

A Defense of Modest Foundationalism

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Modest Foundationalism, like other evidentialist, epistemological theories, requires justification in determining the validity of one's belief in a certain proposition. In fact, this theory is completely centered on justification, and whether or not one is justified in believing a proposition. There are three general principles that make up the theory of Modest Foundationalism. The first one (MF1) states that basic beliefs are spontaneously formed beliefs. Most likely, beliefs about the external world, i.e. from experiences via one's sensory perceptions, and beliefs about mental states can be considered justified and basic. The second principle (MF2)¹ states that a spontaneously formed belief is justified provided it is a proper response to experiences and it is not defeated by other evidence the believer has. The last principle of the theory (MF3) says that nonbasic beliefs are justified when they are supported by strong inductive inferences - including enumerative induction and inference to the best explanation - from justified basic beliefs.² This specific theory of foundationalism was a response to the objections to Cartesian Foundationalism, which, for example, proposed that one cannot be fallible about their own mental states, thus one's justified basic beliefs - one's beliefs about our own states of mind - are supposedly beliefs by which one cannot be mistaken. This is indubitably false, since it's practically common sense that one can be mistaken about a process that is going on within their mind. Another objection to Cartesian Foundationalism for which is accounted in Modest Foundationalism is one of the main principles of the theory: Ordinary perceptual beliefs about the external world *can* be justified basic beliefs. The perception of a certain event is enough for

¹ Edit of original premise outlined on page 74 of below source due to an objection concerning the premise not explaining what proper responses to an experience are.

² Feldman, Richard. *Epistemology* (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2003), 75.

one to spontaneously form a belief about a relative proposition, and having to describe that the reason behind forming said belief is more or less equivalent to simply proclaiming that one believes it. One more problem with Cartesian Foundationalism that Modest Foundationalism explains is inferential justification; non-basic beliefs can be justified even if they can't be deduced from basic ones. Just for the sake of giving a definition of "inferential justification," an example of a theory of inferential justification is Richard Fumerton's proposal, which has since been deemed the "Principle of Inferential Justification (PIJ)."³ The principle states that in order for a subject to be justified in believing a proposition on the basis of another proposition, one must be (1) justified in believing the other proposition and (2) justified in believing that the other proposition makes probable the original proposition.⁴

An example that can be applied to Modest Foundationalism is as follows: suppose there is a man A, who has great vision and other sensory abilities, who is walking down a street. In the distance, he sees another man B running out of a house with some objects, and as he is running away he maintains a panicked look on his face. Additionally, when A walks by the house in question, he sees a window that has a gigantic hole with glass shards everywhere. With the evidence set E, which is made up of the justified basic beliefs formed through visually perceiving the broken window and the perceived, frantic fleeing of B holding the objects, A forms the justified belief Q that B had broken into that house due to his perceptual obtainment of E. By applying inferential justification, A then forms the justified non-basic belief P that B had stolen those objects from that house, P being justified due to it arising from inference to the best

³ As previously stated, explaining this theory of inferential justification is just to outline the general idea. I will not be actually applying this to the theory.

⁴ Rhoda, Alan R. 2008. "Fumerton's Principle of Inferential Justification, Skepticism, and the Nature of Inference." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 33 (2008): 215-234.

explanation through justified non-basic belief Q. So, because of A's visual perception of events making up evidence set E, A can justifiably believe Q, and through Q, A can justifiably infer P.

The theory of Modest Foundationalism is a very strong theory of evidential justification and is able to explain and account for aspects with which other evidentialist theories have problems. For starters, the theory more accurately depicts sensory perception as applied to forming beliefs with more solidarity. In fact, it is practically the only evidentialist theory of justification that considers perceptually obtained beliefs except for Cartesian Foundationalism. Regarding other, non-related theories, they only consider previously known evidence in supporting beliefs without touching on perceptions and the senses. It seems as if many other theories of justification would be a lot stronger and more difficult to refute had they taken into account evidence based off of sensory perception, or had mention of sensory perception as being justifiable evidence.⁵ A notable theory/principle of justification that would have benefitted from mentioning sensory perception and its role in the formulation of beliefs in the first place is the belief justification principle (BJ) of Evidentialism, which states that a subject S's belief that proposition P at time T is justified if and only if (i) believing P is justified for S at T and (ii) S believes P on the basis of evidence that supports P. In the Movie Times example, an objection to BJ, a man F and his wife are going to the movies to see a particular movie A. F, having access to today's newspaper, visually perceived that F's showing time was at 8:00 in yesterday's paper. Considering the fact that movies *more often than not* show at the same time each day, F did not look in today's paper to see the showing time of A. However, upon arrival to the movies, F saw A's showing time was actually at 7:30.⁶ This is supposed to be a problem for BJ, since F had

⁵ BJ fails to emphasize this, which is why it is discussed as having this obvious flaw.

