

## Lecture 19: Modest Foundationalism

### I. Modest Foundationalism Explicated

Following Feldman (pp. 71-75), *modest foundationalism* can be formulated as follows:

*modest foundationalism:*

- i. Spontaneously formed beliefs can be immediately justified. Typically, these include *beliefs about the external world* (for example, a belief *that there is a chair to one's right*) and *beliefs about one's own mental states* (for example, a belief *that one has a headache right now*).
- ii. A spontaneously formed belief is immediately justified provided it is a proper response to one's experiences, and provided it is not defeated by other evidence that one has.
- iii. All other justified beliefs are justified because they follow from one's immediately justified beliefs via *deductive inference*, *inductive inference*, or *inference to the best explanation*.

Pryor's way of formulating the central modest foundationalist thesis about perceptual justification:

Whenever you have an experience as of P's being the case, you thereby have immediate *prima facie* justification for believing P.

*Prima facie* justification is justification that can be defeated by other evidence that one possesses. Examples of defeating evidence for your *prima facie* justification in believing P via perception could include:

- Stronger evidence in favor of  $\sim P$ .
- Evidence that P's truth in these circumstances is not ascertainable by perception.
- Evidence that your senses are malfunctioning.
- Evidence that "explains away" its seeming to you as if P is the case.

(Note: modest foundationalists *do not* hold that beliefs formed spontaneously on the basis of perception are *prima facie* justified *because* perceptual experiences tend to be reliable.)

### II. The Virtues of Modest Foundationalism

Among the many advantages of modest foundationalism are the following:

- It provides a plausible and reasonably straightforward reply to the regress argument.
- It seemingly accords with common sense.
- It avoids the "beliefs about one's mental states are rare" objection to Cartesian foundationalism.
- It avoids the "beliefs about one's mental states are not infallible" objection to Cartesian foundationalism.
- It avoids the "deduction is too restrictive" objection to Cartesian foundationalism.

### III. Potential Problems for Modest Foundationalism

- *worry #1*: The central thesis appears to be *ad hoc* and/or not sufficiently explanatory.
- *worry #2*: Which responses to experience are proper, and which are improper? Consider this case:

*Three Men in a Garden*: Three people, conveniently named Expert, Novice, and Ignorant, are standing in a garden looking at a hornbeam tree. They have a clear and unobstructed view of the tree. The visual appearance presented to each is exactly the same. (Ignore the minor

differences due to their slightly different angles of observation.) Expert knows a lot about trees and can easily identify hornbeams immediately. Novice knows a little about trees but is unfamiliar with hornbeams. Ignorant doesn't know anything about trees—in fact, Ignorant doesn't even know which of the things in the garden is a tree and which is a flower.

There seem to be three options for the modest foundationalist, none of them entirely satisfactory:

1. All three people have an experience as of a hornbeam and as of a tree, so all three are immediately justified in believing *that there is a hornbeam over there* and *that there is a tree over there*.
  2. None of them has an experience as of a hornbeam or as of a tree, so any belief that they have *that there is a hornbeam over there* or *that there is a tree over there* is mediately justified.
  3. Expert has an experience as of a hornbeam tree, Novice has an experience as of a tree, and Ignorant has an experience merely as of something partially green and partially brown, so background information and prior experiences can affect what one's experiences are like.
- *worry #3*: Sosa's dilemma ("The Raft and the Pyramid," §10).

Sosa has us imagine a race of extraterrestrial beings with observational mechanisms radically unlike ours, but who also have knowledge of their environment. When one of these beings has a type  $\phi$  experience as of something  $F$ , it typically forms a belief *that something here is  $F$*  in a spontaneous way.

It seems, then, that we have two epistemic principles:

- (P<sub>1</sub>) Whenever a human has a visual experience as of something red, that human thereby has immediate *prima facie* justification to believe *that something here is red*.
- (P<sub>2</sub>) Whenever an alien has a  $\phi$  experience as of something  $F$ , that alien thereby has immediate *prima facie* justification to believe *that something here is  $F$* .

The dilemma for modest foundationalists: are these two epistemic principles *fundamental* or *derivative*?

- *first horn*: They are both fundamental.  
*problem*: We have "a multitude of equally basic principles with no unifying factor" (p. 158).
- *second horn*: They are both derivative.  
*problem*: Then there must be something that unifies our multitude of principles, so modest foundationalism cannot be the entire story.

One proposal for a fundamental principle linking our two principles:

- (F) If  $\sigma$  is a sensible characteristic (such as a color, shape, sound, etc.), then whenever a subject has an experience as of something  $\sigma$ , that subject thereby has immediate *prima facie* justification to believe *that something here is  $\sigma$* .

Sosa's objections to this principle:

- i. "It is not clear we have a viable notion of sensible characteristics on the basis of examples as diverse as colors, shapes, tones, odors, and so on" (p. 159).
- ii. Would a belief *that something here is  $\sigma$*  on the basis of an experience as of something  $\sigma$  still be justified in a world in which beliefs with such an origin are nearly always false?
- iii. Couldn't there be aliens whose non-inferential knowledge of the external world does not "derive casually or otherwise from sensory experience of [sensory] characteristics" (p. 159)?

Sosa concludes that we need a more abstract principle to explain why (P<sub>1</sub>) and (P<sub>2</sub>) both seem true. That more abstract principle, he insists, is *reliabilism*.