

Lecture 17: Bonjour's Anti-Foundationalist Argument

I. Bonjour on the Nature of Epistemic Justification

According to Bonjour, what separates *epistemic justification* from other sorts of justification that a belief might have (*pragmatic, moral, religious*) is "its essential or internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth" (p. 113).

assumption #1: Beliefs are epistemically justified only if and to the extent that they are aimed at the cognitive goal of truth.

Bonjour also holds that "the idea of being epistemically responsible is the core of the concept of epistemic justification" (ibid.).

assumption #2: If one holds an *epistemically unjustified* belief, one is being *epistemically irresponsible*, and if one holds an *epistemically justified* belief, one is being *epistemically responsible*.

Note: one might question this link between *epistemic justification* and *epistemic responsibility* (or *praiseworthiness*). In the moral realm, some theories distinguish between *morally right* acts and *morally praiseworthy* ones. Maybe we can make a similar distinction in the epistemic realm.

II. Bonjour on Truth-Indicating Features

Bonjour takes four crucial claims to follow from these two assumptions:

- *claim #1:* For a belief B to be epistemically justified, it must have some feature, ϕ , which makes it highly likely to be true (i.e. it must possess a *truth-indicating feature*).

rationale: To think otherwise is to give up on assumption #1.

- *claim #2:* For belief B with truth-indicating feature ϕ to be epistemically justified, the premises of the following justificatory argument must be justified and true:

- i. Belief B has feature ϕ .
- ii. Beliefs having feature ϕ are highly likely to be true.
Therefore, B is highly likely to be true.

rationale: How else could the presence of ϕ make B highly likely to be true?

- *claim #3:* For belief B with truth-indicating feature ϕ to be epistemically justified *for a given subject*, the subject must also be in cognitive possession of the above justificatory argument.

rationale: If the subject did not possess the argument, then it would be epistemically irresponsible of her to hold the belief (even if the premises of the argument are in fact true), and hence (by assumption #2) her belief would be unjustified.

- *claim #4:* The only way to be in cognitive possession of such an argument is to *believe with justification* its premises.

rationale: How could one be *in cognitive possession* of the argument without believing its premises? And how could the argument underwrite belief B's justification if the subject believes those premises without justification?

Let us call the argument that having ϕ makes a belief likely to be true a *truth-indicating feature (TIF) argument*.

III. Bonjour's Argument against Foundationalism

Putting these claims together, we can argue against the possibility of immediately justified beliefs.

(Note: Bonjour only runs his argument against the possibility of immediately justified *empirical* beliefs, but the argument appears to be perfectly general.)

Bonjour's argument against foundationalism:

1. Suppose subject S has some belief B that is immediately justified. [*supposition for reductio*]
2. For B to be epistemically justified, it must have some feature, ϕ , which makes it highly likely to be true. [*premise (claim #1)*]
3. For B to be epistemically justified for subject S due to its possessing feature ϕ , S must be in cognitive possession of the following TIF argument: [*premise (claim #3)*]
 - i. Belief B has feature ϕ .
 - ii. Beliefs having feature ϕ are highly likely to be true.
Therefore, B is highly likely to be true.
4. The only way to be in cognitive possession of such an argument is to *believe with justification* its premises. [*premise (claim #4)*]
5. So, for B to be epistemically justified for S, its justification must depend on the justification of further beliefs that S has. [*follows from 2, 3, 4*]
6. So, B is not immediately justified for S. [*follows from 5*]
7. So, there are no immediately justified beliefs. [*follows from 1, 6 by reductio ad absurdum*]

Bonjour imagines two ways of responding to this argument:

- *Externalists* will deny premise 3.
- *Givenists* (i.e. defenders of the doctrine of the given) will deny premise 4.

IV. Bonjour against the Given

According to the *doctrine of the given*, one's belief that a certain state of affairs ("the given") obtains can be immediately justified in virtue of one's "immediately apprehending" or "being directly presented with" or "intuiting" the state of affairs in question.

No assumption is being made here that one's apprehension of the given is certain or infallible. Also, no assumption is being made that only one's inner mental states can be given.

Thus we have three items:

- The state of affairs S. (For example: my headache.)
- The belief B that S obtains. (For example: my belief *that I have a headache*.)
- The immediate apprehension of S. (For example: my immediate apprehension of my headache.)

Bonjour's question: what kind of state is the third of these?

He poses the following dilemma for the defender of the given:

- *first horn*: The immediate apprehension of S is a cognitive state.
If the immediate apprehension is a cognitive state (even one more rudimentary than a belief), why doesn't it itself require justification? If it does, then we haven't reached a foundational point.
- *second horn*: The immediate apprehension of S is not a cognitive state.
If the immediate apprehension is not a cognitive state, how can it possibly confer justification on belief B, in the sense of giving the subject a reason to think that B is likely to be true?

One might suggest that immediate apprehensions are *semi-cognitive states* that can confer justification without requiring it themselves, but Bonjour calls this a "hopelessly contrived and *ad hoc*" proposal (p. 118).

Bonjour's central claim: "it is one and the same feature of a cognitive state, viz. its assertive content, which both enables it to confer justification on other states and also requires it to be justified itself" (p. 119).