

# Bonjour on Coherentism: A Critical Analysis of "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge"

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## Introduction

Danny Kaye once said, "A bassoon is an ill wind no one blows good."<sup>1</sup> The same has also been said for epistemological foundational theories. Epistemological foundationalism is the doctrine that knowledge has foundations or, generically speaking, that we have basic beliefs, which serve as the foundations of knowledge. These basic beliefs are, it is supposed, in need of no justification—they are self-justifying. From an appeal to these basic beliefs, our other beliefs receive their justification. Since Plato, epistemological foundational theories have been the standard in philosophy. In recent years, however, such theories have fallen onto hard times, philosophically speaking. The major criticism of foundationalism is the argument that we do not have epistemically basic beliefs that justify other beliefs. Thus foundationalism is untenable. The point of this paper, however, is not to provide a substitute theory, or a negative apologetics of foundationalism. The point of this paper is first, to examine Laurence Bonjour's cogent criticisms of foundationalism and second, to show that Bonjour's coherence epistemology fails as a substitute theory.

## Bonjour's Criticism of Foundationalism

Bonjour argues that the motivation for a coherence theory of knowledge (hereafter CTEK) is that all foundationalist theories are untenable since they suffer from the regress problem. The regress problem, as he puts it, results from the definition of knowledge as adequately justified true belief ("Coherence Theory" 117).

The most obvious way beliefs are justified is inferential justification. In its most explicit form, inferential justification consists in providing an argument from one or more other beliefs as premises to the justificandum belief as conclusion. But it is obviously a necessary condition for such inferential justification that the beliefs

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1. This essay was awarded first prize in the 1995 David H. Yarn Essay Contest.

appealed to as premises be themselves already justified in some fashion; that a belief follows from unjustified premises lends it no justification. Now the premise-belief might also be justified inferentially, but such justification would only introduce further premise-beliefs which would have to be justified in some way, thus leading apparently to an infinite, vicious regress of epistemic justification. ("Coherence Theory" 117)

Therefore, the foundationalist is left with the problem of finding a self-justifying, epistemically basic belief, which can serve as a foundation.

Traditionally, the self-justifying beliefs sought have taken the form of raw sense-data or the empirically "given." What this boils down to is the claim that sensory experience is the foundation of knowledge. In other words, what is immediately apprehended or intuited is epistemologically basic. Further, the believer in some way apprehends the given as justified. Therefore, foundationalist justification need not fall victim to the regress problem because the given serves as a self-justifying basic belief. For our purposes here, the foundationalist need not insist on either the incorrigibility or uncertainty of the given. The only requirement is that givenness play a central role in providing a stop to the regress of justification.

The problem with givenism, Bonjour claims, is that what justifies a belief is an immediate apprehension of a particular state of affairs that-p. This immediate apprehension requires that there be a believer, the state of affairs that-p as the object of belief, and the immediate apprehension of that-p by the believer. The problem arises when we examine the immediate apprehension of a state of affairs that-p. Bonjour argues that an immediate apprehension is a cognitive state even more rudimentary than a belief and entails the assertion that-p ("Foundations" 107). Hence, he continues, it is not clear why the apprehension of the proposition that-p does not itself require justification. If the answer is that the apprehension is justified by reference to the state of affairs that-p, then this apprehension requires a second apprehension of the state of affairs that-p to justify the original apprehension that-p. Otherwise, the same cognitive state serves as both the apprehension and justification of the apprehension that-p, "thus pulling it up by its own cognitive bootstraps" ("Foundations" 108).

If, however, the response is to deny the claim that apprehensions are cognitive states, then there is no need for the justification of apprehensions. Problematically, this response strips the believer of the reason for holding that-p is true. In other words, "if [apprehension] is

not a cognitive state and thus involves no cognitive grasp of the state of affairs in question . . . by virtue of having the [apprehension]" ("Foundations" 108), then how does it provide a means for believing that the belief that-*p* is true? Therefore, Bonjour concludes,

The givenist is caught in a fundamental dilemma: if his intuitions or immediate apprehensions are construed as cognitive, then they will be both capable of giving justification and in need of it themselves; if they are non-cognitive, then they do not need justification but are also apparently incapable of providing it. This, at bottom, is why epistemological givenness is a myth. ("Foundations" 109)

If, however, the givenists account for apprehension as a semi-cognitive state in which the mind confronts its object, without any intermediary, then they have only postponed the regress problem. The key, Bonjour argues, is to "distinguish two aspects of a cognitive state, its capacity to justify other states and its own need for justification, and then try to find a state that possesses only the former aspect and not the latter" ("Foundations" 110–11). However, it seems that these two aspects cannot be separated in that they are "one and the same feature of a cognitive state" ("Foundations" 110). In other words, what enables a cognitive state to confer justification on other states is also what demands that it be itself justified. Thus any attempt to solve the problem of the given with an appeal to semi-cognitive states does not avoid the regress of justification.

