

Foundationalism: Dead or Alive?

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Introduction

One of the most prominent terms in recent characterizations of the differences between modern and postmodern is foundationalism. Modernism made a strong appeal to foundationalism, but postmodernists are virtually unanimous in the opinion that foundationalism must be rejected. Indeed, James McClendon and Nancey Murphy regard holism rather than foundationalism as one of the criteria of postmodernism.¹ The purpose of this article will be to examine the nature of this dispute to determine whether foundationalism is indeed untenable as a means of justifying theological doctrine.

Definition of the Issue

In general, classical foundationalism is the contention that in the knowing process, there are certain unshakeable starting points that are not justified by any other propositions. They are immediately justified because they possess a character such that they are indubitable (i.e., cannot be doubted) or incorrigible (i.e., it is not possible to be mistaken about them). In the rationalist form of foundationalism, found in Descartes, such a foundation is known rationally, or by pure thought. For an empiricist like Locke, the foundation is sense data. The second element of foundationalism is that these foundations serve as justification for other beliefs, which are therefore mediately justified.

Usually, postmodernists have concentrated their attacks on a model of classical foundationalism, often singling out Descartes. In some ways that has presented a relatively easy target. When

foundationalism is said to be dead, classical foundationalism is usually meant. However, since about 1975, significantly different versions of foundationism have been proposed. These make more modest claims about their effectiveness. Triplett comments, "It is not clear that the standard arguments against foundationalism will work against these newer, more modest theories. Indeed, these theories were by and large designed with the purpose of overcoming standard objections."² An accurate discussion of foundationalism must take into account these developments. William Alston speaks of two types of foundationalism,³ while Triplett has a much more elaborate morphology. He separates varieties of foundationalism into two large groups, in terms of their "specifications of the nature of basic propositions," and "accounts of the relation between basic and nonbasic propositions." Within each of these two major groups are subgroups, with two or more varieties of each, leading to no fewer than twenty labels for foundationalist views.⁴ In addition, Reformed epistemology, which is the most sustained critique of classical foundationalism, constructs its own type of foundationalism. Thus it is extremely important to identify the exact character of the foundationalism we are discussing.

Awareness of this variety does not always translate into discrimination in discussion, however. So, for example, Rodney Clapp acknowledges that "the word *foundationalism* hardly has a single, univocal meaning. Thus there are some important Christian thinkers, perhaps

most notably Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, who call themselves foundation-
alists but are certainly not foundationalists
of the sort worried over through these
pages.”⁵ Yet this distinction does not seem
to enter into his discussion of such evan-
gelical theologians as Ronald Nash and
Kenneth Kantzer, whom he finds guilty
of slipping back into quasi-foundationalist
language and thought.⁶ Clapp’s failure to
distinguish these theologians from the
sort of foundationalism he is describing,
as he did with Plantinga, is particularly
curious, since he closely identifies evan-
gelical foundationalism with the common
sense realism of Thomas Reid.⁷ He does
not comment on the fact that Plantinga has
in his later writings indicated a consider-
able affinity for the thought of Reid.⁸

In the last quarter-century, not only
postmodernists but also most philoso-
phers have asserted or assumed that
foundationalism, having been refuted, is
dead. Sometimes the rhetoric has been
almost moral in tone: “Suddenly ‘anti-
foundationalist’ is a good thing to be,”
said Simpson;⁹ and Levi pronounced that
“opposition to foundationalism ought to
be the philosophical equivalent of resis-
tance to sin.”¹⁰

The Rejection of Foundationalism

A major problem for most forms of
hard foundationalism is the epistemic
regress problem. This is the question of
how we justify some item of belief or
knowledge, and then, how we justify the
justifier. If I say that I believe *j*, and then
am asked why, my answer is that I believe
j because of *k*. The further question may
then be pressed, however, as to why I con-
sider *k* to be adequate justification for *j*.
For example, if I assert that there is a yel-
low table in the room, I may be asked why

