

## CHAPTER IV

### COHERENTISM

#### STATEMENT AND EVALUATION

The traditional rival of foundationalism as a theory of justification is the coherence theory, that is, epistemic coherentism. Coherentism is associated with idealism – both of the German and the British variety. Coherence theory is primarily a theory of truth and is evident in British idealism, e.g., of Bradley<sup>1</sup> and Bosanquet<sup>2</sup>. The clearest specimen of this idealistic view is Brand Blanshard's *The Nature of Thought*.<sup>3</sup> In the Continent, Spinoza's *Ethics* is also regarded as an example of the coherence theory along with that of Hegel's.

There are many philosophical views which have been called “coherence theories” including theories of truth and meaning; but what we have in mind, in the present context, is a coherence theory of epistemic justification within a coherence theory of empirical knowledge. Whether it is a coherence theory of truth, meaning or justification that is being explored, the initial difficulty felt in each is how to define the term “coherence”. The term ‘coherence’ cannot be adequately defined, it has been said. Brand Blanshard says, “... no fully satisfactory definition can be given.”<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ewing says: It is wrong to tie down the advocates of the coherence theory to a precise definition ...”<sup>5</sup> Blanshard further says that what it means may be clearer if we take a few examples of familiar systems. We know that the coherence theory of truth makes use of the mathematical metaphor (model).

A coherent system is a completely interconnected system where no proposition is arbitrary; every proposition would be entailed by the others jointly and even singly.<sup>6</sup> The vision that all of mans knowledge of the physical universe forms part of one, single, all-embracing cognitive system is of ancient and respectable lineage. This ideal is indeed ancient, for it was adumbrated by Parmenides, elaborated by Plato, developed in loving detail and with immense labor by Aristotle. Incidentally, Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* also provides the impulse for foundationalism. Coherence theory of knowledge and truth is also espoused by a whole host of thinkers from the Church fathers to Leibnitz, Hegel and beyond.

The ideal of systematicity is sought, in the mainstream Western tradition, in mathematics, in particular, geometry. Let us look at the number series. If we abstract a number from the number series it would be a mere unrecognizable X; similarly, the very thought of a straight line involves the thought of Euclidean space to which it belongs. It is perhaps in such systems as Euclidean geometry that we get the most perfect examples of coherence. The idealist theories like Ewing, Joachim and others have fallen back on such models in clarifying the meaning of coherence, while elucidating the coherence theory of truth advocated by them.

Assuming that the classical account of knowledge is correct at least in maintaining that justified true belief is necessary for knowledge (with or without additional conditions), we can identify two kinds of coherence theories of knowledge, those that are coherentist merely in virtue of incorporating a coherence theory of justification, and those that are doubly coherentist because they account both for justification and truth in terms of

coherence. Such seems to be the view of logical positivist thinkers, Neurath and Carnap<sup>7</sup> defending coherence theory of justification and knowledge in addition to coherence theory of truth. In this chapter we shall concentrate on the coherence theory of justification

### **Section: I**

Historically, the coherence theory of justification grew out of a rejection of foundationalism, particularly as an outcome of the regress of justification. It rejects empirical foundationalism and holds instead that coherence, roughly, the agreement and mutual inferential support of empirical beliefs is the primary or even the exclusive basis for empirical justification as such, the entailment theory of coherence of the idealists concerning the relationship of coherence as a relation of necessary connection is entertained by no present philosopher and that is not quite without reasons. No logical relationship, by itself, can establish the truth or even the credibility of any factual judgment. Every contingent statement can be negated. If we have a system of contingent statements necessarily implying each other, we can also have a system of statements negating these and also having relation of entailment among themselves. So every contingent system in one system is negated in the other. The entailment theory of coherence severs itself off from truth.<sup>8</sup>

As a theory of epistemic justification the coherence theory is a about epistemic warrant or authority of empirical statement deriving entirely from coherence and not at all from any sort of 'foundation'. It says that there is no question of a belief's being justified all by itself, self-justified or self-warranted, as the foundationalist's basic beliefs are supposed to be. To be

justified a belief must fit into a coherent system. And the system is more or less justified depending on how well it hangs together considered as a whole. Our body of beliefs forms a coherent whole. It does not need a foundation. According to this theory, all beliefs in the context of knowledge are justified by virtue of their relation to other beliefs. This is not coherence definition of truth; it is rather the view that *justification* of any belief depends on that belief's having evidential support from other beliefs via mutual relation of coherence. Thus, on an intuitive level, coherence is a matter of how the beliefs, in a system of beliefs fit together or "dovetail" with each other, so as to constitute one unified and tightly structured whole. And it is clear that the fitting together depends on logical, inferential and explanatory relations of many different sorts among the components of the system.

