Is coherentism coherent?

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In 'A *reductio* of coherentism' Tom Stoneham offers an interesting and novel argument against epistemological coherentism. 'On the face of it', he writes, 'the argument gives a conclusive *reductio ad absurdum* of any coherence theory of justification. But that cannot be right, can it?' (2007: 254). It could be right (for no philosophical position is in principle immune to a *reductio*). But it isn't. Stoneham's first step is to argue that coherentists are committed to the claim that:

> P1 (= Stoneham's 4): For some p and q and some thinker at some time, it is possible that the belief that $p\&q$ is [epistemically, C.J.] better supported than the belief that p or the belief that q alone.

Stoneham then introduces the following principle of epistemic support:

> P2 (= Stoneham's 5): The belief that p epistemically supports the belief that q only if p raises the probability of q.

From P1 and P2 he infers that:

> C: There is a pair of propositions [p and q, C.J.] such that $pr(p\&q) > pr(p)$.

Since C is false, Stoneham concludes by way of a *reductio* that coherentism is false. However, the argument is defective at several points.

1. Stoneham begins by arguing that coherentists must accept that 'the relation of epistemic support is not asymmetric' (255). This is indeed a view that coherentists explicitly endorse, and I shall not question it here.[1] However, in a subsequent step, Stoneham presents the following argument that this symmetry thesis entails P1. Suppose the belief b(p) 'supports b(q) in the presence of [belief set] S ... and b(q) supports b(p) in the presence of S'. Yet S 'does not support b(p) or b(q) or b($\sim p$) or b($\sim q$)' alone (255). Since, in the presence of S, b(p) supports b(q) and vice versa, 'S + b(p) provides more support for b(q) than S alone and S + b(q) provides more support for b(p) than S alone.... Then if the subject adds just b(p) or just b(q), he will be adding a belief with no support, but if he adds both he will be adding a belief (viz. b($p\&q$)) with positive support' (255). How exactly is this supposed to follow?

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[1] See, for example, the first of Paul Thagard's seven core principles of explanatory coherence (1989: 436; 2000: 43).

The argument is that according to the symmetry thesis the following is possible: S does not support b(*p*) or b(*q*) alone; but, since b(*p*) is supported in the presence of S plus b(*q*), and b(*q*) is supported in the presence of S plus b(*p*), b(*p*&*q*) is supported in the presence of S. The argument thus relies on the following principle of epistemic support:

(ES) If S&b(*p*) supports b(*q*), and S&b(*q*) supports b(*p*), then S supports b(*p*&*q*).

Should the coherentist accept this principle? Should *anyone* accept it? Suppose that S, if supplemented by the belief that this year Jolly Jumper (JJ) will win the Kentucky Derby, supports the belief that JJ will also win the Louisiana Derby; and that S, if one adds that JJ will win the Louisiana Derby, supports the belief that JJ will win the Kentucky Derby. (Let S contain the belief that the same horse will win both Derbies, for example.) Does it follow that S supports the belief that JJ will win both the Kentucky and the Louisiana Derby? No.

2. A related problem with Stoneham's argument that coherentists are committed to P1 is that it neglects the typical coherentist claim that the coherence of a doxastic system is inversely proportional to the number and (relative) size of any inferentially relatively unconnected subsystems it contains.[2] This constraint too has the consequence that it is possible that, in the presence of S, b(*p*) epistemically supports b(*q*) and vice versa, while S nonetheless fails to provide good epistemic reasons to adopt b(*p*&*q*). This latter belief may, if accepted, be relegated to an epistemically isolated subsystem. Suppose S contains the belief b(*r*), and (*p*&*q*) is the best explanation for *r* but is otherwise unconnected with the contents of the beliefs in S. Nothing in Stoneham's scenario rules out that b(*r*) belongs to an isolated subsystem of S. If it does, then although adding b(*p*&*q*) would produce a system in which b(*p*), b(*q*), and b(*r*) are epistemically connected (via inferential connections between *p*, *q*, and *r*), there would still be no (or almost no) connections between these three items and the rest of S. Should we say in this case that S will support, or give us good epistemic reasons to believe, (*p*&*q*)? No. The negative effects of multiplying the members of an isolated subsystem will normally outweigh the positive effects obtained within that subsystem. Moreover, since b(*p*&*q*) is more complex than b(*p*) or b(*q*) alone, the additional support relations within the subsystem would be traded in for a decrease in S's simplicity. As coherentists (along with most epistemologists) typically maintain, this also has detrimental effects

