

BONJOUR'S INTERNALIST FOUNDATIONALISM AND EPISTEMIC VIRTUES

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BonJour's argumentative strategy underlying his account of internalist empirical foundationalism posits a descriptive relation between an empirical belief and the corresponding sensory experience. I argue that his argumentative strategy makes it necessary to appeal to epistemic virtues, such as accuracy, simplicity and coherence, for the epistemic assessment of the foregoing relation. I also argue that the relevance of epistemic virtues to this assessment is due to what I call background beliefs in one's belief-system. I thus conclude that BonJour's argumentative strategy is misguided in the sense that it overlooks the role of background beliefs in the assessment of empirical beliefs in terms of epistemic virtues, meaning that there can be no basic empirical beliefs in the way suggested by BonJour.

Keywords: BonJour – Internalist foundationalism – Sellarsian dilemma – Epistemic virtues – Background beliefs

1. Introduction

According to the basic tenet of foundationalism, what are called basic (or foundational) beliefs serve to justify other beliefs in one's belief-system, while they are themselves non-inferentially justified, i.e., in a way that does not require any other beliefs. Foundationalism comes in two main versions, namely internalism and externalism. The internalist version maintains that the factors that confer epistemic justification on one's belief-system are available in his conscious states of mind in the sense that he has direct and immediate access to them, whereas the externalist version acknowledges the possibility that those factors that confer epistemic justification could be inaccessible by the believer.

Laurence BonJour (2003a) offered an account of internalist foundationalism that has been prominent in recent years in the epistemology literature. In this paper, I will unpack BonJour's argumentative strategy underlying his account of foundationalism. I will argue that his argumentative strategy makes it necessary to appeal to what I shall call background beliefs for the epistemic assessment of empirical beliefs, thus conflicting with the basic tenet of empirical foundationalism. In the next section, I will revisit BonJour's account to set the stage for the ensuing discussion.

2. BonJour's internalist foundationalism

BonJour develops his account of internalist foundationalism as a solution to what is often referred to as the Sellarsian dilemma (Sellars 1963), which is concerned with whether the grasp of sensory (or experiential) content is propositional (i.e. conceptual) or not. Briefly, this dilemma can be stated as follows. If we assume that our grasp of experiential content is propositional, then the proposition that contains our grasp of a particular sensory experience, if it is itself justified, can confer justification on another empirical belief. But, in this case, we face the problem of explaining how the proposition that is supposed to confer justification does not itself stand in need of justification. On the other hand, if we acknowledge that our grasp of sensory content is non-propositional (i.e. non-conceptual), then no justification seems necessary; because what we grasp in this case does not involve any conceptual claim concerning the character of our sensory experience. But, in this case, we face the problem of explaining how anything non-propositional can serve to justify beliefs that are propositional.

BonJour's proposed solution to the Sellarsian dilemma is based on a distinction he makes between two kinds of beliefs, namely an occurrent belief and a meta-belief. While an occurrent belief is a first-order belief, a meta-belief is a second-order belief about the existence and content of an occurrent belief (BonJour 2003a, 61). BonJour regards an occurrent belief as "a conscious state" and thereby suggests that being aware of its propositional content and its assertive, rather than questioning or doubting, character are two aspects that are constitutive of having such a belief (BonJour 2003a, 62). He calls this kind of awareness induced in one's mind while developing a first-order belief "constitutive" or "built-in awareness", and he suggests that it is strictly infallible. In BonJour's words:

Since it is in virtue of this constitutive or "built-in" awareness of content that the belief is the particular belief that it is with the specific content that it has, rather than some other belief or some other sort of state, there is apparently no way in which this awareness of content could be mistaken – simply because there is no independent fact or situation for it to be mistaken about (BonJour 2003a, 64).

Note that in BonJour's account it is not the first-order, occurrent, belief that is infallible and that does not stand in need of justification. Rather, the believer does need a reason as to why he has developed the first-order belief in question, whereas he does not need any reason to justify why he has acquired a built-in awareness due to having the first-order belief that he has developed.

BonJour takes a meta-belief to be “a *description* of the very content involved in the constitutive awareness of content”. He also suggests that “by consciously having that constitutive awareness, [one is] in an ideal position to judge whether or not this description is true”. Therefore, in BonJour’s account, what counts as a basic belief is a true and justified meta-belief, and “constitutive awareness of content [is] the ultimate source of justification”, in that it enables justifying a meta-belief in the way required by internalist foundationalism, as one has internal access to his own built-in awareness (BonJour 2003a, 64).