I believe this, and would probably give
some answer such as, “because I see it
there,” or “I am having a sensory percep-
tion of it.” Suppose, however, that I am
asked, “How do you know that your sen-
sory perception is accurate?” I may give
some further justification for this belief,
but then I am faced with justifying that
justification, and so am involved in a
vicious infinite regress. Furthermore,
Plantinga points out that foundationalism
does not fulfill its own criterion: In classi-
cal foundationalism, a belief must be
either foundational or derivative in order
to be rational. Foundational beliefs are
(a) self-evident (e.g., mathematical state-
ments like $2+2=4$ and definitional or ana-
lytic matters, like all cows are mammals),
(b) evident to the senses (i.e., reporting
immediate experiences), or incorrigible
(i.e., matters about which it is impossible
to be wrong, usually one’s immediate sub-
jective states). Derivative beliefs are those
beliefs that one can infer by logical prin-
ciples from these foundational beliefs.

The question, according to Plantinga,
is whether classical foundationalism is
rational. Which of the two criteria of
rationality does the contention that these
are the criteria of rationality fulfill? It
would appear that it does not meet either
of these. In other words, foundationalism
is self-referentially inconsistent.¹¹

A further problem with foundation-
alism, according to Plantinga, is that many
of the common beliefs of ordinary life, on
which we base our living, are clearly jus-
tified beliefs, yet they are excluded by the
criteria of classical foundationalism. These
are matters that are not evident to the
senses, self-evident, or incorrigible. Con-
sequently, they must be justified by a
demonstration of their relationship to
foundational or properly basic beliefs. No

one, however, has ever produced such demonstration. Plantinga says, "Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for me; at any rate no one has given good reason to think any of them is."¹² Clark comments: "Any philosophical principle that excludes cases of obviously rational beliefs ought to be rejected."¹³

This latter criticism appears less impressive than the first. While these may well be rational beliefs, and may in some sense be inescapable if one is to function in ordinary daily affairs, "obviously rational" is a bit too strong. Whether such are rational, and on what basis, is what is at issue here. Certainly George Berkeley did not think some of them obvious. Nonetheless, the first objection indicates the problem of epistemic regress. From a practical standpoint, one must stop the process of justification at some point, but where and why? This is the dilemma that faces any epistemology.

An Attempted Postfoundationalist Theology

In light of these problems, a widespread conviction has arisen among both philosophers and theologians that if theology is to be done, it cannot be done on a foundationalist basis. One theologian who has attempted to develop a postmodern and postfoundationalist theology is Wentzel van Huyssteen, formerly of the University of Port Elizabeth in South Africa and now of Princeton Seminary. His theological method may serve as an example of one type of attempt to estab-

lish theology without recourse to the foundationalist methodology.

Van Huyssteen is concerned with the question of the reality of the Christian faith, its validity or credibility. Are theologians indeed saying anything credible about God? He says that the task of systematic theology is "to demonstrate through creative reflection that the Christian faith has its own integrity: an integrity and uniqueness that may integrate the divergent dimensions of our modern experience, to give it the maximum degree of meaning and significance."¹⁴ Van Huyssteen intends to formulate a theological method that will not draw a sharp distinction between what is usually termed fundamental theology and systematic theology. By that he means that the question of a confessional theology grappling with contextual issues is not to be separated from an apologetic theology that sets forth its discourse to those outside the Christian faith.¹⁵

In so doing, van Huyssteen has a specific definition of Christian theology in mind: "Accounting critically for their faith presupposes that theologians must be prepared to reflect on their own thought processes, and this places upon them the fundamental task of relating the essence of their faith to the question of the very nature of rationality, as posed in contemporary philosophy of science."¹⁶ Thus, the treatment of theology in relationship to philosophy of science will be a major part of his endeavor. This is because "It is, after all, this branch of philosophy which concerns itself with analyzing and critically assessing the premises of science and thus seeks to construct rational theories of science."¹⁷