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[2] This has been stressed for example by BonJour (1985: 98).

on S.[3] The core idea of coherentism is that a belief which does not enhance the overall coherence of a doxastic system is not epistemically supported by that system. So, if it is possible that adding b($p\&q$) to S does not result in a more coherent system than S, b($p\&q$) need not be better supported by S than b(p) or b(q) alone, even if in the presence of S, b(p) supports b(q) and vice versa.

3. The fact that P1 does not follow from coherentism does not entail that P1 is false, or that coherentists should not accept it. In fact they can accept P1 without falling victim to the proposed *reductio*. First, coherentists typically reject P2 as well, and with good reason. Second, Stoneham's conclusion does not follow from P1 and P2. Stoneham introduces P2 as an 'axiom', pointing out that 'it is hard to see how there could be counter-examples' (256). However, consider an epistemic situation in which S contains the belief that q and q's credence relative to the rest of S is 1. In that case p cannot raise the probability of q. Yet does this mean that p cannot 'epistemically support' q, or that p cannot constitute an epistemic justifier (an epistemic reason, a good ground) for q? I believe with absolute certainty that I have hands. This proposition entails that there is an external world, and I know that this entailment holds. Then someone presents me with a convincing new argument against global scepticism (i.e. against the thesis that we don't know that there is an external world). Should I or should I not adopt that argument? The answer, it seems, is that I should adopt it, even though my prior probability for the proposition that there is an external world is already 1. Stoneham concedes that P2 'might be a matter for debate', but doesn't think that weakening the consequent of this premise to '...p does not lower the probability of q' would be appropriate. 'How can p give us any reason to believe q is true', he asks, 'if the truth of p does not make q any more likely?' (256). However, there is no reason to restrict the relation of epistemic support, or being an epistemic reason, for a given belief to items that enhance the strength of, or initiate, that belief. The fact that in some epistemic situations an argument can't serve as a psychological ground for a belief doesn't entail that it fails to provide epistemic support for it.

4. Finally, let us ask how C is supposed to follow from P1 and P2. Stoneham argues as follows: 'These probabilities are credences. Suppose

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[3] As expressed e.g. in Thagard's second core principle of explanatory coherence (1989: 436–37; 2000: 43).

our subject has belief set S and comes to consider p and q, then the credence of p is 0.5 but the credence of $p\&q$ is >0.5' (255). Stoneham's reasoning goes as follows. Suppose that (a) $pr(p|S) = 0.5$ and $pr(q|S) = 0.5$; (b) $pr(p|S\&q) > 0.5$ and $pr(q|S\&p) > 0.5$. However, if (b) is the case then $pr(p\&q|S) > 0.5$. And if that is right, it can be inferred by (a) that $pr(p\&q|S) > pr(p|S)$, which is false. The problem with this argument closely resembles the one discussed in §1. The argument assumes that:

(ES*) If the credence of q, given $S\&b(p)$, is > 0.5, and the credence of p, given $S\&b(q)$, is > 0.5, then the credence of $(p\&q)$, given S, is > 0.5.

But like ES, ES* is false. From the facts that $S\&b(p)$ provides a reason to believe q, and that $S\&b(q)$ provides a reason to believe p, it does not follow that S provides a reason to believe $(p\&q)$. Witness our Derby example and the isolated subsystem objection.

Despite its defects, Stoneham's argument is interesting, and it does have its epistemological merits. It brings out precisely why we should *not* restrict the notion of epistemic support to a relation in which a belief's probability is raised, or accept epistemic principles such as ES and ES*. Contrary to Stoneham's aim, however, this does not undermine current versions of coherentism, but instead supports them.[4]

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