Virtue Foundherentism
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Abstract
Foundherentism is a new and promising theory of epistemic justification that has not received its due in the secondary literature. Accordingly, in this paper, I will examine foundherentism with three principal concerns in mind. First, I explain the epistemic components of foundherentism. Second, I defend foundherentism against the charge of reliabilism. While third and finally, I argue that foundherentism needs to be supplemented with a virtuous component.

Over ten years have passed since Susan Haack introduced her remarkable, yet, largely misinterpreted and unacknowledged work *Evidence and Inquiry* into epistemological circles. *Evidence and Inquiry*, fleshes out in considerable detail, Haack’s new theory of epistemic justification Haack baptizes, ‘foundherentism.’ As the name implies, ‘foundherentism’ combines the strengths of the traditional foundationalist and coherentist epistemic positions without absorbing either of their well-worn problems. Moreover and as Haack herself notes foundherentism has been very influential in such diverse fields as education and law.¹ However, philosophers, especially in epistemology, have been less impressed. Only a handful of articles have attempted to examine the merits of foundherentism while those that have, are less than charitable misinterpreting or indeed misrepresenting Haack’s promising and unique position as the case may be.² Thus, in order to do justice to this remarkable and promising theory of epistemic justification, this paper will explain, defend and then criticize foundherentism in three separate sections. In the first section, I examine and explain as concisely as possible, Haack’s foundherentist position. Indeed, such an explanation is quite pressing when one considers the very brief and (very misguided) reviews of Haack’s *Evidence and Inquiry* in the secondary literature [9]. My second purpose is to debunk, what appears on the surface, to be a devastating criticism of foundherentism as articulated by Andrew C. Clune. Clune argues that Haack is a closet reliabilist and therefore, foundherentism is ultimately incoherent—foundherentism claims to be truth indicative but at bottom is really truth conducive. I will conclude that Haack seems to be able to avoid the charge of reliabilism and indeed that a careful and close reading of *Evidence and Inquiry* shows that she had already anticipated this misinterpretation. Third and finally, I will examine one remaining problem concerning foundherentism that Haack glosses over in her most recent work *Defending Science Within Reason*, which I call the “virtue problem.” I conclude that the true problem for Haack is that she places too much epistemic importance and responsibility on the epistemic subject charged with gathering and evaluating the evidence in an intellectual inquiry but without providing any guidelines or tools in order to facilitate this process. However, even if Haack does supplement her position with a virtuous component, such additional criteria for the justification of p could only be “objective” or truth conducive. “Virtue foundherentism” as I call it, would be a contradictory and perplexing dual-aspect hybrid of truth conducive and truth evidential components. Thus, though promising, “virtue foundherentism” is ultimately incoherent as it is a species of reliabilism after all, but of the virtuous type.

¹See the interview with Susan Haack, “The Intellectual Journey of an Eminent Logician-Philosopher” at http://www.miami.edu/phi/haack/DrlHaackInterview.pdf
²See [1] and compare with [3]. To see two antipodal readings of the same work.

In *Evidence and Inquiry*, Susan Haack proposes nothing less than a complete reconstruction of epistemology as traditionally conceived. Though Haack is in full agreement with the traditional project of epistemology, that is, of determining
the conditions for justified true belief, nevertheless, Haack feels there is a great need to re-examine epistemology, including its specific questions, methodologies and conventional positions with “fresh eyes” in order to move forward. There seem to be two equally important reasons for Haack’s proposed reconstruction. First, Haack argues against those philosophers who suggest that the usual project of epistemology, as the search for knowledge is “radically misconceived” [8, p. 611]. Rather, Haack wants to demonstrate that the traditional project of discovering conditions, criteria and rules for establishing justified true belief is still a viable and worthwhile pursuit. Thus, Haack’s first motive for a radical reconstruction of epistemology, is to deter us from taking the all too easy and tempting path of exclaiming the death of philosophy via the death of epistemology, pace Richard Rorty, and instead, to urge us to continue on the “the bloody hard way” of the traditional pursuit of knowledge and truth. 3

However, although Haack holds that epistemology as traditionally conceived, is a worthwhile and feasible pursuit, we must be clear that she conceives epistemic justification somewhat differently than traditional theorists. Consequently, the second reason for a proposed reconstruction of epistemology, appeals to those who see the merit in continuing with the time-honored custom of seeking clear criteria for epistemic justification and ratification, yet, find themselves at an impasse between those two great, traditional, epistemological positions, those of foundationalism and coherentism respectively speaking. Both of these positions, as we will discover, have their merits but also their age-old and much struggled with difficulties. Hence, Haack’s proposed solution is meant to synthesize these two positions into a new one (foundherentism) preserving the merits of each position while simultaneously ameliorating and dissolving each theory’s respective difficulties.

