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Two Puzzles of Coherentism

I. The Positions in Outline

Question: Does the sole method of belief justification come from the coherence of the belief in question with a sufficiently complex system of other beliefs?

-or maybe-

Question 2: Can coherence generate justification for beliefs where none was previously present?

Coherentism: "...regardless of the order in which they are acquired, claims are justified only when they coalesce to constitute a tenable system of thought. The acceptability of the individual sentence, as well as methods and standards, is derivative, stemming from their role in a tenable system... The thesis of epistemological holism that I want to consider is that epistemic justification is *primarily* [my emphasis] a property of a suitably comprehensive, coherent account, when the best explanation of coherence is that the account is at least roughly true. The epistemic justification of individual claims derives from their membership in a justified account" (Elgin 156-158).

-Note that she says "primarily a property" of a coherent account rather than "solely" as I suggested in the above question. While this statement serves in the article as Elgin's target theory, as stated it is questionable whether her position actually escapes a form of *weak foundationalism*.

Prima Facie Argument for Coherentism: Even if we have absolutely no faith in a group of witnesses individually, if when questioned in isolation from one another they all tell the same story the truth of that story seems like the only possible explanation for their coherence. It seems that we have taken reports that individually would have had little or no justification and through their coherence have developed justification for what they claim.

Foundationalism: "...the foundation consists of *basic beliefs* – beliefs that a subject is justified in holding even in the absence of any justifying reason for them – and all other justified beliefs derive their justification at least in part from such basic beliefs... foundationalists do not typically deny the power of coherence to contribute to the overall epistemic status of a body of belief. They simply insist that coherence cannot do all the work on its own – there must be at least a modicum of intrinsic credibility or non-inferential warrant possessed by basic beliefs before coherence can have its amplifying effect" (Van Cleve 168 & 169).

Aristotelian claims about justification:

1. Some beliefs are justified.
2. No belief is justified unless some other belief serves as a reason for it.

3. One belief cannot serve as reason justifying another unless the first is itself justified.
4. If A serves as reason justifying B, then B cannot serve (directly or indirectly) as a reason justifying B. (Van Cleve 168)

Van Cleve says there are 5 ways of handling the above argument:

1. *Skepticism*: Deny 1.
2. *Foundationalism*: Deny 2 “maintaining that some beliefs are justified in the absence of reasons”.
3. *Positism*: Deny 3: maintain “that chains of justifying reasons can terminate in reasons that are not justified themselves, but are simply individual or societal posits” (168).
4. *Coherentism*: Deny 4: “maintaining that beliefs can be justified in virtue of relations of mutual support”.
5. *Infinetism*: Accept all four assumptions and the resulting infinite regress. (168)

Levels of Foundationalism

-Strong Foundationalism: “basic beliefs are ‘not just adequately justified, but also *infallible, certain, indubitable, or incorrigible*’ (BonJour, 1985, pp. 26-30” (169).

-Moderate Foundationalism: “The non-inferential warrant possessed by basic beliefs need not amount to absolute certainty or any of the other privileged statuses just mentioned, but it must be ‘sufficient by itself to satisfy the adequate justification condition for knowledge’ (Bonjour, 1985, p. 26)” (169).

-Weak Foundationalism: “‘basic beliefs possess only a very low degree of epistemic justification on their own, a degree of justification insufficient by itself either to satisfy the adequate justification condition for knowledge or to qualify them as acceptable justifying premises for further beliefs. Such beliefs are only “initially credible,” rather than fully justified’ (Bonjour, 1985, p. 28). We must rely on coherence among such initially credible beliefs to amplify their level of warrant up to the point where it is adequate for knowledge” (169).

-It is concerning that Elgin says “primarily” a matter of coherence rather than “solely” as any initial warrant placed in basic beliefs seems to be weak foundationalism. We can discuss Elgin’s arguments in greater detail.

