

THE FOUNDERENTIST VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION BY EXPERIENCE

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“Part of what justifies A in believing that
there’s a dog in the room, for example,
is its looking to him as if there is ”

(Haack 1997b, p 31)

Abstract

I show that Susan Haack’s founderentist theory of justification accounts for the role of experience in the creation of justification (a role which has seemed mysterious since experience is not a proposition and therefore cannot, seemingly, support any proposition) Experience causes one to be justified in believing by causing certain beliefs — the truth of which is necessary to one’s being justified — to be true This is revealed when we notice that, as founderentism holds, no belief is basic in the foundationalist sense, while all beliefs derive their justification from experience, contrary to coherentism

Susan Haack’s founderentism (Haack 1993) seems to me to be true It combines the virtues of coherentism and foundationalism, while leaving out their vices It holds that our beliefs get their justification by being based on experience, rather than supposing that they derive their justification only from each other At the same time it maintains that every justified belief requires as evidence beliefs which are themselves justified, and no belief has grounding only in experience Thus, founderentism is right to uphold experientialism, the position that an empirical belief’s justification derives partly from

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its being caused by experience. For coherentism is wrong to overlook that fact and to suppose that a set of mutually supporting beliefs yields justification even if it is unconnected to experience.¹ And foundherentism is right to point out that even perceptual beliefs require support from other beliefs (or, as we will see, from propositions true of the agent's experiential states) in order to be justified. Foundationalism was wrong to fear coherentism lurking in that view.

But there is the rub. Although all of that must be true, the book left me without a picture of precisely how experience provides justification for a belief that q , rather than merely causing it, and how it does this in concert with other beliefs that help to support q . Here I explain how this works. I hope I do not either misrepresent foundherentism or merely repeat what Haack has already said.² I take myself to be filling in a few of the crossword puzzle entries which I think she left blank. Here are those details.

Take a simple example of an empirical belief that q : "there is a dog there." A knows there is a dog there because A sees it. But A 's seeing it is not a proposition but an event. Yet, it certainly is important to A 's being justified in believing that there is a dog there. Now consider that perhaps experience provides justification by having a role in the following argument:

P_1 If A is having a perceptual experience, then A may³ believe that A perceives that q if it seems (i.e., looks or sounds, etc.) to A that q and if there is no overriding evidence.

P_2 If A doesn't have evidence r_1, r_2, r_3 , then there is no overriding evidence.

P_3 A doesn't have evidence r_1, r_2, r_3 .

P_4 A is having a perceptual experience.

C_1 A may believe that A perceives that q if it seems to A that q .

Here pieces of evidence r are such as these

- r_1 It is not the case that A is looking with enough care
- r_2 It is not the case that A can tell that the lighting is good
- r_3 It is not the case that A does not feel feverish
- r_4 It is not the case that in the past what A seemed to perceive when having similar experiences turned out, upon further inquiry, to be the case

There are many more r 's than I've listed (r_{23} It is not the case that A remembers whether she is wearing her contact lenses) The existence of any evidence r tends to show that it is not the case that, given the evidence A has, what A seems to perceive is likely to be the case Hence, r 's are the possibilities one must be able to rule out in order to be justified in believing that one is perceiving what one seems to perceive If they can be ruled out, then one is justified in believing that P_3 , i.e., that there is no overriding evidence to believe that one is judging unjustifiedly what one's experience shows

The justification for P_1 and P_2 is that they are tautologies It is clear that P_2 is a tautology As for P_1 , one might object that, even if there is no reason *to doubt* that experience shows one something, there may be no reason *to believe* that it shows one something After all, there could be a Cartesian evil genie However, this objection overlooks that experience just is a showing (Our experiences aren't brown patches, but experiences in which objects that look like brown patches show themselves) The only epistemic question is about what experience shows, and that is a question about where the line between epistemic continence and epistemic incontinence lies for each particular case of a belief The possibility of an evil genie is a piece of evidence r and pertains not to P_1 but to P_3 Maybe experience doesn't show much, and we are all enormously incontinent But that is the question of whether P_3 is true, not whether P_1 is true (Anyways, once we get the skeptic in the

trenches in this way, he will lose. There is an abundant lack of evidence for the existence of an evil genie, and the brown patch is furry, dog-shaped and wet-tongued. But that is another topic.)

