

## Response to “Beliefs Are Justified by Coherence”

Daniel Howard-Snyder

Kevin McCain and Ted Poston endorse (a modified version of) Peter Klein’s *Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness*, namely this:

(PAA) S’s belief that p is justified only because there is some good reason available to S for p.

McCain and Poston (MCP) also endorse *Explanatory Coherentism*, according to which

(EC) S’s belief that p is justified because and only because p is a member of an explanatorily coherent set of propositions that are, together, the objects of all of S’s beliefs and experiences, and that set is available to S.

What should we make of these two principles?

### Two Problems

#### An Obstacle to Basic Beliefs?

First, let’s note that MCP assert that PAA poses a difficulty for the idea that there are some basic beliefs. That’s because, by their lights, you can’t have a good reason available to you for p if you have a basic belief that p. This is false. The good reason available to you might be an experience, under the appropriate conditions. Moreover, even if the good reason available to you is, e.g., the proposition that the experience is a reliable indicator of the truth of your belief that p, and even if you believe that proposition, your belief that p might still be basic since you might base your belief that p on the experience and not on your belief that the experience is a reliable indicator of the truth of your belief that p. For more on Klein’s PAA, see Howard-Snyder and Coffman 2006, 536-542, available online.

#### A Problem for “Availability”

Second, notice that both principles speak of something being *available* to S. What does that involve? As Klein makes tolerably clear, what it is for a good reason to be available to S is for S to be in position to become aware of it and its goodness. Likewise, then, what it is for an explanatorily coherent set of propositions to be available to S is for S to be in a position to become aware of the set and its explanatory coherence.

And there lies trouble. No human being is in a position to become aware of the set of propositions that are the objects of *all* of their beliefs and experiences (at a given time); moreover, no human being is in a position to become aware of the explanatory coherence of that set of propositions (at that time). So MCP must relinquish either PAA or EC—unless they wish to embrace epistemic nihilism. Alternatively, they might relinquish the availability constraint. That’s what I recommend.

### More Problems for EC

So, then, let’s focus on EC absent the availability constraint:

(EC-minus) S’s belief that p is justified because, and only because, p is a member of an explanatorily coherent set of propositions that are, together, the objects of all of S’s beliefs and experiences.

Now recall from my initial essay that the relevant sort of justification in question is *epistemic* justification. Epistemologists think of epistemic justification in two broad ways. First, for a belief of a person to be epistemically justified is for it to be held in a truth-conducive fashion—that is, held in such a way that, by virtue of holding it in that way, the belief is likely to be true. Call this *the truth-conduciveness conception* of epistemic justification. Second, for a belief of a person to be epistemically justified is for it to be held responsibly—that is, held in such a way that, by virtue of holding it in that way, the person does not violate any epistemic obligations. Call this *the responsibility conception* of epistemic justification. Let’s consider EC-minus in light of each of these conceptions.

### Truth-conduciveness

Is it true that *if* the proposition *p* that *S* believes is a member of an explanatorily coherent set of propositions that are, together, the objects of all of *S*'s beliefs and experiences, *then* *S* holds the belief that *p* in such a way that *p* is likely to be true? Put the question another way: is it true that *mere* "coherence among our beliefs and experiences can provide an excellent reason to think our beliefs are true" (MCP p. xxx)? A third way: is it true that, *all by itself*, "the coherence of an explanatory system yields justification" (MCP p. xxx) where justification is understood as truth-conduciveness? I suspect not. Let me explain.

Imagine the propositional contents of the beliefs and experiences of some fictional character, say, Bilbo Baggins, at a particular time in the middle of *The Hobbit*. In the world of the story, that middle set of contents followed another set of contents that followed another set of contents and so on back to Bilbo's initial set of contents. Also, in the world of the story, that middle set of contents preceded another set of contents that preceded another set of contents and so on all the way to Bilbo's last set of contents (supposing there was a last). So we might well imagine Bilbo's *complete* set of contents, the series of momentary sets of contents successively laid out, from start to finish, changing over time as Bilbo's life unfolds, including the contents that weren't expressed in the telling of *The Hobbit*. Something similar can be imagined about nearly every character in just about any piece of fiction that ever has been written or ever will be written. Indeed, something similar can be said about the characters in the infinitely many merely possible never-to-be-written pieces of fiction. In each case, we might well imagine a character's complete set of contents in the way we imagined Bilbo's. Now let's imagine *your* complete set of contents. Fortunately, that series of momentary sets of contents has yet to be completed, but we can idealize away from that happy fact and imagine it anyway.

Notice three things about this infinity of complete sets of contents. First, notice that they can't all be true. Indeed, notice that if yours approximates the truth, then all the others are thoroughly false—including Bilbo's and Harry Potter's. And if Bilbo's approximates the truth, then all the others are thoroughly false—including yours and Harry Potter's. And if Harry Potter's approximates the truth, then all the others are thoroughly false—including yours and Bilbo's. And so on. Second, notice that each of these complete sets of contents is, for the most part, as explanatorily coherent as yours, at least for long stretches of time. Third, imagine some supermind popping into existence and, before viewing the world for itself, taking in before its mind's eye, all in one fell swoop, each of these infinitely many complete sets of contents, and their enviable explanatory coherence. Notice that despite this information and despite its powers, our supermind would be unable to tell what world it was in. The supermind might think to itself: "Am I in Bilbo's world? Or Harry Potter's? Or \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in the blank with your name]?" And it would say the same thing about each of the other infinitely many worlds associated with each explanatorily coherent complete set of contents that it held before its mind's eye.

The moral of this imaginative exercise is clear. It is obviously false that *mere* explanatory coherence can provide an excellent reason for you to think your beliefs are true. It is obviously false that *all by itself* the coherence of an explanatory system yields justification, where justification is understood as truth-conduciveness.

### Responsibility

Now let's turn to the second way of thinking about epistemic justification. Is it true that *if* the proposition *p* that *S* believes is a member of an explanatorily coherent set of propositions that are, together, the objects of all of *S*'s beliefs and experiences, *then* *S* holds the belief that *p* in such a way that *S* violates no epistemic obligations? Well, that depends on what other propositions *S* believes. Suppose that *S* wisely believes that mere explanatory coherence provides absolutely *no* reason to think that *any* of *S*'s beliefs are true—as I think *S* should, given their awareness of the argument above. Then, if *S* has their wits about them, *S* will also think that, *all by itself*, the fact that *p* is a member of an explanatorily coherent set of propositions is a lousy reason to think that *p* is true. Given that *S* has no other basis for believing *p*, then, if goes ahead and believes *p* anyway, *S* will violate the epistemic obligation: *Don't believe something when, by your own lights, all you've got to go on to believe it is a lousy reason to think that it is true*. Therefore, it is false that the coherence of an explanatory system yields justification, where justification is understood as responsibility—at least not for people who are aware of the Bilbo argument above.

I suspect, therefore, that EC-minus is false. And what goes for EC-minus goes for any other version of Coherentism. Simply because the contents of a system of beliefs and experiences is structured in an explanatorily coherent way, it does not follow that some belief whose content is a member of that system enjoys epistemic justification.

**References**

Howard-Snyder, D., and Coffman, E.J. 2006. "Three Arguments Against Foundationalism: Arbitrariness, Epistemic Regress, and Existential Support," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 36: 535-564.