Breaking down Elgin’s Initial Example

The example Elgin uses in order to motivate intuitions for her holistic position is the case of three independently unreliable witnesses all claiming that they saw a green haired individual steal a Latin textbook (hereafter P). Elgin claims that while the report of any one of these individuals would not be good reason to believe P the fact that they all say the same thing is reason to think that P is true.

Elgin argues that as long as the witnesses are not colluding, the coherence of their claims is best explained by the truth of what they claim.

4 Interacting Ideas in the Witness Example:

1. *Witnesses are antecedently and individually unreliable.*
 - a. The witnesses have general characteristics such that in contexts like this one they frequently produce false reports.
2. *The witnesses do not interact with each other in a way that could impact the nature of their reports.*
 - a. The probability of the occurrence of any one report relates to the others only through the truth or falsehood of P.
3. *P is antecedently improbable.*
 - a. A green haired thief is antecedently improbable because there are not many people with green hair. Elgin says that it makes a difference whether P has low antecedent probability. This is because we need to make sure that the coherence is doing the work in getting us to believe P (157).
4. *All witness reports cohere.*
 - a. They all say that P.

Elgin takes 1-3 as the fixed background against which we are supposed to see how coherence can generate the warrant needed on its own. That is, 1-3 are supposed to be an environment devoid of warrant so that the introduction of coherence can be seen to be the deciding factor in developing warrant in the system.

How does the introduction of coherence create warrant or When is truth the best explanation for coherence?

Of a potentially infinite list of answers the witnesses could give, they all give one. The idea is that if P could be the only cause of their all reporting P, then P must be true. By 1, they cannot cohere because they are naturally talented at producing true reports. This seems unhelpful, as it detaches the truth of P from the report that P. By 2 they cannot be in collusion. By 3 they could not have given this answer because it fit some stereotype or had another form of antecedent plausibility. Therefore, all that seems left is that despite 1, given 2 & 3 the best explanation of 4, them all landing on P, is that P is true and P caused them to report P.

Breaking this down further, P caused the witnesses to report P means that whatever the general tendency for unreliability in the witnesses, this time each of them were successful transferring their witnessing of P into a report that P. So even though the witnesses are generally unreliable (or are of an unreliable type), this time they were indeed reliable (token reliable).

Note: If such a causal condition is not met between P and the reports that P, the coherence of the accounts with P and each other does not suggest that the accounts produce warrant for P. Furthermore, we may think this causal connection needs to be *of the right type*.

So it is still reasonable that in certain circumstances the truth of a claim is the best explanation for the presence of coherence. But is this enough to get us the idea

that coherence alone provides warrant? Perhaps it is not the coherence *per se* that is ultimately important, but the token reliability implied by the coherence through the causal relationship it suggests.

Reframing the Debate: We may want to include an additional element in the debate between foundationalism and coherentism. Foundational properties definitely include type reliability, but does “coherence alone” include token reliability when that token reliability is discovered with the help of coherence, or is token reliability a foundational property?

II. Puzzle #1: Coherence and Probability

Support for Coherence Increasing Probability:

Huemer's Equation (Van Cleve 172)

“If n is the number of possible answers and X is the answer on which independent witnesses A and B agree, then...”:

$$P(X|A \text{ says } X \ \& \ B \text{ says } X) = (np^2 - p^2) / (np^2 - p^2 + 1)$$

-Here the witnesses have the same level of credibility: p

-Note: as n approaches infinity, P approaches 1 as long as $p > 1/n$.

-How do we determine the number of possible answers?

Problem with Huemer's Equation #1: Shogenji: How can we set p before we start?

Sounds potentially foundationalist.

Tomoji Shogenji (Shogenji “Justification by Coherence from Scratch”)

Shogenji disagrees with Huemer: “Let E_1, \dots, E_w be pieces of evidence in support, respectively, of propositions, A_1, \dots, A_w . We will establish that if E_1, \dots, E_w are independent of each other and have no individual credibility, then $P(A_i|E_1, \dots, E_w) = P(A_i)$ for any $i = 1, \dots, w$. In other words, if the pieces of evidence are independent of each other and have no individual credibility, then they have no impact on the probability of any propositions they (purport to) support” (Shogenji 3).

