

To say that the external world propositions can be deduced from the appearance propositions is to say that it is not even possible for the appearance propositions to be true while the external world propositions are false. Unfortunately, it is possible. It is possible to have a dream or hallucination in which you have experiences just like those you have when you enter the room. Careful could have the experiences he has had as a result of some elaborate scheme in which Filcher is framed for the crime. In general, no set of experiences logically guarantees any particular external world propositions. The deduction condition in (CF3) is too stringent.

D. Conclusions on Cartesian Foundationalism

It is clear that Cartesian foundationalism is not a satisfactory theory, given the truth of *The Standard View*. There are the following problems:

1. Beliefs about one's own mental states are not immune from error. So if beliefs about these matters are basic, whatever it is that makes them justified has to be something other than this property. We need a different explanation of what makes basic beliefs justified. So (CF2) must be revised.
2. Not *all* beliefs about one's own mental states are basic justified beliefs. Beliefs about one's own mental states can be derived from other beliefs, and thus can be nonbasic. Beliefs about these matters can be unjustified.
3. The things that Cartesian foundationalists count as basic are things that in ordinary circumstances we do not believe at all. It seems that the starting point for our beliefs is ordinary observations of the world, not introspections. So (CF1) needs to be revised. (Of course, this point is controversial.)
4. Much of what we know (according to *The Standard View*) cannot be deduced from what is basic. This is clearly true if our basic beliefs are beliefs about our own internal states. But even if we take spontaneous judgments about the external world to be basic, much of what we know goes beyond what can be deduced from that.

Before examining a version of foundationalism that attempts to make the changes these points suggest, it will be helpful to consider the other approach to justification that has been influential in the history of philosophy, coherentism.

IV. COHERENTISM

A. The Main Idea of Coherentism

The central idea of coherentist theories of justification is that every justified belief is justified by virtue of its relations to other beliefs. In other words, no beliefs are foundational or basic. So coherentists reject premise (1-4) of *The Infinite Regress Argument*, the step of the regress argument that rejects circular evidential chains. This is not because they think that you can justify one belief

by another, that second by a third, and then justify the third by appeal to the first. Rather, their idea is that justification is a more systematic and holistic matter, that each belief is justified by the way it fits into one's overall system of beliefs.

Thus, coherentists endorse the following two central ideas:

- C1. Only beliefs can justify other beliefs. Nothing other than a belief can contribute to justification.
- C2. Every justified belief depends in part on other beliefs for its justification. (There are no justified basic beliefs.)¹⁵

Coherentists think that a belief is justified when it coheres with, or fits together well with, one's other beliefs. This idea has considerable intuitive force, as is brought out by the following examples.

Example 4.9: Growing Hair

Harry has a generally hard-headed attitude concerning the effectiveness of medications. He always wants to see the evidence before he believes they will work. He rejects outlandish claims based on individual testimonials. He is sensibly dubious about the alleged miracle cures touted in advertisements. But Harry is starting to lose his hair and he is quite upset about this. One day he hears somebody say that Miraclepro cures baldness, and he believes it.

It should strike you that Harry's belief that

6. Miraclepro cures baldness

is not justified. And what is particularly notable is that the belief is quite incongruous for Harry. You might say that he should know better than to believe such a thing. Indeed, he *does* know better, in that his own principles tell him not to believe (6) in these circumstances. Coherentists would agree. They would say that this belief is incoherent for him—it does not fit with his other beliefs. Harry accepts something along the lines of

- P. A medical treatment is effective only if there is good clinical evidence showing that it is effective, and there is no good clinical evidence that Miraclepro is effective.

Yet, Harry believes (6) in the absence of the needed evidence. We can see a kind of incoherence in his system. The belief about Miraclepro is the one that stands out as the "bad" belief in his system.

Example 4.9 illustrates one way a belief can fail to cohere with one's other beliefs. It is an individual belief that violates the believer's own general principles. Another example illustrates another way a belief can fail to cohere.

Example 4.10: Falling Tree Limbs

Storm's family owns two cars—one rather new and one an old junker. Each night the cars are parked in the driveway. One night there is a major ice storm and large quantities of ice are forming on the tree limbs, causing branches to break from the trees and fall. There is a tree overhanging the driveway. Storm hears the sound of a branch crashing into a car right out in the driveway. Storm thinks that the branch must have hit the old junker.

