Foundationalism Vs. Skepticism: The Greater Philosophical Ideology

1. Introduction

Throughout this paper, the goal will be to accomplish three tasks. First, I will describe the foundationalist argument brought forward in philosophy, and attest to the strength of this theory. Along with explaining this argument, Descartes’ foundationalist theory will be used to give a brief example of how foundationalism can apply to the world in which humans live. The second goal will be to explain the opposing philosophical theory of skepticism, and highlight the objections that have been levied against skepticism. The final goal will be to argue that given the alternatives of foundationalism and skepticism, and that skepticism is not a valid hypothesis for the way that humans live in our society, foundationalism is a better alternative. By using this argument to give proof to the foundationalist theory, humans can rely upon foundationalist arguments to justify their beliefs.

2. The Foundationalist Argument and Strengths

Foundationalist theories begin with the idea that there are two types of beliefs, justified basic beliefs and justified nonbasic beliefs. Justified basic beliefs are beliefs that we can use as a foundation for our nonbasic beliefs, and are supported or justified from something other than beliefs (Lemos 2007: 45). These basic justified beliefs are the basis upon which humans justify our other ideas, hence the name foundationalism. With a foundational or basic belief, we can create a linear group of beliefs that build upon each other, thus providing a chain of justification for all of our beliefs. These basic beliefs, provided by Lemos, are described when the author notes, “Traditionally, examples of justified basic beliefs include two kinds, (1) beliefs about simple logical or mathematical truths and (2) beliefs about our own mental states” (Lemos 2007: 45). Examples from society provide evidence for this idea. For instance, humans do not need justification or support for the fact that 2=2, because this idea is something we simply understand as knowledge. Similarly, humans do not need to find justification to know that they are angry, sad, happy, or any other mental state, because this knowledge is apparent to humans. Although there are basic justified beliefs, we also have nonbasic beliefs that must be justified, and thus we must rely upon our basic beliefs as justification for these nonbasic beliefs.

Once the basic ideas behind foundationalism have been established, it is necessary to discuss one form of foundationalism. Classical foundationalism has been considered very strict by most scholars, and the resulting theory allows for humans to have justification for very little knowledge about the world or facts in general (Lemos 2007: 53). Classical foundationalists believe that humans can have justification for a proposition if they are certain about that proposition, or if they get justification from other beliefs that are also certain (Lemos 2007: 51). This argument holds that humans must be infallible about their belief, or deduce their beliefs from prior infallible beliefs. This method of foundationalism is very strict, and the constraint of infallibility, or the idea that you cannot be wrong about the idea, limits the amount of knowledge humans can have.
Despite the constraints placed on knowledge in the classical foundationalism approach, there remain certain ideas that cannot be denied. Descartes puts forward the most basic idea, which seems infallible “I am; I exist […],” (Descartes 1993: 19). In Descartes’ quotation, he notes that humans can think, and as long as we think this allows us to know that we exist. Even if we are being tricked or deceived about our thoughts, it is undeniable that if you think, you exist. This proposition acts as a justified basic belief for humans, where we may not understand why we exist, but we can know that we exist and base other beliefs upon this foundation.

3. Evidence for Classical Foundationalism (P)

Various scholars and authors have claimed that foundationalism is the only legitimate form of justification for obtaining knowledge. Although there are multiple theories for the justification of beliefs besides foundationalism and skepticism, which are two opposing ideologies, authors have given evidence to support the idea that foundationalism is the only ideology that gives a true argument for how humans can justify their knowledge. In Descartes’ Meditations, Descartes explains the importance of creating a firm foundation when he writes, “I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences” (Descartes1993: 13). Descartes notes that in order to create a process for knowledge, it is necessary to create a firm base of knowledge that you can build upon. Foundationalism is a source of justifying beliefs, where knowledge can be obtained through reliance upon previous beliefs.

Like Descartes, other scholars have attempted to provide reasons why foundationalism is the best process for justifying human’s beliefs. For example, Aristotle offered a regress argument as proof for foundationalism. This argument gives a reason to believe that there must be justified basic beliefs, which other beliefs rest upon. As Lemos notes, there are four possible outcomes for how a chain of beliefs can occur (Lemos 2007: 47). Lemos describes these four outcomes by writing, “[…] (i) the series terminates in a belief that is not justified, (ii) the series does not terminate, but contains an infinite number of supporting beliefs, (iii) the series is circular, (iv) the justificational series terminates or ends in a justified basic belief,” (Lemos 2007: 47). Foundationalists argue that there is a belief that leads to another belief, and this pattern continues in a line. Option one is shown as insufficient due to the fact that an unjustified belief should not support or serve as the foundation for other beliefs (Lemos 2007: 48). The second option is unworkable because humans would not be able to understand if there were no sources to our beliefs, and instead beliefs went on infinitely (Lemos 2007: 48). Option three also fails to provide a working method for foundationalism because circular belief means that one belief can justify itself, and humans understand that one belief is not able to act as justification for its own truth (Lemos 2007: 49).

