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Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory

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Moral knowledge, to the extent anyone has it, is as much a matter of knowing *how*—how to act, react, feel and reflect appropriately—as it is a matter of knowing *that*—that injustice is wrong, courage is valuable, and care is due. Such knowledge is embodied in a range of capacities, abilities, and skills that are not acquired simply by learning that certain things are morally required or forbidden or that certain abilities and skills are important.[1] To lose sight of this fact, to focus exclusively on questions concerning what is commonly called *propositional knowledge,* is to lose one's grip on (at least one crucial aspect of) the intimate connection between morality and action. At the same time, insofar as it suggests that moral capacities can be exhaustively accounted for by appeal to peoples' cognitive states, to focus on propositional knowledge is to invite an overintellectualized picture of those capacities. No account of moral knowledge will be adequate unless it does justice to the ways in which knowing right from wrong, and good from bad, is not simply a matter of forming the correct beliefs but is a matter of acquiring certain abilities to act, react, feel, and reflect appropriately in the situations in which one finds oneself. And this means a satisfying treatment of moral epistemology must give due attention to what's involved in knowing how to be moral.

I mention this now, at the beginning of my paper, as a partial corrective to what follows. For in the rest of this paper I will not be giving due attention to what's involved in knowing *how* to be moral. I won't even give much attention to what's involved in *knowing that* something is moral (or not). I will be concentrating instead almost exclusively on questions concerning the *justification* of moral belief, and will then be focusing—even more narrowly—on questions of epistemic, rather than moral, justification, giving only indirect attention to issues relating to moral justification.[2] I will be asking:

Under what conditions are a person's moral beliefs epistemically justified? And so: Under what conditions are *our* moral beliefs epistemically justified?

What I hope to offer here is an account of epistemic justification that can do justice to the epistemic challenges our moral beliefs face, while leaving room for some of those beliefs, sometimes, to count as justified in precisely the same way our more mundane nonmoral beliefs, sometimes, do. I don't mean to suggest, and I certainly won't argue, that our moral beliefs are actually as justified as many of our other beliefs are. I think many of them are not; the challenges they face properly induce epistemic humility. But I do think that some of our moral beliefs are justified and justified in the same sense (if not always to the same degree) as are many of our other beliefs.

As a result, what I'll be doing is primarily defending in general—and without special regard for morality—a theory of the epistemic justification of belief that applies across the board to all our beliefs. Despite my being especially concerned with the status of our moral beliefs, then, a great deal of the discussion that follows will be put in terms that self-consciously and intentionally don't speak directly to morality. So far as I can see, the epistemic evaluation of our moral beliefs is of a piece with that of all our other beliefs; there is no distinctive epistemology of moral belief.

Nonetheless, our moral beliefs do have distinctive features that render them epistemologically suspect. Most notably, our moral beliefs are disturbingly hard to justify in the face of disagreement. All too often we are reduced to invoking convictions that seem more obviously right than any justification we might offer for them, even as we recognize that others find incompatible views (that they are no better able to defend) equally obvious. Even if we are confident that we can explain away what we take to be their mistaken views by appeal to their particular situation, experience, and especially training, it takes no leap of the imagination to see that similar explanations of our views are available to them. Worse, those explanations are available to us; when we turn our attention to the explanation of our own views, just the same sorts of explanations seem to go through—explanations that appeal to physical, psychological, and social facts, but not to moral facts, as the determinants of our beliefs. We seem ourselves to be able to explain all our own moral views without having to suppose that any of them are actually true.

The difficulties merely compound when we wonder what it would take for those beliefs actually to be true, even given our inclination to think some of them are. On reflection, it is not at all clear, for instance, how moral properties (assuming there are some) might fit into and relate to the world as we know it. Unlike everyday nonmoral properties of normal-sized objects, moral properties seem to make a claim on us regardless of our tastes, preferences, and affective attitudes. They seem to have a distinctive normative authority that allows them legitimately to command the allegiance of everyone. That some course of action is right, that some thing is good, that some character admirable, apparently necessarily gives us reason to act or respond in some way or another, whereas that some act is legal, or some thing blue, or some character

uncommon, seem in themselves to provide no particular reason to act or respond at all. Yet it is a mystery how moral properties might come by this authority. Moreover, as different from others as these putatively authoritative facts seem to be, they do not float free of the more mundane physical, psychological, and social properties of people, actions, or institutions. In fact, people, actions, and institutions apparently have the moral properties they do always thanks to their nonmoral properties, even as their being right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, just or unjust, looks to be something over and above their exhibiting whatever nonmoral properties they do.

At the same time, for us to be able to discover moral properties (if we ever do), it looks as if we would have to rely on some means other than those we normally use to learn about the world. We don't seem to see, taste, hear, smell, or touch moral properties, nor do we seem to rely on common methods of empirical investigation and confirmation to discover them. Although we speak of *feeling* that something is wrong, or right, the suggestion that these feelings are extra or suprasensory perceptions, the product of some special moral faculty, is hardly plausible. Despite the apparent dependence of moral properties on nonmoral properties, the results of empirical investigation appears to be altogether irrelevant to the justification of our moral views (although not to their application). Our moral beliefs have, at best, it seems, only a tenuous connection to experience, a connection evidently established more by the moral convictions we bring to bear on that experience than by the untainted input of experience.

All told, then, what these moral properties might actually be and how we might manage to learn about them is, at least, mysterious. Their very mysteriousness naturally raises doubts about what grounds we might actually have for our moral beliefs.

These concerns are not at all easily or confidently put to rest. They work together not simply to undermine confidence in our particular convictions, but also to suggest that our moral views as a whole might best be seen as an explicable illusion.[3] Some would even say that these problems offer good grounds for embracing noncognitivism—for thinking our moral attitudes are best viewed not as beliefs at all but rather as expressions of preference, or a projection of our sentiments, or a reflection of norms we (just happen to) embrace. When it comes to our moral attitudes, they say, epistemic evaluations are out of place because the attitudes in question are not the sorts of things that can be true or false.[4]

I am not myself inclined to noncognitivism. And, in another context, I would argue that when the reasons adduced to justify some action or attitude succeed, they simultaneously provide grounds for one's thinking, of certain moral judgments concerning the actions or attitudes, that they are true.[5] But that argument is not so important here, since the main questions I need to address—concerning the justification of belief (whether moral or not)—can and should be raised about the epistemic credentials of the noncognitivism I am inclined to reject.[6] Consequently, in the rest of the paper, I will simply

assume (contentiously) that people do sometimes have moral beliefs and that we can reasonably wonder about them whether they are epistemically justified in believing as they do.

In what follows, I will defend a coherence theory of epistemic justification according to which our beliefs, moral and otherwise, are justified only if, and then to the extent that, they cohere well with the other things we believe. On this view, whether a person's beliefs are justified is a matter of how well they hang together. One person, then, may be justified in holding some belief that another would be justified in rejecting, and how justified the first person would be is not a matter of her belief actually being true, nor a matter of it satisfying some epistemic standard wholly independent of the other things she believes, but rather a function precisely of what else she believes.

In the end, and perhaps not surprisingly, what recommends this view is that it coheres well—better than its competitors—with what we already believe concerning justification. Most especially, I will be trying to accommodate two features of justification. The first is that a person may be justified in holding a view we recognize to be false, and massively so. This is the force and implication of dramatic examples well known in epistemology that appeal to evil demons and brains in vats. But the same recognition crops up in everyday situations in which we recognize someone as justifiably holding the views they do despite their being unfortunately ill-informed or understandably misled by the partial information they have available. The second feature is that holding justified beliefs represents an accomplishment that is bound up with actually having some reason to think what one believes is true. So although one might justifiably believe what (as it happens) is false, one must, even in those situations, have reason to think it true.

Of course, the fit between the coherence theory and our initial convictions concerning justification will at points be less than perfect, and later in the paper I will be at pains to explain away, rather than accommodate, some of the views that make other accounts of justification seem attractive. Nonetheless, the coherence theory does an extremely good job of explaining, and in other ways making sense of, the variety of views people have concerning the nature of epistemic justification. At the same time, I'll suggest, it has the significant advantage of making good sense of our actually being, at least to some extent and concerning some things, epistemically justified in holding our moral beliefs.

Before spelling out the coherence theory of epistemic justification and defending it, I want first to back into the discussion by describing (what might be called) the coherence *method* for moral theorizing. This foray into method is appropriate for two reasons. First, I will, in effect, be applying the method to questions of epistemology, relying on the approach the method recommends in an attempt to identify and defend an acceptable theory of epistemic justification. Second, the coherence theory's recent appeal, especially in moral theory, can be traced directly to the attractiveness of this method. In fact, many have thought that the coherence method is the only approach to moral theorizing that promises any hope of progress, and more than a few have seen the method as being intimately intertwined with the coherence theory. I should emphasize right off, though, what will become clear: that someone might value the method without thinking that the justification of our resulting views is a matter of their relative coherence. Although anyone attracted by the coherence theory will be inclined to endorse the methodology, adoption of the method is compatible with rejection of the coherence theory of justification.[7]

Coherence and the Method of Reflective Equilibrium

The coherence method, or at least evidence of its use, shows up throughout the history of moral theorizing. Yet the coherence method has risen to recognized prominence in moral theory only recently thanks to John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*.[8] Referring to it there as the method of reflective equilibrium, Rawls characterizes the process of developing an acceptable moral theory as a matter of shifting back and forth among the various moral judgments one is initially inclined to make and the more or less abstract theoretical principles one is examining and attempting to develop, altering the collection of principles to fit better the judgments and adjusting the judgments so as to bring them, as best one can, in line with plausible principles.

The method is anything but static; it is meant to be deployed continually as one's set of convictions shifts thanks to expanding experience and in light of reflecting on the grounds one might have for those convictions. All along, as the method would have it, one should increase the coherence of one's beliefs by eliminating inconsistencies, articulating principles that are already implicit in one's judgments, and seeking out further grounds that would justify and unify these judgments and principles, always being willing to shift one's view in light of the developments. As things progress, some of the initial judgments will have to be put aside as ill-informed, misguided, or otherwise suspect (perhaps because there seems to be no plausible way to defend them), and new commitments will come on board thanks sometimes just to expanding experience, and other times to seeing what is implicit in, or required by, what else one believes.

The underlying idea is that, while we inevitably start with whatever attitudes, convictions, and beliefs we have, and properly rely on them in adjusting our opinions, we should not rest content with things as they stand, but should instead subject our evaluative attitudes to the pressures of reflection—doing what we can to render systematic, by providing general principles for, the hodgepodge of convictions with which we begin. Starting with our initial convictions we are to forge, as best we can, a consistent, unified, set of beliefs that inter-relate in ways that allow our more particular convictions to find support from more general principles, which themselves find support from their ability to account for the more particular judgments.

The process is at least analogous to the one we rely on in developing our scientific theories, where we start with various observations, hypotheses, and hunches and then work to bring these together within a coherent system. All

the while, we are adjusting the theoretical principles so as to fit the relevant observations, articulate the general hypotheses, and follow our hunches, even as we are refining our observations, altering our hypotheses, and reevaluating our hunches, to bring them in line with our best theories.

There are dangers, of course, in over-extending the analogy between scientific and moral methodology, dangers that come, for instance, from thinking that the initial moral judgments must, like some perceptual observations, be due to the operation of a special faculty, or from thinking that moral principles must, like scientific laws, explain our making the judgments we do, or from thinking that moral theories, like scientific theories, tell us how things are but not how they should be. In many striking ways scientific inquiry differs substantially from moral inquiry.

Yet there are dangers as well in ignoring the methodological analogy, dangers that come, most especially, from ignoring the extent to which moral judgments are sensitive to reflection and argument, and from thinking that experience has no role to play in expanding and confirming our moral views. Regardless, so far as the method is concerned, our aim should be to bring our various views, no matter what they concern (physics, ethics, epistemology, or mathematics), into a reflective equilibrium.

Two sorts of equilibria might be sought in moral theorizing: a narrow equilibrium that is reached if one settles on a set of moral principles that cohere well with the moral judgments that, on reflection, one is willing to embrace; and a wider equilibrium that requires more, as it brings into the mix not just particular moral judgments and general moral principles but also judgments and principles concerning whatever psychological, social, physical, or metaphysical matters might prove relevant—including judgments and principles about the relevance of these other areas. Either would count as a *reflective* equilibrium as long as the various elements have been, and can continue to be, embraced in light of the pressures of reflection; yet their scope will vary according to what sorts of considerations are brought to bear. The actual equilibria that we establish, such as they are, are I suspect always, at best, only more or less wide. So while the method itself may forever encourage attempts to broaden the scope and deepen the understanding provided by one's theories, actually achieving a comprehensive reflective equilibrium will almost surely remain always at most an ideal.[9]

Recommending the method right off is the fact that it seems, in some sense, simply to work. By trying to articulate principles that would underwrite, elaborate, or refine the various judgments we're already inclined to make we often uncover (what we take to be) reasons for thinking the initial judgments were insufficiently subtle, or excessively parochial, or distressingly unsupportable. And we often find as well that various judgments we remain confident of, and can now support by appeal to more general principles, have implications we hadn't recognized and wouldn't have taken account of but for the attempt to understand what reason we might have for accepting them. Engaging in the attempt to establish a reflective equilibrium often leads us not just to change our initial judgments but to change them, as we think, *for the better.*

The question naturally arises: In what sense are our judgments better? One answer is that they are not better, at least not in any important sense. After all, the thought might go, any method that simply starts with the beliefs one happens to have and then works to generate a set of principles consistent, so far as possible, with those beliefs, is at best a recipe for a set of coherent principles that have no claim to our interest. Admittedly, if we had some independent reason for thinking our initial views accurately reflected the nature of morality, or that the coherence of a set of beliefs was reason to think them true, then we might have some reason to use the method. But we have no reason to think these things.[10]

Against this answer, I will eventually defend the method and its results on epistemic grounds, arguing that as one approaches a (wide) reflective equilibrium one thereby increases the extent to which the beliefs one holds are epistemically justified. On this view, what recommends the method is that using it is one and the same with trying to proportion one's beliefs to the available evidence. And this means that the method, successfully used, results in beliefs that are better because better justified. Since actually achieving wide reflective equilibrium is a matter of embracing a fully coherent—and so, in light of the coherence theory, well justified—set of beliefs, the method has conspicuous attractions for anyone who thinks, as I do, that the coherence theory of justification can be defended. Furthermore, I will argue, the attractions remain even though what reason we have for thinking our initial moral views accurate is not independent of the moral views they end up supporting in reflective equilibrium and even though we should not think that the mere coherence of our views gives us reason to think that they are true.

While adopting the method makes obvious sense for anyone who accepts a coherence theory of epistemic justification, many have found the method attractive on other grounds. Some have recommended the coherence method as a useful way of discovering justified beliefs, despite their holding that the justification of those beliefs turns on something other than their cohering well with the variety of considerations the method brings to bear.[11] This heuristic account of the value of the method of reflective equilibrium retains the view that the method's use results in a collection of beliefs that might be epistemically justified. What it rejects is the coherence theory's account of their justification as being mutually dependent and turning on their relative coherence.

Others who have found the method attractive trace its appeal not to the epistemic value of the resulting beliefs but to the moral importance of acting on principles one can, on reflection, consistently embrace. The underlying idea here is that one counts as having acted on principle at all only if the principle in question is such that one is willing to endorse its implications for cases other than those at hand. And one does that only when, in effect, the principle stands in reflective equilibrium both with one's other principles and with one's other judgments about particular cases, actual and possible, beyond those one happens to face. To claim to be acting on some principle, only to disown its implications for other cases, is to belie one's allegiance to the principle and to forfeit the backing it would otherwise offer for one's action.

While views of this sort offer a reason to value the coherence method, the reason offered is squarely moral; and while we might be tempted to ask why we should believe true the claim that we have such a reason, the claim itself is not an epistemic one. If people do have a moral reason to act only on a set of principles that stand in reflective equilibrium, then using the method, and restricting one's actions to those endorsed by the resulting set of convictions, would make good sense even as it leaves aside completely questions of whether the beliefs are epistemically justified.

