

— The Blackwell Guide to —  
**Epistemology**

Edited by  
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First published 1999

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Blackwell Publishers Inc.

350 Main Street  
Malden, Massachusetts 02148  
USA

Blackwell Publishers Ltd

108 Cowley Road  
Oxford OX4 1JF  
UK

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*Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

The Blackwell guide to epistemology / edited by John Greco and Ernest Sosa.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-631-20290-0 (h.c. : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-631-20291-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Knowledge, Theory of. I. Greco, John. II. Sosa, Ernest.

BD161.B465 1999

121—dc21 98-23967

CIP

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library

Typeset in 10 on 13pt Galliard  
by Graphicsart Limited, Hong Kong  
Printed in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper

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 Chapter 4
 

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# The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism

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*from Green & Sosa, eds.*

*The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology  
(1999)*

My aim in this paper is to explore the dispute between foundationalism and coherentism and attempt a resolution. I will begin by considering the origin of the issue in the famous epistemic regress problem. Next I will explore the central foundationalist idea and the most central objections that have been raised against foundationalist views. This will lead to a consideration of the main contours of the coherentist alternative, and eventually to a discussion of objections to coherentism – including several specific ones that I now judge to be clearly fatal, especially when taken together. This will motivate, finally, a reconsideration of foundationalism. I will argue that the dialectically most serious objection to foundationalism can be successfully answered. While the answer that I will suggest admittedly carries with it the price of aggravating certain other difficulties, especially the venerable problem of showing how belief in an external world of physical objects can be justified, it still seems to me to leave foundationalism as by far the more defensible and promising of the two alternatives.

For the purposes of this paper, I will make three rather large assumptions that I will not attempt to justify here. First, I will assume the correctness of the realist conception of truth as correspondence or agreement with the appropriate region or chunk of mind-independent reality (where the relevant sort of mind independence is only in relation to the specific cognitive act in question, thus allowing for the possibility that beliefs about mental matters may also be true in this sense). My own conviction is that there is no alternative to this conception of truth that is ultimately even intelligible, but those who do not agree can perhaps regard this assumption as merely a way of focusing the issue in a way that is adequately narrow to be reasonably dealt with within the present compass.

Second, I will assume that the subject of which foundationalism and coherentism are offering competing accounts is the fundamental structure of the epistemic

justification of contingent or empirical beliefs, where what is distinctive about *epistemic* justification is that it involves an acceptably strong reason for thinking that the belief in question is true or likely to be true. This is not the only possible account of the subject matter of this dispute, but it is by far the most standard and straightforward.<sup>1</sup>

Third, I will assume that an *internalist* rather than an *externalist* conception of epistemic justification is correct, i.e., roughly, that a belief's being epistemically justified requires that the believer in question have in his cognitive possession or be suitably aware of such a reason or adequate basis for thinking that the belief is true. While I believe that this assumption is also correct, the main motivation for it in the present context is that it is needed in order for the foundationalism-coherentism issue to be even worth discussing. For if an externalist conception of justification were correct, there would then, in my judgment, be no serious objections to a foundationalist view and hence no dialectical motive for the complexities and difficulties of the coherentist alternative.

### 1. The Epistemic Regress Problem

As already remarked, the foundationalist-coherentist dialectic arises from the epistemic regress problem, and it is with that familiar problem that we must accordingly begin. Setting aside a general skepticism about reasoning, it seems highly plausible to suppose that many of a person's contingent or empirical beliefs are interrelated in such a way that if a particular belief of conjunction of beliefs were somehow known or assumed to be true, this would provide a good reason for thinking that some further belief was true. An explicit statement of such a reason would take the form of an argument or inference from the former belief or conjunction of beliefs as premise to the latter belief as conclusion. Such a putatively justifying reason may appropriately be referred to as a *conditional reason*. But it is obvious that the existence of a conditional reason of this sort can yield a reason or justification *simpliter* for its unconditional conclusion only if there is some further reason or justification, which must seemingly be epistemically prior, for accepting the truth of its premises.

In this way the issue of epistemic justification for one contingent or empirical belief may be in effect transmuted, via an appropriate conditional reason, into the issue of justification for one or more other contingent or empirical beliefs. Clearly this process can be repeated, in principle at least through many stages, yielding an epistemological tree-structure in which a belief at one level is conditionally justified in relation to those at a prior level, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Equally clearly, however, the delineation of an epistemological structure of this sort does nothing by itself to show that *any* of the beliefs that appear in it are true. It remains open to a would-be skeptic, even if he or she concedes all of the conditional reasons involved, to reject any belief in the structure simply by rejecting some or all of the premises upon which that belief's justification conditionally depends.

