I am going to deal with the foundations of First Philosophy in its entirety.

—Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

The basics of foundationalism

Foundationalism is the classic view regarding the nature of warranted belief acceptance, non-acceptance and the suspending of judgement. It has been advocated by such historically significant philosophers as Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Reid, and Kant as well as such significant contemporaries as A.J. Ayer, C.I. Lewis and Roderick Chisholm. It has been the subject of serious philosophical attacks by such prominent philosophers as Donald Davidson, Keith Lehrer, Laurence Bonjour and Richard Rorty.¹ What is foundationalism, however?

Given that foundationalism is a theory about the nature of epistemic warrant, it should be clear that it is a normative theory—i.e., it tells us when we are warranted, reasonable, or permitted to assent, not assent or suspend judgment regarding a proposition. How does it differ from the internalist and externalist views of epistemic warrant we have been discussing? Most importantly, it tells us about the structure of epistemically warranted doxastic attitudes. That is, it tells us how our epistemically warranted doxastic attitudes are related to each other. Put differently, it tells us that every member of a cognitive being’s set of doxastic attitudes is organized and formally related in very important ways. What is that organization and formal relation? According to the foundationalist, genuine (propositional) knowledge and epistemically warranted belief has a two-tier structure: some instances of our knowledge and epistemically warranted belief are foundational and every other instance is non-foundational. What is the difference between foundational and non-foundational instances of knowledge and epistemically warranted belief? Focusing on the warrant of the doxastic attitude of belief, consider the following:

A. If S’s belief that p is epistemically warranted, then S’s belief that p is either (a) foundational or (b) non-foundational.

B. If S’s belief that p is foundational, then S’s belief that p is properly basic (where a properly basic belief is one that has its positive epistemic status immediately, i.e., it is not warranted via an inferential relation).

C. If S’s belief that p is non-foundational, then S’s belief that p is properly non-basic (where a properly non-basic belief is one that has its positive epistemic status mediately: that is, such a belief is warranted via an inferential relation from one (or more) properly basic beliefs, e.g., S’s belief that p is warranted via an inferential relation when and only when, there is some other proposition q, such that (a) S believes that q, (b) S is epistemically warranted in believing that q and (c) S is warranted in believing that q’s being true entails that p is true).

Hence,

D. If S’s belief that p is epistemically warranted, then S’s belief that p is either (a) properly basic or (b) properly non-basic.

From this, it should be clear, given (C), that all foundationalists are committed to the following thesis:

¹ Bonjour’s attack of foundationalism and defense of coherentism is considered to be one the best attempts to change how epistemologists think about the structure of epistemic warrant. That work can be found in his landmark monograph *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1985). Today, however, Bonjour advocates and defends a form of foundationalism. In his recent monograph, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (NY: Cambridge, 1998), he argues for foundationalism calling this move from coherentism to foundationalism the correcting of his epistemological sins.
FOUNDATIONALISM₁: All properly non-basic beliefs are warranted in virtue of their being rightly related to (at least) one properly basic belief.

Some philosophers have argued that foundationalism requires a commitment to another thesis as well, namely,

FOUNDATIONALISM₂: There are properly basic beliefs (i.e., there is at least one cognizer that has at least one properly basic belief).

Although this is not explicit in the above argument, it has been argued that foundationalism does not make any sense without FOUNDATIONALISM₂. Is it correct that foundationalism requires a commitment to that view as well? In other words, if one rejects FOUNDATIONALISM₂, does that imply he is not a foundationalist? Clearly the person that rejects FOUNDATIONALISM₂ is committed to justification skepticism, but is he not able to be a foundationalist and a skeptic?

While we’ll take this up a bit later, let us say why this might this matter. One important reason is the following. Some scholars—philosophers and non-philosophers alike—have taken it that FOUNDATIONALISM₂ is false and thus have pronounced “the death of epistemology.” Why? They take this to follow from the following two theses:

a. Epistemology requires a commitment to foundationalism.

and

b. Foundationalism is true only if FOUNDATIONALISM₂ is true,

Most epistemologists are not moved by this; they believe that that philosophical “obituary” was premature, that epistemology is alive and well. How do they argue for this? Some philosophers do so by denying (a); such persons advocate coherentism. Other philosophers argue that it’s not clear whether we should accept (a) given that it is ambiguous. On the one hand, it could mean that

a’. Epistemology requires a commitment to classical (i.e., Cartesian) foundationalism;

on the other hand, it could mean

a”’. Epistemology requires a commitment to some form of foundationalism.

