Coherentist's theory of Epistemic Explanation and Their Function

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Abstract:

The theory of justification, also known as coherentism, holds that an individual belief or a collection of beliefs is justified if and only if the beliefs in the collection form a coherent system. In order to separate the coherence theory of justification from the coherence theory of truth, one must first define the terms. The former is a theory that explains what it means to be justified in holding a particular belief or set of beliefs. The latter is a philosophical account of what it means for a claim to be true. Modern coherence theorists usually agree with a coherence theory of justification, but they don't usually support a coherence theory of truth. This is different from some earlier writers in the British idealist tradition. For the purposes of their epistemological inquiries, they either favour a correspondence theory of truth or take the notion of truth as given. Despite this, many writers insist that coherence justification can serve as a guide to or standard for truth. However, these criticisms fail to explain why some beliefs appear to be justified by their internal consistency. This paper fills a hole in the literature against coherence by giving an account of justification by coherence that is not coherentist.

Keywords: *Anti-coherentist, Coherence, justification, British idealist tradition*

Introduction:

Foundationalism and coherence When we have good reason to believe something is true is a central question in epistemology. The concept of epistemic justification is not intuitive, and traditional explanations of it have proven to be deeply flawed. Justified beliefs are those that are either self-evidently true or deduced from self-evident truths, according to a tradition inspired by Descartes. However, many of our supposedly justified beliefs are not thought to be grounded in self-evident truths or to be strictly derivable from other tenets of our belief system, as is often argued. As a result, the rationalist framework of Cartesian thought appears too limiting. Problems of a similar nature plague empiricist attempts to base all knowledge on the supposedly incontestable data of the senses. Depending on the context, sense data are either incontestable or insufficiently informative to

provide sufficient justification for a sufficient portion of our purported knowledge. It's not entirely agreed upon how best to define "foundationalism." Another type of foundationalism holds that some beliefs have independent epistemic support from a source other than doxastic doxa. This bolstering isn't always sufficient on its own, and it may need to be reinforced to provide sufficient strength for learning. The infinite justification loop could be broken with this kind of non-doxastic backing. It might not even need to rely on incontrovertible evidence or absolute certainty to do so. The role that coherence plays in such foundationalist accounts of justification is also debatable, as is the strength of the non-doxastic support on its own. Those who disagree with this view have cast doubt on the comprehension of the non-doxastic support relationship. Because of this, Davidson (1986) criticises advocates for failing to provide an adequate explanation of the connection between experience and belief that permits the former to justify the latter. Many epistemologists, faced with problems in both rationalism and empiricism, have come to reject the foundationalist justificatory structure on which both are based. These epistemologists prefer a holistic picture of justification that does not distinguish between basic or foundational and non-basic or derived beliefs but rather treats all of our beliefs as equal members of a "web of belief" (Quine and Ullian 1970; cf. Neurath 1983/1932 and Sosa 1980). This is in contrast to the traditional view that our knowledge is structured like Euclidean geometry, with basic axioms and derived theorems. Because it provides no positive account of justification beyond a speculative metaphor about webs of belief, the mere rejection of foundationalism is not an alternative theory in and of itself. A more robust counterargument suggests that the coherence or consistency of our beliefs is what ultimately justifies them. What sets apart a coherence theory, according to Davidson, is "simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for a belief except another belief" (Davidson, 1986). Even if each of our beliefs lacks justification when viewed in splendid isolation, the fact that they cohere can establish their truth, so the thinking goes. Some advocates, following C. I. Lewis (1946), compare this to the way that a jury can reach a verdict based on corroborating testimony even if no single piece of evidence would do so on its own. Any theory of justification or knowledge based on the principle of coherence must immediately confront a major objection. The isolation objection asks how the mere fact that a system is coherent, if the latter is understood as a purely system-internal matter, can lead to any meaningful insight into the nature of reality. A coherence theory in its most fundamental form does not give experience a central role, so there is little reason to think that a coherent set of beliefs accurately reflects the world outside of the mind. Similarly well-known, but for different reasons, is the alternative systems objection. It's possible that for every consistent body of thought, there are others that are just as consistent but fundamentally at odds with it. All these mutually exclusive systems could be justified if coherence were sufficient for justification. Of course, this fact completely debunks the idea that coherence is a sign of truth. As we shall see, most, if not all, influential coherence theorists try to sidestep these

