

ON A “FATAL DILEMMA” FOR MODERATE FOUNDATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary foundationalists prefer Moderate Foundationalism over Strong Foundationalism. In this paper, we assess two arguments against the former which have been recently defended by Timothy McGrew. Three theses are central to the discussion: that only beliefs can be *probabilifying* evidence, that justification is *internal*, in McGrew’s sense of the term, and that only beliefs can be *nonarbitrary* justifying reasons.

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particular belief of a person is *basic* just in case it is epistemically justified and it owes its justification to something other than her other justified beliefs or their interrelations; a person’s belief is *nonbasic* just in case it is epistemically justified but not basic. Foundationalists agree that if one has a nonbasic belief, then—at rock bottom—it owes its justification to at least one basic belief. There are justified beliefs because and only because there are basic beliefs. Such is the genus *Foundationalism*.¹ One species is *Strong Foundationalism* (SF), the view that in order to be basic, a belief must enjoy certain epistemic immunities, e.g. immunity from error, refutation, or doubt. *Moderate Foundationalism* (MF) denies this.² Among contemporary foundationalists, MF is preferred over SF, but SF has its proponents, one of which is Timothy McGrew. In this paper, we assess two of his arguments against MF.

I. THE 1999 DILEMMA

McGrew says that any version of MF is the target of a “fatal dilemma.” That’s because, according to MF, “there are basic beliefs that are less than certain,” i.e., there are basic beliefs that “are more or less probable but that this probability falls short of a 100 percent guarantee.” But, declares McGrew, there is no such thing as probability, in the sense that counts for justification, that is not based on an inference

from other beliefs; for, “Probability [in the relevant sense] arises from a relation between the probable proposition and a body of evidence.” From this “simple fact about probability” emerges the dilemma, which he expresses as follows:

If there are basic beliefs that are merely probable, then they are not basic at all; they are inferred, probable in relation to some other beliefs that support them. The focus of inquiry shifts back to the supporting beliefs, and the dilemma gets started there once again: Either they are basic or they are not. If they are not, we have to go back still further. If they are basic, then they cannot be merely probable. (McGrew 1999, 226-227)

What, exactly, is the argument here? At the most general level, we suggest it is this:

1. Either there are merely probable basic beliefs or there are not.
2. If there are no merely probable basic beliefs, then MF is false.³
3. If there are merely probable basic beliefs, then MF is false.
4. So, MF is false. (1-3)

Premise 3, of course, is not just obvious, and McGrew argues for it along the following lines:

- 3a. Probability is a relation that holds only between a probable proposition and a body of evidence.⁴
- 3b. If probability is a relation that holds only between a probable proposition and a body of evidence, then a merely probable belief is based on an inference from other beliefs.
- 3c. If a merely probable belief is based on an inference from other beliefs, then, if there are merely probable basic beliefs, they are based on an inference from other beliefs.
- 3d. So, if there are merely probable basic beliefs, they are based on an inference from other beliefs.⁵ (3a-3c)
- 3e. If they are based on an inference from other beliefs, then they are not basic.
- 3f. So, if there are merely probable basic beliefs, then they are not basic. (3d, 3e)

It is a short step from 3f to 3. What should we make of this argument, specifically 3a and 3b?

We begin with 3b. Suppose that probability is a relation that holds only between a probable proposition and a body of evidence. 3b asserts that, in that case, a merely probable belief is based on an inference from other beliefs. But why suppose that follows? So far as we can see, the only possible reason to suppose that it follows is this:

- I. Only beliefs can be probabilifying evidence.

Thesis I is clearly false, however—assuming the ordinary concept of evidence is intended. Lawyers enter guns and fingerprints and the like “as evidence,” and people generally speak of experience as “evidence” for their mundane perceptual beliefs. The ordinary concept of evidence allows for things other than beliefs to be probabilifying evidence.

Perhaps McGrew means to use “evidence” in a technical sense that implies that only beliefs can be probabilifying evidence. If so, our objection has no force. However, if the argument is to remain valid, this technical sense of “evidence” must be used in premise 3a, in which case 3a is true only if

3g. Probability is a relation that holds only between a probable proposition and a body of *beliefs*.

3g, however, is false. Items other than beliefs can make a proposition more likely to be true than it otherwise would be. And here we don’t merely have in mind non-doxastic items such as propositions and statements.

