

BONJOUR'S NEW "OLD-FASHIONED" FOUNDATIONALISM

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Laurence Bonjour has recently abandoned his long-standing coherentist project for a theory of foundationalism, the theory of the empirically "given." The given theory maintains that *only* nondoxastic experiential states of "direct awareness" or "direct acquaintance" can confer justification on basic beliefs; consequently, only beliefs about one's own mental states are eligible for basic justification. For this reason, Bonjour's new view has been aptly labeled "old-fashioned."¹ Yet, it is also subject to a classical objection that afflicts given theories, the Sellarsian Dilemma.

In this paper, I examine Bonjour's given theory, negotiate a Sellarsian Dilemma-related strategy offered by Alvin Plantinga, and criticize Bonjour's underlying account of basic justification. After spending some exegetical time locating his notion of basic justification, I argue that the set of conditions Bonjour (ostensibly) proposes is not sufficient, nor is one of the salient conditions necessary, for basic justification.

1. Bonjour's Foundationalism and the Sellarsian Dilemma

Bonjour's starting point is a well-known objection to the given theory, the Sellarsian Dilemma (hereafter, SD). He thus seeks to sketch a brand of foundationalism that can solve this problem. The SD runs as follows:²

(SD): An agent's awareness of a nondoxastic experiential state (hereafter, NES) is either propositional or it is not. If it is propositional, then it could confer justification, but it would require justification in order to do so; consequently, the original putative basic belief(s) would not be basic after all. If the awareness is not propositional, then it would not require justification; but, then, it could not confer justification because it would not stand in the right sort of evidential relations to basic beliefs.

In short, the SD claims that it is impossible for a regress terminator to confer justification without requiring it. Rephrased, if something can terminate a justificatory regress, then it cannot justify; if it can justify, then it cannot terminate a justificatory regress.

Bonjour plans to challenge the second horn of the dilemma.³ While an agent's awareness of an NES is *not* propositional, he argues, it can nonetheless justify basic beliefs. Consider an NES, say, my visual experience of seeing a patch of red. According to Bonjour, this "experience is a conscious state" that "automatically involves a constitutive or 'built-in' nonapperceptive awareness of its own distinctive sort of content, namely sensory or experiential content" ("Defense" 29). So, unlike other recent given theorists,⁴ Bonjour construes this awareness not as a relation between an agent and some fact (e.g., my being appeared to red-ly); rather, he argues that an agent's conscious awareness of an NES is built into the NES itself. This constitutive element supposedly plays a crucial role:

Since it is this awareness of sensory content that gives my experiential state the content that it has and thus constitutes it as the specific experiential

state that it is, there is no logical room for this awareness to be mistaken about the content in question. ("Defense" 29)

According to BonJour, then, an agent's awareness of the content of an NES is infallible. Since one is aware of an experience by virtue of having that experience, one's awareness could not be mistaken about the content of that experience. Of course, as BonJour cautions, it does not follow that the infallibility of one's awareness extends to one's belief about one's awareness; the awareness, but not the belief about it, is infallible.

How does any of this allow BonJour to escape the SD? Presumably, my infallible constitutive awareness of my NES (e.g., my awareness of being appeared to red-ly) serves as a reason for thinking that my belief (e.g., I am being appeared to red-ly) is true, but does not require justification since this awareness cannot be justified or unjustified. If this is on target, then BonJour has solved the dilemma: One's awareness of an experience can confer justification and at the same time terminate the justificatory regress since it is not an appropriate object of justification.

2. Plantinga on Reasons

BonJour is surely right to say that one's awareness of an NES, so understood, does not require justification. Like cows and computers, there is no sense in which it can be justified or unjustified. But, is it capable of conferring justification? Just how does this awareness serve as a *reason* for thinking my justificandum belief is true? As Plantinga protests:

[T]here is not any sensible way in which my being appeared to red-ly can be the justification for my belief that I am thus appeared to; it cannot be itself a *reason* for my belief that I am being appeared to red-ly. That is because it is simply not the right sort of animal to serve as a reason: it is not itself a belief; it does not have truth value; it is not itself something from which something can be inferred; it does not itself possess propositional content ("Direct" 63).

Not surprisingly, BonJour realizes this but insists that the justificatory relation between an agent's awareness of an experience and an agent's belief about her awareness need not be logical; rather, the justificatory relation is "descriptive." Although one's awareness of an experience is not propositional, it can be "conceptually described" and thus "constitute a kind of reason or basis for thinking the description is true" ("Defense" 30).