Here the reference to the whole system is crucial. Coherence theorists do not merely claim that the epistemic significance of a given belief must always be assessed in the context of some further commitments; rather, they insist that the justification of individual beliefs depends on such properties of total belief-systems. Coherence theories are holistic in nature. The difference between foundationalism and coherentism can be explained in terms of two competing models of justifying inference. The former conceives of justifying inference on a linear model, in which justification proceeds from given 'premises' to 'conclusions' often described as the one-directionality of justification. The coherent theorist's holistic model is decidedly *non-linear*. The primary function of providing evidence is not to transfer epistemic status from belief to belief. Indeed, beliefs are not the primary focus of justification, rather it is the whole system of beliefs that is justified or not in the primary sense; individual beliefs are justified in virtue of their

membership in an appropriately structured system of beliefs, and not because this status is passed on to them from beliefs further down some evidential chain in which they figure. Our doxastic system does not allow justification of belief to end in a foundation belief. While the beliefs that comprise a given system will be logically interconnected in various ways, these connections are not in themselves relations of justification. Rather the density of such interconnections contributes to the coherence of the system. The coherence of a system of beliefs is enhanced or diminished to the extent to which the interconnections are increased or decreased. Individual beliefs are justified derivatively in virtue of belonging to a coherent total view.

As Laurence Bonjour says:

The alternative (to the linear conception of inferential justification) is a holistic or systematic conception of inferential justification ...: beliefs are justified by being inferentially related to other beliefs in the overall context of a coherent system.<sup>9</sup>

Bonjour continues further saying:

There is no ultimate relation of epistemic priority among the members of such a system and consequently no basis for a true regress. The component beliefs are so related that each can be justified in terms of the others; the direction in which the justifying argument actually moves depends on which belief is under scrutiny in a particular

context. The apparent circle of justification is not vicious because the justification of particular beliefs depends finally not on other particular beliefs, but on the over- all system and its coherence.<sup>10</sup>

The word “system” is a recurrent feature in coherentism. What is a system, then? According to Nicholas Rescher, a system is not just constellation of interrelated elements, but one of elements assembled together in a functional unity.<sup>11</sup> He understands a system in the light of cognitive systematization – the systematic structuring of bodies of information. For him, systematicity lies deep not only in the very nature of scientific understanding but also represents an idealization toward which science can and should progress. He gives an analysis of the idea of coherence in terms of systematic interrelationships. A system is the believer’s entire body or set of beliefs, all of which would stand or fall together. But on careful reflection, such an extreme holism is quite unnecessary and is highly implausible. In addition to aggravating a number of other problems. It would force the coherentist to say, most implausibly, that the justification of a belief in an area, for example, nuclear physics could be undermined by a serious incoherence in the person’s beliefs in another area, for example, art history, which is completely unrelated to nuclear physics. What coherentists clearly require is that the primary units of justification be groups of interrelated beliefs, rather than individual beliefs: groups that are large enough to either satisfy or non-trivially fail to satisfy the various aspects of the concept of coherence.

With this preliminary account of the coherence theory as an alternative to foundationism, we may add that coherence is often understood as consistency. But coherence and consistency are not the same thing. A coherent system must be consistent but not conversely, a consistent system need not be very coherent. Consistency is a necessary condition for coherence. But it is not the sufficient condition. The absence of conflict or incongruence between the components of a system is not coherence. Coherence has to do with systematic connections between components of a belief system. Mere lack of conflict or confrontation among beliefs which exist independently of one another may give rise to consistency, but that will not be coherence. Mere consistency appears to bear a negative sense – absence of conflict. Whereas coherence means something more – a positive relation that brings some propositions together. And the positive connection among beliefs must be some sort of inferential relations. These inferential relations contribute to the coherence of a system of beliefs and this coherence is enhanced in proportion to the number and strength of such relations. And, the coherence of a system of beliefs is diminished to the extent to which it is divided into sub-systems of beliefs which wear away the inferential connection. Cornman<sup>12</sup> and others have worried that coherentism suffers from fatal flaws because a coherentist's justificatory set might include simultaneously as elements theorems of quantum mechanics and materials from classical mechanics, thus producing inconsistency. Our contention is that the functioning of the epistemic agent is such that it greatly constrains the elements of the justificatory set, and thus renders this concern otiose. Moreover, the notion of coherence, as we are arguing, is a more positive connection or mutual relatedness among beliefs.

Second, coherence is closely connected with the concept of explanation. In Chapter I of this work, the relation between explanation and justification is raised. It has been argued that explanation is not Justification-affording when we are speaking of justifying a single proposition by another proposition or a belief by another belief. But we have not discounted its role in justification in the context of a body of beliefs. Hitherto, the best grounds derive not from mathematics but from research practices in natural sciences. Standard examples in scientific research show that justification is the strongest when explanatory theories and experimental observations fit together. A scientist begins with, say, beliefs about the shapes of orbits of known planets, and the planets' masses, belief in the theory of gravitation, beliefs about the influence of gravitation on the shapes of planetary orbits, and beliefs about the way telescopes give observations of distance bodies. These beliefs cohere in a system of explanation, prediction and confirmation. This scientific situation seems to include the feature that each belief is epistemically supported by its coherence with the others in the system. Nothing outside of the system is needed for coherence to play the role of a justifying factor. In particular, the support provided by mutual coherence in an explanatory system does not depend on any self-justifying belief inside or out of the system. These considerations defend two coherentist theses:

- (i) Explanatory coherence contributes to epistemic justification.
- (ii) No autonomously justified belief is necessary, for the beliefs in a coherence system are to be supported by their mutual coherence.

