

LECTURE TEN: REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM

3 March 2014

The Epistemological Question is: In virtue of what are our moral beliefs justified?

This is an instance of the General Epistemological Question: In virtue of what are our beliefs justified?

We'll start by considering two famous answers to the General Epistemological Question.

Here's one answer:

FOUNDATIONALISM: some beliefs are non-inferentially justified, and all justified beliefs are non-inferentially justified or justified by other beliefs which are non-inferentially justified.

Regress Argument for Foundationalism:

Suppose I have some belief 1 that needs justification. It will be justified by some belief 2 that is justified by some belief 3 and so on. Now we have three options.

- a. This chain of justifying beliefs might go on indefinitely. But then it seems that at no point do any of our beliefs become justified.
- b. The chain might go around in a circle, so that at some point belief 99 is justified by belief 1. But then each belief is partly justifying itself, which again doesn't seem to ever get any of them really justified.
- c. None of the beliefs are justified. But that seems false. Surely I'm justified in believing some of the things I believe.
- d. The chain might end in a special class of beliefs, which do not inherit their justification from their relations to other beliefs.

Candidates for non-inferentially justified beliefs: beliefs based on our senses; beliefs about our experience; beliefs based on the scientific method; beliefs about matters the truth of which we perceive clearly and distinctly.

Some Objections to Foundationalism:

Objection One: Whenever your belief is justified, you must have some background belief concerning the reliability or trustworthiness of the belief's source. For example, a belief based on your visual perception is justified only if you have a background belief about the accuracy of your visual perception. But then it looks like your visual belief is partly *based on* this background belief about the accuracy of perception. So it's inferential. The idea is that *every* justified belief is like this. Hence, any justified belief is inferential.

Objection Two: Underdetermination worries. Scientific results are often consistent with different scientific hypotheses. Our own beliefs based on our senses are informed by our theories about material objects, sociology, psychology, etc. For any given particular belief to be justified, we seem to need background theoretical beliefs.

These objections suggest we need more than the notion of a proper foundation to account for the justification of beliefs.

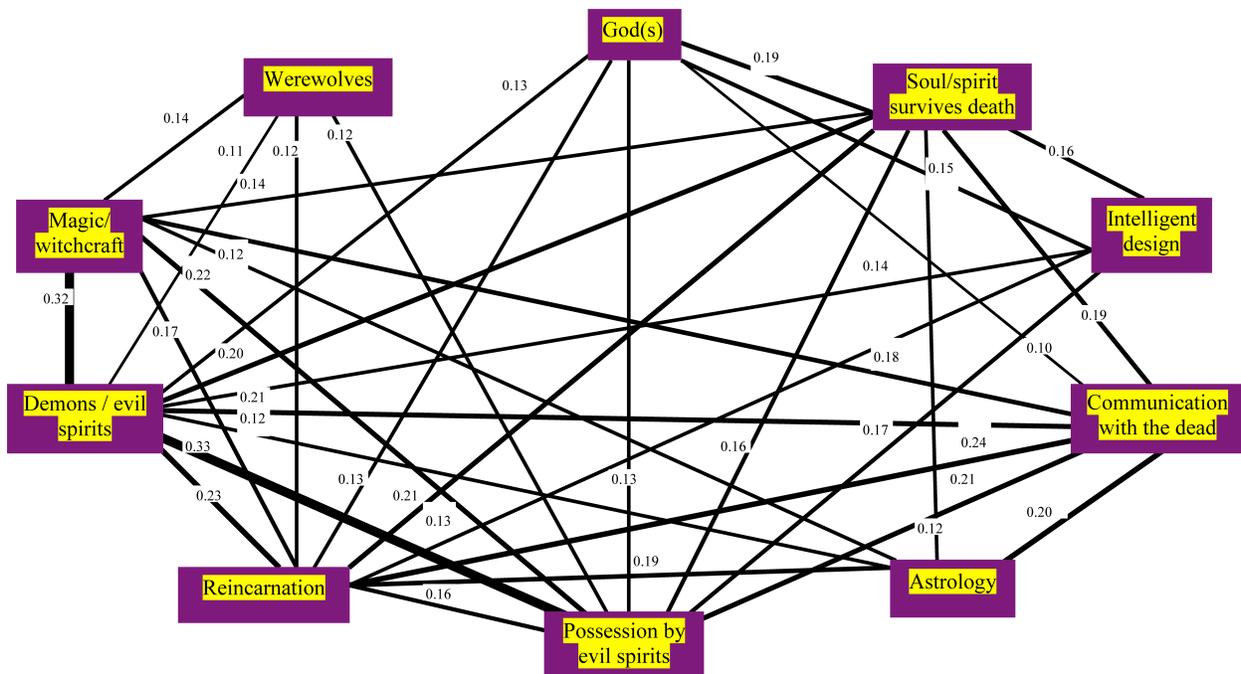
Let's put foundationalism aside and consider a second answer to the General Epistemological Question:

COHERENTISM: No beliefs are non-inferentially justified. Justified beliefs are justified in virtue of their *coherence* with one's other beliefs.

Generally speaking, coherentists think that this web of beliefs is rather sprawling and complex, rather than the simple linear chain mentioned earlier.

What is coherence? Minimally, it involves logical consistency. If your theory predicts a perturbation, and yet you believe there was no perturbation, you cannot continue to believe both. But coherence is broader than simple logical consistency, since again, for instance, logical consistency underdetermines theory choice. Coherence involves some slightly obscure evaluative conception of what makes a set of beliefs better or worse.

