

# Foundationalism and Coherentism From a Contextualist Point of View

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## 1. Foundationalism

Here is the picture classical foundationalism draws of empirical justification: Our system of beliefs is structured like a pyramid, it consists of a broad foundation of perceptual beliefs, i.e. beliefs reporting the contents of our perceptual states, and a superstructure of worldly beliefs, i.e. beliefs reporting what is going on in the world around us. The beliefs building the foundation, the perceptual beliefs, are to be justified noninferentially, by direct appeal to our perceptual experiences, while the beliefs in the superstructure, beliefs about what is going on in the world around us, are to be justified inferentially, i.e. by appeal to other beliefs. Ultimately, our worldly beliefs thus rest on our perceptual beliefs, which in turn draw upon our perceptual experiences.

Now, according to a widespread view, this picture has two serious downsides: firstly, the objection goes, it is a mystery how perceptual experiences justify perceptual beliefs and, secondly, it is fairly doubtful whether worldly beliefs can validly be inferred from perceptual ones. Thus, Wilfrid Sellars calls the foundationalist picture "The Myth of the Given" (Sellars 1956). But what exactly are the reasons for Sellars' well-known aversion to foundationalism?

According to Sellars, perceptual states cannot justify worldly beliefs for reasons relating to the nature of the contents of perceptual states. Notice that the contents of perceptual states are either conceptual or nonconceptual. No matter what they are, according to Sellars' objection they cannot justify our worldly beliefs. Here is why: Suppose that perceptual content is nonconceptual. In this case the relation between a perceptual state and a belief is obviously not logical or inferential. But if this relation is not logical or inferential, then – the argument goes – it cannot help in justifying a belief. As a consequence, if perceptual states have nonconceptual contents, then – pace the foundationalist – they cannot justify perceptual beliefs.

On the other hand, if the contents of perceptual states are conceptual, then they are fallible, for then they can misrepresent what they are a representation of. But if perceptual states are fallible, then – according to Sellars – they cannot justify our worldly beliefs: they are no secure foundation.<sup>1</sup> Hence, even if we would allow perceptual states to justify perceptual beliefs, it would still be a mystery how perceptual beliefs could justify worldly beliefs. Let me give an example: How could my appeal to my belief that it seems to me as if I have hands justify my belief that I actually do have hands, if, for all I know, I might be a handless brain in a vat? Thus, once we consider sceptical scenarios like the vat-scenario, an inference from perceptual beliefs to worldly beliefs seems out of the question: The foundationalist merely asserts that such inferences can justify worldly beliefs, but they actually cannot.

Let me sum up. According to what I have called the widespread view, even though perceptual experiences *cause* our worldly beliefs, nevertheless they are not apt to

*justify* them.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the foundationalist is taken to be somebody, who gives an adequate description of the actual processes leading to worldly beliefs, while crucially failing in an epistemological respect: She cannot provide an argument to the effect that these processes are trustworthy. In a nutshell: the foundationalist owes us a reason to trust our senses.

## 2. Coherentism

Coherentism is most straightforwardly characterised by its opposition to foundationalism: it dispenses with the notion of justification by appeal to perceptual experience and takes the view that beliefs can be justified only inferentially. As Davidson (1986, 310) puts it, "[w]hat distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief."

How can we put more flesh onto the bones of this general idea? Fine-tuning aside, according to the coherentist, a belief is justified just in case it can be integrated into an appropriately structured, coherent and sufficiently comprehensive system of beliefs. My belief that I have hands, for instance, is justified just because it fits fairly naturally into my present system of beliefs, which is – the coherentist argues – largely coherent and sufficiently comprehensive. No doubt, this idea has some *prima facie* appeal: a belief's cohering with the rest of my beliefs seems to enhance the chances of its being true, and why, then, shouldn't we regard coherence as justificatory? To use Neurath's familiar metaphor, beliefs are justified because they mutually support each other just like the planks of a raft.

Now, there is obviously a great deal to be said about the notions of coherence and comprehensiveness at play here. However, setting fine-tuning aside once again, one of the standard objections to coherentist theories of justification can easily be put like this: Justified beliefs are, by all accounts, not only true by chance. But since at least some beliefs that coherently fit into our belief systems are, if true, true by chance only, coherence doesn't have any interesting relation to epistemic justification.

For an illustration of this argument it is worth reconsidering the possible situation in which I am a brain in a vat, freshly envatted just yesterday. Now, it is fairly obvious that my belief system in that situation is qualitatively identical with my belief system in the actual situation: in both situations do I believe that I've had scrambled eggs for breakfast, that I wanted to become a gym instructor when I was little, that Falco was the greatest pop star ever, etc. But now notice that if those two belief systems are indeed qualitatively identical, then every single belief I could possibly have must cohere with both systems to the very same degree. Thus, since my belief that I have hands coheres pretty well with my actual belief system, it also does so with my belief system in the vat-situation. But this leads to an unpleasant result for the coherentist: she must accept that my belief that I have hands is justified in both

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sosa 1980, 24.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Davidson 1986, 310, McDowell 1994, 7ff. and Rorty 1979, 178.

situations. As a consequence, at least some of my justified beliefs are, if true, true by accident only. Hence, a belief's coherently fitting into a belief system does not at all seem to have the required positive effects on its epistemic status: How can the coherentist affirm that I am justified in believing that I have hands, if, for all I know, I could just as well be a handless brain in vat?