After examining each of the four processes in the regression argument, the fourth option is the only process that seems to work. Lemos describes the effectiveness of the fourth option by writing, “Proponents of the regress argument claim that option (iv) is the only acceptable option, and therefore, there are justified basic beliefs. They conclude that since some beliefs enjoy nonbasic justification, there must be some beliefs that are justified basic beliefs,” (Lemos 2007: 49). The argument put forward by Lemos seems to conform to the world in which humans interact and obtain knowledge. The regress argument shows that there is only one way that humans’ knowledge can form, and that is to infer information from these basic justified beliefs, and thus obtain justification for other beliefs. There are other arguments for the justification of
knowledge such as coherentism, virtue epistemology, and many others that state that humans can be justified, but these other arguments do not hold that humans must have a foundational belief, which other beliefs are based upon. Aristotle’s regress argument proves that the only theory that is plausible is a theory that begins with a justified basic belief that acts as a foundation. This regress argument proves that foundationalism is the only argument that specifically requires a basic belief to act as a foundation, and the result is that foundationalism is the only plausible theory where humans have epistemic justification for their beliefs.

Strong and lasting theories are those that can withstand the objections levied against them. The foundationalist argument has a few objections, which attempt to discredit this method of justification of our knowledge. The first objection to foundationalism notes that philosophers may argue that the only way for humans to justify their beliefs is drawing on other beliefs (Lemos 2007: 74). In other words, humans can only justify their belief by referring back to another belief. Foundationalists will respond to this objection by noting that justifying a belief is very different than a belief being epistemically justified (Lemos 2007: 74). Lemos further notes that, “Even if the only way to justify a belief is to appeal to other beliefs, it does not follow that beliefs are the only source of justification or the only things that make beliefs justified,” (Lemos 2007: 74). This idea holds that humans do not always justify beliefs based upon other beliefs, but many times use experiences or feelings to justify their beliefs and knowledge.

A second argument against foundationalism attests that beliefs must have certain features, and these certain features must have “justified ‘meta-beliefs,’” (Lemos 2007: 75). Lemos further explains these meta-beliefs by giving the example that, “[…] (i) belief B is a cognitively spontaneous introspective belief, and (ii) cognitively spontaneous introspective beliefs are very likely to be true” (Lemos 2007: 76). By adding these additional standards for determining justified basic beliefs, these basic beliefs can no longer be considered justified basic beliefs. To respond to this objection, foundationalists have posed the answer that, “The requirement that every justified empirical belief be supported by justified meta-beliefs requires that we have an infinite number of increasingly complex meta-beliefs and this is a requirement that cannot be met” (Lemos 2007: 77). Again, the human mind is not able to devise an infinite number of meta-beliefs, and this leads to an implausible objection from those philosophers who argue against foundationalism. The response of these foundationalist scholars lends evidence for overcoming objections and supporting the belief that humans can have justified basic beliefs, which can be used to justify nonbasic beliefs. Thus, the foundationalist theory seems plausible in our society.

4. Skepticism (Q)

Although the majority of epistemological theories propose that humans have some form of justification for knowledge, skepticism argues the opposite point. A conception of skepticism holds that humans are not truly justified in believing many, or any, of the ideas that we typically believe to be knowledge (Lemos 2007: 131). Skeptics assert that humans are not justified, or able to have knowledge, and thus humans cannot understand either the external world or certain facts. Philosophical skeptics note that skepticism can have different degrees or levels. One level of skepticism, local skepticism, argues that humans do not have the ability to justify or know certain points or pieces of knowledge (Lemos 2007: 132). Another degree of skepticism, global skepticism, will posit that humans are unable to have knowledge about anything internal or external, thus humans have no justification for any knowledge (Lemos 2007: 132). Whereas
humans may not have the ability to justify one idea with local skepticism, all knowledge is ruled out for humans under global skepticism.