From the natural scientific model it seems that explanatory coherence is at least part of the truth about justification. We shall discuss this particular feature of coherence below.

## **Section: II**

The theory of explanatory coherence or coherence as explanation has been elaborated by Keith Lehrer before having made a statement of his own version of coherence theory.<sup>13</sup> Before we enter into that we shall make certain cautionary remarks. Explanation in the context of coherence theory should not be understood as causal explanation. Gilbert Harman<sup>14</sup> condemns causal explanation of a belief as insufficient to account for all varieties of knowledge. He suggests replacing 'cause' by 'because', that is to say, by the explanatory efficacy of a belief. Explanation is a wider term, causal explanation being a variant of it. Evidence and that which is evidenced may not be causally related. Evidences are supposed to explain – provide reasons or a sufficiently plausible account of why a belief is held.

According to the theory of explanatory coherence, whether a belief is justified, cannot be decided in isolation from a system of beliefs. The system of beliefs determining justification must be one in which we explain as much as we can and leave as little unexplained as possible. If justification is explanatory, then it is the function of a belief in explanation that justifies it. There are two ways in which a belief can so function. A belief can either itself explain or be part of what explains something, or it can be explained or

be part of what is explained. To have explanatory coherence, one must both have something to explain and something to explain it. It means that some beliefs are justified because they get explained, and they, on their part, explain others. As Lehrer has variously put it: "All beliefs are explained by their explanatory role." Again, "Some beliefs are justified because of what they explain, others are justified because they are explained."

"Moreover, a belief may be justified *both* because it explains *and* because it is explained,"<sup>15</sup>

This theory has an appeal for us because this theory succeeds not only in justifying perceptual claims but also claims about the mental states of others. For example, my belief that the chair on which I am sitting supports me may explain why, in my present posture, I do not fall to the ground; and that the chair supports me may be explained, given my position in it, by the rigidity, hardness and so on of the chair, and this, in turn, may be explained by the solidity of the floor, that it is made of concrete and not of butter. This theory can also explain our justified beliefs in the mental states of others. Let us state an example. Suppose I saw an injured man before me writing, moaning and behaving in ways which I would behave if I were experiencing intense pain. Advocates of explanatory coherence theory argue that the best explanation of why he behaves the way he does, is that he is feeling pain. If one argues that the man is not feeling pain then one has to confront several problems. The first problem is: we must explain why the man is behaving in this way though he is not feeling pain? If we opt for some alternative explanation of his behavior we have to assume that though this man is not in pain others in such circumstances would feel pain. But then some explanation is needed to account for the difference. Otherwise we have to

suppose that others generally fail to feel pain in such circumstances in which case we must explain why do we feel pain while others do not? The only way, it seems, to get rid of the problem is to suppose that generally others including the injured man of our example feel pain as we do in these circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

Explanatory coherence is connected with the question of better explanatory systems. It stipulates that the idea of explanation and better explanation are to be stressed. Thus a system has maximum explanatory coherence among those systems of beliefs understood by *s*, if and only if, there is no system having greater explanatory coherence among those systems. Beliefs which explain have undoubtedly more explanatory efficacy than the beliefs which are explained by it. Beliefs that are both explaining and explained reach a high level of justification. Related to this is the feature that explanation may have degree. A belief may be better explained, better than another, or it may explain better, better than another. A system of beliefs has greater explanatory coherence than a second if the first leaves less unexplained beliefs or explains better what it does explain than that of the explanatory coherence of the second. This is the view of Wilfrid Sellars<sup>17</sup> who suggests that if a belief system is held together by a maximum of explanatory connections, then it is the one to be chosen. Suppose that there are two systems of beliefs, each having a maximum explanatory coherence and yet they are inconsistent with each other. Pointing out this flaw Lehrer argues as follows:

There may be two or more systems of beliefs each having a maximum of explanatory coherence. Each may be such that

no other consistent system of beliefs leaves less unexplained, and none explains what it does explain better. Consequently, a belief may cohere with one system of beliefs having a maximum of explanatory coherence while the contradictory of that belief coheres with another system of beliefs having a maximum of explanatory coherence. In the current account both beliefs would be completely justified.<sup>18</sup>

It is plain that this is something absurd and hence unacceptable. To skirt the absurdity, it is felt that something in addition to the explanatory relation of coherence between beliefs has to be there as an ingredient of justification. We must have a criterion to choose between two such systems. Lehrer refers to the views of philosophers such as Sellars, Quine and Harman who have appealed to the simplicity of the over-all system to provide such a criterion. Of two systems, both having a maximum of explanatory coherence, the simpler of the two is to be accepted.

