

What is Epistemology?
and
The Nature of Justification

Phil 20009: Epistemology

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What is Epistemology?

- One of the core areas of Philosophy
- A.K.A. Theory of Knowledge
- Concerned with nature, sources, and limits of knowledge and justification.
- Primarily concerned with propositional knowledge, i.e. knowledge *that* such-and-such is true. (Compare this to know-how, i.e. knowledge *how* to such-and-such).
- Other related topics:
 - Rationality
 - Evidence

What is Epistemology? (2)

- Some central epistemological questions:
Question: What is Knowledge?
An answer: Knowledge is true beliefs acquired by reliable methods
Question: Are there limits to knowledge?
An answer: Scepticism about unobservables.
Question: What is the nature of justification?
An answer: The nature of justification is foundational.
- Three prominent projects in Epistemology:
 - 1) Giving rules for good believing
 - 2) Defining knowledge
 - 3) Defeating the Sceptic

Justification

- A general rule of good believing:
Only believe X when you have justification for X.
- Indeed the traditional answer to the question
‘When do we know that something is the case?’ is
‘When: (a) we believe it,
(b) it is true and
(c) we are *justified* in believing it’.
- One idea: A belief is *justified* if and only if it is inferred from one or more beliefs which are themselves justified.

Agrippa's Trilemma

1. A belief can only be justified by another belief.
2. A belief can only be a justifier if it is itself justified.
3. If there is a justified belief, it must be supported by a chain of justifiers that EITHER:
 - a. never ends
 - b. ends in a basic or self-justifying belief
 - c. goes in a circle

BUT:

4. a. an infinite chain of beliefs does not justify
- b. there are no basic or self-justifying beliefs
- c. circular chains of beliefs do not justify

THUS:

5. There are no justified beliefs.

Two Answers to the Trilemma

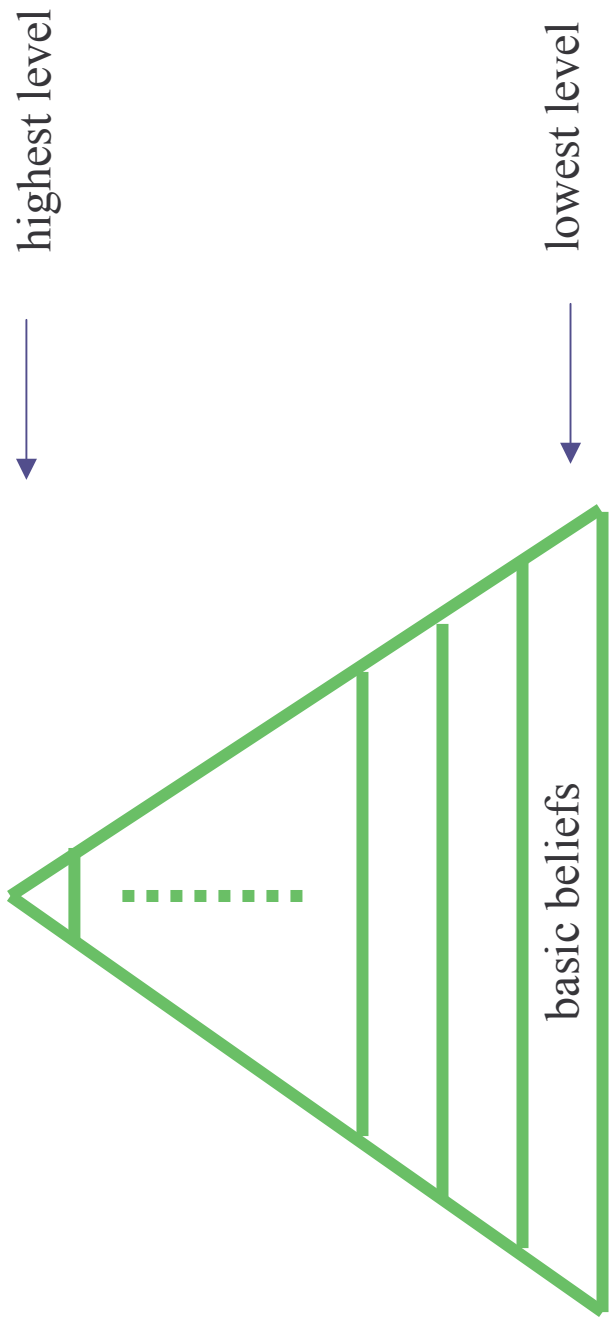
- Two Answers from Two Traditions:
 - Foundationalism
 - Coherentism
- Foundationalism rejects 4b (also rejects 1)
In particular, Foundationalists claim that some beliefs are basic.
- Coherentism rejects 4c
In particular, Coherentists claim that not all circular reasoning is bad; some circular reasoning justifies.
- Let's look at each of these traditions in turn...