Accordingly, Haack, much like Descartes in his Meditations, begins Evidence and Inquiry by examining the principal problems and difficulties of specific foundationalist and coherentist positions in chapters one, two and three of her book. Each traditional, epistemic position, according to Haack, is prone to two separate problems. Foundationalism, briefly summarized here, holds that some beliefs are more basic, that is, more epistemically secure than others and that all other beliefs derive their justification from these few, basic, beliefs. 4 However, as stated, foundationalism leaves itself open to what Haack calls the ‘swings and roundabouts argument’: one must make a choice between epistemic security on the one hand and epistemic content. The second objection, Haack calls the ‘up, back and all the way down objection’: upper-tier beliefs can help justify basic beliefs and vice versa, therefore justification is not one-directional, as the foundationalist would have it. Since the foundationalist cannot challenge either of these objections without being a foundationalist, foundationalism is not a very good theory of knowledge [7, p. 30-33].

Coherentism, on the other hand, again briefly defined, holds that justification depends exclusively on the relationship between beliefs in a specific belief system. That is, a belief system is justified if and only if all of the beliefs are consistent with one another. However, it too, is subject to two different objections. The first objection, is the isolation objection, or what Haack, following C.I. Lewis, calls ‘the drunken sailors objection’: since consistency is both a necessary and sufficient condition for the justification for a belief set then it is possible for a belief set to be consistent and yet fail to be true. The second objection Haack names ‘the too much to ask argument’: it is “too much to ask” that is, unrealistic, for an epistemic subject to hold a completely consistent set of beliefs. Thus, since the coherentist cannot respond to these objections without being a coherentist the same conclusion applies: a new epistemic theory is in order [7, p. 21-24].

With this demolition of the two traditional theories of epistemology out of the way, in chapter...
four of Evidence and Inquiry, Haack turns her attention to articulating the goals, structure and method of the foundherentist position. According to Haack, the goal of articulating an alternative epistemic position to foundationalist and coherentist theories of justification is simply to explicate a definite and specific type of,

Epistemic justification which conforms to the desiderata which emerged from the arguments of previous chapters: to allow the relevance of experience to empirical justification (which will require an articulation of the interplay of causal and evaluative aspects); and to allow pervasive mutual support among beliefs (which will require an account of the difference between legitimate mutual support and objectionable circularity [7, p. 73].

As we will see, Haack’s proposal combines the merits of the foundationalist and coherentist positions into a harmonious unity. Like the foundationalist, Haack’s position is open to causal evidence of both sensory and introspective kinds. Like the coherentist, this causal evidence though important and necessary for justification, is not a sufficient condition for justification. Consequently, there must be an evaluative component, performed by the epistemic subject, by examining the belief in p within the context of the relevant beliefs, within the belief set, of a specific individual and at a specific time. In short, Haack’s proposal as we shall see, combines the positive aspects of each of the aforementioned traditional epistemic theories while also demonstrating that the foundherentist is not open to the traditional objections we saw in the above.

In order to understand the basics of Haack’s foundherentism we must first comprehend her distinctions, terms and definitions. Accordingly, I shall first examine Haack’s understanding of the term ‘belief.’ Haack makes a distinction between two different meanings of ‘belief.’ The first, Haack calls the state of belief a person is in, (hereafter S-beliefs) when there exists, a causal relationship between a particular individual and the world. That is, an S-belief simply refers to the immediate causal position one is in when they believe that p. This causal position, as we will see, may be either sensory or introspective [7, p. 74].

The second component, Haack calls the ‘C’ or content of one’s beliefs. In short, S-beliefs can be equated with someone’s believing something, that is, the act of believing, while the C-beliefs are defined as what they believe. Thus, the content of a belief or C-belief represents the propositions or statements that can be constructed from a person’s state of belief (S-belief). Therefore, Haack offers both a causal and evaluative (double aspect theory of justification). Providing a very condensed and cursory summary of her position, “how good one’s C-evidence is” will be composed of three separate, yet, interdependent parts: 1) the causal S-beliefs, 2) the translation of S-beliefs into C-evidence and 3) the evaluative stage or how ‘good’ A’s evidence is with respect to p. I shall now examine each of these stages in turn.