The problem here is that it is not easy to decide which of the two is the simpler. The notion of simplicity "is obscure and complex". There are different ways of deciding which is. Simplicity can be judged from different dimensions. In Lehrer's words:

One system may be simpler than another in terms of the postulates of the system; in terms of the basic concepts of the system; in terms of the ontology of the system. We have, at least, postulational, conceptual and ontological

simplicity to consider, and these modes of simplicity may conflict.<sup>19</sup>

Another difficulty is in the offing. Suppose that there are in fact such simple systems. The question would be: How to choose between them? If two systems are equally simple and equally coherent, it will be difficult to decide which provides complete justification for the beliefs within it without compromising one's theoretical position. Sometimes conceptual simplicity is purchased at the cost of multiplication of entities in ontology. Some other times ontological simplicity is to be given priority over postulational simplicity. The main point is that there is reason to doubt that there is any articulate conception of simplicity to which impartial appeal could be made in choosing between explanatory coherent systems. Finally, we may enhance the simplicity and coherence of a system by leaving out concepts and entities, by decreasing less explained beliefs or denying the truth of these statements describing something unexplained, until we reach a system where nothing remains unexplained. Thus there is a simple system which is sterilized to remain confined to only what can be neatly explained. In such a system coherence among beliefs will be maximum but at the expense of a minimum of content. On the basis of these defects of explanatory coherence, Lehrer concludes that coherence is not a matter of explanation.

Lehrer's reconstructed theory of coherence starts with linking justification with a background system of beliefs, the formation of which has the goals of attaining truth and avoiding error. *S* may be completely justified in what he believes, when the belief has a better chance of cohering with the background system of beliefs. The background belief system is a nexus of

beliefs that *S* forms about himself, about the world, about his abilities, circumstances, etc., together with his beliefs about others, about what they see or believe. To quote from Lehrer:

The justification of perceptual beliefs arises within the nexus of cohering beliefs. It is not the simple belief that I see something red, but that belief together with other beliefs about myself, my abilities, and my circumstances, on which justification depends. That is not all. My beliefs about others, about what they see and believe, may also be relevant. Doubts I have may be erased by the testimony of others which brings me to believe that they share my beliefs about what is before me. My beliefs concerning general theories, scientific or otherwise contribute to justification. ... The complete justification of our perceptual beliefs depends on a myriad of other beliefs, about ourselves, about others, about experience, and about the entire universe.<sup>20</sup>

A person *S* goes on with this system of beliefs till he is given to delete beliefs as an impartial and disinterested truth-seeker. Such purging of erroneous beliefs results in a new system of beliefs which is called the corrected doxastic system of *S*. The corrected doxastic system of *S* is a subset of the doxastic set, resulting when every statement is deleted which describes *S* as believing something he would ease to believe as an impartial and disinterested truth-seeker.

The corrected doxastic system of S includes all those beliefs of S which are rational, which are based on some evidence. In forming a corrected doxastic system irrational unfounded beliefs must be eliminated.<sup>21</sup>

A statement coheres with the corrected doxastic system of S if and only if within that system  $p$  is believed to have a better chance of being true than a competing claim. The question is, what is Lehrer's idea of competition? Generally, the idea of competition can be illustrated with reference to cases which involve the ideas of winning or losing as far example, in cases of drawings in a lottery. Other gambling situations further illustrate the idea of competition and what it involves. However, in the present context the problem may be considered in the light of our perceptual beliefs. Suppose I believe that I see a vase on the table. This belief competes with my having the belief that the vase I am seeing is not a real vase but a vase-like thing to deceive me. The belief that I see a red apple before me has little chance of being erroneous when I compare this with those competition with which it competes. Comparative reasonableness helps us to understand this notion. In short, I believe that there is a better chance that I see a red apple or a real vase, is true than any statement which competes with it. Its having a better chance of being true than its competitors is guaranteed by the support it gets within a system of beliefs; to use Lehrer's words: "The beliefs he (the believer) would retain as a veracious man." This system would not, of course, contain any and every belief but a specified sort of beliefs. We make, as if, cost-benefit comparison of our beliefs, making an assessment of which beliefs to retain and which beliefs to purge in line with, impartial and disinterested quest for truth in a specified area. In Lehrer's terminology a

person is personally justified “in accepting a proposition  $p$  if and only if  $p$  coheres with his corrected doxastic system.” Since the latter is a set of propositions the subject “accepts in the interest of truth”, this embodies an idea of what has been called epistemic conscientiousness.

What Lehrer subscribes to is a subjective theory of coherence instead of defending an objective coherence theory. In an attempt to justify one’s beliefs there is nothing other than one’s beliefs to which one can appeal. As we have already noted him saying that there is no exit from the circle of beliefs. A man’s system of beliefs must consist of statements articulating what he believes. Lehrer calls them ‘doxastic statements’ and the system comprising of them is called the ‘doxastic system’. It is a set of subjective statements. It is with such a system that a belief must cohere in order to be completely justified. Lehrer suggests a theory of subjective probability based on comparison instead of quantitative measure of probability. “A man may believe that one statement has a better chance of being true than another without believing either statement to have any precise numerical chance of being true.”<sup>22</sup>. In the words of Chowdhury;

... the justifying process is stretched to that point where the subject himself is satisfied. ... Rather than demanding an external guarantee of success subjective integrity of the enquirer and the internal relations among his beliefs are stressed upon. Justification is not needed until a knowledge claim is disputed and justification need not proceed beyond the point at which agreement is reached. Sufficiency of evidence or the justifiability of it is

relative to the person to whom something is to be justified. It all depends on how much he already knows and how much he needs to be satisfied. Even when one may fail to convince others, one may be completely justified in one's beliefs (though the belief is not self-justified).<sup>23</sup>

