

## Unified Foundherentism

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### Introduction

No one area of philosophy is truly independent of any other, and if there is one area upon which all others depend, it is metaphysics. The problem of how we can have knowledge is, by definition, an epistemological concern. But there is much that is uncertain in the philosophy of mind, and since it is minds that know things, it seems that a proper theory of mind should provide a good starting point for the problem of how we can have knowledge. However, a theory of mind must rest upon a solid metaphysical foundation. Thus, how one approaches the problem of knowledge will be dictated, ultimately, by one's metaphysical assumptions. The potential solutions will be markedly different for idealists, dualists, neutral monists, and, much to their chagrin, physicalists (physicalism is, after all, a metaphysical thesis). What I shall argue here is that neither foundationalism nor coherentism is correct. And while foundherentism offers the potential to explain knowledge, a satisfactory account thereof will require a new theory of mind, and a hence new kind of metaphysics.

## I. The Problem with Foundationalism

Foundationalism is an intuitively attractive view; that our sense perceptions serve as a constant source of knowledge about the external world seems entirely plausible. This thought is encapsulated in the adage, "Seeing is believing". After all, if I witness some event E, and were later asked by some third party how I know that E occurred, I could simply state that I *saw* it happen. Now, my reliability as a witness, or the integrity of my memory, may be called into question. But if I have an un-obscured perception of something, then it would seem that I am somewhat justified in accepting that perception as providing me with some knowledge of the external world.

Of course, such a common-sensical notion of perception is somewhat naïve, for it is easy to conceive of hypothetical situations wherein the perceiver is entirely wrong. It may be, for example, that some malevolent spirit is deceiving me, or that I have been duped by some government conspiracy. I could even be delusional, or just dreaming. But these scenarios are all far-fetched, and given a lack of evidence to the contrary, it is safe to assume that my perceptions are veridical. It would seem that even if we cannot be absolutely certain of the veracity of our sense perceptions, we are at least justified to some degree in accepting them as true. What is needed is some accounting of knowledge that admits the primacy of our sense perceptions.

Roderick Chisholm has attempted to provide such an account, which assumes a great deal of first-person authority, and that the meanings of our words are internally grounded. On this view, our sense perceptions are "given" to us, and serve as a foundation for knowledge of the external world. But while I cannot doubt that what I perceive is just exactly what I perceive, I may wonder just how my perceptions correspond to the external world. For if the meanings of

my words are internally grounded, and my perceptions serve as the foundation for all of my knowledge, then it seems that I am trapped in my own subjective little world. In other words, my knowledge is not of the external world, but of my own immediate perceptions. How then can I *know* that my perceptions *correspond* to the external world? I had made an assumption above that given no evidence to the contrary, our perceptions are probably veridical. But how can I *know* this? I cannot have a perception that my perceptions are veridical, that would be nonsense. And it won't help to have some belief that my perceptions are veridical, for while I cannot doubt that I *believe* that my perceptions are veridical, that doesn't mean that they *are* veridical. It could turn out that my perceptions are entirely confused, and I would never know any better.

Ultimately, foundationalism leaves one trapped in one's own subjectivity. The only knowledge to be had is either knowledge of one's own perceptions (which needn't correspond to anything in the external world), and one's own beliefs (which needn't be true). If this is the case, then there can be no knowledge of the external world.

## II. The Problem with Coherentism

Coherentism appears to solve this subjective difficulty. We are justified in believing that P, because we have other beliefs that support the belief that P. Wilfrid Sellars propounded a convincing coherentist theory of knowledge, which assumes, to a great extent, objective conditions for the veracity of our beliefs. This is probably a good move, given that the truth conditions for most of our beliefs are indeed out in the external world. On this view, my belief that P is supported by the knowledge that a proposition (e.g. "I see a dog") is an indication of being in the presence of a dog, that I am a competent speaker of the English language, and that I

am in "standard conditions" of perception (p 123). And while I can doubt any one of these beliefs, according to Sellars I cannot doubt all of them at once (p 124). Let us suppose this last claim to be true, that we can doubt but just one belief. Let us then doubt that we are in "standard conditions". Now we must support the belief that we are in "standard conditions" with some other beliefs. But to know that we are in standard conditions, we must know some state-of-affairs regarding our particular place in the world, and the surrounding conditions. Presumably, the only way to know some contingent state-of-affairs in the world is to make an observation. But since we doubt that we are in "standard conditions", we cannot use that belief to make an observation that we are in "standard conditions", for that would be a vicious circle! Perhaps, then, we could ask some trusted acquaintance to verify that we are in "standard conditions". However, I can only accept their observation as being true if they are in "standard conditions". But they cannot verify that, and I cannot either, for I would have to know that I am in "standard conditions" before I could judge that they are in "standard conditions". Thus, it must be that no one can ever know that they or anyone else are in "standard conditions", and so there can be no knowledge of the external world.

