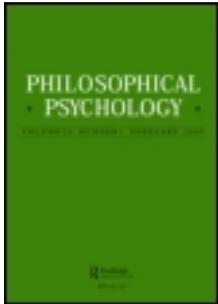


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### Coherentism, brain science, and the meaning of life: A response to Thagard

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## COMMENTARY

# Coherentism, brain science, and the meaning of life: A response to Thagard

*In his “Nihilism, Skepticism, and Philosophical Method,” Paul Thagard claims that my critique of his *The Brain and the Meaning of Life* misapprehends his argument. According to Thagard, the critique wrongly assumes that the book offers foundationalist justifications for Thagard’s views whereas, in fact, the justifications his book presents are coherentist. In my response, I show that the claim that my critique depends on foundationalist assumptions is ungrounded. Moreover, the appeal to coherentist rather than foundationalist justifications does not salvage Thagard’s discussion, since it is problematic under both foundationalism and coherentism. Thagard does not show that the anti-nihilist position he supports is more coherent than the nihilist position he rejects, and brain research does not justify his claims about the meaning of life under coherentism any more than under foundationalism.*

In his “Nihilism, skepticism, and philosophical method: A response to Landau on coherence and the meaning of life” (2012), Paul Thagard claims that my critique (2012) of his book *The brain and the meaning of life* (Thagard, 2010) is based on a misapprehension. According to Thagard, the critique assumes that the book offers foundationalist justifications for Thagard’s views on the brain and the meaning of life, whereas the justifications his book presents are actually coherentist.

However, my critique does not in fact depend on a foundationalist interpretation of Thagard’s claims. Thagard bases his complaint on my claim that he cannot deduce values from facts. But the inference is problematic: my critique does make that claim, but then immediately proceeds to examine Thagard’s discussion of values and facts from a coherentist perspective as well. Moreover, the discussion of facts and values is only one out of many points the critique raises, and it is faulty to extrapolate from it to the critique at large. Finally, discussing the impossibility of deducing values from facts does not attest to foundationalist presuppositions. Coherentist accounts allow beliefs to support each other in a variety of ways (e.g., inductive, deductive, explanatory). Thus, discussing the impossibility of deducing values from facts could be part of both coherentist and foundationalist accounts. The claim that my critique depends on

foundationalist assumptions, then, is ungrounded. Furthermore, it is incorrect; almost everything in the critique applies to foundationalist and coherentist justifications alike.

Most importantly, however, the appeal to coherentist rather than foundationalist justifications does not salvage Thagard's discussion. Take, first, Thagard's argument against nihilism. Thagard emphasizes the coherence in the anti-nihilist position. But there is a great deal of coherence also in the nihilist position. Thagard does not try to show, either in his book or in his response, why the nihilist position is less coherent than the anti-nihilist one. But this renders his rejection of nihilism problematic, as it is unclear what advantage the position he argues for has over the position he rejects. It is true that Thagard's anti-nihilist discussion is problematic under foundationalism as well; but he is incorrect in suggesting that his argument is not problematic under coherentism, or that my critique of his claims depends on foundationalist presuppositions.

I was also perplexed by Thagard's claim that "[Landau] insists that the large amounts of psychological and neuroscientific results that I discuss are simply irrelevant to determining the meaning of life" (p. 1). The critique does not insist that neuroscientific results are irrelevant; it rather argues for this claim in some detail. I fail to see how Thagard's response answers the arguments the critique raises. He points out that he is a coherentist. But brain research does not justify, and is not justified by, claims about the meaning of life under coherentism any more than under foundationalism. As already argued in my review:

Brain research merely shows the correlation between events in the brain and what happens in the psychological and philosophical spheres. It does not give us any information about the identity, or the value, of what we find in the psychological and philosophical spheres. (Landau, 2012, p. 10)

The neuroscientific information Thagard supplies would have made his claims about the meaning of life stronger—that is, it would have increased the coherence of his account—if it made a difference to the account whether the neurological claims were correct or incorrect. Consider, by contrast, the "detective" example of coherentist justification. Suppose that our belief is that it is Jones who murdered Smith. There is some evidence that Jones hated Smith. A witness thinks she saw a person of Jones's height entering Smith's house on the night of the murder. Jones appears to like the type of tobacco found at the murder scene. All these pieces of information cohere with each other and support the belief that Jones did it. Learning that Jones in fact loved Smith, that the person entering Smith's house was much taller than Jones, or that Jones actually dislikes the type of tobacco found at the murder scene would weaken our belief that Jones did it. All these beliefs are relevant to the belief that Jones did it, as they either support or weaken it. Similarly, the beliefs that Jones did it, that Jones hated Smith, and that Jones likes the type of tobacco found near Smith's body support the belief that it is Jones who entered the house on the night of the murder, and learning that Smith actually died by his own hand, that Jones hates that type of tobacco, etc., would weaken our belief that it is Jones who entered the house at the night of the murder.

However, this is not the case with neuroscientific details and Thagard's beliefs about the meaning of life. Consider Thagard's claim that work makes life meaningful. The claim that work makes life meaningful does not cohere better with the claim that when we work something happens in area A of the brain than with the claim that when we work something happens in area B of the brain. Discovering that in fact it all happens in area B (or, for that matter, in the spleen rather than in the brain) would not weaken the claim about the meaning of life. Likewise, the claim that when we work something happens in area A of the brain coheres no better with the claim that work makes life meaningful than with the claim that work makes life meaningless. The neuroscientific fact about area A does not support the theory of the meaning of life, nor does the theory of the meaning of life support the neuroscientific fact. In contrast, Jones's hatred of Smith does support the belief that Jones did it, while Jones's love of Smith would weaken the belief that Jones did it.

New data about what happens in area A, then, does not function here as a new belief that joins the others and supports them further as would, for example, new data about Jones's recent purchase of the kind of tobacco found near Smith's body. The latter piece of information does lend more support to the belief that Jones did it. But data about the neurological correlates does not; it does not make a difference. As Thagard would agree, not all beliefs are relevant to all theories, even under a coherentist view; and as the critique shows in some detail, the neuroscientific facts Thagard elaborates on are such irrelevant beliefs. They do not add to the coherence of his theories of the meaning of life and thus do not support his theses under coherentism any more than under foundationalism. My critique, then, does not presuppose a foundationalist model, and Thagard's emphasis, in his response, that when he presents neuroscientific data he is a coherentist rather than a foundationalist, does not strengthen the argument of his book.

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