Consider purely qualitative mental states, for example. Suppose your athlete’s foot is flaring up again, and you feel that characteristic itching between your toes. Naturally, you believe that your toes are itchy. That sensation has no propositional content, but the probability of the truth of the proposition that your toes are itchy is much greater than it otherwise would be given your sensation.

Another example is object perception. Suppose that the perceptual experience of objects has no propositional content, and suppose you are looking at a red cup in normal circumstances.⁶ Naturally, you believe that the cup is red. The cup’s visually appearing red to you has no propositional content, but the probability of the truth of the proposition that the cup is red is much greater than it otherwise would be given the cup’s visually appearing red to you.

But what if purely qualitative states and the perceptual experience of objects have propositional content? Even if so, 3g is false. That’s because the probability relation could hold between a probable proposition, on the one hand, and purely qualitative states and perceptual experience, on the other, in virtue of the fact that the propositional contents of the latter make the (believed) proposition probable.

It appears that McGrew’s dilemma has at least one false premise: 3b, if “evidence” is used in the ordinary sense; 3a if “evidence” is used in the technical sense. We have no doubt that the dilemma could be modified to meet our objection. We expect that any such modification, however, will resemble an argument he presented earlier in his career, to which we now turn.

II. THE 1995 DILEMMA

Here is how McGrew put the earlier argument:

1. If MF is true, then S has at least one basic belief which is internally justified but less than certain, i.e., which has an epistemic probability greater than zero but less than one. (Call this basic belief “B.”)

2. No proposition has an epistemic probability which is greater than zero but less than one in strict isolation; all judgments of intermediate epistemic probability or likelihood are implicit relational propositions of the form $P(h/e)$ 'n (i.e., the probability of h given the evidence e is n).
3. [So] If MF is true, then B is probable only in relation to some other proposition or propositions. (Call the conjunction of these propositions "C.")
4. Either S believes B on the basis of C or he does not.
5. If he does believe B on the basis C, then B is not basic for S (Definition of "basic"; stipulation that B is basic given in premise 1)
6. If he does not believe B on the basis of C, then S is at best only externally "justified" in believing that B, not internally justified.
7. [So] MF is false. (1995: 64)

What should we make of this argument?

For starters, note some minor infelicities. First, premise 1 is false. MF does not preclude externalist justification. Second, if 3 follows from 1 and 2, that is only because *the propositional content of B* is probable in relation to some other proposition or propositions, not because the belief-state as such—i.e., B—is probable in relation to that proposition. Third, we do not understand premises 4, 5, and 6. McGrew introduced the variable "B" to label belief-states, and we do not understand what it is for a *belief-state* to be the propositional content of a belief. Perhaps he intended the variable "B" to label propositions. If so, then we do not understand premise 1 since we do not understand what it is for S to "have" *the proposition B*.⁷

If we remove these infelicities, the following reconstruction is the result:

1. If MF is true, then S has a merely probable basic belief that p .⁸
2. If S has a merely probable basic belief that p , then there is some proposition or conjunction of propositions (call it "C"), such that the epistemic probability of p given C is greater than zero but less than one.
3. If there is some proposition or conjunction C such that the epistemic probability of p given C is greater than zero but less than one, then either S believes that p on the basis of C or S does not.
4. If S believes that p on the basis of C, then S's belief that p is not basic for S.
5. If S does not believe that p on the basis of C, then S's belief that p is not internally justified (and hence it is not justified for S, and thus not basic for her).
6. So, if MF is true, then S has a merely probable basic belief that p that is *not* basic for S. (1-5)
7. That is not possible.
8. So, MF is false. (7, 8)

We wish to focus on premises 4 and 5.

Suppose that the antecedent of premise 4 is true, that is, suppose that S believes that p on the basis of C. C, you will recall, is some proposition or conjunction of propositions such that the epistemic probability of p given C for S is greater than zero but less than one. Now, suppose that S's belief that p is based on C in the sense that her belief that p owes its justification, in large part, to the truth of C. In that case, the fact that S believes that p on the basis of C does not imply that her belief owes its justification to some other belief (i.e., belief *state*) of hers, in which case it does not imply that her belief that p is not basic. In what sense, then, must S's belief that p be based *on C* in order for 4 to be true? We suggest this sense:

4*. If S believes that p on the basis of *her belief that C*, then S's belief that p is not basic for S.

4* seems true. If S believes that p on the basis of her belief that C, then her belief that p owes its justification, in large part, to her *believing C*, in which case S's belief that p is not basic. This is how we will understand premise 4 here, as 4*. To avoid equivocation, we will have to read other uses of the locution "on the basis of C" in the same way, specifically in premises 3 and 5. Consider it done.