The foundationalist will typically argue that the justification of any empirical belief will eventually reach a foundation—a self-justifying belief. However, Bonjour argues, the same question may be asked of that foundation that is asked of the beliefs, namely, what justifies it? Therefore the need for justification does not end at the foundation. If he is right, foundationalism is an indefensible position.

### **Bonjour's Coherentism**

In "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge," Bonjour argues that the justification of a specific empirical belief must be inferential, and, in light of the above criticisms of foundationalism, it is in principle impossible for there to be any epistemologically basic beliefs or foundations for empirical knowledge. Since there are no foundations, and since justification is inferential, there must be a circle of beliefs that mutually justify each other. Further, internal coherence justifies this circle.

Prima facie, it seems that CTEK does not avoid the infinite regress problem. By asserting that justification is inferential and then claiming that the system that confers justification is an enclosed circular system, it appears that the coherentist has not solved the regress problem. Bonjour argues that if justification moves in a circle and if each belief is justified by other beliefs, then some beliefs that serve as conclusions in justification will also function as premises in justifying other beliefs. Thus no belief is justified. For example, if belief *a* justifies belief *b*, and *b* justifies *c*, and *c* justifies *d*, and *d* justifies *a*, then no beliefs are justified.

This argument against coherentism, Bonjour maintains, rests on a linear conception of inferential justification. Further, he claims, "it is just this linear conception of inferential justification that ultimately generates the regress problem" ("Coherence Theory" 120). If the coherentist accepts this notion of inferential justification, then CTEK cannot be taken as a serious epistemological theory. However, if he or she were to redefine inferential justification as nonlinear, CTEK could avoid the previous criticisms. Therefore, the response of the coherentist to the regress problem is to reject the linear conception of inferential justification.

The result of this rejection is an acceptance of a holistic or systematic conception of inferential justification. For the coherentist, then, beliefs derive their justification from being inferentially related to other beliefs within the context of a coherent system. The system is a large set of coherent beliefs that relate to each other inferentially. Thus, if one belief is justified, it can justify another, which in turn justifies another and so forth.

Here, Bonjour carefully points out that the main goal of CTEK is the global justification of the belief system. While individual beliefs all contribute to the justification of other individual beliefs, these beliefs ultimately derive their justification from the justification of the whole system. Further, when individual beliefs are considered, it may appear that inferential justification is linear. However, at the global level no system of linear dependence exists between beliefs. Bonjour, then, asserts a more holistic interdependence. "Thus, there is no ultimate relation of epistemic priority among the members of such a system and consequently no basis for a true regress" ("Coherence Theory" 121).

With this established, Bonjour offers four requirements for justification:

1. The inferability of that particular belief from other particular beliefs, and further inference relations among particular beliefs.

2. The coherence of the overall system of beliefs.
3. The justification of the overall system of beliefs.
4. The justification of the particular belief in question, by virtue of its membership in the system. ("Coherence Theory" 121)

According to Bonjour, each of the above steps depends directly on the one preceding it. Thus, before the belief that-*p* is justified, steps 1–4 must be completed.

Next, Bonjour addresses three criticisms of CTEK dealing with the relation between coherence and justification.

(I) According to CTEK, the system of beliefs which constitutes empirical knowledge is justified solely by reference to coherence. But coherence will never suffice to pick out one system of beliefs, since there will always be many other alternative, incompatible systems of belief which are equally coherent and hence equally justified according to the CTEK.

(II) According to CTEK, empirical beliefs are justified only in terms of relations to other beliefs and to the system of beliefs; at no point does any relation to the world come in. But this means that the alleged system of empirical knowledge is deprived of all input from the world. Surely such a self-enclosed system of beliefs cannot constitute empirical knowledge.

(III) An adequate epistemological theory must establish a connection between its account of justification and its account of truth; i.e., it must be shown that justification, as viewed by that theory, is truth-conducive, that one who seeks justified beliefs is at least likely to find true ones. But the only way in which the CTEK can do this is by adopting a coherence theory of truth and the absurd idealistic metaphysics which goes along with it. ("Coherence Theory" 123)

Bonjour's response to these objections rest on his account of empirical belief acquisition.