BonJour thinks that his foregoing characterizations of the nature of an occurrent belief, and of its relation to a second-order meta-belief provides an escape route from the horns of the Sellarsian dilemma. To this end, he extends the foregoing account concerning occurrent and meta-beliefs to the justification of empirical beliefs – i.e. beliefs about sensory experiences – by drawing a parallel between a sensory experience and an occurrent belief. In BonJour’s view, for example, one’s having the visual experience of seeing a physical object, which exemplifies a sensory experience, is a conscious state like an occurrent belief, and it thus brings with it a built-in awareness of its sensory content. BonJour suggests that “[s]ince it is this awareness of sensory content that gives [one’s] experiential state the specific character that it has [...] there is simply no logical room for this awareness to be mistaken about the content in question” (BonJour 2003a, 70). In his view, like built-in awareness associated with a first-order belief, built-in awareness associated with a sensory experience is infallible, meaning that it does not stand in need of justification.

Even though BonJour acknowledges that the content of sensory experience is non-conceptual and that sensory experience “seems far too specific, detailed, and variegated to be adequately captured in any conceptual or propositional formulation” (BonJour 2003a, 71), he goes on to suggest that:

I can see no reason why it would not be possible for us to have the conceptual resources to provide [...] a phenomenological description of experience to any level of precision and accuracy desired, even though it seems obvious that we would always fall short of an ideally complete description – as seems to be the case with any conceptual description (BonJour 2003a, 80).

Therefore, in BonJour’s view, an empirical belief contains a conceptual description of the sensory experience which the belief is about. By virtue of having an infallible awareness of the sensory content of his belief, one is “in a good, indeed an ideal, position to judge directly whether the conceptual description [contained in an empirical belief] is accurate as far as it goes, and if so, to be thereby justified in accepting the belief” (BonJour 2003a, 73). This in turn means that having an infallible awareness

of the non-conceptual content of a sensory experience “can seemingly constitute a kind of reason for thinking that the description [contained in an empirical belief] is true or correct (or equally, of course, untrue or incorrect) – thus apparently providing a reason for the justification of [that belief]” (BonJour 2003a, 72). Therefore, since the justifying reason here is internally and directly accessible to the believer in a way that does not depend on any other beliefs, an empirical belief can be basic in the sense required by internalist foundationalism.

3. A holistic objection to BonJour’s foundationalism

As the previous discussion shows, an essential aspect of BonJour’s account is that it posits “a *descriptive* relation [that has] to do with the accuracy or inaccuracy of fit between a conceptual description and a non-conceptual object that the description purports to describe” (BonJour 2003a, 72). For the justification of empirical beliefs, he also requires that there be a direct comparison of this descriptive content with the content of sensory experience, so that by virtue of his built-in awareness of the latter, one can ascertain and recognize the accuracy of the descriptive relation between a basic empirical belief which he seeks to justify and the corresponding sensory experience. In BonJour’s words:

[I]f the foregoing account is correct, we seem to have found a case of exactly the sort of direct comparison or “confrontation” between a conceptual description and the non-conceptual element or chunk of reality that it purports to describe which seems intuitively to be essential if our conceptual descriptions are ever to capture reality in an ascertainable way. Such a comparison can only take place, to be sure, where the reality in question is itself a conscious state and where the description in question pertains to the conscious content of that very state, but in that very specific case it seems to be entirely unproblematic and perfectly genuine (BonJour 2003a, 74 – 75).

Note that the requirement of direct comparison, rather than indirect, is crucial for BonJour’s account, for an indirect comparison would necessitate other beliefs for the justification of basic beliefs. This aspect of BonJour’s account has been criticized by Michael Bergmann:

[I]s there, in addition to the belief B and the experience E, another act of judging required in order for B to be justified? BonJour’s answer is that a *direct comparison* of B’s content and E’s content is required. But can there be a direct comparison of those two contents without there being, in addition to B and E, another act of judging (or of conceiving of E in a certain way)?

