Coherentism, Truth, and Witness Agreement

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ABSTRACT: Coherentists on epistemic justification claim that all justification is inferential, and that beliefs, when justified, get their justification together (not in isolation) as members of a coherent belief system. Some recent work in formal epistemology shows that "individual credibility" is needed for "witness agreement" to increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth. It can seem that, from this result in formal epistemology, it follows that coherentist justification is not truth-conducive, that it is not the case that, under the requisite conditions, coherentist justification increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. I argue that this does not follow.

KEYWORDS: Coherentism; Individual credibility; Justification; Truth-conduciveness; Witness agreement

I

Coherentists on epistemic justification claim that *all* justification is *inferential*, in that all justification requires evidential support from beliefs. Coherentists thus claim that no justification is noninferential,[1] and, so, justification has no foundation—no class of beliefs the justification of which is noninferential and serves as the basis of all inferential justification.[2] Instead, justification is *holistic* in *structure*. Beliefs, when justified, get their justification together, not in isolation, as members of a coherent belief system. Let's say, for simplicity, that coherentist justification is solely a matter of *doxastic coherence*:

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[1] Coherentists deny that there can be noninferential *justification*. But coherentists need not, and should not, deny that there can be noninferential *belief-formation*, that is, belief-formation not consisting in an inference from beliefs. See BonJour (1985, sec. 6.1).

[2] On foundationalism, a belief can be justified even if it is not evidentially supported by *beliefs*. On some varieties of foundationalism, a belief can be justified in virtue of being evidentially supported by a *perceptual experience*. Paul Moser (1989) has a sophisticated view along these lines.

For any subject *S*, and proposition *p* (such that *S* believes that *p*), *S*'s belief that *p* is justified just in case *S*'s belief system is coherent.[3]

Is coherentist justification *truth-conducive*? That is, does coherentist justification, under the requisite conditions,[4] *increase* the probability of truth and make for a *high* probability of truth?[5] This is a pressing question for coherentists. *Epistemic* justification, it seems, is truth-conducive, and so unless coherentist justification is truth-conducive, coherentism is not the correct theory of epistemic justification.[6]

A tempting strategy for coherentists is to approach this issue (of whether coherentist justification is truth-conducive) indirectly, by focusing on cases of "witness agreement." Suppose a crime has been committed. There are ten suspects, one of whom is Smith. Initially, the probability of Smith's being the criminal is just .1. Likewise for each of the

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[3] For general discussion of the elements of coherence, see BonJour (1985, Ch. 5). For discussion of *probabilistic* conceptions of coherence, see Olsson (2005a, pp. 95-102), Siebel (2005), and Douven and Meijs (2007). For a nonprobabilistic account of coherence, see Lehrer (2000, Ch. 6). For discussion of forms of coherentism requiring, for justification, more than coherence, e.g. reliability, see Roche (2006). It might be that coherentists should hold that what matters for justification is not the coherence of the subject's *belief system as a whole*, but the coherence of a certain *proper subset* (or "module") of that system. See Lycan (1996) and Olsson (1997).

[4] Just what the *requisite* conditions are is a main issue of this paper.

[5] A related, but distinct, question is whether, *ceteris paribus*, *greater* coherentist justification makes for a *greater* probability of truth. For discussion, see Klein and Warfield (1994), Merricks (1995), Klein and Warfield (1996), Cross (1999), Shogenji (1999), Bovens and Olsson (2000), Olsson (2001), Olsson (2002), Bovens and Olsson (2002), Bovens and Hartmann (2003), Bovens and Hartmann (2005), Olsson (2005a), Olsson (2005b), Shogenji (2005b), Bovens and Hartmann (2006), Huemer (2007), Meijs and Douven (2007), Shogenji (2007), and Schupbach (2008).

[6] I shall assume, as seems plausible, that epistemic justification is truth-conducive. This is a generous assumption. If epistemic justification is *not* truth-conducive (in the sense in question), and it is *not* incumbent on coherentists to show that coherentist justification is truth-conducive, then the formal epistemological result explained in §II, below, poses no threat to coherentism. Even if, contrary to what I shall argue, the result in question showed that coherentist justification is not truth-conducive, it might still be that coherentism is the correct theory of epistemic justification. For discussion, in addition to that in this paper, of how to understand the "truth connection," i.e. the connection between justification and truth, see e.g. Lehrer and Cohen (1983), Cohen (1984), Conee (2004), and Kvanvig (2007).