Yet another way to defend the method, again without appealing to its epistemic value, is to argue that its use has significant practical advantages. Just as all sorts of advantages are secured by requiring that judges make explicit the rationale behind their decisions, so too, we might think, practical considerations require something similar of ordinary people. After all, moral thought and reflection obviously play a crucially important role in social life; to the extent this role might best be served by people being able to articulate and defend the principles on which they act, using and recommending the method of reflective equilibrium would seem eminently reasonably. Not least of the advantages is that successful deployment of the method puts one in a good position to offer (either to oneself or to others) a coherent set of principles that might be open to scrutiny and evaluation. Widespread use of the method of reflective equilibrium, individually, or perhaps collectively, might even give us hope of our developing a coherent public morality—the advantages of which may have nothing to do with truth.

The practical value of the method is reflected in the fact that most effective forms of moral argumentation appear to work by revealing to people that their own views need shoring up or changing if those views are to cohere with others they are unwilling to jettison. Threats and promises might get people to change what they say, but when it comes to getting people actually to change their minds little works so well as showing them that, on balance, the views they already accept recommend the position one is defending. Of course, we should not exaggerate the effectiveness of this approach or its relative importance as a way of getting people to change their views. Clearly, its effectiveness is significantly constrained by peoples' willingness either to refuse to see the consequences of what they accept or, when they do, to accept those consequences no matter how implausible they are. And its relative importance needs to be measured with a steady eye on the frequency with which people change their views as a result of experience and exposure, imagination and empathy, rather than reflection and argumentation. Nevertheless, when we do work to change someone's view or to see whether our own might be improved, the considerations we bring to bear regularly play precisely the role the coherence method would recommend.

Just how good these moral and practical defences of the method are, I'm not sure. I doubt that we have anything like a moral responsibility always to act on principle, let alone on a set of fully articulated principles of the sort the method would encourage us to seek. Too often, and in too many contexts,

it looks as if people are morally justified in acting as they do despite their inability to identify anything remotely like a clear set of principles. Responsible moral behavior doesn't seem to require reflective access to such principles. I doubt too that our various practical and social aims are well advanced by the more rarified and arcane results a full deployment of the method is likely to produce. Almost surely a point of diminishing practical returns will be reached well before the method's requirements have been satisfied.

Even if these doubts are borne out, however, I think they wouldn't fully undermine an appeal to moral and practical considerations as relevant to a defence of the method. Actually, because I believe the method results in epistemically justified beliefs, and believe as well that we have a moral obligation of sorts to see that the moral convictions we act on are epistemically justified, I am committed to our having moral, and not just epistemic, reasons for using the method of reflective equilibrium. Still, I believe that the value of the method is not exhausted when a person satisfies this moral responsibility, such as it is. For part of what is valuable about the method is simply that it helps us to secure epistemically justified moral beliefs.

In fact, one of the key advantages of the coherence theory of justification is that it can explain well what reason we have to use the method even after our moral responsibilities have been satisfied and our practical aims met. At least so I think. This suggestion will be plausible, however, only if good sense can be made out of the coherence theory of justification, and it is to that task that I now turn. So the rest of this paper can reasonably be seen as an extended defense of the peculiarly epistemic value of the coherence method.

Epistemic Justification

What does it take for a person to be justified in holding some belief?[12] Different, and often incompatible, answers will be plausible depending on the sort of justification that is at issue. I'll mention three obvious possibilities.

First, we might be concerned with whether a person is *morally justified* in holding the belief, in whether her holding of the belief satisfies the relevant moral standards. If so, we'll be interested, say, in whether she is within her rights to believe it, or in whether her believing it is (or is expected to be) conducive to the greatest happiness, or in whether her believing it is compatible with her other obligations. Which, if any, of these considerations should be invoked depends on what the right standards of moral justification actually are. (I've here only mentioned some leading candidates.)

Second, we might be concerned with whether a person is in some other way *pragmatically justified* in holding the belief, in whether her holding of the belief satisfies the relevant pragmatic standards. If so, we'll be interested, say, in whether her believing it advances her interests, or in whether her believing it is (subjectively or objectively) likely to contribute to the satisfaction of her preferences, or in whether her believing it will lead to a fulfilling life. Which,

if any, of these considerations should be invoked depends on what the right standards of pragmatic justification actually are. (Here too I've only mentioned some leading candidates.)

Or third, we might be concerned with whether a person is *epistemically justified* in holding the belief, in whether her holding of the belief satisfies the relevant epistemic standards. If so, we'll be interested, say, in whether her believing it is appropriately sensitive to her evidence, or in whether her believing it means it is (subjectively or objectively) likely to be true, or in whether her believing it is the result of a reliable belief-forming process.[13] This time, which, if any, of these considerations should be invoked will depend on what the right standards of epistemic justification actually are. (And, again, I've only mentioned some leading candidates.)

With these three sorts of justification in mind, we need to distinguish between justifying what is believ*ed*—the content of the belief—and justifying the state or act of believ*ing*. As I've described moral, pragmatic, and epistemic justification, the concern was with the latter, with whether a person was justified *in holding* a particular belief, not with whether the belief was justified.

Sometimes, though, when we describe someone's moral belief as morally justified, we are interested in what she believes—in the content of her belief. And what we have in mind is that what she believes can be justified by appeal, say, to some more general moral principle. So we might say that a person's belief that she ought to support a local soup kitchen is morally justified and not mean that she is morally or epistemically or pragmatically justified in believing it, but instead that what she believes is both true and, say, justified by the more general duty we have to help others. We may even count what she believes as justified in light of moral principles we accept without thinking she either recognizes those principles or would endorse them if she did. In these cases we are not concentrating on *her* moral or epistemic or pragmatic justification for believing as she does, nor on what justification she might have for the belief, but rather on what grounds there might be (even if she doesn't have them) for the belief she holds—on what reason there might be for thinking it true.

And in general, in our epistemic evaluations of peoples' beliefs, we standardly focus on what is believ*ed* rather than on the state or act of believ*ing*. Even when we are concerned with whether someone is epistemically justified in holding a belief, we are usually interested not primarily in her holding of the belief but in, for example, whether the belief she holds is supported by the evidence available to her, or in whether the belief is either self-evident or appropriately grounded in her experience. In these cases, we are interested in what justification she might have for the belief. In fact, the temptation is to maintain that whether a person is epistemically justified in holding the belief turns on whether the belief she is holding is itself justified, and that *that* turns on there being some suitable connection between what is believed and the evidence available to her. I will, in what follows, acquiesce to this temptation.[14]

When it comes to epistemic justification, if we distinguish, in the way I've been suggesting, between when a person's *belief* is justified and when *she* is justified in holding it, we can capture the dependence of the latter on the former by saying: the person, if she is to be justified in holding some belief, must be holding it *because* it is justified—that the belief is justified must be part of the explanation of why she is holding it. If instead a person holds a belief because of wishful thinking or fear or carelessness, or in some other way without regard to the evidence she actually has, then her believing it is unjustified even if what is believed happens to be supported by the available evidence. On this view, no matter how strong the evidence for the belief might be, and regardless of whether the belief is true, the person is not justified in holding the belief, if her holding it is insensitive to the evidence.[15] This *basing requirement* demands that a person's beliefs be based in an appropriate way on her evidence, if the beliefs are to count as justifiably held.[16]

The distinction between a belief being justified and a person being justified in holding the belief is in some ways reminiscent of Kant's distinction between merely acting in accordance with duty and acting *because* it is one's duty.[17] On Kant's view, a person is morally justified in acting only if both: (i) the action satisfies the Categorical Imperative; and (ii) that fact matters to whether the act would be performed. Pushing the analogy, we might identify an Epistemic Imperative to the effect that one should *Believe only as the preponderance of one's evidence would allow.* We can then say that a person is epistemically justified in holding some belief only if both: (i) the belief satisfies the Epistemic Imperative; and (ii) that fact matters to whether the belief would be held.[18] And just as Kant's *Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law* doesn't require one to act on all such maxims, so too the epistemic imperative should be read not as requiring one to believe everything one's evidence would allow, but as requiring that one believe *only* as one's evidence would allow.[19]

I think the Epistemic Imperative together with the basing requirement articulate one crucial dimension of the epistemic evaluation, and I will take them as capturing, albeit in quite general terms, the core of our notion of *epistemically justified believing*. But obviously there are other dimensions of epistemic evaluation. We evaluate people as more or less knowledgeable, in light of the extent to which what they (justifiably) believe is actually true; as more or less perceptive, in light of how sensitive they are to the world around them; as more or less sophisticated, in light of their ability to identify and deploy reasons for the beliefs they hold; and as more or less responsible, in light of their efforts to gather and reflect on evidence. Each of these evaluations invokes standards that seem either to go beyond or to be completely independent of the considerations that matter to justification. Often they impose a kind of epistemic strict liability (inappropriate to questions of justification) according to which how one fares epistemically does not turn on what one had reason to do or believe. Even though I set these other epistemic evaluations aside in what follows, keeping them in mind is important when it comes

to sorting out the various ways a person who is justified in believing as she does might suffer significant shortcomings, epistemic and otherwise.

In particular, recognizing that a person is epistemically justified in holding her beliefs may still leave us thinking the beliefs not just false but—as will often enough be the case with peoples' moral views—repugnant. A person might be epistemically justified in holding her beliefs, and yet be holding beliefs that are morally abhorrent, just as with more mundane matters a person might justifiably believe what turns out to be false.[20] Needless to say, a person who holds abhorrent beliefs will, in an important sense, not be holding the beliefs she should. Worse, she might, on the basis of those beliefs, act in deeply objectionable ways. But the grounds we have for thinking her actions immoral and her views horribly mistaken might (sadly) be unavailable to her; and if they are unavailable to her, and we recognize this, we may have to grant that she is epistemically justified in holding her position.

Whether she is depends crucially on what evidence is available to her. I suspect that, in many cases, those who hold abhorrent views actually have volumes of evidence, to which they are insensitive, that stand against their convictions. To the extent they hold their views because of prejudice, or fear, or self-interest, or insecurity, they are not appropriately basing their beliefs on the available evidence and so are not justifiably holding their views (no matter how coherent their epistemically insensitive system of beliefs is). At least in principle, though, some people might be raised in an environment so distorted that the evidence they have, such as it is, actually supports their repugnant views. We will of course have reason to try to change their views and their behavior to the extent we can, and we certainly needn't think their beliefs are ones we might reasonably accept. Still, if their beliefs are supported by the evidence actually available to them, I think they are epistemically justified in holding them, even though they are morally the worse for their views.[21]

Foundationalism and Coherentism

Against this background, let's return to the question, now made more specific: What does it take for a person to be *epistemically* (as opposed to morally or pragmatically) justified in holding the belief she does? Under what conditions, for instance, would she be justified in accepting utilitarianism or in rejecting Naziism, or in thinking courage virtuous, or pleasure good?

When concerned with belief in general, with no special focus on moral beliefs, answers have traditionally divided into two camps, one foundationalist, the other coherentist. Both approaches normally accept the basing requirement—the view that when the belief is justified a person is justified in believing as she does only if, in addition, she believes as she does because her belief is justified. Where the contrast between foundationalism and coherentism shows up is in their respective accounts of what it takes for a belief to be epistemically justified.

The foundationalist's account involves appealing to some class of *epistemically privileged* beliefs (that enjoy their privilege independently of their inferential/evidential connections) and then holding that a belief, moral or otherwise, is justified if and only if either: (i) it is member of that privileged class; or (ii) it bears an appropriate evidential/inferential relation to a belief that is a member of the class.[22]

Different versions of foundationalism emerge as different classes of belief are singled out as foundational and as different evidential/inferential relations are countenanced as appropriate. Just to mention a few of the familiar suggestions, beliefs might count as foundational in virtue of being certain, or incorrigible, or formed under the appropriate circumstances, while an inferential relation might count as appropriate if it is deductive, or inductive, or abductive, or explanatory. Precisely how the details are filled in will make a huge difference to both the stringency of the requirements imposed and the plausibility of the theory that results. What all the versions share, though, is the view that there is an epistemically privileged class of beliefs that are justified independently of the evidential/inferential relations they might bear to other beliefs and that all other beliefs are justified, when they are, in virtue of the support they receive from foundational beliefs.

In characterizing foundationalism this way, I'm steering clear of attributing to foundationalism a number of more extreme views it often travels with—for instance, the view that all justification must flow unidirectionally from the foundational beliefs to the others, and the view that the foundational beliefs are infallible,[23] and the view that a fully developed system of justified beliefs will take the shape either of a pyramid with all the foundational beliefs eventually supporting a single ultimate principle or of an inverted pyramid with a single foundational belief supporting the whole superstructure.[24] While a foundationalist might ultimately be forced into one or another of these views by her own arguments, she might not be. What matters to her foundationalism, as I see it, is that she thinks there is a privileged class of noninferentially justified beliefs without which no other beliefs would be justified at all.

Suppose, then, that some of our moral views are justified. Suppose that we are justified in thinking that cruelty is wrong, Naziism is evil, racism repugnant, kindness required, promises binding, or whatever. How would our justified moral beliefs (assuming there are some) fit into the foundationalist's picture of justification? Foundationalists who hold that some moral beliefs *are* justified must hold either that some moral beliefs are epistemically privileged or that, although none are, some moral beliefs are nonetheless justified inferentially by appeal ultimately to some nonmoral beliefs that are.

The vast majority of foundationalists working in moral theory have gone the first route and embraced a *moral foundation,* holding that some of our moral beliefs qualify as epistemically privileged. Influenced by Hume's observation that one cannot legitimately infer an "ought" from an "is," they've held that our nonmoral beliefs, taken alone, can provide no evidence whatsoever for our moral convictions.[25] There is, they think, an inferentially unbridgeable

gap between nonmoral and moral beliefs (or at least between nonevaluative and evaluative beliefs).

Whether Hume himself thought the problems plaguing such an inference were insuperable is controversial. But his responsibility for making those problems felt is beyond question. In any case, as Hume saw the issue, the problems center on the transition from claims about what is the case (e.g., that God commands something, or that a course of action will produce happiness, or that the majority of people approve of some trait) to claims concerning what ought to be done or what should be approved. Take whichever nonevaluative premises you like concerning how things are, were, or will be, and it seems (Hume suggested) that no conclusion follows concerning how they ought to be, absent the aid of an evaluative premise. Suppose, for instance, that some course of action would promote happiness. From that it doesn't follow that people should so act—unless we appeal to an additional evaluative premise, e.g., that people should act so as to promote happiness. Of course, it might be that an appropriate additional premise is true. The point is that apparently some moral premise or other is needed to secure a moral conclusion from nonmoral premises. If this is right, it means that, on a foundationalist's view of justification, the only way any of our moral beliefs could be justified is if some of them are epistemically privileged—otherwise they are all ultimately unjustifiable. The central problem facing such a position is to make plausible the suggestion that at least some moral beliefs are properly viewed as epistemically privileged. And this is no small problem since all the concerns that raise general epistemic worries about our moral views devolve onto any particular proposal one might make to the effect that some subset of those views is epistemically privileged.

In any case, among those who think some moral beliefs are foundational, many have treated the privileged moral beliefs as roughly on a par with perceptual judgments and suggested that the justification of our various moral principles parallels the kind of justification our scientific principles receive from perception.[26] Others have thought that our privileged moral beliefs concern, instead, the most general and abstract principles of morality, and that these in turn serve to justify (or not) our other beliefs deductively. The crucial difference between these views is found primarily in the kind of inferential support each believes the foundational beliefs provide for the others. I think the difference is more or less fairly captured by saying the first group treats the justification of our nonfoundational beliefs as involving inductive, abductive, and explanatory considerations, whereas the other treats the justification of nonfoundational beliefs as a matter of showing that they follow deductively, with the help of nonmoral assumptions, from the foundational beliefs. Either way, at least some moral beliefs—the foundational ones—are held to be justified independently of whatever inferential/evidential relations they might bear to other beliefs.

