

In this paper I will explain what the Agrippan Trilemma is and explain the ways that foundationalism and coherentism are responses to it. I will then prove that, although foundationalism and coherentism are attractive responses to the Trilemma they have some serious problems that limit their usefulness in our search for truth and knowledge. Namely, foundationalism's inability to properly respond to the 'level ascent' argument and coherentism's inability to leap the wide chasm between true belief and knowledge.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD a philosopher by the name of Agrippa was credited with giving clear articulation to what was considered to be a serious problem with the justification of knowledge and true beliefs. It works on the assumption that knowledge must be grounded in good reason in order to be justified. If we can accept this as fact, the sceptic argues that we will soon find that our belief and knowledge are not well grounded at all. The Agrippan argument shows that a persistent investigation into the reasons for our knowledge will lead to one of three things.

The first option of the Trilemma is infinite regress. This occurs when one's justification for a belief is based on another belief, which in turn is based on another belief and so on into infinity. Infinite regress of justification is computationally impossible and therefore, useless as an approach to justification. If, for example, you held that belief A was justified by belief B, one would then question what justified belief B. In order to be epistemically responsible you would need to give reason for holding belief B. Upon stating belief C as your justification for belief B one may begin to see the pattern of infinite regression beginning to form.

Circularity of argumentation is the second option of the Agrippan Trilemma. This form of justification occurs when one belief, A, is justified by another belief, B, which is justified by A. If, for example, someone claims that all opponents of affirmative action are racist and then defends the point by saying, "If they weren't racist, they wouldn't oppose it," that person is presenting a circular argument. This type of argumentation can come in a much larger form but the size of the argument has nothing to do with its inherent flaw of circularity.

The third option for justification according to the Agrippan Trilemma is called dogmatism. Dogmatic justification is the most epistemically irresponsible form of justification because it is not justification at all. It can be best described as a refusal or inability to justify one's beliefs. For example one could claim that they believe in god but fail to justify their belief and simply take this claim as true knowledge. This type of justification can be referred to as dogmatic and is embraced by a group called the foundationalists.

Rather than refute the claims contained within the Agrippan Trilemma the foundationalists thought it would bring about better results if they worked with the Trilemma as opposed to against it. The foundationalist agrees that infinite regress and circular justifications are sceptical but, in an attempt to avoid circularity, they deny that dogmatic justification is.

Foundationalists aim to avoid circularity and infinite regress in their approach by distinguishing between mediate (indirect) and immediate (direct) justification of belief. Perhaps the best way to explain this concept is with an example. "Consider a mediately justified belief that  $p$  (we are using lower case letters as dummies for belief contents). It is, by hypothesis, justified by its relation to one or more other justified beliefs,  $q$  and  $r$ . Now what justifies each of these, e.g.  $q$ ? If it too is mediately justified that is because it is related appropriately to one or more further justified beliefs, e.g.  $s$ . By virtue of what is  $s$  justified?"<sup>1</sup>

When justification is mediate infinite regress occurs. The creation of immediately justified beliefs by the foundationalists is an attempt at addressing this problem. Once the idea of immediately justified beliefs is injected into the Agrippan Trilemma the problem of infinite regress stops. This is because it is assumed that all beliefs trace back to one or more immediately justified beliefs.

There are various alternative versions of foundationalism. Some accounts of foundationalism, rather than explain the particular beliefs of one person, explain the beliefs of a group. Science is a good example of this, as scientific observations can be considered

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<sup>1</sup> Alston, William, "Foundationalism", in Dancy, Jonathan & Sosa, Ernest (eds.). *A Companion To Epistemology*, pp. 144-145.

immediately justified beliefs. Any knowledge derived from those immediately justified beliefs are considered to be mediately justified. There are also disagreements among foundationalists with regards to who or what is a reliable source of immediately justified beliefs.

Although there are different approaches to foundationalism and disagreements about small details, the idea that there are beliefs that can exist without reason or proper justification is present. It is also this idea that is its main fault. Often called the ‘myth of the given’, immediate justification has been attacked with what has been called a ‘level ascent’ argument. “According to which whatever is taken to immediately justify a belief can only do so if the subject is justified in supposing that the putative justifier has what it takes to do so. Hence, since the justification of the original belief depends on the justification of the higher level belief just specified, the justification is not immediate after all.”<sup>2</sup> So the problem then, is to find support for these higher level requirements. Once again we are faced with the problem of infinite regress of justification of belief. Thus, the foundationalist approach to the Agrippan Trilemma has proven itself to be an ineffective and epistemically irresponsible solution to the problems introduced by the Trilemma.

