Reading Questions

1. What is the distinction between a justified belief and an unjustified belief? Can you think of your own example of a justified belief? Of an unjustified belief?
2. Are all beliefs that are supported by good arguments justified beliefs?
3. According to foundationalism, are all justified beliefs supported by good arguments?
4. Explain, in your own words, the Infinite Regress Argument for Foundationalism.
5. What is a reductio ad absurdum argument? Can you construct your own example of one?
6. According to foundationalism, what are the two ways that a belief can be justified?
7. Are all foundational beliefs justified?
8. Are all justified beliefs foundational?
9. Can we let whatever beliefs we please count as foundational? Why or why not?
10. What is an epistemological objective?
11. What is a test for foundationality?

Epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge. Philosophers often define knowledge as justified true belief, and we’ll be focusing on the “justified” part of that definition. At its most basic, a belief is said to be justified for you if and only if you have good reason to believe it.

What’s a good reason to believe something? Good question. It can be difficult to spell out precisely what a good reason to believe something is, but you probably know it when you see it.

If Ann believes that it will rain tomorrow because a certain weather report says so and because she knows that this weather report is generally pretty reliable, then she has good reason for her belief and her belief is justified.

If Betty believes that it will rain tomorrow because she found a penny on the sidewalk and because she has a superstitious conviction to the effect that always rains the day after she finds a penny on the sidewalk (and this despite the fact that she’s often found...
pennies one day and enjoyed sunny, rainless weather the following day), then she doesn’t have a good reason for her belief and her belief is unjustified.

It’s worth noting here that whether or not a belief is justified has *everything* to do with the reasons that someone has for the belief and *nothing* to do with content of the belief itself. The very same belief (the belief that it’s going to rain tomorrow) can be justified for one person (Ann) and not justified for another person (Betty), if the first person has good reason to hold the belief and the second person doesn’t. The *truth* of the belief, on the other hand, is the same for both Ann and Betty because, assuming that Ann and Betty live in roughly the same place, it doesn’t make sense to say that it will rain tomorrow for Ann but not for Betty. Either it rains tomorrow or it doesn’t, period. We can say that justification is relative to the believer in a way that truth is not.

Because nobody’s perfect, I suspect that we all hold some beliefs without good reason. I suspect we all have some unjustified beliefs. We can think of a person’s beliefs as falling into two general categories – justified and unjustified – like so:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justified Beliefs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unjustified Beliefs</td>
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As we saw when considering Ann and Betty’s belief that it will rain tomorrow, justified beliefs and unjustified beliefs are often fairly easy to identify because the difference between good and bad reasons for believing something is intuitively pretty clear. But we can learn something important about justification by considering Ann and Betty again.

Betty supported her belief with an argument that looked something like this:

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I found a penny today. + It always rains the day after I find a penny. \\
\downarrow
It will rain tomorrow.
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Because the claim that it always rains the day after Betty finds a penny is false – and because she has good reason to think that it’s false – Betty’s belief that it will rain tomorrow isn’t supported by a good argument. The conclusion *may* be true, but we can’t tell that on the basis of Betty’s reasoning. Given Betty’s argument, the claim that it will rain tomorrow could easily be false.
Ann, on the other hand, supported her belief with this argument:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The weather report says it will rain} & \quad + \quad \text{The weather report is reliable.} \\
& \downarrow \\
\text{It will rain tomorrow.}
\end{align*}
\]

Because the premises of this argument are true and because the inference is strong, Ann’s belief that it will rain tomorrow is supported by a good argument. Ann’s argument gives her good reason to think that it will rain tomorrow.