Van Huyssteen appears to commit himself to metaphysical realism and to a

correspondence view of truth, when he defines cognitivity: "The word *cognitivity* is used throughout in the sense of reference or reality depiction in theological statements: in what sense theological statements refer to reality or claim to be true, in the provisional sense of the word."¹⁸ He is quite clear about what he does not envision as the nature of this rationality, however. He is clearly opposed to all forms of authoritarianism. These would be especially the case with an absolutist view of doctrine: "Thus one of the most significant and incisive shifts in modern systematic-theological thought must surely be the swing away from a type of theology in which seemingly immutable conceptual models cause theological statements to be seen as precise and true dogmatic propositions, toward a new sensitivity to the relational nature of the language of religious experience."¹⁹ He is especially critical of dogmatic and authoritarian positions that result from the dismissal of the quest for a meaningful and credible basis for systematic theology. An example is "the claim that theology as such is founded on divine revelation and that this revelation has come to us through the exclusive authority of the Bible or the church."²⁰ Any such claim to infallible insight into divine revelation "poses nearly insurmountable problems to understanding the question of the origins of theological conceptual models and of the question of the truth of theological assertions."²¹ Rather, we must see that any theological conception, even one that claims to come from Scripture, "has been shaped by series of traditions and historically determined presuppositions."²²

Van Huyssteen believes that the conception of immutable theological models

was tied to a method of theology that assimilated it to logical positivism in science. Even Karl Barth, who sought to free his theological method from any philosophy and make theology autonomous, rather than assimilated to the methods of any other sciences, fell into the trap of a basically positivistic view of rationality.²³

The alternative view of rationality that van Huyssteen offers will not be a traditional foundationalism. By foundationalism, it is apparent that he is referring to something like the rationalism of Descartes or the empiricism of Locke, each of which in its own way attempted to build upon some indisputable or indubitable bedrock starting point. Rather, he proposes a postfoundationalist approach, "moving beyond the absolutism of foundationalism and the relativism of anti-foundationalism."²⁴ This approach will be found in critical realism. Compared to most realisms, critical realism makes a rather modest claim: "it purports to explain why it makes sense not to abandon some of the Christian faith's most basic realist assumptions. Critical realism thus will turn out to be at least in part an empirical thesis and not just a metaphysical claim about how the world must be."²⁵ This does not mean, however, that the choice of critical realism in theological reflection necessarily requires a choice of some form of realism in the natural sciences or the social sciences. This is because the different sciences require not only different strategies but also different conceptions of what would be regarded as an explanation. What must be asked, however, is "whether theology in any way exhibits a rationality comparable to the rationality of scientific reflection."²⁶

When he faces the question of the origin of theological statements, van

Huyssteen's answer is clear and definite: "the language of our spontaneous religious experience is, in the most profound sense, the origin of our theological language."²⁷ Such prescientific and pre-reflective language cannot simply be assimilated uncritically into systematic theology's vocabulary, however. It must undergo a transformation from the metaphorical language of religious experience to obtain maximum conceptual clarity.²⁸ Yet theology must always go back to that experiential basis: "In the wider Christian interpretative framework all religious language refers directly or indirectly to a type of religious experience that Christians through all ages have come to call an encounter with God."²⁹ These theological statements, however, are not to be divorced, as if in some purely objective way, from the theologian's own basic convictions and religious commitments. These enter into both the religious experience, and the choice of models to employ.³⁰

It is important to see that theological language is necessarily figurative or metaphorical. By a metaphor, he means "a word or expression used in an unusual context to lead us to new insights."³¹ A metaphor opens up insights into the world that cannot be conveyed by literal language. So it is a way of knowing, not just a means of communication.³²

Some of these metaphors ascend to the level of models, which enable us to formulate theories or networks of theories. Van Huyssteen agrees with Sally McFague that a model is a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power.³³ The models have the power to provide continuity in religious traditions. For example, he illustrates the nature and role of models or doctrines as follows:

The basic metaphor of our Christian faith—which I myself would call salvation in Jesus Christ—thus develops from the complex biblical language, through the numerous dimensions and meanings of a long-standing tradition of Christian reflection, into models and eventually into theological concepts, which become accessible through faith and various devotional forms (including creeds, liturgies, and confessions) and thus in turn direct the religious experiences of Christian believers.³⁴

