

Experience Alone is Not Enough: Reply to Howard-Snyder

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Daniel Howard-Snyder's essay is admirably clear and helpful for getting a handle on some of the key issues concerning the structure of epistemic justification. In fact, we agree with one of Howard-Snyder's key points—experiences play a central role in justifying beliefs. However, we also disagree with him on several points.

1 How should we understand coherentism and foundationalism?

As we noted in our first essay, coherentism is often mischaracterized. At its core, coherentism is the view that a belief's justification is justified by its coherence with some body of information. This information may be restricted to beliefs, but it may be understood to include beliefs and experiences. Howard-Snyder's initial description of a justified "basic" belief is one that "owes its justification to something other than (i) her other beliefs or (ii) any features of the relations between them" (pg. 1). Given Howard-Snyder's conditions, if experience contributes at all to the justification of one's belief, that belief is basic. This is problematic because a belief that the liquid is acidic is not basic even though it is justified by the combination of an experience of the litmus paper turning red and a belief that if the paper turns red then the liquid is acidic. Moreover, it presupposes too narrow of a view of coherentism because it entails that coherentism must hold that experiences play *no role whatsoever* in justifying one's beliefs. As we explained in our first essay this a common, but mistaken, understanding of coherentism. Coherentists can, and should, claim that experiences play an important role in justifying one's beliefs. Recall, the basic idea of coherentism is that a belief that p is justified because p is part of a system of beliefs and experiences that fit together in such a way that the overall system is coherent.

The disagreement between coherentists and foundationalists doesn't come down to *whether* experiences play a role in justification, but *how* experiences contribute to the justification of beliefs. Coherentists claim that experiences contribute to the justification of belief only when they are part of a coherent system of other experiences and beliefs; foundationalists claim that an experience can justify belief all by itself. This is the real issue between coherentism and foundationalism, and it is the heart of our disagreement with Howard-Snyder. We'll now turn to explaining where we think Howard-Snyder's case for foundationalism falters.

2 Howard-Snyder's support for foundationalism

Howard-Snyder begins his positive case for foundationalism by appealing to common-sense. More specifically, he presents examples of justified beliefs where it is intuitive that experiences play a role in justifying those beliefs. As he says, each of these cases is such that the subject "hold[s] the belief on the basis of something that makes the belief very likely to be true: experience" (pg. 5). As a result, Howard-Snyder takes these cases to provide clear support for foundationalism.

This isn't correct though. The cases that Howard-Snyder presents illustrate the necessity of experience for the justification of certain beliefs, but they don't show that experience, all on its own, is sufficient for justification. His first example mentions his justified belief that he feels achy and hungry. He rightly notes that his experiences of feeling achy and hungry play a central role in justifying this belief. The misstep though is to infer that these experiences do all of the justifying work. It isn't just the experiences that justify Howard-Snyder's belief—he also relies on background information (other beliefs and experiences that he has). For instance, at a minimum Howard-Snyder relies on his beliefs about what it feels like to be achy and hungry. After all, if Howard-Snyder didn't already believe that this is what achy feels like and that is what it feels like to be hungry, he wouldn't be in a position to identify the feelings he currently experiences as "achy and hungry experiences". Without these background beliefs Howard-Snyder would have no reason to believe that his present experiences are of being achy and hungry rather than, say, itchy and satisfied. Similar points apply to Howard-Snyder's other examples. As a result, although these examples help make it clear that experience plays an important role in justifying beliefs, they fail to demonstrate that experiences can justify beliefs on their own. Hence, they provide no reason to accept foundationalism over coherentism. In fact, when we think carefully about the examples they provide reason to accept coherentism because we see that experiences justify only when combined with background information, i.e. experiences justify only when they are part of a coherent system of beliefs and

experiences.¹

The other component of Howard-Snyder's positive case for foundationalism involves arguing that foundationalism solves the regress problem. We pointed out in our first essay that the "solution" foundationalism offers to the regress problem is problematic because of the problem of arbitrariness and the problem of experience (Howard-Snyder treats both of these problems as part of the "Sellarsian dilemma"). Instead of repeating our previous discussion here we'll turn our attention to critiquing Howard-Snyder's attempts to avoid these problems.

3 The Problem of Arbitrariness

Howard-Snyder's response to the arbitrariness problem boils down to the idea that experiences can make the truth of the relevant belief likely because of a "matching" between the experience and the belief. He offers two suggestions for what this matching might be. First, Howard-Snyder considers that foundationalists might claim that there is a "lawlike connection" between certain experiences and beliefs. As a result of this lawlike connection, he maintains that such an experience could make the appropriate belief "very likely to be true" (pg. 10). Second, Howard-Snyder proposes that foundationalists may go with the idea that experiences represent content "in a way analogous to the way in which a photo represents a scene or a map represents a terrain" (pg. 10). He suggests that just like maps may match terrains, experiences may match certain beliefs, and this match allows the former to justify the latter.

Both ideas are interesting, but neither solves the basic problem. The flaw in both instances is that whether or not an experience matches a belief, a belief based on that experience is still arbitrary from one's perspective unless she is aware of the matching. Suppose that you have a visual experience of a 7 by 9 dot matrix, your favorite number is 63, and you believe that this visual experience is of 63 dots. Even though the experience matches the belief, the experience does not directly justify the belief. You need to know that this experience is an experience of 63 dots. But, the fact that you need this extra information means that the experience isn't justifying alone. Thus, it seems that either beliefs based on experience are arbitrary or beliefs based on experience are justified because of their fit with other beliefs and experiences. Either way, foundationalism fails to solve the regress problem.

¹For elaboration of this point see Poston's 'Framework Account of Reasons' (Poston 2014, 56–61).

4 The Problem of Experience

A major challenge for foundationalism arising from the problem of experience is to account for how an experience with content that matches belief can justify without requiring justification itself. That is, the foundationalist has to explain how an experience with content that can be accurate or inaccurate can justify without itself being justified. Howard-Snyder's response to this problem is straightforward. He argues that just because an experience has content it doesn't mean that the experience has to be justified. To support this claim he mentions several other mental states that have content but aren't the sort of things that can be justified. Among these mental states are: imagining, wondering, and entertaining. These states aren't the kind of states that are justified or unjustified. He claims that experience is in the same boat as these mental states. So, Howard-Snyder maintains that experiences aren't the sort of things that can be justified.

Howard-Snyder is certainly correct that mental states like imagining, wondering, and entertaining aren't the sort of things that can be justified. Nevertheless, this doesn't solve the problem of experience. Any argument by analogy (such as Howard-Snyder's) is only as strong as the analogy upon which it relies. While experiences and these other mental states (imagining, wondering, and entertaining) are alike in some ways, they are different in one very important respect. Experiences can provide justification for beliefs, but these other mental states can't. So, it's not merely that experience is like other mental states with content. Experience is a mental state with content that helps justify beliefs. This makes it very different from the other mental states that Howard-Snyder considers. Consequently, we can't conclude from the fact that these other mental states can't be justified/unjustified that experiences can't be.

5 Conclusion

Howard-Snyder's essay is a virtuous defense of foundationalism. Unfortunately, it's a fight that can't be won?justification is built upon the brick and mortar of experience and belief.

References

Poston, T. (2014). *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism*, Palgrave MacMillan.