

# CHAPTER 14

## Coherentism and the Justification of Moral Beliefs

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What I hope to offer here is an account of epistemic justification that can do justice to the epistemic challenges our moral beliefs face, while leaving room for some of those beliefs, sometimes, to count as justified in precisely the same way our more mundane non-moral beliefs, sometimes, do. I don't mean to suggest, and I certainly won't argue, that our moral beliefs are actually as justified as many of our other beliefs are. I think many of them are not; the challenges they face properly induce epistemic humility. But I do think that some of our moral beliefs are justified and justified in the same sense (if not always to the same degree) as are many of our other beliefs.

As a result, what I'll be doing is primarily defending in general – and without special regard for morality – a theory of the epistemic justification of belief that applies across the board to all our beliefs.

### Foundationalism and Coherentism

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What does it take for a person to be *epistemically* (as opposed to morally or pragmatically)

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justified in holding the belief she does? Under what conditions, for instance, would she be justified in accepting utilitarianism or in rejecting Naziism, or in thinking courage virtuous, or pleasure good?

When concerned with belief in general, with no special focus on moral beliefs, answers have traditionally divided into two camps, one foundationalist, the other coherentist. The foundationalist's account involves appealing to some class of *epistemically privileged* beliefs (that enjoy their privilege independently of their inferential/evidential connections) and then holding that a belief, any belief, moral or otherwise, is justified if and only if either: (i) it is member of that privileged class; or (ii) it bears an appropriate evidential/inferential relation to a belief that is a member of the class.

Different versions of foundationalism emerge as different classes of belief are singled out as foundational and as different evidential/inferential relations are countenanced as appropriate. Just to mention a few of the familiar suggestions, beliefs might count as foundational in virtue of being certain, or incorrigible, or formed under the appropriate circumstances, while an inferential relation might count as appropriate if it is deductive, or inductive, or abductive, or explanatory. Precisely how the details are filled in will make a huge difference to both the stringency of the requirements imposed and the plausibility of

the theory that results. What all the versions share, though, is the view that there is an epistemically privileged class of beliefs that are justified independently of the evidential/inferential relations they might bear to other beliefs and that all other beliefs are justified, when they are, in virtue of the support they receive from foundational beliefs<sup>1</sup> [ . . . ]

Suppose, then, that some of our moral views are justified. How would our justified moral beliefs (assuming there are some) fit into the foundationalist's picture of justification? Foundationalists who hold that some moral beliefs are justified must hold either that some moral beliefs are epistemically privileged or that, although none are, some moral beliefs are nonetheless justified inferentially by appeal ultimately to some nonmoral beliefs that are.

The vast majority of foundationalists working in moral theory have gone the first route and embraced a *moral foundation*, holding that some of our moral beliefs qualify as epistemically privileged. Influenced by Hume's observation that one cannot legitimately infer an "ought" from an "is," they've held that our nonmoral beliefs, taken alone, can provide no evidence whatsoever for our moral convictions.<sup>2</sup> There is, they think, an inferentially unbridgeable gap between nonmoral and moral beliefs (or at least between nonevaluative and evaluative beliefs) [ . . . ]

If this is right, it means that, on a foundationalist's view of justification, the only way any of our moral beliefs could be justified is if some of them are epistemically privileged — otherwise they all are ultimately unjustifiable. The central problem facing such a position is to make plausible the suggestion that at least some moral beliefs are properly viewed as epistemically privileged. And this is no small problem since all the concerns that raise general epistemic worries about our moral views devolve onto any particular proposal one might make to the effect that some subset of those views is epistemically privileged.

Coherentists, in contrast, reject precisely this view, maintaining that whatever justification our moral beliefs enjoy is due entirely to the relations they bear to other things we believe. Those who think the gap between nonmoral and moral beliefs (or at least between none-

valuative and evaluative beliefs) is forever unbridgeable, maintain that all our moral beliefs receive what justification they have only from other moral (or at least evaluative) beliefs. Others, though, hold that, whatever the nature of the "is"/"ought" gap, it does not work to insulate completely our moral judgments from nonmoral (and nonevaluative) considerations. On their view, metaphysical, epistemological, social, and psychological considerations might all be relevant to the justification of our moral views. Significantly, defenders of this version of moral coherentism needn't hold that nonmoral beliefs *alone* either entail or in some other way inferentially support moral conclusions; they may well hold that our moral views themselves establish the epistemic relevance of nonmoral considerations. This means that a coherentist can accept all the standard arguments for the "is"/"ought" gap without being committed to holding that all the evidence we have for our moral views come from moral considerations. In fact, given just how implausible it is to see any of our moral views as epistemically privileged, a great attraction of coherentism is its ability to make sense of our moral views being (to a greater or lesser extent) justified even in the face of the "is"/"ought" gap.