So, one can be justified in believing P_1 , P_2 , and (sometimes) P_3 . They, together with P_4 , give us C_1 that "I may believe I'm perceiving that q if it seems to me that q ". C_1 , along with the belief that "It seems to me that q " (call this P_5), yields C_2 "I may believe that I'm perceiving that q ".

Figure 1 shows the lines of inference in this argument. The dashed lines are lines of causation between experience and P_4 & P_5 .

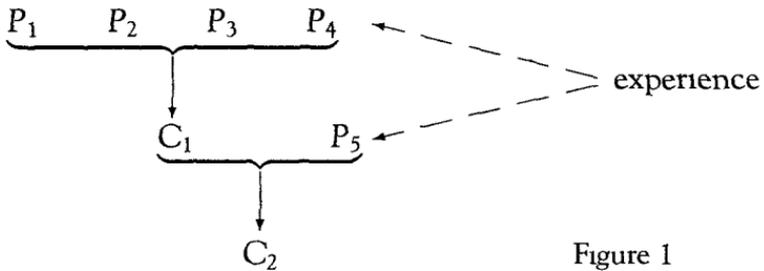


Figure 1

It seems that on normal occasions, such as upon looking at a dog in one's well-lit and familiar house, one has the basis for C_2 , the belief that one is justified in believing that q .⁴ On such occasions, one has evidence which justifies one in believing that P_1 , P_2 , and P_3 . But unless one has evidence for P_4 , the proof of C_2 won't go through. One piece of evidence (not given in the figure) for P_4 is P_6 "I am conscious." P_6 supports P_4 in a Cartesian way. There is a logical necessity regarding the nature of minds. In order to have an experience, one must be conscious, and to be conscious one must have an experience. As Descartes would have said, as long as I think I have experience, I do have experience. As for the justification for P_6 , it is clear and Cartesian, as well. If you can take up the issue, you're conscious.

There is justification for P_5 available to A . A can know that *it seems* to her that something, since A knows that she is having an experience. (So, we might draw an arrow of support from P_4 to P_5 .) A can be justified in believing that it seems to her that q , since there are components of her experience that she can discern and that, along with the absence of any components which would not be there were it not to seem to her that q , are jointly sufficient to count as a seeming that q .⁵ A also finds support for her belief that P_5 in the fact that she understands the concept of q well. There may be other reasons. In any event, if A couldn't have these reasons for P_5 , A couldn't be justified in believing that P_5 . The point is that the propositions which justify C_2 all have and require support from other propositions. The picture of things in Figure 1 is thus not foundationalist.

Also, P_5 must be true, in order for it to play its justificatory role in supporting C_2 in concert with C_1 . For if P_5 is false, A would not be justified in believing that P_5 , and this would undermine A 's evidence for C_2 by making it based on a groundless proposition. Now, the reason that if P_5 is false, A cannot be justified in believing it, is that the evidence for P_5 and the facts that make P_5 true are necessarily identical. A is justified in believing that it seems to her that there is a dog there if and only if there are parts of A 's experience which jointly constitute the fact that it seems to her that there is a dog there.

Descartes would perhaps not have liked that I don't assume that one always believes that P_5 whenever P_5 . A might not believe that it seems to have started to snow outside even though it does seem that way to her. Her attention is elsewhere, so she doesn't believe that P_5 , a bit of her experiential C-evidence.⁶ Her experience nevertheless makes her justified in believing that it has started to snow, because it causes her to have that bit of experiential S-evidence (i.e., that experiential state which makes P_5 true) about which she can formulate beliefs.

