

BonJour's chapter 9.

Inferential justification is when a belief that p is justified on the basis of another justified belief that q . Once this is understood, we can formulate the regress argument as follows (this is slightly different and simpler than Bonjour's version):

1. If all justified beliefs are inferentially justified, then either all justified beliefs are justified by an infinite series of justified beliefs, or all justified beliefs are justified by beliefs prior in this series.
2. It is false that all justified beliefs are justified by an infinite series of justified belief.
3. It is false that all justified beliefs are justified by beliefs prior in this series.
4. Hence, it is false that all justified beliefs are inferentially justified.

The conclusion implied that there are justified beliefs that are justified on the basis of something other than another justified belief. The argument has basically a modus tollens form. If this argument is sound, then the conclusion has one of two consequences: there are no justified beliefs (skepticism) or some justified beliefs are not inferentially justified (foundationalism).

Strictly speaking, as this second alternative is stated in negative terms of the "source" of justification. Typically, inferential justification "transfers" justification from one belief to another. By contrast, non-inferential justification must "transfer" or "generate" justification from something that is not another justified belief. Candidates for this "something" can be legion. There seem to be three main categories: mere beliefs, other mental states, and facts about the world. The latter two categories also could include justified mental states or justified facts about the world in which case justification would be "transferred" from that state or fact to the belief in question. If this "something" is not justified, then justification is "generated" from it to the belief in question. Any of the "transfer" candidates have the same regress problem. We could broaden the language in the above argument to include any type of inferential justification.

Let's focus on the "generation" candidates: mere beliefs, other mental states, facts about the world. (The first two are internalist candidates and the second is an externalist candidate.) Typically, foundationalists propose sensory experience (a type of mental state) as the "generator" of justification for empirical beliefs.

1. Sensory experience has a nonconceptual content.
2. If sensory experience has a nonconceptual content, then sensory experience cannot provide a reason for the truth of any content of a belief.
3. If sensory experience cannot provide a reason for the truth of any content of a belief, then sensory experience cannot provide justification to any belief.
4. Hence, sensory experience cannot provide justification to any belief.

These premises can be defended in the following manner. The idea behind it is that something not formulated in conceptual terms cannot be a reason for thinking something that is formulated in conceptual terms is true. The contents of beliefs involve conceptual classifications, e.g., when I believe that sugar dissolves, I must understand, to some degree, the concepts of sugar and dissolution. These concepts are necessary for believing in the sense that if I did not possess these concepts, then I could not have this belief. The entire content of this belief can be expressed in a sentence, i.e., "Sugar dissolves." A reason for thinking this belief to be true is a reason for thinking this sentence to be true. As such, any such reason must take the form of another sentence that has deductive or inductive support.

The issue is whether a sensory experience can take the form of such a sentence. Consider my experience of seeing a variety of colors and shapes. No concept is necessary for the having of this experience. Indeed, the content of this experience cannot be expressed entirely in concepts. It has a phenomenal, or felt, quality that eludes conceptual classification. In other words, no sentence can express the content of this experience. From the above, it follows that this experience cannot provide a reason for the truth of any belief.

BonJour uses an analogy to critique these premises. It concerns the justification of second order beliefs. My second order belief that I have an occurrent belief that p is justified by its introspective nature that is neither nonconceptual nor a second order belief. To occurrently believe that p is to be conscious of its content. This consciousness is constitutive of the belief, it is not reflective or second order. This consciousness then can be used to justify a second order belief that I have an occurrent belief that p. This consciousness may also play a role in the formation of the second order belief. It provides an internally available reason for the truth of the second order belief.

The analogy to sensory experience is as follows. To have a sensory experience is to be conscious of its phenomenal content. This awareness plays a role in the cause of and the justification of the belief that I have a sensory experience. It remains true that concepts cannot entirely express the content of a sensory experience and mere awareness of this content is not true or false and make no conceptual claim. BonJour claims that this awareness can lead to a belief about my sensory experience. This belief can partially conceptualize or describe my sensory experience and it can be true or false with respect to the accuracy of this conceptual description. I also am in a unique position to make a direct comparison to judge its accuracy. BonJour also believes that this is an adequate basis for its justification.

This provides a foundationalist answer to the regress argument. Some justified beliefs are justified on the basis of a conscious awareness of the content of a sensory experience. According to BonJour, this conscious awareness is not itself in need of justification, so it can "generate" justification.