An Essay about Foundationalism in Theory of Knowledge

1. Introducing the Issue: What is the epistemological question discussed in this course that you (and your opponents) are trying to address?

Rejecting infinitism and the circular reasoning of coherentism, foundationalism seems the only remaining option that can be taken to end the chain of infinite regress from skepticism, since these three theories about justificatory structures appear to be exhaustive. Traditional foundationalists seek infallible, indubitable, and incorrigible foundations but set extremely high requirements for justification. Modern modest foundationalists try to relax the criteria but face Bonjour's challenge. There comes the dilemma of foundationalism.

2. Thesis Statement: Clearly and rigorously state the position you take on the above epistemological question. (This statement will be the view you defend in this essay. The remainder of this essay should revolve exclusively around supporting this statement here).

I attempt to revise traditional foundationalism by combining it with contextualism. This position, contextualist foundationalism (CF), claims that the truth conditions of foundationality attribution vary with contexts. Specifically, the sentence "P is foundationally justified" expresses different propositions, depending on what standard is used to evaluate foundationality in that context.

3. Elaboration: Elaborate on and clarify your position to avoid potential misunderstanding and confusion with similar positions.

CF is both a theory of language and justificatory structures. Compared to epistemic contextualism of knowledge, it adopts the same contextualist strategy but focuses its application on justificatory structural analysis. It essentially agrees with traditional foundationalists' stringent criteria but are more flexible by making foundationality context-sensitive. In response to the two key questions for foundationalism, CF states that infallible, indubitable, and incorrigible beliefs are foundational, and they are self-justifying or self-evident by these properties, but only in contexts where the subject holding these true beliefs is absolutely certain about them. Thus, beliefs may count as foundational in some contexts, but not in others where they can be further doubted, revised or overturned with higher standards. Since CF is an update version of traditional foundationalism, it partially agrees with traditional foundationalism and denies the views of modern foundationalism.

4. Opposition: State and explain your target opponent position(s) in preparation for your attack of it later.
(Note that your answer here should not include everything about this opponent position.

Rather, you should analyze it to highlight its disadvantageous features to be compared with your own theory in the next question. Your answer to this question serves purely as a preparation for your answer to the next question. But remember to represent your opponent fairly.)

Experential and (process) reliabilist foundationalism are two versions of modern foundationalism. The former suffers from Sellars's dilemma, so I will mainly treat the latter (RF) as the competing theory of CF. RF states that being produced by a reliable process offers justification for foundational beliefs. This view, as a version of moderate foundationalism, allows foundational beliefs to be open to doubt but then faces Bonjour's challenge, which devises a dilemma for RF by asking what makes for foundationality. If RF opts for a concrete answer, then even basic beliefs can be challenged by further interrogation, making this position collapse into skepticism. If they cannot provide a satisfactory account for foundationality, the arbitrary response makes RF lose the legitimacy to stop a regress. RF then faces an awkward situation. Besides, RF is essentially a reliabilist, thus an externalist view. It also shares the disadvantages of reliabilism (e.g., the generality problem) and externalism (e.g., the easy knowledge problem).

5. Main Argumentation: Compared to your main target opponent position(s), what advantage(s) does your own position have, what problems does it solve/avoid?

I argue three advantages for CF over RF.

Firstly, it solves Bonjour's challenge. With the manipulation of Contextualist strategy, foundational beliefs only need to be undoubted in specific contexts where they are foundational (and thus no skepticism is led), but needn't be undoubtable in every context as traditional foundationalists think. According to CF, Bonjour's dilemma automatically creates a high-standard philosophical context where Bonjour uses it to doubt foundational beliefs in low-standard ordinary contexts. This should bring no harm to the truth value for the ordinary foundationality attribution.

Secondly, CF avoids some problems of reliabilism and externalism shared by RF. Since CF sticks to traditional foundationalism's criteria and refuses reliabilist criteria for foundationality, naturally it is free from reliabilists' disadvantages. Moreover, CF can defend a contextualized form of access internalism. In that sense, CF avoids externalists' (also RF's) easy knowledge problem while still provides regress stoppers through foundationalism as capable as RF, instead of generating skepticism as most internalists do. Features for contexts mainly include: 1. the speaker's mental/psychological states, which are internal to an agent; 2. the conversational environment, which the agent normally forms direct sensory experiences or perceptions about and thus has direct access to. Subsequently, if the justifying factors for foundational beliefs are context-dependent, they must also lie within the agent's perspective. Agents are commonly aware of the contextual shift and how this shift affects their justification. For example,

imagine an agent admits "2+2=4" is foundationally justified in a formal mathematical context, while not in a computer programming context where limited precision or rounding error could generate a nuanced result. It would be weird if we ask why he makes these two claims but he fails to offer any plausible explanation, if not justifiable to others, at least to himself. Intellectualized agents should intuitively recognize the contextual variation and understand why this causes different foundationality criteria.

Thirdly, CF serves as a middle way to reconcile the divergence between foundationalism and coherentism. For CF, beliefs won't offer mutual support simultaneously, but may foundationally justify each other in different contexts. Both CF and coherentism can agree with the non-existence of a distinctive class of fixed regress stoppers. Even though CF rejects coherentism by claiming coherence alone is not enough, CF can explain coherentists' intuitions very well.

6. Foreseeing Objections: What would your main target opponent(s) say to attack your position and/or to defend her own position from your attack?

There might be three main challenges:
1. Foundationality attribution, unlike knowledge attribution, is rarely committed in ordinary linguistic usage as a technical term for philosophers, threatening CF to lose the ground of ordinary speakers;
2. Traditional foundationalists may worry the flexibility of foundations violates the original intention of foundationalism to reject skepticism, since it makes absolute certainty become also flexible;
3. Opponents of traditional foundationalists may pose the same challenge for CF: given the high requirements for foundational justification, there is no reason to loosen the requirements for justification transmission, resulting in skepticism.

7. Response to Objections: How would you respond to this attack/defense of your opponent?

My responses:
1. Even though the term "foundationally justified" is not directly attributed, we sometimes judge about foundationality indirectly. For instance, as long as an agent says "2+2=4", we could further ask "why you said that?". In a computer programming context, he may answer "because the computer is using a decimal system and approximate the result to an integer", implying "2+2=4" need further justification and is not foundational. In mathematical context, however, he may answer "Come on! So obvious axiom!", implying the opposite. Thus, we can always apply the "ask why" method to test all linguistic data and make equivalent transformations. That suggests CF analyzes other indirect attribution depending on foundationality instead of direct foundationality attribution;
2. Referring to Lewis's contextualism, CF can similarly claim that S's belief P is foundationally justified iff P is infallible, indubitable, and incorrigible in every

possibility left uneliminated by S, except those that are properly ignored. In this sense, absolute certainty is indeed guaranteed in every possibility to reject skepticism, as long as we adopt the proper ignoring strategy. For example, when we say “2+2=4” in most everyday contexts, we are absolutely certain about it and properly ignore the possibility of the special computer context. It is still foundationally justified;

3. In CF, unlike other foundationalism, it is necessary to distinguish the first-order and second-order requirements. The former are related to foundational justification and justification transmission in a specific context, which are context-dependent. The latter set identical requirements for all foundational beliefs in all contexts (e.g., infallibility, indubitability, incorrigibility), which are context-independent. The objection merely mixes the two levels of requirements, while they can be compatible according to CF.