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# Coherentism and the Sensation Objection

**ABSTRACT**

Coherentist theories of justification face the Sensation objection, according to which some experiences, such as that of a headache, independently justify us in holding certain beliefs regardless of whether they cohere with the rest of our beliefs. Since coherentism holds that our beliefs are justified only on the basis of coherence with the rest of our beliefs, coherentism is, or so it has been argued, false. But the Sensation objection fails. First of all, there is no independent justification going on in these cases. And second, a variant of Bonjour's theory of introspection can make sense of these cases within a pure coherentist position.

Keywords: Coherentism, Bonjour, introspection, Sensation objection.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Suppose you feel a persistent and throbbing pain in your head, and that you on the basis of this experience come to believe that you have a headache. However, for some reason, this belief does not fit together, or cohere, with the rest of your beliefs. You believe many things, but none of them support the belief that you have a headache. You have drinken enough water, you suffer from no illness, and you have recently taken an aspirin. Are you still justified in believing that you have a headache? It seems you are. But why is this so? One possible answer is that some of your beliefs, including the belief that you have a headache, are justified to you on their own, or independently justified, because of your having certain sensations or experiences.

One task of epistemology is to decide what makes a belief count as justified. Coherentist theories of justification claim that for you to be justified in holding a belief, it is necessary and sufficient that this belief coheres with the rest of your beliefs. But in the case of your headache, you seem justified in holding this belief even if it does not cohere with the rest of your beliefs. And so coherentism must be false. Call this objection to coherentism the "Sensation objection".<sup>1</sup> It is the aim of this paper to examine whether and to which degree this objection is successful.

The paper is dispositioned as follows. Section two introduces the debate on epistemic justification and the subsequent rationale for accepting a coherentist position. Section three presents the Sensation objection and outlines two specific ways in which this objection supposedly refutes coherentism. Section four considers a psychological reply according to which certain experiences by necessity bring about certain beliefs. This reply fails to save coherentism, since we can always imagine situations where the experiences fail to induce such beliefs, and since even when they do, coherence may still be insufficient for justification. Section five suggests another reply, namely that our beliefs, to the extent that they are justified, are always justified in the context of a set of background beliefs. Because of this, there is no *independent* justification going on in these cases. This insight leads to section six and seven, in which we consider how a particular account of coherence, namely that of Bonjour's coherence theory of introspection, answers the objection.

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1 This objection has been suggested by Earl Conee under the label "The Sensational Objection" in "Isolation and Beyond", *Philosophical Topics* 23 (1995), 129-46, at 138-43; and Ernest Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980), 3-26, at 18-20. Similar arguments have been made by Stephen E. Rosenbaum, "Reviving the Isolation Argument", *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985), 241-8; and John L. Pollock, *Knowledge and Justification* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), 28.

## 2. COHERENTIST THEORIES OF JUSTIFICATION

In what follows, we deal with a certain branch of epistemology, namely that of how our beliefs are *justified*. This is a normative rather than descriptive question: we ask not of the psychological processes of how we come to hold certain beliefs, nor of any sociological account of why we think of them as justified. Rather, we want to know under what circumstances we ought to count beliefs as justified, regardless of whether we actually think of them as justified or not.

*Epistemological* theories of justification differ from *metaphysical* theories of truth or the ontological status of the world. Such metaphysical theories try to explain what makes a proposition true or false or whether the world exists independently of our minds. Which answers to these metaphysical questions are correct has some epistemological relevance. Strictly speaking, however, most metaphysical theories should be logically compatible with most epistemological theories of justification. In what follows, I say nothing of these matters, but simply take as my starting point a so called realist ontology, according to which there exists a mind-independent world; as well as a correspondence theory of truth, which is the view that empirical propositions are true or false depending upon their corresponding to this world.

Theories of *justification* must be distinguished from theories of *methodology* in epistemological inquiry: that is, justificatory theories differ from theories about what we should and can do in order to reach true or justified beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Which methodological theories are correct is sure to depend upon some interesting empirical facts about biology, psychology, sociology, and perhaps even politics. In what follows, I leave aside the difficult question of which such methods we should employ. To avoid sliding imperceptibly from justificatory issues to methodological ones, I shall consider the person's system of beliefs as fixed, rather than as in a state of development or flux.

When trying to decide which theory of justification is correct, we may ask two different questions.<sup>3</sup> First, we may want to know whether a belief *is justified*, regardless of whether the person has any chance of knowing whether it is so justified or not. In that case, we are most likely inclined to accept an externalist theory of justification, according to which the reasons for counting a person's belief as justified may be wholly exterior to her. In that case, the person need never know that she is justified in holding a particular belief. Second, we may want to know whether the person herself is justified *in holding* a particular belief. We then assess her actions and behaviour as a responsible epistemic agent. In this case, we are most likely inclined towards some internalist view,

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Stern makes this distinction admirably clear in his "Coherence as a Test for Truth", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2004), 296-326.

