A Social Foundationalist Response to the Epistemic Regress Problem

1. Introduction

It is almost trivial to say that, as epistemic agents, we come to believe *that P* because this is justified by the other beliefs that we already hold. But for the Pyronnian skeptics, this picture of justification collapses upon as soon as we take it to its extreme and ask how this series of justifications is ultimately justified. In this case we are left, they claim, with three choices: an infinite chain of regress (as the infinitists would claim), a circular chain of mutually-justifying beliefs (as held by the coherentists), or a set of basic beliefs that do not need to be justified by any other beliefs (as the foundationalists tend to accept).

In this paper, I accept the third horn of the trilemma and defend foundationalism from what I deem to be its strongest critique – Wilfred Sellars's (1997) Argument from Epistemic Priority, as developed by Jeremy Koons (2016) – by arguing for a form of foundationalism in which social *is-talk* serves as non-inferential propositional knowledge at the base of the epistemic pyramid. I begin this argument by elaborating upon the epistemic regress problem, before focusing specifically on the merits of foundationalism, as well as its major critiques. I then reconstruct the main anti-foundationalist argument to which this paper responds: the Sellarsian Dilemma and its development into the argument from epistemic priority in the work of Jeremy Koons. Finally, I propose a solution based on the fundamentality of social *is-talk*, demonstrating how these socially-acquired concepts can serve as the foundations for our pyramids of knowledge.

2. Foundationalism and its Discontents

When the skeptic asks about how we know what we know, the standard response is to look for the justification of our beliefs. These justifications come in the form of other beliefs that justify the particular things we claim to know – we know that rained because we know that the soil and plants are wet, that no one was watering the garden earlier, that a fire hydrant has not gone awry to drench the area, and a bundle of other beliefs. But the persistent skeptic would continue to ask: how are those justifying beliefs justified? They would ask this question over and over again, whittling away at our web of beliefs insistently. The question is, what will they find at the bottom? This is the problem of epistemic regress (Aikin, 2010).

There are three main solutions to this problem. For the infinitists – very few philosophers have taken this view, but it is most famously defended by Peter Klein (2011) – the skeptic will never be able to stop asking the question, because our beliefs are an infinite chain of reasons that never actually terminate. For the coherentists – a much bigger fraction of epistemologists, defended most famously by Laurence Bonjour before his defection to the foundationalist camp (1988)– the skeptic will be forced to ask the question in circles like a merry-go-round, as our web of beliefs is cyclical by nature, and is justified precisely because all of the beliefs cohere with each other. Finally, for the foundationalists – the largest and perhaps oldest segment of epistemologists, defended most famously by the likes of Roderick Chisholm (2013) – the skeptic's incessant questioning will be put to rest when we reach our foundational beliefs, which do not need other beliefs to justify them. These are the three horns of what is called "Agrippa's

Trilemma[1]"

While all of these answers have their merits, I find the first two responses lacking. Infinitism is particularly easy to swat away, as its relative unpopularity is a byproduct of the numerous objections to it, which are in my opinion damning. For one, critics point out a seeming incongruence between an infinite chain of justification and a clearly finite mind that supposedly contains it (Zhao, 2021). Moreover, its entire premise is a concept long assailed by philosophers as problematic: an infinite regress (Nawar, 2022). Coherentism, while much more popular, likewise faces arguably damning critiques. For one, many coherentist theories of justification have been criticized for their lack of clarity on when propositions can be mutually supported, and on the extent to which particular coherences factor into the broader web of beliefs (Elgin & Van Cleve, 2013). More importantly, it faces what is called the isolation objection: if the only thing that matters is the internal consistency of the web of beliefs, how can the web in any way be dependent upon reality (Moser, 1989)? In other words, they argue that if justification is based purely on coherence, there is no assurance that it is *truth-tracking*.