Example 4.10 is similar to Example 4.9 in that some wishful thinking is involved. However, in Example 4.10 Storm may not be violating any general principle he accepts. Unless he has other beliefs about the specific locations of the car and the sound of the branch, his belief about the car is simply thrown into the system without anything supporting it. We might say that in Example 4.10 Storm's belief *lacks positive coherence*: There is no positive support for it within the system. In contrast, in Example 4.9 Harry's belief had *negative coherence*: It was in conflict with the rest of the system. For a belief to be justified, according to coherentism, it must not be like either of these. However, these considerations do not amount to a precise account of what coherence is. Nothing said so far constitutes any clear explanation of what sort of conflict with other beliefs rules out coherence nor what sort of internal support is needed for coherence. Furthermore, as will become clearer in the next section, there is an important question about exactly what it is that a belief must cohere with in order to be justified according to coherentist standards.

An initial formulation of coherentism, then, is as follows:

CT. S is justified in believing p iff p coheres with S's system of beliefs.

To develop a reasonably precise coherentist theory, coherentists must address two questions:

- QC1. What counts as S's system of beliefs?
- QC2. What is it for a belief to cohere with a system of beliefs?

To see the force of the questions, suppose that coherentists made two assumptions:

- A1. S's system of beliefs = everything S believes.
- A2. A proposition coheres with a system of beliefs provided it logically follows from the conjunction of everything in the system.

Applying (A1) and (A2) to (CT) yields the following coherentist theory:

CT1. S is justified in believing p iff p logically follows from the conjunction of everything S believes.

A moment's reflection reveals that (CT1) has the absurd consequence that everything anyone believes is justified. The argument for this is simple. Suppose S believes p. The conjunction of everything S believes will then be a long conjunction, one conjunct of which is p itself. A simple law of logic is that a conjunction implies each of its conjuncts. Thus, if S believes p, q, r, s, and so on, then the conjunction of everything S believes will be the long proposition "p and q and r and s . . ." Trivially, this conjunction implies p. According to (CT1), it follows that S's belief that p is justified, no matter what p is and no matter how well it fits the rest of what S believes. According to this theory, then, Harry's belief in Example 4.9 and Storm's belief in Example 4.10 are justified. This is just what coherentism was supposed to avoid. Coherentists need something better than (CT1).

In attempting to develop a better version of coherentism, it is important to keep the following point in mind. Assume, just for the sake of argument, that we have a reasonably clear understanding of the idea of a coherent system of beliefs. Using this idea, we can formulate the following proposal:

CT2. S is justified in believing p iff S's system of beliefs is coherent and includes a belief in p.

The idea behind (CT2) is that justified beliefs are beliefs that are components of coherent systems and unjustified beliefs are components of systems that are not coherent. Given a reasonably clear idea of what coherence is, (CT2) would be a reasonably clear proposal.

However, (CT2) is not the least bit plausible. There may be something desirable about having coherent systems of belief. However, few of us manage to achieve this. We all make some mistakes, we succumb to wishful thinking, we fail to realize the consequences of our beliefs. There are, in all realistic cases, some beliefs that render our systems at least to some degree incoherent. According to (CT2), if that's the case, then none of us is ever justified in believing anything. Consider your belief that you exist. Even if you are making some big mistakes on other matters, this is something that you are justified in believing. According to (CT2), that belief is justified only if you do believe that you exist and your system of beliefs is coherent. As noted, if you resemble a normal human being with respect to your beliefs, then your belief system is not coherent. Hence, by (CT2), your belief that you exist is not justified.

The problem with (CT2) can be stated in a more general way. It says that all beliefs in a coherent system are justified and all beliefs in a noncoherent system are not justified. Any individual's belief system is either coherent or not coherent. So the theory implies that for each individual, either all of his or her beliefs are justified or else all of them are not justified. Because, in fact, any real person falls short of a coherent system, the theory implies that no real person has any justified beliefs. However, the truth about each of us is not so extreme. We each have some justified beliefs and some unjustified beliefs. (CT2) cannot account for this simple fact. A successful version of coherentism must be more selective than (CT2) is.

It would not help matters to say that the degree to which a belief is justified depends upon the level of coherence of the believer's overall system. Suppose your belief system is, on the whole, moderately coherent. The present proposal would yield the result that all of your beliefs are moderately well justified. This fails to distinguish properly between your well-justified beliefs and your wild speculations.

It is clear, then, that coherentists need new and better answers to (QC1) and (QC2). Somehow, coherentism has to be formulated in way that enables it to identify some beliefs as justified and some as unjustified.