The heart of the difference between foundationalism and coherentism, as the distinction applies generally, is found in coherentism's rejection of the view that there is an epistemically privileged subset of beliefs (moral or not), and its rejection of the view that all other beliefs are justified only in virtue of the relations they bear to such privileged beliefs. This difference turns on what foundationalism asserts and coherentism denies.<sup>3</sup> Yet coherentism goes beyond the denial and offers a positive account of what it takes for a person's belief to be epistemically justified.<sup>4</sup>

The coherentist's positive account involves articulating a conception of what it is for one belief to cohere with others, and then arguing that a person's belief is epistemically justified only if, and then to the extent that, the belief in question coheres well with her other beliefs. There is, on the coherentist's view, no subset of beliefs that counts as epistemically privileged (at least none whose privilege is independent of the inferential connections its members bear to

other beliefs). Instead, beliefs, moral and otherwise, enjoy whatever epistemic credentials they have thanks to the evidential/inferential relations they bear to other beliefs. The more and better the relations, the greater the degree of coherence enjoyed by the set and the stronger the justification. Predictably, different versions of coherentism emerge as different evidential/inferential relations are countenanced as appropriate. Also predictably, precisely how the details are filled in will make a huge difference to both the stringency of the requirements imposed and the plausibility of the theory that results. What all the versions share, though, is the view that the extent to which a belief is justified turns simply on the evidential/inferential relations it bears to other beliefs [ . . . ]

I am going to put off, for a time, offering a positive account of coherence and its relation to justification, turning first to one argument, *the regress argument*, that is commonly thought to show that no version of coherentism has a chance of being right regardless of the specific account of coherence it offers. I will, in the next two sections, argue that a coherentist can consistently recognize the force of the regress argument and yet satisfyingly stop the regress without having her position collapse into a version of foundationalism. With that argument made, I will then offer a positive account of coherence as a backdrop for replying to several other objections to coherentism many have found persuasive.

### The Regress Argument

The regress argument is by far the most influential argument against both coherentism in general and coherentism as applied to our moral beliefs. As this argument would have it, if any beliefs are justified at all, some must be justified independently of the relations they bear to other beliefs. In other words, coherentism has got to be false.

The argument begins with the assumption that one belief provides justification for another only if it is, itself, justified. For any given belief, then, the question arises: what sort of justification does it enjoy? If it is justified by other beliefs from which it is inferable,

then the beliefs on which its justification depends must themselves be justified and we can raise the same question about them, and then again about whatever beliefs justify those. If we are to avoid an infinite regress, there are only two possibilities (compatible with holding that the initial belief is justified). Either:

- (i) The path of justification from one belief to those from which it is inferable, to those from which they are inferable, leads back to the initial belief, in which case the justification comes objectionably full circle; or
- (ii) There are some justified beliefs that are justified independently of the support they might receive from others (say, because they are self-justifying or because they are justified by something other than a belief, perhaps an experience), in which case the regress can be satisfyingly stopped.

Foundationalists have taken comfort from this argument thinking, first, that coherentism is saddled with defending some version of the apparently indefensible (i) and, second, that the kind of beliefs their theories identify as epistemically privileged would play just the role that (ii) makes clear needs to be filled.

Coherentists hold (at least) one of three things: that the way in which one's justification for a belief might come full circle is not, after all, objectionable; or that a coherentist might, despite appearances, acknowledge that there are some justified beliefs that are justified independently of the support they might receive from others; or that there's some third option. Although I am tempted by the first option, in the course of what follows, I shall defend the second as available to a coherentist [ . . . ]

Whether the regress can actually be stopped [ . . . ] depends on how the assumption that starts the regress is interpreted. As originally put, that assumption was: one belief provides justification for another only if it is, itself, justified. We can distinguish two relevant readings of this assumption. On one reading, the assumption is: One belief provides *positive* justification for another only if it is, itself,

*positively* justified. On the other, it is: One belief provides *positive* justification for another only if it is, itself, *permissively* justified [where a belief is *positively* justified only if the available evidence counts in its favor, while a belief is *permissively* justified as long as the balance of available evidence does not count against it].<sup>5</sup> [ . . . ] [T]he second reading of the assumption is both strong enough to get the regress going and weak enough to allow the regress to come to an end in beliefs that require no others for their justification [ . . . ]