traditional objections by giving a unique status to certain beliefs close to experience, regardless of what they are called (Lewis, 1946: "supposed facts asserted;" Rescher, 1973: "truth-candidates;" BonJour, 1985: "cognitively spontaneous beliefs"). These theories are often classified as "variants of weak foundationalism" because their unique status is open to interpretation. Weak foundationalists typically argue that while coherence cannot provide justification for beliefs that have no prior warrant, it can provide justification for beliefs that already have some initial warrant, however slight, such as observational beliefs. Quite a few prominent modern philosophers have come out in support of the coherence theory of justification. This is only the tip of the iceberg, however; these theories also address a wide range of other concerns, all of which are tied together by the holistic approach they each take to justifying beliefs. Coherence theorists have been interested in the following things and questions (see Bender, 1989):

Evidence-Based Explanation Through Internal Consistency:

In this analysis, we look at how the coherence of existing empirical justifications for beliefs can be strengthened. This sort of thing occurs frequently. Examples include increased confidence in a belief when it can be supported by evidence across multiple senses. Similarly, when our views, based on the testimonies of several witnesses we already somewhat trust, fit together neatly, we grow surer of their veracity. In this situation, the job of coherence is to improve the existing empirical support for each belief, which exists regardless of its coherence with other beliefs. In the following two sections, I separate these less contentious examples from the more contentious ones, in which beliefs with no independent empirical explanation become justified by their coherence. In this context, it is important to remember that the evidence supporting each individual viewpoint must come from the real world rather than any abstract theory. There are often strong non-empirical arguments in favour of giving varying degrees of probability to distinct contingent claims. It makes sense, even without any knowledge of tomorrow's weather, to give a higher probability to the proposition that it will be raining someplace in the world than to the proposition that it will be raining in New York. That's because the first hypothesis has a better shot at being correct because it's less narrow. In some cases, such extra-empirical justifications might be all that's needed to accept a hypothesis that's otherwise purely hypothetical. But this isn't the kind of evidence we'll consider on its own. Since we're only interested in studying empirical justification, any growth in other types of justification will be ignored. If each of the beliefs that make up the coherent whole is already more justified by empirical evidence than by non-empirical reasons alone, then this section only talks about the case when the empirical justification provided by the coherent whole is increased.

Regression Illness:

According to the conventional justified true belief theory of knowing, one cannot be considered to know that a proposition p is true unless they have strong reasons for believing that p is

true. Lucy must be very confident in her abilities to predict exam success if she is certain she will do so for tomorrow's test. Think about Lucy's justifications now. The other beliefs she holds are those concerning her past performance, her level of preparation, and so on. These other beliefs, upon which the first belief rests, must also be facts that Lucy knows for her to have certainty that she will pass the exam. After all, knowledge can't rest on anything less than itself, like ignorance (cf. Rescher 1979, 76). Lucy's knowledge of the reasons implies that the reasons themselves must rest on a foundation of reasons, and so on. A regress of ever-narrowing justifications is thus necessary for every claim to knowledge. Since doing so would necessitate citing an endless set of beliefs, it appears implausible at best. However, the vast majority of us hold the opinion that such insight is achievable.

How does the coherentist explain away the regress? According to the coherentist, there is nothing stopping the regression from continuing indefinitely. It follows that A can be a justification for B, which justifies C, which justifies A. Assuming this is correct, we have a never-ending chain of reasoning that does not require an endless number of beliefs. Each belief in the chain is supported by an even more extensive chain of beliefs and justifications. However, this solution has an immediate flaw due to the widespread belief that justificatory circles are inherently vicious. If you ask someone why they think C, and they say, "Because," then that person can say that B is the reason why. She may give an explanation (A) if questioned about her belief (B). However, if she is challenged on her belief in A, she cannot appeal to C, which is open to debate in the current justificatory setting. Even if she tried to defend A by appealing to C, her defence wouldn't hold water.

