Lecture 17: Coherentism

I. Linear vs. Holistic Coherentism
All coherentists hold that there are no immediately justified beliefs. However, we can distinguish between two ways of being a coherentist:

*Linear* coherentists reject the premise in the regress argument according to which beliefs cannot be justified by a chain of supporting justified beliefs that loops back on itself.

*Holistic* coherentists reject the regress argument’s presupposition that “relations of justification . . . involve a linear, asymmetrical order of dependence among the beliefs in question.” Instead, they hold that “all of the beliefs in a relevant system of beliefs stand in relations of mutual support, with none being epistemically prior to the others” (BonJour, “In Search of Coherentism,” pp. 44-45).

Almost all actual coherentists have been of the holistic variety, so that is the version we will focus on.

Any particular version of holistic coherentism should answer the following three questions:

i. What makes a system of beliefs more or less coherent?

ii. For a given individual belief, what is the relevant system of beliefs of which it is a part?

iii. How is the justification of an individual belief determined by the coherence of its relevant system of beliefs?

Some authors assume that the answer to (ii) is “the subject’s entire set of beliefs.” But then answering (iii) becomes very difficult. For example, the following proposals lead to highly counterintuitive consequences:

*first proposed answer to (iii):* S’s belief B is justified if and only if, and to the extent that, S’s entire system of beliefs is coherent.

*second proposed answer to (iii):* S’s belief B is justified if and only if, and to the extent that, S’s entire system of beliefs would be less coherent if it did not include B.

It is more plausible to assume that there is some function, $\Gamma(B)$, that maps a given belief B to its relevant system of beliefs, where that system does not necessarily consist in all of the subject’s beliefs. Then we can answer (iii) as follows:

*third proposed answer to (iii):* S’s belief B is justified if and only if, and to the extent that, $\Gamma(B)$ is coherent.

II. The Nature of Coherence
Coherence is primarily a property of groups or systems of beliefs. Moreover, coherence is a gradable notion: some systems of beliefs are more or less coherent than others.

*Negative factors* that are usually held to decrease the coherence of a system of beliefs:

- **logical inconsistency:** The beliefs in the system are logically inconsistent with one another.
- **probabilistic inconsistency:** The system of beliefs include a belief in P and a belief that P is very unlikely.
- **presence of anomalies:** Some beliefs in the system lack positive support (whether deductive, inductive, or abductive) from any other beliefs in the system.

*Positive factors* that are usually held to increase the coherence of a system of beliefs:

- **inferential connections between beliefs:** Some beliefs in the system deductively or inductively or abductively support another belief in the system.
BonJour and Feldman seem to assume that each of these factors can be weighed against each other in order to determine an overall “coherence value” for a given system of beliefs. (Need we make this assumption?)

More generally, how to provide a full account of the nature of coherence is currently an unsolved problem for coherentists.

III. Tradition Objection #1: The Alternate Systems Objection

*objection*: Presumably there are indefinitely many different systems of belief that are equally coherent. Moreover, for almost any belief one chooses, there presumably exists a coherent system containing that belief, and an equally coherent system containing its negation. So every belief, no matter how crazy, can be justified for a subject.

*standard reply*: On further reflection, this consequence doesn’t seem objectionable. Consider my belief in P, and the belief in not-P of someone with a radically different but equally self-supporting system of beliefs. To say that my belief in P is justified for me, given my other beliefs, whereas this other person’s belief in not-P is justified for her, given her other beliefs, seems like exactly the right result.

IV. Traditional Objection #2: The Isolation Objection

*objection*: The idea that epistemic justification depends solely on the internal coherence of a system of beliefs seems to entail that such justification does not require any contact or input from the world outside that system of beliefs—and in particular, does not require that one take into account one’s experiences (as opposed to one’s beliefs about one’s experiences). However, this seems implausible.

For example, consider the case of *Magic Feldman*, who has the exact same beliefs as basketball player Magic Johnson, but the exact same experiences as epistemologist Richard Feldman. If we stipulate that Magic Johnson’s entire system of beliefs is fully coherent, it follows that Magic Feldman’s beliefs are all fully justified. But surely that is an absurd result!

*first reply*: Deny that Magic Feldman is possible, perhaps because our beliefs about how things appear to us are infallible. (But then why not be a Cartesian foundationalist?)

*second reply*: Provide a coherentist account of observation to foreclose such possibilities.

V. Interlude: A Coherentist Account of Observation

For various reasons, we might want to accommodate an important justificatory role for *sense perception* or *sensory observation* within the coherentist framework.

*the basic idea*: Continue to insist that experience in itself merely causes beliefs and cannot justify them, but find a coherentist role for experience by adverting to our beliefs about the origins of perceptual beliefs and their general reliability when formed in that way.

BonJour’s particular proposal for how to do this focuses on a certain class of beliefs:

*cognitively spontaneous beliefs*: Beliefs that simply “strike” the observer in an involuntary, coercive, non-inferential way.

Suppose I walk into a well-lit room and spontaneously form the belief that there is a chair over there. BonJour’s suggestion is that I will usually also have beliefs like the following:

- a belief that my belief that there is a chair over there was spontaneously formed;
- a belief that my belief that there is a chair over there was formed via visual perception in good lighting conditions;
- a belief that beliefs formed spontaneously via visual perception in good lighting conditions are usually true.

If each of these three beliefs are in turn mutually supported by other beliefs in my system of beliefs, my spontaneous perceptual belief that there is a chair over there can be justified by the usual appeals to coherence.
BonJour claims that such an account allows for “a kind of observational input from the extra-conceptual world that is still recognizably coherentist in its justification” (“In Search of Coherentism,” p. 50).

**first worry**: All this does is provide for the bare possibility of coherentist observation, whereas intuitively sensory observation is required for all justified empirical beliefs.

**second worry**: More importantly, this coherentist account of observation appears to be of no use in replying to the isolation objection, since it is only specified within the subject’s body of beliefs that cognitively spontaneous beliefs have occurred under the right conditions.

For example, in the Magic Feldman case, Magic Feldman might hold the following beliefs:

- A belief that I seem to see James Worthy streaking up the court;
- A belief that my belief that I seem to see James Worthy streaking up the court was spontaneously formed;
- A belief that my belief that I seem to see James Worthy streaking up the court was formed via visual perception in good lighting conditions;
- A belief that beliefs formed spontaneously via visual perception in good lighting conditions are usually true.

Thus the coherentist account of observation does not rule out this case, and—more importantly—provides no help in explaining why subjects like Magic Feldman seem epistemically criticizable.

**VI. Traditional Objection #3: The Truth Connection**

**objection**: Recall BonJour’s assumption that the mark of epistemic justification is its connection to the cognitive goal of truth: beliefs which are epistemically justified must possess some property which makes them highly likely to be true. So the coherentist owes us some story of why beliefs that have the property of (say) being a member of a system of coherent beliefs are highly likely to be true. And the worry is that such a story cannot be told.

(The isolation and alternate system objections can be seen as further exacerbating this worry.)

**first reply**: Endorse a coherence theory of truth. (Not a popular move these days.)

**second reply**: Provide some sort of argument from the premise that a given system of beliefs is coherent to the conclusion that the beliefs which make up that system are highly likely to be true. However, one must do so in a way that does not render the argument viciously circular.

**third reply**: Reject BonJour’s assumption about the nature of epistemic justification.