The 'Agrippan Trilemma' is a problem that identifies the somewhat ambiguous relationship between belief and justification. Both foundationalism and coherentism attempt to resolve a piece of this trilemma by establishing particular relations between justification and belief. Foundationalists will typically take the position that there has to be some immediate beliefs that do not require justification, all other beliefs will rest on these foundations (which are generally understood to be either somewhat cognitively or phenomenally based, or self-evident in some way). Coherentists hold a position that suggests that beliefs are only justified if they can fit coherently into the system of beliefs held by an individual. Foundationalists often rely heavily on the infinite regress argument and such a strategy does not necessarily yield a viable solution to the Agrippan Trilemma. On the other hand, coherentists who tend to reject the infinite regress argument, have the problem of determining just how and when an individual's system of beliefs coheres with a new belief.

How does a belief become justified? Does a belief require reference to further beliefs in order to be justified? Does this entail an infinite regress? These are questions that were raised by the school of Agrippa during a time in ancient Greece when Pyrrhonian skepticism was experiencing a revival. The Agrippans actually went so far as to create modalities which describe the ways in which claims may possibly be justified. The Agrippan Trilemma emerges from three such modalities, it is constructed in the following way. If the justification of one belief is based on reference to further beliefs then it is difficult to see how any belief can be justified since this relation between belief and justification entails an infinite regress. If this infinite regress is to be stopped at any point then the chain of justification will be broken and all beliefs will cease to be justified. Beliefs may also be justified by invoking a circular system of justification (as opposed to a linear system). Such a system will entail a structure that would allow a belief 'A' to be justified

by a belief 'B', which will be justified by belief a 'C' which is in turn, justified by the original belief 'A'.

The foundationalist position traditionally embraces the second portion of this trilemma in adverse reaction to the first portion of the trilemma. Because it is absurd to talk of an infinite regress of justified beliefs (and circular argumentation is simply not an option for the foundationalist) the solution to this trilemma must be contained in determining a proper foundation for beliefs that will not require further justification. Direct or immediate beliefs constitute the foundation upon which this system of justification is built. The 'superstructure'[1] that rests upon this foundation is constructed with mediate or indirect beliefs. In order for a mediate belief to be justified it must stand in a particular relation to one of the foundational (immediate) beliefs. Justification of those immediate, foundational beliefs usually occur via experience, though they can often occurs through 'self-evidence' or some form of 'self-warrant'. In all cases of immediate belief it does seem as though belief will function to 'record' some aspect of experience that is supposedly directly given whether it be via some qualitative aspect of experience or concept that is simply deemed 'obvious', for even 'self-evident' concepts must at some point be experienced. Presumably, an original foundational belief sits at the base of a multiply branching tree structure that allows the justification of further mediate beliefs.[2]

This system of justification seems to entail that the original belief will occur as some sort of brute fact that will have no reference or bear any relation to further beliefs. It's very difficult to imagine what type of belief this could possibly be. Even if one posits a qualitative aspect of experience, such as 'redness', as an original brute fact of experience, one might be lead to wonder

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[1]William P. Alston, "foundationalism", *Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1992), p. 144-147.
[2]Ibid., p. 145.

whether a conception of 'redness' can be had without complimentary notions of 'blueness' and 'yellowness'. These beliefs only seem obvious when posited within some framework of further beliefs. As for 'self-justifying' beliefs, one might be lead to wonder whether the concept of 'justification' is required in order for such beliefs to be warranted. Does the individual know that a particular belief is 'justified'? If so, then it would seem that there are two beliefs at work (the particular belief in question and the belief that entails a notion of 'justification'), in which case it will be difficult to determine which belief is the original one. If the individual does not know that the self-justifying belief is justified, then s/he will not have a foundation upon which further mediate beliefs may be justified. In this way, it would seem as though a foundationalist position is not quite feasible. It is difficult to see how even the foundationalist cannot avoid, at the very least, some form of circular argument with the justification of belief, if not an all-out infinite regress through invoking further 'foundational' beliefs to justify previous 'foundational' beliefs.

This leads us to the coherentist position, which entails that the justification of beliefs occurs alongside the maintenance of a coherent system of beliefs. In order for a particular belief to be justified it must cohere with a background system of beliefs.[3] There seem to be four theories regarding the way in which a particular belief may come to be justified. The weak coherentist theory entails that the way in which a belief coheres with the background system of beliefs is just one determinant of belief-justification; other determinants include perception, memory, and intuition. The emphasis in the strong coherentist theory is placed on the manner in which a particular belief coheres with a background system of beliefs. There is also a positive and a negative theory of coherence. The positive theory of coherence entails that coherence with a background system of beliefs is a sufficient condition for the justification of a belief, whereas the

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[3]Lehrer, Keith "coherentism", *Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1992), p. 67-70.

negative theory implies that a belief will be nullified if it does not cohere with a background system of beliefs.[4] The problem with all of these theories seems to be that they rely on a stagnant (as opposed to, perhaps, a dynamic) system of background beliefs. Presumably, the background system of beliefs should constantly be in flux, since individuals are constantly adding, subtracting, and altering their beliefs. If beliefs are always in flux, how is it that coherence can be assessed? When the moment for the justification of a new possible belief occurs, does the background system of beliefs freeze in order that the coherence assessment may take place?

Is this a process that occurs consciously? If so, then we must constantly experience moments of mental paralysis in order so that we may determine whether a particular belief that is being considered is justified or not. Furthermore, are we really aware of all the beliefs that we hold? If not, how can we possibly determine whether or not a new belief is justified? Is this an 'unconscious' process? Don't individuals have some control over the beliefs that they hold to be justified? What happens to beliefs that remain unjustified? Do they take no part in the background system of beliefs? Is there any sort of queue for beliefs that are waiting for the moment of justification? At what point does a belief become justified? Does the justification of a new belief jeopardize any beliefs that were previously held to be justified?

While both the coherentist and the foundationalist positions are significantly problematic, it would seem that perhaps coherentism is a little further along in coming up with a viable solution to the Agrippan Trilemma. At the very least, coherentism seems to be somewhat more plausible than foundationalism, though this need not entail that the coherentist position be very plausible at all. As demonstrated above, many important questions regarding the coherentist system of justification remain unanswered.

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[4]Ibid., p. 67.