B. A Version of Coherentism

Coherence, whatever exactly it is, is a property that a system of beliefs may have to a greater or lesser degree. One system of beliefs may be more coherent than another. Philosophers have proposed various things that add to, or detract from, coherence.¹⁶ It is easiest to grasp these ideas by considering systems of belief that are largely alike, with only a few differences introduced to highlight factors that affect coherence. For example, suppose two people each believe a large number of propositions—*p*, *q*, *r*, and so on. Let us assume that there are no logical conflicts among the propositions these people believe. That is, it is at least possible that all their beliefs are true. And then suppose that one of the people forms the belief that *p* is false, and the person simply adds this belief to his system. Now there is a contradiction in the belief system. It includes beliefs in both *p* and $\sim p$. It cannot be that both of these are true. Now the system contains an inconsistency. And that makes it less coherent. Inconsistencies need not be as obvious as the one just described. A person might believe several propositions and fail to realize that they imply the denial of another proposition that the person believes. This belief system is also inconsistent, although the inconsistency is not so blatant. In any case, inconsistency detracts from coherence.

One thing that adds to the coherence of a system is the fact that it contains beliefs that constitute explanations for other beliefs in the system. Suppose that gardener #1 believes that all of the plants in his garden are wilted and that it has not rained in a long time. Suppose gardener #2 believes these things and also believes that plants wilt when they do not get any water for a long time. (Perhaps gardener #2 also believes that rain provides plants with water.) Gardener #2 has a richer, more fully developed belief system. The richness comes in part from the way it links together beliefs that are isolated from one another in gardener #1's belief system. Having these kinds of connections is often thought to add to the coherence of a belief system.

Perhaps having individual beliefs that conflict with one's general principles also detracts from the coherence value of one's system of beliefs.

We will say that factors such as these determine the *coherence value* of a system of beliefs. This does not constitute a complete account of coherence values, but it does provide some explanation of the idea. Coherentists can make use of the coherence values of systems of beliefs to formulate a version of coher-

entism that gets around the initial difficulties covered in the previous section.¹⁷ We can formulate the theory this way:

- CT3. S is justified in believing *p* iff the coherence value of S's system of beliefs would be greater if it included a belief in *p* than it would be if it did not include that belief.

The intended implications of (CT3) can best be seen by considering two situations, one in which a person already does believe a proposition and one in which a person does not believe it. If the person does believe the proposition, then the coherence value of the system as it actually is can be compared to its coherence value with that belief removed from the system. If removing the belief detracts from the coherence value of the system, then believing that proposition is justified. If the person does not already believe the proposition, then the coherence value of the actual system can be compared to the value of the system that would be formed if that belief were added. (CT3) says that when the version of the system with the belief has a higher value than the version without it, then the belief is justified. In accord with (CT3), we will say that a belief coheres with a system of beliefs when it enhances the coherence value of that system. Thus, (CT3) preserves the idea that a belief is justified when it coheres with one's system of beliefs.

(CT3) may deal reasonably well with Examples 4.9 and 4.10. In Example 4.9, Harry had a general belief about effective treatments and a specific belief about *Miraclegro* that did not fit together well. Intuitively, the belief about *Miraclegro* was the bad guy. It is plausible to hold that Harry's belief system would be more coherent if that belief were dropped. So (CT3) has the correct result that it is not justified. In Example 4.10, Storm has a belief that is unconnected with his other beliefs. So perhaps his system would gain coherence by dropping it. Again, (CT3) seems to have the right results for this case.

There are, however, vexing details that need to be worked out for (CT3). Consider again Harry from Example 4.9. Harry has an unjustified belief in (6), the proposition that *Miraclegro* cures baldness. Intuitively, we judge that his system of beliefs would be more coherent if this belief were dropped. (CT3) assesses justification by looking at what happens to the coherence value of the system if this belief alone were to be dropped. The problem with this is that Harry may well believe a number of other propositions that are connected to (6) in crucial ways. For example, if he just bought some *Miraclegro*, then he may believe

7. I just bought some stuff that cures baldness.

If we assess the justification of (6) by looking to see what happens to the system if it alone is dropped, then we are to assess the coherence value of Harry's system if he stops believing (6) but continues to believe (7). He may also believe many other propositions closely connected to (6). For example, he may believe

8. *Miraclegro* cures baldness but spray paint does not.

