

# IS COHERENTISM CONSISTENT?

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## Introduction

Can a perceptual experience justify (epistemically) a belief? More generally, can a nonbelief justify a belief? Coherentists answer in the negative: Only a belief can justify a belief. A perceptual experience can *cause* a belief but cannot *justify* a belief. Coherentists eschew all noninferential justification—justification independent of evidential support from beliefs—and, with it, the idea that justification has a foundation. Instead, justification is holistic in structure. Beliefs are justified together, not in isolation, as members of a coherent belief system.

The main question of this paper is: Is coherentism consistent? In section 2, I set out an apparent inconsistency in coherentism. In section 3, I give a resolution to this apparent inconsistency. Lastly in section 4, I conclude.

## An Apparent Inconsistency in Coherentism

The claim that only beliefs can justify beliefs can be put as follows:

(A) For  $X$  to justify  $S$ 's belief in  $p$ ,  $X$  needs to be a belief (or collection of beliefs).

If (A) is correct, then, assuming that perceptual experiences are not beliefs,<sup>1</sup> it follows that perceptual experiences cannot justify beliefs, hence, cannot noninferentially justify beliefs. But is (A) correct?

One main argument for (A) is premised on the thesis that only mental states that can stand in logical relations (deductive or inductive) to beliefs can justify beliefs:

(B) For  $X$  to justify  $S$ 's belief in  $p$ ,  $X$  needs to be a mental state (or collection of mental states) that can stand in logical relations to beliefs.

(B) follows from the thesis that:

(C) For  $X$  to justify  $S$ 's belief in  $p$ ,  $X$  needs to be a mental state (or collection of mental states) that stands in a logical relation to  $S$ 's belief in  $p$ .<sup>2</sup>

The argument from (B) to (A) proceeds as follows. Perceptual experiences are non-propositional in content. So, since things that are non-propositional in content cannot stand in logical relations to beliefs or to anything else, it follows that perceptual experiences cannot stand in logical relations to beliefs. Hence, by (B), perceptual

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<sup>1</sup> This assumption is highly plausible. For example, it can look to one as if there is a blue book there, even if one does not believe that there is a blue book there, say, because one believes that the lighting conditions are abnormal.

<sup>2</sup> This thesis is quite similar to what James Pryor (189) calls the "Premise Principle," and what Peter Markie (349) calls the "Rational Support Principle."

William A. Roche

experiences cannot justify beliefs. Thus, since hopes, fears, etc., cannot justify beliefs,<sup>3</sup> it follows that only beliefs can justify beliefs.

Donald Davidson can be read as arguing in this fashion. Consider:

The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified. (157)

Davidson speaks of “sensations,” not of “perceptual experiences.” But the argument proceeds as above. Sensations are non-propositional in content—sensations are not propositional attitudes. So, sensations cannot stand in logical relations to beliefs (only causal relations), thus cannot justify beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

The argument above from (B) to (A) raises some important, and vexing, questions. Is it correct that perceptual experiences are non-propositional in content? Is it correct that things that are non-propositional in content cannot stand in logical relations to beliefs or to anything else? Is (B) correct? Or, can  $X$  justify  $S$ 's belief in  $p$  even if  $X$  is not a mental state that can stand in logical relations to beliefs? But the question I want to consider is different: Is (A) *consistent* with the main tenets of coherentism?

A negative answer to this question can be defended as follows. Coherentists claim that beliefs are justified not by beliefs, but by *coherence*. More precisely:

(D)  $S$ 's beliefs, when justified, are justified by *the fact that  $S$ 's belief system is coherent*.

The fact that  $S$ 's belief system is coherent is not itself a belief. Rather, it is a *fact* about a system of beliefs. So, strictly speaking, if (D) is correct, then (A) is false.<sup>5</sup> Thus, (A) is inconsistent with (D), a main tenet—the main tenet—of coherentism.

Similarly, it can be argued that (B) is inconsistent with (D). The fact that  $S$ 's belief system is coherent is not a mental state, and so is not a mental state that can stand in logical relation to beliefs. Hence, by (B),  $S$ 's beliefs cannot be justified by the fact that  $S$ 's belief system is coherent. But, by (D),  $S$ 's beliefs, when justified, are justified by the

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<sup>3</sup> Though not because of (B). Hopes, fears, and other such nondoxastic *propositional* attitudes can stand in logical relations to beliefs.