His argument begins simply by the addition of an observation requirement. In order for CTEK to qualify as a theory of empirical knowledge there must be some input from the world into the cognitive system. Thus, the project becomes an explanation of how CTEK accommodates empirical input into the system. His first step is to distinguish between two kinds of inference—inference with respect to the origins of beliefs and inference with respect to justification. Observational beliefs are non-inferential in their origin. Conversely, he claims that justified beliefs are inferential. Therefore, he concludes, "observational beliefs are

non-inferential only in the first sense, that their epistemic authority or warrant derives from inferential relations to other beliefs and thus ultimately from coherence" ("Coherence Theory" 124). This is an important distinction because earlier he claimed that justification is inferential. Conversely, observational beliefs are non-inferential. Thus, without the above distinction a simple *reductio ad absurdum* would follow.

Next, he discusses the justification of these observations, or "spontaneously cognitive observational beliefs." These are beliefs due directly to observation. They are "spontaneously cognitive" in that they are non-inferential, and we cannot help having them. CTEK claims that the reason that all observational beliefs are warranted "is that we have empirical background knowledge which tells us that beliefs of that specific sort are epistemically reliable" ("Coherence Theory" 127). How is this done? Well, the response to this rests on his answer to objection II, which is resolved by the addition of an observation requirement. What this means is that the belief system accumulates beliefs through observation. These beliefs are then justified by whether they cohere in the system.<sup>2</sup>

The formula he gives for justification of these spontaneously cognitive observational beliefs is as follows:

- (i) I have a spontaneous belief that P (about subject matter S) which is an instance of kind K.
  - (ii) Spontaneous beliefs about S which are instances of K are very likely to be true, if conditions C are satisfied.
  - (iii) Conditions C are satisfied.
  - [(iv) I know i-iii are the case.]
- Therefore, my belief that P is (probably) true.  
Therefore, (probably) P. ("Coherence Theory" 128)

With this in mind, he returns to the project of resolving criticisms I and III. The claim in I is that there could be many equally coherent systems of belief among which it would be impossible to decide. However, once the observation requirement is recognized, it will be clear that any system that does not take into account empirical data will be insufficient. Thus, conformity with empirical input is the deciding factor between rival systems.

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2. If the observational beliefs do not cohere in the system then they are rejected. If they do, they are accepted. Further, if the acceptance of an observational belief creates a contradiction among other coherent beliefs, there must be a set of rules that decides which are preserved and which are rejected. Unfortunately Bonjour does not elaborate much on what these rules would be.

The most difficult of the three, Bonjour feels, is objection III, which deals with the inability of simple coherence to establish the link between justification and truth. He answers this challenge by offering a correspondence theory of truth. This theory is important because of his earlier acceptance of spontaneously cognitive observational beliefs. His claim is that if enough aspects of the world are observable, and those that are not have a causal impact on the observable world, then a coherent account of observational beliefs will furnish an account of truth in the long run. (This may mean that if a state of affairs  $p$  exists in the world, and a person  $S$  observes  $p$ , then  $S$  will have an observational belief that- $p$ , which is very likely to be true. However, Bonjour does not give a full explanation of this theory.) Therefore, Bonjour concludes, CTEK is not only capable of halting the regress problem but also of answering the traditional attacks. Thus, according to Bonjour, CTEK is a plausible epistemological theory.

### Criticism of CTEK

In examining CTEK it is important to remember that it is a theory of the justification of empirical knowledge; the following criticisms center around this consideration. My criticisms can be divided into four main categories: first, the problem with intellectualist models of justification; second, the concern with the possibility of the acquisition and justification of primitive knowledge; third, the isolation problem; and finally, what I will call the "foundational problem."

Ernest Sosa, in "The Raft and the Pyramid," argues that if Bonjour is going to criticize foundationalism on the grounds that it implies that no mental state can serve as a foundation for knowledge, then a version of the same argument can be used against CTEK. Further, he claims that parasitism of justification yields an equally devastating result for both foundationalism and CTEK. He begins by analyzing the coherentists' criticisms as stemming from an intellectualist model of justification. According to this model, "justification of a belief is parasitical on certain logical relations among propositions" (Sosa 151). In other words, justification of a belief that- $p$  relies on the fact that- $p$  is a member of a coherent set. Thus justification of that- $p$  is indirectly parasitic on the logical relations of propositions within the set. If this type of indirect parasitism is allowed, then the belief that- $p$  could be justified by the fact that- $p$  logically implies that- $p$ . In such a case, the intellectualist model is equally devastating to both coherentism and foundationalism. Hence, one of the major criticisms of foundationalism, by a coherence theorist, cuts equally well against CTEK.

