On the day I began writing this introduction, as on any other day, there were a number of things I believed to be true. A few examples: I believed I was in Port aux Basques, Newfoundland. I believed I was caught up on my student loan payments. I believed that, when I was seven, a dog named Tuffy lived across the street with a family whose name I can’t recall. I believed all these things, but I was less confident in some of those beliefs than others. Why? One way of explaining why is to point out that I am less justified in holding some of those beliefs than others. But what exactly does it mean to say a belief is justified?

Kinds of Justification

The word ‘justified’ gets used in many ways. A person might, for instance, be morally justified in demanding a raise from her boss. People also sometimes describe an action as justified if the action is successful. So, for instance, a person might claim that his foolish gamble on a long-shot horse was justified by the fact that, against all odds, the gamble paid off. The sense we are interested in, however, is neither of these. We are concerned here with what we might call epistemological justification. That is, we are concerned with what it is for a belief held by a particular person to be such that there is good reason to think it is true. This is, of course, only a rough characterization of epistemological justification. The notion should become clearer as you read through the selections.

Foundationalism

The most influential account of what it is for a belief to be justified is foundationalism. This view comes in a number of varieties, but all of them agree that there are two fundamentally different kinds of justified belief. Some of our beliefs are justified as a result of the support of other beliefs. So, for
instance, we might say my belief that it is 3:15 p.m. as I write this sentence is justified by my belief that my watch indicates it is 3:15 p.m. and my belief that my watch is accurate. A belief which is justified in this way may be referred to as inferentially justified, i.e., justified by the way in which it may be inferred from my other beliefs. According to foundationalists, many of our justified beliefs are inferentially justified, but not all of them. They claim that justification must come to an end somewhere and that it comes to an end in Basic Beliefs, i.e., in beliefs which do not derive their justification from the support of other beliefs. Exactly what sort of belief is a Basic Belief is a matter about which there is some disagreement, but a common example is a belief about immediate experience. For example, some foundationalists would suggest that a person’s belief that he sees something red at a given moment is a belief that is justified not by the support of other beliefs, but by the experience of seeing something red.

**The Regress Argument**

Why should we think there are such things as Basic Beliefs? To answer this question foundationalists often appeal to the regress argument, an argument which is supposed to show that any justified belief must either itself be a Basic Belief or else must depend at some point on a Basic Belief for its justification. Either way, we can conclude that if any beliefs are ever justified there must be such a thing as a Basic Belief. The argument proceeds as follows. Suppose a person has justified belief A (e.g., the belief that he is in Port aux Basques, Newfoundland). Clearly, this justified belief is either inferentially justified or not. If it is not inferentially justified, then it is itself a Basic Belief (and so we have proved there are such things as Basic Beliefs). What if it is inferentially justified? Then we can ask about the beliefs from which belief A derives its justification. Suppose justified belief A is supported by belief B (B might be the belief that the bus that brought the person to this town was supposed to deliver its passengers to Port aux Basques). We can then ask whether belief B is itself justified. Most would answer that it must be if belief A (which relies on belief B for its justification) is justified. If this is right, we can then ask whether justified belief B is inferentially justified or not. Again, if it is not, we have discovered there are Basic Beliefs (in this case, belief B would be the Basic Belief). What if belief B is also inferentially justified? If it is, we should ask about the status of the belief from which it derives its justification. Suppose belief B derives its justification from belief C. Again, if we think this belief must itself be justified in order
for B to be justified, we can ask whether this justified belief is inferentially justified or not. If it is not, then we have found the Basic Belief we were looking for. What if it is inferentially justified? Can we go on like this forever, positing the existence of an infinite chain of justified beliefs, each one justified by a belief further back in the chain? The foundationalist says no. The chain must come to an end somewhere. If this is right, we must ask what sort of belief the chain will end in. Three possibilities have typically been proposed: (1) in a Basic Belief, (2) by looping upon itself at some point (so that, for example, A is justified by B which is justified by C which is justified by A) or (3) in an unjustified belief. Option 3 has, for a reason we have already seen, been thought unacceptable. The idea is that a belief cannot be inferentially justified unless the belief it is based upon is justified. As for option 2, this is usually declared unacceptable since it requires a belief to justify itself at some point. This leaves us only with option 1 and thus the conclusion that if any beliefs are justified they must either be Basic Beliefs or else must rely at some point on Basic Beliefs for their justification.