other nine suspects. Then, a number of witnesses come forward. We have just as much reason for believing that they are liars as for believing that they are truth-tellers. But, they all testify, independently of each other (no collusion), that Smith committed the crime. It seems that, together, the witness reports would constitute a case of coherence, in fact, a case of very high (perhaps maximal) coherence.[7] The reports would be in perfect agreement with each other, and so could not better "hang together." Moreover, it seems that, were there enough witnesses, it would be highly probable that the witnesses are telling the truth, hence that Smith committed the crime.[8] Were the witnesses lying, their agreement that Smith committed the crime would be rather surprising—not something to be expected. If, then, there are conditions under which witness agreement increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth, perhaps it follows that, under similar conditions, coherentist justification (doxastic coherence), too, increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. If so, perhaps it follows that coherentist justification is truth-conducive.[9]

C. I. Lewis (1946, Ch. XI), though, argues that coherence (or, "congruence") *by itself* can neither increase the probability of truth nor generate a high probability of truth. The cohering elements, e.g. the witness reports in a case of witness agreement, need to have some *individual* (or *prima facie*) *credibility*—credibility independent of coherence considerations. Here Lewis makes this point with respect to "mnemic presentations" and the coherence thereof:

> It is essential to the argument that any item of our sense of past fact be *prima facie* credible; that such mnemic presentation itself should, before any further examination as to congruence, afford some probability of past fact. Just what degree of credibility thus attaches initially to the remembered, merely because remembered, we do not need to ask. It does not appear that we could, candidly, assign any particular degree to it. . . . But it does not need to be assigned. . . . If, however, there were *no* initial presumption attaching to the mnemically presented; no valid supposition of a real connection with past experience; then no extent of congruity with other such items would give rise to any eventual credibility. The coherence of a novel, or of the daydreams we are aware of fabricating as we go along, can never have the slightest

[7] Erik Olsson (2005a, pp. 12-24) argues that witness agreement, where all the witnesses testify to the truth of the same proposition, is a case of (perhaps high or even maximal) coherence. Cf. van Cleve (2005, p. 174).

[8] Admittedly, the case as it stands is underdescribed.

[9] This would depend on whether the conditions in question are the *requisite* conditions.

> weight toward crediting the content of them as fact, no matter how detailed and mutually congruent such items may be. (1946, pp. 356-357, emphasis Lewis's)

Laurence BonJour (1985) takes the other side of the debate,[10] arguing that no individual (or, "antecedent") credibility is required. BonJour writes:

> What Lewis does not see, however, is that his own example shows quite convincingly that no antecedent degree of warrant or credibility is required. For as long as we are confident that the reports of various witnesses are genuinely independent of each other, a high enough degree of coherence among them will eventually dictate the hypothesis of truth telling as the only available explanation of their agreement—even, indeed, if those individual reports initially have a high degree of *negative* credibility, that is, are much more likely to be false than true (for example in the case where all the witnesses are known to be habitual liars). And by the same token, so long as apparently cognitively spontaneous beliefs are genuinely independent of each other, their agreement will eventually generate credibility, without the need for any initial degree of warrant. (1985, p. 148, emphasis BonJour's)

Some recent work in formal epistemology establishes that, on a certain understanding of "individual credibility," Lewis is correct about *witness agreement* and the need for individual credibility. It can seem that, from this formal epistemological result concerning witness agreement, it follows that coherentist justification is not truth-conducive, that it is not the case that coherentist justification, under the requisite conditions, increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. I aim to show that this does not follow.

II

Michael Huemer (1997), Erik Olsson (2002, 2005a), and Tomoji Shogenji (2005a) argue that:

(A) Under conditions of no individual credibility (i.e. conditions in which the witnesses have no individual credibility with respect to the claim to which

[10] Or at least can be read as doing so. But see §VI, below, where I suggest an alternative reading of BonJour's position.

they testified), witness agreement neither increases the probability of truth nor generates a high probability of truth.[11]

The notion of individual credibility is here understood as follows:

(B) For any witness w, and proposition p, w has no individual credibility with respect to p if and only if $\Pr(p \mid w \text{ said that } p) = \Pr(p)$.[12]

Consider the crime case from above (third paragraph in §I). Suppose there are twenty witnesses: $w_1, \ldots, w_{20}$. Suppose the witnesses have no individual credibility with respect to the claim that Smith committed the crime, so that for each witness w_i, Pr(Smith committed the crime | w_i said that Smith committed the crime) = Pr(Smith committed the crime). Then, by (A), it would follow that Pr(Smith committed the crime | $w_1, \ldots, w_{20}$ all said that Smith committed the crime) = Pr(Smith committed the crime) = .1.