As such, in this paper, I adopt a form of foundationalism. Foundationalism holds that there are certain basic beliefs which are self-justified or justified non-inferentially, and upon

[1] Since Agrippa's trilemma is presented as an argument for skepticisim, I do not consider the acceptance of the skeptical conclusion as a response to it, and hence have not discussed it here. Moreover, in the interest of space, only superficial descriptions of the various theories of epistemic justification have been given here. Ernest Sosa's (2018) anthology of epistemological readings is a useful resource for those interested in a more comprehensive account of these views.

which all other beliefs ultimately rest. These foundational beliefs might be understood as self-evident truths, sensory experiences, or other forms of immediate awareness that do not require further justification (Hasan, 2022). While foundationalists, differ on what precisely counts as a foundational belief – classical foundationalists tend to emphasize self-evident truths and infallible sensory experiences, while modest foundationalists allow for basic beliefs that are defeasible or open to revision – the affirmation of a solid bedrock for knowledge upon which all other beliefs drawn justification from remains its core tenet.

While I am in no way claiming that foundationalism is a perfect theory, it enjoys particular merits that, in large part, explain its relative popularity. For one, its basic metaphor intuitively responds to the regress problem: much like a pyramid, our beliefs rest on a chain of justified other beliefs which are ultimately grounded in unshakeable foundations that are self-justifying. Not only is the mechanism here clear, but it also aligns with a commonly accepted feature of beliefs wherein we seem to be much more sure about certain beliefs than others.

But this, again, is not free from critiques. The most serious of these critiques all attempt to question what seems to be the solution's most vulnerable point: the epistemic foundation itself. One line of attack targets the arbitrariness of these beliefs, claiming that the selection of these foundations is artificial and therefore nonsensical (Howard-Snyder & Coffman, 2006). Another anti-foundationalist argument focuses on the certainty of these beliefs, pointing out that we are often unsure about whether to believe the main candidate for epistemic foundations – observation reports – and that these foundations are therefore not as unshakeable as they once were (Pollock & Cruz, 1999). Unlike the previous objections to infinitism and coherentism, however, they seem

to be fairly easy to respond to. On the first count, we need only to show that discovering noninferentially-justified beliefs is not an arbitrary process, as the need for non-inferential bases is already a clear criterion for selection. Likewise, only strong foundationalism – which requires incorrigible foundations – is vulnerable to the second count, and the foundationalist can easily adopt a weaker notion of foundational beliefs.

One critique, however, stands out as particularly challenging, as evidenced by the wealth of scholarship attempting to reconstruct and refine it: the Sellarsian Dilemma. It is this specific critique that I attempt to answer in this paper.

3. The Sellarsian Critique of Foundationalism

In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Wilfred Sellars offers what I think is the most devastating anti-foundationalist argument. In this section, I reconstruct this argument – both as it was originally presented by Sellars, and as it was developed by Jeremy Koons – before spelling out exactly what it would take to respond to the Sellarsian dilemma.

Sellars's master argument begins by setting out the qualities that a belief must possess to serve as a foundational belief: (1) positive epistemic status, (2) epistemic independence, and (3) epistemic efficacy (DeVries et al., 2000). For clarity, these three qualities can be defined as follows:

PES: *p* has positive epistemic status for S iff S is more justified in believing p than its

negation[2]

EI: *p* is epistemically independent for S iff the positive epistemic status of *p* for S does not depend on inference from any other belief to have positive epistemic status

EE: *p* is epistemically efficacious for S iff the positive epistemic status of *p* for S is able to confer positive epistemic status upon other beliefs.

From these definitions, Sellars shows that no belief can satisfy all three conditions, and therefore that there are no foundational beliefs. The argument proceeds as follows:

Foundational knowledge must either be propositional (such as, for example, an axiom of thought, or a conceptual definition), or non-propositional (such as the perception of an apple, or even perhaps the material object itself). If it is the latter, contends Sellars, then it cannot be epistemically efficacious, because only propositions can have a truth value, and therefore only they can confer positive epistemic status on others. If it is the former, he says further, it must either be inferential or non-inferential. But if it is inferential, then it is obviously not epistemically independent. Therefore, the only candidate left for foundational knowledge is non-inferential propositional knowledge (such as the observation report "this is red").