Competing with foundationalism as a feasible opposition to the Agrippan Trilemma is coherentism. The coherentist believes that the idea of justification through infinite regress and foundationalist dogmatism are unacceptable. The coherentist tries to salvage what they can from circular justification. Coherentism can most easily be described as a belief system, or web, in which beliefs become true or justifiable from other beliefs within that web. Rather than call their form of justification circular, the coherentist prefers to describe their system of beliefs as a self supporting web.

To elaborate, coherentism is the idea that justification can be found in a relationship where beliefs justify, or cohere, with each other. For example, a coherentist would argue that the reason you believe that you are sitting down reading this paper and not a rock is that your belief that you are reading this paper has a coherent place in your web of beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Among the

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p 147

<sup>3</sup> Lehrer, Keith, “Coherentism”, in Dancy, Jonathan & Sosa, Ernest (eds.). *A Companion To Epistemology*, p. 67.

advantages of this approach to justification is its ability to avoid infinite regress through a rejection of linear justification.

Within coherentism are various approaches that deserve some attention. The first distinction to be made between the different types of coherentism is the one between strong and weak. Weak coherentist theories “tell us that the way in which a belief coheres with a background system of beliefs is one determinant of justification, other typical determinants being perception, memory and intuition. Strong theories, by contrast tell us that justification is solely a matter of how a belief coheres with a system of beliefs.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, strong coherentism’s sole requirement for justification is coherence. The weak coherentist does not see coherence as his or her only requirement for justification.

Another important distinction to make when discussing coherentist theories is the distinction between positive coherentism and negative coherentism. For a belief to be justified by a positive coherence theory of justification it must cohere with a background system of beliefs. In order to produce justified belief with a negative coherence theory we must make sure that it does not fail to cohere with ones background system of beliefs. Perhaps put more clearly “according to a positive coherence theory, coherence has the power to produce justification, while according to a negative coherence theory, coherence has only the power to nullify justification.”<sup>5</sup>

As illustrated, there are many different approaches to the coherentist theory of justification. With all the differences in this system there is one similarity, the idea that a belief can be justified if it coheres with the other beliefs in that particular system of belief. It is this basic belief of coherentism that leads to its fatal flaw.

This flaw of coherentism was born from its reliance on internal justification based on relations among beliefs. The problem is that if “justification is solely a matter of internal relations between beliefs, we are left with the possibility that the internal relations might fail to

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p 67.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p 67.

correspond with any external reality.”<sup>6</sup> For coherentism to be of any use it must find a way to progress from merely justifying beliefs, erroneous or otherwise, to being able to provide knowledge of the external world.

The deep chasm that separates true belief from knowledge may be explained best through example. Let us analyze the case of a lunatic who believes he is an orange. In his mind everything he believes coheres with the belief that he is, in fact an orange. According to the coherentist, the lunatic would be justified in this belief.

The lunatic in the example, like all people has a background system of beliefs that has a theory about how we relate to the external world. “For justification to convert to knowledge, that theory must be sufficiently free from error so that the coherence is sustained in corrected versions of our background system of beliefs.”<sup>7</sup>

The idea that a lunatic or a person in good mental health could have an erroneous theory about their relation to the world is not difficult to picture. If this is possible what can be said of a theory of knowledge that lacks the ability to distinguish erroneous from hard earned justified belief? What can be said of its failure to “bridge the gap between mere true belief, which might be no more than a lucky guess, and knowledge, which must be grounded in some connection between internal subjective conditions and external objective realities.”<sup>8</sup>

In an attempt to free itself from the grip of the Trilemma the coherentist must exercise an unacceptable amount of epistemic irresponsibility. The idea that individual beliefs can be justified as long they cohere with the individuals other beliefs is neither profound or of any use in our search for knowledge and responsibly justified belief.

In this paper I have explained what the Agrippan Trilemma is and the sense that foundationalism and coherentism are responses to it. I have proven that foundationalism and coherentism seem like attractive positions to take. However, upon further investigation they

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p 69.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p 147

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p 147

appear epistemically irresponsible and much less attractive due to foundationalism's inability to answer the 'level ascent' problem and coherentism's inability to leap the wide chasm between true belief and knowledge.