<sup>3</sup> See Kent Bach, "A Rationale for Reliabilism", *The Monist* 68 (1985), 246-63, at 246-53.

according to which the reasons constituting the justification of a belief must be accessible to the believer herself. In what follows, it is this second question which I am concerned with, and I shall assume that an internalist view of justification is correct.

Let us focus on this second sense of justification. Suppose that you hold a number of different beliefs. Which theory of justification can best account for which beliefs you are and are not justified in holding?

Perhaps we think that each belief is justified from it being inferred from other justified beliefs. For example, your belief that you bought food in the store is justified because you are justified in believing (a) that you have a receipt in your hands, (b) that you now have twenty dollars less in your pocket, and (c) that you remember buying food, and so on. But this raises the question of what makes these other beliefs justified. Presumably they must be justified by appeals to other justified beliefs. But, to repeat ourselves, what makes *these* further beliefs justified? Each belief summoned to confer justification thus seems to require its own justification in turn, resulting in an infinitely long chain of beliefs, each supporting the other. But surely it is implausible that our beliefs should be justified through such an infinitely long chain of beliefs. In particular, it seems impossible for any living person to hold an infinite number of beliefs. This is commonly known as the Regress problem.

The most natural solution to the Regress problem is to adopt *foundationalism*. Foundationalists agree that a portion of our beliefs are justified inferentially, as in the case of your trip to the grocery store. But they also claim that some beliefs are justified *non-inferentially*. These beliefs are of a "basic" kind such that they confer justification without receiving justification from other beliefs in turn. Foundationalists therefore has an initially plausible reply to the Regress problem. But while historically speaking, foundationalism has been the dominant alternative, it is now in decline. Why is this so?

The difficulties of foundationalism pertains to the challenge of specifying the status of the basic beliefs; that is, of the beliefs intended to confer justification without being justified in turn, or of the unjustified justifiers. One problem is to decide which of our beliefs are basic. H. H. Price suggested that beliefs about our own experiences are "given" to us and thus basic in the required sense.<sup>4</sup> Price exemplifies with the case of watching a red tomato. While there are many things about the tomato which we may doubt, such as whether it is real or hallucinated, there is one thing which we cannot doubt, namely the fact that we directly experience the tomato in the sense of experiencing its

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4 H. H. Price, "The Given", *Knowledge*, ed. Sven Bernecker and Fred Dretske (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009 [2009]), 235-44.

redness, shape, smell and so on. Introspective beliefs, or beliefs about our own experiences, are therefore plausible candidates for being non-inferential and basic in the sense required by foundationalism.

So far so good. But foundationalism suffers from the following dilemma.<sup>5</sup> For what is the status of the experiences which justifies our basic beliefs? It seems as if these experiences are either propositional in nature, or they are not. In other words, either they are experiences *that* something is the case, or merely experiences *of* something. In the case of their being propositional it is clear how they can confer justification to our basic beliefs. If Mary experiences that there is a car in front of her it is easy to see how this experience could justify her in believing that there is such a car. But if experiences are propositional they stand in need of further justification. They cannot therefore provide the kind of basic justification necessary for foundationalism.

On the other hand, if the experiences are not propositional in nature, they need no further justification, but then neither do they confer justification to basic beliefs. Let us illustrate this with the following example. Suppose that Mary and a small child stands in front of a car. Both have the same experience *of* the car: they have the same phenomenological impression of the tires, the windscreen and so on. But since the child does not know what a car is, she does not experience *that* there is a car. The problem is that the same experience might give rise to numerous different and incompatible beliefs. Because of this, an experience of something does not by itself justify a belief that something is the case.

Coherentism provides an alternative to foundationalism and solves the Regress problem without supposing the existence of any basic beliefs. According to coherentism, the justification of a belief depends upon its coherence, or its fitting together, with the rest of the person's system of beliefs, or with some sufficiently large subsystem of her beliefs. Instead of justification of a belief depending upon it being inferred from other justified beliefs, its justification instead derives from it cohering with the person's other beliefs, where this system of beliefs is coherent to a sufficient degree. Coherentist justification is therefore of a *holistic* nature, where the beliefs are mutually supportive in a "web of belief" rather than simply conferring justification in one-way chains of beliefs. If coherentism is successful, the Regress problem is solved, since we need no longer find a specific point where the regress terminates, nor to suppose an infinitely long chain of beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

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5 This dilemma is often attributed to Wilfred Sellars. See, for example, his *Science, Perception and Reality* (London, Aylesbury: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1968 [1963]), 164-70.

