PIJ we can easily show how the epistemic regress argument unfolds. Going back to the example, if you were to believe P, there must be another proposition you could legitimately infer it to be true; E1.

But, surely the only way E1 could justify you that P is true is if E1 is itself justified, and if justification is inferential then it would mean E1 would have to be legitimately inferred from another proposition; E2. As you can see this would go on and on infinitely, hence why it’s a ‘ regress’ argument (Fumerton, 2002). The solution would be to reach a proposition that didn’t need any further justification, one that was noninferential- self-justifiable- and so could be a ‘ foundational’ belief.

One foundational belief thought up by Rene Descartes is that he existed, in his famous Cotigo Ergo Sum ‘ I think, therefore I am’ meditation (Descartes, 1641). From being sure of his existence he then tried to build more beliefs, which is how foundationalism works. The idea of his existence is, to him, infallible, and therefore it could theoretically be used as foundation on which to build more beliefs. However, even such foundations such as the existence of one’s self can be called into question. It is believed that truly infallible beliefs are very few, or arguably do not exist at all (Pritchard, 2006, 41).

This is a problem because, even if a truly infallible belief or beliefs can be deduced, they would be too few and too narrow to be able to build a complex series of beliefs on top of. What I mean by this is that the path from basic foundational beliefs to derived beliefs would be very tricky to bridge. Pritchard used the example of believing 2+2= 4 as infallible. How then, he

argued, would he deduce from this belief that he is sitting at his desk? The problem with suggesting the foundational belief must be infallible is that it is too strict. Logical entailment'- where p logically follows a proposition q, therefore p cannot be true without q being true- is a key part of foundationalism, and so foundationalists with the belief that foundational beliefs must be truly infallible have to deal with this problem (Foundationalism, n. d.). In response to this, Pritchard goes on to say you could argue that fallible beliefs perhaps could be used as a foundation. The reasoning for this is because infallible beliefs are too strict so perhaps the only option is to open up to such beliefs.

An example would be sensory beliefs; perhaps these should be accepted as foundational beliefs. However he acknowledges that this does create another problem: that you would have to argue why you think these deserve to be foundational beliefs. Surely though, sensory beliefs such as ' there is a book on my desk because ' I can see it' have some doubt, and still require justification of their own? The doubt I am referring to is you could, however unlikely, be hallucinating the book and therefore are not fully justified in believing it is there.

Your senses cannot be fully trusted. You would have to then justify, surely, ' how do you know your eyes are seeing a book and your brain isn't just hallucinating', and by doing this you are proving that sensory beliefs are not fully grounded foundational beliefs. This argument is similar to the ' evil demon argument' and dream argument', as they also dismiss sensory beliefs as foundational (Descartes, 1641). This shows that fallible beliefs also have

their problems. Some argue that these non-inferential justified beliefs simply don’t exist.

Let’s say that statement P is claimed to be a non-inferential justified belief. For subject S to be justified in believing P is true, he must have a reason. He must also therefore have a belief in which gives him this reason to justify his believing in P. But how can this be, that S relies on another belief? By being inferentially justified, it has just contradicted itself (Pojman, n. d). However a counter for this by some foundationalists would simply be that there needn’t be a reason for believing P but P itself, as is the definition of a ‘ self-justifiable’ belief.

So, I believethe argument for foundationalism is a good one because as finite beings we cannot deal with an infinite chain of justifications. There must be a bottom, such as Descartes foundational belief. I cannot, however, ignore the arguments against foundationalism. Fallible beliefs should be dismissed as they are flawed from the start, because claiming a belief that can be doubted as fully-grounded is doomed to fail from the start. The problem of moving basic beliefs on to more complex derived beliefs is harder to counter, but I’d still say that infallible foundational beliefs are still the strongest argument for foundationalism.

Perhaps it is just that no philosopher has yet discovered undeniable non-inferrential foundational beliefs so far. Word count – 1140 Bibliography Descartes, R (1641) ‘ Meditations on FirstPhilosophy’, in John Cottingham (ed) ‘ Meditations on First Philosophy: Cambridge University Press, 13-15, 17 Fumerton, R. (2002) ‘ Conditions and Analyses of Knowing’, in Moser, P. (ed.) The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology Oxford: OUP, 204-33.

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