As we saw when we studied logic, beliefs that are supported by good arguments are likely to be true and so if you have a good argument to support one of your beliefs, then that belief is justified for you. (Of course, you needn’t get that belief from being presented with an argument. You might initially believe in God because your parents taught you to, but later come to support that belief with an argument, for example.) We can, if we want, think about beliefs that are supported by good arguments as constituting a subset of justified beliefs, like this:

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Beliefs supported by
good arguments
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Unjustified Beliefs
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But, must all justified beliefs be supported by an argument? Are any beliefs justified for you even if you don’t have good arguments for them? Is there, in other words, some belief that lives within the set of justified beliefs, but outside the set of beliefs that are supported by good arguments?

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Justified Beliefs
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Beliefs supported by
good arguments
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Unjustified Beliefs
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Stop and Think:
Do you think that all justified beliefs are supported by good arguments? Why or why not?

Foundationalism

The Infinite Regress Argument for Foundationalism

Many philosophers think that some beliefs are justified for you even though you can’t support them with a good argument. Here’s why. (This is known as “The Infinite Regress Argument for Foundationalism.”)

For sake of discussion, let’s make two assumptions: i) that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and ii) that you have at least one justified belief. We’ll call that justified belief B1.

(Notice that the first of these assumptions is exactly the opposite of what we want to prove. We want to prove that not every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and we’re starting off by assuming that every justified belief does need to be supported by a good argument. What’s going on? Well, the idea is that this assumption will get us into rather bad trouble, which will lead us to infer that it must be false. And if it’s false, then of course our conclusion must be true. Yes? This kind of argument, which assumes something, shows that a falsehood follows from that assumption, and concludes that the assumption is false is called a reductio ad absurdum argument because it is reducing the assumption to absurdity.)

Since we’re assuming that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and since B1 is justified for you, you must have a good argument to support B1, which means that you’re correctly inferring B1 from some other belief, B2, like this:

\[ B2 \quad \Downarrow \quad B1 \]

But if you don’t have good reason to believe B2, that belief can’t give you good reason to believe B1. This means that B2 needs to be justified for you as well, and since we’re assuming that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, you must have a good argument to support B2, which means that you’re correctly inferring B2 from some other belief, B3, like this:
But if you don't have good reason to believe B3, that belief can't give you good reason to believe B2. This means that B3 needs to be justified for you as well, and since we're assuming that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, you must have a good argument to support B3, which means that you're correctly inferring B3 from some other belief, B4, like this:

\[ B4 \rightarrow B3 \rightarrow B2 \rightarrow B1 \]

And of course B4 needs to be justified for you as well, because otherwise it couldn't provide justification for believing B3... and so on and on and on and on forever, like this:

\[ \text{Infinity} \rightarrow B4 \rightarrow B3 \rightarrow B2 \rightarrow B1 \]

In other words, from the two assumptions i) that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and ii) that you have at least one justified belief, it turns out that you need to have an infinitely long argument, with an infinite number of beliefs, in order to justify that one belief. (This is the infinite regress referred to in the argument's name.) That, however, is absurd. You can't appeal to an infinitely long argument in order to justify anything (How would you get the argument started?) and you can't have an infinite number of beliefs (How would you store them in your brain?).

Since our two assumptions (that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and that you have at least one justified belief) lead us somewhere absurd, at least one of those assumption's got to be wrong! Which one? Well, it's hard to deny that you have at least one justified belief, so we're forced to deny the assumption that every
justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument. Some belief, then, must be justified without support from a good argument.

Types of Justified Belief

So it turns out that just like there are two kinds of belief – justified and unjustified - there are two kinds of justified belief.

1) Some beliefs are justified in virtue of being supported by good arguments; since this involves inferring the belief from others, we’ll call these beliefs “inferentially justified.”

2) Other beliefs are justified without being supported by good arguments; we don’t know exactly what that involves yet, but because it doesn’t involve inferring these beliefs from others, we’ll call them “noninferentially justified beliefs.”

We can represent the types of belief with the following diagram:

An Example

To get a better sense of inferential and noninferential justification, let’s take a specific example. Suppose, for example, I believe that my friend is ready to meet for lunch.