It seems clear that the answer is “No”. For comparison (whether direct or not) involves noting similarities and differences. But that can’t be done if one isn’t aware *that* the items in question have certain features. And that requires one to *judge* that they have the features in question or to *conceive* of them as having those features. But again, such acts of judging or conceiving are precisely the sorts of things that can be correct or not and, hence, justified or not. And this is what leads immediately to the regress problems [...] (Bergmann 2006, 685 – 686).

BonJour replies to Bergmann’s criticism as follows:

I do not need some sort of further, independent justification for thinking that the propositional claim fits my experience and so is true. On the contrary, my justification grows out of my awareness of the content of the claim and of the corresponding experience. To be sure, I must recognize the fit between the two, but this recognition is not a further, cognitively independent judgment, which would then require further independent justification, but is instead *cognitively* guided by and based on those experiences themselves (BonJour 2006, 745 – 746).

BonJour’s reply indicates that he conceives of the content of an empirical belief as an empirical claim whose accuracy can be ascertained by making appeal to the corresponding sensory experience via the built-in awareness of the content of this experience. It is important to note that BonJour considers accuracy to be the sole epistemic virtue in the assessment of this empirical claim. Here, I take an epistemic virtue to mean “a quality or character trait thought to be truth-conducive” (Montmarquet 1987, 482). Therefore, in BonJour’s account, accuracy is an epistemic virtue in the same sense as it is used for an empirical claim – e.g. an empirical hypothesis or theory – namely that the accuracy of the empirical claim contained in a belief, i.e. its experiential content, is conducive to its truth and thus to its justification. By virtue of the built-in awareness of sensory content, the accuracy of the description contained in an empirical belief can be ascertained in comparison with the non-conceptual content of the corresponding sensory experience, and thereby the correctness of the descriptive relation between the two kinds of contents – namely, conceptual and non-conceptual – can be decided by the person who is having the sensory experience in question.

Note that BonJour specifies no degree of accuracy that the content of an empirical belief needs to satisfy in order for it to be considered to be true and justified. He rather suggests that “the person must apprehend or recognize the agreement or fit between the aspect of experience being attended to and the conceptual description given

by the belief” (BonJour 2003b, 193), while the content of a sensory experience can be described with various degrees of accuracy. Therefore, in BonJour’s account, the accuracy of the foregoing description always comes in degrees, and the decision concerning its correctness is a personal decision, in the sense that the particular degree of accuracy necessary for the foregoing descriptive relation to be taken as correct, and thus the corresponding empirical belief to be taken as true and justified, is determined by the person who holds this belief. In other words, the required degree of accuracy follows from his own considerations that can only grow out of some of his other beliefs which I shall call background beliefs in his belief-system. Since these background beliefs, like other beliefs such as meta and occurrent beliefs and higher order beliefs, are part of his own belief-system, they cannot be cordoned off from background beliefs. By the same token, his built-in awareness of the content of his empirical belief in question also cannot be cordoned off from his background beliefs; because any kind of awareness of a particular content is part of his own belief-system. Therefore, one’s awareness of the content of a sensory experience is necessarily laden with his background beliefs.

What follows from the above considerations is that in BonJour’s account the accuracy of the content of an empirical belief must be ascertained, via the built-in-awareness of its content, not only with reference to the corresponding sensory experience, but also with reference to one’s background beliefs. This in turn means that one’s built-in awareness of the content of an empirical belief is not the only reason for him to accept or reject that belief. Rather, one’s justification for accepting an empirical belief is also essentially influenced by his background beliefs that are relevant to the epistemic assessment of the belief in terms of accuracy. This means that empirical beliefs cannot be basic in the way suggested by BonJour’s account, for they are only inferentially justified, i.e. by virtue of their inferential relations to background beliefs.

4. The role of epistemic virtues in the assessment of empirical beliefs

The previous discussion shows that BonJour’s argumentative strategy underlying his account of internalist (empirical) foundationalism has two main aspects. The first is to posit a descriptive relation between the conceptual content of an empirical belief and the non-conceptual content of the corresponding sensory experience and thereby to ground the justification of basic beliefs in the accuracy of this descriptive relation. And the second main aspect is to ascertain whether this descriptive relation possesses the required epistemic virtue, which is taken to be accuracy, by means of the built-in awareness of sensory content that is taken to be infallible.