This result can seem quite puzzling. Initially, the probability of Smith's having committed the crime is just .1. Then, $w_1, \ldots, w_{20}$ come forward. We have just as much reason for believing that they are liars as for believing that they are truth-tellers. But, they all testified that Smith committed the crime, this despite the fact that they testified independently and could have singled out any of nine other suspects. It can seem that *even if* they had no individual credibility, it would be highly probable that they are telling the truth, thus that Smith committed the crime.

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[11] See also Bovens and Olsson (2000), and Olsson and Shogenji (2004). Two comments are in order. First, strictly speaking, the thesis defended by Huemer, Olsson, and Shogenji has an *independence* clause, stating that the various witness reports are probabilistically independent of each other (conditional on the truth or falsity of the hypothesis reported). This clause is quite important. See Huemer (2007). See also Olsson (2005a, pp. 58-60) and Shogenji (2005a, p. 321). But for the purposes of this paper, the independence clause may be ignored. Second, though Olsson and Shogenji side with Lewis in arguing for (A), Olsson and Shogenji disagree with Lewis on certain other related issues. See Olsson and Shogenji (2004), and Olsson (2005a).

[12] A witness can have no individual credibility with respect to some propositions (e.g. propositions in quantum mechanics) and yet have some individual credibility with respect to other propositions (e.g. propositions about the weather). Individual credibility need not be construed as attaching to *witnesses* (relative to propositions). It may instead be construed as attaching to *witness reports*; Lewis and BonJour talk in this fashion. Nothing of substance hinges on which construal is used. I shall continue to speak of individual credibility as attaching to witnesses.

Shogenji (2005a, pp. 311-315, pp. 317-318) and Olsson (2005a, pp. 66-72, pp. 218-219) address this line of reasoning,[13] arguing that it overlooks the fact that:

(C) Under conditions in which there are many (i.e. two or more) ways for a witness to lie, a witness with no individual credibility is more likely to be a liar (a witness who invariably produces false reports) than a truth-teller (a witness who invariably produces true reports).[14]

More precisely, under conditions in which there are n-1 ways for a witness to lie, for $n > 2$, a witness with no individual credibility is n-1 times more likely to be a liar than a truth-teller. So, if each of $w_1, \ldots, w_{20}$ had no individual credibility, then, since there are ten suspects and, so, nine ways for the witnesses to lie,[15] it would follow that each of the witnesses is *nine times more likely to be a liar than a truth-teller*. Thus, if each of $w_1, \ldots, w_{20}$ had no individual credibility, then, contrary to the line of reasoning given in the previous paragraph (and in the third paragraph in §I), it would be false that, prior to receiving their testimonies, we have just as much reason for believing that they are liars as for believing that they are truth-tellers.

Let's grant that (A), (B), and (C) are correct.[16] Let's also grant that (A), (B), and (C) carry over to the case of doxastic coherence (coherentist justification) as follows:

(D) Under conditions of no individual credibility (i.e. conditions in which the cognizer has no individual credibility with respect to the propositions he believes), doxastic coherence neither increases the probability of truth nor generates a high probability of truth.

(E) For any cognizer S, and proposition p, S has no individual credibility with respect to p if and only if $\Pr(p \mid S \text{ believes that } p) = \Pr(p)$.[17]

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[13] See also Huemer (1997, pp. 470-471).

[14] (C) relies on several assumptions. One assumption is that a witness is a truth-teller, a liar, or a "randomizer." A randomizer is a witness who testifies randomly. Suppose, in a particular case, there are n suspects, $s_1, \ldots, s_n$, and they are all equally likely to be the criminal. Suppose a certain witness w is a randomizer, and is set to incriminate one of the suspects. Then, regardless of which of the suspects is guilty, the probability of w's incriminating s_i, for any i, is $1/n$.

[15] It is being assumed that if there are n suspects, there are n-1 ways to lie.

[16] (B) is simply a specification of how to understand the notion of a witness's having no individual credibility. The substantive claims are (A) and (C).

(F) Under conditions in which there are many (i.e. two or more) ways for a cognizer to get things wrong, a cognizer with no individual credibility is more likely to have unreliable processes (processes which invariably produce false beliefs) than reliable processes (processes which invariably produce true beliefs).[18]

The question I want to consider is whether it follows, from (D), (E), and (F), that:

(G) Doxastic coherence is not truth-conducive.

I shall argue in the negative. Hence, if I am correct, then (A), (B), and (C) leave it open that (G) is false.[19] Also, even if (D), (E), and (F) can be established directly,[20] that is, without any appeal to (A), (B), and (C), it might be that (G) is false.