Doctrines, then are not to be thought of as literal descriptions of what they claim to describe. Rather, "The theological doctrine of the Trinity of God, for example, is not a conceptual construction designed to describe God's essential being in an absolutist literal and final sense; its purpose is to unlock the essential implications of the basic biblical metaphor with the aid of a number of further metaphoric models from the Bible (Father, Son, Holy Spirit)."³⁵

Van Huyssteen insists that it is important to have criteria for a critical-realist model of rationality. He proposes three of these: the reality depiction of theological statements; their critical and problem-solving ability; and their constructive and progressive nature.³⁶ Drawing upon critical realism in science, he observes with Hilary Putnam that scientific realism is the only theory that does not make the success of science a miracle.³⁷ Rather than the convergent realism sometimes utilized in scientific realism, however, he advocates a more restricted type of realism, along the lines proposed by Ernan McMullin. Scientific realism's claim is that theology is discovering the structures of the world: "Realism therefore has to do with the existence implications of the theoretic entities of successful theories."³⁸ Of

course, this must be understood, not as a literal description, but as metaphor, “theory-laden,” and conditioned. One must be careful not to make an uncritical, superficial transfer of the realism of science to religious belief and to theology.³⁹ Yet the method he is proposing involves “the conviction that what we are provisionally conceptualizing in theology really exists. This basic assumption and the good reasons we have for it make it possible for theologians, like scientists, to believe they are theorizing in a valid, progressive, and therefore successful way.”⁴⁰ He cites with approval Arthur Peacock’s statement that Christians believe they are making meaningful assertions about a reality that they encounter in faith experiences, a reality beyond our experience. The further important question for van Huyssteen is what, within the Christian context, evokes such religious experiences, and here he identifies especially the biblical text.⁴¹ While insisting that human imagination plays a role in the constructing of theories, he steadfastly resists the suggestion that these metaphors and models only describe the human condition, without raising the question of reference or reality depiction at all.⁴²

This still leaves unanswered, however, the question about the explanatory role of theological models. In contradiction to those who contend that the ability to evoke an emotional, ethical, or spiritual response does not mean that a model has any cognitive function, he contends that the opposite is true. A model can only evoke an affective response because it explains something. He says, “In conclusion, the metaphoric language of theological models and theories can therefore be seen as referential and as reality depicting. This can be achieved without falling

back into a naive-realist, unrevisably descriptive position.”⁴³

The basic metaphor of Christianity has maintained itself through the history of Christianity, as theology has reflected upon the religious experience of believers. Beyond that it has given and is giving maximal meaning in answering the existential questions of life. This is “sound and adequate grounds (albeit never final, positivistic proof) for believing what is directly or indirectly alleged in our theological statements about God.”⁴⁴ It is not necessary to give some empirical proof of the existence of God. Rather, “The community of Christians all over the world—and therefore also of theologians—share in the same basic ultimate commitment by accepting the reality of God’s existence.”⁴⁵ This is supported by two other features of theology: its critical and problem-solving ability, and its progress. By using the Bible, the tradition of Christian reflection, and contemporary scientific thought, theology shows itself able to solve its problems.⁴⁶ And as to the third criterion, growth, he believes that what he sets forth shows that “Despite frequent paradigmatic shifts and breaks in the development of theological knowledge, theology has shown steady and indisputable growth.”⁴⁷

Van Huyssteen has made a valiant effort to develop a rational theology on a postfoundationalist basis. There is much about his effort that is commendable. He has genuinely wrestled with the question of rationality. In so doing, he has correctly seen that theology cannot simply be submitted to some sort of universal criteria, yet it must employ criteria that are subject to criticism, lest it become a ghetto endeavor. He has also offered us insightful understanding of the nature of reli-

gious and theological language, noting correctly that it does not give us a literal or exact rendition of its object. And he has made a strong effort to tie theology to divine revelation. Nonetheless, we must judge his attempt unsuccessful, for several reasons.