Although premise 4, understood as 4*, is true, premise 5 is false. As a first step toward seeing why, let's get a bit clearer about McGrew's take on what is "internal" about justification. He says that justification is internal in that justification must involve "factors to which [one] has access" (1995: 8). What factors, exactly, does he have in mind? And what sort of access? In the case of a merely probable belief that p, he says that the factors to which one must have access are one's (implicit) beliefs in those propositions with respect to which p is epistemically probable (i.e., C), and he says that for one to have such access is for it to be the case that one would appeal to those propositions (i.e., C) in defense of one's belief that p, "given enough time for reflection and sufficient linguistic resources" (1995: 67, 70).⁹ So we have the following thesis:

II. Justification is internal, in McGrew's sense of the term

With this in mind, consider the contrapositive of premise 5 (ignoring the parenthetical additions):

5. If S's (merely probable basic) belief that p is internally justified, then S believes that p on the basis of [her belief that] C.

5 is false, at least if the emphasis is on "internally." McGrew-style internalism does not require S to believe that p *on the basis of* her belief that C. It only requires that S believe C, and that S would appeal to C in defense of her belief that p given sufficient time and linguistic resources. These requirements could be met while S believed that p on the basis of something else, e.g. perceptual experience. In that case, S's belief that p might well be basic while meeting McGrew's internalist requirement.

To put some flesh on the bones of the option we mean to be pointing to, consider the following case.

There is a red cup in front of you, and you now have a visual experience characteristic of seeing a red cup under typical circumstances. (Call the experience “E.”) Naturally enough, you come to believe that there is a red cup. (Call the proposition that you believe “R.”) Furthermore, your believing R is causally explained, in no small part, by your having E; and experiences like E are related to the cognitive processes that give rise to them in such a way that, in the typical circumstances in which they operate, there is a lawlike tendency for those experiences to occur only if the beliefs that they produce are apt to be true. Moreover, there is a conjunction of propositions, C, such that the epistemic probability of R given E and C is very high for you, but below 1; and you believe C. Finally, if you had enough time for reflection and sufficient linguistic resources, you would appeal to C, and E as well, in defense of your belief that R. (Add that you have no defeaters if you’d like.)

Our point is not that this is a case of justified belief. Rather, our point is that nothing in this case runs afoul of McGrew’s internalism; furthermore, it is clearly a case in which your belief is *not* based on your *belief* in C.

So, if premise 5 is true, it is true in virtue of some aspect of justification other than McGrew’s internalism. What does he have to offer on that score? His thesis I—i.e., the claim that only beliefs can be probabilifying evidence—might do the trick. We have nothing to add to what we have already said about that. Alternatively, a certain element in what he calls “the traditional concept of justification” might do just as well (1995, 8). The element we have in mind is McGrew’s claim that justification involves having *nonarbitrary justifying reasons*. Amplifying on this claim, he writes:

This is an important component of the traditional concept of justification because it helps to define the connection between justification and reasonableness. A belief acquired at random, without evidential connection to the believer’s cognitive set, has *as such* no particular claim to truth. The problem is not that its origins are damning—it might later acquire credibility through appropriate evidential links with other beliefs. But pending such incorporation it has no credibility. A basic intuition regarding justification is that no belief can pass on credibility unless it possesses some credibility itself; hence, such arbitrary beliefs cannot confer justification. (1996, 10-11)

Two things stand out in this passage. First, what it is for a reason to be arbitrary is for it be such that there is no “evidential connection to the believer’s cognitive set”; correlatively, what it is for a reason to be *nonarbitrary* is for it to be such that there is an evidential connection to the believer’s cognitive set. Second, the absence of an evidential connection to one’s cognitive set is a bad-making feature of a reason since, in that case, the reason has no particular claim to the truth. Consequently, it lacks credibility, and so it cannot “pass on” justification to another belief.