VARIETIES OF FOUNDATIONALISM

Foundationalists agree that if any belief is ever justified there must be such a thing as a Basic Belief, but there has been considerable disagreement about what Basic Beliefs are like. In particular foundationalists have disagreed about whether a Basic Belief can be false and how Basic Beliefs transfer their justification to other beliefs. With regard to the first claim, some have argued that a Basic Belief must somehow be guaranteed to be true. Others maintain a position known as fallibilism, according to which a Basic Belief (or any other justified belief) may turn out to be false. Furthermore, while all foundationalists agree that a Basic Belief must be justified to some extent without the support of other beliefs, some have claimed that a Basic Belief can have its degree of justification increased by the support of other beliefs. With regard to the second claim, there has been disagreement about whether an inferentially justified belief must be guaranteed to be true if the beliefs it is supported by are true. Some have said it must, while others maintain only that the inferentially justified belief must somehow be likely to be true if the beliefs it is supported by are true. Generally, those foundationalists who insist that a Basic Belief must be guaranteed to be true and that any beliefs it supports are also guaranteed to be true are called strong or classical foundationalists. There are, however, many foundationalists who opt for weaker versions of foundationalism than this.
Alternatives to Foundationalism

Not everyone is convinced by the regress argument that foundationalism is the only acceptable account of justification. The main competitor to Foundationalism is coherentism, according to which only beliefs can justify beliefs. Hence, coherentists claim that no beliefs are Basic; all our beliefs derive their justification from the support of other beliefs. A person’s belief is justified on this view if it fits together well with his other beliefs (i.e., if it coheres with his other beliefs). Another theory is contextualism. Contextualists claim that whether a particular belief is justified for a particular person depends upon the standards operating in the context or situation we are considering. They claim that a belief may be unjustified in one context, but justified in another. A third alternative is reliabilism, according to which a belief is justified if it was caused by a reliable belief-forming process (roughly, a process which is likely to produce true beliefs).

Justification and Knowledge

The topic here is justification, but you may notice that some of the readings discuss knowledge, not justification. Why is this? A detailed answer requires some consideration of the relationship between knowledge and justification, a topic about which a lot could be said. For now, however, it is enough to say only this: Many philosophers claim that a belief must be justified if it is to count as knowledge. If this is right, we can simply note that if a belief can be shown to be known when some particular set of conditions has been met, it has also been shown to be justified when those conditions are met. As such, considering what it takes for a belief to be known is often thought to be relevant to considering what it takes for a belief to be justified.

Why Care About Justification?

Why should we care about the notion of justification? We should care because we spend a great deal of our lives thinking about what we are justified in believing. We are a kind of creature that wants to have reasons for the things we do. We want to be justified in our judgments about what other people are like and about what course of action is likely to get us the results we want. In other words, we should care about what justification is precisely because the notion is so central to our lives.

Fallibilists claim it is possible for a justified belief to be false. Is this correct? If so, under what sort of conditions can a belief be justified but
false? Does the regress argument make a convincing case for foundationalism? What, if any, weaknesses does the argument have? Suppose there are Basic Beliefs. What would be some good candidates for examples of Basic Beliefs? What would allow these beliefs to be justified without the support of other beliefs? What does it mean for a set of beliefs to be coherent? What does coherence have to do with justification? Are there beliefs which are justified in some situations, but not others? If so, what are some examples? Why does the situation make a difference?

**Suggested Further Reading**


Lewis, C. I. An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation. LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1946.