What, then, seems to be the problem? Is this not exactly what the foundationalist proposes? Sellars says that upon closer scrutiny, even this fails, because non-inferential

[2] The definition here is drawn from Chisholm (1973). In his terminology (which I have not used here so as not to invoke arguments on hsi formulation of an overall foundationalist theory of knowledge), to have positive epistemic status is to have an epistemic status that is more justified than propositions that are counterbalanced.

propositional knowledge is not truly epistemically independent, since the observation report's authority does not come from itself. They do not gain positive epistemic status by themselves because, as he points out, the subject gains knowledge only if they are able to know that their reports are reliable, which is, ultimately, another piece of knowledge. As Sellars himself says:

> "All that the view I am defending requires is that no tokening by S *now* of "This is green" is to count as "expressing observational knowledge" unless it is also correct to say of S that he *now* knows the appropriate fact of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y,* namely that (and again I oversimplify) utterances of "This is green" are reliable indicators of the presence of green objects in standard conditions of perception (76-77)."

It is from this point of departure that Koons develops his own explication of the Sellarsian dilemma, calling the contention quoted above the *Argument from Epistemic Authority* restating this latter point by Sellars succinctly: *is-talk* is epistemically prior to *looks-talk*.

He argues for this cleverly with an example. Suppose, he says, Smith and Jones are observing as a bluish-violet glow envelops a church steeple, hissing and buzzing while a thunderstorm rages on. While Smith is well-read in the sciences and understands that this is the result of the ionization of air molecules due to the intense energy of a thunderstorm, Jones has a worldview that is "a poorly-supported pastiche of superstition and paranormal, which he has acquired from poorly-sourced websites and unreliable supermarket tabloids (tabloids of the sort that specialize in absurd stories about Elvis sightings, people giving birth to alien babies, and bizarre tales of the supernatural (4158)." Despite observing the exact same phenomena, they each have two different beliefs, with Smith believing that he saw the natural phenomenon that is St.

Elmo's Fire, while Jones thinks that he saw a ghost. While Smith is clearly justified in his belief, is Jones justified as well? For Koons, Jones's belief is not justified, because his *look-talk* failed to live up to the standards of an empirically-validated theory of *is-talk*. Therefore, says Koons, "the observational predicates ('ghost,' 'St. Elmo's fire,' etc) we employ stand and fall with the theories that stand behind them." Thus, again, we are only justified in using these concepts if they exist within the content of an overall theory with positive epistemic status – and therefore are only justified in using them by appealing to knowledge beyond the observation reports themselves.

Taken together, the Sellarsian Dilemma and Koons's explication of it are a formidable opposition to the foundationalist picture of knowledge. I also agree with several of their conclusions: that non-propositional knowledge cannot be epistemically efficacious, that inferential propositional knowledge is obviously not epistemically independent, and that observation reports do indeed require justified *is-talk* in order to lead to have positive epistemic status.

In my view, however, this critique rests on a myopic view of *is-talk* that restricts these conceptual structures to the individual, which therefore forces these conceptual structures to be understood as beliefs. I argue that when *is-talk* is understood socially – in that the conceptual structures of *is-talk* are acquired through social processes, it can have positive epistemic status despite not being epistemically justified (since it depends on social justification). This thereby allows for authoritative noninferential propositional knowledge claims which, in turn, can serve as foundational knowledge. To do this, I must show that this social is-talk meets the

aforementioned requirements of foundational knowledge: positive epistemic status, epistemic independence, and epistemic efficacy.

4. The Social Foundationalist Response

With the requirements of a solution to the Sellarsian Dilemma spelled out, I now offer a solution based on a social justification. After laying out the groundwork for my contention, I argue that social is-talk can (1) have positive epistemic status, (2) are epistemically independent, and (3) are epistemically efficacious, which means it can serve as foundational knowledge. I then respond to a few key counter arguments for this position. I end this final section by showing how social foundationalism improves upon other responses to anti-foundationalist argumentation, especially as a potential springboard for naturalizing epistemological inquiry into the epistemic regress problem.

