

Module 5: Coherentism

1. The Gist of the Theory

- A belief that p for S is reasonable to hold (*justified*) iff it coheres with (is supported by) the rest of S 's beliefs.
- A belief that p for S is not reasonable to hold (*unjustified*) iff it does not cohere (conflicts) with the rest of S 's beliefs.
- Justification is entirely determined by its coherence relations with other beliefs.
 - Coherentism is a doxastic theory of justification — a theory of epistemic justification that contends that **all** beliefs are justified by *other beliefs*.
 - Foundationalism is a non-doxastic theory of justification — a theory of epistemic justification that contends that **some** beliefs are justified by something that is not a belief (e.g. experiences, the fact that a belief is indubitable).
- Coherence vs. Consistency
 - Consistency is a logical property of sets of propositions (or beliefs)
 - A set of beliefs are *logically consistent* if and only if it is possible for all of the beliefs to be true.
 - A set of beliefs are either consistent or they are not.
 - Coherence is a stronger property
 - A set of beliefs are *coherent* if and only if some of the beliefs support the plausibility of other beliefs.
 - A set of beliefs can be *more* or *less* coherent.
 - Example
 - Consistent but not very coherent: Green is a color, John is a fisherman, A circle is a mathematical object
 - Consistent but highly coherent: John lives on third avenue, I saw a guy on a third avenue (from a distance) that looks like John, John's wife and older son told me that he John was on third avenue today.
- What Makes a Belief More or Less Coherent?
 - Logical Consistency
 - Explanatory Connections
 - Consistency with Norms for How Beliefs Should be Formed
 - Other Factors?

2. Justification according to Coherentism: What

S is justified in the belief that p iff S 's set of beliefs are coherent with the belief that p .

Objection: this makes all of our beliefs justified.

S is justified in the belief that p iff the degree of coherence of the set of beliefs is greater **with** a belief that p than **without** a belief that p .

If we want to know whether a belief in p is justified, we simply examine whether a set of beliefs becomes more coherent with p or without p .

Example?

Objection #1?

Objection #2?

Group #1

Explain the coherence theory of epistemic justification. What is its essential claim? How are beliefs justified? Give an example.

Group #2

What are two problems with the coherence theory of epistemic justification.

1. Coherentism vs. Foundationalism

Coherentists claim that (i) non-doxastic experience cannot be a source of epistemic justification, (ii) there are no basic beliefs, and (iii) every belief is justified in terms of coherence relations between other beliefs.

Foundationalists claim that (i) non-doxastic experience can be a source of epistemic justification, (ii) there are basic beliefs that have some degree of non-doxastic support, and (iii) every non-basic belief is justified in terms of its dependence upon basic beliefs.

Which one of these is correct? You might think about choosing between the two in terms of *the better of two evils* or in terms of a *cost-benefit analysis*. In order to determine which theory provides a more plausible account of epistemic justification, let's look at objections to each.

1.1 Objections to Foundationalism

Objection #1: Only beliefs can be a source of epistemic justification

Suppose two people disagree about an issue. Person A claims p and Person B claims $not-p$. In order to justify p , A cites a number of beliefs r, s, t . In order to justify p , B cites $not-r, not-s, and not-t$. If beliefs are the only thing that a person can cite in justifying belief, then beliefs are the only sources of justification.

- (1) Beliefs are the only things we can cite in justifying a belief
- (2) If beliefs are the only things we can cite in justifying a belief, then beliefs are the only sources of justification.
- (3) Beliefs are the only source of justification.

Objection #2: Justified basic beliefs do not exist.

Suppose that what distinguishes basic beliefs from non-basic beliefs is a property k .

If a belief B is basic, it has property k . If a belief is non-basic, it does not have property k .

Coherentists argue that in order for B to be justified for a particular individual S,

- (i) B must have k , and
- (ii) S must also be justified in his/her belief that B has k .

However, if S must be justified in his/her belief that B has k , then B is **not basic** since it depends upon an additional belief R that makes B justified for S.

Outcome: Foundationalism is false, ergo Coherentism is more preferable.

1.2 Objections to Coherentism

Objection #1: Removing an Unjustified Belief Can Lower Justification

Objection #2: Incoherence Can Infect More Beliefs Than It Should

Objection #3: The Isolation Argument

Consider two individuals John and Mary. John and Mary believe the following three things:

- (i) I see a furry cat in front of me.
- (ii) I am allergic to furry cats.
- (iii) I am sneezing.

On the coherentist account John and Mary are *equally justified*. Now suppose that John and Mary are looking at different things. John is looking at a large furry hairball in the corner of the room, while Mary is looking at a furry cat. Coherentism is not preferable to foundationalism because Mary is clearly more justified than John because Mary's belief in (i) is supported by a nondoxastic experience while John's is not. More generally, coherentism is not preferable because it disregards the role that experience plays to justification.

2. Mixed Rejection / Acceptance

You might mix different features of coherentism and foundationalism together. For example,

Foundherentism (Susan Haack from *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* 1993)

- (i) non-doxastic experience can be a source of epistemic justification (rejection of coherentism)
- (ii) there are no basic beliefs (rejection of foundationalism)
- (iii) every belief is justified if and only if it is justified by coherence relations and non-doxastic experience.