The idea of subjective justification is carried forward by Lehrer in his book, *Theory of Knowledge*,<sup>24</sup> as personal justification. In Lehrer's view such justification amounts to coherence with a background system – called the evaluation system – consists of three parts “the acceptance system, the preference system and the reasoning system. The acceptance system is the core of the evaluation system and is defined as the set of states of acceptance of *S* described by statements of the form “*S* accepts that *p*” attributing to *S* just those things *S* accepts at *t* with the objective of obtaining truth and avoiding error with respect to the content accepted, that is, with respect to the content that *p*.<sup>25</sup> Suppose, to take an example, that *s* accepts Guwahati is Assam. That might lead one to expect that the statement “Guwahati is in Assam” should be an element of *S*'s acceptance system. But this, as we saw, is not how Lehrer defines the notion. Rather, the acceptance system contains the statement “*S* accepts that “Guwahati is in Assam”. So, when Lehrer writes that in personal justification we must start with what we accept<sup>26</sup>, this does not mean that we are allowed to take the truth of “Guwahati is in Assam” and other propositions we accept for granted. It only means that we may take for granted that we accept those things, i.e., we take a certain attitude, that of acceptance, towards those propositions. Lehrer sometimes

calls the set of all propositions  $p$  such that “ $S$  accepts that  $p$ ” is in the acceptance system, in the content of the system.

The preference system of  $S$  at  $t$  is the set of states of preference described by statements of the form “ $S$  prefers accepting that  $p$  to accepting that  $q$ ” attributing to  $S$  just those preferences  $S$  has at  $t$ . Finally, the reasoning system of  $S$  at  $t$  is the set of states of reasoning from acceptance of the premises  $p_1, p_2$  to the conclusion  $c$ . Both the preference system and the reasoning system are geared to the objective of obtaining truth and avoiding error.

What is Lehrer’s motivation to introduce the preference and reasoning systems as part of the evaluation system? As for preferences, he writes the following in his book, *Self-Trust*.<sup>26</sup>

I have said before that a person is personally justified in accepting if and only if acceptance of it coheres with the acceptance system of the person. I now think that will not suffice, because preferences are also essential to the kind of coherence that yields justified acceptance.<sup>27</sup>

It is also of interest to note that in Lehrer’s view the justification of preferences parallels the justification of acceptances:

Thus, personally justified acceptance, acceptance justified for me, is acceptance that coheres with an evaluation system including preferences. Justification, we

are told, is coherence with the evaluation system. How, then, should we understand coherence? Coherence and personal justification result when all objections, incompatible with a person's acceptance system, and threatening to undermine its reliability, are answered.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the process of justifying a claim has the character of a game with the objections and answers being the different moves the players can make. Lehrer fittingly calls it the justification game. If all the objections raised by the critic are met, then the claimant wins the game. If he wins the game, his original claim coheres with the evaluation system and he is personally or subjectively justified in accepting her original claim, if not, he is not justified in his acceptance.<sup>29</sup> Lehrer is careful to point out that the justification game is only a "heuristic device for understanding considerations that make a person justified in accepting something rather than a psychological model of mental processes"<sup>30</sup>

Laurence Bonjour has developed a coherence theory of empirical knowledge in his paper "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?"<sup>31</sup> prefaced by his anti-foundationalist stand. The purpose of this paper is intended as "an idealized reconstruction of a relatively pure coherence theory".<sup>32</sup> He has the conviction that all foundationalist accounts of empirical knowledge are untenable. He argues against the foundationalist theory that basic beliefs provide a secure foundation for empirical knowledge. Not only that. He also argues against the idea that inferential justification is essentially linear in character involving a linear sequence of beliefs along which warrant is transferred from the basic to the non-basic

beliefs.<sup>33</sup> His other objections against foundationalism have been discussed in Chapter III and we do not intend to repeat them here. In his later works<sup>34</sup> this anti-foundationalist posture is considerably softened. He became more concerned with articulating the concept of coherence and to save it from the serious objections raised against it. Let us pass on to his account of coherence. He puts forward three theses:

1. A believer's system of beliefs must be logically consistent.
2. The system of beliefs is coherent in proportion to the degree of its probabilistic consistency.
3. The system's coherence is increased in proportion to the number and strength of inferential connections among its components.
4. The coherence of the system is diminished to the extent to which it is divided into inferentially isolated sub-systems and the coherence is decreased in proportion to the pressure of unexplained anomalies.

These contentions are not new. They are accepted by almost all coherentists. We find some of them being discussed at length in Keith Lehrer's version of coherentism. What else does BonJour tell us? He makes an attempt to devise answers to some of the standard objections that have continued to vitiate coherentism. Three most fatal objections detected by BonJour<sup>34</sup> are as follows.