<sup>4</sup> The issue of whether things other than beliefs, e.g., perceptual experiences, can justify beliefs has been much discussed in epistemology. See, for example, Bonjour (Ch. 4).

<sup>5</sup> Read (D) as saying, in part, that  $S$ 's beliefs *can be* justified, and so *can be* justified by the fact that his belief system is coherent.

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fact that *S*'s belief system is coherent. The conclusion, it seems, is that (B), like (A), is inconsistent with a central tenet of coherentism.<sup>6</sup>

Matthias Steup argues in roughly this fashion against what he calls “BonJour’s dilemma argument.” Steup characterizes BonJour’s dilemma argument as relying on the claim that:

(E) For *X* to justify *S*'s belief in *p*, *X* needs to be capable of being justified.<sup>7</sup>

Steup objects that this claim is inconsistent with BonJour’s coherentism:

The issue BonJour’s dilemma argument raises is whether a belief’s justification can have its source in something that is not itself capable of being justified. BonJour claims that a belief’s justification can’t have its source in any such thing. Yet, and this is what foundationalists should say in reply to BonJour’s argument, his own coherentist position appears to presuppose that it can. The central thesis of coherentism, after all, is that beliefs are justified by coherence. (144)

In terms of (D), the point is this: The fact that *S*'s belief system is coherent is not itself capable of being justified—it is not the right sort of thing for that. Yet, if (D) is correct, *S*'s beliefs, when justified, are justified by the fact that *S*'s belief system is coherent, hence by something not capable of being justified. This is incompatible with (E).

The apparent inconsistency between (A) and (D) is all the more troubling because (D) is central to what coherentists say in reply to the regress argument for foundationalism. One of the central premises in the regress argument for foundationalism is the claim that justification cannot move in a circle, where, say, the belief in *p* receives justification from the belief in *q*, which receives justification from the belief in *r*, . . . which receives justification from the belief in *p*. Coherentists reply that, as they see it, justification is not transferred between beliefs. Justification is *holistic*. Beliefs are justified together as members of a coherent belief system. When a belief system is coherent, this fact about the system renders the beliefs therein justified.

The situation is this. (A) and (D) seem to be inconsistent with each other, and obviously so. Yet, it seems coherentists accept both (A) and (D). Can this seeming inconsistency in coherentism be resolved?

### A Resolution

James Pryor discusses this issue. He suggests what he takes to be a plausible reply on behalf of coherentism:

[W]e might worry whether the coherentist is himself in a position to accept the Master Argument. After all, doesn’t the coherentist want facts about *coherence* to

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<sup>6</sup> Earl Conee makes this point in answer to an argument in Michael Williams (393).

<sup>7</sup> This is my formulation, not Steup’s.

play a justifying role? Yet coherence is not itself a belief or a belief-like state. Here I think the coherentist can reply, “Notice that coherence is a property of *the contents* of your beliefs. Any set of beliefs having the same contents would be just as coherent. So it is OK to say that it is always your beliefs that are doing the justifying. It is just that certain sets of beliefs (those whose contents cohere well) justify more than others. Talk about the justifying role of *coherence* is shorthand for talk about which sets of beliefs justify and which don’t.” This seems to me a plausible line for the coherentist to take. (188, emphasis Pryor’s)

In terms of (A) and (D), the reply is that (D) can be read as stating that *S*’s beliefs, when justified, are justified *by S’s beliefs* because together they are coherent. Hence, (D) is consistent with (A).

I agree that claims about justification by coherence can be read as claims about justification by beliefs. But this is not why (A) and (D) are consistent with each other. If what I argue below is correct, (A) and (D) are consistent with each other because (A) and (D), when properly understood, are about two distinct issues.