Here's an example of a web of beliefs. This web connects supernatural beliefs.



This diagram also shows you what the main objection will be to coherentism. Coherence is cheap. So long as the appropriate relations obtain between one's web of beliefs, one can be justified in believing in werewolves and witchcraft and magic. Any two coherent sets of beliefs will contain beliefs that are equally well justified. But this seems false. Some beliefs in coherent sets are *more* justified than beliefs in other equally coherent sets of beliefs. So we need more than the notion of coherence to account for the justification of beliefs.

Let's put both of these positions aside, and consider an alternative, often thought to be a version of coherentism, but with a bit of foundationalism thrown in. This is first and foremost an epistemology for ethics, not a general epistemology, though I leave it to you to think about how it might be extended. We'll even start this on a new page.

REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM

The simple idea is that we start theorising with a bunch of beliefs about cases, and a bunch of beliefs about moral principles. Then we see whether they cohere. If not, we try to make the most minimal revisions, both to our intuitions about cases, and our intuitions about principles, in pursuit of coherence. Having undergone this process a few times, we will hopefully find ourselves with some stable set of beliefs about both cases and principles. This set of beliefs will be coherent. We are justified in believing these beliefs.

The process of modifying our beliefs about principles in the light of our beliefs about cases, and modifying our beliefs about cases in the light of our beliefs about principles, is a *reflective* process. We undertake it clear-headedly, under circumstances in which “our moral capacities are most likely to be displayed without distortion” and are “rendered under conditions favourable to the exercise of the sense of justice and therefore in circumstances where the more common excuses and explanations for making a mistake do not happen” (Rawls, TOJ, p.47ish). The stable end-point is an equilibrium point. (Might there be more than one?)

The coherence part of this position is clear. The foundational part is manifest in three ways:

- a. the default status given to the beliefs about cases and principles that we find ourselves with – our “considered judgements”;
- b. in their default strength: when faced with a conflict, we should abandon the belief which is *less secure*;
- c. and in status of the notion of coherence itself. We said earlier this is an evaluative notion.

A nice example of reflective equilibrium methodology in action, from Sanford Levy:

Suppose that George, after taking a variety of anthropology classes, becomes enamored of traditional, technologically primitive ways of life, ways that are fast disappearing from our world. He comes to believe that those ways of life are valuable and should be protected as far as possible from the encroachment of modern civilization. George has also been an environmentalist for many years, and is especially interested in the protection of marine mammals. His beliefs in the value of environmental protection and in the value of protecting traditional societies have long sat comfortably together. He has viewed members of traditional societies as natural conservationists and as living in harmony with their environment. But a problem occurs. He reads in the newspaper of a group of Native Americans in Alaska wishing to reestablish traditional whale hunting. As an environmentalist, and also as a person with a great love of the giant marine mammals, George has long been opposed to hunting whales. And yet, the hunt had for centuries, if not millennia, been part of traditional culture. George now faces a conflict. He comes to see that his support for traditional cultures may not be fully consistent with his environmentalism. This conflict intensifies when he goes to the library to do a little research on the relations not just between contemporary traditional cultures and their environments, but between prehistoric cultures and their environments. He finds that such cultures were not quite as environmentally benign as he had long assumed. He reads with dismay chapters of Quaternary Extinctions in which experts argue that prehistoric peoples were destructive much as modern humans are. Wherever humans appeared, species disappeared. This pattern is found through much of the world, from North America to Polynesia. It is speculated, he reads, that such destruction was the result of causes much like the modern causes of the destruction of species. These include over hunting, habitat destruction, and the introduction of exotic species such as rats.

Faced with this dilemma, George is in a state of disequilibrium. The solution is not obvious. He must give up, or at least modify, his support of environmental causes, his support of traditional societies, or both. Many moves are open to him. For example, he could weaken his support of traditional cultures and say they are only to be supported in so far as they are not environmentally destructive beyond a point. Or he could, in the name of preserving traditional cultures, modify his support of environmental causes. He could say that whaling, which would never be permissible for a modern, technological society, is legitimate as part of a traditional culture. And so far as the issue of Native Alaskan whaling goes, he even

has the possibility of trying to preserve both his commitment to the environment and to traditional cultures without modification. For he could argue that strictly speaking, once disrupted, genuinely traditional cultures cannot be reestablished. The traditional lives of Alaskan natives are largely gone, replaced by something different. And even if reestablishment were in principle possible, reintroducing the hunt does not do the job. Rather than reestablishing the traditional culture, it is nothing but a symbolic reminder of that now dead culture. And, he could reason, the great sea mammals need not be sacrificed as a mere symbol of a dead culture.

Advantages of reflective equilibrium:

- a. It avoids the above objections to foundationalism: it involves background theories; it allows that our beliefs about the 'fixed points' – cases and principles – rest on other beliefs and are revisable.
- b. It adds something to coherentism, since certain starting points are given default weight. Hence avoids the objection that, for any given person, any coherent set of beliefs contains beliefs that are just as well justified as any other.
- c. It undermines the assumption that metaethical theses, e.g. nihilism or subjectivism, automatically undercut substantive ethical theses.
- d. It is *practicable*: it gives us a working methodology.
- e. Possible extension to other domains.

Some worries about reflective equilibrium:

- a. it is *too conservative*: gives our initial moral judgements too much weight
- b. it is *too relativistic*: different people have different starting points; possibility of different equilibria
- c. it is *ill-defined*: we need a better substantive, metaphysical, and epistemological account of coherence