

BonJour on Foundationalism

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Both the 'coherentist' and the 'foundationalist' theories of the justification of our claims to empirical knowledge are subject to considerable difficulty, as Laurence Bonjour admirably brings out in his book *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*.¹ (Coherentism is the view that justification of a proposition is always and exclusively a matter of its coherence with a whole system of propositions; foundationalism, that it is at least sometimes also a matter of its having foundations in things which are not propositions, typically a range of sense-impressions or observations of physical objects.) Bonjour argues, however, that while the difficulties encountered by the foundationalist view are insuperable, a version of the coherentist position can be salvaged by considerations which render it proof against the usual objections. I myself maintain exactly the opposite view, which I shall try to defend in what follows.²

If every empirical belief requires justification by another empirical belief, we seem to be faced with either a vicious circle or an infinite regress; and the sceptical conclusion appears to follow, that there is no reason to think that any empirical belief is true. The foundationalist tries to stop the regress by maintaining that some empirical beliefs are justified in a way that does not depend on inference from other such beliefs.³ One influential way of doing this (and the one which I shall try to defend) is to maintain that while indeed all empirical *beliefs* have to be justified, in the case of some of these beliefs, the justification consists of reference to mental states other than beliefs which do not themselves have to be justified; these are described in various ways by various authors, but are usually said to be 'given', 'represented', or something equivalent.⁴ To this there is, on Bonjour's view, one basic and decisive objection. If these allegedly given states are themselves cognitive, then they will be able to supply justification for other cognitive states, but will be in need of such justification themselves. But if they are not cognitive, while they may not be *in need of* such justification, they will certainly be incapable of *supplying* it.⁵ 'It is clear on reflection that it is one and the same feature of a cognitive state, namely, its assertive or at least representative content, which both enables it to confer justification on other states and also creates the need for it to be itself justified—thus making it impossible to separate these two aspects.'⁶ The reply which some have made to this objection, that apprehension of the given is a kind of *quasi-cognitive* or *semi-judgmental* state, able to *confer* justification while not *requiring* it, seems 'hopelessly contrived and *ad hoc*.'⁷ Thus appeal to the given appears in the last analysis inevitably to collapse.⁸

The basic problem for the foundationalist 'amounts to a dilemma: if

there is no justification, basic beliefs' (i.e., beliefs which are not justified by reference to other beliefs) 'are rendered epistemically arbitrary, thereby fatally impugning the very claim of foundationalism to constitute a theory of epistemic justification, while a justification which appeals to further premises of some sort threatens to begin anew the regress of justification which it is the whole point of foundationalism to avoid.'⁹ The solution which I propose to the dilemma is as follows. The justification of empirical beliefs is of two kinds: that on the basis of *other beliefs*, and that on the basis of *experience*. Let us distinguish these respectively as justification₁ and justification₂. Experience characteristically *causes* belief, but it may also in a sense *justify*₂ it. For example, my present belief that my grey overcoat is hanging now in a corner of the room in which I am working is caused by the fact that, about a minute before composing the first draft of this sentence, I raised my eyes and had a visual impression as though of my grey coat in that state and position. But the visual impression is not only a cause of the belief, it is also a justification; in that in asking whether my belief about the present whereabouts of my grey coat is true, I can properly appeal to the sense-experience which I enjoyed at that time as tending to show that it is. Certainly, it is conceivable that there should be some other explanation of why I had the experience that I did; my visual cortex might have been electrically stimulated accordingly, or I might have been under the influence of alcohol or drugs. But a rapid survey of the memories of my recent past confirms that these possibilities are far less likely. My coat's being where it appeared to me to be seems far the best available explanation of the visual appearance to me a few minutes ago of my coat being there; and it can be corroborated at any moment by another glance in the appropriate direction.

Are sense-experiences themselves beliefs? If not, what cognitive status do they have, and how are they related to beliefs? I maintain that sense-experiences characteristically give rise to, and provide *prima facie* justification₂ for, beliefs about material objects. (Here the view of C.I. Lewis and many others appears to me to be right, that sense-experiences as such form the ultimate basis, or more strictly a part of the ultimate basis,¹⁰ for our empirical beliefs; against Anthony Quinton's opinion, that it is perceptions of material objects and events in one's immediate environment which are in this way basic.) To raise experiences as such in one's present or (usually immediate) past to the level of explicit judgment or 'belief' requires a particular kind of attention. I have to concentrate in order to arrive at such a judgment as the following: 'My visual field at the moment has a thin cylinder of pure white near its centre. A rectangular patch of less pure white, covered with pale blue lines, provides the immediate background for this; and two rather knobby lumps of greyish-pink are at the bottom left- and right-hand corners.' In fact, such registers of present experience, while it is not perhaps strange to call them 'judgments', are at best limiting cases of 'belief'; one does not know whether this is the correct term to apply to them. Perhaps 'quasi-' or 'semi-beliefs' is just what they should be called; yet it would be wrong to denigrate them in BonJour's manner, as *ad hoc*

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inventions, as it is so obviously possible to produce instances of them at a moment's notice.