In response, the coherentist might say she never meant to imply that circular reasoning is acceptable dialectically. What she takes issue with is the idea that justification must necessarily follow a chain of causation in which reasons are given for reasons, and so on. For this line of reasoning to make sense, it must be assumed that personal convictions are ultimately what count as justifiable. The coherentist argues that this is incorrect and that it is actually complete belief systems, rather than individual beliefs, that require primary justification. Ideas in and of themselves can be justified, but only as part of a larger system of beliefs that has already been justified. Because, according to this view, the coherence of a belief system is what ultimately determines its justification, we can call this an approach focused on coherence. If your worldview has a high enough degree of internal consistency, you have good reason to hold on to it. Simply put, this is Laurence BonJour's answer to the regression issue from 1985.

Alternative Explanations for Coherence:

Section 6 will examine some of the issues we've brought up thus far, such as the link between coherence and system size, while also returning to the challenge of defining the conventional notion of coherence. However, the present discussion is based on the recognition that a number of well-

known, self-proclaimed coherentists have adopted interpretations of the fundamental notion and its significance in philosophical inquiry that differ slightly from the conventional one. The list includes names like Nicolas Rescher, Keith Lehrer, and Paul Thagard.

The concept of a "truth candidate" is central to Rescher's account, which is outlined in Rescher (1973), his seminal work on the topic. If there is evidence supporting a claim, then that claim is a truth candidate. Lewis' "supposed facts asserted" are similar to Rescher's "truth candidates." Similarly, in both circumstances, the relevant assertions are first impressions rather than rock-solid facts. Although Rescher's 1973 book is titled A Coherence Theory of Truth, the purpose of his investigation is not to explore the possibility of defining truth in terms of coherence but rather to find a truth criterion, which he defines as a systematic procedure for selecting from a set of conflicting and even contradictory truth candidates those elements which it is rational to accept as bona fide truths. His technique boils down to finding the most "plausible" subset of the original set by first finding all subsets that are consistent but would become inconsistent if extended by more components of the original set. The definition of plausibility does not seem to have any direct connection to the commonsense idea of consistency. Although the conventional idea of coherence is crucial to the intellectual foundations of Rescher's theory, it plays a secondary role in the theory itself. In his later book, Rescher gives a more traditional view of coherence from a "system-theoretic" point of view (Rescher, 1979).

To help define justification, a key component of Keith Lehrer's elaborate definition of knowing, he turns to the idea of coherence. According to Lehrer, a person has good reason to accept a notion if and only if it is consistent with the appropriate section of her mind. As was mentioned before, this is the relational concept of coherence. The "acceptance system" of the individual, which consists of statements like "the subject accepts this and that," is the relevant part of Lehrer's (1990) work. As a result, "S accepts that A" would be present in S's acceptance system, but A itself would not. Later in his career, Lehrer argued that consistency with a more intricate mental structure, which he called the "evaluation system," was crucial (e.g., Lehrer 2000 and 2003).

Argumentation by Internal Consistency:

The resurgence of C. I. Lewis's work and the study programme he encouraged by translating elements of the coherence theory into the language of probability is likely the most important advance in the coherence theory in recent years. This sort of coherence differs from the notion that a probability function is coherent if and only if it satisfies the axioms of probability calculus. Here, we apply such coherent probability functions to model coherence as mutual support, agreement, etc., and call this "the theory of coherence." Therefore, in this context, the term "probabilistic coherence" has a different meaning than it does in traditional Bayesian theories. Probabilistic interpretations of coherence theory have enabled precise mathematical definitions and proofs of findings. More ideas

and findings can now be transferred from one subject to another, such as between coherence theory and confirmation theory in the study of the philosophy of science. The outcome is an interdisciplinary curriculum that draws on philosophy of science, cognitive psychology, AI, and legal theory to investigate the concept of coherence. This paper will focus on this new development in the field.

