

BonJour, "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Justification"

**1.
The Regress Argument: The Coherentist Response**

Remember the Regress Argument. In response, the coherentist claims: "Reject premise 4!" Beliefs are justified from within—from the relations of mutual support (logical, probabilistic, explanatory) that they bear to other beliefs.

**2.
Two Conceptions of Coherence**

Circular coherence: Belief B_1 is justified on virtue of belief B_2 , which in turn gets its support from $B_3 \dots B_{n-1}$, which is justified by B_n , which finally is justified by B_1 .
Circular coherentism—like foundationalism—presupposes a linear conception of justification.

Holistic coherence: Relations of justification do not involve a linear or symmetrical order of dependence; all of the beliefs in a system mutually support one another and none are epistemically prior to any other.
This is BonJour's view.

Conditions on coherence:

1. Logical consistency – This is a purely negative condition; it states that one's system of beliefs must lack conflict.
2. Positive explanatory connections – One's system of beliefs must involve inferential and explanatory connections between beliefs, e.g., induction, deduction.

According to BonJour, how is an individual belief justified?

There are four 'stages':

- i. the inferability of that particular belief from other particular beliefs;
- ii. the coherence of the overall system of beliefs;
- iii. the justification of the overall system of beliefs;
- iv. the justification of the particular belief in question, by virtue of its membership in the system.

Each of these steps depends on the step before it. According to BonJour, overlooking steps (ii) and (iii) have led to the linear model of justification.

Step (iii) is important. According to BonJour, it is not enough that a belief is a member of a coherent system. A person must also be able to recognize that the belief stands in this relationship to other beliefs. If a person does not have access to this, then s/he has no reason to think that the belief is likely to be true. So, being justified in believing that p involves having a further justified belief that p is likely to be true. (This latter belief involves believing that my belief that p is a member of my system of beliefs and that that system as a whole is justified—i.e., coherent.)

But what justifies these further meta-beliefs? According to BonJour, they are not justified in the traditional internalist or externalist sense. Rather, I cannot help but hold them to be true. Such a belief is "a basic and unavoidable feature of cognitive practice".

**3.
Three Objections**

(a) The input objection:

According to coherentism, a system of beliefs is justified given the relations its beliefs hold to each other. Given this, we seem to have lost any relation to the world; according to coherentism, it doesn't matter what the world is like! If a system of beliefs represents the world accurately, then this is a mere coincidence. But we have agreed (earlier in the term) that accidentally true beliefs do not qualify as knowledge. So, coherentism cannot account for empirical knowledge.

Response: We must distinguish between that which causes a belief and that which justifies it.

Cognitively spontaneous beliefs: arise without being inferred from any other beliefs (e.g., perceptual beliefs).

The world has an effect on one's belief system by giving rise to cognitively spontaneous beliefs. Still, these beliefs are justified in virtue of their coherence with the entire system of one's beliefs.

BonJour thinks that his response to the input objection provides the resources with which to deal with two other objections.

(b) The alternative coherent system objection:

There may be two (or more!) mutually incompatible coherent systems that are equally coherent. Coherentism does not have the resources with which to make a principled choice between these systems—even if we, *prima facie*, one of these systems provides a more accurate representation of the worlds.

Response: This may happen at a time. But, in the long run, with the continuation of cognitively spontaneous beliefs, one system is bound to be more coherent than the other.

Is this response good enough?

(c) The problem of truth:

Coherence may be necessary for justification; but it is not sufficient. It does not allow us a means of distinguishing truth from deluded, but coherent, theories or systems of beliefs (theories just are systems of beliefs). That is, it does not give us an account of why coherently justified beliefs are more likely to be true than beliefs that are not justified in this way.

Response: There are at least two ways to connect coherence with truth.

- (i) Accept the coherence theory of truth—i.e., the view that a belief is true if and only if coheres with a set of beliefs.

But BonJour rejects this option.

- (ii) Accept the correspondence theory of truth and argue that a correspondence with reality provides the most plausible explanation of the fact that the overall belief system remains coherent while the agent continually accepts cognitively spontaneous beliefs. A system of beliefs that remains coherent over time is more likely to correspond to an independent realist.

This is what BonJour argues.

Is this good enough? What about a world in which a demon continuously causes you to have cognitively spontaneous beliefs, and that these contribute to a coherent system of beliefs?