Now, Plantinga's criticism here concerns not BonJour's conception of (basic) justification, but the nature of reasons. As such, it invites the following questions: Can only beliefs serve as reasons? If so, is it because reasons must be propositional? Why cannot nonpropositional objects be capable of conferring justification, too? These are very difficult questions, and only a sustained inquiry into the issue could hope to answer them. Suffice it to say, while BonJour has a fairly liberal understanding of what can qualify as a reason, his view is not uncommon; in fact, many contemporary authors advocate nonpropositional experiential evidence in order to combat the SD.⁵ Moreover, Plantinga has not shown that only propositional attitudes (or mental states nearby) can serve as reasons; that is, he has not shown that nonpropositional or nonconceptual objects cannot *in principle* confer justification. While it would be absurd to say that cows and computers can confer justification, there is a very natural sense in which we speak of my seeing a cow as constituting a reason, or being evidence, for my belief that there is a cow.

Thus, we may have reached a stalemate as to *whether* an agent's awareness of an experience can serve as a reason. Short arguments to the contrary, we may be forced to admit that one's awareness of an NES is "*available* to justify foundational beliefs" ("Defense" 29) on pain of begging the question against the advocate of nondoxastic justification. In that case, the SD no longer poses a problem for BonJour. But, of course, this is only because we have put no official constraints on the kinds of things that can serve as justifiers. What is more, the fact that BonJour has eluded the dilemma does nothing to show that his conception of justification is the least bit plausible. Below, I will explain why I think it is not especially plausible.

3. Searching for the Fourth Condition

The following is the most explicit passage on BonJour's conception of basic justification; and, I now want to spend some time dissecting it, as the proposal is not entirely clear:

Where I have a conscious state of sensory experience, I am . . . aware of the specific sensory content of that state simply by virtue of having that experience. And thus if an apperceptive belief that I entertain purports to describe or conceptually characterize that perceptual content, albeit no doubt incompletely, and if I understand the descriptive content of that belief, . . . then I seem to be in a good, indeed an ideal, position to judge whether the conceptual description is accurate as far as it goes, and if so, to be thereby justified in accepting the belief ("Defense" 30).

Thus, it seems BonJour proposes the following for basic justification:

(BJ): *S*'s belief that she has a conscious sensory experience *e* is basically justified for *S* if and only if (i) *S* has *e* and thus an awareness of *e*'s content,⁶ (ii) *S* believes that she has *e*, and (iii) *S*'s belief that she has *e* is not based on any other beliefs.

Clearly, however, as it stands, (BJ) would be an uncharitable reading of the above excerpt. For starters, it fails to recognize a seemingly essential connection between an agent's experience and her belief about the experience. Consider that I could have a red visual experience (and an awareness thereof) and have a red appearance belief, but come to the belief *not* because I am in fact appeared to red-ly, but through wishful thinking (say, I have a peculiar fondness for believing that I am appeared to red-ly). For now, then, let us assume this is not BonJour's complete account; consequently, we need to determine a fourth condition that ties one's experience with one's belief about the experience.

Perhaps the following phrase provides a clue: ". . . if I understand the descriptive content of that belief . . ." Given that a necessary condition for understanding *x* is having a belief about *x*, we may reasonably suppose that BonJour intends for another *belief* to fill the bill. Thus, the final condition might read:

(IV-a) *S* believes that she believes that she has *e*.

This proposal, however, is severely flawed. If the fourth condition requires a metabelief, then a regress would ensue and the justificandum belief would not be basic after all. If, for example, my belief that I am being appeared to red-ly is justified by my metabelief that

I believe that I am being appeared to red-ly, then my metabelief would itself be in need of justification. Consequently, my original belief would not be basic. Furthermore, since BonJour would not be a given theorist on this reading, we can safely assume (IV-a) is not what is intended.

Maybe the fourth condition does not require a metabelief, but only the *fact* that one's belief accurately describes one's experience. This interpretation would at least alleviate worries about a potential regress. So construed, condition (iv) would run:

(IV-b) *S*'s belief that she has *e* accurately describes *e*.

But (IV-b) is too weak. In effect, it adds nothing to the initial three conditions of (BJ). Again, I could have a red visual experience (and awareness thereof) and a red appearance belief that accurately describes my visual experience but come to the belief by means of wishful thinking. In addition, (IV-b) does not require that an agent have any kind of access to the reason for her belief; it is merely an external fact that *S*'s belief accurately describes her experience. However, internalists, like BonJour, demand such a restriction. For these reasons, we can suppose that BonJour does not champion (IV-b).

A third try underscores the following: ". . . then I seem to be in a good, indeed an ideal, position to judge whether the description is accurate . . ." Accordingly, condition (iv) would read:

(IV-c) *S* is in a good/ideal position to judge that her belief that she has *e* accurately describes *e*.