⁶ Feldman, 46-47.

access to more evidence that could have refuted his claim. The problems I have with this lie in the fact that from his experiences, he has a justified belief that the movie would start at the time that he visually perceived to be the time. If his experiences with going to the movies resulted in a particular movie *usually* showing at the same time, then he was perfectly justified in believing that the time that he visually perceived in yesterday's paper was indeed the time it was going to be played today. In fact, PIJ could be applied to this example; had BJ accounted for perception and inferential justification, then F's inferred belief that A would be shown at 8:00 due to his previous experience with movies *more often than not* being played at the same times each day would undoubtedly be justified. However, that is where a problem lies with BJ; it does not emphasize what the evidence could be to form the basis in supporting a proposition. This vagueness remains a severely easy target for the BJ principle of justification, but the objection presented above to BJ could be refuted by evidentialists if evidentialism involved defining what evidence could be utilized. It is with this principle that multiple subsequent philosophers derive their beliefs. However, due to its obvious shortcomings, more emphasized versions of it had to be proposed in order to account for said shortcomings, which can be seen in evidentialist theories that have arisen since the formulation of the principle, including Modest Foundationalism.

A competing evidential theory of justification to Modest Foundationalism is Coherentism which, in an updated version (CT3), states that a subject S is justified in believing proposition P if and only if the coherence value of S's system of beliefs would be greater if it included a belief in P than it would be if it did not include that belief.⁷ A very compelling objection to this version of Coherentism is what is known as The Isolation Objection. The general premise of this

⁷ Ibid., 65.

objection is that, since Coherentism is only concerned with the manner in which a belief coheres with the already developed system of beliefs, it completely disregards one's experiences, which seem absolutely central to the formulation of beliefs. This can be shown in The Psychology Experiment example. In the example, two subjects L and R, who are very similar people, with all the same relevant background beliefs, are told that they will be shown two lines on a monitor and they are to form a belief about which is longer. Additionally, they are both led to believe that the one on the right will be longer. The lines then appear on the monitor and both of them believe that the one on the right is longer. However, for L, the one on the left appears to be longer, and it looks that way. L simply ignores the character of his experience and forms his belief entirely on the basis of what he was led to believe.⁸ Coherentism implies that L is completely justified in believing that the line on the right is longer because that belief is supported by his previous beliefs and he has no other beliefs that defeat it. This implication, however, is entirely incorrect; L *does* have experiential evidence that counts against this belief, yet Coherentism totally ignores this evidence. It says that solely what L believes matters, when in reality that is not so. In Modest Foundationalism, basic beliefs must be properly connected to experiences, thus The Isolation Objection that undermines coherentism is avoided. By applying Modest Foundationalism to The Psychology Experiment example, it would be concluded that L is definitely *not* justified in believing that the right line is longer. Since the theory takes experiential evidence into account, L's belief that the left line is longer is false, yet it is a proper response to their experience. Ultimately, L's perception of the left line being longer would

⁸ Ibid., 69.

defeat his belief that the right line is longer, thus making the belief unjustified. So, luckily for modest foundationalism, The Isolation Objection is not an issue.

Like any philosophical theory, there are those that will try to find flaws in an attempt to object to the claims being made by said theory, leading proponents of the theory to either defend the objections or edit the theory in order to solidify it. Modest Foundationalism definitely has its opponents, one of them being Laurence BonJour. A coherentist, he objected to the very idea that justified basic beliefs even exist. His argument against these certain types of beliefs can be outlined as follows:

- 1.) Belief B has feature Φ .
- 2.) Beliefs having feature Φ are highly likely to be true.
- 3.) Therefore, B is highly likely to be true.⁹

This argument that one must have for an allegedly basic belief can be called a “Truth Indicative Feature” (TIF) for that belief. An example of a TIF being applied can be when someone visually perceives a car, and thus forms the belief B that they see a car. According to BonJour’s thinking, the person would only be justified in believing their belief if they had a TIF argument for it. In this case, the belief that this person formulated would only be justified if they usually get things right in regards to visually perceiving objects. Bonjour proposed an argument against foundationalism by utilizing said TIF argument:

⁹ BonJour, Laurence. *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 30-31.

1. For any proposition P that S believes, either S has a TIF argument for it or S doesn't.
 2. If S has a TIF argument for it, then S's belief in P is supported by that argument and is not a justified basic belief.
 3. If S does not have a TIF argument for it, then S's belief in P is not justified and thus is not a justified basic belief.
- C. Therefore, S's belief in P is not a justified basic belief.¹⁰

This argument is compelling, however, it is much too redundant. The simple act of experiencing an event is all the justification needed in order to form a justified basic belief; a TIF argument is simply overjustification of a feature that is much too irrelevant to mention, i.e., the irrelevance lies in the very implication of Bonjour's argument that one must justifiably believe that they are justified in believing their belief. When someone experiences something, you do not need to know that said experiences are good reasons for beliefs or even know that your belief is justified; if it were necessary to do so, then one's justification for seeing a car would be that they are currently experiencing a visual perception of a car, which ultimately seems as if the justification for seeing the car would be that they are seeing a car, which is simply redundant. You can, though, know, and be justified in believing the belief due to the experience. So, (3) of Bonjour's argument is mistaken; since an experience can directly justify a belief without needing a TIF argument. Also, even if the person does have the TIF argument for it, the belief may also be

¹⁰ Feldman, 76.

completely justified directly by experience and still maintain being a justified basic belief. So, (2) of BonJour's argument is also mistaken.