Multiple theories exist for the idea that humans are not able to have knowledge or justification about certain facts. One argument is the argument from certainty. A model of the argument for certainty is put forward in the “Module 9 Skepticism” notes (Agler 2010). This argument states,

(1) S knows that p only if S is certain that p
(2) S is not certain that p.
(3) S does not know that p.

(1) notes that it is possible to know some idea or proposition if you are certain about that proposition. The underlying justification for (1) comes from the principle of exclusion. The principle of exclusion holds that humans can have knowledge about a certain proposition if they can disprove the propositions that conflict with their idea. If you can disprove any objection to the idea you believe, then it follows that you have justification to believe this idea. (2) explains that humans are not able to be certain about propositions, and this premise can be supported by the sensitivity requirement for knowledge. The sensitivity principle holds that if you know that something is false, then you would stop believing that idea immediately (Lemos 2007: 142). Since skeptics argue humans do not have this sensitivity requirement, humans are not able to have knowledge (Lemos 2007: 142). Finally, (3) demonstrates that because of the prior two premises, humans are not able to have knowledge of certain propositions. Skeptics clearly believe that humans can never have absolute certainty about any knowledge, and thus humans have no knowledge. Certainty is described by Lemos, noting that certainty requires the “highest possible degree of justification,” (Lemos 2007: 134). In support of the certainty theory, although someone may believe that they have knowledge of something simple, they cannot be certain that an evil demon is not tricking them, nor can they assert that they are not a “brain in a vat” that is not actually experiencing the external world.

A second argument for skepticism is called the infallibility argument. The infallibility argument posits,

(1) S knows that p only if S is infallible that p
(2) S is not infallible that p.
(3) S does not know that p.

(1) explains that in order to know a proposition, there must be infallibility about that proposition. Since humans do not have infallibility about this proposition, noted in (2), humans again lack the ability to have knowledge. This denial of knowledge is portrayed in the (3). Skeptics will say that if humans are unable to be infallible about something, then they lack the ability to truly know that idea. Despite the various additional skeptical arguments, one final theory is sufficient to demonstrate the view of philosophical skeptics. The principle of exclusion argues that humans can know information if they can disprove any propositions that go against that idea (Lemos 2007: 140). Unfortunately, skeptics will also say that humans do not have the ability to disprove any facts with certainty, and thus they are unable to obtain knowledge about a subject (Lemos 2007: 140). Since skeptics argue that humans are not able to prove an idea with absolute
certainty or infallibility, humans are not able to disprove facts either, leading to a case where knowledge is an unobtainable ideal.¹

5. Objections to Skepticism (Not Q)

The certainty and infallibility arguments for skepticism are very strong, and hold that unless humans have perfect knowledge about something, they are not able to know this fact. One problem related to both of these arguments is the issue that most humans do not use the term “know” synonymously with “certainty” or “infallibility.” Humans continually make assumptions and claim to have knowledge about certain facts, despite the fact that we are not one hundred percent positive that these assumptions are correct. The same idea holds true for the infallibility argument, where being infallible is too strong for knowledge. The result remains that humans base their knowledge on ideas that they have evidence for, although they may not be certain or infallible about this idea.

Scholars in the philosophical world have come forward and argued against the skeptical argument from ignorance. One philosopher, G.E. Moore, holds that humans can have knowledge about certain facts, which is explained when Moore writes,

[…] skeptical arguments concerning the existence of the external world, other minds, or the past always rest on some premise or assumption which is less reasonable than the claims about knowledge or justification they are designed to refute. Since they are less reasonable to believe, it is not reasonable for us to abandon our knowledge claims. (cited in Lemos 2007: 144).

In Moore’s view, humans have basic ideas that are quite acceptable for our requirements of knowledge, and these ideas are more reasonable to hold than the ideas put forward by skeptics. To strengthen Moore’s response, Lemos notes that humans do not need to understand why one argument is more rational (Lemos 2007: 146). This point gives support to Moore because although humans may not understand why they believe they have certain knowledge, it is alright for them to continue to believe this knowledge without questioning their reasons.

A second response to the principle of exclusion, also referred to as the argument from ignorance, is noted as the relevant alternatives response. In this response, Lemos claims that humans are not required to disprove every possible alternative to an idea, but only disprove alternatives that are pertinent or closely related (Lemos 2007: 147). An example similar to those put forward by Lemos describes my belief that I have a nose. In order to have knowledge that I have a nose, I must disprove objections to this idea. Fortunately, in the relevant alternatives response, I do not have to disprove ideas like “I have a carrot for a nose,” or “I am just a brain in a vat,” but only ideas that are closely related to this idea.