First, he has tied the understanding of theology very closely to the model of science. He states that philosophy of science is the discipline that concerns itself with questions of truth or reality. Yet, strangely, that connection is never really argued for. He speaks of "the indisputable interrelatedness of philosophy of science problems and fundamental-theological questions,"⁴⁸ and "We have seen that the question of rationality leads theology directly to the question of criteria that would also be valid from a philosophy of science point of view."⁴⁹ Yet he really has not offered adequate evidence for this contention, and it certainly is not the case that this interrelatedness is indisputable. He seems to regard the philosophy of science as exhaustive of the field of epistemology, which most philosophers would not do.

Second, van Huyssteen has bound theological language very closely to religious experience. He asserts that this is not simply an expression of religious feelings, but that it refers to the reality of God. Bearing in mind, however, that he is seeking to make his theology answer the questions posed by philosophy of science, including presumably, the behavioral sciences, this creates a problem for him. For there are behavioral sciences that study religious experience as simply a matter of subjective human feelings. It is questionable whether he has presented enough grounding for these religious experiences to be able to contend that they are indeed reality depicting, of a reality of the nature

of God.

Third, very different models are drawn from religious experiences, both within Christianity and across the spectrum of different religions. In light of competing models based on religious feelings, how does one justify the Christian models that van Huyssteen accepts simply on the basis of such feelings? It appears that his argument for the reality of the objects of theological reflection on the basis of the conviction of the community of Christian believers around the world does not really take into account the endeavors of the "scientific study of religion" by such disciplines as sociology and anthropology, or of the empirical fact of religious pluralism.

Fourth, it is not always clear what criteria he is employing, or how he justifies the use of such criteria. It is true, for example, that he considers progress to be one of the critical criteria. Yet just what constitutes progress in theology, and why these developments are so designated, is not self-evident, despite his statement that such progress is indisputable.

A final difficulty is one that attends all claims of contextuality, of the conditionedness of all thought. Van Huyssteen seems to hold to this idea on the primary level, but not on the secondary level. By that I mean that although such conditioning must be present in all thought, there are no indications of his awareness of the presence and effect of such conditioning on his own theory. The assertions he makes are very categorical in some cases. This comes out most clearly when he talks about authoritarian views, and of absolutist identification of revelation with the Bible, in a particular understanding of it. But if his view is true, then it must also apply to itself. Van Huyssteen finds him-

self in much the same sort of predicament that the sociologists of knowledge recognized but to which they could not respond adequately.

Van Huyssteen is endeavoring to avoid the dual problems of subjectivism and pluralism on the one hand, and of dogmatic naive realism on the other. In his effort to avoid the latter, however, he so qualifies his positive case that although there is much discussion of the reality of theology's objects, there is little real argument. He frequently makes statements such as "I am fully convinced that,"⁵⁰ "it now becomes clear that,"⁵¹ "indisputable interrelatedness,"⁵² and "in conclusion,"⁵³ when insufficient support has been offered for the conclusion advanced.

Coherentism

As philosophers have rejected traditional or hard foundationalism, they have turned to other forms of justification. While some of them have embraced pragmatic criteria, most have adopted coherentism. The major difference between coherentism and foundationalism is how propositions are related to one another in terms of their justification. In foundationalism there is a monodirectional justification. Basic or foundational beliefs justify the derived beliefs, but not vice versa. In coherentism, however, the relationship is more complex. There really are no basic propositions. All propositions, even those about sensory experience, must be justified by relationship to other propositions within the epistemic system. Justification of a proposition is sought, not by showing the relationship to certain epistemologically privileged propositions, termed basic or foundational, but by showing the coherence of any proposition with the other proposi-

tions in the system.

For this approach there is a problem of epistemic regress as well, but it is a different type of regress than that encountered by foundationalism. Here the problem is that we are caught in a regress in a vicious circle. If *m* is justified by *n*, and *n* is justified by *o*, and *o* is justified by *p*, and *p* is justified by *m*, then it appears that *m* is justified by itself. In most cases, of course, the circle is considerably larger than this, so that the direct circularity is not quite so obvious. Furthermore, a number of coherentisms in effect say that each proposition is justified by each of the others.