### 3. Contextualism

According to contextualism about 'justification' the situational context determines the strength of the epistemic position a subject has to be in so as to fall into the extension of the predicate ' $\xi$  is justified'.<sup>3</sup> This view is *prima facie* fairly natural, since epistemic standards are quite obviously lower in everyday discourse than they are in scientific contexts, for instance. And this is exactly the contextualist's point: somebody's evidence may be sufficient for being 'justified'<sup>4</sup> in one context, while it may fail to be so in another. Thus, contextualism can point to an apparent analogy between ' $\xi$  is justified' and other gradable expressions like ' $\xi$  is flat' or ' $\xi$  is empty': just like what counts as 'flat' or 'empty' may vary from context to context, so what counts as 'justified' may vary from context to context. Hence, contextualism is the view that contextual factors like the speakers' goals, their intentions, expectations and the overall purpose of their conversation play a crucial role in the evaluation of 'justification'-ascriptions.

Now, how is this theory about the semantics of ' $\xi$  is justified' supposed to help us out of the problems we encountered with regard to coherentism and foundationalism? Let us construe contextualism about 'justification' as follows: Suppose that a subject's belief that  $p$  is 'justified' in a context  $C$  just in case the subject has 'good reasons' for believing that  $p$  in  $C$ . Now, as the adjunct 'in  $C$ ' suggests, what counts as a 'good reason' is itself heavily dependent on context. What is the benefit of this analysis of 'justification' in terms of 'good reasons'? Obviously, once we have accepted such an analysis, we can easily claim that perceptual experiences and coherent integrability into a belief system count as 'good reasons' for worldly beliefs in some contexts, while they fail to do so in others.

Let me give an example. I have perceptual experiences as of myself having hands. In an everyday context these experiences obviously count as 'good reasons' for my belief that I have hands, for they suffice to exclude those alternatives to my having hands that are relevant in everyday contexts: they suffice, for instance, to rule out that my hands were amputated, that I have lost them in a car accident, that I am a Thalidomide victim, etc. However, if you are a good story-teller, then you can easily generate a context in which my perceptual experiences no longer count as 'good reasons' for my belief that I have hands. In particular, if you can tell stories about handless brains in vats as colourful as Daniel Dennett (Dennett 1982) can, then I might pretty soon find myself in a context, in which my perceptual experiences as of myself having hands are not worth a penny with regard to my belief that I have

hands. Thus, the foundationalist's view that experiences can 'justify' worldly beliefs is actually true in a great deal of contexts, even though it fails to be true in contexts with extraordinarily high standards.

What about coherentism? Obviously, the contextualist can say pretty much the same about coherent integrability into belief systems as I have just said about perceptual experience: There are contexts in which the fact that a belief coherently fits into a belief system counts as a 'good reason' for that belief. But again, there are contexts in which this is not so: If you or Dan Dennett tell stories about brains in vats, coherence with my background beliefs will no longer provide 'good reasons' for a pretty large range of my worldly beliefs.

Thus, according to contextualism, the question 'Can perceptual experience or coherent integrability into a belief system justify worldly beliefs?' is meaningful relative to a particular conversational context only. If we do not provide enough information about the beliefs, desires and conversational goals of the participants of some particular conversation, the question will simply fail to express a complete proposition. And how could we epistemologists answer such a question?

Moreover, note that contextualism has a neat explanation of why foundationalism and coherentism seem implausible to many philosophers: The epistemic standards prevalent in the contexts of philosophical discussions are typically exceedingly high. Indeed, they are typically so high that almost nothing counts as a 'good reason' in such a context. As a consequence, it is no wonder that philosophers insensitive to the context-sensitivity of ' $\xi$  is justified' doubt the merits of foundationalism and coherentism. From a contextualist point of view, however, these doubts are not to be taken seriously. Quite to the contrary, once we take into account the context-sensitivity of ' $\xi$  is justified', the problems of coherentism and foundationalism, and also the controversy between these two theories, can easily be resolved.<sup>5</sup>

### References

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<sup>3</sup> See Cohen 1988 for a standard exposition of contextualism.

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of convenience I use scare quotes so as to indicate metalinguistic usage: instead of awkward formulations such as ' $x$  falls into the extension of the predicate ' $\xi$  is justified' in context  $C$ ' or ' $x$  satisfies the predicate ' $\xi$  is justified' in  $C$ ' I simply use expressions such as ' $x$  is justified' in  $C$ .

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Brain Ball for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.