This distinction between permissive and positive justification, and the resulting appeal to permissively justified beliefs, has at least three advantages. First, it can explain how the regress might be stopped; it comes to an end if and when we arrive at beliefs that are permissively justified. Second, it leaves room for regress-stoppers that, despite their “regress-stopping” role, might be both over-ridable and underminable; permissively justified beliefs will lose their status when, for instance, new evidence is acquired that tells against them. Third, it avoids saying that among a person’s reasons for believing as she does are reasons constituted by considerations that are unavailable to her; whether a belief counts as permissively justified turns only on whether the other things she believes provide, on balance, evidence against the belief.<sup>6</sup> [ . . . ]

Strikingly, though, coherentists can admit permissively justified beliefs, and rely on them to stop the regress in just the way the foundationalist is proposing, *without abandoning coherentism*. Such a coherentist will still deny that there is an *epistemically privileged set* of beliefs that enjoy their privilege independently of their inferential connections – since which beliefs count as permissively justified depends upon the evidential/inferential relations they bear to others. Moreover, such a coherentist can continue to hold that what positive reason we have for any belief will still always depend solely on what other beliefs a person has. This sort of coherentism, then, grants the regress argument’s initial assumption: that a belief can provide (positive) justification for another belief only if it is, itself (permissively) justified. It grants as well that, to the extent an unacceptable regress threatens, it can be brought to a

stop with the recognition that beliefs can be justified in either of two senses. What it denies is foundationalism’s characteristic – and defining – claim that some beliefs (the regress-stoppers) are epistemically privileged independently of the inferential/evidential relations they bear to other beliefs. It insists instead that whether a belief can serve to stop the regress – whether it counts as permissively justified or not, is fully determined by the evidential relations it bears to other beliefs, and that when it does so count it itself enjoys no positive justification, even as it is available to provide positive support for other beliefs.

The coherentist won’t hold that the permissively justified beliefs that bring the regress to a stop have anything else to recommend them independently of how they relate to other beliefs; their primary role is to provide the epistemic input – the initial bits of evidence – one justifiably relies upon in seeking out views that are positively justified.

Nor will the coherentist say that every belief spontaneously formed will count as permissively justified. Even if one forms a belief non-inferentially, say as a direct result of some experience, whether it counts as permissively justified will depend on what else one believes. If I turn my head and come to think there’s a dog at my feet, the proven past reliability of beliefs of this kind gives me reason to trust this belief as well, and it will count as one I am positively (and not just permissively) justified in believing, even though it is cognitively spontaneous. Whereas, if I find myself yet again confident that this time, finally, I will win the lottery, I have ample reason to distrust the belief, and if I believe it any way, it will count as unjustified (and not permissively justified at all). In the great majority of cases, we might expect, people will have various background beliefs that serve either to support or to undermine the new beliefs they just happen to find themselves with.

And, standardly, any belief’s status as merely permissively justified will be comparatively unstable, in that it is likely either to emerge as positively justified as it becomes intertwined with, and in various ways supported by, other beliefs or to become unjustified as one discovers reasons not to trust it. Looked at

over time, one's initially merely permissively justified beliefs will regularly get swept up by others so as to become positively justified (as we find reason to think them true) or get sifted out as unjustified (as we find reason to think them suspect).

### Permissively Justified Beliefs and Positive Support

As long as beliefs that are merely permissively justified can provide positive justification for other beliefs, foundationalists and coherentists alike can successfully stop the regress, and the regress argument will tell not at all against coherentism. However, if permissively justified beliefs cannot provide positive justification, an appeal to permissively justified beliefs won't help either the coherentist or the foundationalist, when it comes to stopping the regress.

So we need to ask: Can beliefs we have no reason to accept really provide positive support? The temptation is to think not. Even if some permissively justified beliefs (say, the visually prompted belief that there's something red in front of me) can serve to justify others (say, that there's something colored in front of me), it looks as if not all permissively justified beliefs can play this role. In fact, people often seem to hold beliefs that are apparently permissively justified (since they seem to have on balance no reason to reject them) that pretty clearly couldn't serve to justify any other belief. Wild hunches, weird forebodings, and spurious superstitions are, after all, commonplace; and permissively justified though they may be, such beliefs seem not at all able to justify those beliefs that are based on them.

Now a foundationalist might step in at this point hoping to re-establish a role for epistemically privileged beliefs. Unlike coherentists, she is able to distinguish those permissively justified beliefs that can justify others from those that can't, by treating some as epistemically privileged and others not. She might hold that the difference is found in whether the person is being epistemically responsible in holding the belief or in whether the belief is properly caused by experience, or in whether it is suitably concerned with one's private

experience. It is open to the foundationalist to hold that epistemic responsibility, or proper etiology, or appropriate content, might mark the difference between those permissively justified beliefs that can, and those that can't, provide positive justification for other beliefs. A coherentist, in contrast, has to say that all permissively justified beliefs can serve to justify other beliefs, if she is to avoid a surreptitious appeal to privileged beliefs.