Coherentists, in contrast, reject precisely this view, maintaining that whatever justification our moral beliefs enjoy is due to the relations they bear to other things we believe. Those who think the gap between nonmoral and moral beliefs (or at least between nonevaluative and evaluative beliefs) is forever unbridgeable, maintain that all our moral beliefs receive what justification they have only from other moral (or at least evaluative) beliefs. Others, though, hold that, whatever the nature of the "is"/"ought" gap, it does not work to insulate completely our moral judgments from nonmoral (and nonevaluative) considerations. On their view, metaphysical, epistemological, social, and psychological considerations might all be relevant to the justification of our moral views. Significantly, defenders of this version of moral coherentism needn't hold that nonmoral beliefs *alone* either entail or in some other way inferentially support moral conclusions; they may well hold that our moral views themselves establish the epistemic relevance of nonmoral considerations. This means that a coherentist can accept all the standard arguments for the "is"/"ought" gap without being committed to holding that all the evidence we have for our moral views come from moral considerations. In fact, given just how implausible it is to see any of our moral views as epistemically privileged, a great attraction of coherentism is its ability to make sense of our moral views being (to a greater or lesser extent) justified even in the face of the "is"/"ought" gap.

It's worth mentioning that an epistemological coherentist might well end up holding a kind of (nonepistemic) foundationalism with respect to morality. Here I have in mind a view that defends, on coherentist grounds, the idea that there is some single criterion for, or some fundamental principle of, morality. Someone might argue that an action is right if and only if it would be approved by the agent on full and informed reflection and then rely on considerations of what an agent would approve under those conditions to defend certain moral principles. Or someone might similarly rely on the view that an action is right if and only if it would be rational for the agent to perform it; or if and only if it is licensed by rules people could rationally agree to; or if and only if it satisfies the Categorical Imperative; or if and only if it maximizes overall utility; or if and only if it accords with God's will. In a perfectly reasonable sense, each of these views proposes a "foundation" for morality. Yet the arguments standardly offered in their defense regularly appeal, in just the way coherentism would predict, to a wide variety of other considerations (concerning what people value, how they reason, the effect their attitudes have on their actions, the authority they accord to their moral views) as evidence for the fundamental principle in question. For all coherentism says, any one of these proposals might be true. Moreover, any one of them might be justifiably believed by a coherentist. What coherentism is committed to is the claim that, if any one of these views is justifiably believed by a person, it will, and must, be in light of what else she believes. None of these views, and no other view, is justified except in this way (according to the coherentist).

The heart of the difference between foundationalism and coherentism, as the distinction applies generally, is found in coherentism's rejection of the view that there is an epistemically privileged subset of beliefs (moral or not), and its rejection of the view that all other beliefs are justified only in virtue

of the relations they bear to such privileged beliefs. This difference turns on what foundationalism asserts and coherentism denies.[27] Yet coherentism goes beyond the denial and offers a positive account of what it takes for a person's belief to be epistemically justified.[28]

The coherentist's positive account involves articulating a conception of what it is for one belief to cohere with others, and then arguing that a person's belief is epistemically justified only if, and then to the extent that, the belief in question coheres well with her other beliefs. There is, on the coherentist's view, no subset of beliefs that counts as epistemically privileged (at least none whose privilege is independent of the inferential connections its members bear to other beliefs). Instead, beliefs, moral and otherwise, enjoy whatever epistemic credentials they have thanks to the evidential/inferential relations they bear to other beliefs. The more and better the relations, the greater the degree of coherence enjoyed by the set and the stronger the justification. Predictably, different versions of coherentism emerge as different evidential/inferential relations are countenanced as appropriate.[29] Also predictably, precisely how the details are filled in will make a huge difference to both the stringency of the requirements imposed and the plausibility of the theory that results. What all the versions share, though, is the view that the extent to which a belief is justified turns simply on the evidential/inferential relations it bears to other beliefs.

In characterizing coherentism in this way, I am steering clear (as I did with foundationalism) of attributing to it some of the more extreme views it often travels with—for instance, the view that all justification is global and nonlinear, and the view that to be justified in believing anything a person must believe of her beliefs that they form a coherent system, and the view that coherence itself provides evidence that a system of belief is likely to be true. While a coherentist might ultimately be forced into one or another of these views by her own arguments, she might not be. What matters to her coherentism, as I see it, is that she thinks (negatively) that there is no epistemically privileged class of beliefs and (positively) that beliefs are justified only if, and then to the extent that, they cohere well with the other beliefs one holds.

To forestall a natural confusion, I should emphasize that coherentism, no less than foundationalism, can admit that not all of our beliefs, not even all of our justified beliefs, are actually inferred from others. We often believe things thanks to the promptings of experience, for example, even though we do not infer what we believe from anything else we already believe. Such beliefs are, in an important sense, cognitively spontaneous. Yet the fact that they are caused in the way they are doesn't preclude them from standing in various inferential/evidential relations to the other things we believe.[30] And it is how they stand, *vis á vis* these other beliefs, that on the coherentist's account determines whether they are justified.[31]

I am going to put off, for a time, offering a positive account of coherence and its relation to justification, turning first to one argument, *the regress argument,* that is commonly thought to show that no version of coherentism has a chance of being right regardless of the specific account of coherence it offers. I will, in the next two sections, argue that a coherentist can consistently recognize the force of the regress argument and yet satisfyingly stop the regress without having her position collapse into a version of foundationalism. With that argument made, I will then offer a positive account of coherence as a backdrop for replying to several other objections to coherentism many have found persuasive.

The Regress Argument

The regress argument is by far the most influential argument against both coherentism in general and coherentism as applied to our moral beliefs. As this argument would have it, if any beliefs are justified at all, some must be justified independently of the relations they bear to other beliefs. In other words, coherentism has got to be false.

The argument, which goes back at least to Aristotle,[32] begins with the assumption that one belief provides justification for another only if it is, itself, justified. For any given belief, then, the question arises: what sort of justification does it enjoy? If it is justified by other beliefs from which it is inferable, then the beliefs on which its justification depends must themselves be justified and we can raise the same question about them, and then again about whatever beliefs justify those. If we are to avoid an infinite regress, there are only two possibilities (compatible with holding that the initial belief is justified). Either:

(i) The path of justification from one belief to those from which it is inferable, to those from which they are inferable, leads back to the initial belief, in which case the justification comes objectionably full circle; or

(ii) There are some justified beliefs that are justified independently of the support they might receive from others (say, because they are self-justifying or because they are justified by something other than a belief, perhaps an experience), in which case the regress can be satisfyingly stopped.

Foundationalists have taken comfort from this argument thinking, first, that coherentism is saddled with defending some version of the apparently indefensible (i) and, second, that the kind of beliefs their theories identify as epistemically privileged would play just the role that (ii) makes clear needs to be filled.

Skeptical and nonskeptical foundationalists alike have relied on the regress argument to attack coherentism. According to nonskeptical foundationalists, there are in fact beliefs that can stop the regress, and they serve as the foundation on which the justification of all other beliefs depends. According to skeptical foundationalists, there are no such beliefs (concerning the domain in question), so although foundationalism provides the correct account of what it would take for beliefs to be justified, no relevant belief is in fact justified—regardless of what other beliefs one holds.[33]

Against both skeptical and nonskeptical foundationalists, coherentists hold (at least) one of three things: that the way in which one's justification for a

belief might come full circle is not, after all, objectionable; or that a coherentist might, despite appearances, acknowledge that there are some justified beliefs that are justified independently of the support they might receive from others; or that there's some third option. Although I am tempted by the first option, in the course of what follows I shall defend the second as available to a coherentist. To that end, I'll argue that on one interpretation the initial assumption of the regress argument (that one belief can justify another only if it is, itself, justified) makes the argument too strong even for a foundationalist to resist, while on another interpretation a coherentist can, consistent with coherentism, stop the regress in the same way a foundationalist can—by appeal to beliefs that are justifiably held despite their having no inferential support. Either way, the regress argument won't work to support foundationalism as over against coherentism.

Now nonskeptical foundationalism has commonly been thought to face at least three significant difficulties. First, there seem to be no uncontroversial candidates for the role of foundational belief. Second, even if there were some plausible candidates, the foundation they would provide would, as many think, be too paltry to support anything like the number and kind of beliefs we take to be justified. And third, once we distinguish between a belief being justified and a person being justified in holding a belief, it looks as if even putatively foundational beliefs won't stop the regress, because people won't justifiably hold them in the absence of evidence, and that evidence, in turn, must be such that they are justified in accepting it—and that simply re-invites the regress.

All three difficulties have been taken, at various times, by various people, to pose insuperable difficulties for anyone hoping to establish the nonskeptical view that our beliefs are sometimes justified. While I will briefly discuss each of the worries, the third is, I will suggest, eventually the most telling (although not in the form it usually takes). And the right response to the difficulty, I will argue, is not to embrace a skeptical foundationalism but to reject the view that justified belief requires the sort of privileged beliefs foundationalism champions. Let me go through the difficulties in order.

First, as I've said, many have thought that there are no beliefs that might plausibly be treated as foundational. This problem has seemed especially pressing since, traditionally, foundational beliefs have been credited with all sorts of wonderful properties, with being, for instance, infallible, or indubitable, or incorrigible, or certain. The more exalted the claims made on their behalf, the less plausible it is that any belief lives up to the claims. Yet foundational beliefs needn't have any especially dramatic properties to stop the regress. They needn't be infallible, nor indubitable, nor incorrigible, nor certain. All they need to be is: justified not on account of the inferential relations they bear to other beliefs. They can even work to stop the regress if what justification they do have is both over-ridable (in the face of the inferential implications of other beliefs) and underminable (in certain contexts where their presumptive justification disappears). As long as there are some beliefs that are justified independently of any support they may receive from other beliefs, the regress can be brought to a halt. That there might be such beliefs is at least plausible, one might grant.

It could be that our beliefs to the effect that we feel pain, or see red, or seem to be thinking, or (to move to beliefs with a moral content) that cruelty is wrong, or courage honorable, or pleasure good, are each justifiably believed, independently of the support they might receive from other beliefs, as long as they are neither over-ridden by contrary evidence nor undermined by the circumstances. Each of these, one might think, could serve as suitable stopping places in an otherwise infinite regress of justification.

But then, second, to the extent these beliefs, or some others, are plausible candidates for stopping the regress, people have thought such beliefs would be so few in number or so narrow in scope or so devoid of implications that only a very small percentage of the beliefs we're inclined to think are justified actually are. So even if wholesale skepticism goes too far, the few beliefs that (let us grant) are justified independently of the inferential relations they bear to others, and the few beliefs they might adequately support, apparently constitute an embarrassingly small collection of relatively little interest. We may then be justified in believing a few things, the worry goes, but we are likely to have on this view no justification for our beliefs about the external world, about other minds, about the future, or about substantive moral issues. A reasonable response to this worry, though, is not to think that such beliefs are unjustified, but rather to think the worry arises only if one over-constricts one's view either of which beliefs count as foundational or of what those beliefs might serve to support. The nonskeptical foundationalist can, with more than a little plausibility, maintain that any theory that purports to articulate our notion of justification has got to be wrong if it has as an implication that virtually none of our everyday beliefs are ever justified.

Finally, third, it has seemed to many that we shouldn't in any case grant what I've been allowing for the sake of the argument: that there might be beliefs that could be justifiably held in any way independent of the relations they bear to other beliefs. For it looks as if, whatever beliefs a foundationalist settles on as appropriate regress stoppers, a person will be justified in holding the belief only if she has some evidence for it, some reason to think it true. This thought introduces a collection of arguments many have thought decisively undermine stopping the regress in the way the foundationalist proposes. Not all of the arguments in the collection are, I think, compelling. Working through the dialectic they introduce, however, is a useful way of showing, I'll suggest, that the best defense available to a foundationalist provides as well the resources a coherentist needs to resist the regress argument.

The first member of the collection of arguments appeals to the basing requirement and interprets it as demanding (what might be called) *doxastic ascent.* As this argument would have it, a person holds a belief because it is justified, and so satisfies the basing requirement, only if she both believes of *it* (the belief in question), that it has some epistemic credential, and holds the belief on those grounds.[34] So, for someone to satisfy the basing requirement

when believing that there is something red before her, she must believe of her belief that, say, she formed it under the appropriate circumstances (e.g., in good light, and thanks to her visual apparatus working properly); and for her to satisfy the basing requirement when believing that some law is just she must believe of her belief, say, that she formed it under the appropriate circumstances as well (e.g., when free of the influence of self-interest, and thanks to her appreciating the law's real effects on all).[35]

Interpreted in this way, the basing requirement is met only if a person has beliefs concerning her beliefs to the effect that they are justified or have some property in virtue of which they are justified. But that is to allege that her justifiably holding the first belief (whatever its content, regardless of her circumstances) requires that she have another, distinct, belief that serves to justify her holding it. Acknowledging that requirement is just to abandon the claim that the belief in question is appropriately foundational—even if it is infallible, or indubitable, or incorrigible, or certain, or whatever. Moreover, if the second order belief is to justify holding the "foundational" belief, it too must be justifiably held, and that requires yet another belief, this time concerning it . . . and we're off on a new regress, but now with no hope of stopping it by appeal to beliefs that are justifiably held not in virtue of the inferential support they receive from other beliefs. Many coherentists have thought this argument establishes that foundationalists no less than coherentists must find a way out of the regress other than that provided by appealing to some privileged class of beliefs.

Against this argument, a foundationalist might well, and I think would rightly, resist the proposed interpretation of the basing requirement. A foundationalist can and should deny that to be justified in believing something we must believe of the belief that it is justified. What the requirement properly understood demands, the foundationalist should say, is that, if a person's holding of a belief is to count as justified, the belief must in fact be held because it is justified, but she needn't have any beliefs to the effect that her belief is justified. What matters is that she believes as she does because of her evidence rather than, say, because of wishful thinking or dogmatic faith. She needn't even be aware that her beliefs are regulated by her evidence, as long as they are. Thus a person may have a set of well-justified beliefs even if she is unaware of herself as a believer—as long as her beliefs are, in fact, themselves appropriately sensitive to the evidence she has.[36] If this is right, a system of justified beliefs needn't have anywhere in it a belief to the effect that "My belief that _____ is _____." Obviously, a person who lacks beliefs about her beliefs will not be in a position to offer a direct justification of her *holding* the beliefs she does, since she is (by hypothesis) unaware of herself as holding beliefs. Yet she would still be able to justify her particular beliefs; she would be able to offer reasons for believing as she does, by appealing to the available evidence (such as she believes it to be).

Of course, once a person does acquire beliefs about her beliefs, all sorts of worries may emerge about her own reliability that can well and truly shake

up her justification. And, as it happens, we are all aware of ourselves and aware as well that we often form false beliefs. This fact about us means that the thought "I might in this case be mistaken" needs to be taken into account in evaluating the support our beliefs provide for one another. What self-awareness as epistemic agents introduces into the mix is an ever-relevant concern with the possibility that we might be mistaken. Still, the thought that we might be mistaken, if we have no particular reason to think we actually are, presumably doesn't provide much reason in itself for thinking our view false, just as the thought that all the particles in a room might rush to one corner of it, doesn't provide much reason in itself for thinking they will.

In any case, I think the foundationalist would be right to resist the demand for doxastic ascent as a condition on justifiable belief. But there is a variation on the first argument that captures its spirit without insisting on doxastic ascent. It picks up on the regress argument's initial assumption and turns it against foundationalism by insisting that a belief is not justifiably held at all unless one has at least some evidence for it—some reason to think it true (although the reason need not involve any claim about one's beliefs). A belief held without reason, the argument would have it, is not justifiably held. I'll call this the *epistemic ascent* argument since, in demanding that each justified belief be backed by some reasons that support it, it suggests we should always be able to ascend from one belief to the reasons that back it. The upshot of this assumption seems immediately devastating to the foundationalist: a belief unsupported by other beliefs—the content of which constitute the available evidence—will be one believed for no reason and so will be unjustified. And this means it can't serve to stop the regress. The very immediacy of this upshot makes it plausible for the foundationalist to claim the argument in effect begs the question by assuming all justified beliefs are inferentially justified. In fact, the very point the foundationalist tries to make with the regress argument is that some beliefs must be justified independently of the support they receive from others.