The foregoing picture leads directly to the epistemic regress problem. Suppose that at a particular node of the tree, the issue of justification for the premise beliefs is conditionally answered by appeal to a new set of premises; that at the next level, the issue of justification for those new premises is conditionally answered by appeal to yet further premises; and so on. The obvious problem is to say how this regress of levels or stages of justification, each dependent on the next, finally ends, assuming (as I shall here) that the finding of new sets of premise-beliefs (beliefs not appearing previously in the overall structure) that are adequate to conditionally justify the premise-beliefs of the previous stage cannot and does not go on infinitely. At first glance, at least, there seem to be only three general alternatives:

(i) The final stage of any particular branch of the regress may invoke premise-beliefs for which no further reason or justification of any sort is available. In this case, it seems to follow that the epistemological tree-structure, no matter how complicated and ramified it may be, offers no reason or justification for thinking that *any* of the component beliefs that are essentially dependent on those unjustified beliefs are true.<sup>3</sup> It tells us, in effect, only that some things would be true *if* other things were true, and that those other things would be true *if* still further things were true, and so on, ending with things that there is no reason to believe to be true.

(ii) The final stage of the regress may invoke premise-beliefs that have occurred earlier in the structure, so that the justificational structure in effect loops back upon itself in some fashion. In this case, assuming again that all relevant justificatory relations are captured by the structure, the justification for all of the components of the structure is apparently either directly circular or else dependent on premise-beliefs that are justified only in a circular and apparently questionbegging manner. Thus such a justificational structure again seems to present no reason for thinking that any of the component beliefs are true.

(iii) The only apparently remaining alternative is that though there is *some* sort of reason or justification for thinking that the premise-beliefs of the final stage are true, this reason is not of the conditional or inferential sort we have been discussing and hence avoids invoking new premise-beliefs that would themselves be in need of justification.<sup>4</sup> Thus such beliefs, if they exist, might be said to be *unconditionally justified*.

It is of course this third alternative that is advocated by foundationalism, with these unconditionally justified or "basic" beliefs constituting the foundation upon which the rest of contingent or empirical knowledge allegedly rests. The foundationalist's main argument is that only this alternative can avoid the highly implausible skeptical conclusion that no contingent or empirical belief is ever justified.

### 2. Foundationalism and its Problems

Given our earlier assumptions, the argument for foundationalism on the basis of the epistemic regress problem appears initially to be extremely compelling, indeed

so much so that only very severe problems pertaining to the resulting foundationalist position could make it reasonable to resist it. In addition, the most standard version of foundationalism is extremely plausible from an intuitive or common-sense standpoint: it certainly seems as though we have many justified contingent or empirical beliefs that are not justified by appeal to other beliefs, but rather by appeal to sensory and introspective *experience*. Thus it is at least a bit surprising that a central theme of recent epistemological discussion, often the single point on which otherwise widely disparate philosophers find themselves in agreement, is the conviction that internalist foundationalism is an untenable, indeed hopeless position, one that must be abandoned if epistemological progress is to be made.

There are serious reasons for such a conclusion, the most important of which (in my judgment) will be considered momentarily. But it should also be noted that is doubtful that there is any very general agreement concerning the deficiencies of foundationalism; indeed, many of those who reject it do not seem to have any very definite argument in mind. Thus, as happens with rather alarming frequency in philosophy, the movement away from foundationalism in the last three decades or so often looks less like a reasoned dialectical progression than a fashionable stampede. And it is of course the rejection of internalist foundationalism that provides the main motivation for views like coherentism and externalism, neither of which could plausibly be claimed to be very attractive if it were not viewed by its proponents as the only remaining dialectical alternative.

What then are the alleged problems with internalist foundationalism? The most important ones fall into two main areas, the first pertaining to the relation between the supposed foundational beliefs and the other beliefs that are to be justified by appeal to them, and the second pertaining to the nature and justification of the foundational beliefs themselves.

The first kind of problem is concerned with the putative justificatory relation between the unconditionally justified foundational or basic beliefs and the nonbasic or "superstructure" beliefs, as those two components are specified by any particular version of foundationalism. The main issue here is whether it is possible on the basis of the foundation specified by such a position to provide an adequate justification for the other beliefs that we ordinarily regard as justified, or at least for a reasonably high proportion of such beliefs. A foundationalist view that falls seriously short in this area will itself amount to a fairly severe version of skepticism. Such a skeptical result is both implausible in itself and also tends to seriously undercut the foundationalist argument, discussed above, against other views.

It is obvious that the shape and seriousness of this first general sort of problem will vary widely among foundationalist views, depending in large part on just how much is included in the specified set of basic or foundational beliefs (which will depend in turn on the specific account of how those beliefs are justified). In particular, a view (e.g. Quinton's<sup>5</sup>) according to which at least some beliefs about physical objects count as basic or foundational will clearly have substantially less difficulty in giving a reasonably plausible account of the overall scope of nonfoundational knowledge than will a more traditional view (such as Lewis's<sup>6</sup>) that restricts

the foundations to beliefs about subjective states of experience. Since, as will emerge later on, the general sort of foundationalist view that turns out, in my view, to be the most dialectically defensible is of the latter, more traditional sort, I believe that this issue has to be taken very seriously. More will be said about it toward the end of the paper, after the nature of the proposed foundation has emerged.