It is necessary to first clarify what I mean by social is-talk in this instance. Drawing from Koons's own usage of *is-talk*, I use it to refer not to top-down criteria that seek to provide an essential definition of what a particular concept X is, but bottom-up definitions that explain the characteristics of the particular concept, allowing observations of these criteria to lead to judgements wherein whatever is being perceived *is X*. I explicitly talk about this as *social* to differentiate it from Koons' understanding of *is-talk* as a personal theory or conceptual schema, and to highlight that these concepts arise from regularities of social behavior rather than purely epistemic judgements.

To illustrate this definition further, this understanding of social is-talk is akin to Pollock's

(1974) notion of justification conditions in contrast to truth conditions, where he talks about the importance not just of objective parameters for the determination of what a thing absolutely *is*, but also the observation conditions that allow the observer to identify that whatever they are observing *is X.* To reappropriate Pollock's analogy for justification conditions*, social is-talk* is not the ornithologist's scientific definition of the bird, it is the cluster of criteria (such as the presence of wings and feathers, the ability of flight, and other similar observable conditions) that allows the onlooker to affirm that the entity being observed in their binoculars truly is a bird. It usually takes the form "If C1^C2^...Cn" then it is likely that p" where C1 to Cn are various observation conditions, and p is the judgement that the observed entity *is X*.

It is likewise necessary to discuss what is meant by "social justification." In this paper, social justification is construed broadly as justification through social facts rather than inference. We may make this definition more explicit as follows:

> **SJ:** *p* is socially justified iff (1) it has positive epistemic status, (2) it derives positive epistemic status from social facts, and (3) its positive epistemic status does not have any other belief as a necessary condition.

One can note that this definition has a few salient features. First, it does not require socially justified beliefs to be incorrigible, as merely having positive epistemic status is enough. Second, it does not require socially justified beliefs to be justified only on the basis of social factors; they can be justified by other beliefs as well, but they must still have positive epistemic status even without these beliefs.

Finally, we must explicitly state what it means for a proposition to derive positive epistemic status from social facts. Here, I use Durkheim's (1982) notion of social facts to refer to values and behaviors that are "external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him (p.52)." The justification conditions for identifying a bird, for example, may be seen as a social fact, in that it is external to the onlookers and socially constructed, yet is able to coerce them to judge particular perceptual content in a particular way. These social facts are internalized and "learned" by mechanisms that are inscribed in social participation, such as the child's ostensive learning of concepts during infancy, or the ways new group members become acquainted with the conceptual structures of the groups they are affiliated with through mimicry and explicit instruction (Carls, 2021; (Batzke & Ernst, 2023).

Taking these clarifications together, we see the main motivation for appealing specifically to social *is-talk* as a response to the Sellarsian Dilemma. The dilemma trades on the assumption that the *looks-talk* involved in observation reports is epistemically secondary to *is-talk*, which when restricted to individual *is-talk*, seems to gain positive epistemic status only through inference. But social facts seem, at least prima facie, to be able to confer positive epistemic status to social *is-talk*, and it does so through social justification rather than inference.

But can social is-talk, in fact, satisfy all three requirements for foundational knowledge? Let us examine these requirements in turn. First, social *is-talk* can have positive epistemic status, because social justification does provide a mechanism by which a subject S can become more justified in believing S than its negation. The existence of a social fact governing conceptual judgements of the form "*if X1^X2^...Xn then it is likely that p"* does give a subject a positive

reason to believe *p* rather than ~p.

