Summary of
‘Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?’

[Introduction] Epistemological foundationalism claims that some empirical beliefs have epistemic justification which does not depend on the justification of other empirical beliefs.

The existence of foundationalism persists because it has not been properly attacked at its central thesis.

There is one central argument to foundationalism on which all these variations are based, however. It goes like this: if a belief is to be justified the justification must also be based on beliefs, which themselves must be justified... and so on. This is called the epistemic regress problem. The foundationalists then simply say “see? it must end somewhere, eh?” and this response can correspondingly be termed the epistemic regress argument.

[Section I] The most natural way to justify a belief is by producing a justificatory argument: belief A is justified by citing some other belief B, from which A is inferable in some acceptable way. This is inferential justification. It is clear that B must also be justified. Note that a belief can be arrived at through other means, this is just a method of justification of that belief. Also the justification doesn’t need to be pre-recorded so to speak, it is enough that a justification can be made upon demand.

There are four possibilities for this regress problem: (i) the regress might terminate with beliefs for which no justification of any kind is available; (ii) the regress might proceed infinitely; (iii) the regress might circle back upon itself; (iv) the regress might terminate because beliefs are reached which are justified (justified by themselves somehow). Option (iv) is foundationalism.

Possibility (i) is not viable since with this outcome justification could depend on completely arbitrary other beliefs. Alternative (ii) gives a skeptical outcome, the skepticism only avoided that the regress, though infinite, is not vicious. Alternative (iii) has been much more prominent than (ii). Adopters of this view tend to argue a holistic view of justification, using a coherence theory of justification (internal coherence among beliefs). This too is subject to a number of objections, and is thus also unacceptable.

We may, however, find similar problems to the above in foundationalism, so an argument by elimination of possibilities is note useful.

[Section II] Strong foundationalism leads directly from alternative (iv). The beliefs are only required to be adequately justified, extra qualifications such as certain, infallible, indubitable, etc. are unimportant.

There must be some feature of a basic belief which provides a secure foundation for empirical knowledge. Lets call that property $\phi$. One argument for a belief (B) to qualify as basic goes like this: (i) Belief B has feature $\phi$. (ii) Beliefs having feature $\phi$ are highly likely to be true. Therefore B is highly likely to be true. The argument against this is that for B to be justified for a particular person it is necessary that the person be in cognitive possession of that justification, and thus B is not basic since its justification depends on at least one other empirical belief. The foundationalist responds that it is not necessary for the possessor of the basic belief know or even justifiably believe that the belief is available. Second they argue the possessor may be in cognitive possession f the
belief, but that their cognitive grasp of the premises required consist only of intuitions or immediate apprehensions.

[Section III] The ‘externalist’ (term given by Armstrong) view is this: the person who has a basic belief need not be in possession of any justified reason for his belief and need not even think that there is such a reason; the status of their belief depends solely on the external relation. The argument then goes like this: (i) Belief B is an instance of kind K. (ii) Beliefs of kind K are connected in a law-like way with the sorts of states of affairs which would make them true, and are thus highly likely to be true. Therefore B is highly likely to be true.

However, the regress problem comes from the person needing to know some set of premises to justify a belief, and this technique amounts to waiving this general requirement in cases where the justification takes a certain form. Certainly externalism seems plausible since the person would not go wrong in accepting a belief based on one of these external relations, but even so this does not justify the person’s acceptance of the belief. Externalism, then, seems to be abandoning the traditional notion of epistemic justification and along with it anything resembling the traditional conception of knowledge. Though that might be a good thing, it inadvertently means that the externalist view is not a solution to the regress problem.

[Section IV] The second foundationalist response to the regress problem (the standard solution) is the traditional doctrine of cognitive givenness. Givenness is the idea that basic beliefs are justified by reference not to further beliefs, but rather to states of affairs in the world which are immediately apprehended, directly presented, or intuited. Let there be a basic belief that-p which is supposedly to be justified by reference to a given or immediately apprehended state of affairs. It is this immediate apprehension of the state of affairs which justifies this belief. The three items present in this situation are: the belief, the state of affairs which is the object of the belief, and the intuition or immediate apprehension of the state of affairs.

The third aspect seems to be a cognitive state which involves the assertion that-p. There are two alternative ways of looking at this aspect – that these immediate apprehensions are cognitive, or that they are non-cognitive. If the immediate apprehensions are construed as cognitive, then they will be both capable of giving justification and in need of it themselves; if the intuitions are non-cognitive, then they do not need justification but are also apparently incapable of providing it. If a person has no cognitive grasp of the state of affairs in question by virtue of having such a non-cognitive intuition then the intuition cannot give the person a reason for thinking that his belief is true or even likely to be true. Thus epistemological givenness is a myth.

No account, then seems to be available of how an empirical belief can be genuinely justified in an epistemic sense, while avoiding all reference to further empirical beliefs or cognitions which themselves would require justification.