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Must knowledge be grounded in epistemic foundations?

By Damian E M Milton

The nature of knowledge has been a problematic issue that has puzzled philosophers over centuries of enquiry. Many definitions however, encompass the notion of a 'justified true belief', although 'Gettier cases' (cited in Pritchard 2006) show many concerns regarding such a definition, a sound justification is usually seen as an essential component of what knowledge comprises of. The structure of justification is however, a problematic area within epistemology, as when one is asked how they are justified in their belief one is limited to choose between three alternatives. Firstly, that the belief is unsupported (and needs no further justification). Secondly, that the belief is supported by an infinite chain of justification (with no supporting justification appearing more than on one occasion) and thirdly, that the belief is supported by a circular chain of justification. The schools of thought that defend each of these answers are respectively called Foundationalism, Infitism and Coherentism. In this assignment, these positions will be compared and evaluated in terms of whether knowledge does need foundational beliefs in order to be justifiable.

The Foundationalist position is that some beliefs do not require further justification, as they are self-justifying, thus any chain of justification stops at these foundational beliefs. This position was famously espoused by Rene Descartes (cited in Pritchard 2006) who argued that foundational beliefs are those that are beyond doubt and are thus self-evidently true and certain. The famous example of such a foundation was Descartes' belief in his own existence: 'cogito ergo sum'. The fact that he could doubt his existence proves that one has to be alive to doubt it.

Probably the leading exponent of the Coherentist approach was W. V. O. Quine (cited in Pritchard 2006). Coherentism has a practicality in its application, as most beliefs held by people are justified using a 'web' of ideas that have built up an individuals 'world-view'. In this view, someone may follow an incorrect world view, yet be justified in following the only theoretical/evidential tools at their disposal. Quine employs a scientific account of epistemology where: 'No statement is immune to revision' (cited in Pritchard 2006: 38). Coherentists argue that if the circle of justification is sufficiently large enough and holds up to rebuttals that it can sustain a belief, yet Foundationalists would argue that no matter how large the circle is, it really does not provide support for a belief without some foundational principle.

Infitism by contrast to the other perspectives has been historically far less popular, yet has been recently advocated by Klein (1998). Klein's Infitism relies upon two principles developed from criticisms of Coherentism's 'question-begging' and Foundationalism's use of 'arbitrary foundations'. The first being the "Principle of Avoiding Circularity" (PAC), which is

a response to the 'question-begging' of Coherentism. Klein uses the term "Evidential ancestry" to mean the links in the chains of justification. Klein states that if r is a reason for p , and q is a reason for r , then r is in the evidential ancestry of p , and q is in the evidential ancestry of both p and r . The adherence of Infitism to this principle allows it to avoid the circularity of the Coherentist.

The other principle central to Infitism is the "Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness" (PAA). Klein argues that no ultimate foundational reason will serve as the arbitrary stopping point of the chain. Every reason requires another reason. These principles entail that the chains of justification must be unending and that no justification can be a reason for itself.

In conclusion, there are several issues faced by the 'classical' Foundationalist approach. This way of thinking puts too much emphasis on the infallibility of knowledge to be beyond doubt and error and thus one is left with very few beliefs that can be said to be self-justifying (if Klein is correct, none can). One answer to this, is to be less stringent regarding the criteria used for a 'foundational belief', yet then one faces the problem of explaining why such a belief should be seen as foundational in the first instance. Another problem faced by the Foundationalist approach is how a foundational belief can provide a foundation for a non-foundational belief, without also assuming an infallible logical connection between one and the other. In defence of Foundationalism, Descartes did provide an irrefutable foundational belief that one can use to build knowledge upon, however precariously.

Bibliography

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