Which sense of (a) is requisite for the epistemology-is-dead pronouncement? The only way to make that pronouncement hold is if (a) really means (a’). Is (a’) is true? Most philosophers argue that it isn’t. What about (a”)? These same philosophers argue that, if (a) just means (a”), then (a) is true. However, the (a”) reading of (a) does not—even with (b)—imply “the death of epistemology.” What form of foundationalism is that? We’ll call that theory modest foundationalism. Before we take a closer look at the varieties of foundationalism (as well as the coherentist alternatives), however, let us consider why we should think that (some form of) foundationalism is true.

Why think that foundationalism is the correct structure of justification?

Foundationalists adopt their view in light of the epistemic regress problem. This problem, first formulated by Aristotle (Posterior Analytics Book I, Chps. 2-3), attempts to show that unless there are properly basic beliefs, philosophical skepticism is the only possible epistemic view with which we will be left. Before we say why this is the case, let us describe the form of philosophical skepticism we want to have in mind. For our purposes, let us focus on philosophical skepticism about the external world. In particular, let us focus on a form of justification skepticism about the external world, namely, the view that
W-SKEPTICISM$_{ew}$: For any person $S$ and proposition $p$ about the external world, it is not possible for $S$ to be epistemically warranted in believing that $p$ is true or for $S$ to be epistemically warranted in believing that $p$ is false.\(^2\)

Why does the epistemic regress problem imply W-SKEPTICISM$_{ew}$? As we’ll see shortly, unless there are basic beliefs and some of those basic beliefs are properly basic, we will be faced with an infinite regress of evidential “linkings.” And as epistemologists have argued over and over again, such a regress cannot give rise to justification thereby entailing that we cannot know anything about the external world. If that’s correct and we are to avoid W-SKEPTICISM$_{ew}$, then we must find a way to “block” the infinite regress. Argues the foundationalist, the only way for that to be is if there are properly basic beliefs about the external world. Let us then formulate the epistemic regress problem into an argument.

The standard argument for foundationalism is called The Regress Argument. That argument is this:

1. If a belief $b$ is warranted, then $b$ is a member of a justifying chain of beliefs. [Premise]
2. A justifying chain of beliefs either terminates or fails to terminate. [Premise]
3. If a justifying chain of beliefs fails to terminate, then that chain either regresses to infinity or it is circular. [Premise]
4. An infinite regressing chain cannot warrant beliefs. [Premise]
5. A circular chain cannot warrant beliefs. [Premise]

Therefore,

6. If a belief $b$ is warranted, then $b$ must be a member of a justifying chain of beliefs that terminates. [From 1-5]
7. If a justifying chain of beliefs terminates, then either it terminates with a warranted belief or an unwarranted belief. [Premise]
8. If it terminates with an unwarranted belief, then no member of the chain of beliefs is warranted. [Premise]

Therefore,

9. If a belief $b$ is warranted, then $b$ is a member of a justifying chain of beliefs that terminates with a belief that is warranted. [From 6-8]

Is The Regress Argument sound? That is, is it valid and are (1)–(8) actually true? According to the foundationalist, it is sound. If so, then we have established FOUNDATIONALISM$_1$. For (9) is a version of that thesis. Coherentists demur; they argue that the argument is valid, but unsound. Why? They take it that (5) is false. So, they try to block the defense of FOUNDATIONALISM$_1$ by denying (5).

What about the philosophical skeptic? What should they say about this argument? This brings us back to the question about FOUNDATIONALISM$_2$. It seems to me that a philosophical skeptic could in principle accept this argument is sound since it only establishes FOUNDATIONALISM$_1$. That is, it seems to me that the philosophical skeptic could argue that (9) is true such that we understand what must be the case were there justified beliefs about the external world, yet still deny that there are any

\(^2\) Two things. First, given that W-SKEPTICISM$_{ew}$ is a form of justification skepticism, it should be obvious that if it is true, then knowledge skepticism about the external world is true. Second, W-SKEPTICISM$_{ew}$ does not imply skepticism about propositions of logic, mathematics, and introspection. Skepticism (whether of the knowledge or justification variety) about these further classes of propositions is broader in scope than the form of skepticism described by W-SKEPTICISM$_{ew}$.
such beliefs. The philosophical skeptic denies FOUNDATIONALISM$_2$, not FOUNDATIONALISM$_1$. Of course, it is likely that foundationalists are motivated to accept foundationalism because they are committed to FOUNDATIONALISM$_2$. To demonstrate that, they need to employ the further premise that

10. There’s at least one belief $b$, such that $b$ about the external world and is warranted.

Should we accept (10)? If the standard view is correct, then (10) is clearly true. As we’ll see, it is this further claim, premise (10), that the advocate of W-SKEPTICISM$_{ew}$ clearly rejects. As such, she rejects the standard view. We’ll take up at the end of class whether we (epistemically) should join the philosophical skeptic in rejecting (10). Since we’re assuming that the standard view is true (until we see otherwise), we’ll grant the foundationalist (10).