The above objection failed, but there is another objection to the core of foundationalism that can be interpreted better as a request of clarification rather than an objection. Those opposing modest foundationalism would say that although there is definitely merit when stating that certain beliefs are properly based on experience and others are not, it would be good to have a more systematic and general understanding of just why things work out the way modest foundationalists say they do.¹¹ An example of this is that, while visually perceiving a laptop, the belief that one sees a laptop would be properly based off of experience, while the belief that one is seeing a four-year-old laptop would not be. Opponents to the theory request modest foundationalists to formulate a reply concerning the difference between these cases, since, in the case of the four-year-old laptop, one who says that they believe they see a four-year-old laptop would not be justified in believing that since it was not based off of a proper response to the experience in question. A response to this could be that visually perceiving the laptop and believing that it is simply a laptop would indubitably pass as a belief properly based on experience, whereas stating the belief that the laptop is four-years-old would be a belief due to a perceptual experience *and* previous experiences with the laptop in a manner which would enable the person to determine the age of it. Another response to this request could be the principle of seemings, which could be generally put as a belief obtained through how something seemed (e.g. visually perceived). A view of epistemic justification derived from seemings, *Phonomenal Conservatism (PC)*, states that subject S is justified in believing proposition P if it seems to S

¹¹ Ibid., 77.

that P is true and S has no evidence that would defeat S's belief in P.¹² This applies to practically every type of belief, but especially to those formed by visual perception. If S visually perceives P and there is no evidence that would make S unjustified in believing P, then S is justified in believing P. This response to objections to Modest Foundationalism is persuasive considering it takes into account what would be considered proper responses to experiences. For a belief to be justified by way of "seeming," the experiences (which would be the seemings) used in forming a belief would have to be the result of a proper response to said experiences. This proper response would necessarily have to be that of the same content ("P") of the seeming (e.g. It seems that I am visually perceiving a car; so therefore, I see a car, with the conclusion being the proper response to the proposition being the seeming). Because of the principle's nature of allowing for justified basic beliefs as a result of proper responses to experiences, it definitely works as an incredible response to objections previously discussed.

Considering the fact that Modest Foundationalism allows for inductive justification, it would only make sense to mention an objection to the justification of inductive reasoning. A philosopher by the name of David Hume was extremely skeptical about the reasonability of inductive inferences. He viewed induction as relying on a particular principle (PF) which states that the future will be like the past or, more precisely, if x percent of the observed A's have been B's, then X percent of the unobserved A's are B's.¹³ With this, Hume concocted an argument against inductive reasoning which goes as such:

1. If (PF) can be justified at all, then it can be justified either by pure reason, or by an inference from observed facts.

¹² Cullison, Andrew. 2010. "What Are Seemings?" *Ratio* 23 (2010): 260-274.

¹³ Feldman, 133.

2. (PF) cannot be justified by pure reason, since (PF) is not a necessary truth (i.e., it is not always the case that X percent of all A's will be B's).
3. (PF) cannot be justified by an inference from observed facts, since any attempt to infer (PF) from observed facts would *assume* the truth of (PF) (i.e., it is observed that (PF) is true, then that judgement would be reliant on the fact that one has observed that the future will be like the past, which is what (PF) states).
4. Therefore, (PF) cannot be justified.

Philosophers have taken this argument into consideration ever since its initial concoction.

Because of this, there have been a few very compelling responses to Hume's argument. One of these responses is simply a denial of the truth behind (PF), and the objection to this principle being the principle on which induction relies. The principle with which modest foundationalists reply (PFR) states that knowing that things have been a certain way in the past gives you a good reason to believe that they will be that way in the future.¹⁴ With this principle comes what has been known as the *A Priori* Defense of Induction. This response admits that Hume's argument may be sound, but the fact of the matter is that it completely misses the point of what induction truly relies on. Induction actually does *not* rely on (PF); rather, it relies on something resembling (PFR), which, unlike (PF), *is* a necessary truth that can be justified by pure reason (*a priori*). So, since induction relies on observing similarities with the future compared to the past, it is justified to base beliefs off of said prior observations if it is mostly true that the relative situation in the future can be accurately shown to have been the case in the past.

¹⁴ Ibid, 137.

Modest Foundationalism is quite a strong theory of epistemic justification. Since it derived its theory on the basis of strengthening previously made claims, evidentialist claims of spontaneity of belief formation due to sensory perceptions is even stronger than it previously was in other evidentialist theories. Due to the theory of modest foundationalism, there can be a lot more about one's beliefs that can be explained regarding the nature of beliefs, the nature of inference, the nature of justification, and how these three concepts can coincide and work together to form separate, induced, perfectly justified beliefs.