These are versions of coherentism that escape the major effect of this form of the regress problem, and they are best termed holistic coherentism. The central conception of coherentism with respect to justification is that a belief is justified by its coherence with one's other beliefs. The unit of coherence theoretically varies with the size of the set of beliefs one holds, since it may involve all of one's other beliefs. Some of these, of course, may be closer to the belief at issue, and thus may be more significant for producing coherence with it. While such a definition of coherence would apply to circular views of justification, holistic forms of coherence differ from such in not being linear. That is to say, justification for a given belief does not necessarily emerge from a direct inferential line running to it from propositions that serve as premises for it, which in turn are related by a similar direct inferential line to other premises, until there is a return to the original proposition as a premise. Audi expresses a moderate version of holistic coherence as follows:

II. For any *S* and any *t*, if *S* has any justified beliefs at *t*, then at *t*, (1) they are each justified by virtue of their

coherence with one or more others of S's beliefs; and (2) they would remain justified even if (other things remaining equal) any justification they derive from sources other than coherence were eliminated.⁵⁴

On this model, coherence is not necessarily a straight-line type of relationship to another (justified) belief or proposition. It is a question of the relationship between this belief and potentially a large number of propositions, conceivably even all the beliefs one holds. It avoids the problem of the regress by drawing a distinction not ordinarily found in foundationalism. It contends that the epistemic chain terminates in a belief that is psychologically direct but epistemically indirect. As belief, the last link in the process is direct since it is non-inferential. As knowledge, however, it is indirect, not simply in the usual sense that it is inferential, but in a broader sense. This belief "constitutes knowledge only by virtue of receiving support from other knowledge or belief."⁵⁵ It is not inferred from other elements of knowledge, but its status as knowledge depends upon its coherence with one's other beliefs, many of which are presumably, knowledge themselves. As Audi puts it, "It is thus knowledge through, though not by inference from, other knowledge—or at least through justified beliefs; hence it is epistemically indirect and thus non-foundational."⁵⁶

Coherentism and Foundationalism

We must now ask whether this type of coherence is necessarily exclusive of foundationalism. Such judgments should be tempered by an awareness of the immense outpouring of literature on foundationalism especially since 1975. Triplett's comment here is well-taken: "At this point in time, however, we have to

deal not with a single foundationalist theory but with a variety of related theories." His further comment is a helpful caution: "Whether the arguments that have been made against foundationalism are successful against all theories that might be appropriately described as foundational remains to be seen."⁵⁷ In fact, many of these more modest varieties of foundationalism were designed to overcome the standard objections to classical foundationalism.⁵⁸

Triplett gives a more general characterization of foundationalism:

- EF1: There are basic propositions.
- EF2: Any justified empirical proposition is either basic or derives its justification, at least in part, from the fact that it stands in an appropriate relation to propositions that are basic.⁵⁹

This means, simply, that there are propositions that form starting points. They are not justified by derivation from any other propositions. These are called basic, and are justified by that status. There are other justified propositions that derive their justification from "standing in an appropriate relationship to basic propositions."

Note that this definition does not specify the nature of the basic propositions, whether renditions of sense experience or logical a prioris, whether indubitable in some sense or not. This means that in theory a large variety of views can be classified as foundationalisms. In fact, the concept of foundationalism becomes so expanded that even ostensive anti-foundationalists are classified as foundationalists of a type. With respect to his category of context dependence of basic propositions he has a class termed "contextual foundationalism." A subcategory of this group

maintains that what functions as basic propositions varies with different cultural, historical, or scientific conditions. This socio-cultural form of contextual foundationalism includes the later Wittgenstein, Quine, and Sellars, none of whom have seen themselves as foundationalists. Even Rorty falls into this group:

Although his metaphilosophical conclusions imply the rejection of any positive theory of knowledge, Rorty's specific comments on and criticisms of traditional theories of knowledge seem to imply one sort of Contextual Foundationalist account, according to which basic propositions are whatever fundamental assumptions remain accepted and unchallenged in a given social or even conversational context.⁶⁰

Holistic coherentism also fits within one of Tripplett's varieties of foundationalism, namely, psychological foundationalism, for it holds that if we have any beliefs at all, we have some that are direct or non-inferential. Nonetheless, it denies epistemological foundationalism, since it rejects the idea that for there to be knowledge at all, some of it must be epistemically direct.

