

FOUNDATIONALISM AND ARBITRARINESS

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Abstract. Nonskeptical foundationalists say that there are basic beliefs. But, one might object, either there is a reason why basic beliefs are likely to be true or there is not. If there is, then they are not basic; if there is not, then they are arbitrary. I argue that this dilemma is not nearly as decisive as its author, Peter Klein, would have us believe.

A 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 (if any) because and only because there are basic beliefs. Such is the genus *Foundationalism*.¹ In this essay I assess Peter Klein's recent case against Foundationalism, which is centered on the charge that basic beliefs are arbitrary.²

¹ Four observations are in order. First, although I 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. My assessment of Klein's case against Foundationalism does not hang on this modification of the characterization of basic belief in the text. Third, my characterization of Foundationalism does not imply that *there are* basic beliefs. It allows that Foundationalism could be true even if there were no believers and even if there were no justified beliefs. Fourth, my characterization of Foundationalism does not imply that Coherentism is a species of Foundationalism. It leaves Coherentism where it should stay. The latter two observations constitute virtues of my characterization of Foundationalism, a virtue lacking in other characterizations.

² Peter Klein, "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13 (1999), 297-325, hereafter HK.

Klein sets his case against Foundationalism in the context of a dialogue between himself and the Foundationalist, call her *Freeda*, which, for all practical purposes, goes like this:

- Klein: Foundationalists advocate believing certain things *arbitrarily*.
Freeda: We do?
Klein: Ya, but you call them basic beliefs.
Freeda: Oh, I see. There must be some misunderstanding. We advocate believing certain things *without reasons*, not *arbitrarily*.³
Klein: Ha! Now there's a distinction without a difference!
Freeda: What...what do you mean?
Klein: To believe something without a reason *entails* believing it arbitrarily. After all, firstly, if you believe something without a reason, then there is nothing that makes it even slightly better to believe than any of its contraries. And, secondly, if there's nothing that makes it even slightly better to believe than any of its contraries, then you believe it arbitrarily.
Freeda: Ah. I see. There really is a misunderstanding here. It's that first premise of yours. Let me explain. We advocate believing something without a reason only when there is some meta-justification for it, an argument to the effect that belief in it has some property P, and any belief that has P is likely to be true. Of course, we foundationalists squabble about what P is, exactly; but that's beside the point. The point is that we advocate believing something without reasons *only when* there is some such meta-justification, something that indicates that one is believing it in a truth-conducive fashion. In that case, we can hardly be charged with advocating believing something *arbitrarily*, wouldn't you agree?

Now we hear from Klein in his own voice:

Can [the foundationalist] avoid advocating the acceptance of arbitrary reasons by moving to meta-justifications?... Pick your favorite accounts of the property, P. I think...that the old Pyrrhonian question is reasonable: Why is having P truth-conducive? Now, either there is an answer available to that question or there isn't... If there is an answer, then the regress continues—at least one more step, and that is all that is needed here, because that shows that the offered reason that some belief has P or some set of beliefs has P does not stop the regress. If there isn't an answer, the assertion is arbitrary.⁴

To clarify matters, Klein insists,

My point is merely that moving to the meta-level, that is, arguing that such beliefs [i.e. basic beliefs] are likely to be true because they possess a certain property, P, will not avoid the problem faced by foundationalism. Either the meta-justification provides a reason for thinking the base proposition is true (and hence the regress does not end) or it does not (hence, accepting the base proposition is arbitrary).⁵

³ Although Freeda goes along with Klein's claim that only beliefs can be reasons, many foundationalists do not. Since my concerns with Klein's argument go much deeper than this, I propose to let Freeda's concession stand.

⁴ HK 303.

⁵ HK 304.

And finally, he concludes:

To generalize: Foundationalism...cannot avoid the regress by appealing to a meta-claim that a belief having some property, P, is likely to be true. That claim itself requires an argument that appeals to reasons.... For surely a reason is required to justify the belief that propositions with property, P, are likely to be true; and whatever justifies that claim will require a reason; and—well, you get the point.⁶

Now, what exactly is Klein's argument here? Pretty clearly, he intends a dilemma, specifically this:

1. Either there is a meta-justification or there is not.
2. If there is, then there are no basic beliefs (i.e., Foundationalism is false).
3. If there is not, then Foundationalism advocates arbitrariness at the base.
4. So, either there are no basic beliefs (i.e., Foundationalism is false) or Foundationalism advocates arbitrariness at the base.

What should we make of this dilemma?

Note that the conclusion is disjunctive and only one of the disjuncts is the denial of Foundationalism. One might object that, in that case, it is hardly an argument *against* Foundationalism. Perhaps the foundationalist can rest content with arbitrary basic beliefs.