For the moment, however, I want to focus on a second and to my mind more dialectically fundamental kind of objection to foundationalism, one that asks how the supposedly basic or foundational beliefs are themselves justified or rendered epistemically acceptable. The basic beliefs in a foundationalist account of empirical knowledge are, after all, themselves contingent and presumably empirical beliefs, beliefs that are true in some possible worlds and false in others. It thus seems obvious that if they are to serve as the justificatory premises for all the rest of empirical knowledge, then some sort of justification is needed for thinking that they are themselves true or likely to be true. And the problem is that it initially seems impossible to explain how there can be such a reason or justification for basic beliefs that is internally accessible without at the same time impugning their status as basic.

Foundationalists have responded to this challenge, sometimes only by implication, in a variety of different ways. Some have claimed in effect that the issue of justification for the basic or foundational beliefs somehow does not arise or at least cannot be correctly or meaningfully raised, but this sort of view seems to me difficult or impossible to take seriously, given the already noted contingent and empirical character of the beliefs in question.

Others have appealed to the idea that such beliefs are somehow *self-justifying*.<sup>7</sup> This idea has a good deal of appeal in the area of a priori justification. It seems quite plausible to say of simple a priori beliefs that they are self-justified or, perhaps better, self-evident: that the intuitively apprehended necessity of their content provides a reason for thinking that they are true.<sup>8</sup> But whether or not this view of the a priori is correct, it is very hard to see how a belief that is contingent and empirical in character can have such a status. Since such a belief is not true in all possible worlds, some reason beyond its content seems needed for thinking that it is in fact true or likely to be true in the actual world.

But where then is the justification or epistemic authority of a basic belief supposed to come from? As already noted, the obvious appeal from an intuitive standpoint is to sensory and introspective experience. But it is not easy, from a structural and dialectical standpoint, to see how such an appeal is supposed to work, and foundationalists, despite the intuitive plausibility of their core idea, do not seem to me to have done very well in clarifying this critical point.

Clearly the experience that justifies a particular basic belief must have a correlative specific character. But the problem is to say how the specific character of the experience is itself apprehended in a way that makes it possible to appeal to it for justification within an internalist view. If that character is apprehended in an appropriate belief (or belief-like state), the belief that I have such-and-such a

specific sort of experience, then the original, supposedly basic belief appears to have lost that status, since its justification now depends on this further belief, and the issue of the justification of this new, apperceptive belief immediately arises and appears to be no easier to deal with. Whereas if the apprehension of the specific character of experience does not take the form of a belief or belief-like cognitive state, if when I apprehend my experience I am not thereby cognitively aware *that* it is of a certain specific sort, then any further issue of justification is perhaps avoided, but at the cost of making it difficult to see how such an apprehension can confer justification on the original, supposedly basic belief. In particular, if the apprehension of the experiential content is not in any way belief-like or propositional in character, how can there be any sort of inferential or quasi-inferential transition from the awareness of that content to the truth (or likely truth) of a supposedly basic belief? And in the absence of such an inference, in what way does the experience or the apprehension thereof constitute a reason for thinking that the belief is true?

It is this fundamental dilemma pertaining to the apprehension of experiential content that seems to me to pose the most fundamental objection to the most obvious and otherwise plausible versions of foundationalism, thereby constituting a strong dialectical motive for considering the possibility of a nonfoundationalist alternative. We shall return to it later, following an extended look at the coherentist position.

### 3. The Coherentist Gambit

Even more obviously than in the case of externalism, where there are other, broadly "naturalistic" motivations at work as well, the main motivation for coherentism is the avoidance of foundationalism, rather than any initial plausibility attaching to coherentism itself. While it is very plausible that coherence or something like it is *one* important ingredient in empirical justification, it is initially *very* implausible that it is the whole story. The reasons here are both familiar and obvious: (i) a pure coherence theory seems to entail, paradoxically, that epistemic justification requires on input from or contact with the world outside the system of beliefs; (ii) it seems possible to invent indefinitely many alternative systems of belief in a purely arbitrary way and yet make each of them entirely coherent; and, in part because of these two previous objections, (iii) there seems to be no clear connection between the coherence of a system of beliefs and the cognitive goal of truth.

In fact, of course, largely for the reasons just noted, probably no one has ever seriously advocated a *pure* coherence theory of empirical justification, one in which the coherence of a set of beliefs is claimed to be by itself sufficient for justification. The coherentist project has rather been in effect to supplement the appeal to coherence in a way that avoids or at least mitigates the foregoing objections, while at the same time avoiding a relapse into foundationalism. Given this

essentially negative aim, it is not surprising that the details of the various positive coherentist and quasi-coherentist positions vary quite widely, so much so that it is far from clear that there is very much common ground that can be identified as the core coherentist position.