1. There is the so-called "isolation problem" or "input problem" – the problem of self-enclosed system of beliefs devoid of actual empirical reference. An account of justification of beliefs that depends entirely on coherence will have the absurd consequence that contingent or empirical

beliefs might be justified in the absence of an inferential input from the extra-conceptual world that they attempt to describe. This would have the consequence that the truth of the beliefs could only be an accident in relation to the world. This phenomenon has been described by saying that ‘we cannot go beyond the web of belief’ or “the circle of beliefs”.

2. The second standard objection is the alternative coherent system objection. There is always the possibility of indefinitely many different possible systems beliefs each as internally coherent as the others and are equally justified. This is surely an absurd result. There will arise the problem of selection among competing coherent systems.

3. The third and the most fundamental objection is whether adopting beliefs on the basis of coherentist justification is likely to lead to believing the truth. Justification being truth conducive, one who seeks justified beliefs is at least to find true ones because truth is the goal of the cognitive enterprise.

We know that the concept of coherence suffers from the problem of a self-enclosed system of beliefs devoid of actual empirical reference. It is obvious that the beliefs in order to be empirical beliefs must have real connections with the world. There must be some input into the cognitive system from the world. This is what Bonjour means by the “observation requirement”. Coherentists hardly deny the role of observations in empirical justification. But how is it plausible to explain observational beliefs in a non-foundationalist way? Simply the fact that they have their origin in sense-experience does not guarantee that they are justification-giving in character.

In any case, the causal explanation of the beliefs cannot be foreclosed. The world impinges upon us by causing beliefs which are spontaneous. And they are to be understood causally and not epistemically. They are epistemically justified only from within the system.

BonJour seeks to address these largely unsolved problems by what he calls the “the observation requirement”, that is, the role of observation in empirical justification within the coherentist framework. These observational beliefs are conceived in two ways. So far as their origin is concerned, such beliefs are non-inferential. But their justification is a matter of the coherence among these empirical beliefs. In the justifying sense, there is no belief that is non-inferential. BonJour says:

Thus the reason that visual perceptual beliefs are epistemically justified or warranted is that we have empirical background knowledge which tells us that beliefs of this specific sort are epistemically reliable. This is the basic claim of the CTEK for all varieties of observation.<sup>35</sup>

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Thus, BonJour allows for the input into the cognitive system from the world while insisting that this input must be understood in causal rather than in epistemic terms. In any case their causal explanation cannot be foreclosed. The world impinges on us by causing beliefs which are spontaneous. As such they are to be understood causally. They are epistemically justified only from within the system. Thus, by making the distinction between the generating sense and the justificatory sense of these beliefs BonJour provides both for input from the non-conceptual world and their being epistemically justified or warranted only from the system. The observational beliefs are marked by spontaneity. This, he argues, will allow a role to experience, while remaining faithful to the coherentist conception of justification as exclusively inferential. Examples of such observation beliefs would be, "I see a red book on the desk before me", "The figure approaching is my friend John", etc.

In his *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, BonJour attempts to provide for observational input by appealing to the specific idea of a "cognitively spontaneous belief", one which simply strikes the observer in an involuntary, coercive, non-inferential way, rather than arising as a product of any sort of inference or other discursive processes. That a belief

has this status, however, says nothing, so far, according to the coherentist, about how or even whether it is justified. They strike us spontaneously. They are not reliable but are likely to be true when specific conditions are fulfilled, namely, the lighting conditions are normal, the distance is not too great, and one is not under the influence of drug and so on. But how do we know that our beliefs are objectively reliable? In fact there is no reason to think that all cognitively spontaneous beliefs are justified since this class of beliefs includes hunches and irrational spontaneous convictions, as well as beliefs resulting from perception. Bonjour, however, maintains as follows:

... certain cognitively spontaneous beliefs are justified from within the system, by appeal to (i) the fact of their spontaneous occurrences; and (ii) the apparent track record of spontaneous beliefs of those specific kind (identified by such things as their subject matter, their apparent mode of sensory production, as reflected in the content of the belief, and concomitant factors of various kind) as regards frequency of truth (under specified conditions), all these being assessed, of course, from within the system.<sup>36</sup>

The justifying reason for such cognitively spontaneous beliefs appeals to their status as being cognitively spontaneous. The resulting justification is also dependent on the fact that the claim that a belief of this kind and produced in this way is likely to be true stands in a relation of coherence with the background system of beliefs. Such a belief would have arrived at (1) non-inferentially but still justified by appeal to inference relation and (2)

coherence. We have a bridge built between the inputs from the world its being recognizably coherent in character.