Another problem with CTEK is the impossibility of primitive knowledge. In other words, if a belief is acceptable only if it is justified, and if it is justified only by the way it coheres with the other beliefs in the system, then how do we begin to acquire beliefs? Bonjour is very careful to state that neither intuition nor observational beliefs are basic. He also claims that all observational beliefs must be justified by the way they relate to the coherent set of beliefs. If this is the case, then it does not seem possible to acquire any original beliefs with which to judge others. In this model, then, the only way primitive knowledge can be justified is if the brain is already furnished with a coherent set of justified beliefs. But these beliefs would be basic, and Bonjour claims that there are no basic beliefs. Thus, either Bonjour must hold to an implausible theory of innate ideas, in which case he would be a foundationalist, or he must admit the impossibility of obtaining primitive, and therefore all, knowledge.

However, Bonjour seems to advocate a type of rationalist theory of innate ideas. Unfortunately, a theory of innate ideas is even more problematic than his conception of justification. Nevertheless, if he did opt for a concept of innate ideas to serve as the original set of coherent beliefs from which justification could begin, he would solve the problem of primitive belief acquisition. The problem with this approach is that not only would he have to furnish an argument for innate ideas, but he would also have to show that such a set of ideas is itself justified. Otherwise, the system itself would be unjustified.

Assuming, however, that it is possible to have beliefs, CTEK does seem to lend itself to another serious problem—*isolation*. The isolation problem is the idea that it is possible to hold a coherent set of beliefs that does not correspond to the actual world.<sup>3</sup> This criticism is particularly poignant in view of Bonjour's observation requirement. For Bonjour, a belief within a coherent system cannot be justified unless the entire system is itself justified. Further, observational beliefs are what provide this justification: they ensure that the coherentist is not isolated. Paradoxically, he also holds that observational beliefs are justified by the way they cohere within the system. The problem is that he cannot allow justification to go both ways, that is, if he accepts his criticisms of foundationalism. In other words, the purpose of the observation requirement is to justify the entire belief system. If so, then what justifies

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3. For an isolationist criticism of coherence theory, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1993), 179–80.



the system is not its coherence but observation, which itself cannot be justified by the coherence of the system—observation justifies the system itself.

Let me clarify this criticism by employing the process Bonjour advocates. For example, if a person *S* has a coherent set of beliefs *Q* and wants to ensure that she is not isolated, then she must make a set of observations *Y* which are used to check *Q*. If observations *Y* show that *Q* is inconsistent with the world, then *S* must modify *Q* accordingly. The question then becomes, how is *Y* justified? Its coherence within *Q* cannot provide its justification because *Y* is exactly what justifies *Q*. Thus, Bonjour is forced to accept that observational beliefs are somehow self-justifying. If he holds that they are self-justifying, then he is a foundationalist, which yields a *reductio* of his whole project. However, if he does not accept that observational beliefs are self-justifying, then he must accept the isolation problem as inherent in CTEK.<sup>4</sup> Either way, CTEK is untenable.

If CTEK is untenable, then Bonjour's causal theory of truth seems to support this criticism. In other words, his position can be stated thus: if a state of affairs *p* exists in the world and a person *S* observes *p*, then *S* will have an observational belief that-*p* that is very likely to be true. If this account is accurate, then it would seem that observational beliefs are, in a sense, self-justifying. If they are not self-justifying, then there is no way that observation can provide relief from the isolation problem. If they are self-justifying, then his CTEK theory is foundational.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined Bonjour's persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and his arguments on behalf of CTEK. I have also shown that CTEK cannot provide an account of primitive knowledge. Further, I have shown that CTEK, as described in Bonjour's article, "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge," either falls victim to the isolation problem or becomes a foundationalist theory and is thus untenable. If these criticisms are correct, then Bonjour must either adopt

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4. He must accept this problem as inherent because the entire system must be itself justified before any set of beliefs in the system can confer justification on any observational beliefs. Thus, observational beliefs cannot confer justification to the system. If so, then CTEK must remain isolated. In other words, the system may be coherent, but it does not receive input from the world.

a weak foundational theory of a priori knowledge or a naturalized theory of justification. However, either option makes Bonjour's theory something other than a coherence theory. This result, I assume, is not one Bonjour would be comfortable with.

### Works Cited

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