Two different moves are available to foundationalists here. Foundationalists might accept the argument's assumption that every belief justifiably held must be supported by reasons and yet maintain that some beliefs are justified by reasons that are not the contents of a belief.[37] Or they might reject the assumption and maintain that some beliefs are justified in the absence of any positive reason to believe them.

Against the first option, I would press a version of what is often called *internalism.*[38] This view starts with the observation that, when it comes to people being justified in believing as they do, the reasons *they have* for believing one way or another must be available to them. Then it contends that the reasons become appropriately available only when the considerations that count *as reasons* become the content of those people's beliefs (or the content of something so like a belief, for instance, "an awareness that . . .", as not to be worth distinguishing from belief in this context).[39] On this view, the considerations a person has for a belief come into her cognitive economy

appropriately, and so become available to her, only thanks to being the content of some cognitive state.[40]

An externalist who, for example, treats a person's beliefs as justified by the fact that they are appropriately caused (e.g., directly by experience or by a reliable belief-forming mechanism) will have to hold either that a person has no reason to believe as she nonetheless justifiably does, or that what reason she has might be unavailable to her despite its serving to justify her belief. The first is no help if we let stand the present argument's assumption that a belief is justified only if the person has some reason to hold it. The second commits one to saying implausibly that considerations unavailable to a person can count as reasons *that person has* for believing one way rather than another.

Rejecting externalism is compatible, clearly, with acknowledging that when *we* recognize that someone's beliefs are appropriately caused, that fact might well provide *us* with reason to accept what she believes; just as, when we know someone's beliefs are not appropriately caused, we might have reason to reject what she believes even as we recognize her as justified in holding her (false) beliefs. Nevertheless, as long as she remains unaware of the causal pedigree of her belief, it seems strange, to say the least, to think that the pedigree provides *her* with any reasons whatsoever. It is that strange claim the externalist being considered here has to hold.

Someone might suggest, though, that both coherence and the basing relation are, by my own account, reasons people have for believing as they do even when they have no beliefs concerning either of them. After all, I am committed to treating both as conditions on justified believing, and yet I admit, even insisted on behalf of the foundationalist, that a person might justifiably hold her beliefs without having beliefs about them, and so without believing of her beliefs either that they are coherent or that they satisfy the basing requirement. But this suggestion involves a crucial misunderstanding. Neither coherence nor the basing relation are offered as *reasons* for the person in question to believe anything (unless she comes to have beliefs concerning them). Of course, according to coherentism, what matters to the justification of her belief is the extent to which the belief being evaluated (as justified or not) coheres with her other beliefs, and what matters to her being justified in believing as she does is that her belief is appropriately based on her evidence. Yet what counts as a person's evidence for a belief is not its relative coherence with her other beliefs, nor her sensitivity to the evidence, but rather the content of those beliefs of hers that provide deductive, inductive, and explanatory support for the content of the belief in question. Relative coherence is a reflection of the extent of that support, not an extra bit of support.

Foundationalists, however, might accept these points and admit that what count as reasons an agent has for believing must be the content of some belief or some suitably similar cognitive state. They still can and should take the second option and maintain that the epistemic ascent argument simply begs the question by assuming that all justified beliefs are justified by something that provides a person with reason to believe as she does. The force of the

argument dissolves, they might say, once we distinguish between permissive and positive justification. A belief is permissively justified, the suggestion goes, when a person does not have, on balance, reason to reject it,[41] whereas a belief is positively justified when a person has, on balance, positive reason to hold it. With this distinction in hand, the foundationalist can grant that, when we're talking about positive justification, no belief is justified unless a person has some evidence for it, and yet insist that, when it comes to stopping the regress, all that's needed are some permissively justified beliefs.

Whether the regress can actually be stopped this way depends on how the assumption that starts the regress is interpreted. As originally put, that assumption was: one belief provides justification for another only if it is, itself, justified. With the distinction between permissive and positive justification on hand, though, we can distinguish two relevant readings of this assumption. On one reading, the assumption is: One belief provides *positive* justification for another only if it is, itself, *positively* justified. On the other, it is: One belief provides *positive* justification for another only if it is, itself, *permissively* justified.[42] Read in the first way, the assumption makes an appeal to permissively justified beliefs irrelevant, for on that interpretation beliefs that are merely permissively justified provide no positive justification. But this strong reading of the assumption isn't available to the foundationalist once she has accepted the internalist's claim that all positive support is provided by (the contents of) beliefs. On her own view, the privileged class of beliefs that are supposed to stop the regress (whatever they are) are themselves, at least initially, not justified by others—and that means they are not positively justified.[43] Fortunately, though, the second reading of the assumption is both strong enough to get the regress going and weak enough to allow the regress to come to an end in beliefs that require no others for their justification. Thus, by relying on the second reading of the assumption, the foundationalist is able to put the regress in motion without falling victim to its momentum.

This distinction between permissive and positive justification, and the resulting appeal to permissively justified beliefs, has at least three advantages. First, it can explain how the regress might be stopped; it comes to an end if and when we arrive at beliefs that are permissively justified. Second, it leaves room for regress-stoppers that, despite their "regress-stopping" role, might be both over-ridable and underminable; permissively justified beliefs will lose their status when, for instance, new evidence is acquired that tells against them. Third, it avoids saying that among a person's reasons for believing as she does are reasons constituted by considerations that are unavailable to her; whether a belief counts as permissively justified turns only on whether the other things she believes provide, on balance, evidence against the belief.[44]

The foundationalist is thus well placed to argue that all we need, to stop the regress, are some permissively justified beliefs; the regress comes to an end when we appeal to the contents of beliefs we actually hold that we have (on balance) no reason to reject. There is no need for the foundationalist to attribute to them any special properties, and there may well be enough of them to support an extensive and plausibly rich set of inferentially justified

beliefs. This means an appeal to permissively justified beliefs as appropriate regress-stoppers serves the foundationalist well when it comes to avoiding the three difficulties, mentioned earlier, that regularly haunt foundationalism. It is, in any case, the only plausible position available to those who grant that what reasons a person has are always found in the contents of her beliefs.

Strikingly, though, coherentists can admit permissively justified beliefs, and rely on them to stop the regress in just the way the foundationalist is proposing, *without abandoning coherentism.* Such a coherentist will still deny that there is an *epistemically privileged set* of beliefs that enjoy their privilege independently of their inferential connections—since which beliefs count as permissively justified depends upon the evidential/inferential relations they bear to others. Moreover, such a coherentist can continue to hold that what positive reason we have for any belief will still always depend solely on what other beliefs a person has. This sort of coherentism, then, grants the regress argument's initial assumption: that a belief can provide (positive) justification for another belief only if it is itself (permissively) justified. It grants as well that, to the extent an unacceptable regress threatens, it can be brought to a stop with the recognition that beliefs can be justified in either of two senses. What it denies is foundationalism's characteristic—and defining—claim that some beliefs (the regress stoppers) are epistemically privileged independently of the inferential/evidential relations they bear to other beliefs. It insists instead that whether a belief can serve to stop the regress, whether it counts as permissively justified or not, is fully determined by the evidential relations it bears to other beliefs, and that when it does so count it itself enjoys no positive justification, even as it is available to provide positive support for other beliefs.

The coherentist won't hold that the permissively justified beliefs that bring the regress to a stop have anything else to recommend them independently of how they relate to other beliefs; their primary role is to provide the epistemic input—the initial bits of evidence—one justifiably relies upon in seeking out views that are positively justified.

Nor will the coherentist say that every belief spontaneously formed will count as permissively justified. Even if one forms a belief noninferentially, say as a direct result of some experience, whether it counts as permissively justified will depend on what else one believes. If I turn my head and come to think there's a dog at my feet, the proven past reliability of beliefs of this kind gives me reason to trust this belief as well, and it will count as one I am positively (and not just permissively) justified in believing, even though it is cognitively spontaneous. Whereas, if I find myself yet again confident that this time, finally, I will win the lottery, I have ample reason to distrust the belief, and if I believe it any way, it will count as unjustified (and not permissively justified at all). In the great majority of cases, we might expect, people will have various background beliefs that serve either to support or to undermine the new beliefs they just happen to find themselves with.

And, standardly, any belief's status as merely permissively justified will be comparatively unstable, in that it is likely either to emerge as positively justified as it becomes intertwined with, and in various ways supported by,

other beliefs or to become unjustified as one discovers reasons not to trust it. Looked at over time, one's initially merely permissively justified beliefs will regularly get swept up by others so as to become positively justified (as we find reason to think them true) or get sifted out as unjustified (as we find reason to think them suspect).

Permissively Justified Beliefs and Positive Support

As long as beliefs that are merely permissively justified can provide positive justification for other beliefs, foundationalists and coherentists alike can successfully stop the regress, and the regress argument will tell not at all against coherentism. However, if permissively justified beliefs cannot provide positive justification, an appeal to permissively justified beliefs won't help either the coherentist or the foundationalist, when it comes to stopping the regress.

So we need to ask: Can beliefs we have no reason to accept really provide positive support? The temptation is to think not. Even if some permissively justified beliefs (say, the visually prompted belief that there's something red in front of me) can serve to justify others (say, that there's something colored in front of me), it looks as if not all permissively justified beliefs can play this role. In fact, people often seem to hold beliefs that are apparently permissively justified (since they seem to have on balance no reason to reject them) that pretty clearly couldn't serve to justify any other belief. Wild hunches, weird forebodings, and spurious superstitions are, after all, commonplace; and permissively justified though they may be, such beliefs seem not at all able to justify those beliefs that are based on them.

Now a foundationalist might step in at this point hoping to re-establish a role for epistemically privileged beliefs. Unlike coherentists, she is able to distinguish those permissively justified beliefs that can justify others from those that can't, by treating some as epistemically privileged and others not. She might hold that the difference is found in whether the person is being epistemically responsible in holding the belief or in whether the belief is properly caused by experience, or in whether it is suitably concerned with one's private experience. It is open to the foundationalist to hold that epistemic responsibility, or proper etiology, or appropriate content, might mark the difference between those permissively justified beliefs that can, and those that can't, provide positive justification for other beliefs. A coherentist, in contrast, has to say that all permissively justified beliefs can serve to justify other beliefs, if she is to avoid a surreptitious appeal to privileged beliefs.

Problems arise for the foundationalist, however, as soon as one turns to the question: Why do the specific features identified (whatever they are) make a difference to one's justification? Any attempt to distinguish between permissively justified beliefs that will and those that won't provide positive evidence seems inevitably to face a dilemma.

In every case, the proposed grounds for drawing the distinction will either involve considerations that are potentially unavailable to the person in ques-

tion or not. If they do, then the account will involve, I'll argue, an implausible kind of externalism; if they don't, then by adducing considerations that are available to that person, the view will in the end not be able to mark a difference among permissively justified beliefs in a way that counts only some as capable of providing positive support for other beliefs.

Suppose the foundationalist embraces externalism and (for instance) takes the etiology of the particular belief to be crucial to its ability to justify other beliefs. In a particular case, a person might then hold a belief that lacks the proper history and yet be unaware of that fact. And so far as her evidence is concerned, the belief will be no different from other beliefs of hers that enjoy the proper history. When it comes to the evidence she has, her merely permissively justified beliefs are indistinguishable. That the difference would nonetheless make a difference to her being able justifiably to rely on her belief to justify others seems quite implausible.

It's easy to imagine situations in which two people have the very same beliefs, rely on them identically in reaching various other beliefs, and so are *apparently* equally justified in what they believe, even though they differ (unbeknownst to them) in what originally caused their permissively justified beliefs. One of the two might be in the hands of an evil demon or entranced by a virtual reality machine while the other is not, or one might be experiencing a drug-induced hallucination while the other is really living the life the first imagines, or one might be undergoing an optical illusion indistinguishable ("from the inside") from the accurate visual experiences the other is having.[45] In each of these cases, if we were to assume that only those beliefs with the proper etiology will serve to justify other beliefs, we would be committed to holding that those who have no reason whatsoever to think they are victims of deception, manipulation, drugs, or illusion, though they are, differ substantially, in the justification they have for believing as they do, from those others who are not victims but who have exactly the same grounds available to them for believing as they do. No doubt they are not equally well-placed epistemically. No doubt too we have reason to distinguish between them. Yet when it comes to the justification each has for her own view, they appear to be identically situated. Similar concerns plague any other externalist proposal a foundationalist might offer as grounds for distinguishing among permissively justified beliefs when it comes to their ability to contribute positively to the justification of other beliefs.

Alternatively, and for good reason, the foundationalist might avoid externalism and suggest marking the distinction between permissively justified beliefs that can, and those that can't, provide positive support, by appealing to considerations the person in question has available. But then the considerations adduced will either tell against certain putatively permissively justified beliefs, and so establish the beliefs as not permissively justified at all, or tell in favor of certain beliefs, and so establish them as positively justified. If the first, if the person herself has reason not to hold the belief in question, then coherentist and foundationalist alike will rightly resist seeing the beliefs that are at issue as capable of establishing positive justification, since the beliefs are not even permissively justified. If the second, if the person has reason to rely on the belief, then the belief is positively justified and we simply shift the issue back to the status of the considerations the foundationalist identifies and ask of them whether they can provide positive support. At some point, if an infinite regress is to be avoided, we will inevitably appeal to some permissively justified belief as providing positive support for others, but at this point with no grounds for saying that only some such permissively justified beliefs can play this role.

Plainly, the objection I've pressed against the externalist proposal is not irresistible. One might want to insist that people who are identically situated *so far as they can tell* still differ when it comes to how justified they are in holding the view they share. And insisting on this would not be unmotivated, since otherwise one is committed to the still apparently counter-intuitive idea that beliefs one has no reason to hold might nonetheless provide grounds for holding other beliefs. Thus an important part of the coherentist's position turns on being able to defuse this concern. So let me turn to that.

I suspect that resistance to the idea that permissively justified beliefs might provide positive support for other beliefs is bolstered substantially by the cases of wild bunches, weird forebodings, spurious superstitions, etc., that I have already mentioned. These seem to be cases where a person's permissively justified beliefs pretty clearly couldn't serve to justify others. Yet the appearance is misleading, not usually because the beliefs can serve to justify others but because (when the cases are compelling) the beliefs are not actually permissively justified. A great many of the supposedly permissively justified beliefs we reject as unable to support others are beliefs we think the person herself has reason to suspect (even if she doesn't in fact suspect them). In fact, cases of wild hunches, weird forebodings, and spurious superstitions, count as *wild, weird,* and *spurious,* precisely because we think of the beliefs in question as ones the person has reason to reject.

The same general point holds for cases that don't involve wild, weird, or spurious beliefs but instead appeal, say, to beliefs that a person recognizes to be unsupported in situations where (we think) they have reason to think support is needed (as when they should realize that the belief is, in the absence of positive evidence, unlikely to be true). All the time, our expectations concerning which background beliefs a person will naturally hold regularly influence our particular judgments concerning whether they are justified in relying on some putatively permissively justified belief to justify others. As the coherentist sees things, though, what matters to the person's justification is that she actually have those background beliefs, and if she doesn't, then they will neither tell against nor support her beliefs. As coherentism would predict, even beliefs we consider to be wild, weird, or spurious are beliefs we simultaneously recognize to be such that people, in another time or culture, would be justified in accepting. We are not, of course, thereby expressing an endorsement of what they believe, but we are acknowledging them as justifiably believing as they do given the evidence available to them. If we narrow our view to those beliefs that really are permissively justified—those the person in question actually has no reason, on balance, to reject—the plausibility of seeing these beliefs as all capable of providing some positive support for others increases dramatically.