I will attempt nonetheless in the present section to identify and explain in a necessarily schematic way the main elements that are arguably essential to any developed coherentist position that purports to be an account of a notion of epistemic justification that is both internalist in character and plausibly conducive to finding truth (understood in the realist way indicated above). There are, I will suggest, four such elements, elements that are needed to stave off the most obvious problems and define a relatively clear and specific position.<sup>10</sup>

(i) Of the three alternatives with regard to the outcome of the epistemic regress that were outlined above, the coherentist clearly opts for the second, the idea that the chains of justification for particular contingent, empirical beliefs circle or loop back upon themselves. Incautious advocates of coherentism have sometimes seemed to endorse the idea that such a picture is acceptable if only the circles are "large enough." But the obvious objection to circular chains of justification, to which the size of the circle seems irrelevant, is that they involve circular reasoning and hence have no genuine justificatory force.

The only very clear coherentist response to this objection, stemming originally from Bosanquet,<sup>11</sup> is that it depends on the mistaken idea that relations of justification fundamentally involve a *linear*, asymmetrical order of dependence among the beliefs in question. The contrary suggestion is that justification, when properly understood, is ultimately *nonlinear* or *holistic* in character, with all of the beliefs in the system standing in relations of mutual support, but none being epistemically prior to the others. In this way, it is alleged, any true circularity is avoided. Such a view amounts to making the system itself the primary unit of justification, with its component beliefs being justified only derivatively, by virtue of their membership in an appropriate sort of system. And the property of the system, in virtue of which it is justified, is of course specified as coherence.<sup>12</sup>

(ii) But what exactly is coherence? The second component of any serious coherence theory will be some relatively specific account of this relation. On an intuitive level, coherence is a matter of how the beliefs in a system of beliefs fit together or "dovetail" with each other, so as to constitute one unified and tightly structured whole. And it is clear that this fitting together depends on logical, inferential, and explanatory relations of many different sorts among the components of the system. But spelling out the details of this idea, particularly in a way that would allow reasonably precise assessments of comparative coherence, is extremely difficult, at least partly because such an account will depend on the correct account of a number of more specific and still inadequately understood topics, such as induction, confirmation, probability, explanation, and various issues in logic (such as those connected with "relevance logic").

Some points are, however, relatively clear. First, any conception of coherence that is even *prima facie* adequate as a basis for epistemic justification must require

for the coherentist to hold that the justification of such a belief can still depend on coherence with the background system of beliefs. It is crucial here, however, that the justification in question still depend also in some way on the fact that the belief was a result of perception, since justification that depended only on the coherence of the belief's propositional content with the rest of the cognitive system would make the observational status of the belief justificationaly irrelevant.

My own previously held version of this general gambit<sup>16</sup> attempts to provide for observational input by appealing to the slightly more specific idea of a *cognitively spontaneous belief*: one that simply strikes the observer in an involuntary, coercive, noninferential way, rather than arising as a product of any sort of inference or other discursive process, whether explicit or implicit. That a belief has this status, however, says nothing so far, according to the coherentist, about how or even whether it is justified; indeed, there is no reason to think that all cognitively spontaneous beliefs *are* justified, or even necessarily that most of them are, since the category would include hunches and irrational spontaneous convictions, as well as beliefs resulting from perception. The suggestion is then that certain cognitively spontaneous beliefs are justified from within the system, by appeal to: (i) the fact of their spontaneous occurrence; and (ii) the apparent track record of spontaneous beliefs of those specific kinds (identified by such things as their general subject matter, their apparent mode of sensory production, as reflected in the content of the belief, and concomitant factors of various kinds) as regards frequency of truth (under specified conditions), all this being assessed, of course, from within the system.<sup>17</sup>

It this way, it seems possible for there to be a justifying reason for such a cognitively spontaneous belief that appeals to its status as cognitively spontaneous and thus putatively observational, but still does so in a way that makes the resulting justification dependent on the fact that the claim that a belief of this kind and produced in this way is likely to be true stands in a relation of coherence with the background system of beliefs. Such a belief would thus be *arrived at* noninferentially, but still *justified* by appeal to inference relations and coherence. It would thus seem to provide a kind of input from the nonconceptual world that is still recognizably coherentist in character.

There are two further important points about coherentist observation that need to be mentioned briefly. First, the other beliefs needed to give a justifying reason for a particular observational belief must themselves be justified in some way that does not amount to a relapse into foundationalism. Included here will be: (i) beliefs about the specific conditions under which the cognitively spontaneous belief in question occurred; (ii) the belief that cognitively spontaneous beliefs of the specific kind in question are likely, under those conditions, to be true; and (iii) beliefs pertaining to that specific belief and its occurrence, including the belief that it was indeed cognitively spontaneous, together with further beliefs that are relevant to determining the particular kind of belief in question. The justification for (i) will in general have to include other observational beliefs, themselves justified in the same general fashion, so that any case of justified