This condition also enjoys the advantage of not falling prey to a potential regress, but has its own problems. As Plantinga remarks, if (IV-c) "is sufficient for noninferential justification . . . why cannot I also be justified in believing noninferentially that the chair before me is red? Am I not also in a good, even ideal position to make that judgment?" ("Direct" 60). What is the epistemically relevant difference between my believing that I am appeared to red-ly and my believing that I see a red chair?

BonJour responds to these questions, and, in doing so, further reveals his view:

For a belief to be justified . . . is simply for the believer to have a good reason for thinking it is true, where *having* such a reason requires that one have direct conscious access to it. Since I have no conscious access to the chair that is direct in the relevant sense the perceptual belief that there is a chair present cannot be basic ("Replies" 83).

At last, it seems that we have found the fourth condition:

(iv) *S* has direct conscious access to *e*.

Thus, our final product—call it (BJ)*—can be construed as: (BJ) + (iv).⁷ According to BonJour, then, an agent must have direct conscious access to an experience to be justified in believing that she has that experience. Furthermore, since an agent does have such access by virtue of her awareness of the experience, she is (basically) justified in believing that she has that experience, assuming (i-iii) hold.

4. Reservations about Justification

To see why (BJ)* is not sufficient for basic justification we need not look far. Once more, I could have a red visual experience and by virtue of my constitutive awareness have direct conscious access to my experience and have a red appearance belief but come to the belief by wishful thinking. Consider similar cases: Suppose I suffer from two brain lesions. One causes me to have a red visual experience, the other causes me to form a red appearance belief; additionally, each is triggered when I hear a police siren. Thus, when a siren sounds, I immediately believe that I am being appeared to red-ly not because I saw something red, but because the siren caused me to believe that way. Or, suppose I am the victim of an evil neurosurgeon who has implanted a mechanism in my brain that prevents me from naturally forming red appearance beliefs on the basis of red visual experiences, but artificially induces red appearance beliefs when I have red visual experiences. In such cases, it seems I would *not* be justified in believing that I am appeared to red-ly even though I was appeared to red-ly, and even though I had direct conscious access to my experience, because I came to the belief for reasons other than the one of being appeared to red-ly. More generally, it is possible for *S*'s awareness of an experience and *S*'s belief about her awareness to come apart because *S* could always arrive at a belief—*any* belief—for the wrong reasons; and, when this happens, *S*'s belief will be unjustified.⁸

Recall BonJour's earlier warning: Although *S*'s awareness of an experience is infallible, that property does not extend to *S*'s corresponding belief. While this is undoubtedly true, BonJour seems to assume that if *S*'s awareness of an experience is infallible, it follows that *S*'s *belief* about her experience is *justified*. But, the infallibility of *S*'s awareness of an experience does not guarantee, nor necessarily make more probable, the truth of *S*'s belief about her experience. (BJ)* fares no better against our proposed counterexamples than (BJ) does because the "direct access" requirement does not help tie together one's experience and one's belief about her experience. Therefore, (BJ)* is likewise not sufficient for basic justification.

To see why (iv) of (BJ)* is not necessary, consider the following case: Suppose an alien race of beings evolved with perceptual systems and cognitive abilities very similar to ours. They have qualitative sensory experiences and their perceptual beliefs are, say, ninety-eight percent reliable. The only epistemically relevant difference between us and the alien race is that they have no introspective access to their experiences—i.e., they are unable to become aware of, among other things, how they are appeared to. Now, intuitively, it seems that the perceptual beliefs of such beings can be justified even though they lack introspective access to their mental states. If we assume that an alien's perceptual system is generally reliable in normal conditions, and suppose that, say, the alien has not violated any possible epistemic duties, then it seems, *pace* BonJour, the belief could be justified, even though the alien lacks direct conscious access to its experiences.⁹ If so, then condition (iv) is not necessary for (basic) justification.

Perhaps BonJour would not share the intuition that such beings are justified. Fair enough. But there are also actual experiments in cognitive science that call into question the authority of our introspective capabilities. In a famous study, Nisbett and Wilson ("Telling," "Accuracy") asked subjects to examine an assortment of nylon stockings and to rate their quality. Unbeknownst to the subjects, however, the stockings were identical. Surprisingly, the position of the stockings on the table substantially influenced the subjects' choices

("Accuracy" 123).¹⁰ But, when asked whether the stockings' position had any effect on their judgments, virtually all subjects explicitly denied any such influence ("Accuracy" 124).¹¹

Now, the study is interesting for our purposes because it suggests that a subject's introspective access does not enable her to recognize that one experience of how she is being appeared to is identical to another experience of how she is being appeared to.¹² For example, on one occasion subjects believed they were being appeared to softly; on a subsequent occasion, they believed they were being appeared to more-softly. Introspection did not help their chances of recognizing that they were being appeared to in the same way. So, if we "have little or no introspective access to higher-order cognitive processes" ("Accuracy" 118), or simply lack sufficient introspective access to the reasons for our beliefs, then imposing an access constraint on justification, as BonJour does, is much too stringent. Otherwise, our perceptual beliefs would be very rarely justified, and that just does not ring true.