Still, one might be inclined to think that any belief one has, on balance, no reason to hold can't possibly serve to justify anything else. This will seem reasonable, even unavoidable, as long as we think of evidential relations roughly on the model of logical relations as simply justification preserving in the way logical relations are truth preserving. If evidential relations among beliefs serve merely as conduits of justification, one belief will receive positive support from others only to the extent those others themselves have some positive support to convey. On this view, some belief may, thanks to the support it receives from several other beliefs, itself enjoy more positive justification than any of the others, yet the total positive justification it can enjoy is limited nonetheless by the positive justification those other beliefs collectively have to offer. Underwriting this view of evidential relations is the intuition that one belief can be seen as epistemically valuable in light of the relation it bears to others only if the others are themselves epistemically valuable. Just as one action will count as good because of its consequences only if its consequences are good, so too some belief will count as positively justified by other beliefs only if those others are positively justified. Clearly, if this view is right, then beliefs that are merely permissively justified will be useless when it comes to providing positive support for others and an appeal to them won't serve to stop the regress on behalf of either foundationalists or coherentists.

What the coherentist must say (and the foundationalist will have reason to say as well) is that the intuition, and the view of justification it underwrites, are mistaken. Fortunately, in ethics and in epistemology, there's an alternative view that has its own appeal: that the value of an action or a belief depends upon both what it is related to and, more importantly for our purposes, how it is related to them. The intuition here is that the value of the whole may not be a function of the value of its parts considered independently of how they are related.[46] Just as things that are valueless considered in isolation may come to be related in such a way as to constitute something of significant value, so too beliefs that enjoy no positive justification considered in isolation may come to be evidentially related in such a way as to constitute a set of positively justified beliefs.[47]

The appeal of this alternative view depends upon our ability to see the evidential relations themselves as making a difference to the justifactory status of the beliefs they relate. They might be seen as making a difference in either of two ways: The relations themselves might work to enhance and not merely preserve justificatory value; or they might serve as a condition of the justifactory value of the beliefs they relate. The first suggestion, which is the more straightforward (but I think in the end less attractive) one, would enable us to appeal to the justifactory value of the evidential relations when it comes to explaining how it is that a belief supported by another that is merely permissively justified may in light of the relation they bear to one another count as positively justified.[48] The second suggestion would pick up on the fact that the common distinction between things that are good in themselves and things that are good for their consequences can be supplemented with a

distinction between things that are only conditionally good and those that are unconditionally good.[49] The idea, then, would be that our beliefs, to the extent they are justified, are only conditionally justified—the condition being set by their being appropriately related to other beliefs the person has. Significantly, this latter view needn't be accompanied by any commitment to there being beliefs (or evidential relations) that are unconditionally justified; it would be enough if some beliefs might be conditionally justified. In any case, either account would serve to explain how it is that a belief's being properly related to another that is only permissively justified might render it positively justified.[50]

A full story following up either suggestion would involve explaining the distinctive epistemic contribution the evidential relations are supposed to play. However the details go, the epistemic role of such relations—their status as *evidential* relations—will presumably be bound up with their having a systematic if indirect connection to truth. Of course, evidential relations won't be such that, when they hold among beliefs, the beliefs are thereby sure to be, or even likely to be, true. Rather, I suspect, the relations that are in fact evidential will be those determined by canons of reasoning that are truth conducive (and not just truth preserving) in that systematically respecting them would have the tendency of shifting views towards the truth in the long haul, given accurate information.[51] Obviously, a person might respect the relevant canons of reasoning over time and so hold beliefs that are evidentially related (on this view) and yet, because of lack of evidence, or misleading evidence, actually consistently have evidence for false views. But in these cases, as well as happier ones, if the beliefs are in fact supported by the weight of the evidence available to the person, they count as justified, at least according to the coherentist.[52] In any case, while coherentism is committed to there being a fact of the matter as to whether, and to what extent, two beliefs are evidentially related, it is not wedded to any particular account of those evidential relations.

As should be clear, coherentism, at least the kind I'm advancing, grants that there are conditions on justifiable believing that may hold (or not) independently of what a person has reason to think. In particular, to the extent coherentism defines the relative coherence of a set of beliefs in terms of relations among those beliefs (that a person might have no beliefs concerning), the coherentist must accept a kind of externalism about justification.[53] Whether a person's beliefs are actually appropriately related turns on considerations that might be unavailable to her. The appropriate evidential relations might hold when she has no beliefs concerning them, or in cases where she thinks they don't, or they might fail to hold even in cases where she thinks they do hold. What matters is that her beliefs are appropriately related, not that she thinks they are; and if she does think they are, whether that belief is itself justified will turn on whether it is appropriately related to her other beliefs, not on whether she thinks it is.

Importantly, though, the externalism here concerns not what counts as a person's reasons for believing as she does but rather what counts as a justified

belief. Nor does it allow that people identically situated, when it comes to the evidence available to them, might differ in the justification they have for holding their beliefs. This sort of externalism is virtually unavoidable if we hope to get any purchase on there being a difference between some belief being justified and a person thinking of it as justified. Even if we were to end up advancing criteria of justification that are sensitive to the criteria the person in question accepts, we would need to distinguish between a belief satisfying those criteria and a person thinking it does.

The Nature and Role of Coherence

To address several of the concerns one might have about the coherence theory of justification, I need now to say something more specific about the connection between the relative coherence of a set of beliefs and the evidential/inferential relations that hold among the beliefs. According to coherentism, I've said, a belief is justified only if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things the person believes.[54] Along the way, though, I've also attributed to the coherentist the view that a belief is (i) permissively justified if and only if the weight of the evidence available to the person does not, on balance, tell against the belief; and (ii) positively justified if and only if the weight of the evidence, again on balance, tells in favor of the belief (just how positively justified it is will be a matter of how strong the evidence, on balance, is). Seeing how these characterizations of justification relate to one another is crucial to seeing the sort of coherence theory I am advancing.

How then does the relative coherence of a set of beliefs reflect the evidential relations that hold among those beliefs? And how does the relative coherence of one's beliefs relate to their being justified? I will take these questions in order.

The relative coherence of a set of beliefs is a matter of whether, and to what degree, the set exhibits (what I will call) *evidential consistency, connectedness,* and *comprehensiveness.*[55] The first, evidential consistency, sets a necessary and sufficient condition for (minimal) coherence, while the second and third, connectedness and comprehensiveness, serve, when present, to increase the relative coherence of a set that is minimally coherent. Each, though, is a property of a set of beliefs, if it is at all, only in virtue of the evidential relations that hold among the contents of the beliefs in the set.

Thus, a set of beliefs counts as (minimally) coherent if and only if the set is evidentially consistent—that is, if and only if the weight of the evidence provided by the various beliefs in the set don't tell, on balance, against any of the others.[56] Given an evidentially consistent, and so at least minimally coherent, set, just how coherent the set is will be a matter of the connectedness and comprehensiveness it exhibits.

Clearly, a set of beliefs can count as minimally coherent even if none of the beliefs in the set are evidentially supported by any of the others. However, an evidentially consistent (and so coherent) set might contain some beliefs

that are, to a greater or lesser extent, evidentially related to others in the set in a way that means they, on balance, receive support from the others, or provide support for them, or both. In these cases, the evidential relations among the beliefs induce in the set some degree of what I've called connectedness. The stronger and more extensive the support, the more connected, and more coherent, the set. Thus, a set will be more or less coherent, assuming it is evidentially consistent, to the extent the beliefs in it enjoy positive support from others in the set. At the same time, for any given set that is at least minimally coherent, its relative coherence, because comprehensiveness, will increase when other beliefs are added to the set, assuming it remains evidentially consistent. The more comprehensive the set, other things equal, the more coherent it will be.[57]

It goes without saying that virtually no one's total set of beliefs will count as even minimally coherent, although subsets of those beliefs will presumably count as more than minimally coherent. Similarly, virtually no one holds beliefs all of which are justified, although subsets of most peoples' beliefs will presumably count as positively and not just permissively justified.

When it comes to relating the relative coherence of a person's beliefs to their status as justified beliefs, the coherentist's suggestion is, first, that those beliefs of hers that are justified are all and only those that belong to the subset of her beliefs that is maximally coherent and, second, that a belief will belong or not to that subset in virtue of the evidential relations it bears to everything else she believes. A subset of a person's beliefs will count as maximally coherent only if it is evidentially consistent and then if, when compared to all the subsets of her total belief set that are evidentially consistent, it exhibits a greater degree of coherence over-all (thanks to its connectedness and comprehensiveness) than do the others.[58]

If a person has a belief that is evidentially related to no others, it will belong to the maximally coherent subset of her beliefs (because any subset not containing it would be less comprehensive and so less coherent than one that differed from that set only by including it) and will count as permissively justified. If she has, as she presumably will, a belief that is evidentially related to others, whether it will count as justified merely permissively, or positively, or not at all, will turn on whether it and the beliefs to which it is related are members of the maximally coherent subset of her beliefs. It may be that the belief, but not those that are evidentially related to it, will be a member of that set, in which case it will count as permissively but not positively justified. It may be, though, that it along with at least some of the others that support it are members of that maximally coherent subset, in which case it will count as positively justified in virtue of the positive support it receives from them (whether or not those others are themselves positively justified). Or it may be that it, and the beliefs that support it, are (even taken together) such that the weight of the evidence provided by other things the person believes tells against them, in which case, though a person has some evidence for the belief neither it, nor the beliefs that provide the evidence she has for it, count as justified.

One consequence of this view is that even beliefs one is unjustified in holding will, when held, nonetheless count as providing evidence for believing other things. That they provide evidence for believing other things, though, doesn't mean that they are permissively justified, since the person herself has reason not to accept them. Nor does it mean that the beliefs they provide evidence for will count as positively justified, since the considerations that tell against the original beliefs undercut the support they provide to others.

If, for instance, I have an unjustified belief that there will be a draught in Guatemala (unjustified because the evidence actually available to me tells against it), that belief, along with some others, will provide me with some reason to think coffee prices will rise. If I then do believe that coffee prices will rise, I will have some reason. Yet that new belief, like the (by hypothesis) unjustified one on which it depends, is presumably unjustified in light of the other things I believe. Not every belief a person has some reason to hold counts as a justified belief. Still, and perhaps at first disturbingly, if in time I acquired a quite formidable subset of beliefs built originally in light of some unjustified beliefs, there could in principle come a time when I am justified in jettisoning the old beliefs in light of the newer ones. This is not what usually happens, but it happens often enough to bear notice. The process I have in mind shows up nicely when one justifiably abandons a previously well-supported and impressive scientific theory (perhaps, but not necessarily, in favor of another) in the face of accumulated anomalies. Originally, one is justified in rejecting each of the anomalies as misleading (as illusions, distortions, or inaccurate observations) in light of one's well established theory; however, as the anomalies mount, the case against the original theory builds eventually to the point (at least sometimes) where one is justified in accepting the collection of anomalies as accurate observations and unjustified in continuing to accept the original theory.[59]

How well a particular belief coheres with the other things the person believes, we can now say, is determined by whether it is a member of the maximally coherent subset of what she believes (it doesn't count as cohering at all if it is not), and if it is, whether, and to what extent, it is evidentially supported by other beliefs in that set (the more support it receives the better it coheres). Any belief in the set will at least be permissively justified, and will be more or less positively justified as it receives more or less evidential support from other beliefs in the set. Thus, to say that a belief is justified only if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things the person believes, is to register the way in which one's justification turns on how one's belief relates evidentially to whatever else one believes.

A full articulation of the coherence theory I've been describing would of course involve developing a theory of what relations count as evidential. And clearly this is not the place to begin that project. But I should emphasize that any plausible theory of justification will require supplementation by an account of evidential relations, since all such theories recognize and rely in some way or other on there being evidential relations that our beliefs might bear to one another.

The extent to which a particular belief is justified, incidentally, does not always vary with the relative coherence of the set of beliefs to which it belongs. A belief does not enjoy an increase in justification simply because the set to which it belongs has increased in coherence. To see why, imagine a person holds some isolated belief—say, that she is feeling pain now—that is consistent with everything else she believes, but not connected (evidentially or inferentially) with them. As things stand, the belief minimally coheres with the person's other beliefs but bears no evidentially relevant connection to them. Suppose that the person then acquires new evidence in support of those other beliefs so that her justification for holding them increases. As long as the isolated belief remains consistent with the new set, it remains justifiably believed. Yet the person's justification for believing it has not changed one bit; an overall increase in the coherence of her beliefs leaves the evidentially isolated belief as it was before. No doubt, truly isolated beliefs are a rarity, but if they are possible then the coherence of one's set of beliefs might increase or decrease without making a difference to one's justification in holding some beliefs (the isolated ones). Even so, because beliefs that are isolated at one point might, with the acquisition of new evidence, be connected with others, isolation should not be confused with insulation. The justifactory status of the currently isolated beliefs will remain, as before and always, dependent upon what else one believes.

Against this background, we can also characterize what it would be for a potential belief to cohere well with what a person actually believes. Whether such a belief would cohere at all with the other beliefs a person holds depends on whether, were the person to believe it, it would then be a member of the (perhaps, in light of the new belief, dramatically different) maximally coherent subset of everything she believes. And how well such a belief would cohere with the others depends on the degree to which the resulting maximally coherent set would be more coherent than its predecessor. If such a belief would cohere with whatever else she believes, then should she believe it, the belief would be justified.[60]

To say, though, that a belief is such that, should one hold it, the belief would be justified, is not to say that one should hold the belief. The Epistemic Imperative requires that we believe only as the evidence allows, it doesn't demand that we believe everything the evidence allows. This means a potential belief that would be justified if held, might, compatible with the Imperative, nonetheless not be believed. What is ruled out as unjustified is believing those things the available evidence, on balance, tells against.[61]

With that earlier discussion in mind, it is perhaps also worth emphasizing that the coherence theory is being advanced here as an account of what it is for a person's belief to be justified, not as an account of what it is for a person to be justified in holding some belief. A belief might belong to the maximally coherent subset of a person's beliefs, and so count as a justified belief, even if the person is not justified in believing it. An account of when a person is justified in believing something that is, in fact, well supported by the evidence available to her will come only when a suitably articulated version of the

basing requirement is added to the view. Roughly speaking, though, and according to coherentism, for a person to be justified in holding a belief, she has to believe it *because* it coheres well with her other beliefs (though she needn't believe it coheres).[62]

Some Objections

I can't here do full justice to the range of objections that have been raised to coherentism. However, I would like to indicate the extent to which some of the more common objections miss their mark, at least when it comes to the version of coherentism I am advancing. The objections I have in mind are that coherentism has got to be false because the mere fact that a set of beliefs is coherent is no reason to think they are true; that coherentism is objectionably conservative and inappropriately privileges one's actual beliefs; and that coherentism fails to recognize sufficiently the importance of experience. I will take these objections in order and suggest that each either misunderstands coherentism or underestimates the resources available to it.

Aside from the regress argument, the most common objection to coherentism turns on noticing that for any coherent set of beliefs a person might actually hold, there's another possible set of beliefs that is equally or more coherent.[63] This observation raises two concerns: First, isn't coherentism committed to the obviously false view that the mere coherence of a set of beliefs is reason to think them true; and second, isn't the coherentist consequently unable to account for the fact that we can justifiably reject views we recognize to be more coherent than our own? These concerns are all the more pressing because it looks as if we have exceedingly strong inductive grounds for thinking that any coherent set of beliefs, our own included, is likely to be false.[64]

To respond to these worries we need to distinguish two questions: What is it for a belief to be justified? and What is it that justifies a belief? Coherentism, of the sort I am defending, is addressed to the first question but not the second—a belief is justified if and then to the extent that it coheres well with a person's other beliefs, but it is not *justified by* the fact that it is a member of a coherent set of beliefs. What a person's beliefs are justified by are her other beliefs—or, more accurately, by the facts, as she takes them to be, so far as they provide evidence for her view.