Unfortunately, the foundationalist cannot find solace in arbitrariness. That's because justification just *is* being nonarbitrary in the relevant sense; if one justifiably believes something, then it is at least slightly better to believe it rather than its contraries.

Consequently, an arbitrary belief is unjustified. But by definition, a basic belief is justified. Thus, if the *basic* beliefs that Foundationalism advocates are *arbitrary*, then they are at once justified and not justified—a contradiction. So the arbitrariness option reduces to the denial of Foundationalism. In what follows, I will take it that if Klein's premises are true, then Foundationalism is false (full stop).

So, what about the premises? In particular, why should we suppose that premise 2 is true? Klein's case for it goes like this:

- 2a. If there is a meta-justification, then the regress does not end.
- 2b. If the regress does not end, then there are no basic beliefs.
2. So, if there is a meta-justification, then there are no basic beliefs (i.e., Foundationalism is false).

What should we make of this argument?

Premise 2a is false, I suggest. Let's consider a particular case. Suppose S believes that there are some red things. Her reason for this is that there are red balls. Her reason for this is that there is a red ball in front of her. And, finally, her reason for this is that the ball in front of her looks red. Now, suppose she has no reason for believing that the ball in front of her looks red; that is, given Klein's thesis that only beliefs can be reasons, suppose that there is no other *belief* of hers which serves as a reason for her believing that the ball looks red. So S believes that the ball looks red without reasons. Now, suppose that *there is* a meta-justification for S's belief; her belief that the ball looks red has some property P such that any belief that has P is very likely to be true. If Klein's premise 2a is true, *it follows* that "the regress" does not end. It does not follow, however.

⁶ HK 304.

To see why, keep three points in mind. First, the person whose noetic structure is under discussion is our friend *S*, and it is the regress of *her* reasons which, according to Klein, does not end in the scenario above. In particular *her* regress of reasons does not end with her belief that the ball in front of her looks red. Second, *S*'s regress of reasons continues if and only if *she* believes that the ball looks red on the basis of some other reason, some other belief of hers (given Klein's thesis that only beliefs can be reasons). Third, arguments are abstract entities; thus, given the scenario described above, there exists, in the abstract, some ordered set of propositions schematically expressed in English like this:

1. *S*'s belief that the ball looks red has feature *P*.
2. Beliefs having *P* are very likely to be true.
3. So, *S*'s belief that the ball looks red is very likely to be true.

Thus, if Klein's premise 2a is true, then, it follows from the fact that this meta-justification exists in the abstract that *S* believes that the ball looks red on the basis of some other reason, some other belief of hers. But that can't be right. The *sheer existence* of the meta-justificatory argument, in the abstract, does not determine *S*'s psychological structure. The sheer existence of the meta-justification is not sufficient for *her* to believe that the ball looks red *on the basis of that meta-justificatory argument*. So 2a is false.

Perhaps Klein meant to say that when *the contemporary foundationalist appeals to meta-justifications* in order to meet the challenge of arbitrariness, the regress continues. (See the second quote from him above.) It's not their sheer existence that suffices for the continuation of the regress; it's *the appeal to them* that suffices. In that case, 2a should be modified as follows:

- 2a'. If the contemporary foundationalist appeals to a meta-justification in order to explain why basic beliefs are not arbitrary, the regress does not end.

But 2a' is just as clearly false as 2a. Does the contemporary foundationalist's "moving to the meta-level, that is, arguing that [basic] beliefs are likely to be true because they possess a certain property, *P*," suffice to bring about that regress of reasons in *S*'s noetic structure continues? Imagine Sappho, some ancient Greek attending a circus; she sees a black bear in front of her playing with a red ball and comes to believe that the ball looks red. Twenty-five hundred years later some foundationalist moves to the meta-level, arguing that beliefs such as hers are likely to be true because they possess a certain property, *P*. If 2a' is true, it follows that Sappho, back then at the circus, believed that the ball looks red on the basis of the contemporary foundationalist's appeal to a meta-justification for her sort of belief. But this consequence is surely false. Even friends of backward causation will deny that contemporary foundationalists have *this* much power (even if Foundationalism is correct).

A question naturally arises at this point: if it is neither the sheer existence of a meta-justification nor the contemporary foundationalist's appeal to one that makes it the case that the regress of reasons continues in *S*'s noetic structure, then what *does* make it the case that it continues?

Perhaps Klein will insist that the meta-justification must be "subjectively available" to *S*. Perhaps he'll say that if there is a meta-justification, then, if it is to be at all relevant to meeting the challenge of arbitrariness *in S's case*, it must be "properly hooked up with

S's own beliefs."⁷ If that's the way we are to understand Klein, then his explicit statement of his case against Foundationalism is *enormously* misleading. The fact that there are no basic beliefs does not follow from the fact that there *is* a meta-justification or the fact that *the foundationalist* appeals to a meta-justification to meet the charge of arbitrariness. Rather, if there is a meta-justification that explains how a particular individual's basic belief can be justified without reasons, then that meta-justification must be "properly hooked up" with *her own* beliefs; otherwise, her belief is arbitrary.