Lewis acknowledges that the credibility of individual reports need not be extremely high when taken in isolation for coherence to have a beneficial effect, but he is adamant that it must be greater than zero. When discussing reports from memory, he adds, "If... there were no initial presumption attaching to the anemically reported... then no extent of congruity with other such items would give rise to any eventual credence" (357). That is to say, if the beliefs in a set lack any credibility to begin with, then there is no justification that can be derived from seeing their coherence. So, Lewis is arguing for a form of foundationalism that is not as strong as pure coherence. It seems that Laurence BonJour (1985, 148) agrees with Lewis on this point: "[a]s long as we are confident that the reports of the various witnesses are genuinely independent from each other, a high enough degree of coherence among them will eventually dictate the hypothesis of truth-telling as the only available explanation of their agreement." BonJour then refutes Lewis's claim that there must be some degree of positive antecedent credibility by saying, "[w]hat Lewis does not perceive is that his own [witness] example indicates rather strongly that no prior degree of warrant or credibility is required" (148). At this point, BonJour seems to be rejecting Lewis's argument that credibility can't be boosted by coherence unless the sources are at least a little credible to begin with. BonJour says that coherence can serve this purpose even if there isn't a prior degree of warrant, as long as the witnesses tell their stories separately.

Analysis and Debate on Truth-Conveying Capabilities:

In 1994, Peter Klein and Ted Warfield published an article in Analysis that sparked a fruitful discussion about coherence and probability (e.g., Klein and Warfield 1994 and 1996, Merricks 1995, Shogenji 1999, Cross 1999, Akiba 2000, Olsson 2001, Fitelson 2003, and Siebel 2004). Klein and Warfield argue that it is not sufficient to assume that one set of ideas is truer than another just because it is more consistent. Rather, they argued, a lower likelihood of the full set is connected with a higher degree of coherence. The logic behind their argument is straightforward: boosting the cohesiveness of a set of data simply by adding new data that explains the data already in the set is typically all that's needed. However, the likelihood that the entire set is true decreases proportionally when more genuinely new information is provided. According to Klein and Warfield, this is a natural consequence of the well-established anticorrelation between probability and detail. They came to the conclusion that coherence does not promote truth.

Much like C. I. Lewis, Klein and Warfield used a mystery story (the so-called "Dunnit example") to demonstrate their point. As it turns out, the fundamental point can be stated by referring to a simpler situation, and this example is overly complicated (borrowed from computer science, where it is used to exemplify the concept of non-monotonic inference). Let's say you hear from Jane that Tweety is a bird and from Carl that he isn't able to fly. The resulting collection of information, S = "Tweety is a bird," "Tweety cannot fly," lacks intuitive coherence. From the perspective of Lewis's definition, it's also incoherent, as doing so reduces the likelihood of both items being true. There is sufficient evidence at this stage to suspect either Jane or Carl of lying. However, we learn that Tweety is a penguin after contacting a third party, Rick. A more consistent set would be S′ = "Tweety is a bird," "Tweety cannot fly," and "Tweety is a penguin," rather than S. With Rick's help, we can piece together why that anomaly occurred in the first place.

S′, the newly expanded set, is more internally consistent than S. S is less informative than S′, but the conjunction of all the propositions in S is more likely than the conjunction of all the propositions in S′. Because of this, an increase in coherence does not automatically translate to a greater joint probability of truth. It appears that Klein and Warfield are correct; coherence does not encourage truth.

Conclusions:

The coherence theory of justification is an intriguing possibility for resolving certain perplexing epistemological issues. Perhaps most importantly, it proposes a method of seeing epistemic justification as emerging from a "web of belief." This rivals and may ultimately supplant the foundationalist view of knowledge as based on an unshakeable bedrock of undeniable fact, which has held sway for so long but is now coming under growing criticism. Coherentism, which relies on nondoxastic support, may also be more promising than competing foundationalist perspectives. Not surprisingly, critics of coherence theory have pointed out that proponents of the theory have struggled to give the kind of concrete examples and explanations that would allow it to move beyond the metaphorical. Recent researchers have taken up this task in the wake of C. I. Lewis's pioneering work with a reasonable amount of success in terms of clarity and proven outcomes, but a fair number of these results are to the coherentist's disadvantage. Some findings lend credence to a weak foundationalist argument that holds that coherence can strengthen preexisting trust. However, at first glance, the impossibility results also seem to have a detrimental impact on this rather radical version of coherence theory. It is often said that while it is simple to present a compelling theory in the abstract, the true test of any philosophical endeavour is whether or not the final product can withstand rigorous scrutiny when it is fully specified (the devil is in the details, and so on). This is especially true for the coherence theory of epistemic justification, as recent developments in the field have demonstrated.

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