The first stage of epistemic justification then, for A, is to consider all of A’s S-beliefs, which denote all of the related sensory, introspective, etc states of ‘A’ which are all part of the causal nexus when he or she is in the act, state or process of believing that p. Second, the C-beliefs are the propositions and statements that accurately reflect S-beliefs. That is, the C-beliefs are simply the propositions and statements ‘A’ can create from A’s S-beliefs. Third and finally, this new C-belief faces a tribunal of sorts: the person tests the cogency of this new C-belief in light of what he or she already knows from all of the C-reasons that are relevant and related to this new C-belief. If the new C-belief is coherent with the person’s previously strongly warranted belief system, then the new C-belief is also justified. If, on the other hand, the new belief conflicts when placed in the context of one’s C-reasons, then the individual may use this new belief to determine whether his belief system, as a whole, is justified or not. Third and finally, whether the belief system as a whole is justified, largely depends on the comprehensiveness of the belief system. That is, how many related C-beliefs ‘A’ has and how these beliefs are organized. With all of this stated in somewhat abstract terms, let us turn to Haack’s crossword analogy to concretize her epistemic schema [7, p. 74].

Perhaps the best metaphor to explain the novelty and epistemic merits of Haack’s position is
that of a crossword puzzle. A crossword puzzle is composed of three elements. First, we have the puzzle itself with all of its intersecting entries. Second, we have the entries themselves. While third and finally, we have the clues (both across and down) in order to fill in the appropriate entry. A successful crossword puzzle then, will depend on whether all of the entries have been filled in correctly. However, in order to “fill in” a crossword, each entry must correctly answer its corresponding clue, while every entry must correctly fit or be supported by the already filled in intersecting entries.

Analogously, the foundherentist can also say that the justification of a belief depends on three interrelated yet, independent aspects. First, how favourable the C-evidence is with respect to p or, in other words, how well our evidence fits the clue in the crossword puzzle. The second aspect can be defined as how secure our evidence is independently of the clue and entry of the crossword. That is, how secure, how certain are we, that all of the intersecting entries that directly intersect with the C-belief in question are correct according to each of their respective clues. While third and finally, there is the comprehensiveness condition, where we examine the crossword as a whole. Did we investigate all of the relevant C-evidence for the clue? Are there any other factors that may come into play when investigating the propositions? Have we been diligent enough in defining them? How much of the crossword puzzle has been filled in etc. Stating all of this more succinctly we can therefore conclude that the primitive explicandum for the foundherentist can be expressed as follows: “A is more/less justified, at time t, in believing that p, depending on how good his evidence is” [7, p. 74].

With this brief summary of Haack’s position in mind, we can now turn to evaluate the merits of Andrew C. Clune’s article “Justification of Empirical Belief: Problems with Haack’s Foundherentism.” Clune, in this very short, yet, penetrating article, claims that on two distinct levels, foundherentism is in fact, a species of reliabilism. On the level of justification, foundherentism holds that

“1. Experience provides a partial justification of each and every empirical belief and this justification occurs independently of the support of other beliefs” [3, p. 462].

That is, Haack must provide adequate and sufficient reasons as to why the senses justify at least and only in part, our beliefs. However, as Clune correctly notes, the only justification Haack provides to demonstrate that the senses can serve to justify our beliefs is

1. “Experience (sensory and introspective) is a source of empirical information”; and

2. “It is the only ultimate source of such information available to us” [3, p. 462].

However, if Clune is right, then Haack simply assumes the senses are reliable and hence is reliabilist. Therefore, Haack’s ultimate grounds for the justification for any empirical belief would be the senses only because the senses are reliable, external, truth conducive, belief-forming processes.