III

(G) denies that doxastic coherence, under *the requisite conditions*, increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. The phrase "the requisite conditions" is meant to indicate *the conditions under which doxastic coherence should be expected to increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth, in*

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[17] (E), like (B), is not a substantive claim. (E) merely specifies how to understand the notion of a cognizer's having no individual credibility.

[18] I noted above that (C) relies on the assumption that a witness is a truth-teller, a liar, or a randomizer. Accordingly, (F) should be understood as relying on the assumption that a cognizer's processes are reliable, unreliable, or random. Suppose, in a particular case, there are n possible belief contents, $p_1, \ldots, p_n$, and they are all equally likely to be correct. Suppose a certain process r is random, and is set to produce a belief with one of the contents. Then, regardless of which of the contents is correct, the probability of r's "picking" p_i, for any i, is $1/n$.

[19] I take it that if (D), (E), and (F) do not lead to (G), then neither do (A), (B), and (C).

[20] See Bovens and Olsson (2000), Olsson (2002), Olsson and Shogenji (2004), Olsson (2005a), and Shogenji (2005a).

order for coherentism to be the correct theory of epistemic justification.[21] What, then, are the requisite conditions? *All* possible conditions? Or *just some*? If the latter, which ones?

Consider:

(H) Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive only if under conditions of *no individual credibility*, doxastic coherence both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth.

(H) says that among the conditions under which doxastic coherence should be expected to increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth are conditions of no individual credibility. If (H) is correct, then, given (D), which says that under conditions of no individual credibility, doxastic coherence neither increases the probability of truth nor generates a high probability of truth, it follows that, as (G) says, doxastic coherence is not truth-conducive.[22]

But suppose (H) is false, and conditions of no individual credibility are *not* among the conditions under which doxastic coherence should be expected to increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth. Then, even if (D) is correct, it might be that (G) is false.

So, is (H) correct?

IV

If (H) is correct, then, given (F), it follows that:

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[21] Recall, from §I, that I am assuming that epistemic justification is truth-conducive, and so unless doxastic coherence (coherentist justification) is truth-conducive, coherentism is not the correct theory of epistemic justification.

[22] (H) says: Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive *only if* under conditions of no individual credibility, doxastic coherence *both* increases the probability of truth *and* generates a high probability of truth. (D) says: Under conditions of no individual credibility, doxastic coherence *neither* increases the probability of truth *nor* generates a high probability of truth. (D) thus implies that: *It is not the case* that under conditions of no individual credibility, doxastic coherence both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. Hence, if (D) is correct, the consequent of (H) is false. Hence, if (H) is correct, and (D) is correct, it follows that the antecedent of (H) is false, in which case (G) is correct.

(I) Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive only if under conditions in which *the cognizer is more likely to have unreliable processes (processes which invariably produce false beliefs) than reliable processes (processes which invariably produce true beliefs)*, doxastic coherence both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth.[23]

This means that among the conditions under which doxastic coherence should be expected to increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth are conditions in which the cognizer is more likely—indeed, *much* more likely, where there are *very* many ways to get things wrong—to have unreliable processes than reliable processes.

I find (I) to be quite implausible. It seems that even if under certain rather *extreme* conditions, such as where the cognizer is *much* more likely to have unreliable processes than reliable processes, doxastic coherence fails to increase the probability of truth or generate a high probability of truth, it might still be that coherentism is the correct theory of epistemic justification. It might still be that all justification is inferential, and beliefs, when justified, are justified together (not in isolation) as members of a coherent belief system.[24]

A more plausible proposal, it seems, is that the test should be of whether doxastic coherence increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth under conditions of *ignorance as to the reliability of the cognizer's processes*. In other words:

(J) Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive if and only if under conditions of *ignorance as to the reliability of the cognizer's processes*, doxastic coherence both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth.[25]

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[23] I am assuming that when a cognizer forms, say, a perceptual belief, there are two or more ways for her to get things wrong.

[24] It might be argued, in favor of (I), that for doxastic coherence to be truth-conducive, it needs to be the case that under *any* conditions in which there can be doxastic coherence, even conditions in which the cognizer is much more likely to have unreliable processes than reliable processes, doxastic coherence increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. I consider this proposal in §V.

[25] I am simplifying a bit. I take it to be plausible that, *with respect to the issue of reliability*, the requisite conditions are conditions of ignorance as to the reliability of the

If (J) is correct, and if conditions of ignorance as to the reliability of the cognizer's processes are conditions in which *the cognizer is just as likely to have unreliable processes as reliable processes*, then:

(K) Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive if and only if under conditions in which *the cognizer is just as likely to have unreliable processes as reliable processes*, doxastic coherence both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth.[26]

If (K) is true, (I) is false.[27] Hence, if (J) holds, and (J) leads to (K), it follows that (I) is incorrect. Then, since (I) follows from the conjunction of (H) and (F), and since, as I grant, (F) is correct, it follows that (H) is false.