We need, therefore, to revise Klein's case against Foundationalism. Let *S* be any human person, and let *Bp* be any allegedly basic belief that *p*. If we are to understand Klein in the way suggested, then Klein's case against Foundationalism is *really* this:

1. Either *S* has a meta-justification for her *Bp* that is properly hooked up with her own beliefs or she does not.
2. If she does, then *S*'s *Bp* is not basic.
3. If she does not, then *S*'s *Bp* is arbitrary (hence not justified, so not basic).
4. So, *S*'s *Bp* is not basic.

The conclusion is a contradiction (remember: *S*'s *Bp* is *ex hypothesi* a basic belief). Therefore, it is impossible for there to be basic beliefs—Foundationalism is false. What should we make of this revised dilemma? Of course, reliabilists of certain sorts will deny premise 3, but I want to focus on premise 2.

Two sorts of questions arise immediately. First, what is this "hook-up" of which Klein speaks? And under what conditions is it "properly" exhibited? Unfortunately, he doesn't answer these questions; he leaves the notion undefined, so far as I can see. Let's suppose, for now, that we have a sufficient grasp of "properly hooked up" to move on.

The second question is this: even if *S* has a meta-justification for her *Bp* that is "properly hooked up" with her own beliefs, why suppose it follows that her *Bp* is not basic? That is, why suppose 2 is true? Klein does not explicitly offer an argument, but I'd like to suggest that it's no mystery as to what sort of thing he needs to say in defense of 2. He needs to say something like this:

- 2a. If *S* has a meta-justification for her *Bp* that is *properly hooked up* with *S*'s own beliefs, then *S* *believes* the premises of the meta-justification.
- 2b. If *S* *believes* the premises of the meta-justification, then *S*'s *Bp* is not basic.
2. So, if *S* has a meta-justification for her *Bp* that is properly hooked up with *S*'s own beliefs, then *S*'s *Bp* is not basic. (2a, 2b)

This would be an excellent argument if premise 2b were true; unfortunately, it isn't.

The fact that *S* *believes* the premises of a meta-justification does *not* imply that *S*'s *Bp* *derives its justification* from her belief in those premises. To see why, consider the following case. Suppose you interrupt Sappho while she's looking at the ball at the circus and inform her that it is very likely that her belief that it looks red is true since it has *P* and *P* is truth-conducive. She reflects for a moment, and then concurs with you. Does it *follow* that her belief that the ball looks red *derives* its justification from the meta-justification she newly believes? Of course not. To suppose that it does suffice is to confuse these two states of affairs:

⁷ See HK 300.

- S believes the ball looks red *and* S believes the premises of a meta-justification for her belief.
- S belief that the ball looks red *derives its justification from* her belief in the premises of a meta-justification.

The latter is not the former, and the former does not entail the latter. In that case, since S can believe the premises of a meta-justification without her Bp *deriving* its justification therefrom, the possibility remains that S's Bp is basic even though she believes the premises of the meta-justification. That is to say, 2b is false.

There is only one way to bridge the gap that Klein needs to bridge here, and that way is to lay it down, explicitly or implicitly, that S's Bp is not "properly hooked up" to her belief in the premises of the meta-justification *unless the justification of her Bp is derived from her belief in the premises of the meta-justification*. Unfortunately, this way of bridging the gap leads to disappointment. For in that case, premise 3 of the revised dilemma, with its undefined locution "properly hooked up," turns out to be way of saying in Klein's vocabulary that

- 3*. If S's Bp does not *derive its justification from* a meta-justification for her Bp, then S's Bp is arbitrary.

And 3*, by contraposition and the semantic platitude that justification is nonarbitrariness *par excellence*, is just another way of saying

- 3**. If S's Bp is justified, then S's Bp *derives its justification from* a meta-justification for her Bp.

3**, however, is nothing more than a stylistic variant on the denial of Foundationalism. Friends and foes of Foundationalism alike rightly wish for more than *that* as a premise in an argument against Foundationalism.

Perhaps I'm mistaken, but, so far as I can see, Klein's case against Foundationalism fails. Even so, Foundationalism may nevertheless be false. Thus, all we can conclude here is that if we wish to reject Foundationalism sensibly, we will have to look to someone other than Peter Klein for guidance.⁸

⁸ For comments on previous drafts, I thank William Alston, Michael Bergmann, Tom Downing, Hud Hudson, and Christian Lee. Michael Bergmann has authored an excellent critique of Klein's argument that differs from mine. See his "What's *Not* Wrong with Foundationalism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming, but available at <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~bergmann/klein.htm>.