Haack does not give a strict definition of what reliabilism is however, it is implied that all reliabilist theories are non-evidential (they are external and not internal theories of epistemic justification and are, therefore, only interested in examining reliable belief-forming processes.) Second, in general, reliabilist positions hold truth-conducive theories of justification [7, p. 139-158 and esp. p. 139]. Alvin I. Goldman argues that there are reliabilist indicator theories though he admits that the “reliable process theories have been far more influential.” See Goldman’s article, “Reliabilism” [5, p. 433]. Although F.P. Ramsey is usually credited with articulating the first true reliabilist epistemic position, see his [11], in my mind, it is not until D.M. Armstrong published Belief, Truth and Knowledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), that a fully worked out reliabilism is produced. Goldman does, in fact, produce, what I would call a proto-reliabilism, in his “A causal theory of knowing”, The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 64, 1967, 357-372 but his distinct and influential reliabilist position is only fully articulated in his much later writings. See Goldman’s Epistemology and Cognition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986.)
On the other hand, because of Haack’s reliabilism on the level of justification, Clune concludes that she must also be a reliabilist on the level of ratification. Haack’s foundherentist position as we saw, is truth indicative; all Haack can provide are reasons for thinking that foundherentism is truthful based on what we consider to be reasonable and rational explanations and provided that the senses are reliable indicators of truth. However, it is this last point, which Clune thinks, reveals Haack to be a closet reliabilist. Clune writes, 

“In order for foundherentism to be adequate as a theory of justification, the subject’s beliefs must be truth ‘indicative’, and this is only possible if the senses are reliable means of detecting information about the environment” [3, p. 462].

Thus, since it is the evidence of the senses, which, Haack presupposes, anchor our beliefs to our environment, she can only conjecture that foundherentism is truth indicative to knowledge. Therefore, she does not, and cannot, provide any reasons or evidence to justify her claim that “the ultimate evidence with respect to empirical beliefs is experiential evidence both sensory and introspective” [7, p. 213]. Rather, she must simply assume that the senses as well as introspection are reliable most of the time and thus, Haack does not present an internal evidential or ‘indicative’ epistemic position at all. Rather, the ultimate ground of foundherentism must be the senses and this means that Haack, at bottom and despite all of her posturing to the contrary, really presents a causal and external theory of justification and therefore is a reliabilist.

Nevertheless, although Clune seems to understand Haack’s argument he misrepresents Haack’s position with regard to two important points. First, Haack does not think, pace the reliabilist, that foundherentism is truth conducive but rather asserts the much less ambitious, much less demanding and therefore, much more defensible position that foundherentism is only truth indicative. What this means is that the ultimate ratification of foundherentism and unlike reliabilism is not causal but rather evaluative and internal. Haack argues that foundherentism is truth indicative because we can only provide what we take to be truth indicative; what we believe to be reasonable evidence, warranted by what we think are rational reasons [7, p. 210]. And, if this fails to satisfy the radical skeptic and all the Gettier paradoxes he can muster, then so be it. This is the best we can do. Hence, the ratification of foundherentism is once more, dependent on a double aspect—it is dependent not only on assuming the senses are reliable but also on the reasons or more specifically, what we consider to be a cogent, rational, reasons to defeat the skeptic. By neglecting the second aspect of foundherentism, Haack does indeed appear to be a reliabilist. However, it is precisely this second aspect, or the evaluative aspect of foundherentism, which differentiates it from reliabilism in general. For this evaluative component applies across the board. That is to say, even at the level of our sensory experience there is still interpretation at work.

Secondly, the related misrepresentation by Clune occurs when he also presents Haack’s notion of sensory evidence as one that is innocent or pure of theory. He fails to acknowledge, that even at this level, the senses are still conditioned, or ‘theory impregnated’ by our evolutionary trajectory as human beings, and by our cognitive capacities as individuals. Therefore, our senses are not purely empirical causal structures, which perfectly or even reliably (50 percent +1 of the time) mirror the world as it really is. Even at this level, there is still work for the evaluative and interpretative processes to understand what we really saw, heard, smelled and tasted based on our increasing understanding of our specific, species biological makeup. As Haack makes this clear, 

“Built into my account of perceptual evidence, as in our pre-analytic concept of the evidence of the senses, is a conception of perception as at once direct and interpretative. In normal cases, perception is of things and events in the world around us; but there is pervasive interpenetration of perceptual experience and background beliefs” [7, p. 612].

It is for this very reason that Haack goes in to
considerable detail, in chapter five:

“The Evidence of the Senses: Conjectures and Refutations,” to explain that, “perception (is) of things and events around one, not of sense-data, colour patches, or whatever. But at the same time it allows for the pervasive inter-penetration of background beliefs onto our beliefs about what we see, hear” [7, p.110].

In other words, and following the work of noted ecological psychologist J.J. Gibson, Haack argues that perception, for human beings, is distinctly human: “A perceptual system, a system for the detection of information afforded by the things and events in their (the specific species) environment” [7, p.114] (also, see [4]). Hence, though perception seems to be truth indicative it is not, truth conducive nor on its own reliable as the reliabilist would have it. Perception is always interpreted whether biologically, unconsciously or consciously speaking. Haack’s point is that only an internal and evidential epistemic position such as foundherentism takes all of these points into consideration.