Next, let us suppose that we are in "standard conditions", but doubt that we are competent speakers of the English language (CSEL's). To support our belief that we are in fact CSEL's, we would need to believe that others are CSEL's. Then, the fact that we are able to converse normally with other CSEL's would indicate that we ourselves are CSEL's. But how can we know that anyone else is a CSEL? Wouldn't we first have to know that we ourselves are CSEL's, in order to judge that others are CSEL's? Again, we have a vicious circle, and no one can know that they or anyone else are a CSEL. So, not only can no one ever know that they are in "standard conditions", but no one can ever know that they are a CSEL (or any other language). This can

only mean one thing: that, on a coherentist account, no one can ever have any knowledge of the external world.

### III. The Problem with Foundherentism

What is needed, obviously, is something not so subjective as foundationalism, and yet not so externalized as coherentism. Susan Haack has attempted to provide such a theory, which she calls foundherentism. She focuses on the interplay between mental states (S-beliefs) and the contents thereof (C-beliefs). Now, since mental states can cause other mental states, Haack defines S-evidence as "...a set of states...causally related to [the] S-belief that *p*" (229). And C-evidence is "...a set of propositions capable of standing in logical or quasi-logical relations to the C-belief that *p*." (229) In this way, Haack seems to draw together Chisholm's foundationalism (loosely corresponding to the S-beliefs) and Sellars' coherentism (loosely corresponding to the C-beliefs), but something is amiss. One may wonder why there is any need to distinguish between mental states (S-beliefs) and the contents thereof (C-beliefs), and so it seems that foundherentism is in danger of collapsing into either foundationalism or coherentism.

Furthermore, such a parallelistic account reeks of an intolerable sort of dualism. Despite her word choice, S-beliefs sound like what philosophers of mind call *brain states*, and C-beliefs sound like what they call *mental states*. Here we are confronted with the age-old problem of the explanatory gap in the philosophy of mind, and if my analysis of foundherentism is correct, then Haack inherits all the difficulties that come with it. So, while I think that some sort of foundherentism is true, there is more work that needs to be done in order to dispel the illusory gap between S-beliefs and C-beliefs.

#### IV. The Unification of Foundherentism

As I have argued, the unification of foundherentism can only come through a proper theory of mind, which in turn will depend on a proper metaphysical theory. And while I can't hope to resolve all these difficulties here, I would like to characterize what a solution might look like. For a great many reasons I have adopted a type of neutral monism, whereby the apparent dual-aspect nature of reality is just an illusion. If this is true, then brain states and mental states should turn out to be the same thing, and likewise so will S-beliefs and C-beliefs. To illustrate how this works, I will provide an example of perceiving a dog.

Suppose that I walk outside one morning and see a dog. It is not that I have a perception, which I then apperceive and judge to be a dog; no, the dog is simply constituted in my phenomenological field (PF) as a dog. A PF is instantiated as the processing of information by a causal nexus in the world. In this example, the causal nexus is what we call my brain. Incoming data, in the form of patterns in light waves/particles, effect a change in this nexus. This sets into effect a chain of causation, resulting in the "association" of various different concepts. These concepts are not separate from the perceived object; they are bound up in it. Thus, the object is constituted in my PF not as an object that is *judged* to be a dog, but simply *as* a dog. On introspection, I can justify my belief that it is a dog by referencing my beliefs about dogs, but this extraneous effort plays no role in the initial perception. Consciousness is a unified phenomenon, and the objects of consciousness are unified also. They are, in a sense, "bundled up" with the meanings that are attached to them in the process of being perceived.

The metaphysical system that allows for this view is somewhat strange. The intentional object in the external world (i.e. the dog) is a complex pattern, a certain aspect of which (depending on the external angle/mode of perception) gets transmitted as a pattern into my mind through some medium (e.g. light). The intensional object, the medium of transmission, and my mind are all of the same substance (which isn't something that we should like to call "substance" at all, but that is a topic for another paper). This pattern in the mind is then "associated" with other patterns, and is instantiated in my PF through this processing. It may seem at first that a physicalist could tell much the same story, but there are deeper difficulties here that preclude a physicalist account. A PF is not really a "thing" in itself; it simply refers to the processing of these patterns in a unified manner. And it is not "physical" stuff that is *doing* this processing; as I've said, it isn't really any kind of "substance" at all. The patterns that we perceive are taken to be of "physical" stuff, but this is just an illusion.

### Conclusion

The metaphysical system required for such a theory of knowledge is far beyond the scope of this paper. What I have tried to do here was explore some of the fundamental difficulties with the prevailing theories of knowledge, and offer some hope for a real alternative. That is quite an ambitious task, and I don't suppose to have convinced anyone of any of this, except myself. What I do hope to have done is to show that something else is needed, and that this something else will require far more effort than what has been put forth thus far.

## References

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