His system may lose coherence if he continues to believe things like (7) and (8) but drops (6). Due to its connections to other beliefs, then, dropping (6) alone may detract from coherence, even though believing (6) is not justified. Hence, it is not clear that (CT3) does deal properly with this example. The fact that any belief, even one that is not justified, can still have logical connections to many other beliefs poses a hard problem for coherentists. It is not clear how to revise coherentism to avoid this problem.

There is another puzzle that advocates of (CT3) must face. Consider Harry's justified belief in (P), the proposition saying that treatments do not work without clinical evidence of their effectiveness and there is no evidence of the effectiveness of *Miraclegro* (for baldness). Coherentists say that Harry's system would be more coherent if he dropped (6) from his system. Ignore the problem just discussed and suppose that this is true. However, it is also true that he could gain some coherence by dropping (P) from his system. This is because (P) also contributes to the incoherence his system displays. Hence, (CT3) implies that his belief in the principle is not justified either. Generally, when one's current system is incoherent because two beliefs conflict, there is an increase in coherence from dropping either one. The theory seems to imply that neither belief is justified. Yet that need not be the case, as Example 4.9 illustrated. A better version of coherentism will somehow allow for the possibility that one of the conflicting beliefs, or one group of conflicting groups of beliefs, is justified. Perhaps coherentists can come up with some way to cope with this problem.

The two problems just discussed surely do not show that coherentism is mistaken. They show only that there are difficult problems for coherentists to solve. Perhaps they can solve them by specifying in a better way the system of beliefs with which a belief must cohere in order to be justified. For example, in some of the examples a key feature is that a belief is held more out of wishful thinking than out of an effort to get at the truth. Coherentists could define justification in terms of coherence with this truth-directed subsystem.¹⁸ Possibly some such account will avoid the problems considered so far.

There are some other objections to coherentism that are intended to go to the heart of the theory. Some critics contend that the central coherentist idea is wrong. They argue that justification is not entirely a matter of how one's beliefs fit together. We will turn next to two objections that attempt to capitalize on this point.

C. Objections to Coherentism

C1. The Alternative Systems Objection Here is a statement of a commonly expressed objection to coherentism:

According to a coherence theory of empirical justification . . . the system of beliefs which constitutes empirical knowledge is epistemically justified solely by virtue of its internal coherence. But such an appeal to coherence will never even begin to pick out one uniquely justified system of beliefs, since on any plausible conception of coherence, there will always be many, probably infinitely many, different and incompatible systems of belief which are equally coherent.¹⁹

Here is one way to spell out this objection.²⁰ Consider the proposition that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. If, as the objectors contend, there are many different, and incompatible, coherent systems of beliefs, there will be some systems that include this belief and others that include its negation. If that belief is part of your actual system, you can imagine a system that replaces everything supporting it or following from it with different propositions. By carefully constructing the new system, you could get one just as coherent as your current system, but including the proposition that Lincoln was not assassinated. Thus, if there are all these different coherent systems, then you can make any belief you want justified simply by picking and choosing the rest of your beliefs appropriately. That cannot be right. Here is a more formal statement of the argument:

Argument 4.3: The Alternative Systems Argument

- 3-1. If (CT) is true, then a belief is justified iff it coheres with the believer's system of beliefs.
 - 3-2. A person can make any selected belief cohere with his system of beliefs by properly adjusting the rest of the system to make it fit with that one.
 - 3-3. If (CT) is true, then a person can make any selected belief justified by properly adjusting the rest of his beliefs. (3-1), (3-2)
 - 3-4. But it is not the case that one can make any selected belief justified by properly adjusting the rest of one's beliefs.
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- 3-5. (CT) is not true. (3-3), (3-4)

There is strong reason to doubt that this is a good objection to coherentism.²¹ One problem with it is that (3-2) is false. People simply do not have that much control over their beliefs. But this is not the major problem with the argument.

Consider again the belief about Lincoln with which this subsection began. Coherentists are not committed to the absurd conclusion that you already are justified in believing both that Lincoln was assassinated and that he was not. Nor are they committed to the idea that you have the power to adjust your beliefs to build up a coherent system around either of these options. Coherentists are not stuck with the implausible claim that we can form our beliefs at will. They are committed to the idea that someone could have the belief that Lincoln was assassinated, and that this belief could cohere with his belief system, and that therefore this belief could be justified. They are also committed to the conclusion that a person could have the belief that Lincoln was not assassinated, that this belief could also cohere with a different system he could have had, and that therefore this belief also could be justified. Far from being false, however, this conclusion seems exactly right. Conflicting beliefs, in alternative systems, can be justified. People who have had different experiences and learned different things might justifiably believe very different things. There may be some people who have been taught nonstandard things and who, as a result, have a justified belief that Lincoln was not assassinated. There is no good objection to coherentism here.

believing that the line on the right is longer, because that belief is supported by his prior beliefs and he has no other beliefs that defeat it. Yet Lefty does have experiential evidence—the way the lines look—that counts against this belief. Coherentism improperly leaves this out of the picture. It says that only what Lefty believes matters. It gives an incorrect account of this more realistic example.