5. Concluding Remarks

Obviously, none of the foregoing criticisms are, nor were they intended to be, conclusive. It would indeed be very surprising if one of our leading contemporary epistemologists did not have an arsenal of replies. My only hopes were to (i) shed light on BonJour's newfound given theory, (ii) guard it from a Sellarsian Dilemma-type objection, and (iii) expose some (perceived) weaknesses in BonJour's account of basic justification. Just how BonJour would respond to my misgivings is a subject that regrettably must be saved for another time.¹³

NOTES

¹ Obviously, the label is intended to convey the Cartesian flavor of BonJour's position. It comes from *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism* where BonJour's two papers appear.

² The dilemma first appeared in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," reprinted in Sellars. Since it is not entirely clear (perhaps doubtful) that Sellars had in mind the dilemma contemporary epistemologists have subsequently attributed to him, I will formulate my own version. My rendering is a hybrid of BonJour's in (1985), ch. 4 and (2001a), esp. pp. 23-24, as well as Steup's, esp. p. 143. I should stress that I do not care whether this is in fact Sellars's dilemma. It strikes me as important regardless of its origin.

³ Officially, BonJour interprets his argument as escaping between the horns of the dilemma ("Defense" 25). However, in an endnote (note 8), he does recognize and endorse this alternative construal—i.e., grasping the second horn. Neither my exegesis of BonJour's position nor any of my arguments will hinge on the difference.

⁴ See, e.g., Fumerton.

⁵ For a recent defense of nonpropositional experiential evidence, see Alston. It is interesting to note that Plantinga himself *seems* to endorse nonpropositional experiential evidence. In *Warrant and Proper Function*, he writes: "My perceptual beliefs are not ordinarily formed on the basis of *propositions about* my experience; nonetheless they are formed on the basis of my experience. You look out of the window; you are appeared to in a certain characteristic way; you find yourself with the belief that what you see is an expanse of green grass. You have *evidence* for this belief; the evidence of your senses. Your evidence is just this way of being appeared to" (98; italics original). It may not be entirely fair to stick Plantinga with this position because he also seems to claim that being appeared to in a certain way serves as evidence for my belief that I am appeared to in that way only insofar as and by virtue of being the input of a properly functioning cognitive faculty in a design plan aimed

at the truth. However, this seems to be a case in which the evidence is *good* evidence; (above) we are talking about whether or not it is even *possible* for one's awareness of an experience to serve as evidence.

⁶ Recall: Since *S* is aware of the content of an experience simply by having the experience, *S*'s having a conscious sensory experience *e* entails *S*'s being aware of the content of *e*.

⁷ Strictly speaking, condition (i) of (BJ) may entail condition (iv) since an agent's constitutive awareness of a sensory experience provides the agent with direct access to the experience. Thus, we may alternatively understand BonJour's notion of basic justification as (BJ) *simpliciter* (above), given this robust reading of condition (i). I have put it differently because whereas (i) strikes me as a psychological condition, (iv) strikes me as a distinctly epistemic condition.

⁸ Here, I echo Goldman (1992) where he argues that any belief—whether it is self-evident, self-presenting, or infallible—can be unjustified in the absence of causal requirements.

⁹ I do not wish to endorse any particular theory of epistemic justification here. My aim is only to reject any theory that includes a direct access constraint on justification.

¹⁰ In particular, the "further their position was to the right, the more likely the stockings were to be chosen as being of the best quality" (123).

¹¹ Subjects cited, for example, a stocking's (apparently) superior weave or greater elasticity as reasons for preference (124).

¹² For the record, the experiment purportedly shows that "whatever capacity for direct introspection on cognitive processes may exist, it is insufficient to produce generally accurate verbal reports about the effects of stimuli on one's own behavior" ("Accuracy" 118). Nisbett and Wilson hypothesize that our reports about the effects of stimuli on evaluations and behavior are the result of "*a priori* causal theories" ("Accuracy" 129). Accordingly, putative introspective beliefs are accurate if one's *a priori* causal beliefs are accurate and inaccurate if one's *a priori* beliefs are inaccurate; the accuracy of "introspective" beliefs is not the result of successful introspection. In the experiment above, subjects explained the reasons for their beliefs inaccurately because they did not expect an item's position to influence their judgments.

¹³ I would like to thank Jack Lyons for helpful comments on several drafts of this paper. Mistakes herein, of course, are solely mine.

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Aaron Champene

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