My friend is ready to meet for lunch.
If you asked me how I’m justified in believing that my friend is ready to meet for lunch, I’d tell you that my cell phone is ringing. Very few people except my friend ever call me on my cell phone, but she usually does call me around this time of day when she’s ready to grab a sandwich and wants to see if I can join her.

I have justified my belief that my friend is ready for lunch giving an argument for this claim that relies upon, among other things, the fact that my cell phone is ringing. We can think of my belief that my friend is ready for lunch as being built “on top of” my belief that my cell phone is ringing, like bricks in a wall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My friend is ready to meet for lunch.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My cell phone is ringing.</td>
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(Note: This way of thinking about arguments is “upside down” compared to the diagramming method. If I diagrammed this argument it would be

My cell phone is ringing.

My friend is ready to meet for lunch.

When talking about epistemology, though, we’ll be thinking about beliefs using the wall model because that will prove to be a useful metaphor.)

If you asked what justification I have for believing that my cell phone is ringing, I’d answer that I hear a melodic sound coming from my purse. Since I don’t carry around any other device that sings at me, it must be my cell phone.

I have now shown you how my belief that my cell phone is ringing is justified (in part) by my belief that I hear a melodic sound coming from my purse.

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hear a melodic sound coming from my purse.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The infinite regress argument tells us that you can’t go on forever asking me “And what argument do you have to support that?” Eventually, there has to be some beliefs that are justified for me even though I don’t have an argument to support them, and it seems as though we may have hit upon such a belief here.

Frankly, if you asked me why I was justified in believing that I hear a particular melodic sound, it would be difficult for me to provide you with a satisfactory answer. I’d be very tempted to simply repeat myself - “Well, I know that I hear the sound because I hear the sound!”– which, as an argument, is clearly circular. But does my inability to produce a good argument mean that I’m not justified in thinking that I hear a melodic sound? I don’t think so. It just means that this belief is justified for me noninferentially. This is where other justificatory arguments start, a belief that is justified without argument and that can serve as a premise for an argument that, in turn, justifies other beliefs.

Foundationalism: The Wall Model

It’s as though our justified beliefs form a wall, with each belief a brick and the inferences between them the mortar. Many beliefs are justified in virtue of being securely linked to other, more basic, beliefs lower down (that is to say, by being correctly inferred from other beliefs) but eventually we get to the foundation of the wall, where beliefs aren’t justified in virtue of being connected to (or inferred from) a lower belief. These foundational beliefs are justified without argument because they are, in some sense, too basic to be argued for. They rest on the ground and serve as the foundation for the rest of our wall. Not surprisingly, this view of justification is called foundationalism and the noninferentially justified beliefs are call foundational.

It’s important to remember that a belief is justified for you if it is anywhere in your belief wall. In other words, both foundational and inferential beliefs are justified; they’re just justified in different ways.

Of course, unless you’re epistemologically perfect, not all of your beliefs are justified. Unjustified beliefs, I suppose, are like rocks that either tumbled off the wall or else were never in it. They’re rubble that, in an ideal world, would be cleared away.
Inference

Inferentially Justified Belief

Inference

Inferentially Justified Belief

Inference

Noninferentially Justified Belief

Tests for Foundationality and Epistemological Objectives

Foundationalism is a compellingly attractive picture of justification, but it raises a tricky question. How do we decide what beliefs we can take as foundational, or justified without argument? We don’t want foundational beliefs to be an epistemological blank check that allows us to simply declare any belief we please to be justified even though we can’t given an argument to support it. This would defeat the whole purpose of justifying our beliefs. Remember, justified beliefs are supposed to be beliefs for which we have good reason. If I could simply stipulate that any belief I happen to like – such as the belief that the Tooth Fairy exists – is foundational, then, since all foundational beliefs are justified, I could simply go around declaring any belief I liked to be justified, whether or not I have good reason to think that the belief is true. That’s bad. What we need, then, is a good test for foundationality that we can apply to beliefs to decide if they’re strong enough to be taken as foundational.