The approach just described, of focusing on conditions of *ignorance as to the reliability of the cognizer's processes*, seems to be BonJour's approach in BonJour (1985). In Chapter 1 (sec. 1.3), BonJour argues that when an epistemologist gives a theory of justification, she needs to give a "metajustification" for that theory, i.e. an *a priori* argument showing that justification of the proposed sort is likely to lead to truth. Then, in Chapter 8, BonJour attempts to give a metajustification for his coherentism.[28] He

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cognizer's processes. It might be, though, that the requisite conditions involve more than just ignorance as to reliability.

[26] (K) does not say, or imply, that doxastic coherence is truth-conducive only if *the only conditions* in which doxastic coherence increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth are conditions in which the cognizer is just as likely to have unreliable processes as reliable processes.

[27] (K) says that: Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive *if* and only if under conditions in which the cognizer is *just as likely* to have unreliable processes as reliable processes, doxastic coherence increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. (K) thus implies that: It is false that doxastic coherence is truth-conducive *only if* under conditions in which the cognizer is *more likely* to have unreliable processes than reliable processes, doxastic coherence increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. (This inference fails if the following conditional holds: If doxastic coherence increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth under conditions in which the cognizer is *just as likely* to have unreliable processes as reliable processes, then doxastic coherence increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth under conditions in which the cognizer is *more likely* to have unreliable processes than reliable processes. But this conditional seems false.)

[28] BonJour is now a foundationalist. See BonJour (1999), and BonJour and Sosa (2003).

attempts to show *a priori* that if, over a long run, one's belief system has remained coherent, stable, and in accord with the "Observation Requirement,"[29] one's beliefs are likely, to a degree proportional to the longness of the run and the coherence and stability of the system, to be true.[30] This argument is meant to be of help in answering the *external-world* skeptic.[31] One can argue (or reason) that, though *initially one was ignorant as to the reliability of one's processes*, as well as to all other external-world matters, now one has (at least relatively) strong evidence that one's processes are reliable and one's beliefs are true—viz. that, over a long run, one's belief system has remained coherent, stable, and in accord with the Observation Requirement.[32]

I do not claim to have shown that (J) and (K) are true, or to have shown that (H) and (I) are false. The point is that (J) and (K) strike me, at least, as preferable to (H) and (I), and that if we rejected (H) and (I) in favor of (J) and (K), we could accept (D), (E), and (F) and yet not accept (G). Hence, even if (A), (B), and (C) held, and even if they transferred to the case of doxastic coherence, in the way of (D), (E), and (F), further argumentation would be needed to establish that (G).

V

It might seem that:

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[29] This is the requirement that a belief system "contain laws attributing a high degree of reliability to a reasonable variety of cognitively spontaneous beliefs (including in particular those kinds of introspective beliefs which are required for the recognition of other cognitively spontaneous beliefs)" (1985, p. 141).

[30] BonJour's argument makes no appeal to witness agreement. In fact, in Chapter 8, the chapter in which he tries to give a metajustification for his coherentism, BonJour discusses witness agreement *not at all*.

[31] For BonJour, one's grasp of one's belief system is not at issue. One may simply take it for granted, when engaged in epistemological investigation, that one's grasp of one's belief system is by and large correct. See BonJour's discussion of the "Doxastic Presumption" (1985, pp. 103-106). What is at issue, for BonJour, is whether one's *external-world* beliefs are correct. BonJour's metajustification is meant to be of help in defending one's *external-world* beliefs against the *external-world* skeptic.

[32] Reliability should here be understood so that reliability comes in degrees, and a process can be reliable (though not fully reliable) even if it does not invariably produce true beliefs.

(L) For any theory of justification *T*, for *T*-justification (justification according to *T*) to be truth-conducive, it needs to be the case that under *any* conditions in which there can be *T*-justification, *T*-justification both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth.

Suppose (L) is correct. Then since (it seems) there can be doxastic coherence in conditions in which the cognizer is more likely to have unreliable processes than reliable processes, it would follow that (I) is correct. Also, since (it seems) there can be doxastic coherence in conditions in which the cognizer has no individual credibility, it would follow that (H) is correct.