Some defenders of coherentism might reply that one's beliefs *must* conform to one's experiences. If so, then Examples 4.11 and 4.12 are not even possible. However, if that is the case, then it turns out that a core element of foundationalism is right after all—these beliefs about experiences seem to be in some sense “infallible” or “incorrigible”—we have to be right about them. So if you reject this argument against coherentism on these grounds, you seem to be appealing to a foundationalist idea.

This suggests that it would be a good idea to reconsider foundationalism in an effort to come up with a version that avoids the difficulties of Cartesian foundationalism.

D. Conclusions on Coherentism

1. The main idea of coherentism can be given in two characteristic coherentist claims:
 - C1. Only beliefs can justify other beliefs. Nothing other than a belief can contribute to justification.
 - C2. Every justified belief depends in part upon other beliefs for its justification. (There are no justified basic beliefs.)
2. We have not yet found a suitable way to formulate the coherentist theory. Among the problems for coherentists are these: (a) Distinguishing sensibly among actual beliefs to characterize some as justified and some as unjustified; (b) saying what coherence actually is.
3. Many critics think that (C1) has been refuted by *The Isolation Argument*. This argument shows that experiences matter for justification.

V. MODEST FOUNDATIONALISM

A. The Main Idea

Recall that foundationalists must answer these questions:

- QF1. What are the kinds of things our justified basic beliefs are about? Which beliefs are justified and basic?
- QF2. How are these basic beliefs justified? If they are not justified by other beliefs, how do they get justified?
- QF3. What sort of connection must a nonbasic belief have to basic beliefs in order to be justified?

In recent years, philosophers have developed versions of foundationalism that avoid the problems encountered by Cartesian foundationalism.²³ These contemporary versions of foundationalism, often called *modest foundationalism*, typically hold that basic beliefs are ordinary perceptual beliefs about the external world, that these beliefs can be justified without being immune from error, and that nonbasic beliefs can be justified if they are well supported by basic beliefs without being deducible from them. The conditions placed on justified beliefs are thus less demanding, or more modest, than those endorsed by Cartesian foundationalism.

The modest foundationalist idea is as follows: As people navigate their way around the world, they are routinely bombarded with sensory stimuli. They regularly form beliefs, not about the internal effects of those stimuli, but about the world outside them. They believe such things as that the lights are on, there's a book on the table, and so on. Modest foundationalists regard these as justified basic beliefs. They do not say that we cannot be mistaken about these matters. Nevertheless, they hold that beliefs such as these are often very well justified. Finally, they say that these justified basic beliefs can provide justifying reasons for additional beliefs about the world even if the further beliefs are not deducible from the basic ones.

This all seems entirely plausible, but hard questions arise when we attempt to spell out the details. We turn next to that.

B. Versions of Modest Foundationalism

Modest foundationalists think that our basic beliefs are typically beliefs about the world around us, beliefs about the things that we see or otherwise sense. We typically form these beliefs automatically, without any conscious reasoning or deliberation. When you walk into a room you might immediately come to believe that the lights are on, that there is a blue chair in front of a brown table, and so on. Modest foundationalists think that beliefs such as these are basic and that they are often justified. This does not imply that you can never be wrong about such matters or that all beliefs like these are justified.²⁴ The details of modest foundationalist views about these matters will emerge from discussion of their answers to (QF1) and (QF2). Before examining that part of their theory, consider how they will answer (QF3). In other words, how, according to modest foundationalism, are the rest of our beliefs justified? What can replace the deduction condition in Cartesian foundationalism?

Consider again Example 4.1. Careful had strong reasons to think that Filcher stole the painting. Those reasons are summed up in proposition (9):

9. The painting was in Filcher's possession, Filcher's fingerprints were at the scene of the theft, . . .

While (9) may not contain only propositions that are basic, according to the present view, it is not too hard to see how a belief in (9) might be based on things