A useful analogy can be found in the expected utility theory of rational choice. According to that theory, a person's choice is rational if and only if, given the available options, the choice maximizes her expected utility. But the fact that the option maximizes her expected utility is not an extra reason for the person to choose it—rather its status as the option that maximizes expected utility is a reflection of (what the theory supposes to be) the reasons the person has for choosing it.[65] Now of course one might have all sorts of objections to this theory, and I don't rest my case for the coherence theory on the acceptability of rational choice theory. Far from it. Still, I do want to suggest that the relation between expected utility and the reasons an agent

has for making one choice over another (according to this theory) provides a nice analogue to the relation between relative coherence and the reasons a person has for holding one belief rather than another. As the analogy would have it, the fact that a belief coheres better than do the available alternatives with a person's other beliefs is not an extra reason for the person to hold it—rather its status as the belief that maximizes coherence is a reflection of the reasons the person has for holding it. So thought of, the coherence theory is not committed to saying that the coherence of our beliefs is a reason to think they are true. Instead, what evidence we have for the truth of our beliefs is found in, and only in, what else we believe. This means a coherentist can and should admit that the mere fact that a set of beliefs is coherent provides one with no reason to think they are true, even though, if the beliefs in question are one's own, their relative coherence will reflect the extent to which one's evidence gives one reason to think they are true.

Just as the maximizing theory of rationality doesn't offer substantive reasons for a person to act, so too the coherence theory doesn't offer substantive reasons for a person to believe or not. In both cases, the theories are offered as accurate and informative characterizations of the link between what we value or believe and the rationality or justification of what we do or believe. In each case, the plausibility of the theory depends, of course, on whether it actually captures the conditions under which someone counts as having chosen rationally or believed with justification. While I have my doubts about the theory of rationality on that front, I think the coherence theory of justification does a surprisingly good job.

What, then, does the coherentist say about those situations in which one recognizes that someone else holds a view that is more coherent than is one's own? If justification is a matter of coherence, shouldn't I abandon my beliefs if I discover there is an alternative set of beliefs that is more coherent? The coherentist does have to hold that, if the person's beliefs really are more coherent, then that person has more justification for believing as she does, given her evidence, than one has for one's own view. However, acknowledging this is not yet to say that one has any reason to reject one's views in favor of hers, not least of all because the mere fact that her view is more coherent is no reason to think it true, but also because her evidence, such as it is, might justifiably be rejected by you as misleading, ill informed, or otherwise unacceptable (even if the other person is justified in relying on it).

Often, of course, the alternative coherent views, at least those we take seriously, will be ones that we ourselves see some reason to accept, even if we think on balance the evidence tells against them. To take a moral example: Suppose that concerning various matters I am inclined to think consequentialist considerations are relevant and often decisive. I think, for instance, that when it comes to public policy the fact that one policy would produce more happiness for all than some other policy is a reason to choose it, or I think the fact that some present would ease someone's sorrow is a reason to give it, or whatever. Suppose too, though, that I resist the utilitarian view that some action is right if and only if it produces the greatest happiness for

the greatest number, on the grounds that there are some things one cannot legitimately do to another person no matter how much happiness would be produced. In this situation I might well recognize that the utilitarian's position, given her other beliefs, is more coherent than mine. And I may have no single overarching moral principle to propose in place of the utilitarian's. Am I then required to accept utilitarianism? Is a coherentist committed to saying I am? The utilitarian and I share a good number of beliefs concerning the sort of considerations that might be relevant to moral evaluation, and to this extent we both have some grounds for thinking utilitarianism is true. Yet we differ on crucial points; in particular, I think (say) that willful murder is always wrong, no matter what, and that a sadist's pleasures are utterly worthless, and I think the rightness of an act depends as much on why it was performed as on the effects it happens to produce. She believes that I am wrong about these things (and others). I may, of course, be brought around to the utilitarian's view if she offers compelling grounds for seeing my own beliefs as explicable but false. And part of her argument in defense of utilitarianism will reasonably be that the utilitarian view does a good job of accounting for a number of things we both believe, which itself provides some evidence for the principle. Still, and even as I give due weight to the fact that the utilitarian principle captures well a number of considerations, I will justifiably reject it if (but only if) the weight of the evidence provided by what else I believe (some of which she denies) tells on balance against her view.

In the end, whether one is justified in retaining one's original view in light of another depends on whether one's own evidence tells in favor of the other view or not. In the face of (even) coherent alternatives, one justifiably rejects the others, when one does, on the basis of what one justifiably believes.[66] Often, the weight of one's evidence will tell against views one recognizes would be more coherent, and one justifiably rejects them on the grounds that one has reason for thinking them false. Given what else one believes, the alternative views do not after all count as coherent alternatives for you despite their being recognizably coherent when held by others. This means, of course, that had one's initial beliefs been different, had one believed one thing rather than another, one would have justifiably rejected the views that one actually (and with justification) accepts. But this doesn't mean that the fact that one believes as one does is one's reason for rejecting the alternative; rather one's reason is that the alternative clashes with the facts (as you take them to be).

Recognizing the crucial role played by one's actual beliefs naturally raises two more worries about the coherence theory: that it will have objectionably conservative implications and that it inappropriately privileges the beliefs one merely happens to have. The conservativism of the view, however, goes just as far as, but not farther than, the conservativism that comes with allowing that one must base one's beliefs on the available evidence. This inevitable limitation requires acknowledging that throughout our epistemic endeavors we will be appealing to what we believe, because what evidence one has is limited to that provided by one's beliefs (and other relevantly similar cognitive states). We are never able to stand fully apart from those beliefs without then

losing all grounds for believing anything at all. Yet this reliance on what we happen to believe has no seriously conservative implications, since those beliefs themselves, especially in light of the new evidence experience and reflection regularly provide, won't stand as fixed points but will instead shift in response to the new evidence (if they are to continue to count as justified).

When it comes to privileging actual beliefs, it is no part of this coherence theory that the mere fact that one believes something, considered alone, provides any reason whatsoever for thinking the belief true; that evidence must come from other things one believes, if it is to come at all. Absent such a background, a person will take the content of her belief to be true, but that is a reflection of what it is for an attitude to count as a belief. And the content of that belief does serve as evidence for other things she might believe, but in relying on that evidence, she is not taking the fact that she believes it to be evidence for something else, rather she is taking what she believes (say, that the coffee is hot, or that willful cruelty is wrong) as her evidence.[67]

Sometimes, though, we do have reason to take the fact that we believe something as reason to believe the belief true. When we do, however, it is always in light of other things we believe about our having the belief—say that we are usually right about this sort of thing, or that it was formed under circumstances that are conducive to the forming of accurate beliefs. Of course, even without these background beliefs concerning the reliability of our belief forming mechanisms, the belief that we believe something will be evidence for a number of things (though not for the truth of the belief). For instance, and trivially, it will be evidence for thinking that we exist. But the evidence it provides for that is independent of the truth of the belief we have a belief concerning. The beliefs we have provide all the evidence available to us at any given time, yet our actual beliefs, on the coherentist view, are not even permissively justified except in light of the other evidence available. Far from treating our actual beliefs as epistemically privileged (in a way that would have the theory collapse into foundationalism) coherentism recognizes them as justified at all only as they relate to the person's other beliefs.

Still, because the coherence theory treats as evidence only what we already believe, it might seem to ignore a crucial impetus for change: experience. On the one hand, the theory may seem unable even to accommodate experiential input and observation. On the other hand, although it might be able to accommodate such input, it may seem not properly to recognize its importance. And surely any adequate theory must acknowledge the role and importance of experience and observation when it comes to the justification of belief.

The first concern, I think, is undercut by the role cognitively spontaneous beliefs are able to play within coherentism. It's true, coherentism doesn't allow experience as relevant to justification unless and until the experience comes into the person's cognitive economy. Yet, especially in its recognition of cognitively spontaneous beliefs, coherentism leaves room for experiences to enter that cognitive economy unbidden, either thanks to the experiences themselves having a cognitive content (in which case it is the content of the experience that serves as evidence) or by their being the content of an

appropriate cognitive attitude (in which case it is the fact that such an experience occurred that serves as evidence). At the same time, coherentists can mark off the cognitively spontaneous beliefs that provide observational evidence for other things we believe, by embracing an account of observation according to which any belief formed noninferentially as a direct result of perceptual experience counts as an observation. Of course, which beliefs we justifiably count as having been formed in direct response to perceptual experience will itself depend on what we believe about ourselves and our situation; we can only justifiably distinguish between those spontaneous beliefs that count as observations and those that don't in light of what else we believe. And even when we do justifiably mark that general distinction, we will be justified in treating any particular observation as accurate only in light of what else we believe. Nonetheless, coherentists, no less than foundationalists, are able to recognize these beliefs, and other noninferred beliefs, as a regular source of new evidence that plays a crucial role in determining what we are justified in believing. What is distinctive about coherentism is its claim that the epistemic credentials these beliefs, and all others, enjoy is dependent on the evidential/inferential relations they bear to others. And a belief can bear the appropriate sort of relation to others even if, as it happens, it was caused directly by experience or is concerned directly with experience.

The second concern is encouraged by the thought that the coherence theory is committed to treating a set of beliefs as justified as long as it is coherent, regardless of whether those beliefs have been properly informed by experience. Even if the coherence theory can allow experiential input, the concern is that it treats such input as incidentally important rather than crucial.

The worry can be brought out with an example. Imagine that someone holds an exceedingly coherent set of beliefs, as coherent as any coherentist could demand. But imagine too that because of some neural accident, or a Mad Scientist's mucking about, or God's intervention, her beliefs become insensitive to experience. Her beliefs remain in a coherent stasis, although now they are uninfluenced one way or the other by her accumulating experience. Surely, one is inclined to say, she is no longer justified in holding her beliefs despite their continued coherence, and this shows that, as the foundationalist can hold, the status of our beliefs as justified depends on their being properly responsive to experience and not on their being coherent.[68]

So far, the case is crucially underdescribed. We need to distinguish between: (i) the person whose experiences continue to provide her with evidence that she unfortunately fails to take into account; and (ii) the person who may in a sense continue to have experiences although the link between her experience and her cognitive states is severed in a way that keeps her from acquiring new evidence from those experiences. In the first case, she is clearly unjustified in holding her beliefs precisely for the reasons a coherentist can acknowledge: She violates the basing requirement. Whatever explains her continuing to hold the beliefs she does, it is not the evidence available to her. What she believes may or may not be justified; whether it is depends on whether the evidence provided by her experiences (to which she is unresponsive) tells

against them, on balance. But because she doesn't believe as she does because her beliefs cohere well with her evidence, she is not justified in holding those beliefs even on the coherentist's view. In the second case, though, the coherentist will say that the person may in fact be justified in holding her beliefs, though she is in an epistemically sad situation. For in this case she is, by hypothesis, not receiving new evidence from her senses and so her failure to respond to those experiences by changing her beliefs is no reflection on the justification she has for them. To think otherwise is to fall back on the sort of externalism that holds people strictly liable for what they believe even in cases where they have no reason to believe otherwise.[69] Either way, I think the example doesn't support the idea that coherentism ignores the importance of one's being properly responsive to one's experiences.

Nonetheless, coherentism requires experience only to the extent experience (broadly construed) is the source of new evidence. It imposes no specific requirement on the nature of that experience (on either its source or content) nor on how a person must see her views as being related to experience. And its liberalness on these matters may be problematic. There are two plausible claims that together suggest that peoples' beliefs are justified only if they see those beliefs as grounded in their experience. The first is that a person's beliefs are justified only if the supposition that they are true figures as part of the best explanation that person has of her holding the belief. The second is that such an explanation will inevitably, at some point, appeal to that person's experiences. The first claim gets its plausibility from the conviction that we would have reason to rely on our beliefs only if we thought they were responsive to the facts they concern, just as we would have reason to rely on someone else's beliefs only if we thought their beliefs responsive to the facts they concern. The second gets its plausibility from the general conviction that only experience establishes an appropriate link between our beliefs and what they are about.

The first claim goes wrong, in the way the doxastic ascent argument does, if it sees justification as available only to those who have beliefs about their beliefs (to the effect that the truth of the beliefs helps to explain their being held). One might justifiably hold the beliefs one does without even being aware of the beliefs themselves as things that might be explained. Yet for those of us who do have beliefs about our beliefs, it does seem reasonable for us to ask, and to be worried if we can't answer in the appropriate way, the question of why we believe as we do. If we discover our beliefs seem not appropriately sensitive to the facts (as we take them to be) we will normally see that as good grounds for suspecting that our believing as we do in effect violates the basing requirement.[70] So for those who recognize the basing requirement and see the connection between satisfying that requirement and being able to explain their beliefs by appeal to their truth, the requirement will make sense. Others, though, in holding different views, may still be justified in believing as they do.

As for the second claim, whether being appropriately sensitive to the facts involves our views being sensitive to our experiences depends in large part

on whether our beliefs concern matters that we believe to be discoverable only through experience. When it comes to morals and mathematics, for instance, the relevance of experience is at least questionable. To the extent we are thorough-going empiricists, though, we will think experience is always crucial, and the demand that we be able to see our beliefs as hooking up in the right way with experience will then be natural. Yet one might intelligibly reject empiricism and, depending on what else one believes, be justified in doing so. Thus, even if empiricism is true, recognizing its truth and living up to the strictures such a recognition would bring, cannot plausibly be seen as conditions on justified belief.

The important thing to notice about both the explanatory requirement and the empiricist assumption is that they represent at most substantive restrictions on what *we* can justifiably believe, given what else we believe. And coherentism can perfectly well acknowledge these restrictions as ones we justifiably believe appropriate; they are more or less justified, according to the coherentist, to the extent to which they are actually supported by the evidence available to those who hold them. All that coherentism denies is that satisfying them represents a necessary condition on justification. On the coherentist's view, even if, on balance, we have reason to reject any belief not properly grounded in experience, other people may, depending on what else they believe, be justified in holding their beliefs even when they have no explanation of them or no explanation of them that links them to experience.

Incidentally, I do think that the truth of our moral beliefs often plays a role in explaining both why we hold them and why we have the experiences we take as evidence for them. Thus we might appeal to the injustice of certain institutions to explain the social unrest we observe; to the value of an activity to explain why it regularly gives rise to satisfaction; to the evilness of a character to explain a person's willingness to act as we learn someone has. Yet these explanations rely on our justifiably believing institutions of that type unjust, or activities of that sort good, or characters of that kind evil; they go through only if, in giving them, we can legitimately invoke other background moral views in accounting for the relation between morality and the experiences we hope to explain. If instead we had to build up, piecemeal, and without recourse to background views, an explanation of moral beliefs relying initially only on certain privileged beliefs (say concerning our sensory experiences) we would, I suspect, never find ourselves having to appeal to the truth of our moral views to explain our holding them. At the same time, though, I suspect as well that were we similarly obliged to explain our nonmoral views in this piecemeal fashion the truth of few of them would figure in an explanation of our holding them.