6 See Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 87-93.

I provide a more detailed formulation of a specific theory of coherentism later on. For now, it is enough to note that I deal only with "pure" coherence theories. That is, I limit myself to theories which hold that coherence among a person's beliefs is both necessary and sufficient for justification. On such theories, a person's beliefs brings with them no independent support, or support on their own, but their justification stems instead entirely from the extent to which they cohere with the rest of her beliefs. It is this drastic claim on the coherentist's part that makes the Sensation objection possible.

### 3. THE SENSATION OBJECTION

Before we discuss the Sensation objection, we must distinguish it from the objection that coherentism is not truth-conducive. According to this objection, coherentism is problematic because the coherence of a system of beliefs makes it no more likely that its constituent beliefs are true. Informally, this is shown by considering everyday cases in which persons are deluded about features of the world even as their total systems of beliefs are coherent, such as in the case of an asylum inmate who believes he is Napoleon, but where this belief coheres well with his other equally false beliefs. Formally, this result has been proven within the framework of Bayesian probability theory.<sup>7</sup> It is claimed that since a theory of justification must aim for truth, and since coherentism cannot guarantee the truth of our beliefs solely on the basis of their coherence, coherentism is unacceptable.

If coherentism is not truth-conducive, its success as a theory of justification depends upon whether there is a competing theory which is better off, either because such a theory is truth-conducive, or because it has some other advantage. I am sceptical that there exists such a theory, partly because I do not see how any internalist theory can guarantee truth-conduciveness. But in any case, if coherentism is refuted, it must be refuted for the right reasons. Precisely because coherentism suffers from heavy criticism in the contemporary debate, we must be careful about which objections goes through. As I shall argue, the Sensation objection gives us no reason to reject coherentism, regardless of whether some other objection is successful.

The rationale for this paper therefore depends upon whether the Sensation objection is independent from the objection that coherentism is not truth-conducive. But this is clearly the case. Imagine, for example, the possible world where, whenever a person holds a coherent system of beliefs, all beliefs in this system happen to be true. In such a world, the presence of coherence

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<sup>7</sup> For the formal argument, see Erik Olsson's *Against Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 61-76.



among a person's beliefs guarantees their truth: coherentism is truth-conducive. But in this world, a person who holds an incoherent system of beliefs and who feels a sudden pain in her head seems to be justified in believing that she has a headache even if this belief does not, because of the incoherence of her system, cohere with the rest of her system of beliefs. Therefore, the Sensation objection holds whether coherentism is truth-conducive or not.

Let us try to formulate the Sensation objection more clearly. The objection can be drawn out from the following two statements:

(CS) Coherentism: It is necessary and sufficient for any belief to cohere with the person's other beliefs in order for her to be justified in holding this belief.

(IE) The Independent Justification Thesis: A person is justified in holding some beliefs, grounded in experiences such as perception or introspection, regardless of whether they cohere with the person's other beliefs.

CS is a vague statement of coherentism, and one which needs to be augmented later on. IE is a statement of the intuition underlying our introductory case with the headache. According to IE, whenever we experience a headache we are also justified in holding the belief that we have a headache, regardless of whether this belief coheres with the rest of our beliefs or not.

The tension between CS and IE suggests two ways in which to state the Sensation objection. First, there is the case where a person holds a belief which is not justified to her because of IE, but which coheres with the rest of her beliefs. In this case, coherence is not *sufficient* for justification. Second, there is the case where a person is independently justified in holding a belief because of IE, but where this belief does not cohere with the rest of her beliefs. In this case, coherence is not *necessary* for justification. In both cases, coherentism fails to be either sufficient or necessary for justification.

Consider the first version of the objection. Suppose, as we did in the introduction to this paper, that having a headache is an experience which independently justifies some beliefs. And imagine a person, Mary, who holds a coherent system of beliefs supporting the belief that she does not have a headache, but who at the same time experiences an uncomfortable pain in her head. This argument against coherentism goes as follows:

Mary's Headache:

(1-MH) If coherentism is true, then the following is true as well: If Mary's belief that she does not have a headache coheres with the rest of her beliefs, then Mary is justified in believing that she does not have a headache (from CS).

(2-MH) Mary's belief that she does not have a headache coheres with the rest of her beliefs (assumption).

(3-MH): Therefore: If coherentism is true, then Mary is justified in believing she does not have a headache (from 1-MH and 2-MH).

(4-MH): But: Mary is justified in believing that she has a headache (from IE).

Therefore: Coherentism is false (from 3-MH and 4-MH).

In Mary's case, the coherence among her beliefs is not *sufficient* to justify her belief that she does not have a headache. The justification is defeated by her experience of a headache.