It is interesting to note that when analyzed by Tripplett's categories, van Huysteen's thought can be seen to be a type of foundationalism, albeit of a much more modest sort than that usually associated with the term. He is working with an approach in which certain propositions are justified by appeal to their relationship to certain other propositions, namely, those that are either scientific in nature or are derived from religious experience. Yet, as we have seen, the approach he practices leads him into serious difficulties. We must now ask whether there are other forms of modest foundationalism that

escape those difficulties.

Modest Foundationalism

The question now is whether there is any form of foundationalism that retains the epistemic directness of knowledge, but at the same time preserves the values found in holistic coherentism? A moderate or fallibilistic type of foundationalism is the best candidate for such a role. By fallibilist we mean that not even foundational beliefs are indisputable. Furthermore, in this type of foundationalism, the justification of superstructural beliefs by relationship to foundational beliefs is not necessarily deductive. Rather, they may be inductively justified by foundational beliefs. That means that they may be false even if the foundational beliefs are true. Just as one's foundational beliefs may be fallible, so may one's inferences, so that the superstructural or derived beliefs are fallible.

Moreover, a fallibilist foundationalism must allow for discovering error, both in the foundational and the superstructural beliefs. Foundational beliefs may be found to conflict with other, justified foundational beliefs, or with superstructure beliefs that are sufficiently well supported to be considered justified. This latter variety might, for example, be the case where one superstructure belief conflicts with another superstructure belief that is deductively inferentially derived from or implied by a justified foundational belief.

This means that the foundations, while necessary, need not be absolute. Audi puts it this way: "it requires epistemic unmoved movers, but not unmovable movers. Solid ground is enough, even if bedrock is better. There are also different kinds of bedrock, and not all of them have the invulnerability apparently belonging

to beliefs of luminously self-evident truths of logic.”⁶¹ While this analysis applies primarily to justification, it also means that foundationalism with respect to knowledge can be fallibilistic, for the grounds for one’s knowledge are not indefeasible. Perceptual grounds can be overridden, for example. One can fail or cease to know a proposition, not because it is false or discovered to be so, but because one ceases to be justified in believing it.

How, then, does this type of modest foundationalism relate to coherentism? There is one obvious point of relationship, which is negative in nature. This is that incoherence, or contradiction, may serve to defeat justified, even directly justified and hence foundational, belief. An example would be the defeat of a memorial belief, such as remembering an oak tree growing in a certain spot, but being unable to find sensory evidence of such a tree growing there or having grown there.

Second, although not attributing its truth to coherence, a fallibilist foundationalism can employ the principle of independence. This is one of a whole set of principles coherentists commonly utilize. This is the principle that “the larger the number of independent mutually coherent factors one believes to support the truth of a proposition, the better one’s justification for believing it (other things being equal).”⁶² Thus, the confirmatory effect of more than one sense, or of sense and memory, or of sense and self-evidence, provides stronger justification. While the role of coherence in this type of fallibilist foundationalism is restricted, it is a significant one.

What, then is the difference between a fallibilist foundationalism and a holistic coherentism? It is not that the latter allows a place for, or appeals to, coherence and

the former does not. Nor is it even, in Audi’s judgment, a question of whether coherence is necessary to justification. Rather, it is a question of whether coherence is a basic source of it and is a sufficient basis for justification.⁶³

Conclusion

We have examined the widespread current criticisms of foundationalism and observed that they are directed primarily at classical foundationalism—the belief that there are certain basic propositions that do not depend upon anything else for their justification, being in some sense or other indubitable. We have examined one attempt at a postfoundationalist epistemology, and observed the serious problems attached to it.