This is better illustrated by appealing to an example. Suppose that a caveman called Fred sees a plant in front of him. His senses provide several observation reports such as that he is looking at the plant under standard conditions, the plant appears to have compound leaves with three leaflets on each leaf, and that it has berry-like fruits containing a single seed (drupes) that are hard and whitish.[3] Over time, his tribe has learned not to touch this plant because it causes intense rashes, and so growing up, Fred has been spanked by accompanying adults every time he attempted to hold the plant. He has never been explicitly told about the conceptual judgements of the plant, and hence does not have testimonial beliefs to go by. Does Fred's belief that "If I am observing something under standard conditions that seems to be a plant with three leaflets on each leaf, and berry-like fruits containing a hard and whitish seed, I am likely perceiving a poisonous plant," have positive epistemic status through social justification? Is he justified in believing that his perceptual experiences do entail a further *looks-judgement* even without appealing to any other belief, and instead simply internalizing social behavior?[4] The answer

[3] One potential point of disagreement in this response is its tendency to transform concepts into a russian nesting doll of *is-talk*, as this attempt at identifying the plant branches downward into conceptual questions with regards to the observation conditions for three-ness, berry-likeness, hardness, and whitishness, which subsequently must be defined by even more observation conditions. I find it acceptable that there will come a point wherein these concepts can only be explained by ostensive appeals to perception.

[4] The previous objection may be carried over here as well, pointing out that these beliefs depend on, at minimum, the social *is-talk* of their underlying observation conditions. But this can once again be resolved by recognizing that it is social *is-talk* all the way down, and that our social facts still ultimately justify our knowledge. To return to the

seems to be a resounding yes. Therefore, social *is-talk* can indeed have positive epistemic status through social justification.

The immediate critique here is that the non-epistemic values involved in social justification cannot possibly change a belief's epistemic status, as these values only correspond to the social desirability of a belief, and in no way correspond to its truth. This is akin to the general objection offered by BonJour in his original argument against foundationalism, saying that beliefs are only justified if the subject has a good reason to think that they are true. But social facts are truth-tracking as well, at least to some extent. Social facts arise as a product of the interests of both individuals and society as a whole. If we accept that truth is, in general, something to be desired for both individuals and society, then it follows that we can reasonably expect social forces to be generally truth-tracking, if only to resolve doxastic coordination problems and to be socially beneficial in instances wherein true beliefs lead to social gains. In this case, the truth-tracking nature of social facts arises because it supervenes upon the social interests that are at play in the construction of these social institutions.[5]

Second, social is-talk can be epistemically independent, because the change in epistemic

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analogy of the pyramid, my view does not require every instance of social *is-talk* to be equally basic; it only requires that the most basic beliefs are instances of *is-talk*, allowing for other instances of social *is-talk* to draw on the conceptual infrastructure of other, more basic, instances.

[5]My position does not necessitate that the foundational beliefs are incorrigible, and should instead be taken as a form of modest foundationalism. As such, the social facts need not be perfect paths to true belief; they only need to be generally truth-tracking so as to be able to confer positive epistemic status on the beliefs acquired through social justification.

status did not require inference from any other beliefs. A core facet of social facts is that they are external and irreducible to the psychology of the subject, and are hence not beliefs in themselves. While they may lead individual certain things –as is the case for social *is-talk* – these beliefs arise must arise from non-epistemic considerations such as the need to fit in, the desire to communicate on common ground, or even the fear various social control methods, precisely because there is no belief from which they can be drawn.

But a critic may once again ask: would the subject not have to believe in the positive epistemic status of the claim that the learning process is reliable before accepting the social *is-talk* as foundational knowledge? I argue once again in the negative. Let us pursue once more Fred the caveman's judgement of the poisonous plant. Must Fred have the explicit belief that the social facts governing his judgement are reliable? No, he need not even have explicit knowledge of the existence of any social facts external to him, and instead only have the internal belief that the particular criteria he perceived entail a judgement that he is looking at a poisonous plant. The authority of the judgement does not come from a belief in the reliability of the mechanism in which it was attained, but from the social factors that grant the belief positive epistemic status.