Let us move on to the second version of the objection. In this version, coherence is not even a *necessary* component of justification. The protagonist here is Thomas, who feels a painful sensation in his head, but who unlike Mary both believes that he has a headache and holds a system of beliefs sufficiently incoherent to not justify this belief. Consider then:

Thomas' Headache:

(1-TH) If coherentism is true, then the following is true as well: If Thomas' belief that he has a headache does not cohere with the rest of his beliefs, then Thomas is not justified in believing that he has a headache (from CS).

(2-TH): Thomas' belief that he has a headache does not cohere with the rest of his beliefs (assumption).

(3-TH): Therefore: If coherentism is true, then Thomas is not justified in believing that he has a headache (from 1-TH and 2-TH).

(4-TH): But: Thomas is justified in believing that he has a headache (from IE).

Therefore: Coherentism is false (from 3-TH and 4-TH).

The cases of Mary and Thomas neatly illustrate the Sensation objection. How can the coherentist reply?

#### 4. PSYCHOLOGICAL REPLIES

One way to counter the arguments made in the cases of Mary and Thomas is to deny the assumptions made in the second premises, that is, in 2-MH and 2-TH. Consider the incredulity felt when first encountering the case of Mary. How can Mary fail to believe that she has a headache, even as she vividly feels the throbbing pain in her head? This opens up for the psychological claim that cases such as Mary's are impossible. Certain experiences, we may argue, are such that they always intimate or bring about certain introspective beliefs.<sup>8</sup> Since the experience of a headache always brings about the belief that one has a headache, Mary's situation is impossible. The case cannot constitute an objection to coherentism, since it was never a possible scenario to begin with.

There are at least two objections to this kind of psychological reply. First, we may wonder whether it is true. For consider what kind of impossibility is involved. Is Mary's belief in having a headache by *necessity* induced by her experience of a headache, such that there is no possible world in which she could have had this experience without believing that she has a headache? This seems too strong. There could be a number of exceptions to the idea that experiences always bring about certain beliefs. As Earl Conee has argued, the causal connection between our experiences and belief formation is likely of a much more contingent nature.<sup>9</sup> The point is that we can always imagine some hindrance to our experiences bringing about certain beliefs, perhaps because of simple inattentiveness to those same experiences.

Of course, a watered down impossibility claim, reduced to a less strict and more commonsensical notion, might fare better. It may very well be true that most people, under standard conditions, always form the belief in their having headaches whenever their heads hurt. Under this interpretation, the psychological claim is true. But then it no longer provides the coherentist with the resources she needs to respond to the case of Mary.

Second, the reply does not solve the case of Thomas. Thomas experiences and believes he has a headache, which is fully compatible with the idea that his experience of a headache always brings about this belief. However, since his system of beliefs is incoherent it cannot lend any justification to the belief that he has a headache, and so coherentism is unable to explain the justification of this belief – regardless of whether headache-beliefs are always induced by headache-experiences or not.

Of course, we could attempt a similar psychological claim with respect to Thomas. We could claim that the experience of a headache not only brings about the belief that he has a headache, but

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8 See Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge", 20; Conee, "Isolation and Beyond", 140-1.

9 Conee, "Isolation and Beyond", 141.

also whatever coherent system of beliefs is necessary for supporting this belief. This makes Thomas case impossible. But it is also an implausible claim. What guarantee do we have that the experience of a headache brings about these other beliefs? Psychological replies to the objection therefore seem like non-starters.

##### 5. BACKGROUND BELIEFS

Another strategy is to rid ourselves of IE by rejecting that there is any *independent* justification going on in the case of Mary and Thomas. In that case, we want to show how 2-MH and 2-TH cannot be true at the same time as 4-MH and 4-TH. In other words, whenever the coherence of Mary's and Thomas' system of beliefs are as described in the second premises, there should be no independent justification going on as described in the fourth premises. This reply builds on a well-known response available to the coherentist, and which was hinted at in the reply to the foundationalist, namely that our beliefs are always justified against a system of supporting background beliefs.

Let us start with a situation where the need to consider one's background beliefs is most clear, namely a case of perception. Suppose that you see an old friend on the street outside of your office window. Normally, this experience may seem to confer independent justification to your belief that your friend is, indeed, walking past your office. But, the coherentist objects, this belief is so justified only given that you hold other beliefs as well, for example the belief that your perceptual faculties are reliable, that your friend doesn't have an identical twin living nearby, etc. And the absence of sceptical beliefs are required as well: if you believe that you are hooked up to some devious neuroscientist's mad experiment, true or not, then you are certainly not justified in believing anything at all about your friend walking past the window.