An important advantage of the coherence theory is that it can make good sense of our legitimately relying in this way on background assumptions, whether moral or not: If these assumptions cohere well with the other things we believe, then when it comes time to show that our particular beliefs, say, some of our moral beliefs, are properly responsive to our experiences, the background assumptions are among the beliefs we may legitimately take into

account. If everything comes together appropriately, and the explanations actually go through, we can justifiably believe that our moral beliefs play a role in explaining our experiences. Of course, everything might not come together appropriately; even as we find ourselves initially justified in relying on moral assumptions in trying to explain our experiences, we may discover the explanations are not good. In that case, we need to weigh the justification we have for those beliefs against the recognition that they might be explanatorily impotent. While I think the bulk of the justification we have for our moral beliefs really has nothing to do with their playing an important role in explaining our experiences, I am inclined to think that we would not be justified in believing of some moral principles that they were true, unless we also thought their being true made some difference to, and so contribute to an explanation of, our believing them.[71]

Conclusion

Most of this paper has been given over to articulating and defending a version of the coherence theory of justification. As that theory would have it, a belief is justified if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things a person believes. And a person is justified in holding some belief if and only if the belief itself is justified and she holds it because it is justified. In various crucial ways the theory differs from most versions of the coherence theory. First of all, rather than dodging the regress argument by embracing a holistic theory of justification, this version meets the argument head on and, with the foundationalist, acknowledges that certain beliefs may serve as suitable regress-stoppers. Unlike foundationalism, however, it insists that these regress-stoppers—the beliefs that count as permissively, but not positively, justified—enjoy no special epistemic privilege and are themselves characterizable only in terms of the evidential connections they bear to other beliefs. When beliefs are permissively justified it is only in light of the relations they bear to other beliefs. Second of all, while it treats the coherence of one's beliefs as a criterion of justification, it treats coherence itself not as a justifying property of those beliefs but rather as a measure of the evidential support the beliefs enjoy. In every case, what evidence a person has for her beliefs is found not in their relative coherence, but in the contents of her other beliefs.

Thus there is in coherentism a built-in commitment to relativism about justification. What a person in fact believes, and so what evidence she happens to have available, is crucial to whether her views are justified, and a belief one person is justified in accepting may be such that others would be justified in rejecting it. The relativism doesn't collapse, of course, into the view that anything one takes to be justified is. The coherentist says a person's belief is justified only if it coheres well with her other beliefs; whether it does is independent of whether she thinks it does (except as such a belief might be countenanced as evidentially related to other things she believes). In any given case, according to coherentism, there is a fact of the matter about whether

someone is justified and they, as well as anyone else, might get that fact wrong.

There is as well a deep seated recognition of fallibilism. Not only does a coherentist treat each belief as open to revision in light of others, she recognizes also that even a fully coherent, and so wonderfully justified, set of beliefs might turn out to be false. Justification's link to truth, such as it is, is not provided by coherence itself, but instead by the evidential relations that bind beliefs together into coherent sets. Thus the theory makes good sense of how we can look back on our own earlier beliefs as having been justified and yet now justifiably thought wrong; and it makes good sense out of how we can distinguish among others as between those who are justified in holding their differing (and as we see it false) views and those that aren't.

At the same time, the theory finds a good place for the thought that, while we recognize that any of our beliefs might be wrong, that fact about us and our beliefs doesn't in and of itself count as strong reason to reject our view—certainly not nearly as strong as would be our coming to think we actually had made a mistake (in which case we've got reasons precisely as strong as the support that view has, for changing the view in question). Thus the coherentist responds to the skeptic neither decisively nor simply by deciding not to worry about her challenge, but by advancing a positive view about what sort of evidence the mere possibility of error constitutes. Each suggestion that a person might have made a mistake is appropriately countered, when it can be, by appeal to the evidence available that supports the view. A person might of course be wrong in the positive view she advances—a possibility the skeptic will push—but that fact too tells only so far against the weight of the evidence the person might be able to marshall in defense of her own view. Whether, concerning any particular issue, a person is justified in accepting skepticism will turn (as does the justification for all beliefs) on the weight of the evidence available.

In defending the coherence theory of justification I have, in effect, been offering an extended defense of the particularly epistemic value of the method of reflective equilibrium. The general line of defense is, I hope, pretty clear: The method is valuable because its successful deployment results in our holding justified beliefs. However, the defense remains only partial since it simply assumes that the mutual support sought in using the method corresponds to evidential support. Although I believe it does, I've offered here no argument for thinking so.

In any case, let me turn to the two questions I raised early in the paper: Under what conditions are a person's moral beliefs epistemically justified? and under what conditions are *our* moral beliefs epistemically justified? In answer to the first, I've argued—by defending a version of the coherence theory—that a person's moral beliefs are epistemically justified if, and then to the extent that, they cohere well with the other things she believes. With this answer in mind, it should be clear that an answer to the second question needn't merely repeat the answer to the first, at least when we can say something substantive about the various other things we happen to believe.

As it happens, when we turn our attention to our moral beliefs, most of us find that, on the one hand, we seem to have overwhelmingly good reason for believing certain things (e.g., that deliberate cruelty is wrong, that slavery is unjust, and that courage is valuable, that happiness is important, that justice is appropriately demanded, and that certain considerations are morally relevant, others not); while, on the other hand, we have a substantial number of beliefs about morality as well as about metaphysics and epistemology more generally, that seemingly tell against our having any good reason at all for holding the moral beliefs we do (or any others). Some of our apparently well-supported beliefs, in other words, seem to clash with others. Coherentism councils against taking any of these views as decisive, yet at the same time it encourages seeking out some accommodation by sorting through the various commitments that clash in an attempt to render them at least consistent and preferably more.

To the extent that our moral views can be reconciled with the other things we believe, they will be epistemically justified, and all the more so as they provide evidence for one another. Yet the pressing worries about moral theory are really worries as to whether our moral views will even minimally cohere with the bulk of things we seemingly justifiably believe. In raising metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological worries about the status of our moral claims we are articulating the considerations that seem to stand as, often quite strong, evidence against our moral beliefs. Depending on how strong that evidence is, our moral views, even if they cohere well among themselves, might turn out to be unjustified. This means the coherence theory provides no safe haven for our moral opinions; it won't count them as justified if only they can be made internally consistent and systematically impressive. They will be justified if, but only if, they cohere well with the other things we believe; that is, if, but only if, the weight of all the available evidence tells in their favor. How the evidence weighs is, unfortunately, not at all clear. What is clear, though, is that any account that can succeed in making good sense of our moral views as, by our lights, metaphysically unambitious, epistemically accessible, and psychologically realistic, will straight-away enjoy a huge epistemic advantage. Working out such an account, while essential to the epistemic good standing of our moral beliefs, is not so much a matter of doing epistemology as it is one of doing moral philosophy. Yet, if the coherence theory is right, in doing the moral philosophy, we have good reason to adjust our moral beliefs in light of metaphysical and epistemological concerns. And, to go back to the first point I made in this paper, we have good reason as well to recognize how much of morality is not a matter of belief at all; for that too is part of the evidence we must accommodate.[72]

Notes

1. Presumably, whatever capacities, abilities, and skills, constitute knowing how to be moral would, in principle, find a propositional reflection in a full compendium of moral truths (among which would be included the claim that acting morally requires

having certain capacities, etc.). Yet possession of such a compendium, even if fully grasped and completely justified, may leave one utterly unable, even if willing, to do what one knows is required. And in not knowing how to do what one knows to be required, one would be lacking a pivotal bit of moral knowledge.

2. Later on I will say something about how epistemic justification differs from other sorts of justification. For the time being, however, I will simply assume we all have an intuitive grasp on there being a difference between, say, the moral, the pragmatic, and the epistemic credentials a belief might enjoy. Each set of credentials may, in a perfectly reasonable sense, make it true that the belief is justified, but the sort of justification at issue will change as the relevant credentials shift. My concern will be with epistemic credentials—those that get their point and purchase from a concern with evidence, truth, and knowledge.

3. J. L. Mackie defends this view in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977).

4. For influential defences of what is often called *noncognitivism,* see A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952); C. L. Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944); Simon Blackburn's *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Allan Gibbard's *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

5. So, for instance, to the extent that an action is successfully justified by appeal to its consequences, then the fact that the action has those consequences is grounds for believing that the action is right or permissible; and to the extent some attitude is successfully justified by appeal to its cause, then the fact that the attitude was caused in the way it was is grounds for believing the attitude appropriate.

6. What I am concerned with here is the justification of belief in general and if moral beliefs don't require justification (because there aren't any) then we can ask equally well what would justify one in thinking there are no moral beliefs.

7. I note here only a natural inclination. One might accept the coherence theory of justification and nonetheless reject the coherence methodology. Aiming directly at some goal is not always the best way of achieving it and it may be that aiming directly at securing a coherent set of beliefs (in the way the coherence methodology recommends) might not be the best way of securing such a set.

8. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). Earlier, Nelson Goodman offered a defense of the method's use in determining valid rules of deductive and inductive inference in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast,* 4th edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 63–66, originally published in 1955. See Norman Daniels' "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *Journal of Philosophy* (1979), pp. 256–82; and "Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedean Points," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (1980), pp. 83–103; for lucid discussion of the method of reflective equilibrium. See also Michael DePaul's *Balance and Refinement* (London: Routledge, 1993) and my "Coherence and Models for Model Theorizing," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (1985), pp. 170–90.

9. This is an empirical claim, of course. In principle, at least, someone might actually settle on an equilibrium that would remain unshaken by further reflection. A huge number of people do actually refuse to change their views in light of further reflection. But I suspect most of these people of dogmatism rather than reflective success.

10. See, for instance, David Lyons' "Nature and Soundness of Contract and Coherence Arguments," in *Reading Rawls,* ed. by Norman Daniels (New York: Basic Books, 1975), pp. 141–67; and Richard Brandt's *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 18–20.

11. To take one example, Sidgwick seems to have accepted a foundationalist theory of justification in ethics and elsewhere, even as he thought of, what was in effect, the method of reflective equilibrium as a useful means of discovering the fundamental principles of morality. These principles are justifiably believed, he thought, not in virtue of their cohering with other things we believe but rather because they are certified by intuition properly deployed. *The Methods of Ethics,* by Henry Sidgwick (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1907), seventh edition.

12. As skeptical as one might be of moral beliefs and the suggestion that some of them might be justified, that skepticism needn't have its source in a rabid skepticism that dismisses the very idea of justified belief. I will assume that the notion of justified belief makes sense, even if no beliefs (moral or otherwise) actually are justified. While this means I will be begging the question against a few skeptical positions, all but the most rabid skepticisms work with some account or other of justified belief to make good their own skeptical position. Most versions of skepticism, though, are advanced as being themselves justified (which means they are committed to at least some beliefs being justified). So it is worth noting that the only skepticisms I will be leaving completely to one side are those that reject out of hand and without offering a justification the very idea of justified belief. (Truth be told, I don't much mind ignoring them.)

13. A person, it seems, might be morally but neither pragmatically nor epistemically justified in holding some belief, or pragmatically but neither morally nor epistemically justified, or epistemically but neither morally nor pragmatically justified. The various different considerations that are relevant to these different evaluations might be such that, in some circumstances, they conflict in their deliverances. Perhaps they might, with suitable specification and elaboration, be shown in fact to coincide. Just such a (partial) coincidence is sought, for instance, by those who offer a pragmatic justification for acting morally. If indeed acting morally were always in our interest, then those actions (including acts of believing) that count as morally justified would be at the same time pragmatically justified (assuming that we are pragmatically justified in doing what is in our interest). Alternatively, such a (partial) coincidence is sought by those who offer a moral defense of believing as one's evidence would allow as well as by those who offer an epistemic defense of believing as morality requires.

14. However, I should note that sometimes our epistemic evaluation of someone's holding of a belief has more to do with whether she has taken due care in collecting evidence and reflected adequately on it, than with whether the evidence she has justifies the belief. Whether these considerations are invoked in determining justification or are instead involved in a distinct notion of epistemic responsibility, is often unclear. To the extent epistemic justification is at issue, though, I suspect that which standards are appropriate for evaluating *due care* and *adequate reflection* will depend on the evidence available to the person being evaluated. If so, then whether or not one is epistemically justified in seeking no further evidence or in limiting reflection depends on whether, for instance, one has grounds for thinking that there is important evidence still to be found or properly appreciated. Yet even if one has no such grounds, and so is not unjustified in holding the belief, one might nonetheless be holding it irresponsibly—if one has a responsibility to seek more evidence or reflect further even in cases where one has no reason to think one has such a responsibility.

15. Even necessary truths are such that a person might come to believe one (say as a result of wishful thinking or testimony one knew better than to trust) in a way that leaves the person unjustified in accepting it.

16. I simply pass over, in this paper, the difficulties facing any attempt to specify exactly what it would be for a person's beliefs to be based *in the appropriate way* on her evidence. I pass over as well the complications that are induced by a person's

beliefs always being only *more or less* based on her evidence; a number of other factors are inevitably required in order for one to form or maintain a belief at all. To what extent one's belief needs to be based on one's evidence in order to satisfy the basing requirement is, at best, difficult to say.

17. See the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), trans. by H. J. Paton, p. 65.

18. How far the parallel can be pushed, I'm not sure. I certainly don't want to defend the Epistemic Imperative as a synthetic a priori truth (but then I wouldn't want to defend the Categorical Imperative as one either). Regardless, in both cases there's some plausibility in thinking the two imperatives cash out appealing conceptions of justification. Hume advocates something like the epistemic imperative, when he observes that "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence." See *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 110.

19. *ibid.,* p. 88.

20. She might even be both morally and pragmatically justified in holding such beliefs if, for instance, she is within her rights to believe as she does and her so believing is to her advantage (as it may well be if she is surrounded by others who share her convictions).

21. Suppose some people are epistemically justified in holding an immoral view, are they then morally culpable for the evil they do on the basis of those beliefs? The answer to this turns crucially on whether (and if so, how) the standards of moral responsibility are sensitive to peoples' epistemological situation. If the boundaries of moral responsibility are set in part by what one could justifiably believe, then it might well be that a person who acts immorally on the basis of epistemically well-justified, but morally objectionable, views is not responsible for what she does. Ignorance is, in the absence of negligence, a reasonable moral excuse. And whether one has been negligent depends (I am inclined to think) on whether one had reason to think acting differently was important.

22. Someone might resist the "only if" in this formulation arguing that a liberal minded foundationalist could say just that one way (among others) for a belief to be justified is for it to be either foundational or inferentially supported by foundational beliefs. I opt for the stronger formulation of foundationalism because the main argument for foundationalism—the regress argument (which I discuss later in the paper)—turns on the "only if" clause when it assumes that no beliefs would be justified in the absence of some noninferentially justified beliefs. Other arguments might be appealed to, though, and they might require only the weaker formulation of foundationalism. In fact, the chapters by Audi and Sinnott-Armstrong in this collection work with he weaker definition of foundationalism. Even these weaker foundationalisms, though, accept the view, rejected by coherentism, that some beliefs are epistemically privileged independently of the inferential/evidential relations they bear to other beliefs.

23. See William Alston's "Two Types of Foundationalism," in the *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), pp. 165–85.

24. Two metaphors have dominated characterizations of the two theories: the metaphor of a pyramid to capture foundationalism and that of a raft at sea to capture coherentism. But both are grossly misleading. The pyramid metaphor is misleading since the arguments for foundationalism alone do not support any particular view of how the structure of justified belief will be shaped (other than by requiring some sort of hierarchy). The raft metaphor is less misleading, I suppose, because it does capture nicely the idea that, on a coherentist's view (but also on the foundationalist's view)

things are going better to the extent the raft holds together and better still as the various pieces initially merely lashed together become well secured. But usually the point of the raft analogy is that coherentism allows that, at any particular time, any piece of the raft is liable to replacement. A foundationalist, too, though, might consistently grant that every belief is in principle liable to replacement—foundationalism doesn't require infallibilism—even as it is committed to saying that there must be on board at least some beliefs of a certain privileged kind. See Ernest Sosa's "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge," in *Midwest Studies,* vol 5. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), pp. 3–25.

25. See David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature,* 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 469.

26. Most self-described intuitionists fall into this group. See H. A. Prichard's *Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949); G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903); and W. D. Ross' *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930). Sidgwick, however, falls squarely in the next group. See *The Methods of Ethics, op. cit.* More recently, the analogy with perception has been stressed by, for instance, John McDowell in "Value and Secondary Qualities," *Morality and Objectivity,* ed. by Ted Honderich (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 110–29; Mark Platts in "Moral Reality," in *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 243–63; Jonathan Dancy in *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); and David McNaughton in *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). Despite their reliance on the perceptual model, however, each of these more recent works adopts epistemological views that lean towards coherentism.