more than logical consistency; indeed, in light of general human logical fallibility and more specific problems such as the paradox of the preface (pertaining to the case in which an author prefaces a complicated discussion by saying that he is sure that some of the claims in it are false), it seems a mistake to view logical consistency as even an absolutely necessary requirement for a significant degree of coherence. Second, coherence requires a high degree of inferential interconnectedness in the system of beliefs, involving relations of necessitation, both strictly logical and otherwise, together with probabilistic connections of various kinds. One important aspect of this is what might be called probabilistic consistency, i.e. the minimizing of relations between beliefs in the system in virtue of which some are highly unlikely to be true in relation to others. Third, while some recent positions have emphasized explanatory relations as the basis for coherence,<sup>13</sup> it seems reasonable to clear that this cannot be the whole story. The coherence of a system of beliefs is surely enhanced to the extent that some parts of the system are explained by others, thus reducing the degree to which the beliefs of the system portray unexplained anomalies. But not all relevant sorts of inferential connections are explanatory in character.<sup>14</sup>

As the foregoing very sketchy account suggests, the precise nature of coherence remains a largely unsolved problem, making it reasonable to ask why this lacuna isn't in itself a sufficient basis for dismissing such theories. A partial response to this objection is that difficulties in this area cannot yield anything like a decisive argument against coherence theories and in favor of their foundationalist rivals, because the concept of coherence, or something so similar to it that it will be capable of playing essentially the same role and will involve the same problems, is also an indispensable ingredient in virtually all foundationalist theories: coherence must seemingly be invoked to account for the relation between the basic or foundational beliefs and other nonfoundational or "superstructure" beliefs, in virtue of which the latter are justified in relation to the former.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, giving an adequate account of coherence should not be regarded as exclusively the responsibility of coherentists, despite the central role that the concept plays in their position. But while there is something clearly right about this point as a dialectical response to the use of this problem as an argument for foundationalism, it does not alter the fact that without further clarification of its central concept, coherentism remains an essentially schematic view, rather than a developed position.

(iii) It is a seemingly obvious fact, one that few if any coherentists have seriously attempted to deny, that sensory observation or perception plays a central role in empirical justification. Any coherence theory that even hopes to be viable must thus explain how such observation can be understood in a nonfoundationalist way.

Here the main coherentist claim is that while observational beliefs are indeed a *causal* result of sensory experience, rather than being arrived at inferentially, this does not account for their *justification*, for the reasons outlined above in connection with the second main objection to foundationalism. And thus it seems open

observation will normally or perhaps always involve a set of mutually supporting observations. The justification for (ii) will appeal inductively to other cases of correct observation, as judged from within the system, as well as to more theoretical reasons for thinking that beliefs of the kind in question are generally produced in a reliable way. The justification for (iii) will appeal to introspective beliefs, themselves constituting a species of observation, and ultimately to the believer's comprehensive grasp of his or her overall system of beliefs – the status of which is the focus of the fourth of the main elements, to be discussed next.<sup>18</sup>

Second, the bare *possibility* of coherentist observation is pretty obviously insufficient to accommodate the role that observation (apparently) plays in our cognitive lives. Our intuitive conviction is that perceptual observation is not only possible but pervasive and that an appeal to observational evidence, whether direct or indirect, is essential for the justification of at least contingent beliefs about the world. Thus a coherence theory that does not do violence to these intuitions must *require* and not just allow that a substantial observational element be present in any justified system that includes such contingent beliefs. It must, that is, impose something akin to what I have elsewhere called the Observational Requirement,<sup>19</sup> to the effect that any justified system of putatively empirical beliefs must contain a reasonable proportion of cognitively spontaneous beliefs that according to the system itself are likely to be true.

(iv) Like the other elements already discussed, the last is also in effect a response to an objection that threatens to derail the coherentist position before it even gets off the ground. If it is by appeal to coherence with one's system of beliefs that all issues of empirical justification are to be decided, then an *internalist* coherence theory requires that the believer have an adequate grasp or representation of his system of beliefs, since it is with respect to this system that issues of coherence and so of justification are to be decided. Such a grasp would presumably take the form of a set of metabeliefs (or one comprehensive metabelief) specifying the contents of the system of beliefs. And the seemingly glaring difficulty is that the coherentist view also seemingly precludes there being any way for the metabeliefs that constitutes this grasp to themselves be justified. Such beliefs are obviously empirical and contingent in character; and yet any appeal to coherence for *their* justification would seem to be plainly circular or questionbegging, since what is at issue is the specification of the very system of beliefs in relation to which coherence is to be assessed. Most coherentists have failed to explicitly acknowledge this problem, but it still strikes me as obviously one that a coherentist position must somehow deal with.