Our experiences support widely different beliefs depending upon the structure of the rest of our system of beliefs. This becomes even clearer when considering the following example. Suppose you watch a straight pin partially submersed in water. Your experience of this pin consists of a phenomenological impression which appears before your mind. On the basis of this impression, are you justified in believing that the pin is straight or crooked? It is impossible to tell, unless we also know more about your other beliefs. If Sarah knows about the law of refraction and believes that the pin is straight, and Tim knows nothing of such a law while at the same time believing that the pin is crooked, then both are equally justified in their beliefs. This distinguishes justification from knowledge – sometimes we are justified in believing that which is false, provided our total system

of beliefs is structured in a certain way.

Memory beliefs are similar to perceptual beliefs in this regard. When recalling vivid images from our past, our beliefs concerning these images are justified relative to a body of background beliefs about, for example, other memory beliefs about that time, or the quality or reliability of our memory images or beliefs in general.

We might lend some additional support to this idea by considering the following question: how do we judge between which beliefs we are justified in holding, in the case where we have two similar but incompatible experiences? In this case, it seems plausible that whichever experience is defeated and consequently ignored is so on the basis of its lack of coherence with the rest of the person's system of beliefs, and that it in such a case no longer confers any justification to any of your beliefs. But how can this be true, if such experiences are meant to confer justification independently of their coherence among your beliefs? Should they not confer at least some justification to a belief, even when its incoherence with the rest of one's system of beliefs is apparent?

Let us return to those cases which are based upon introspection. Introspection could be seen as a kind of inner perception, where we examine our own experiences and inner states, such as feeling pleasure or pain. Is it not preposterous to claim that we must have a supporting body of beliefs in order for our introspective beliefs to be justified?

These are surely difficult questions, but an example might call this into doubt. Consider a person, call her Painless, who because of a rare disease to her nervous system has never felt any pain. One day, she is miraculously cured and for the first time capable of feeling pain. Suppose now that she exclaims suddenly, "Ouch, my head hurts! This is what it is like to be in pain!". And suppose that she really feels what any other person would normally call pain. Because of Painless' causal history, it seems natural to ask whether she is really justified in believing she is in pain. For example, we want to know whether she properly excludes painless experiences such as mild skin irritations. Or suppose that Painless did not know she was cured. In that case, we would not criticise her for failing to believe that she has a headache.

If all of our beliefs depend upon a background of other beliefs for their justification, this means that for Mary and Thomas to be justified in believing that they have or do not have headaches, they must also have or lack the relevant background beliefs. For example, they must not believe that they are fooled in their sensory experiences, they must believe that certain experiences count as pain, etc. In other words, their beliefs about their headaches must cohere with a number of other background

beliefs. This observation suggests a way for the coherentist to reply to the Sensation objection. If the coherentist can make it plausible that it is the coherence between the introspective beliefs and the background beliefs, and not the experience, which confers justification, then IE falls, and the fourth premise goes with it. And there is one coherentist theory which promises to do just that, namely that proposed by Laurence Bonjour.<sup>10</sup>

## 6. BONJOUR'S COHERENTISM

Bonjour's theory is made up of the following parts:

(a) *Justification*. Bonjour's provides an account of how individual beliefs are justified.<sup>11</sup> An individual belief is justified when it is a member of a sufficiently large system of coherent beliefs belonging to the person.<sup>12</sup> The coherentist justification is operating on two different levels. First, there is the global level where the whole system is justified on the basis of its coherence. Second, there is the local level where we judge whether individual beliefs are justified, and where justification is conferred to such a belief on the basis of its membership of the coherent system. Membership in a coherent system is acquired when the belief coheres with the rest of the beliefs in this system.

Here is another way of picturing it. Consider how justification is transmitted to an individual belief. For the foundationalist, justification is transmitted from other individual beliefs along with inferential relations. The foundationalist suppose that certain other beliefs are justified, and conclude that a belief is justified by inferring it from these other beliefs. But to avoid the Regress problem, the foundationalist had to stipulate the existence of basic beliefs, which turned out

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10 See Bonjour's *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 87-188. Bonjour has later changed his mind and turned to foundationalism. For his recanting of coherentism, see his "The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism", *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Malden, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004 [1999]), 117-42; and his "Toward a Defense of Empirical Foundationalism", *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism*, ed. Michael R. DePaul (Lanham, Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2001), 21-38.

11 Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 89-93. Bonjour himself does not use the terminology of justification being generated and transmitted, but I find this way of stating his position better. If it makes this account of coherentism differ from that of Bonjour's, then I submit that the new version is an improvement. For an illuminating discussion, see Timothy Joseph Day, "Circularity, Non-Linear Justification and Holistic Coherentism", *The Current State of the Coherence Theory*, ed. John W. Bender (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) 134-41.

12 From this point onwards, I speak about beliefs being justified as a shorthand for a person being justified in holding a belief.

troublesome.

On the coherentist account, justification is not transmitted between individual beliefs, nor is it generated by any particular belief, basic or not. Justification is generated for the whole system on the basis of its coherence, and is only then conferred to the individual beliefs on the basis of whether these beliefs are members of the system: that is, on the basis of whether they cohere with the system as a whole.