-*Evidential Independence*: The existence of one piece of evidence does not influence the existence of another. In other words, they effect one another probabilistically only through the truth or falsity of the proposition they support.

-*No Individual Credibility*: Saying that each piece of evidence has no individual credibility means that the proposition A is just as likely given E as not. This, it seems, is what Huemer's Equation is missing—it assumes that we have a prior understanding of the credibility relation between the claim of a witness and its truth, but this begs the question as to how it got that initial credibility in the first place. In other words, we can't conditionalize on credences without having already assumed some understanding of justification.

The Formal Argument is on pages 4-5

-The idea behind the argument is that given these two conditions, evidential independence and no individual credibility, the probabilities of propositions will remain independent from evidential considerations as the likelihood of each individual piece of evidence given an event A is simply the initial likelihood of that piece of evidence. As such, the likelihood of the conjunction of all pieces of evidence is the same given A or $\neg A$ (that being the initial probability of the conjunction of the evidence).

“We have discovered that the seemingly plausible informal reasoning for JCS [Justified Coherence from Scratch] is deficient. The reasoning is based on the plausible idea that where there are many ways of lying, it is unlikely that independently produced lies agree with each other. The problem is that where there are many ways of lying a witness with no individual credibility in the sense appropriate for JCS must be much more likely to be lying than truthful. We grant that as the number of agreeing witnesses increases, it becomes more and more unlikely that many liars happen to produce matching reports. However, this rapid decrease in the probability of the liar hypothesis is offset by the rapidly decreasing probability that the witnesses with no individual credibility are truth tellers” (Shogenji 8-9).

-The idea here is that because the existence of one piece of evidence is not influenced by the existence of what it purports to support, the truth of the claim is not a good explanation of the coherence among reports. The fact that reports cohere on the truth would be just as likely as them cohering with anything else. In the language of the previous section: coherence itself gives us no reason to suppose token reliability.

-In Huemer’s Equation this is like saying that the no individual credibility assumption makes it such that as n approaches infinity, p approaches zero—we never overcome the $p > 1/n$ threshold.

However, even given his strict requirements on coherence, Shogenji still ultimately concludes that *recurrent* coherence *can* create justification from scratch.

“In order to overcome this difficulty, supporters of justification from scratch must find a scenario where there is a decrease in the probability that lying witnesses are fortuitously producing matching reports but there is no comparable decrease in the probability that the witnesses are truth tellers. This is possible if we can increase the number of matching reports (thus decreasing the probability that liars happen to be telling the same lie) without increasing the number of witnesses” (Shogenji 9).

-The idea behind this is that if a set of witnesses agree repeatedly then we start eliminating the possibility that some of the witnesses are liars or reporting randomly. Randomizers will only produce coherent accounts $1/n$ of the trials. Liars will produce coherent accounts $1/(n-1)$ of the trials. Truth tellers will always produce coherent accounts over all trials (Formal Argument pg. 11-12).

Repeated trials let you know whether your reporters are liars, randomizers, or truth tellers.

Possible Objection: If at one level coherence suggests nothing because any coherence is coincidence, then repeated coherence may simply be a larger coincidence. In other words, why isn't the coherence of a large number of witnesses in one trial sufficient to conclude something about the likelihood that they are not randomizers or liars? There doesn't seem to be anything in principle different between repeated and one-off coherence, rather, it is just a matter of degree.

Another way to articulate this is that the repeated coherence seems to be attempting to get us type reliability—that is, helping us to identify which of our reporters are generally reliable. However, all we are discovering is which of them are generally agreeable with the others.