Problems arise for the foundationalist, however, as soon as one turns to the question: Why do the specific features identified (whatever they are) make a difference to one's justification? Any attempt to distinguish between permissively justified beliefs that will and those that won't provide positive evidence seems inevitably to face a dilemma.

In every case, the proposed grounds for drawing the distinction will either involve considerations that are potentially unavailable to the person in question or not. If they do, then the account will involve, I'll argue, an implausible kind of [what has come to be called] externalism; if they don't, then by adducing considerations that are available to that person, the view will in the end not be able to mark a difference among permissively justified beliefs in a way that counts only some as capable of providing positive support for other beliefs.

Suppose the foundationalist embraces externalism and (for instance) takes the etiology of the particular belief to be crucial to its ability to justify other beliefs. In a particular case, a person might then hold a belief that lacks the proper history and yet be unaware of that fact. And so far as her evidence is concerned, the belief will be no different from other beliefs of hers that enjoy the proper history. When it comes to the evidence she has, her merely permissively justified beliefs are indistinguishable. That the difference would nonetheless make a difference to her being able justifiably to rely on her belief to justify others seems quite implausible.

It's easy to imagine situations in which two people have the very same beliefs, rely on them identically in reaching various other beliefs, and so are *apparently* equally justified in what they believe, even though they differ (unknownst to them) in what originally caused

their permissively justified beliefs. One of the two might be in the hands of an evil demon or entranced by a virtual reality machine while the other is not, or one might be experiencing a drug-induced hallucination while the other is really living the life the first imagines, or one might be undergoing an optical illusion indistinguishable ("from the inside") from the accurate visual experiences the other is having.<sup>7</sup> In each of these cases, if we were to assume that only those beliefs with the proper etiology will serve to justify other beliefs, we would be committed to holding that those who have no reason whatsoever to think they are victims of deception, manipulation, drugs, or illusion, though they are, differ substantially, in the justification they have for believing as they do, from those others who are not victims but who have exactly the same grounds available to them for believing as they do. No doubt they are not equally well-placed epistemically. No doubt too we have reason to distinguish between them. Yet when it comes to the justification each has for her own view, they appear to be identically situated. Similar concerns plague any other externalist proposal a foundationalist might offer as grounds for distinguishing among permissively justified beliefs when it comes to their ability to contribute positively to the justification of other beliefs.

Alternatively, and for good reason, the foundationalist might avoid externalism and suggest marking the distinction between permissively justified beliefs that can, and those that can't, provide positive support, by appealing to considerations the person in question has available. But then the considerations adduced will either tell against certain putatively permissively justified beliefs, and so establish the beliefs as not permissively justified at all, or tell in favor of certain beliefs, and so establish them as positively justified. If the first, if the person herself has reason not to hold the belief in question, then coherentist and foundationalist alike will rightly resist seeing the beliefs that are at issue as capable of establishing positive justification, since the beliefs are not even permissively justified. If the second, if the person has reason to rely on the belief, then the belief is positively justified and we simply shift the issue back to the status of the

considerations the foundationalist identifies and ask of them whether they can provide positive support. At some point, if an infinite regress is to be avoided, we will inevitably appeal to some permissively justified belief as providing positive support for others, but at this point with no grounds for saying that only some such permissively justified beliefs can play this role [ . . . ]

[R]esistance to the idea that permissively justified beliefs might provide positive support for other beliefs is bolstered substantially by the cases of wild hunches, weird forebodings, spurious superstitions, etc., that I have already mentioned. These seem to be cases where a person's permissively justified beliefs pretty clearly couldn't serve to justify others. Yet the appearance is misleading, not usually because the beliefs can serve to justify others but because (when the cases are compelling) the beliefs are not actually permissively justified. A great many of the supposedly permissively justified beliefs we reject as unable to support others are beliefs we think the person herself has reason to suspect (even if she doesn't in fact suspect them). In fact, cases of wild hunches, weird forebodings, and spurious superstitions, count as *wild*, *weird*, or *spurious*, precisely because we think of the beliefs in question as ones the person has reason to reject [ . . . ]