(b) *Coherence*. BonJour supplies an account of coherence as the property of a whole system of beliefs, consisting in the following five conditions or "symptoms" of coherence:<sup>13</sup>

- (1) A system of beliefs is coherent only if it is logically consistent.
- (2) A system of beliefs is coherent in proportion to its degree of probabilistic consistency.
- (3) The coherence of a system of beliefs is increased by the presence of inferential connections between its component beliefs and increased in proportion to the number and strength of such connections.
- (4) The coherence of a system of beliefs is diminished to the extent to which it is divided into subsystems of beliefs which are relatively unconnected to each other by inferential connections.
- (5) The coherence of a system of beliefs is decreased in proportion to the presence of unexplained anomalies in the believed content of the system.

As BonJour admits, this is only a sketchy and incomplete account of coherence, with additional details yet to be filled in. Also, it says nothing of what it means for an individual belief to cohere with a system of beliefs. In what follows, I presume that the individual belief's coherence with a system can be answered by an appeal to some similar account of coherence.

(c) *Internalism*. The most worrying part of BonJour's theory concerns its internalism. Since the following objection threatens to unravel his project before it even takes off the ground, it requires a somewhat longer treatment. Recall that according to internalism, the justification of a belief must be cognitively accessible to the believer herself. In other words, she must have access to the reasons for why her belief is so justified. For the coherentist, this plausibly means that the believer must have the appropriate metabeliefs about the coherence of her system, presumably the metabeliefs (a) that the belief to be justified coheres with a larger system of beliefs, and (b) that this system exhibits

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<sup>13</sup> BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 93-101.

the proper degree of coherence.

The problem is that this appears to reignite the Regress problem, since the metabeliefs must, it may seem, themselves be justified.<sup>14</sup> And BonJour thinks that they cannot be justified by appeal to the coherence with the person's system of beliefs since this, according to him, would induce a vicious circle. The metabeliefs would in such a case be justified if and only if the metabeliefs are justified.

BonJour tries to solve this problem by introducing what he calls the Doxastic Presumption.<sup>15</sup> This is a presumption to the effect that a person's grasp of her system of beliefs, which consists of her metabeliefs, is always approximately correct. But why should we accept this presumption? BonJour suggests it is required for justification to get underway to begin with – unless we have a system of beliefs from which we can begin deciding justification, justification cannot get started in the first place. The problem is that the presumption makes the justification conditional: if, but only if, we accept the presumption that our metabeliefs are approximately correct, then certain particular beliefs can be justified. But if we challenge this presumption, then the coherentist has no clear answer to the sceptic. Introducing the Doxastic Presumption has perhaps stirred up the most controversy regarding BonJour's coherentism, and he himself himself has conceded that the move now strikes him as "pretty desperate".<sup>16</sup>

This is no place to undertake a wholesale study of BonJour's internalism. Still, it seems to me that the critique of this position, including that put forth by BonJour himself, is at least partly misguided. In particular, it seems influenced by precisely the kind of non-holistic linear justification which the coherentist must reject. As I have already argued, and regardless of whether BonJour himself subscribes to this view, justification for a belief should not be seen as generated at the local level based on its coherence with other beliefs, nor as generated simply from its membership in the system. Instead, justification is generated for the whole system, and then transmitted to its individual members. Since justification is never generated by or transmitted between beliefs, the metabeliefs (a) and (b) need not themselves be justified. It is sufficient that they are actually believed by the person.

14 See, for example, Paul K. Moser's "Internalism and Coherentism – A Dilemma", *Analysis* 48 (1988), 161-3; BonJour's "Reply to Moser", *Analysis* 48 (1988), 164-5; and Moser's response in "How Not To Be A Coherentist", *Analysis* 48 (1988), 166-7. Also, see Anthony L. Brueckner's "Problems With Internalist Coherentism", *Philosophical Studies* 54 (1988), 153-60.

15 BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Justification*, 101-106.

16 BonJour, "The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism", 126. For another critique of the Doxastic Presumption, see Hilary Kornblith, "How Internal Can You Get?", *Synthese* 74 (1988), 313-27.



To give an example, consider the justification of a particular belief B. It is, on the picture just sketched, not the case that metabeliefs generate or receive justification which is then somehow transmitted to B. Rather, the metabeliefs are simply components which need to be in place for the *system* to generate and transmit the requisite justification to B. The metabeliefs function here like the crucial parts of a complex machine. As long as they are held sincerely, they need not be justified, nor true, in order for them to constitute part of the reasons for why B is justified. When a person justifies a belief, she does not try to find some metabeliefs to derive its justification from. Rather, she simply makes sure that the requisite metabeliefs are in place, and then has the system transmit justification to the beliefs in question.