Alternatively, one might defend coherentism by saying that the overall problem with Shogenji's argument is that the "no initial credibility" assumption is too strong. While coherentism does say that claims have no initial credibility, that seems to mean that the truth of the proposition has no impact on the existence of the evidence *as far as you know*, not that it simply has no impact whatsoever. This would allow that the likelihood of the conjunction of all pieces of evidence taken individually is not the same as the likelihood of all those pieces of evidence actually existing.

III. Puzzle #2: Coherentism and the Existence of Deliverances

Problem with Huemer's Equation #2: Van Cleve: Are the witness testimonies themselves real?

-Even if we accept coherence from scratch, there is a lingering problem:

"If several individually unreliable reporters agree without collusion, then the fact to which they bear common witness may have high probability in the end. But in attaching a high final probability to the fact attested we are of course taking for granted that the various witnesses *do* testify to it. If we had reason to think that the courtroom and all its proceedings were happening only in a dream or a novel, the fact that the ostensible reports hang together would count for little" (Van Cleve 173).

Elgin's Defense of Coherentism

"The second worry is that coherence can readily be achieved through epistemically illicit means. A good nineteenth-century novel is highly coherent, but not credible on that account..." (159).

"coherence conduces to epistemic acceptability only when the best explanation of the coherence of a constellation of claims is that they are (at least roughly) true" (160).

-This would seem to fall victim to Shogenji's arguments about coincidental coherence (if you buy it), or an argument that evidence coheres for reasons other

than truth (which is now allowed after dropping Shogenji's evidential independence premise), but part of what Elgin says may serve as an avenue towards a solution:

"The coherence that affords epistemic justification is not just coherence among object-level deliverances. We have higher-order commitments about what sorts of object-level deliverances are trustworthy, about how much credibility to accord them, about how they ought to mesh, and about what to do when commitments clash... the coherence that constitutes epistemic justification is something we achieve, not something that simply falls out of the relations in which our object-level deliverances happen to stand to one another" (159).

-If such higher order deliverances can give us a hold on which deliverances we should trust, then the Van Cleve style objection would not be so bad.

But How do We Get Trustworthy Higher Order Deliverances?

"...over time, as we attend to the fates of our various deliverances, we learn that the incorporation of some, but not others, yields accounts which are borne out by further experience, hence which retain their coherence over time" (162).

"That is, the reason for assigning those deliverances significant epistemic weight derives from the coherent account of perception that backs the assignment. Contrary to what foundationalists contend, the justification for privileging perception derives from the relation of perceptual judgments to the rest of our theory of ourselves as cognitive agents interacting with a mind-independent world" (163).

-This sounds kind of like what Shogenji was saying: Over repeated reports we learn to trust certain witnesses. What Elgin adds is that the trustworthiness of these witnesses itself helps us form a theory about the world with which new deliverances must cohere.

-As regards the question of reliability, this suggests that our ideas about what reliability is and the proper causal relationship between reports and events are themselves products of coherent accounts. So even though the initial example fails to prove that we must be coherentists, it seems that there is still a way to account for our reliance upon reliability within the theory.

Virtues of the Theory:

1. Does not privilege any sorts of representations or beliefs *a priori*.
2. It enables us to start with whatever deliverances we happen to have but does not beg the question because those initial deliverances are scrutinized.
3. The standards of assessment are themselves the fruits of epistemic activity, and can change in response to feedback.
4. Everything is subject to revision. (166-167)

The difference between Elgin's position and weak foundationalism is that she believes that all deliverances get the same level of initial credibility regardless of type. The only

thing that can increase the initial credence given to a deliverance is the tendency of deliverances of that type to be coherent.

Van Cleve's Argument from Memories

“How then do we know *these* things: that witness A does say X, that I do ostensibly remember Y, that I do seem to see Z? Many foundationalists would say that there are the grounds on which the rest of our knowledge rests, and that they must themselves be matters of basic knowledge... it seems to me a good case can be made that there must be at least high intrinsic credibility – perhaps high enough to constitute knowledge – attaching to the facts that such-and-such cognitive states (be they experiences, ostensible memories, or beliefs at large) are actually taking place. If this is right, we must not only abjure pre coherentism: we must adopt a moderate rather than a weak foundationalism” (173).