In my own version of coherentism, I appeal at this point to what I call the "Doxastic Presumption." Though this move now strikes me as pretty desperate (a view that many others no doubt arrived at much more swiftly than I did), I still know of no better way to handle the issue in question. The idea is to mitigate the foregoing objection by treating the metabelief in question as an unjustified hypothesis in relation to which issues of justification are *conditionally* assessed, yielding results of the general form: *if* my representation of my system of beliefs

is correct, then such-and-such a particular belief is justified in the sense of being likely to be true. The metabelief in question would presumably still in fact be a product of introspection, even though there is no way within a coherentist position for this most fundamental result of introspection to be justified.<sup>20</sup>

This completes my enumeration of the main elements that any coherentist position must arguably include. All of them are responses to deep-seated problems, and this highlights again the dialectically defensive and reactive posture that seems inevitable for a coherence theory. It is, moreover, more than a little uncertain that any of these elements is really adequate to deal with the specific problem that motivates it. But there is worse to come, as we will see in the next section.

Before turning to further objections to coherentism, however, there is one modest point to be made in the opposite direction, one that has at least some tendency to mitigate the problems faced by the coherentist view. The foregoing account of coherentism follows the trend of virtually all coherentist positions in construing the holistic element in an extreme way in which the unit of justification is the person's entire system of beliefs. Such a view seriously aggravates both the problem that gives rise to the Doxastic Presumption, as discussed above, and also other issues pertaining to the access to coherentist justification. It also yields the highly questionable result that the justification of a belief in one area could be undermined by an incoherence in one's beliefs in a completely unrelated area. And such an extreme holism is in any case quite unnecessary. We have not yet considered the question of just why the coherence of a group of beliefs is supposed to be an indication of its truth, but if there is a defensible answer to this question, there is no apparent reason (and in fact none will emerge) as to why it would not work just as well for a coherent set of beliefs that is much smaller than one's complete belief system (as long as the set in question is not so small as to raise a serious possibility that its apparent coherence is merely a matter of coincidence).

#### 4. Objections to Coherentism

The three historically most standard objections to coherentism have already been briefly enumerated above. There is, first, the so-called "isolation problem" or "input objection," which claims that an account of justification that depends entirely on coherence will have the absurd consequence that contingent or empirical beliefs might be justified in the absence of any informational input from the extraconceptual world that they attempt to describe. This would seem to mean in turn that the truth of the component beliefs, if they happened to be true, could only be an accident in relation to that world, and thus that there could be no genuine reason to think that they are true and so no epistemic justification.

As already discussed above, the primary motivation for the coherentist account of observation is to meet this objection by showing how observational beliefs that are causally generated by the world might nonetheless be given a coherentist



justification, and how an observational requirement of this sort can be made a necessary condition for empirical justification within a coherentist framework.<sup>21</sup> In this way, the input objection might seem, at least *prima facie*, to be met – though we will have to reconsider below whether this attempted answer really succeeds.

The second standard objection is what may be called the alternative coherent systems objection: Even given a relatively demanding conception of coherence, there will still be indefinitely many different possible systems of beliefs, each as internally coherent as the others. Thus, each of these systems will seemingly be equally justified according to a coherentist view. And this is surely an absurd result, especially since *my* belief that is not internally incoherent will be part of one or more such systems.

The coherentist's main attempted response to this objection also depends crucially on the idea of observation. If the existence of a substantial observational component is, as suggested above, made a necessary condition for empirical justification, then, it is claimed, there is no longer any reason to think that such alternative systems can be freely invented, and hence no longer any obvious reason why they should be thought to exist. The point here is that there is no reason to think that the cognitively spontaneous beliefs that are judged as likely to be true by an arbitrarily invented system of beliefs will in fact cohere with that system over time, and thus no reason to think that such a system will remain coherent.<sup>22</sup> Here too the coherentist seems to have at least the gist of a *prima facie* adequate response to the objection in question, though this issue too will be reconsidered below.

The third and most fundamental of the standard objections is in effect a challenge to the coherentist to give a reason for thinking that adopting beliefs on the basis of coherentist justification is likely to lead to believing the truth, which is obviously essential if coherence is to be genuinely a basis for epistemic justification. One response to this problem, one which I have already rejected by implication, is the adoption of a coherence theory of truth. The only apparent alternative is for the coherentist to offer an argument from the (empirical) premise that a given system of beliefs is coherent (and satisfies the requirement of observation) to the conclusion that the component beliefs are likely, to an appropriate degree, to be true. Such an argument will apparently have to itself be a priori in character, since any empirical appeal (beyond the premise that the system is and remains coherent) would have to be itself justified by appeal to coherence, thereby rendering the argument viciously circular.<sup>23</sup> I have elsewhere attempted such an a priori "metajustificatory argument,"<sup>24</sup> centering around the idea that only approximate truth could *explain* the fact of long-run coherence (given the satisfaction of the requirement of observation), but the details of that attempt cannot be gone into here. Whether or not it is defeated by other problems, the coherentist version of such an argument now seems to me to be decisively undercut by the more specific objections to coherentism that are discussed further on in this section.<sup>25</sup>

Coherentism emerges from the foregoing discussion as a shaky and problematic position at best, dialectically on the defensive from the beginning and afflicted with a multitude of problems and objections that can seemingly at best be only

staved off, but rarely if ever decisively answered. Given the apparent strength of the arguments against foundationalism, together with the unacceptability (in my judgment) of externalism, coherentism seemed a project worth attempting, albeit one that clearly faced pretty long odds from the very beginning. Now, however, it seems to me time to concede that it has not succeeded and almost certainly cannot succeed. This result is perhaps already obvious enough in light of the foregoing discussion, but I will support it a bit more by discussing three further objections to coherentism that seem to me pretty clearly fatal. These are no unrelated to the problems and objections already discussed, but they are some what narrower and more focused.

