

Lecture 17: Coherentism

I. Linear vs. Holistic Coherentism

All coherentists hold that beliefs can be justified in virtue of a chain of support that loops back on itself. 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 sequence of mediately justified beliefs that loops back on itself.

Holistic coherentists reject the regress argument's presupposition "that inferential justification is essentially *linear* in character, that it involves a . . . sequence of beliefs, ordered by a relation of epistemic priority, along which epistemic justification is passed from the earlier to the later beliefs in the sequence via connections of inference." Instead, "beliefs are justified by being inferentially related to other beliefs in . . . a coherent system" (BonJour, "The Elements of Coherentism," p. 90).

One way of making sense of this distinction is to stop assuming (as many authors do) that *mediate justification* and *inferential justification* are the same thing. Instead let us distinguish them as follows:

S's belief in P is *mediately justified* iff S's belief in P is justified, and it is justified due to (i.e. in virtue of) its connection to at least one other justified belief of S's.

S's belief in P is *inferentially justified* iff S's belief in P is justified, and it is justified due to (i.e. in virtue of) its inferential connection to at least one other belief of S's.

Then we can say that linear coherentists reply to the regress argument as we originally formulated it by holding that all justified beliefs are both mediately and inferentially justified.

Holistic coherentists, on the other hand, deny that any beliefs are mediately justified, so they resist formulating the regress argument in that way. Instead, they prefer to formulate the regress argument so that the arrows in our diagrams represent *relations of inferential support* (one belief deductively, inductively, or abductively supporting another), not *flows of justification* (one belief being justified because another is).

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, which need not 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

What is coherence? Bonjour's gloss on the notion:

"Intuitively, coherence is a matter of how well a body of beliefs 'hang together': how well its component beliefs fit together, agree or dovetail with each other, so as to produce an organized, tightly structured system of beliefs, rather than either a helter-skelter collection or a set of conflicting subsystems" ("The Elements of Coherentism," p. 93).

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 $\sim P$ 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 $\sim P$ 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 James Worthy is streaking up the court in front of me;*
 a belief *that my belief that James Worthy is streaking up the court in front of me was spontaneously formed;*
 a belief *that my belief that James Worthy is streaking up the court in front of me 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-systems 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.