(L) is false, however. If (L) were true, no *fallibilist* form of justification, coherentist or noncoherentist, would be truth-conducive. Consider Richard Feldman and Earl Conee's evidentialism (2004), a form of *foundationalism* on which for any subject *S*, and proposition *p*, *S*'s belief that *p* is justified if *S*'s believing that *p* "fits" his evidence (experiential and doxastic).[33] Given that, as Feldman and Conee readily admit, *S*'s believing that *p* can fit his evidence even if, in fact, *p* is false, (L) implies that for evidentialist justification to be truth-conducive, it needs to be the case that under conditions in which *p is false*, evidentialist justification increases the probability of *p* and generates a high probability of *p*. Obviously, evidentialist justification cannot satisfy this requirement.

Or consider fallibilist varieties of process reliabilism.[34] On these views, *reliability* does not require *infallibility*, and so there can be reliably-produced beliefs which are nonetheless false. Beliefs of this sort would be justified but false. Then, though, by (L), it would follow that for process-reliabilist justification to be truth-conducive, it needs to be the case that under conditions in which *p* is false, process-reliabilist justification increases the probability of *p* and generates a high probability of *p*. The result, *per impossible*, would be that process-reliabilist justification is not truth-conducive.

(L) can be weakened to:

(L*) For any theory of justification *T*, for *T*-justification to be truth-conducive, it needs to be the case that under any conditions, *compatible with the truth of the believed proposition*, in which there can be *T*-justification, *T*-justification both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth.

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[33] I am glossing over an important but, for my purposes, tangential distinction between justification and "well-foundedness."

[34] See e.g. Goldman (1979).

Because *p*'s being false is *not* compatible with the truth of *p*, (L*), unlike (L), does *not* imply that for evidentialist justification to be truth-conducive, it needs to be the case that under conditions in which *p* is false, evidentialist justification increases the probability of *p* and generates a high probability of *p*. Likewise with respect to other fallibilist forms of justification.[35]

But even (L*) is too strong, it seems. Consider, again, Feldman and Conee's evidentialism. On this view, there can be justified beliefs produced by unreliable processes.[36] Indeed, there can be justified beliefs produced by *highly* unreliable processes. Since highly unreliable processes can produce true beliefs, it follows, by (L*), that for evidentialist justification to be truth-conducive, it needs to be the case that under conditions in which *the cognizer's processes are highly unreliable*, evidentialist justification increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. This seems to be too much—far too much—to require, for evidentialism to be the correct theory of epistemic justification.[37]

The main point is that before it is concluded, on the basis of (L*), that (H) is true, it needs to be shown that (L*) itself is true. Hence, again, even if (A), (B), and (C) held, and even if they transferred to the case of doxastic coherence, further argumentation would be needed to show that (G) is correct.

In §III, I explained that (D) and (H) together entail (G), and that if, though, (H) is false, then, even granting (D), it might be that (G) is false. In §IV, I suggested that (H) and (I) should be rejected in favor of (J) and (K). In this section, §V, I argued that though each of (L) and (L*) leads to (I) and (H), each of (L) and (L*), it seems, is too stringent. I now want to consider whether coherentists themselves are committed to (H), and, with (F), to (I) and not-(K).

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[35] (L*), like (L), leads to (I) and (H).

[36] Unreliability should here be understood so that unreliability comes in degrees, and a process can be unreliable (though not fully unreliable) even if it does not invariably produce false beliefs.

[37] A better test, it seems, is whether evidentialist justification increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth *under conditions of ignorance as to the reliability of the cognizer's processes*. (Again, I am simplifying. The suggestion is that, *with respect to the issue of reliability*, the requisite conditions are conditions of ignorance as to the reliability of the cognizer's processes.)

VI

(K) says that the conditions in which doxastic coherence should be expected to increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth are conditions in which *the cognizer is just as likely to have unreliable processes as reliable processes*. (F) implies that conditions in which a cognizer is just as likely to have unreliable processes as reliable processes are conditions in which *she has some individual credibility*—her believing that *p* increases the probability of *p*.[38] So, (K) and (F) together imply that the conditions in which doxastic coherence should be expected to increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth are conditions in which the cognizer has some individual credibility. Is this implication acceptable?