So the justification of an individual belief is not threatened by unjustified metabeliefs. But what about the metabeliefs themselves? Is it not true that questions raised about the justification of these beliefs cannot be answered, so that a more moderate scepticism about the metabeliefs concerning the coherence of our system of beliefs can still go through?

I am inclined to reject this. The perceived threat stems once again from a non-holistic view of justification, where we look for other beliefs to justify the metabeliefs. It is not strange that this seems to induce a regress. But no such other beliefs are needed. The metabeliefs can be justified by their membership in the system, even as their presence, justified or not, is what makes this system generate justification. Once more, this is because the agent need not be justified in her reasons for why a particular belief is true: its perceived membership in a coherent system of beliefs is enough for its justification.

It is much easier to see how this works if we give up the metaphor of justification occurring in a circle, even a benevolent one. Coherentist justification does not occur in a linear fashion at all: not in a circle, an infinitely long line, or a line with some stopping point of basic beliefs. There is no bootstrapping going on here, since there is no "tugging" or "lifting up" of one belief by another. This paints a very different picture of justification from foundationalist accounts, but this is precisely what we should expect from a competing theory hoping to relieve its problems. The internalism of BonJour's theory is therefore, I believe, not in any danger. Whatever the flaws of coherentism, it is not in such a way incoherent or inconsistent.

(d) *Observation and introspection.* Finally, Laurence BonJour offers an account of coherentist observation and introspection.<sup>17</sup> He suggests that there exist "spontaneous beliefs" which are not inferentially arrived at, but which are still justified by an appeal to the rest of our beliefs. These

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<sup>17</sup> BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 111-38.

beliefs are arrived at and strikes us "in a manner which is both involuntary and quite coercive".<sup>18</sup> They are in this sense psychologically basic, or basic in their origin, even if not basic in any justificatory sense. On these grounds BonJour outlines a wholly internalist and coherentist account of how observational and introspective beliefs are justified, which takes the following general form:<sup>19</sup>

Positive Observational/Introspective Justification:

(1-P) I have a cognitively spontaneous belief that P which is of kind K.

(2-P) Conditions C obtains.

(3-P) Cognitively spontaneous beliefs of kind K in conditions C are very likely to be true.

Therefore, my belief that P is very likely to be true.

Therefore, (probably) P.

And:

Negative Observational/Introspective Justification:

(1-N) I have no cognitively spontaneous belief that P of kind K.

(2-N) Conditions C' obtain.

(3-N) If it were true that P, then, if conditions C' are satisfied, it is very likely that I would have a cognitively spontaneous belief that P of kind K.

Therefore, it is very unlikely that the belief that P (if held) would be true.

Therefore, (probably) it is not the case that P.

This is a wholly coherentist view of justification, since we are justified in accepting our spontaneously held beliefs only when these cohere with our beliefs that the relevant background conditions obtains (2-P and 2-N) and that the obtaining of these conditions implies that these spontaneous beliefs are true (3-P and 3-N).<sup>20</sup>

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18 BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 117.

19 In the case of introspection, BonJour excludes the second premise, since he doubts this premise is necessary in such cases. Since I have argued that we can rightfully doubt whether introspection is reliable, I have reinstated the premise. See BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 123-4 and 132-8.

20 BonJour's adds a so called "Observation Requirement" to his theory, which states that the system, in addition to being sufficiently coherent, must also receive adequate input from the outside world and ascribe a high degree of reliability to such input. It is this requirement that underlies BonJour's further claim that whenever such a system

## 7. INSIDE THE HEADS OF MARY AND THOMAS

Out of the above schematics, we can show that the two versions of the Sensation objection, as suggested in the case of Mary and Thomas, fail.

Let us start with Mary. For Mary's belief that she does not have a headache to be justified according to coherentism, this belief must be connected to background beliefs as follows:

Mary's Introspection:

(1-MI) I have no cognitively spontaneous introspective belief that I have a headache.

(2-MI) I believe that the relevant background conditions are satisfied; that introspection occurred under reliable conditions, and that I hold no sceptical beliefs to the contrary.

(3-MI) I believe that if it was true that I had a headache, then if the relevant background conditions are satisfied, it is very likely that I would have a cognitively spontaneous introspective belief that I have a headache.

Therefore, it is very unlikely that the belief that I had a headache (if held) would be true.

Therefore, (probably) it is not the case that I have a headache.

Recall that, for Mary's Headache to pose a counterexample to coherentism, both 2-MH and 4-MH must be true at the same time. That is, Mary's belief that she does not have a headache must cohere with the rest of her beliefs (premise 2-MH), and she must at the same time, presumably because of the justificatory powers of such experiences, be justified in believing that she has a headache (4-MH).