First. The most obvious objection pertains to the so-called Doxastic Presumption. We have already taken note of the problem of access to the system of belief in relation to which coherence is to be assessed, and of the Doxastic Presumption as the only response that is apparently available. But it must be admitted that the result of this move, as many have taken pains to point out, is a very deep and troubling version of skepticism, albeit not perhaps quite the version that philosphical responses to skepticism have been mainly concerned with: a skepticist according to which no one has *any* justification *simpliciter* for *any* empirical belief but only at best for the conditional claim that *if* a certain unjustified and unjustifiable presumption is correct, then various empirical beliefs are likely to be true. And while it still seems to me that some forms of skepticism are unavoidable and will simply have to be lived with, I find it more and more implausible to suppose that this is one of them.

Second. A less obvious but equally serious objection pertains to the coherentist's attempted account of observational input. It still seems to me that something like the account sketched above succeeds in showing how there can be a kind of input that is justified in a coherentist way. But it is less clear that such input can be effectively recognized or identified as such in an internalistically acceptable way. In particular, the attempt, discussed above, to make the existence of such input a requirement for empirical justification does not succeed, so long as this requirement is construed in such a way that its satisfaction is internalistically recognizable.<sup>27</sup> The reason for this is that the alternative coherent systems objection which this account of input is aimed in part to meet, recurs all over again: as for as it is only specified *within the system* that cognitively spontaneous beliefs occur and that the Observation Requirement is satisfied, there will be indefinitely many other competing coherent systems containing analogous specifications but characterizing the world in more or less any arbitrarily chosen way one likes.

In my earlier discussion of this issue, I attempted to meet this objection by saying that in order to genuinely be justified, such a system must actually be believed and applied,<sup>28</sup> with the suggestion being, as we saw above, that an arbitrarily constructed system would not remain coherent in actual use, and in particular that allegedly cognitively spontaneous beliefs would not genuinely be found to occur in a cognitively spontaneous way. Unfortunately, however, as I somehow managed not to see, this sort of response seems to succeed only because it tacitly appeals

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a direct awareness of one's own actual beliefs and their occurrence that is not legitimately available to a coherentist. As long as the occurrence of cognitively spontaneous beliefs and the satisfaction of the Observation Requirement is assessed only in terms of the coherence of beliefs that these conditions are satisfied with the rest of the system, which is all that the coherentist legitimately has to go on, the objection stands.

I note in passing that it would of course be possible to avoid this second objection by construing the Observation Requirement as an *externalist* requirement, one whose satisfaction does not need to be internally assessable. But externalism, for reasons that I do not have space to detail here, seems to me equally unacceptable; and in any case, as already noted above, an externalist version of coherentism would have no dialectical point, since if externalism were otherwise acceptable, a foundationalist version would be much more straightforward and easier to defend.

Third. The third objection pertains to a topic that has not emerged at all explicitly in our discussion of coherentism so far, but which is nonetheless vitally related to the tenability of the view. As was implicit in the discussion of the alternative coherent systems objection in section 3, a coherence theory must appeal, not just to coherence at a moment, but to coherence over a period of time and indeed over at least a relatively long run. It takes time for the coherence of an arbitrarily invented system to be destroyed by new observations; and in attempting to argue for the connection between coherence and truth, it is only long-run or at least relatively sustained coherence that might seem to demand truth as an explanation.<sup>29</sup> But then the issue arises of how, according to a coherence theory, the memory beliefs upon which any access to the fact of *continued* coherence must rely are themselves to be justified. Many philosophers have offered coherence theories of the justification of memory beliefs, but such an account seems clearly to be involved in vicious circularity if the only reason for thinking that coherentist justification is conducive to truth, and so that the memory beliefs in particular are true, relies on the existence of coherence over time and so on those very memory beliefs themselves. The upshot is that there is no noncircular way for a coherentist to appeal to sustained or long-run coherence, making it even more difficult or, I think, impossible to respond to the alternative coherent systems objection or to argue for the connection between coherence and truth.

Even the foregoing does not exhaust the litany of objections to coherentism, but it surely suffices to make quite clear the untenability of the central coherentist view.