Olsson, I take it, would answer in the negative, at least with respect to BonJour's coherentism. Olsson writes:

> What is the import of this result? Well, we remember that BonJour's main application is his attempted radical justification of belief, in which case our imagined initial position presumably is one of ignorance as to whether our information is reliable or not. In the absence of a better way of representing ignorance probabilistically, we seem obliged to assign to each possibility the same probability. . . . Moreover, given an initial ignorant state, there seems to be no reason to restrict the number of possible contents a given cognitively spontaneous belief may have to 2. . . . Now what we have shown is that invoking these two assumptions—'uniform prior over the possible reliability profiles' and 'more than two possible report contents'—automatically confers a positive degree of credibility on each individual report. It would seem difficult to avoid the conclusion that each cognitively spontaneous belief is to some degree credible even before any appeals to coherence have been made. But this conclusion contradicts BonJour's contention that cognitively spontaneous beliefs are initially lacking in credibility.
>
> The incompatibility is serious because it involves a fundamental assumption in BonJour's epistemology. After all, he takes as the hallmark of his coherence theory that it does not require given data to be individually credible; this is the very feature that is supposed to distinguish his theory from Lewis's weak foundationalism. (2005a, pp. 71-72)

[38] (C) should be understood so that conditions in which a witness is just as likely to be a truth-teller as a liar are conditions in which she has some individual credibility—her testifying that *p* increases the probability of *p*. See Olsson (2005a, p. 71, pp. 218-219). (F) should thus be understood similarly.

Olsson, it seems, takes it to be essential to BonJour's coherentism that individual credibility is not required, that doxastic coherence can increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth even under conditions of no individual credibility.

I read BonJour differently than does Olsson. Consider, again, what BonJour says in answer to Lewis:

> What Lewis does not see, however, is that his own example shows quite convincingly that no antecedent degree of warrant or credibility is required. For as long as we are confident that the reports of various witnesses are genuinely independent of each other, a high enough degree of coherence among them will eventually dictate the hypothesis of truth telling as the only available explanation of their agreement—even, indeed, if those individual reports initially *have a high degree of negative credibility, that is, are much more likely to be false than true* (for example in the case where all the witnesses are known to be habitual liars). And by the same token, so long as apparently cognitively spontaneous beliefs are genuinely independent of each other, their agreement will eventually generate credibility, without the need for any initial degree of warrant. (emphasis mine)

I read BonJour as holding that a witness *w* has *positive* individual credibility with respect to *p* just in case Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is greater than .5, *negative* individual credibility with respect to *p* just in case Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is less than .5, and *no* individual credibility with respect to *p* just in case Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is equal to .5.[39] BonJour's claim is *not* that witness agreement can increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth even when, for each witness *w*, Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is *equal to Pr(p)*. Rather, BonJour's claim is that witness agreement can increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth even when, for each witness *w*, Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is *less than or equal to .5*, indeed, even when Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is *much less than .5*.[40] Likewise with respect to doxastic coherence: BonJour's claim is that doxastic

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[39] Though, strictly speaking, BonJour speaks of individual credibility as attaching to witness reports, not to witnesses.

[40] James van Cleve (2005) reads BonJour in this manner. See also Shogenji (2005a, pp. 314-315). Cf. Olsson (2005a, p. 67, n. 4). If this reading of BonJour is correct, and if Lewis understands "no individual credibility" as in (B), then BonJour's and Lewis's claims are compatible. It can be true that, in some cases, witness agreement increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth even though, for each witness *w*, Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is less than or equal to .5, indeed, even though Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is much less than .5, and yet also be true that witness agreement neither

coherence (plus stability, etc., over a long run) can increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth even when, for each proposition *p* such that *S* believes that *p*, Pr(*p* | *S* believes that *p*) is less than or equal to .5, indeed, even when Pr(*p* | *S* believes that *p*) is much less than .5.

Perhaps, though, BonJour is committed to much more than this. Perhaps coherentists *as such* hold[41] that doxastic coherence can increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth even under conditions of no individual credibility *in the sense of (E)*.[42] Indeed, perhaps coherentists as such hold that (H): Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive only if under conditions of no individual credibility, doxastic coherence both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth. If so, then, with (F), coherentists are committed to (I) and not-(K), and, with (D), coherentists are committed to (G).

Do coherentists as such hold that (H)? An affirmative answer can be defended as follows:

(1) Coherentists as such hold that: Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive only if under *the requisite conditions*, doxastic coherence both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth.

(2) Coherentists as such deny that there can be *noninferential justification*, and *thereby* deny that there can be *individual credibility*.

Therefore

(3) Coherentists as such hold that (H): Doxastic coherence is truth-conducive only if under conditions of *no individual credibility*, doxastic coherence both increases the probability of truth and generates a high probability of truth.

Let's grant that (1) is correct, and that (3) follows from (1) and (2).[43] The question is whether (2) is correct. Clearly, the first part of (2) is correct, that coherentists as such

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increases the probability of truth nor generates a high probability of truth when, for each witness *w*, Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is equal to Pr(*p*). There might be reason, however, for doubting that Lewis understands "no individual credibility" as in (B). See van Cleve (2005, pp. 170-171).

[41] Or *should* hold, to be consistent.