I conclude that BonJour's dilemma is a false one, due to the assimilation of justification₂ to justification₁, and the corresponding assumption that sense-experiences must either themselves amount to fully-fledged beliefs, or fail to provide any sort of justification at all for beliefs about immediately observable objects and other empirical beliefs. Why should philosophers be tempted to make this assimilation? One reason appears to me to be this. On occasions of ambiguity or doubt (Just what place have I arrived at? Which of two possible persons is this?), I may substitute justification₁ for justification₂, by replacing my experiences, present and remembered, with explicit 'beliefs'; or suggesting that someone else does do, by saying something like 'Now what, exactly, *did* you see or hear?' But, in the final analysis, such 'beliefs' are subject only to justification₂, by reference to sense-experience ('Well, I do assure you, I had a clear impression for a couple of seconds as of a bright green light shining in front of me; though I now agree with you, in the light of my later experience, that no such thing could have been where it appeared to me to be.')

As I have said, our beliefs about material objects seem to depend in this kind of way on sense-experiences, rather than *vice versa*. Admittedly, we could not *talk about* sense-experiences as such unless we could talk about perceivable material objects in the first place. At one time Lewis, as BonJour says, was inclined to say that sense-experiences were ineffable; at others, that they could be referred to by an *ad hoc* modification of ordinary language.¹¹ This change of mind might reasonably give rise to suspicion about sense-experiences and their role in the acquisition of knowledge, if it were not for the fact that this account of the matter is perfectly satisfactory. I may well say, 'I have a visual experience *as though* there were grey wisps of hair moving about on the surface of the paper before me, though I know that there are not'; or 'There is a sound like an oboe perpetually playing A in my head, though I know perfectly well that no such sound is being made in my vicinity.'

Lewis's account as BonJour sees it is subject to the usual objections which have been made to phenomenalism.¹² Now the claim (a) that *sense-experiences are (a part of) the basis for our knowledge of the world* is one thing; the doctrine (b) that *all that exists in the last analysis is sense-experiences, and mind and bodies are just convenient ways of referring to clusters of these*, is another. The latter doctrine is certainly open to the standard objections; but I do not see why the former should be so. The alleged deficiencies in (a) seem due only to the mistaken belief that it leads to (b), and it is (b) which is phenomenalism in the strict sense. In accordance with (a), real physical objects are what we come to know about by *inquiry into* our sense-experiences, and their being as they are is the best way of *accounting for* the sense-experiences which we have; but this by no means implies that the objects have no existence prior to or independently of our

sense-experiences, as is implied by phenomenalism properly speaking.

BonJour very usefully sets out what he calls 'the basic anti-foundationalist argument' in five propositions, one of which he says, in my opinion quite correctly, that the foundationalists must contest. If my argument so far has been correct, the proposition which they can contest, or rather relevantly qualify, is number 4, which runs as follows: 'The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason (one which will epistemically justify an empirical belief) is to believe *with justification*¹³ the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.'¹⁴

The trouble here is with the ambiguity of the term 'justification'. Empirical beliefs are characteristically justified₂ by experiences, which are themselves not attended to in such a way as to be the object of explicit 'beliefs' such as would qualify strictly speaking as premises; when the experiences are not thus attended to, the beliefs to which they give rise are justified₂ but not justified₁. All empirical beliefs require justification; but this can₂ either be justification₁ or justification₂. Ordinary empirical beliefs are susceptible to both types₁ of justification; however, some 'beliefs' are subject only to justification₂, which is in terms of experiences such as cannot and need not receive any justification₂ in their turn. So the revised form of proposition 4 should run: 'The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason (one which will epistemically justify an empirical belief) is to believe with justification₁ or justification₂ the premises, or to enjoy or have enjoyed the experiences₁, from which it₂ respectively follows by a process of justification₁, or "follows"¹⁵ by a process of justification₂, that the belief is likely to be true.' This is evidently perfectly consistent with foundationalism.

The given is no myth.