Here an important fact emerges: there is only one sort of thing that can have all of the features McGrew identifies with a nonarbitrary justifying reason, namely a belief. Thus, McGrew’s account of nonarbitrary justifying reasons implies thesis

III. Only beliefs can be nonarbitrary justifying reasons

Here we begin to discern a potential answer to our question. On McGrew's supposition that S's merely probable basic belief that p is justified only if she believes that C, we asked why her belief that p must *owe its justification* to her belief that C. Thesis III gives us the beginnings of an answer:

S's merely probable basic belief that p must be based on *some* belief or other since every justified belief is based on nonarbitrary justifying reasons and only beliefs can be nonarbitrary justifying reasons. The best candidate for the relevant nonarbitrary justifying beliefs is belief in C.¹⁰

What should we make of McGrew's Thesis III, the thesis that only beliefs can be *nonarbitrary* justifying reasons? We submit that it is false. After all, there is no in principle bar against experiences being *nonarbitrary* justifying reasons. Of course, the nature of their nonarbitrariness will not consist in their being evidentially linked to other items in one's cognitive set. But that's no surprise. Experiences are not the sort of things for which it makes sense to say that there can be evidence *for* them. It's not as though you could have evidence *for* your itch or *for* the cup's visually appearing red to you. That in itself, however, does not preclude them from being nonarbitrary justifying reasons. It only means that their nonarbitrariness will consist in something suitable to their nature. Is there anything that might conceivably fit the bill?

Well, most of the mundane perceptual experiences we have are related to the stimuli and cognitive processes that cause them in such a way that, in the environment in which those processes typically operate, there is a lawlike tendency for those experiences to occur only if the beliefs they cause are apt to be true. Upstream, perceptual experiences are the causal products of lawful interactions between our cognitive faculties and the environment; downstream, they tend to cause true beliefs. That's precisely the sort of nonarbitrariness one would expect of perceptual experiences if they were *nonarbitrary* justifying reasons. To suppose otherwise is to impose on experience a conception of nonarbitrariness that is suitable only to beliefs. (We are not arguing here that experiences can be justifying reasons. We are only arguing that their being nonarbitrary in the way McGrew thinks of nonarbitrariness is not sufficient for their not being justifying reasons.)

III. CONCLUSION

As we understand McGrew's arguments against MF, they centrally involve three claims:

- I. Only beliefs can be *probabilifying* evidence.
- II Justification is internal *in McGrew's sense*.
- III. Only beliefs can be *nonarbitrary* justifying reasons.

We have argued that MF is compatible with II, and that there is good reason to deny I and III. Of course, MF may well be false even if McGrew's dilemmas

fail. At best, all that follows from our assessment is that we must look to considerations other than those to which McGrew has called our attention if we are to reject MF sensibly.¹¹

ENDNOTES

1. Two clarifications are in order. First, although we have characterized Foundationalism in terms of *epistemic justification*, it is not wedded to that family of concepts. Substitute whatever general terms of epistemic appraisal you like and the foundationalist will offer you a basic/nonbasic distinction. Second, a foundationalist need not deny that a belief's justification can have multiple sources. For example, suppose you believe with justification that your babies are crying, and your belief owes its justification to (i) your present auditory experience as well as (ii) an inference from the present testimony of your spouse. Is your belief basic or nonbasic? The foundationalist should say that it all depends. If, all else being equal, your belief would still be justified even if it did not owe its justification to your inference from your spouse's testimony, then it is basic; if it would not, then it is nonbasic. The characterization of basic belief in the text should thus be modified. Consider it done.
2. The classic work on epistemic immunities is Alston 1986a.
3. Premise 2 is false since MF could be true even if there are no merely probable basic beliefs, e.g. before there were any believers, or even if nobody is justified in believing anything. MF has no existential implications of the sort stated by premise 2. Presumably, the argument can be stated in such a way as to avoid this objection. In what follows, we will assume premise 2 is true, just to avoid getting bogged down.
4. McGrew: "Probability (in the relevant sense) arises from a relation between the probable proposition and a body of evidence."
5. McGrew: "If there are basic beliefs that are merely probable, then they are not basic at all; they are inferred, probable in relation to some other beliefs that support them."
6. For more on the suggestion that object perception lacks propositional content, see Alston (1999) and Le Morvan (2000).
7. It is not uncommon for excellent philosophers to conflate in practice two senses of the noun "belief"—one that refers to a type of mental state, a belief-state, and the other that refers to the content of such states, a proposition—even when they are well aware of the theoretical difference, as McGrew is. See McGrew (1996: 69).
8. See note 3.
9. There is a lot to complain about here regarding both the character and objects of the required access, but we will let it pass since our concern lies elsewhere. For a sketch of more plausible variations on epistemic internalism, see Alston (1986a; 1986c).
10. McGrew does not say this. It is, however, a way in which what he does assert—namely, Thesis III—might be massaged into a relevant consideration.
11. Acknowledgements . . .

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