Sometimes we say that a given belief is justified (or unjustified) *simpliciter*. For example, “Smith’s belief that Nogot owns a Ford is justified, but, because, in fact, Nogot does not own a Ford, Smith’s belief does not count as knowledge.” Other times we say that a given belief is justified *by such and such* as in “*S*’s belief in *p* is justified by his belief in *q*.” Sometimes when we claim that a given belief is justified by such and such, what we mean is that the belief is justified, in that it satisfies the justification condition for knowledge,<sup>8</sup> and that what makes the belief justified (in that sense) is such and such. In this sense, to say that *S*’s belief in *p* is justified by *X* is to say that *S*’s belief in *p* is justified (that is, *S*’s belief in *p* satisfies the justification condition for knowledge) *by virtue of*, or *because of*, *X*. In other words, *X* is *what makes it the case* that *S*’s belief in *p* is justified—*X* is the *justification-maker*, or *justifier*, for *S*’s belief in *p*. Let us say that when *S*’s belief in *p* is justified by *X* in the sense that *X* is the “justification-maker” (JM) for *S*’s belief in *p*, then *S*’s belief in *p* is justified<sub>JM</sub> by *X*.

Instead of saying that *S*’s belief in *p* is justified<sub>JM</sub> by *X*, we may say that *X* justifies<sub>JM</sub> *S*’s belief in *p*. Also, if the justification-maker is *X* together with *Y*, we may say that *X* and *Y* *together* justify<sub>JM</sub> *S*’s belief in *p*.

The term “justifies” can be used in a second sense, to mean “evidentially supports” (ES) or “provides a reason for.” In this sense, to say that *X* justifies *S*’s belief in *p* is to say that *X* *evidentially supports* or *provides a reason for* *S*’s belief in *p*. Let’s say that when *X* justifies *S*’s belief in *p* in the sense that *X* evidentially supports *S*’s belief in *p*, *X* justifies<sub>ES</sub> *S*’s belief in *p*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I am assuming that justification is required for knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> Likewise, when *X* and *Y* together justify *S*’s belief in *p* in the sense that *X* and *Y* together evidentially support *S*’s belief in *p*, *X* and *Y* together justify<sub>ES</sub> *S*’s belief in *p*.

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Similarly with respect to the term “justified.” When  $S$ 's belief in  $p$  is justified by  $X$  in the sense that  $S$ 's belief in  $p$  is evidentially supported by  $X$ ,  $S$ 's belief in  $p$  is justified<sub>ES</sub> by  $X$ .

The notions of justifies<sub>JM</sub> and justified<sub>JM</sub>, on one hand, and of justifies<sub>ES</sub> and justified<sub>ES</sub>, on the other hand, are distinct. Suppose the justification condition for knowledge does not require evidential support, say, some version of process reliabilism is correct. Then, a belief can be justified even though it has no evidential support—no supporting evidence or reasons. Any such belief would be justified<sub>JM</sub> by some  $X$ , say, the fact that it was produced by a reliable process, but would not be justified<sub>ES</sub> by any  $X$ .

It might be that, for some  $X$ ,  $S$ , and  $p$ , if  $X$  justifies<sub>ES</sub>  $S$ 's belief in  $p$ , then  $X$  justifies<sub>JM</sub>  $S$ 's belief in  $p$ . Nonetheless, the two notions are distinct.

Let us return to (A) and (D). (A) can be read as making a claim about justification-makers, or as making a claim about evidential support:

- (A\*) For  $X$  to justify<sub>JM</sub>  $S$ 's belief in  $p$ ,  $X$  needs to be a belief (or collection of beliefs).
- (A\*\*) For  $X$  to justify<sub>ES</sub>  $S$ 's belief in  $p$ ,  $X$  needs to be a belief (or collection of beliefs).

Likewise, (D) can be read in two ways:

- (D\*)  $S$ 's beliefs, when justified, are justified<sub>JM</sub> by the fact that  $S$ 's belief system is coherent.
- (D\*\*)  $S$ 's beliefs, when justified, are justified<sub>ES</sub> by the fact that  $S$ 's belief system is coherent.

My claim is that coherentists accept (A\*\*) and (D\*), and that (A\*\*) and (D\*) can be true together.