One natural answer (although not the only possible answer) to the question “How do we decide what beliefs to take as foundational?” is “We may take as foundational any beliefs that we get from immediate sense experience.” This is the test for foundationality that I seemed to use when justifying my belief that I heard a melodic sound. I took myself to be justified in believing that I heard a melodic sound simply because I did hear it. The direct hearing was what justified my belief.
Of course, one might go on to ask me why I chose that particular test for foundationality instead of another. Why did I decide to accept, without supporting argument, beliefs that stemmed from my immediate sense experience, as opposed to, say, beliefs that I got in a dream, or from strangers I happen to meet on the first Tuesday of each month? This is a good question. Essentially, it’s a matter of reliability. The beliefs that I get from my immediate sense experience are probably more likely to be true than beliefs that I get from a dream, or from particular strangers.

In short, I opt for one test for foundationality over others because of what I want from my beliefs (truth). I’ll call this last piece of the puzzle, this what-we-want-from-our-beliefs, the “epistemological objective,” and this allows us to represent foundationalism as follows:

Note how much information is encapsulated in this diagram. It shows us that what we want from our beliefs (our epistemological objective) determines how we can tell which beliefs we can simply assume to be true without needing to provide an argument for them (our test for foundationality). Our test for foundationality then tells us which beliefs we can take as foundationally justified. We can then argue from those beliefs to others, which will be inferentially justified for us.

Of course, different philosophers would complete this diagram differently because they accept different epistemological objectives, different tests for foundationality, and different foundational beliefs.
Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge, which philosophers often define as justified true belief.

Justification is relative to the believer because a given belief can be justified for one person but not for another. Truth, on the other hand, is not relative to the believer.

All beliefs that are supported by good arguments are justified. But according to foundationalism, not all justified beliefs need to be supported by good arguments.

The Infinite Regress Argument for Foundationalism:

For sake of discussion, let's make two assumptions: i) that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and ii) that you have at least one justified belief. We'll call that justified belief B1.

Since we're assuming that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and since B1 is justified for you, you must have a good argument to support B1, which means that you're correctly inferring B1 from some other belief, B2. But if you don't have good reason to believe B2, that belief can't give you good reason to believe B1. This means that B2 needs to be justified for you as well, and since we're assuming that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, you must have a good argument to support B2, which means that you're correctly inferring B2 from some other belief, B3. But if you don't have good reason to believe B3, that belief can't give you good reason to believe B2. This means that B3 needs to be justified for you as well, and since we're assuming that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, you must have a good argument to support B3, which means that you're correctly inferring B3 from some other belief, B4. And of course B4 needs to be justified for you as well, because otherwise it couldn't provide justification for believing B3, and so on and on and on and on forever.

In other words, from the two assumptions i) that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and ii) that you have at least one justified belief, it turns out that you need to have an infinitely long argument, with an infinite number of beliefs, in order to justify that one belief. That, however, is absurd. You can't appeal to an infinitely long argument in order to justify anything because the argument could never get started, and you can't have an infinite number of beliefs because you couldn't store them in your brain.

Since our two assumptions (that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument, and that you have at least one justified belief) lead us somewhere absurd, at least one of those assumptions has got to be wrong. It's hard to deny that you have at least one justified belief, so we're forced to deny the assumption that every justified belief needs to be supported by a good argument. Some belief, then, must be justified without support from a good argument.

The Infinite Regress Argument for Foundationalism is a Reductio ad Absurdum argument.
According to foundationalism, not only are there two kinds of beliefs (justified and unjustified) but there are two kinds of justified belief (noninferentially justified and inferentially justified).

We can visualize this using the Wall Model.

Because we can’t let just any belief we please count as foundational, foundationalist epistemologists employ some test for foundationality, and this test is determined by their epistemological objective, or by what they want their justified beliefs to be or do.