Nevertheless, A is justified in believing that q only if A indeed believes that (P_4) she is having an experience. For P_4

is experiential C-evidence which is true if and only if A believes it. For if A does not believe it, then A is not conscious, a fact which would render P_6 , the principal reason supporting P_4 , false (There may be other reasons for P_4 , such as P_5 . But if P_6 is false, then so is P_5 .) This Cartesian fact about consciousness helps to explain why coherentists would be wrong were they to assert that, in order to be justified in believing that q , one's belief that q need not be based on experience, but one need only justifiably believe that one's belief that q is based on experience. For one can't justifiably believe that it is based on experience unless it is based on experience.⁷

Suppose A sees her dog in her house. If there aren't any r 's, experience causes A to be justified in believing that C_1 and that P_5 . Indeed, experience doesn't justify A in believing that C_1 and P_5 , unless by that one means that it causes A to be justified in believing that C_1 and P_5 . But A's experiential S-evidence that q causes A to have experiential C-evidence that P_5 by causing it to be the case that P_5 is true of A. Its seeming to A that q (or, more generally, A's having an experience) also causes A to believe and believe truly that P_4 and P_6 , or, in other words, to have S-beliefs without which and without the truth of the contents of which (i.e., the propositions P_4 and P_6) A would not be justified in believing that C_1 .

This is the beginning of the picture of how "a double-aspect theory, partly causal and partly evaluative, can account for the role of experiential evidence" (Haack 1997a, p. 8). Experientialism is the position that A is justified in believing that q only if A's S-belief that q is partially caused by experience. A's S-belief that q is caused by experience in the case at hand, because A's experiential S-evidence causes A to believe that q by making it true of A that P_5 , that P_4 and that P_6 . And yet, the relation between A's experiential S-evidence and A's belief that q is a justificatory relation, as well as causal one, in that if P_5 and P_4 were not true, A could be justified neither in believing them nor, hence, in believing that q .

As Haack says, “The role of the causal part of the theory is to identify *A*’s *S*-evidence with respect to *q*, on the basis of which *A*’s *C*-evidence with respect to *q* will be constructed”⁸ “Constructed” might seem to be strictly a causal term. And it might seem that it is impossible for a proposition to be caused. Hence, we worry about just how experience, being devoid of propositional content, can play a justificatory role. But here we have seen how “Constructed” has logical aspects that are inseparable from its causal aspects. Experience *can* cause a proposition to be believed or to be true. It causes P_6 and P_4 to be believed and true, and it causes P_5 to be true, as well as, sometimes, believed. I have argued in a Cartesian way that P_4 and P_6 must be true and believed by *A* in order for *A* to be justified in believing that C_1 or that C_2 . Also, I’ve claimed that P_5 must be true in order for *A* to be justified in believing that C_2 . This is because if P_5 is false, then *A* can’t be justified in believing that P_5 . And that is because if the *S*-evidence for P_5 is sufficient to make *A* justified in believing that P_5 , then that *S*-evidence includes experiential *S*-evidence identical to that which would make P_5 true. If *A* has enough evidence to believe that it seems to her that there is a dog there, then it seems to her that there is a dog there. The belief that *q* must be based on experience in order to be justified, because, in order for it to be justified, (a) it must be based causally on the state described by P_5 and logically on P_5 , and (b) P_5 must be justified and, hence, must be true (which is to say that P_5 must describe that state correctly and thereby count as experiential *C*-evidence). Experientialism is thus proved.⁹

This seems to fill in a bit of the puzzle. The preceding paragraph shows how a state can help to justify (i.e., cause to be justified) a belief, even though the notion of something devoid of propositional content doing so seemed puzzling. That’s one problem solved by double-aspect foundherentism. Also, the propositions on the right side in Figure 1 (P_4 and P_5) are either the contents of *S*-beliefs or descriptions of experiential states,

and those *S*-beliefs and states are caused by experience. Hence, Figure 1 shows how experience and reasons cooperate to make *A* justified in believing that *q*, and how reasons support experiential beliefs which seem so “basic” to foundationalists. That’s another problem solved by foundherentism.