Yet we have seen that in recent years a more modest form of foundationalism has arisen. While not claiming indubitability for its foundational propositions, it nonetheless holds that there are two types of propositions: those that are themselves not justified by dependence upon any other propositions, and those that are justified by their relationship to these foundational propositions. In this type of foundationalism, the derivation of superstructure beliefs from foundational beliefs is not necessarily deductive, but may be inductive in nature. Furthermore, justification of this type can utilize coherence of the holistic type. Yet, unless there is added to coherence a measure of derivation from some source such as sense experience, there is no real basis for distinguishing true beliefs from very consistent and coherent false beliefs.

But is foundationalism that important to evangelicalism? I would contend that evangelicalism, as ordinarily understood, has a strong commitment to a correspon-

dence view of truth. Today some contend that doctrines do not make truth claims about God, but function as rules for speech about God, the way the rules of grammar do not themselves make assertions of fact but govern how we use language.⁶⁴ Evangelicalism, and orthodox Christianity in general, has always contended that its assertions about God are actually affirming truths about his nature and actions, and that its historical assertions refer to actual occurrences. I would further contend that all persons who make assertions that they expect others to understand and believe, in practice, assume what I would term a primitive or non-reflective correspondence view of truth. And of the several tests for truth, foundationalism, coherentism, and pragmatism, foundationalism, of the fallibilist sort that I have outlined above, can best sustain such a view of truth.⁶⁵

ENDNOTES

¹Nancey Murphy and James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," *Modern Theology* 5, no. 3 (April 1989) 191-193; 198.

²Timm Triplett, "Recent Work on Foundationalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (April 1990) 93.

³William Alston, "Two Types of Foundationalism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73.7 (April 1976) 165-185.

⁴Triplett, 97.

⁵Rodney Clapp, "How Firm a Foundation: Can Evangelicals Be Nonfoundationalists?" *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Liberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 269-270, n. 9.

⁶*Ibid.*, 85-89.

⁷*Ibid.*, 83.

⁸E.g., Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 218-227.

⁹Evan Simpson, "Introduction: Colloquium, ergo sumus," in *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning*, ed. E. Simpson (Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987) 2.

¹⁰Isaac Levi, "Edification According to Rorty," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 11 (1981) 590.

¹¹Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 60-61.

¹²*Ibid.*, 59-60.

¹³Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 138.

¹⁴Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) x.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, xvii.

²⁰*Ibid.*, xviii.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 40.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 41.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith*, 127.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*, 130.

³⁰Ibid.
³¹Ibid., 131.
³²Ibid., 133-135.
³³Ibid., 138.
³⁴Ibid., 141.
³⁵Ibid., 142.
³⁶Ibid., 148.
³⁷Ibid., 149.
³⁸Ibid., 151.
³⁹Ibid., 155.
⁴⁰Ibid., 155-156.
⁴¹Ibid., 157.
⁴²Ibid., 159.
⁴³Ibid., 161.
⁴⁴Ibid., 162.
⁴⁵Ibid.
⁴⁶Ibid., 177.
⁴⁷Ibid., 162-163.
⁴⁸Ibid., 125.
⁴⁹Ibid., 144-145.
⁵⁰Ibid., 155.
⁵¹Ibid., 163.
⁵²Ibid., 125.
⁵³Ibid., 161.
⁵⁴Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 138.
⁵⁵Ibid., 140.
⁵⁶Ibid.
⁵⁷Triplett, 96.
⁵⁸Ibid., 93.
⁵⁹Ibid., 96.
⁶⁰Ibid., 101.
⁶¹Ibid., 134.
⁶²Ibid., 136.
⁶³Ibid., 162.
⁶⁴George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). For an evangelical version of this conception of doctrine, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), and Stanley J. Grenz

and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: John Knox, 2000).

⁶⁵For a much fuller statement and argument for this contention, see chapters 12 and 13 of my *Truth or Consequences; The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).