As BonJour says, the non-sceptical alternative to foundationalism appears to be coherentism—which is to the effect that at least sometimes justification of a belief merely within a system of other such beliefs is rationally compelling.¹⁶ BonJour frankly and convincingly sets out the difficulties in coherentism. Why does it not suffer from vicious circularity, when it implies that no belief is justifiable otherwise than within a circle of other such beliefs?¹⁷ Cannot there be many coherent systems of belief, incompatible with one another? How can any such system admit input from the nonconceptual world, in such a way as to make it at all likely that it will describe the world correctly? And what is the connection between justification which is internal *to* a set of beliefs and the truth *of* that set of beliefs?¹⁸

How does BonJour counter these difficulties? Quite in the manner of the foundationalist, he does so by appeal to a special class of beliefs which have to be part of any coherent system of beliefs claiming to represent the real world; he calls the members of this class 'cognitively spontaneous beliefs'. In spite of the inadequacies of foundationalism, he says, it does seem to be a reasonable requirement for a coherent set of beliefs that, if it is likely to be true, it must have accommodated sustained observational input. And the more stable and coherent a system of beliefs is, and the greater the

time over which it has met this 'observational requirement', the more it is likely to correspond to reality, and therefore to be true. This is, basically, because such stable coherence in the face of such an observational requirement needs some kind of *explanation*, and the most satisfactory explanation of the existence of a system of belief thus characterised is that it fits the facts of the world.¹⁹ How is this 'sustained observational input' to be characterised, if one is not to fall back on foundationalism after all? We find that we acquire a number of 'cognitively spontaneous beliefs', that is, beliefs which are not derived from the system of beliefs of which we are already in possession. While the acceptance of these beliefs is 'mandated from within the system', their cognitive content 'is not derived inferentially from other beliefs in the system.'²⁰ So the input which is admittedly required, if an internally consistent set of beliefs is to claim with good reason to represent the truth about the world, is secured.

Such appeal to cognitively spontaneous beliefs may sound at first hearing to amount to a kind of weak foundationalism, such that every cognitively spontaneous belief has 'some degree of initial credibility', even if a minimal one.²¹ But this last requirement is unnecessary: 'so long as apparently cognitively spontaneous beliefs are genuinely independent of each other, their agreement will eventually generate credibility, without the need for any initial degree of warrant.'²²

My own principal objection to BonJour's version of coherentism is that it misrepresents what appear to be obvious facts about the relation of belief and knowledge to experience. It is difficult to believe without compelling reason that what is at once the common-sense assumption, and the view of so many philosophers, is totally erroneous: namely, that beliefs are apt to be founded in experience, and that true beliefs are apt to be more fully founded on experience than false ones. BonJour's way of speaking of 'cognitively spontaneous beliefs', without reference to experience, does not seem to take into account what appears to be itself a matter of common experience, and is surely of the essence of science. Rather than just suddenly acquiring an empirical belief, we may hesitate over a possibility, once it has occurred to us, and inquire how far it is corroborated or falsified by experience. It is surely more artificial to say of experimental scientists, that they put themselves in positions to acquire '*cognitively spontaneous beliefs* relevant to whatever hypotheses they are testing, than that they put themselves in positions to undergo the relevant *experience*. To express all observations in terms of 'cognitively spontaneous beliefs', rather than of experience, would no doubt be possible in principle; but it would smack excessively of epicycles. And why get entangled in such complications, when a comparatively simple account can be given of the justification of empirical beliefs at the bar of experience, as I have argued that it can?

Not that BonJour's version of coherentism does not have a sort of plausibility about it, at one level. As a matter of fact, some coherence of a common-sense kind is usually necessary for sense-impressions to give rise to belief in the matters of fact which correspond to them. Suppose I raise my

eyes as I sit writing the first draft of this sentence, and enjoy a vivid visual impression as though of a pink elephant in grey dungarees twenty feet before my eyes. I will be liable to blink, or to change my position and look again, hoping that the apparition will go away. But the more experience provided by my eyes and other senses, combined with the testimony of others, *coheres* to support the view that such a strange state of affairs is indeed the case, the more I will believe, and the more I ought to believe, that it really is the case. To use an argument of a kind often employed by Bonjour—the real existence of such a state of affairs may turn out to be far the most plausible explanation of such varied and coherent experience *as though* of such a state of affairs. (That there is a banana a short distance in front of me is probably, in normal circumstances, the best explanation of a set of visual, tactile, and olfactory sensations *as though* of a banana a short distance in front of me.)

In the course of criticising C.I. Lewis's 'weak foundationalism', Bonjour mentions Lewis's account of memory beliefs as each having 'some antecedent degree of warrant simply by virtue of being' a memory belief; 'this is then amplified by appeal to coherence.'²³ In this respect, Lewis compares the role of memory-beliefs to that of witnesses in court. However, in Bonjour's view, 'what Lewis does not see ... is that his example shows quite convincingly that no antecedent degree of warrant or credibility is required.'²⁴ This seems to me wrong; to be prepared to believe many witnesses whose reports are coherent with one another, is surely *ipso facto* to give some degree of warrant, however small, to each witness taken separately. If witnesses are sufficiently disreputable, one gives and ought to give them little credence; but it surely misrepresents the situation to say one gives them individually no credence at all, if one is prepared to take seriously their interlocking testimony.