The coherentist has no access to the fact to judge the reliability of his beliefs. A system of beliefs which remain coherent and stable over the long run and continues to satisfy the observation requirement is likely to correspond to independent reality. A system which violates this empirical thrust, a system which violates the observation requirement is inferior in status to a coherent system which receives at least some input from the world. A cognitive system which fails to accord with reality is unlikely to remain coherent unless it is revised in that direction. If the observations actually made produce inconsistency or incoherence within the system they force its revision. If the observational beliefs are not themselves rejected by the revision, they will bring the system more in accord with reality<sup>37</sup>

It is clear that the primary motivation for the coherentist account of observation is to meet the isolation problem by showing how observational beliefs that are causally generated by the world might nevertheless given a coherentist justification and how an observational requirement of this sort can be made a necessary condition for empirical justification within a coherentist framework. The coherentist's main response to the alternative coherent system objection also depends crucially on the idea of observation. As regard the objection whether a coherentist theory of justification can ensure truth, the way open for the coherentist is to argue from the premise that a given system of beliefs is coherent to the conclusion that the component beliefs are likely, to an appropriate degree, to be true.<sup>38</sup>

We may venture to say that Bonjour's attitude to foundationalism has changed radically if we attend to the evolution of his thinking for the two decades after the publication of CTEK. In fact he now considers the prospects for defending a viable foundationalism in the face of the objections that were raised at the beginning of the essay, "The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism". He even explicitly speaks of a confrontation between a conceptual description and the non-conceptual chunk of reality. This is particularly significant as it seems to work towards the reconciliation we are after in our context. Let us quote him:

We seem to have exactly the sort of "confrontation" between a conceptual description and the nonconceptual chunk of reality that it purports to describe. Which many philosophers, myself again alas included, have rejected as impossible. Such a confrontation is only possible, to be sure, where the reality in question is itself a conscious state, but in that very specific case it seems to be entirely unproblematic. In that way it turns out to be possible for nonconceptual experience to yield justification for beliefs about the experienced content itself. I conclude that the given is not after all a myth.<sup>39</sup>

What went above we were considering some time-worn objections against the coherence theory of justification. One such objection concerns the relation between coherentist justification and truth-conduciveness. In his influential paper "Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (henceforth CTTK), Davidson has provided a key to overcoming the problem, the

desired link between coherence and truth. The notion of truth thus secured is supposed “not [to be] in competition with a correspondence theory; his argument is that “coherence yields correspondence.” The connection is brought forward by transcendental argument to the effect that had the beliefs not been true they would not have cohered with one another. The point of insisting on correspondence is that the notion of truth yielded is a realistic one and it is realistic without commitment to the idea of “a confrontation between what we believe and reality. He says:

My slogan is: correspondence without confrontation. Given a correct epistemology, we can be realists in all departments. We can accept objective truth conditions as the key to meaning, a realist view of truth, and we can insist that knowledge is of an objective world independent of our thought and language.<sup>40</sup> There are two strategies one might follow in showing that a coherent set of beliefs is largely true. The first is to show that our beliefs accurately represent the world by linking them directly to something outside thought and language. – most plausibly some notion of experience. Davidson rejects this approach with an argument against foundationalism in epistemology and theory of meaning. The second strategy, which he adopts, is some form of coherence theory. What is Davidson’s understanding of coherence? Ordinarily coherence can be said to be no other than absence of logical inconsistency or just equivalent to logical consistency. This is the weak sense of coherence. But in a strong sense, inferential relations of various sorts, explanatory relations, and relations of mutual support are supposed to be indispensable for defining coherence. By coherence, Davidson means any theory which accepts that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.”<sup>41</sup>

The positive part of Davidson's argument is a demonstration that "someone with a more or less coherent belief has reason to suppose that his beliefs are not mistaken in the main."<sup>42</sup> This argument has two parts. First, the nature of beliefs ensures that anyone's beliefs are mostly true. The whole truth about belief is given by its place in radical interpretation, and an interpreter is constrained to find a subject's beliefs true in the main. Second, given the conclusion of the first part of the argument – that beliefs are by their nature true in the main we all have a reason to taking our beliefs to be true in the main. To ask the question "How do I know that my beliefs are generally true" one must ask what belief is and "the agent has only to reflect on what a belief is to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true".<sup>43</sup>

All Davidson has claimed to do is to show that it is impossible for most of our beliefs to be false. In particular he has not aimed at giving us a theory of knowledge, or claimed that merely belonging to a coherent set makes those of our beliefs which are true pieces of knowledge; though he thinks the general presumption in favor of the truth of the members of a coherent set of beliefs is a justification for holding them, he does not think it is necessarily knowledge-yielding justification. For one's beliefs might cohere, and therefore might be true, but one may not have reasons to believe that beliefs are coherent and true. Thus, one may lack justification for one's beliefs. Again, it might so happen that one has reasoned beliefs in the coherence of beliefs but one does not appreciate one's reasons. In that case one lacks knowledge. Thus, having true beliefs is not sufficient for knowledge. What brings truth and knowledge together is meaning. He points out that on his truth-conditional theory of meaning to know the

meaning of a sentence is to know its truth conditions. This of course needs a lot of clarification into which we do not want to enter.