[42] Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, "no individual credibility" is to be understood as in (E).

[43] I take it that if (1) and (2) are true, coherentists as such hold that the requisite conditions (the conditions under which doxastic coherence should be expected to increase

deny that there can be noninferential justification. But do coherentists thereby deny that there can be individual credibility?

No. Suppose *S* believes that *p*. Suppose *S*'s beliefs provide no evidential support to his belief that *p*. Coherentists would say that since all justification is inferential, requiring evidential support from beliefs, it follows that *S*'s belief that *p* is not justified. Coherentists might *not* say, however, that *S* has no individual credibility with respect to *p*. It might be that *S*'s processes are highly reliable, and that Pr(*p*) is low. If so, Pr(*p* | *S* believes that *p*) is greater than, in fact, much greater than, Pr(*p*), and thus, as any coherentist should admit, *S* has some individual credibility with respect to *p*. Analogously, if, in a case of witness agreement, a witness *w* is a truth-teller, and Pr(*p*) is low, then Pr(*p* | *w* said that *p*) is greater than Pr(*p*), and so *w* has some individual credibility with respect to *p*.

Consider the following case, which I adapt from BonJour (1985, p. 41):

> Norman believes that the President is in New York City. This belief was produced by Norman's process of clairvoyance, under circumstances in which this process is highly reliable. Norman, though, has no belief as to whether he has a highly reliable process of clairvoyance. In fact, Norman's beliefs provide no evidential support to his belief that the President is in New York City.

Coherentists would judge that Norman's belief about the President is not justified. For, by hypothesis, Norman's beliefs provide no evidential support to his belief about the President.[44] Clearly, though, Norman has some individual credibility with respect to the claim that the President is in New York City. The prior probability that the President is in New York City is low.[45] The posterior probability—viz. the probability that the President is in New York City given that Norman believes that the President is in New York City—is high.

When coherentists claim that all justification is inferential, the claim is that justification requires reasons and only beliefs can serve as reasons for beliefs; experiences (perceptual or otherwise) can *cause* beliefs but cannot *serve as reasons for*

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the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth) are conditions of *no noninferential justification* and *thus* of *no individual credibility*. Hence (3).

[44] Coherentists appeal to cases of this sort in arguing against externalist theories such as process reliabilism. See BonJour (1985, Ch. 3) and Lehrer (2000, Ch. 8).

[45] Or at least we can suppose. Surely there can be cases in which there is a low prior probability that the President is in New York City.

beliefs.[46] This claim (that all justification is inferential) implies that individual credibility is *insufficient for justification*. For, as discussed in the prior two paragraphs, there can be cases in which *S* has some individual credibility with respect to *p*, and yet *S*'s beliefs provide no evidential support to his belief that *p*. But, importantly, the claim that all justification is inferential does not imply that individual credibility is *impossible*, that there can be no individual credibility.

Of course, it might be that coherentists are incorrect that reasons are required for justification and only beliefs can serve as reasons for beliefs. The present point is that coherentists may, and do, deny the possibility of noninferential justification, and yet do not deny, indeed insist on, the possibility of individual credibility.

Hence, (2) in the argument five paragraphs above is incorrect. It is not the case that coherentists deny that there can be individual credibility, and so it is not the case that coherentists deny this (that there can be individual credibility) in denying that there can be noninferential justification.

This point can be easy to miss. In some contexts, the terms "justification" and "credibility" are used interchangeably. *Credible* beliefs, in such contexts, are simply *justified* beliefs, and *individually* credible beliefs are simply *noninferentially* justified beliefs. A denial of the possibility of noninferential justification is thus a denial of the possibility of individual credibility. However, when "credibility" is used so that *S* has some individual credibility with respect to *p* just in case Pr(*p* | *S* believes that *p*) is greater than Pr(*p*), then coherentists need not, and do not, deny that there can be individual credibility.

VII

Some recent work in formal epistemology shows that under conditions of no individual credibility, witness agreement neither increases the probability of truth nor generates a high probability of truth. It can seem that, from this result in formal epistemology, it follows that coherentist justification, i.e. doxastic coherence, is not truth-conducive. I have tried to show that this does not follow—further argumentation is needed. The crucial question is: Under *what conditions* should coherentist justification be expected to increase the probability of truth and generate a high probability of truth, in order for coherentism to be the correct theory of epistemic justification? If, as might well be the case, conditions of no individual credibility are not among those conditions, then even granting the formal epistemological result concerning witness agreement, and that it

[46] See e.g. Davidson (2000).

carries over to the case of coherentist justification, we cannot conclude that coherentist justification is not truth-conducive.

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