¹ In addition to this idea, Lemos also notes the sensitivity requirement for knowledge, which humans lack for certain premises. Lemos explains this sensitivity requirement by writing, “S’s belief that p is sensitive= Df. If p were false, then S would not believe that p,” (Lemos 2007: 141). The sensitivity requirement holds that if we are sensitive about some idea, if that idea is not true then we would not believe that idea anymore. Skeptics claim that the problem lies in the fact that humans do not hold this sensitivity requirement, and thus knowledge may not be obtained by humans (Lemos 2007: 142). The resulting theory of skepticism holds that humans are unable to deny certain facts, and this hinders humans’ abilities to deny or prove any facts with absolute certainty.
The final objection to the principle of exclusion holds that although there may be multiple responses to a certain idea, the simplest answer is the best choice (Lemos 2007: 153). This theory, the inference to the best explanation theory, believes that humans can usually obtain knowledge by choosing the belief that is most reasonable in their mind. An example for this theory, similar to examples put forward by Lemos, describes the case where I am hit in the head with a bottle. After looking around, I notice a man a few feet away holding another bottle, smiling, laughing, and saying “I hit you right in your head!” There could have been a plane flying above that somehow opened a door and a passenger threw a bottle out, or a machine holding bottles could have exploded nearby, but the most reasonable answer is that the man who admitted to the action is the culprit. This argument seems to give support to the idea that humans can usually rely upon the most basic and reasonable answers as justification for knowledge.

The objections to skepticism give support to the idea that humans can have certain amounts of knowledge at any given time. Requiring certainty and infallibility is too strong for knowledge, and humans continually claim to have knowledge without being absolutely positive that they are correct. Thus, the certainty and infallibility arguments are not plausible in our society. Moore’s theory that humans do have certain facts of knowledge that we believe seems true for humans, based upon the fact that humans usually take certain pieces of knowledge at face value, for instance the idea that 2=2. The relevant response theory seems plausible due to the fact that most humans do not believe or find it possible to be “a brain in a vat,” or to believe other implausible ideas. Finally, I believe the inference to the best explanation theory accords best with our institutions about knowledge. Although there could be an infinite number of possibilities for ideas that humans take as knowledge, most people believe that the most reasonable idea can be taken as knowledge.

6. The Disjunctive Syllogism Argument

After investigating the idea of foundationalism, this theory seems plausible in many aspects. Aristotle’s regress argument demonstrates that foundationalism is the only theory that offers a foundational justified belief, which can act as justification for other nonbasic beliefs. According to this regress argument, the only possible way to have justification for our beliefs is to have a justified basic belief, thus showing foundationalism is the only theory of justification. On the contrary, global skepticism holds that humans are unable to have justification for any beliefs. The Moorean response, principle of exclusion, and the inference to the best theory arguments all disprove skepticism as a plausible theory. Based upon my arguments for foundationalism and against skepticism, foundationalism proves to be the greater theory of epistemic justification.

The argument can be formed as:

1. Foundationalism (P) or skepticism (Q)
2. Not skepticism (Not Q)
3. Therefore foundationalism (P).

(1) notes that only foundationalism (P) or skepticism (Q) can be the correct theory for establishing justification for our knowledge. The objections to skepticism form the second premise (not Q), where skepticism is found as insufficient as a theory of whether humans can have justification for knowledge. The result of this argument holds that since either foundationalism or skepticism must be the correct choice, and since skepticism was insufficient,
foundationalism is the correct theory. As a result, foundationalism is proven to be the correct theory of justification for our knowledge.

7. Conclusion

The disjunctive syllogism form of argumentation holds that there are two possible theories, and only one can be correct. The second point of this argument style holds one of the two theories must be incorrect, which results in the other theory being the correct choice. In comparing foundationalism and skepticism, it has been found that foundationalism theorists can offer evidence for the idea that humans can have both basic and nonbasic justified beliefs, which allow for these humans to have knowledge. In addition, foundationalists have demonstrated the ability to disprove the objections that have been formed against foundationalism. Conversely, skepticism does not allow for humans to have knowledge about the world or facts in general, but this theory is unable to refute numerous objections. After placing the two theories into the disjunctive syllogism argumentation form, foundationalism is the best theory to describe the ability of humans to justify their knowledge.

References