We now turn to the first of the questions raised at the beginning; how does the argument to the essentially veridical nature of beliefs work, and specifically, how do we reach the conclusion that “an interpreter must so interpret as to make a speaker or agent largely correct about the world?”<sup>44</sup> This Davidsonian claim is attractive and intuitively right. In the CTTK, there are two strands of argument offered. First, there are certain general claims. Charity is needed “to make the speaker intelligible, since too great deviation from consistency and corrections leave no common ground on which to judge either community or difference.”<sup>45</sup> The presumption of truth is required to give us a way of getting from sentences held true to belief and meaning, the joint determinants of holding-true: “the principle of charity help solve the problem of the interaction of meaning and belief by restraining the degrees of freedom allowed belief while determining how to interpret words.”<sup>46</sup> and, an equally general point related to these, we need to interpret beliefs as being largely true if we are to make sense of their subject matters; “We can... take it as given that not beliefs are correct. The reason for this is that a belief is identified by its location in a pattern of beliefs, what the belief is about’, Davidson says in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.<sup>47</sup> Second, there is a more specific reason why most of a subject’s most basic beliefs about the immediate environment must be true: “We must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And, what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are.”<sup>48</sup> As an example:

Consider how we discover what some simple sentence means, say, “There’s a table” or “Here is a piece of green paper”, or “Here is a piece of green paper”. Our basic evidence is that the speaker is caused to assent ... to these sentences by the presence of the table or pieces of green paper, whilst the absence of these objects causes him (generally) to dissent from the same sentence.<sup>49</sup>

Now the general arguments obviously do not yield the conclusion that interpretation must be charitable. It is true that we need some way into interpretation. And we need a pattern of beliefs to fix the subject matter of any particular belief. But it is possible to meet those requirements without finding S’s beliefs to be true in the main. The bald assumption of S’s beliefs being false would not suffice for interpretation; since there are many ways of beliefs being false, the mere assumption that most of S’s beliefs are false or of little use in extracting meanings from holdings-true. But a specific assumption about systematic error in S’s beliefs would do. It would hold belief constant so as to allow us to extract meanings, and it would give us all the background we need against which to identify the subject matter of s’s beliefs. To ascribe a brain in vat beliefs about three dimensional physical objects in its environment, for example, seems to meet the general requirements, even though such beliefs would be largely false. If that is true, then the burden of Davidson’s argument for the veridicality of belief falls on the causal considerations. “Communication begins where causes emerge...”<sup>50</sup>

The veridical nature of beliefs can be established by reference to what determines the nature and content of beliefs i.e., the cause of belief, its relation to other beliefs, other propositional attitudes, and its relation to meaning. The role played by the causal factor is such that

“...given the identities and contents of our beliefs, they could not possibly be globally false, for if they were generally caused in some way other than the way they are generally caused, then they would have different contents and identities, they would not be the beliefs they are, they would be about something else.”<sup>51</sup>

Besides, in the exercise of ascription of beliefs causality plays an important role. The interpreter cannot discover the speaker to be largely wrong about the world. For he attributes beliefs to the speaker according to the objects and events in the external world which are supposed by the interpreter to cause the speaker's beliefs. This is connected with the following fact Communication between the speaker and the interpreter is possible because the interpreter's beliefs cohere with the speaker's beliefs But why is it that their beliefs cohere? The reason is: they are caused by the same objective conditions. In other words, the precondition of communication is shared beliefs and the precondition of shared beliefs is identical or similar objective conditions or similar objective causal factors responsible for the formation of beliefs. But, is it not possible, one may ask, that the interpreter is wrong in identifying the causes of the speaker's beliefs and thus wrong in identifying the beliefs themselves? Davidson does not rule out that possibility, but he is quick to add that this can happen some of the

time, not all the time. True, the interpreter and the speaker are fallible human beings. But the ascription of systematic deception or mistake makes no sense. And if this makes no sense then neither does it make sense that all our beliefs are false.

On Davidson's argument, thus, causal conditions and coherence with other beliefs... are equally important determinants in the identity and truth of beliefs. Presumption in the truth of a belief "...increases the larger and more significant the body of beliefs with which a belief coheres and there being no such thing as an isolated belief there is no belief without a presumption in its favour." And it is impossible that a whole body of beliefs is false, though any single belief can be doubted and given up as false.

Davidson calls his theory "mild coherence theory". But the most distinctive feature of the coherence theory is present even in the mild form. This feature is: nothing can justify a belief except another belief. "The source of justification of beliefs cannot lie in anything else than a belief. It is true that sensory stimulations are part of the causal chain that leads to belief but a cause is not a reason According to Davidson, appeal sensation is of no help in answering the question of justification. When Davidson is saying that sensory causes can never serve as epistemic evidence for our beliefs, he is giving u the idea of evidence in the foundationalist sense. It is only between propositional attitudes that a logical or epistemic relation of justifier and justified can hold, for it is only in the case of propositional attitudes that the question of truth or falsity arise. Sensation is not a belief or propositional attitude. So, it cannot sustain any epistemic relation with a belief. Davidson thus thinks that the foundationalist is not in a position to answer the question

of justification. The coherentist can give an argument to show that someone with a more or less coherent belief-set cannot be wholly mistaken. Had our beliefs being not coherent with one another linguistic understanding and communication would have been impossible. Hence, our beliefs are coherent and true. All beliefs, as Davidson points out, are identified directly or indirectly by their causes. But the causal story is not the story of justification. However, those scholars who will want to bring the two camps-coherentism and foundationalism – closer, will not, perhaps, be convinced by Davidson's argument. And in the next chapter, we shall see a move in that direction.

## CHAPTER IV

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