When coherentists claim that only beliefs can justify beliefs, the claim is about *evidential support*, *reasons*, etc. Beliefs can evidentially support beliefs, can serve as reasons for beliefs, and so on. But perceptual experiences cannot. Nor can hopes, desires, etc. Here Davidson speaks explicitly in terms of reasons:

What distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a *reason for holding a belief* except another belief. (156, emphasis mine)

Davidson's argument is that sensations are non-propositional in content and so cannot stand in logical relations to beliefs, hence cannot *serve as reasons for*, or evidentially support, beliefs. Only beliefs can serve as reasons for beliefs. This is (A\*\*), not (A\*).<sup>10</sup>

Coherentists are distinguished from at least some foundationalists in their acceptance of (A\*\*). Some foundationalists deny (A\*\*) in arguing that perceptual experiences can

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<sup>10</sup> I read BonJour as having defended (A\*\*) in *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Ch. 4) and as arguing against (A\*\*) in BonJour and Sosa, *Epistemic Justification*.

serve as reasons for beliefs.<sup>11</sup> But coherentists are not the only theorists who accept (A\*\*). *Infinetists*, too, accept (A\*\*). Infinitists agree with coherentists in denying that regresses of evidential support between beliefs can (legitimately) terminate in beliefs that are evidentially supported by perceptual experiences. Perceptual experiences are impotent to evidentially support beliefs—only beliefs can evidentially support, or serve as reasons for, beliefs. This is why, in part, infinitists hold that chains of evidential support between beliefs should continue on *ad infinitum* with new belief after new belief.<sup>12</sup>

When coherentists claim that beliefs, if justified, are justified by coherence, what they have in mind is (D\*). The claim is about *justification-makers*. *S*'s beliefs, when justified, are justified by *virtue of* the fact that *S*'s belief system is coherent. This fact of coherence, though, is not itself a belief, hence, by (A\*\*), provides no evidential support to *S*'s beliefs. *S*'s beliefs are evidentially supported by his beliefs. Say, *S*'s belief in *p* is evidentially supported by his belief in *q*, which is evidentially supported by his belief in *r* together with his belief in *s*, and so on. But *S*'s belief in *p* is not justified<sub>JM</sub> by his belief in *q*. Rather, *S*'s belief in *p* is justified<sub>JM</sub> by the fact that his belief system is coherent.<sup>13</sup>

Coherentists can follow Prior's suggestion and insist that talk about justification by coherence should be understood as shorthand for talk about justification by beliefs. The view would be that *S*'s beliefs, when justified, are justified<sub>JM</sub> by *S*'s beliefs, and that what enables them to do this is the fact that together they are coherent. But it would still need to be said that there is a second sense in which, for coherentists, only beliefs can justify beliefs—viz., that only beliefs can justify<sub>ES</sub> beliefs. This is an important issue of disagreement between coherentists and at least some foundationalists, and an important area of agreement between coherentists and infinitists. Also, arguments based on claims such as (B) are best understood as arguments for (A\*\*), not (D\*). Infinitists too can employ such arguments, but, of course, infinitists reject (D\*).

The apparent inconsistency set out in section 2 is thus resolved. When properly understood, (A) and (D) concern two distinct issues. (A) concerns what can evidentially support beliefs. (A) states that only beliefs can evidentially support beliefs. (D) concerns what makes beliefs justified. (D) states that what makes beliefs justified (what makes it such that they satisfy the justification condition for knowledge) is the fact that the subject's belief system is coherent

### Conclusion

I have argued that the following claims, when properly understood, are jointly consistent: (i) only beliefs can justify beliefs, (ii) beliefs are justified by coherence, and (iii) coherence is not a belief. The first claim concerns evidential support, reasons, etc. The claim is that only beliefs can *evidentially support* beliefs. The second claim concerns

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<sup>11</sup> For example, see Paul Moser.

<sup>12</sup> Or should do so *at least in principle*. See Klein.

<sup>13</sup> Recall the point above (section 2) that coherentists reply to the regress argument for foundationalism by denying that justification is transferred between beliefs. Justification, they hold, is holistic. When a belief system is coherent, this fact about the system renders the beliefs therein justified.

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justification-makers. The claim is that beliefs are *made justified* by coherence, that is, that the justification-maker for a justified belief is the fact that the subject's belief system is coherent. Of course, consistency is not sufficient for plausibility. Nothing in what I have argued is meant to show that it is plausible that only beliefs can serve as reasons for beliefs. This issue requires separate treatment.

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