

John L. Pollock and Joseph Cruz's "Coherence Theories"
Chapter Three of *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, Second Edition

I. THE BASIC CLAIMS OF COHERENTISM

1. There is no epistemically privileged subclass of beliefs. It follows (1) that no belief is inherently epistemically better off than any other – if we can demand reasons or justification for one belief, then we can do so for any belief – and, in particular, (2) that there are no basic (or foundational) beliefs.
2. S's belief that *p* need not appeal for its justification to other beliefs that are members of an epistemically privileged subclass of beliefs (e.g., basic beliefs).
3. S's belief that *p* is justified by virtue of being related in a certain way to – i.e., by virtue of *cohering* with – S's entire system of beliefs.
 - Some of the theories that P&C call coherence theories, namely, the *linear* coherence theories, make only claims 1 and 2. Some folks are reluctant to call such theories coherence theories, suggesting that any theory that's properly called a *coherence* theory will make all *three* claims. One can be persuaded by their reasoning, for only theories that make claim 3 are theories that maintain that whether a belief is justified depends on whether it *coheres* with other beliefs.
 - What is coherence?
 - We might require a coherent doxastic system to be *logically consistent*.
 - Since coherence comes in degrees, a coherent doxastic system might need to exhibit a high degree of
 - *probabilistic consistency*, where this is the degree to which the beliefs in one's doxastic system are jointly probable, or
 - *explanatory efficacy*, where we can think of this as the extent to which one's doxastic system explains certain phenomena, or
 - *inferential stability*, where this can be seen as the number and strength of inferential connections between a particular belief in the system and other beliefs.

II. MOTIVATIONS FOR COHERENTISM

1. Foundationalism is false (and since we want a theory that allows beliefs to be justified, we also reject skepticism).
2. Coherentism, at least according to its proponents, seems to reflect our epistemic practices. Questions about justification lead us to determine whether our beliefs conflict. If they do conflict, then we (try to) eliminate certain beliefs. And (once

we begin to ask questions about justification, at least) we accept new beliefs only if they generate no conflicts.

III. FOUR KINDS OF COHERENCE THEORY

1. LINEAR NEGATIVE COHERENCE: Each and every one of S's beliefs is *prima facie* justified. However, the (*prima facie*) justification for S's belief that *p* is defeated if another of S's beliefs (or a small set of S's beliefs) gives us reason to believe that *p* is false.
2. HOLISTIC NEGATIVE COHERENCE: Each and every one of S's beliefs is *prima facie* justified. However, the (*prima facie*) justification for S's belief that *p* is defeated if S's belief that *p* fails to cohere with the beliefs in S's doxastic system.
3. LINEAR POSITIVE COHERENCE: S's belief that *p* must appeal for its justification either to another of S's beliefs or to a small set of S's beliefs (but not to all of S's beliefs).
 - THE INFINITE REGRESS VIEW: Justification proceeds linearly, regressing infinitely.
 - But it seems impossible fully and precisely to express such a view.
 - The view also seems incompatible with our ordinary thinking about justification.
 - There seems to be, on this view, nothing from which justification originally proceeds, and this is counterintuitive.
 - THE CIRCULAR VIEW: Justification proceeds linearly, as if regressing, until some point at which a belief must appeal for its justification to *itself*.¹
 - a. My belief that P must *already* be justified if it is to justify my belief that Q.
 - b. Given this, then if my belief that P justifies itself, it must *already* be justified if it is to justify itself.
 - c. Yet this is absurd, and we must accordingly reject linear coherentism.

¹ For a brief statement of such a view, see Keith Lehrer, "Knowledge, skepticism and coherence," *Philosophical Perspectives 13: Epistemology* (Blackwell, 1999).

4. HOLISTIC POSITIVE COHERENCE: S's belief that P is justified by virtue of being a member of a system of beliefs, each one of which, including the belief in question, coheres with all of the others.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES (from Bonjour's *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*)

1. OBJECTION 1: Since coherence is just a relation among beliefs, it seems that a coherent system of beliefs need not involve any input from the world.
 - a. But the system includes *cognitively spontaneous beliefs*. These beliefs (i) are new elements in the system; (ii) they do not derive inferentially from other elements in the system; and (iii) we take them to be caused by the world.
2. OBJECTION 2: But the mere inclusion of these beliefs might not be enough, for maybe we can construct a coherent system without seeing its cognitively spontaneous elements as being reliable enough to constitute input from the world.
 - a. Here we need the *Observation Requirement*, namely, the claim that the coherent system of beliefs must contain laws attributing a high degree of reliability to a reasonable variety (but not necessarily to all) cognitively spontaneous beliefs. Once this requirement is in place, we are *forced* to take a significant variety of cognitively spontaneous beliefs to be reliable.
3. OBJECTION 3: Even in the long run and with the continued impact of observational beliefs, there will always be multiple, equally coherent systems, and we will be unable to decide between them.
 - a. The Observation Requirement rules this out as a possibility.
 - b. Even if we could construct (perhaps by employing the evil demon hypothesis) two equally coherent systems, each of which met the Observation Requirement, we could not provide equally plausible explanations of the coherence of the two systems.

V. A FURTHER OBJECTION

The above qualifications force us to assign only a *causal* role to perception (perceptual states), and even if that constitutes input from the world, it's not clear that it will allow us to assign a *justificatory* role to perception. And, presumably, we want perception to play a justificatory role; we want it to give us *reason* to hold certain beliefs.