Finally, social is-talk is clearly epistemically efficacious, in that it satisfies exactly what Sellars and Koons are looking for. By providing the necessary conceptual infrastructure, it allows beliefs such as "I am appeared to by what looks like poison ivy," and the succeeding "I am looking at poison ivy" to have positive epistemic status.

But the critic may hazard one final critique, pointing out that it is difficult to accept that something can be inferentially justified by something that is not inferentially justified. This

argument, however, merely begs the question. If we accept that being inferentially justified is a necessary condition for a belief to inferentially justify another, then we have sneaked the impossibility of foundationalism into our definitions.

What does this mean for the self-evident status of observation reports? The Sellarsian dilemma shows that while the observation report does seem to be evident upon its experience by the subject, it is not epistemically independent, since its justification depends first on the deployment of the necessary conceptual structures. However, since the foundationalist model is still, over all, linear, one could still reasonably call them, to some extent, foundational, in that they proceed directly from the conceptual structures and are therefore among the lowest rungs on the so-called pyramid of epistemic justification.

What does this mean for the structure of epistemic justification as a whole? Social foundationalism basically argues that the true base of our pyramid of epistemic justification has been, for so long, buried in the sand. Its real basis is the internationalization of social conceptual structures in the form of social *is-talk*, which is both epistemically prior to and necessary for our beliefs regarding how things appear to us, and subsequently, how the world actually is. We end with a Wittgenstein-esque understanding of epistemic justification, wherein we can justify our beliefs because we are initiated into a particular language game (or perhaps, in this case, conceptual game) that provides the conceptual infrastructure for our beliefs.

This position provides a few benefits. For one, it requires no assumption about *a priori* givenness or any necessary connection between how things appear to us and how they really are. Traditional foundationalism demanded the supposition that somehow our looks-judgements

inherently opened the gates to the structure of the world. Here, the assurance is only that our looks-judgements are grounded on how our societies collectively apprehend particular external experiences. Nevertheless, this assurance is still a good reason to believe that our judgements are veritastic, at the very least in terms of a pragmatic sense of what it means for our beliefs to be "true."

Furthermore, it provides us with an intuitive understanding of justification that accords with how we usually think about the acquisition of knowledge as a matter of social teaching – an understanding that was articulated philosophically as early as Augustine in his Confessions. It simply posits that we acquire basic beliefs not through any given internal knowledge, but regularities of social behavior that occurred in all of our childhoods and lead us to form concepts of what animals are, what shapes and colors mean, and even more basic concepts such as truth and falsity.

Finally, this answer to the epistemic regress problem is appealing because it does not merely speculate upon the structure of empirical justification, but it provides a theory that can either be supported or refuted by empirical work in naturalized epistemology. Since it posits a concrete mechanism for the acquisition of foundational knowledge in the form of social *is-talk,* future work assessing the case for social foundationalism can examine not only its logical viability (as I have attempted to do in this paper) but whether it accords with the empirical evidence on concept formation, particularly for new initiants into language games such as children or patients being rehabilitated from brain damage. If it is correct, future studies can strengthen its case by demonstrating mechanisms for the translation of social regularities into our

ways of thought. If it is not, it can be refuted by showing that the dominant method of concept formation does not necessitate learning from regularities in social behavior. In any case, the theory provides an interesting springboard for naturalized epistemological inquiry.

5. Conclusion

Overall, I have demonstrated the viability of a view of the structure of our epistemic justification that is built on the fundamentality of social *is-talk*, or conceptual infrastructure justified by social facts that justify our supposedly foundational looks-judgements and the rest of our knowledge. Responding to the Sellarsian dilemma, I show how social *is-talk* can fulfill all three requirements of foundational knowledge: positive epistemic status, epistemic independence, and epistemic efficacy. I also show that it improves upon traditional foundationalist answers by requiring fewer assumptions about innate knowledge and concepts whilst still remaining truth-tracking, utilizing an intuitive understanding of concept formation, and providing a clear springboard for reinforcement or refutation in naturalized epistemological inquiry.

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