

Lecture 15: Cartesian Foundationalism

I. Introducing Cartesian Foundationalism

We can define foundationalism as follows:

foundationalism:

- a. There are immediately justified beliefs.
- b. All other justified beliefs are justified in virtue of their relation to immediately justified beliefs.

Any particular version of foundationalism should answer three questions:

- What kinds of beliefs can be immediately justified?
- If they are not justified by other beliefs, how can immediately justified beliefs be justified?
- What sort of connection must a mediately justified belief have to immediately justified beliefs in order to be justified?

So-called *Cartesian* (or *classical*, or *strong*) *foundationalism* can be formulated as follows:

Cartesian foundationalism:

- i. *Beliefs about one's own inner state of mind* (e.g. appearance beliefs and beliefs about the having of certain propositional attitudes) and *beliefs about simple necessary truths* (e.g. beliefs about elementary truths of logic and mathematics) can be immediately justified.
- ii. Immediately justified beliefs are justified because we are *infallible* about such matters.
- iii. All other justified beliefs are justified because they can be *deduced* from one's immediately justified beliefs.

(Note: despite its name, it is far from clear that Descartes actually held this view.)

II. Cartesian Foundations

According to Cartesian foundationalists, the following kinds of beliefs can be immediately justified:

- *Appearance beliefs* about what one currently seems to be perceiving and currently seems to be feeling, such as:
 - a belief that *I seem to see a table before me*;
 - a belief that *I seem to hear a loud crash in the distance*;
 - a belief that *I feel cold*;
 - a belief that *I am hungry*;
 - a belief that *I have a dull headache*.
- Beliefs about certain *propositional attitudes* that one currently has, such as:
 - a belief that *I believe that Socrates was mortal*;
 - a belief that *I hope that it won't rain this afternoon*;
 - a belief that *I wonder whether there is a solution to the regress problem*.
- Beliefs about certain *simple necessary truths*, such as:
 - a belief that *if $P \& Q$ is true, then P is true*;
 - a belief that *$2 + 3 = 5$* ;
 - a belief that *if A is taller than B , and B is taller than C , then A is taller than C* .

III. Varieties of Privileged Access

In virtue of what do immediately justified beliefs have the status of being immediately justified?

- *proposal #1*: Immediately justified beliefs are *indubitable* (i.e. they cannot be doubted).
 Proposition P is *indubitable* for subject S iff S is (psychologically) incapable of doubting P.
worry: This sort of psychological fact seems epistemically irrelevant.
- *proposal #2*: Immediately justified beliefs are *self-intimating* (i.e. when they are true, one automatically believes them).
 Proposition P is *self-intimating* for subject S iff whenever P is true, S believes P.
worry: If S also frequently believes P when it is false, it doesn't seem that S is justified in believing P when it is true.
- *proposal #3*: Immediately justified beliefs are *infallible* (i.e. one cannot be mistaken about them).
 Subject S is *infallible* (or *incorrigible*) about proposition P iff whenever S believes P, P is true.
 This seems like a pretty good candidate for a justification-conferring property.

IV. Standard Objections to Cartesian Foundationalism

- *objection #1*: Beliefs about one's inner mental states are uncommon.
 It seems that people rarely (if ever) base their beliefs about the external world on beliefs about their own inner mental states. It follows that, according to Cartesian foundationalism, we rarely (if ever) have justified beliefs about the external world.
reply: We can still count as having appearance beliefs even if we don't consciously entertain the propositions in question.
- *objection #2*: Beliefs about one's inner mental states are not infallible.
 Arguably, the following is an example in which I believe *that I feel something hot* but am wrong:
the initiation trick: As part of an initiation ritual for some secret club, I am blindfolded and told that I will be branded with a red hot poker that I can hear (and smell) being heated for that purpose. When a piece of ice is then pushed into my bare stomach, I scream, for I mistakenly believe myself to be feeling a sensation of intense heat.
one reply: If expectations can affect our beliefs about sensations, then maybe expectations can also affect our sensations themselves, so in this case I temporarily feel a sensation of intense heat.
Feldman's counter-reply: This reply leaves us with no way of explaining what is happening at the moment at which I realize that the thing being pressed into my stomach is not in fact hot.
Jackson's reply: Suppose the only sensation I feel is one of cold. Nonetheless, even though I initially believe *that I'm being touched by a red hot poker* and believe *that red hot poker cause painful sensations of intense heat*, it doesn't follow that I believe *that I am experiencing a painful sensation of intense heat*.
- *objection #3*: Infallibility does not entail being immediately justified.
 Since the proposition *that 1999 is prime* is necessarily true, whenever I believe it, it is true. However, if I believe that 1999 is prime because I think all numbers ending in '9' are prime, it doesn't seem that my belief is immediately justified.
- *objection #4*: Deduction is too restrictive.
reply: Modify (iii) to allow mediately justified beliefs that are based on induction and abduction.