## Notes

- 1 I say "contingent or empirical" to indicate an approximate target, since what it means for a belief to be *empirically* justified is of course one key facet of the overall issue. There is also a somewhat analogous issue and accompanying dialectic for a priori justification, but it differs too greatly, in my judgment, to be capable of being considered within the bounds of the present paper. For a discussion and defense of a foundationalist conception of a priori justification, see my book *In Defense of Pure Reason* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 2 For a clear elaboration of such a picture, see Ernest Sosa, "How Do You Know?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 11 (1974): 113-22.
- 3 I ignore here the possibility of epistemic overdetermination.
- 4 Obviously a particular epistemological structure might partially realize two or even all three of the alternative outcomes of the regress to be discussed. Explicit consideration of these further possibilities will be left to the reader.
- 5 See Anthony Quinton, *The Nature of Things* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).
- 6 See C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1946).
- 7 See Roderick Chisholm, "Theory of Knowledge in America," reprinted in Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 109-93.
- 8 For a defense of this view, see my paper "Toward a Moderate Rationalism," *Philosophical Topics* 23 (1995): 47-78; and my book *In Defense of Pure Reason*.
- 9 For a more elaborate development of this basic objection to foundationalism, see my book *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 4. This book will henceforth be cited as *SEK*.
- 10 Perhaps not surprisingly, the elements that I regard as essential are realized most fully and explicitly in my own former coherentist position, developed in *SEK*. But it is my belief (which cannot be fully defended here) that any coherentist position that has even a *prima facie* chance of meeting the indicated constraints will have to involve

at least a close approximation to these elements, and that at least all but the fourth can be discerned (with varying degrees of clarity) in the main historical examples of coherentism.

- 11 See Bernard Bosanquet, *Implication and Linear Inference* (London: Macmillan, 1920).
- 12 For a further development of this idea, see SEK, pp. 89–93.
- 13 This is true, e.g. of Gilbert Harman's view in *Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); and is at least strongly suggested by Wilfrid Sellars, in such papers as "Givenness and Explanatory Coherence," *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 612–24.
- 14 For some further discussion of the concept of coherence, see SEK, pp. 93–101.
- 15 See e.g. Lewis, in *Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, ch. 11 (who uses the term "congruence"); and Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), ch. 4. The basic point here is that strictly deductive or even enumerative inductive inference from the foundational beliefs does not suffice to justify most of the superstructure beliefs that the foundationalist typically wants to claim to be justified.
- 16 See SEK, ch. 6.
- 17 Something like this idea seems implicit in Blanshard's talk of "beliefs about the technique of acquiring beliefs" and in Sellars' talk of "language-entry transitions"; see Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939), pp. 285–6, and Wilfrid Sellars, "Some Reflections on Language Games," reprinted in his *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 321–58. It seems also to be hinted at, though less explicitly, in various other coherentist views.
- 18 For more detail, see SEK, pp. 124–38.
- 19 See SEK, pp. 140–3.
- 20 For more extended discussion, see SEK, pp. 101–6 and 147–8.
- 21 See SEK, pp. 139–40.
- 22 For more discussion, see SEK, pp. 143–6.
- 23 It might be suggested that there is nothing objectionably circular about a coherence theory appealing to coherence to justify the claim that coherence is truth conducive, and indeed that *any* theory of justification must make an analogous appeal to its fundamental standard (on pain of abandoning its claim to be a comprehensive account of justification). One way to see that there is something wrong with this response is to note that such a self-invoking justification of the claim of truth conduciveness is equally available for many obviously unsatisfactory views of justification (consider the view that belief by me is the standard of justification, where I also believe that all of my beliefs are true). The proper conclusion, I think, is that only a view that appeals to a direct insight into or grasp of truth can avoid this problem – which is what paradigmatically foundationalist views, like the one offered later in this paper, attempt to do. A coherentist view could appeal to such a direct insight into truth only by adopting the sort of coherence theory of truth that is briefly mentioned in the text. (I am indebted to John Greco for calling this issue to my attention.)
- 24 SEK, ch. 8.
- 25 Rescher attempts to give a *pragmatic* argument that the practical success that results from the employment of the coherent system makes it likely that the beliefs of the system are at least approximately true. See Nicholas Rescher, *Methodological Pragmatism* (New York: New York University Press, 1977). But the relation of this argument to the coherence of the system is less than clear, and in any case the obviously

- empirical claim of pragmatic success would, for a coherentist, have to be itself justified by appeal to coherence, again making the argument viciously circular.
- 26 I have sometimes suggested that *if* this presumption is in fact true, then the various empirical beliefs *are justified*, since there is a reason why they are likely to be true. This, however, is a mistake, since though such a reason would, as it were, exist in the abstract it would still be inaccessible to the believer – or to anyone else. (It was Richard Fumerton's gentle insistence that finally led me to see this pretty obvious point.)
  - 27 I am assuming here that the satisfaction of this requirement is part of the overall coherentist reason or justification for *any* empirical claim, i.e., that one who has no access to the fact that this requirement is satisfied fails to really possess a reason for thinking that a belief that satisfies the rest of the coherentist account is likely to be true. For only a justification that includes the satisfaction of this requirement can withstand the input and alternative coherent systems objections. (I am indebted to John Greco for pointing out the need to be more explicit on this point.)
  - 28 SEK, pp. 149–50.
  - 29 See SEK, ch. 8.