

Comments on "Foundational Development"

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Van Haaften and Snik argue in their paper that Foundationalism is false but, nevertheless, our cognitive and moral systems of thought have their foundations. This they explain by saying that all systems presuppose some principles on which they rest. Such principles can be found by using reflection. According to the authors, such principles are asymmetric in time: the earlier stages of thought cannot recognize the validity of what comes later, although the later systems can see both that their own thought is valid and that the earlier systems are not. In this sense the systems really develop. But it also follows that we can never be certain that our own systems are both valid and final. On the contrary, we should expect them to be changed into some better systems in the future.

The authors may want to explain this by referring to their distinction between criteria and meta-criteria of validity. If a system of thought is justified by applying such a criterion as consistency, what justifies the criterion of consistency itself? The answer is, according to the authors, that the justification of the meta-criterion is circular. It is consistent to justify one's system of thought by referring to consistency.

But this is exactly where Foundationalism is supposed to help us. According to Foundationalism, the meta-criterion needs no justification. In this sense it is foundational. But once one rejects Foundationalism, the problem of circularity emerges. This is the case in coherence theories of justification. One possible way out is Pragmatism, of course.

Consistency, as a criterion, is not acceptable merely because it is consistent. Neither is it accepted only because consistency is a cross-culturally valid, timeless truth. Consistency is accepted because it works. Presupposing that we human beings need to live and even flourish in this world of ours, which is so unpredictable and dangerous, we need to plan our actions. And when we plan, we learn from the consequences of the adopted line of action. Gradually, we create systems of thought which will save the time and effort of going through all this planning again and again. Ultimately, what has happened is that we have recognized that consistency works for us.

The authors write, however, as follows:

It must be admitted that there is real kind of circularity involved in the argumentation...For the justification of S(n) does presuppose the specific meta-criterion that is only in S(n) accepted. We may have to swallow this awkward and at the same time inevitable and perhaps also clarifying characteristic of foundational development.

I do not think that the authors' conclusion is warranted. They do not offer any reason for it but the rhetorical reference to swallowing something, a bitter pill. They say that the conclusion is "awkward" (true), "inevitable" (false), and "clarifying" (mystery).

Coherentism is indeed an awkward position, because of this circularity, as everyone who has read his Bradley and the Rescher of *The Coherence Theory of Truth* knows. But the inevitability of circularity is questionable, because of the pragmatist solution, as Rescher has suggested in his later book *Methodological Pragmatism*. Of course it is another question whether pragmatism as a philosophical position is at all appetizing.

What about clarification? How can the alleged circularity of the meta-criterion be clarifying? The authors do not say. I would think that the only clarification we find is that we see how unclear the general theory of foundations can be. But it is questionable whether it is clarifying to see that a key principle of rational thought does not apply. What I mean is that certainly non-circularity is (almost) as important to us as consistency. It seems that the idea of justification, as a whole, is based both on non-circularity and consistency. We are lost if we go in circles.

Both of these ideas, consistency and non-circularity, have been denied. Non-circularity is denied by such coherentists who pose, like the authors, as some kind of pseudo-foundationalists. Also in hermeneutical thought it has been common to speak, following Gadamer, of the "fruitful circle," instead of a "vicious circle." The principle of consistency has also been denied, namely, by Hegel and Marx. They think that all our thought and ethics is inconsistent. They develop the dialectical logic of inconsistency.

The authors do not mention this, although it bears relevance to their views. Namely, they begin by saying:

Liberal education aims at the development of autonomous critical thinking...as the ability and inclination to take an inquisitive attitude towards prevailing opinions...Education should...further the acquisition of general and fundamental principles which guide the responsible person in his thinking.

This explains why the authors are so fond of some kinds of foundations, if not of strict Foundationalism. But, and this is my *main criticism* of their interesting paper: Their idea of foundational development is one-sided. They focus on a series of views, wherein one view is replaced by another and better one. But they seem to dismiss the problems we experience within every view or system of thought. Indeed, it is not only the case that any one good principle or criterion of validity (like consistency) which has been unknown earlier, will later change into something else, which is unknown now. It is also true that any principle, criterion or alleged foundational idea is challenged within our own conceptual framework. Moreover, I would claim that this does not depend on mere multiculturalism, in the sense that just now there exists a set of different world-views with their variable and mutually inconsistent foundational principles. This kind of relativism cannot be true, as I suppose without any explicit reasons in this context.

My point is that within every tradition, within its mainstream, there exist different and incommensurable views concerning even the most basic aspect of this given world-view. Kuhn supposed that this is not the case in normal science, but Feyerabend's anarchism may come closer to the truth. Every system of thought is essentially variable inside, it is incompatible with its rivals now, and it will be surpassed by some more advanced theories in the future.

I think that the authors miss at least one, perhaps two dimensions of their problem of foundations without Foundationalism. But then they may of course say that they wanted to focus on the developmental aspect only. I can imagine that they will further claim that this is the important aspect from the point of view of education.

However, I cannot accept this defense, because the authors assume that liberal education presupposes "the acquisition of general and fundamental principles." I have argued that they should have noticed that such principles need not exist always, nor at any single point in history.

It seems to me that their "failure" depends on the nature of the problem they want to deal with. We need foundations, instinctively, as a safety net; yet at the same time we know that there is no foundation.