27. Compatible with this crucial difference, coherentism may have a great deal in common with foundationalism. It might, for instance, recognize different classes of belief (even as it rejects the suggestion that any class is epistemically privileged), or embrace the same inferential principles, or even allow that justified beliefs take on, for instance, a pyramid structure.

28. Although foundationalism and coherentism, as I have characterized them, are mutually exclusive, they clearly don't exhaust the possibilities. Someone might well reject foundationalism's commitment to an epistemically privileged class of beliefs and yet resist coherentism's positive account of justification in terms of coherence. One might hold, for instance, that one's beliefs are justified if they are reliable indicators of the facts they concern, or, alternatively, if they are the product of a reliable belief-forming mechanism. In neither case would their justification turn on their cohering with one's other beliefs, except to the extent the relevant sort of reliability is related to coherence.

29. Here again the familiar suggestions emerge: An inferential relation might count as appropriate only if it is deductive, or inductive, or explanatory.

30. And of course that one belief rather than another might be prompted directly by an experience will almost surely be a reflection of what else one believes and will in any case be available in the first place only thanks to one having the conceptual repertoire one does.

31. Clearly, when it comes to working out the details of the basing requirement, coherentists need to make sense of how it is that a justified, though uninferred, belief might still be such as to be held because it is justified. And this might look to be especially tricky for a coherentist since the belief's status as justified is supposed to depend on its inferential relations to other beliefs. Here, though, what the coherentist maintains is that such a belief appropriately depends on its being justified as long as it would not have been held had it not borne the right relations. (In whichever way

this gets worked out, it will have to take account of the complications mentioned and sidestepped in note #16.)

32. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics,* 72a25–73a20.

33. A powerful skeptical position in ethics, for instance, embraces foundationalism as an account of justification, mobilizes the "is"/"ought" distinction to show that if our moral views have a foundation that foundation must be provided by some of our moral beliefs, and then maintains that none of our moral beliefs will do the job.

34. The collection of arguments I run through find their source in Wilfrid Sellars' "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," although there the discussion is in terms of knowledge, not justification, and it unfolds without making explicit appeal to the basing requirement. See *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 127–96, esp. sec. 36. Laurence BonJour, in *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); and David Brink, in *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), both offer clear expressions of this argument.

35. In these two examples I am just picking up on one sort of reason one might have for thinking one's belief justified. Alternative suggestions come with different accounts of what would need to be true of a belief for it to serve appropriately as grounds for believing anything else. The variety of suggestions here is as plentiful as the variety of accounts foundationalists have offered for treating one class of beliefs or another as epistemically privileged.

36. A great deal might be packed into what is required in order for a person's beliefs to be appropriately sensitive to her evidence. It might be, for example, that she must be able to offer reasons for her view, or be able and willing to change her view in light of new evidence, or be able to re-evaluate the value of old evidence in light of new. I don't know whether any of these additional requirements are actually appropriate. What I am suggesting, though, is that self-consciousness of oneself as a believer is not required, whatever else is.

37. They might hold, for instance, that when beliefs are based on certain noncognitive states—e.g., perceptual or introspectable states—those states justify the beliefs. See Anthony Quinton's *The Nature of Things* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); and John Pollock's *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986).

38. But only a version since, as will become clear, the sort of coherentism I defend counts as an externalist theory of justification even though it embraces an internalist account of reasons.

39. In what follows I will use "belief" loosely enough to cover a whole slew of cognitive states that have propositional content. The distinctions I thus cover over may well be important, of course, in other contexts where one might contrast belief with, for instance, experience on the grounds that belief is active and reflectively-sensitive, whereas experience is passive and receptive. If the distinction were to be drawn in that way, I am committed to saying that the contents of experience and of belief are of a piece (and both are conceptual) at least to the extent the experiences are supposed to provide reasons for believing. See John McDowell's *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

40. By embracing this sort of internalism, I am taking a stand on a controversial issue and merely rehearsing fairly familiar arguments. A satisfying discussion of the issues would take more space than I can give it here. Still, in the end, I believe the familiar arguments do carry the day. For an in-depth attack on internalism, though, see Frederick Schmitt's *Knowledge and Belief* (London: Routledge, 1992).

41. This will be true when a person has no reason not to hold it or when, if she has such a reason, it is at least balanced by some reason she has for holding it.

42. Clearly there are two other possible readings: (i) one belief provides (permissive) justification for another only if it is, itself, (permissively) justified; and (ii) one belief provides (permissive) justification for another only if it is, itself, (positively) justified. The first of these is weaker even than the weak reading defended in what follows, and would in any case be irrelevant to establishing that we ever have positive reason to believe as we do; and the second would, like the strong reading rejected in what follows, make an appeal to permissive justification useless when it comes to stopping the regress.

43. A foundationalist might conceivably maintain that the epistemically privileged beliefs can provide positive support for themselves. This may be the hopeful idea behind holding that a belief might be *self*-evident. But then a foundationalist needs to make sense of the idea that a belief (that is, the content of a belief) can provide evidence for that very belief. And she needs to do this in a way that doesn't entail that all beliefs provide this kind of support for themselves. (So she can't simply say, for example, that what justifies *her belief that she seems to see blue* is that *she seems to see blue,* which at first might sound plausible, since every *belief that p* could then be justified by *p,* for any p.) The most likely candidates for status as self-evident are presumably beliefs that have analytic truths as their content, yet even they seem only sometimes justifiably believed. Whether a person is positively justified in holding such beliefs seems to depend on why she is holding them, on whether, for instance, she recognizes them to be analytic or accepts them on good authority or has some other reason to think they are true.

44. Although permissively justified beliefs can serve to stop the regress, presumably only positively justified beliefs enjoy the sort of support that knowledge is usually thought to presuppose. In any case, a belief that is *merely* permissively justified will be a belief one has, on balance, no reason to believe—it enjoys no positive justification.

45. Whether these cases are ultimately intelligible is open to question. It's arguable (but I think not true) that the beliefs we are able to attribute to two people so differently situated must always be different. If so, then the supposition that they share beliefs can't be sustained. What matters, though, is not so much whether these represent real possibilities; what matters is that, were they possible, we would normally count the people involved as being equally justified, though not equally well-situated epistemically.

46. G. E. Moore articulates this idea as he spells out what it would be for something to exhibit *organic unity.* See *Principia Ethica, ibid.*

47. Given the definition of positive justification and the rejection of externalism about a person's reasons for believing, no belief will count as positively justified when considered in isolation. Interestingly, though, someone inclined to accept foundationalism, who will then treat some beliefs as positively justified even when considered in isolation from other beliefs, can, and I think should, grant that beliefs to the effect that there are the proper relations among one's beliefs actually enhances the privileged beliefs' justificatory status.

48. If this suggestion is to be worked out in a way that is compatible with the version of internalism I've defended, the justification enhancing role of evidential relations cannot be that of giving a person more reason to believe as she does (since the presence of the relation may be something about which she has no beliefs even when it holds).

49. See Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, ibid.,* pp. 61–62.

50. Incidentally, even if the relations themselves are seen as being valuable, the value they have might itself be conditional on their relating real evidence. Thus, while

the relations will presumably be characterized in terms that allow them to stand among propositions (whether believed or not), the evidential value of these relations might depend upon the status of those propositions as evidence—which status they will have, I've argued, only as they become the content of the relevant person's beliefs.

51. Although misleading in some ways, the Bayesian principle of conditionalization, and the phenomenon of the "swamping of priors," may nonetheless provide a suggestive model for the link between evidential relations and truth that I have in mind. Loosely characterized, here's the phenomenon: given certain assumptions concerning the structure and availability of probability estimates, it can be shown that people who start with even wildly different beliefs (priors) concerning, for instance, the fairness of some coin (each thinking it biased, but in opposite ways) will, given enough information about the results of repeated coin tosses, come to the same view concerning the probability that it will come up heads on the next toss, as long as they revise their beliefs according to the principle of conditionalization; and this will be true (almost) no matter what probabilities they originally assigned. Moreover, the view they will then share will be an accurate view, if the information they receive about successive coin tosses is accurate and bountiful enough.

52. Just as foundationalism admits of both skeptical and anti-skeptical strands, so too does coherentism: a skeptical coherentist holds, in effect, that there are no evidential relations that might hold among our beliefs. Thus, on this view, coherentism gives the right account of what it would take for our beliefs to be positively justified, but none of them have what it takes—an evidential relation to our other beliefs.

53. Lewis Carroll uses his own regress argument to establish this in "What The Tortoise Said to Achilles," *Mind* 4 (1895), pp. 278–80.

54. How well, and whether, a belief coheres with the others a person holds will depend, in part, on what alternatives are available to her. Before Newton came on the scene, people were justified in believing things about the workings of the world that later they would have been unjustified in accepting in light of the evidence and options available. So we might say, a bit more precisely, that a belief is justified only if, and then to the extent that, it coheres *better than does any competitor belief* with the other things the person believes (where two beliefs will compete with one another if either might, but both can't, be held by the person in question).

55. Although here I will be characterizing the coherence of a set of beliefs, the same considerations of evidential consistency, connectedness, and comprehensiveness, will serve to characterize the relative coherence of sets of propositions directly. So, for instance, a set of propositions that constitute a theory will count as minimally coherent if appropriately consistent, and then as more than minimally coherent as the theory is connected and comprehensive.

56. The evidential consistency requirement insists on both more and less than would a requirement that demanded logical consistency from the contents of the beliefs in the set. It demands more because a set that contained only logically consistent beliefs would nonetheless fall short of evidential consistency if the evidence provided by some of the beliefs, on balance, told against one of the beliefs. It demands less because a set that contained logically inconsistent beliefs that were equally well supported by the evidence provided by the other beliefs would count as evidentially consistent (and so minimally coherent). For arguments against requiring logical consistency, see Richard Foley's "Justified Inconsistent Beliefs," in *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1979), pp. 247–57.

57. I don't suppose that there is any algorithm for determining the relative contributions connectedness and comprehensiveness make to the over-all coherence of a set.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that connectedness and comprehensiveness will never compete. While any belief that increases the connectedness of an evidentially consistent set will likewise increase comprehensiveness, and any belief that increases comprehensiveness in such a set will at worst make no difference to connectedness, when it comes to comparing one coherent set with another, we may be faced with one that's more connected but less comprehensive than another and sometimes, at least, comprehensiveness may win out over connectedness or vice versa.

58. There's no worry about a tie here since if two subsets are evidentially consistent and equally coherent, the set that includes all the beliefs in each that can be combined without losing evidential consistency will be more coherent than either. Of course, the larger set may contain logically inconsistent beliefs that enjoy evidential support to the same degree, so that the total weight of the evidence provided by beliefs in the set does not, on balance, tell against either. In that case, the inconsistent beliefs will be justified but only permissively so. When we recognize the inconsistency, the fact that the beliefs are inconsistent will certainly provide evidence against accepting both and may constitute grounds for agnosticism. Yet recognizing the inconsistency provides evidence against both equally, and thus leaves the balance unchanged. We will then have positive—in fact conclusive—reason for thinking the inconsistent beliefs are not all true, which means justifiably holding them will be possible only if we can believe each separately without believing their conjunction. This isn't quite the same as saying, though, that we ought to give up one or the other of the beliefs—we might have no positive reason for giving up any one of them, although we have positive reason for looking for some reason.

59. The same case will build, of course, even without the unjustified beliefs as long as corresponding justified beliefs to the effect that anomalies had emerged are taken on board as the unjustified beliefs are rejected. When the case these beliefs provide has become formidable, it will be because the best explanation of all the apparent illusions, seeming distortions, and ostensibly inaccurate observations is that they are nothing of the sort and that the old theory is false.

60. Nice complications emerge when we consider situations in which the person herself is considering various things she might believe, each of which would cohere well with the other things she believes. In that case, which belief would be justified will depend on which of the options would cohere *better* with the other things she believes (including her beliefs concerning which of the options is more justified), and, having considered the options, believing one that coheres less well, but still well, with her beliefs, would presumably be unjustified.

61. Whether a person's evidence will tell against some of her current beliefs, when it provides stronger support for some other potential beliefs, will depend on whether the person is aware of those options that would cohere well with what else she believes.

62. Suppose that a person holds some belief that does cohere well with her other beliefs. Yet suppose also that she believes something stupid (and unjustified) from which she self-consciously inferred the belief? Is she justified in believing it? That depends: Would she have held the belief even if it hadn't cohered well with the other things she believes? If so, then the fact that the belief was justified doesn't explain her holding it and her holding it is not justified. If not, then the fact that the belief was justified does explain her holding it and her holding it is justified. What then should we say in face of the explicit and yet unjustified and non-justifying reason she offers for her belief? I think we should say that she was justified in holding it given her evidence though mistaken about why. What if she falsely believes of the belief that it doesn't cohere with the other things she believes? Well, if she also believes the

coherence theory, then her belief that the belief doesn't cohere with her other beliefs will be, for her, a reason to reject it—yet it is just one reason among many and that reason may still be overridden by the other reasons she has in virtue of which it counts as actually cohering better than alternatives.

63. Although there are some complications here: Merely taking the original set and negating the content of all the beliefs may give one an equally consistent set of propositions, but that procedure will often leave one with a much less coherent set of potential beliefs because the negation of an explanatory principle does not always explain the negation of the set of claims that was originally explained. Still I think it reasonable to allow that suitable competitor sets can always be constructed, even if not by any simple procedure.

64. In "Coherence and Models for Moral Theorizing," *op. cit.*, I raise this objection to the all too common practice, in moral theory, of treating the fact that one theory is more coherent than another as an independent reason to think the theory true.

65. A person may, of course, be wrong in the probabilities she associates with various outcomes, or the value she attributes to those outcomes. Expected utility often differs from actual utility. Yet, according to this theory, so far as the rationality of her choice is concerned, it is rational if given those views the choice she makes maximizes expected utility.

66. Here the analogy with decision theory may be helpful again. We might well recognize another person as making a choice, from among the same options we face, that maximizes her expected utility, and (if only we could make good sense of interpersonal utility comparisons) we might recognize too that given her expectations and values, the option she takes has a greater expected utility for her than our best option has for us. Nonetheless, that provides us with no reason whatsoever to embrace the option she rationally chooses. We might of course take the fact that she has the expectations or values she does as evidence that ours are misguided, and if so, we will have reason to change ours, but often enough we have good reason to think what she expects or values is irrelevant.

67. Just as the theory of rational choice is not committed to saying that the fact that something advances one's own interests need be a reason a person has for acting, since people's preferences may all be other-directed, so too the coherence theory is not committed to saying that the fact that one believes something need be a reason a person has for believing, since people's beliefs may all have as their content things other than their own beliefs. Now in fact we can expect people to be interested in their own interests and to have beliefs concerning their beliefs, but these interests and beliefs constitute only a fraction of the interests and beliefs a person usually has and neither the maximizing theory of rationality nor the coherence theory of justification gives them any special weight or importance.

68. See Alvin Plantinga's *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

69. We may need yet a third case: It may be that the person has actually had her beliefs "frozen" so that she is not simply insensitive to the beliefs she forms on the basis of experience, nor simply cognitively cut off from her experiences. In this case, I think the most reasonable thing to say is that she is no longer believing anything. But if we still count her as believing, she will still fail the basing requirement because, once her beliefs are "frozen," what explains her holding of them is no longer her evidence but the fact that they are now unchangeable.

70. Of course, even in our own case, we often find ourselves with beliefs we take to be justified despite our inability to offer any respectable explanation of why we hold them, but lacking such an explanation is conspicuously different from having positive reason for thinking the beliefs are insensitive to the relevant facts.

71. For discussion of these issues, see Gilbert Harman's *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Nicholas Sturgeon's "Moral Explanations," in *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), ed. by David Copp and David Zimmerman, pp. 49–78; as well as my "Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence," *Midwest Studies* XII, ed. by Peter French *et al.* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 433–57, and "Normative Explanations," *Philosophical Perspectives* VII, ed. by James Tomberlin (1992), pp. 55–72.

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