Foundationalism

- Foundationalism: A belief is *justified* iff it rests EITHER on basic beliefs OR on beliefs that eventually rest on basic beliefs.
- Basic or ‘foundational’ beliefs are a.k.a. ‘self-justified beliefs’.
- Candidates for foundational beliefs:
 - acquired via sensory organs
 - acquired via pure reasoning
 - acquired via introspection
 - innate
- Two main flavours of Foundationalism:
 - (1) Empiricists
 - (2) Rationalists

Foundationalism (2)

Pyramid Structure



Empiricism

- Main idea: Basic beliefs are *all and only those* acquired via the senses.

As opposed to... beliefs acquired via reasoning, intuition, divine revelation, etc.

- Some Prominent Empiricists:
 - British Empiricists: Locke, Berkeley and Hume.
 - Logical Empiricists: Carnap, Ayer and Hempel.
 - Constructive Empiricists: Van Fraassen *et al.*

Rationalism

- Main idea: Basic beliefs are *all and only those* acquired via pure reasoning.
As opposed to... beliefs acquired via blind faith, guesswork, gullibility, obedience to authority, etc.
- NB: Most Rationalists take a softer approach, namely *at least some* basic beliefs are acquired via pure reasoning.
- Some Prominent Rationalists:
 - Continental: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz.
 - Moderate: Bonjour, Bealer and Audi.

Problems for Foundationalism

- It is contestable whether basic beliefs are rich enough (in content and number) to serve as a foundation.
- NB: The severity of the problem depends on how much can reasonably be included under basic beliefs.
- How do foundational beliefs gain their special epistemic status?
 - Empiricist Reply: By appeal to sensory and introspective experience.

Dilemma:

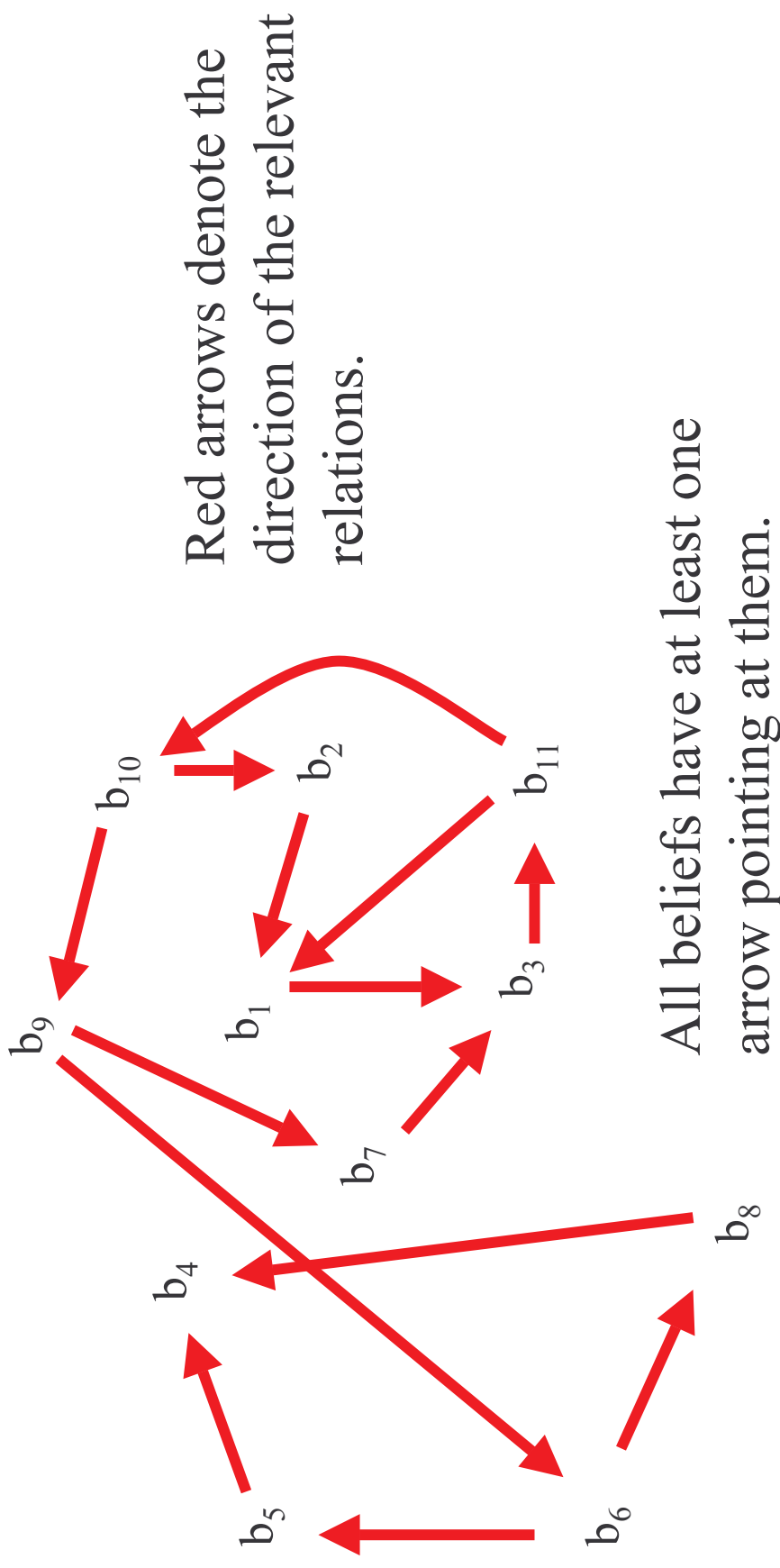
- a) If a special kind of belief justifies foundational beliefs then the latter are no longer basic. Also, what justifies the new beliefs?
- b) If no special kind of belief is involved, how does experience translate into reasons for thinking foundational beliefs true?

Coherentism

- Coherentism: For a belief to be justified it must stand in certain relations to a coherent set of beliefs.
- Coherentism denies the claim that there are basic beliefs.
- On some accounts the unit of justification is the whole system; on others the specific relations between subsets of beliefs.
- Main types of coherence:
 - logical consistency (necessary but not sufficient)
 - other deductive relations
 - explanatory relations
 - evidential relations (inductive, abductive, etc.)
- Some Prominent Coherentists: Bonjour (was), Bosanquet, Quine (of sorts), Davidson.

Coherentism (2)

Web Structure



Problems for Coherentism

- **Desideratum:** Justification must connect to the truth.
Problem: There is no guarantee that a coherent system will contain a single true belief.
- **Desideratum:** Justification takes input from the external world.
Problem: Coherentism makes such input irrelevant.
- **Desideratum:** We want clear answers.
Problem: How can we get such answers, if there are indefinitely many rival sets of belief that are internally coherent?
- **NB:** The concept of coherence is an indispensable ingredient in all foundationalist theories.

Food for Thought

- In what way, if any, could we bridge the gap between Foundationalism and Coherentism?

Reading

- Lawrence Bonjour “The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism” in Greco and Sosa (eds.) *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*.