BonJour uses this argumentative strategy to overcome the difficulty posed by the Sellarsian dilemma, namely that there exists an inferential gap between the conceptual

content of an empirical belief and the non-conceptual content of the corresponding sensory experience, in the sense that one cannot directly infer the truth of the former content from the latter; for one is conceptual and the other is non-conceptual. The fact that the content of an empirical belief (i.e. description of the corresponding sensory experience) possesses the epistemic virtue of accuracy is taken to provide a good reason for thinking that the belief in question is true and justified, thus bridging the foregoing inferential gap. BonJour takes built-in awareness of sensory content to be the ultimate source of justification for basic beliefs (BonJour 2003, 64). Accordingly, in his account, the justification of a basic belief is ultimately grounded in whether its descriptive content possesses the required epistemic virtue, which is taken to be accuracy, while built-in awareness of sensory content is rather what enables one to recognize if the descriptive content of his belief possesses the required epistemic virtue.

BonJour takes accuracy to be the sole epistemic virtue by which to epistemically assess the descriptive content of an empirical belief, which amounts to a description of the corresponding sensory experience. However, accuracy is not the only epistemic virtue relevant to this assessment and other relevant epistemic virtues include the simplicity of the content of a belief and its coherence with the contents of other beliefs belonging to the same belief-system. An epistemic virtue should be seen as a criterion whose fulfilment by the descriptive content of an empirical belief implies the correctness of this content, and thus the truth of the belief. Like accuracy, simplicity and coherency also come in degrees. In cases where the epistemic virtues, which the believer finds relevant to the epistemic assessment of his own empirical beliefs, pull in different directions, he needs to make trade-offs among the different degrees at which these epistemic virtues should be satisfied by his empirical beliefs. For example, a believer might think that a high-degree of accuracy is more (or less) important than simplicity or coherency, or vice versa, for the epistemic assessment of a particular empirical belief of his. Therefore, BonJour's argumentative strategy can be generalized in such a way that epistemic virtues other than accuracy are also included in the epistemic assessment of empirical beliefs and also that the possession of the required epistemic virtue(s) by the content of the belief in question is taken as providing a good reason for thinking that the belief is true and justified.

The epistemic assessment of empirical beliefs in terms of epistemic virtues is a personal cognitive process in the sense that it takes place in the believer's mind. This means that the believer himself must decide which epistemic virtues are to be included in this epistemic assessment; to what extent they must be satisfied by the content of the belief in question; and how they weigh against each other in this assessment. These personal cognitive decisions require the believer to make virtue judgments that are in turn based on his other beliefs, namely those beliefs concerning the relevance of

the epistemic virtues included in the epistemic assessment and their relative importance in this assessment. In this sense, those beliefs to which the believer needs to appeal in order to make the necessary virtue-based judgments, regardless of whether they are basic or not, play the role of background beliefs in the epistemic assessment of empirical beliefs. In other words, the believer cannot make the epistemic assessment of an empirical belief in terms of epistemic virtues, which is necessary to ascertain if its descriptive content possesses the required epistemic virtue(s), without appealing to his own background beliefs, meaning that there can be no basic empirical beliefs in the way suggested by BonJour. Therefore, his argumentative strategy is misguided in the sense that it overlooks the role of background beliefs in the epistemic assessment of the descriptive relation it posits between the content of an empirical belief and its corresponding sensory experience.

5. Concluding remarks

The above discussion indicates the holistic nature of the epistemic justification of empirical beliefs with reference to sensory experience, in a sense reminiscent of Quine's holistic argument against empirical foundationalism (Quine 1951). According to Quine's argument, what is tested in reference to sensory experience are not single (empirical) beliefs, but instead one's entire belief-system, indicating that appeal to sensory experience cannot provide a ground to evaluate beliefs taken singly. Rather, experiential testing alone can only provide a good reason for accepting or rejecting his belief system taken as a whole. Therefore, in a belief-system about the external world, there can be no beliefs that are themselves non-inferentially justified. It is worth noting that Quine's holistic argument involves no reference to epistemic virtues. As I have argued in this paper, the epistemic assessment of (the contents of) empirical beliefs in terms of epistemic virtues cannot be made in isolation from background beliefs that can in turn be inferentially related to some other beliefs in one's belief-system. Therefore, the foregoing epistemic assessment is a holistic one – in the sense of Quine's holism – that is at odds with the basic tenet of empirical foundationalism, namely that there are basic (i.e. non-inferentially justified) empirical beliefs.

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