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BonJour and the Myth of the Given

Laurence BonJour’s epistemology is marked by careful reflection on the consequences of epistemic internalism for an overall theory of epistemic justification. Epistemic internalism requires that the facts which determine whether a subject’s belief is justified are internal or mental facts, facts that, in some sense, a subject is aware of. BonJour formerly argued that epistemic internalism implied epistemic coherentism. A crucial part of this overall argument was a defense of the Sellarsian dilemma. This dilemma attacks foundationalist internalist views that attempt to ground basic beliefs in experiential states such as appearances, seemings, immediate apprehensions, direct awarenesses, or intuitions. BonJour argued that the requirement that these states do not require further reasons conflicts with the internalist requirement that these states provide reasons for a subject to believe that some proposition is true.1

BonJour has renounced this argument and has defended a form of internalistic foundationalism.2 My goal in this chapter is to defend BonJour’s earlier coherentist view about the Sellarsian dilemma from his later foundationalist epistemology. I seek to accomplish this by arguing that his latest attempt to solve the Sellarsian dilemma does not succeed. I begin with an overview of BonJour’s anti-foundationalist argument and his defense of the Sellarsian dilemma contained in his book The Structure of Empirical Knowledge. This will set the stage for evaluating his latest position, which comes in the second section. In the final section, I consider David Chalmers’s recent attempt to defend a position closely similar to BonJour’s by appeal to phenomenal concepts. I argue that

1 BonJour (1978, 1985, Ch. 4).
Chalmers’s view faces similar problems to BonJour’s. It is not possible to consider every attempt to defend the doctrine of the given, but, as the last section aims to show, there is a common core to many attempts to defend that doctrine. I argue that the common core conflicts with the requirements of epistemic internalism. Thus, I take this argument to have shifted the burden of argument back to epistemic internalists who aim to defend a foundationalist view.

5.1 BonJour’s anti-foundationalist argument and the Sellarsian dilemma

BonJour formulates a basic argument against foundationalism in chapter 2 of his book *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. The argument aims to show that epistemic internalism implies that foundationalism is false. BonJour’s argument is heavily influenced by Wilfrid Sellars’s essay ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.’ In section VIII ‘Does empirical knowledge have a foundation?’ Sellars argues that knowledge requires justification that in some sense must be recognized by the knower. Sellars writes, “We have seen that to be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only have authority, this authority must in some sense be recognized by the person whose report it is.” This conflicts, Sellars claims, with the requirement that there can be basic knowledge. William Alston accuses Sellars’s argument of a levels confusion. Sellars’s argument is defensible against Alston’s charge but that is a story for another occasion. In the following I examine BonJour’s formulation of the argument.

**BonJour’s anti-foundationalist argument:**

1. Suppose that there are basic empirical beliefs, that is, empirical beliefs (a) which are epistemically justified, and (b) whose justification does not depend on that of any further empirical beliefs.
2. For a belief to be epistemically justified requires that there be a reason why it is likely to be true.
3. For a belief to be epistemically justified for a particular person requires that this person be himself in cognitive possession of such a reason.

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3 Sellars (1963).
4 Ibid., 168.
5 Alston (1980).
6 BonJour (1985, 32).