I hope I have cleared up some details. I also hope I haven’t gotten foundherentism wrong or merely repeated ideas stated in *Evidence and Inquiry*. Yet, one might still worry that experience seems to have no use for reasons. It is too quick for them. They come after, seeming to be mere “rationalizations” of a justification had in some mysteriously brute-causal way. It seems that experience, as a brute event, provides me with all the justification I need to believe that there is a dog here. No reasons are necessary. We say, “I know there is a dog there, because I see it.” That is a description of direct, non-inferential knowledge that shows no need for a demonstration of evidence. So, it seems that all the *C*-evidence, from P_1 to P_6 , are irrelevant and effete. Therefore, in answer to the question, “How can experience, a brute event, play a justificatory role, a role which only reasons can play?”, one might say, “It obviously plays the only justificatory role, and *C*-evidence plays none.” From here the path to extreme epistemological naturalism opens up, and epistemology is handed over to cognitive scientists.

Yet, that obviously can’t be right, since an event has no propositional content and thus cannot justify anything. If the study of empirical justification could be turned over to the cognitive scientists, then there is no such thing as empirical justification. The solution to the worry is that at the time of the experience I *can* provide (at least to myself, if I am mute) reasons which justify my judgment: reasons P_1 through P_6 . If I couldn’t provide P_1 through P_6 , then experience wouldn’t suffice to make me justified in believing that *q*. That is how the brute event of experience and the reasons cooperate in causing me to be justified in believing that *q*.

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Notes

¹ Haack 1997b and Bonjour 1997 pursue Haack's 1993 criticism of coherentism further

² It may, however, be the case that I offer a more internalist version of foundherentism than Haack, since I think that the degree of A's justification in believing that q depends solely on A's mental states (and their causal and logical interrelations), while Haack, I surmise, thinks it also depends on the causal relations between A's belief and extra-mental events and objects (For example, see the example of the blow to the head in Haack 1998, p. 290) Whether we indeed disagree over internalism (and which degree of internalism is true) is a matter to solve later. In any event, as Haack says, "No doubt there could be other versions of foundherentism differing in details" (Haack 1998, p. 285)

³ In P_1 , "may" means that A would be justified in believing that q , since A would not be epistemically incontinent in so believing. I might as well have said "should" instead of "may", since I mean "may"

in the strong sense of “completely justified”, and one ought to believe what one is completely justified in believing. Thus, “may” and “should” refer to the same justificatory state, while “may” pertains to the question of incontinence, and “should” pertains to whether one is too cautious in one’s beliefs. I leave out the complication of taking degrees of belief into account and proportioning their justification to the supportiveness of the evidence for them.

⁴ Here I leave open the question of whether one must believe that one is justified in believing that q in order to be justified in believing that q . Probably one’s failure to believe that one is justified itself counts as an “ r ”. For such unconfident lack of belief is a sign that one has made a mistake somewhere in evaluating the evidence. That is not to say that how supportive of q the evidence (besides that r) is depends on how confident one is. It doesn’t.

⁵ As Haack (1997a, p. 8) says, “... what set of propositions constitutes his C-evidence with respect to q depends on what states causally sustain/inhibit his believing that q at t . As this last clause suggests, negative as well as positive evidence is taken into account from the beginning.” [Here I have used a “ q ” instead of Haack’s “ p ”.]

⁶ Here I borrow Haack’s notation “S-belief”, “C-belief”, “S-evidence”, “C-evidence”, etc. The distinction is between content-bearing propositions (“C”) and the states (“S”) of mind and experience which maintain them. This notation prevents confusions, such as supposing that one’s belief can be caused and entail another belief. Instead, we say that one’s S-belief can be caused, and one’s C-belief can entail another C-belief.

⁷ See note 9 below.

⁸ Haack 1997b, p. 30. [In this quotation I have used a “ q ” instead of the “ p ” Haack wrote.]

⁹ One might bring in past experiences here. I might wrongly think that I’ve seen Helsinki and infer some judgment about whether its streets run in a grid pattern or not. Hence, one might say that I am justified in believing what I believe about Helsinki’s streets, even though I’ve never had the experience I think I’ve had. However, here I would still need to be using experiences to justify my false belief that I’ve had experiences in Helsinki. I would have to seem to remember Helsinki and/or to hear someone tell me that I’ve seen in Helsinki, and/or to see a receipt from a Helsinki hotel in my house, etc. So, justification always requires a basis in experience.