To see why the argument from Mary's Headache fails, let us consider a case where 2-MH is true, and where Mary's belief that she does not have a headache therefore coheres with the rest of her beliefs. On the present account of coherence, this means that Mary believes (2-MI) that introspection was carried out under reliable conditions and that she holds no sceptical beliefs to the contrary, and (3-MI) that if she had a headache, and if the background conditions were satisfied, she

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remains coherent and stable over time, the best explanation for its coherence is its correspondence to reality. Bonjour hopes this solution makes coherentism truth-conducive, at least in the long run. I leave aside these issues, both because adding the Observation Requirement takes coherentism beyond the idea that coherence is both necessary and sufficient for justification, but also since I am not interested in whether coherentism is truth-conducive. The interested reader should consult Bonjour's *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 141-4, 157-88.

would spontaneously believe that she had a headache. But if she has both of these beliefs, it seems strange to say that she is justified in believing she has a headache. As a consequence, if 2-MH is true, then 4-MH is false, and so this version of the Sensation objection fails.

Consider the following case of introspection, the premises which Thomas would have access to if (counter to what we have so far assumed) his belief that he had a headache cohered with the rest of his beliefs:

Thomas' Introspection:

(1-TI) I have a cognitively spontaneous introspective belief that I have a headache.

(2-TI) I believe that the relevant background conditions are satisfied; that introspection occurs under reliable conditions, and that I hold no sceptical beliefs to the contrary.

(3-TI) I believe that, whenever the relevant background conditions are satisfied, cognitively spontaneous introspective beliefs are very likely to be true.

Therefore, the belief that I have a headache is very likely to be true.

Therefore, I (probably) have a headache.

Remember that we stipulated that Thomas' system of beliefs was incoherent, and did not justify his belief that he had a headache. On the present account of coherence, this means that if 2-TH is correct, then at least one of the premises 1-TI, 2-TI or 3-TI must be false. (Had all the premises been true, there would have existed a coherent set of beliefs justifying his belief that he has a headache.) And so, if we can show that whenever one of these premises are false, Thomas is not justified in believing he has a headache, then we have shown that 2-TH and 4-TH cannot be true at the same time, and that this version of the objection fails.

Let us begin with 1-TI. We already know that Thomas believes himself to have a headache. What we do not know is if he believes that this belief is cognitively spontaneous. But then he must think that he has inferred this belief from some of his other beliefs, in which case 4-TH is clearly false. If Thomas does not believe that his belief in a headache is induced by his experience of a headache, but is rather just a product of his other beliefs, and if these other beliefs are incoherent enough not to support his belief that he has a headache, then he is surely not justified in holding this belief.

What if 2-TI is false? Then Thomas does not believe that the relevant background conditions are

satisfied. For example, he might believe that he is fooled by some Cartesian daemon, or that introspection occurred under unreliable conditions. In this case, it seems doubtful that Thomas is justified in believing that he has a headache, and so 4-TH is false.

But what if 3-TI is false? In that case, Thomas believes that the relevant background conditions obtain, but he does not believe that whenever these conditions hold, the spontaneous belief that he has a headache is likely to be true. In this case, we may blame Thomas for all kinds of irrationality. We may think it highly strange how he can fail to see that this implication holds. But if he persists in this belief, it seems plausible to say that he is not justified in believing that he has a headache, and that once more, 4-TH is false.

It therefore seems as if whenever 2-TH is true, 4-TH is false. Since both premises cannot be true at the same time, the second version of the Sensation objection fails as well.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The Sensation objection holds that since certain beliefs induced by experiences, such as that of having a headache, are justified independently of their coherence with the rest of the person's system of beliefs, coherentist theories of justification are false. Because these theories hold that coherence with one's system of beliefs is both necessary and sufficient for justification, they cannot account for any independent justification. In this paper, two versions of the objection, one in which coherence was insufficient and one in which it was not necessary for justification, were put forth. The coherentist was challenged to respond to these cases.

The upshot of this paper is that the Sensation objection fails. There is no independent justification going on in these cases, since all justification depends on coherence with certain background beliefs. It was further shown that Bonjour's theory of coherentist introspection nicely accounts for this complexity. In particular, the justification of the belief that you have a headache depends only upon your belief that certain background conditions hold, for example, that introspection has occurred under reliable circumstances; as well as the further belief that the obtaining of these conditions makes the belief that you have a headache likely to be true.

This does not prove that coherentism is the correct theory of justification, since other objections against it may still go through. But it does show that coherentism is less problematic than has been previously thought. We should therefore be wary of dismissing coherentism too quickly. Otherwise we might be left with a piecemeal treatment where important philosophical work remains to be done, and where the supposed refutation is unfinished and, well, if I may say so, incoherent.

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