-How can you be sure that you “ostensibly remember” Y? Two possible questions: How do I know that what Y represents actually happened? Or How do I know that I am actually experiencing the deliverance I think I am experiencing? If the latter question is what Van Cleve means, he seems to think that we need to be able to form a higher order thought about the fact that our memories are occurring in order to employ them in reasoning.

-The best response to Van Cleve's above concern can be seen in the response to his second memory objection:

“...ostensible memories give rise to knowledge only with the help of coherence; coherence depends on laws or empirical generalizations; and such generalizations can be known only with the help of memory. In short, we cannot get coherence without the help of laws [or empirical generalization], and if memory does not suffice on its own to give knowledge of particular facts from which the laws are inferred, we cannot get laws without the help of coherence. It appears to follow that we cannot have any knowledge from memory unless the occurrence of ostensible memories is *prima facie* sufficient for knowledge” (174).

Reply on Elgin's Behalf: Van Cleve seems to be arguing that coherentism is incoherent by assuming a linear model of justification and showing that it does not explain the tenability of the coherentist account. However, this is a flawed approach because he is not allowing for how, on that account, justification co-evolves in the presence of various claims. Peter Klein describes this mistake as assuming a “warrant-transfer” model of justification in arguing against a “warrant-emergent” theory of justification (Klein *Infinitism is the Solution to the Regress Problem* 132-133). Specifically, insofar as I am able to employ information from ostensible memories in assessments of coherence, the presence of those memories alongside beliefs about coherence principles alongside beliefs about general laws will be an environment in which justification can arise between the parts. General laws and coherence do not need to be deduced on a coherentist model of justification, only posited and then assessed for coherence.

IV. Further Questions

Further Objections:

1. If I do not have some foundational grounding for the process by which I come to know that I have such and such a memory, how do I know that I am not confabulating?
2. Even if I can come to know what deliverances I have, how do I know that they are true and not coherent as a consequence of something other than their truth?
3. What about the laws of logic? Are they justified by coherence as well?

On 1: Elgin's argument against the first of these is that confabulation is highly unlikely to create beliefs that stand the test of time. That is, it is very likely that experiences will quickly disprove initially coherent confabulations. Additionally, to the degree we have justified beliefs about what mechanisms are causing our deliverances (imagination or perception for example), we can learn to favor one type over the other by forming a coherent belief such as "Attach a high credence to deliverances of perception".

On 2: 2 is more difficult. Part of what seems assumed in Elgin's argument is that truth is the best explanation for coherence among a large number of beliefs. However, there may be beliefs that have a high tendency for coherence for reasons other than their truth. An example is the belief in God—if I believe in God my other beliefs will all, in my eyes, support my belief and my belief in God will help to justify beliefs that were previously unjustified. Additionally, it does not seem like there is any experience that would obviously contradict such a belief. However, one might say that believing in God because it brings coherence to my other beliefs is not a good reason for the belief.

-However, it is not clear to me that problems of this sort do not apply equally well to foundationalism. That is, for any foundationalist property F that a belief must have to be a basic belief, it is not clear that the assessment of such a property could not arise for reasons other than its truth—at least for beliefs about anything other than our own thoughts.

On 3: Elgin says that two of the virtues of coherentism are that it both allows for no a priori truths and requires that all beliefs are subject to revision. This seems to entail that beliefs about logic are themselves only justified through coherence. If this is the case it seems that insofar as we are coherentists we lack good reason to assert that the laws of logic will apply in the same way universally in all minds. If this is the case, there is no reason to think that coherence in the mind of another would resemble what we take coherence to be in our own minds. Assuming that an analog of coherence must be the rule in such an alien system seems premature.

"Here I would like to protest that there are certain principles of logic, at least, that cannot be given up, because they are framework principles without which coherence could scarcely be defined" (Van Cleve 177).