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From my brief analysis, Haack seems correct to conclude that only an internal, evidential, epistemic position such as foundherentism can truly warrant our beliefs. That is to say, we can only justify a proposition according to what we believe to be the evidence that supports it. While simultaneously, we must also trust that our reasoning abilities and methods of evidence collecting are valid and sound. However, there remain additional problems inherent to any internal and evidential theory of justification, which Haack simply does not acknowledge. If, as Haack claims, the primitive explicandum for foundherentism can be summarized as follows: “A is more/less justified, at time t, in believing that p, depending on how good his evidence is.” Then, there is a tremendous epistemic as well as ethical onus and responsibility placed squarely on the shoulders of A, to be able to distinguish between what is the sustaining evidence for p as opposed to the inhibiting evidence for p. For A to use good judgment as well as have the capacity and skill required for valid and sound reasoning. For A to ensure that they have been vigilant in discovering all of the sustaining and inhibiting evidence for p. A must also guard him or herself against falling into the trap of ‘wishful thinking’ or believing that p, because they hope that p. Conversely, A must possess courage to believe that p even if he fears p is true. In essence, Haack’s position needs to be further supplemented with an account of the specific epistemic virtues A is required to possess and exercise in order to fully justify any empirical inquiry. Foundherentism then needs to explain precisely and in very explicit terms, just what these specific virtues are and how A can satisfy them.

However and only under a very charitable interpretation can it be said that Haack even implicitly acknowledges that all epistemically warranted, empirical, investigations will test both the investigator’s cognitive abilities as well as his or her character. In her most recent work, Defending Science Within Reason, Haack alludes to the possibility of a virtuous component for foundherentism (yet still glossing over the true importance of this component) by approvingly quoting Percy Bridgman’s famous explanation of science, (and for Haack all forms of empirical inquiry) as “doing one’s damnedest with one’s mind, no holds barred” [2, p. 551].

However, there is no further explanation as to what, exactly, “doing one’s damnedest with one’s mind” entails other than trying to discover the truth as best a particular subject can. But, it is precisely this subjective element ie. what one believes to be rational reasons for p, what one believes to be evidence for p etc. that continues to haunt and undermine Haack’s overall project. It would seem foundherentism is in need of some additional, “objective”, virtuous criteria to explicate precisely what Haack means by the evaluation of C-evidence for p.

Yet, the difficulty that Haack faces is that if she does specify some additional criteria for the justification of p, then such conditions can only be external and truth conducive with the consequence that foundherentism, as a theory of epistemic justification, becomes a paradoxical and incoherent
hybrid of evidential and truth conducive components. Therefore, Clune is correct in claiming that Haack is a closet reliabilist after all but somewhat imprecise in his argumentation and understanding of Haack’s position. More correctly put, Haack would be a **virtue reliabilist** with some affinities to Ernest Sosa and John Greco’s respective positions (see [13, p. 278] and also [6, p. 424]).

Now, one could object to my above argument and claim that I have merely argued for one school of epistemic virtuous thought that concentrates on intellectual virtues or truth-conducive cognitive capacities. But, there is another school of virtue epistemology called, “character” or moral virtue epistemology. This school includes such philosophers as James A. Montmarquet [10] and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski [14, p. 277-283]. For these philosophers, virtue epistemology means simply developing the proper moral virtues required for truth finding such as intellectual courage, and open-mindedness. Intellectual inquiry then, is akin to moral development and requires both patience and practice. Thus, one could argue that if foundherentism is in need of additional support it could be supplemented from this school and therefore virtue foundherentism remains an internal and evidential epistemic position after all.

However, once again, Haack cannot appeal to **any** subjective virtuous habits of inquiry since the same problem would arise: we can only **assume** that our reasoning abilities, methods of evidence collecting and even moral and intellectual fiber (what Montmarquet calls “intellectual courage”) are truth indicative. And, to base an epistemic theory on such an assumption, is clearly unjustified. Again, we are left with the same intractable problem as before: foundherentism is either a reliable, truth conducive and external (virtue or otherwise) epistemic position or foundherentism is a truth evidential and internal epistemic position, which can only **assume** to be justified. Either of these alternatives would be unsatisfactory for Haack and once more, it would seem, yet another promising epistemic position fails to satisfy the skeptic.

References