Another kind of objection to Bonjour's version of coherentism has been provided by Paul K. Moser.²⁵ Bonjour himself raises the problem of how the fact that a belief coheres or does not cohere with his previously accepted system of beliefs is accessible to the believer himself.²⁶ For this to be possible, 'he must somehow have an adequate grasp of his total system of beliefs'²⁷ Such a set of meta-beliefs would appear to give rise to the problem of justification all over again. To meet the problem, Bonjour appeals to what he calls the Doxastic Presumption, which is to the effect that 'my representation of my overall system of beliefs is approximately correct.'²⁸ This cannot function as a belief, if it is to meet the problem which it is designed to solve; one should rather describe it as 'a basic and unavoidable feature of cognitive *practice*.'²⁹

To protest that the Doxastic Presumption does not have the status of a belief appears to me both implausible and extremely *ad hoc*. Moser sets out the following dilemma. If the required access to one's system of beliefs, admitted by Bonjour, is itself a kind of belief, either it requires justification or it does not. If it does not require justification, then 'Bonjour's coherentism loses its main motivation as an alternative to foundationalism.'

But if it *does* require such justification, then we seem to be confronted once again with the problem of infinite regress.³⁰

It may be noted that the vogue of anti-foundationalism in philosophy has been welcomed by some religious believers; I suspect largely for the following reason. The last type of foundationalism popular among philosophers was that radical form of empiricism known as logical positivism, which notoriously had consequences which were atheistic and anti-religious. But it is plain that if all forms of foundationalism are equally objectionable, atheism cannot be promoted on foundationalist grounds. This has been argued by the Christian philosophers Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff.³¹ However, as Anthony Kenny has pointed out,³² if Christianity is to be commended as neither having nor needing foundations, it is not clear why the same courtesy should not be extended to any cognitive absurdity or moral monstrosity whatever. I myself have tried to show at some length how theism and Christianity might be argued for on a foundationalist basis.³³

- 1 Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- 2 BonJour's coherentist stance has also been attacked by Paul K. Moser, 'Internalism and Coherentism: A Dilemma,' and 'How Not to be a Coherentist' (*Analysis*, October 1988).
- 3 BonJour, op. cit., xi.
- 4 33.
- 5 69, 72, 75.
- 6 78.
- 7 77.
- 8 75, 79.
- 9 58.
- 10 One needs in addition some justification of the assumption that our experiences can provide us with evidence for states of affairs which obtain prior to and independently of those experiences. I have tried to provide such justification in 'Scepticism Revisited' (*Philosophy*, October 1984). For discussion of Lewis and Quinton, cf. BonJour, op. cit., 65–79.
- 11 BonJour, op. cit., 73–4.
- 12 73.
- 13 BonJour's italics; but it would have suited my book to add them had they not been original.
- 14 32.
- 15 'Follows' in the sense that, in the example which I discussed, it 'followed' from my visual experiences *as though of* my grey overcoat hanging on the wall of my room in a certain position, that it probably really *was* hanging there.
- 16 xii.
- 17 Loc. cit.
- 18 25.
- 19 170–171.
- 20 139–40.
- 21 143.
- 22 148.
- 23 147.
- 24 148.
- 25 'How Not to be a Coherentist'.
- 26 BonJour, 101.

- 27 102.
28 'Approximately' stands in italics in the original; but this is not relevant to the present
argument.
29 104
30 'How Not to be a Coherentist', 166.
31 Cf. A. Plantinga, 'Rationality and Religious Belief', in S.M. Cahn and D. Shatz (eds),
Contemporary Philosophy of Religion (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press,
1982); N. Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, 1984).
32 Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York and Guildford: Columbia University
Press, 1983), 16.
33 Cf. Hugo Meynell, *The Intelligible Universe* (London: Macmillan, 1982); 'Faith,
Objectivity, and Historical Falsifiability' (in B. Davies, ed., *Language, Meaning and
God*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987). It may be noted that this issue of foundations
of faith has been one that has traditionally divided Roman Catholics and classical
Protestants.

Sunlight Against Gray Sky

*Charlesbank Road, Boston:
Morning, February 29, 1984*

by Arthur Powers

The Charles River: gun metal gray
under a western sky that is storm
ridden the tattered, war-torn color
of a Confederate uniform.

The sun is to the east. Sun petals play
along gray water and gray green grass
lighting gun metal with the palor
of an old mourning that will not pass.

See how the sun etches the tombed
arches of Harvard bridge, and cups
the mausoleumed old college domes
in light as pale as the cheeks of boys
gone soldiering. Watch! The trees lift up
white skeleton arms in frenzied joy!