Still, one might be inclined to think that any belief one has, on balance, no reason to hold can't possibly serve to justify anything else. This will seem reasonable, even unavoidable, as long as we think of evidential relations roughly on the model of logical relations as simply justification preserving in the way logical relations are truth preserving. If evidential relations among beliefs serve merely as conduits of justification, one belief will receive positive support from others only to the extent those others themselves have some positive support to convey. On this view, some belief may, thanks to the support it receives from several other beliefs, itself enjoy more positive justification than any of the others, yet the total positive justification it can enjoy is limited nonetheless by the positive justification those other beliefs collectively have to offer. Underwriting this view of evidential relations is the intuition that one belief can be seen as



epistemically valuable in light of the relation it bears to others only if the others are themselves epistemically valuable. Just as one action will count as good because of its consequences only if its consequences are good, so too some belief will count as positively justified by other beliefs only if those others are positively justified. Clearly, if this view is right, then beliefs that are merely permissively justified will be useless when it comes to providing positive support for others and an appeal to them won't serve to stop the regress on behalf of either foundationalists or coherentists.

What the coherentist must say (and the foundationalist will have reason to say as well) is that the intuition, and the view of justification it underwrites, are mistaken. Fortunately, in ethics and in epistemology, there's an alternative view that has its own appeal: that the value of an action or a belief depends upon both what it is related to and, more importantly for our purposes, how it is related to them. The intuition here is that the value of the whole may not be a function of the value of its parts considered independently of how they are related.<sup>8</sup> Just as things that are valueless considered in isolation may come to be related in such a way as to constitute something of significant value, so too beliefs that enjoy no positive justification considered in isolation may come to be evidentially related in such a way as to constitute a set of positively justified beliefs.

The appeal of this alternative view depends upon our ability to see the evidential relations themselves as making a difference to the justificatory status of the beliefs they relate. They might be seen as making a difference in either of two ways: The relations themselves might work to enhance and not merely preserve justificatory value; or they might serve as a condition for the justificatory value of the beliefs they relate. The first suggestion, which is the more straightforward (but I think in the end less attractive) one, would enable us to appeal to the justificatory value of the evidential relations when it comes to explaining how it is that a belief supported by another that is merely permissively justified may in light of the relation they bear to one another count as positively justified.<sup>9</sup> The second suggestion would pick up on the fact that the common distinc-

tion between things that are good in themselves and things that are good for their consequences, can be supplemented with a distinction between things that are only conditionally good and those that are unconditionally good. The idea, then, would be that our beliefs, to the extent they are justified, are only conditionally justified – the condition being set by their being appropriately related to other beliefs the person has. Significantly, this latter view needn't be accompanied by any commitment to there being beliefs (or evidential relations) that are unconditionally justified; it would be enough if some beliefs might be conditionally justified. In any case, either account would serve to explain how it is that a belief's being properly related to another that is only permissively justified might render it positively justified.<sup>10</sup>

A full story following up either suggestion would involve explaining the distinctive epistemic contribution the evidential relations are supposed to play. However the details go, the epistemic role of such relations – their status as *evidential* relations – will presumably be bound up with their having a systematic if indirect connection to truth. Of course, evidential relations won't be such that, when they hold among beliefs, the beliefs are thereby sure to be, or even likely to be, true. Rather, I suspect, the relations that are in fact evidential will be those determined by canons of reasoning that are truth conducive (and not just truth preserving) in that systematically respecting them would have the tendency of shifting views towards the truth in the long haul, given accurate information. Obviously, a person might respect the relevant canons of reasoning over time and so hold beliefs that are evidentially related (on this view) and yet, because of lack of evidence, or misleading evidence, actually consistently have evidence for false views. But in these cases, as well as happier ones, if the beliefs are in fact supported by the weight of the evidence available to the person, they count as justified, at least according to the coherentist. In any case, while coherentism is committed to there being a fact of the matter as to whether, and to what extent, two beliefs are evidentially related, it is not wedded to any particular account of those evidential relations [ . . . ]

## The Nature and Role of Coherence

To address several of the concerns one might have about the coherence theory of justification, I need now to say something more specific about the connection between the relative coherence of a set of beliefs and the evidential/inferential relations that hold among the beliefs. According to coherentism, I've said, a belief is justified only if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things the person believes.<sup>11</sup> Along the way, though, I've also attributed to the coherentist the view that a belief is: (i) permissively justified if and only if the weight of the evidence available to the person does not, on balance, tell against the belief; and (ii) positively justified if and only if the weight of the evidence, again on balance, tells in favor of the belief (just how positively justified it is will be a matter of how strong the evidence, on balance, is). Seeing how these characterizations of justification relate to one another is crucial to seeing the sort of coherence theory I am advancing.

How then does the relative coherence of a set of beliefs reflect the evidential relations that hold among those beliefs? And how does the relative coherence of one's beliefs relate to their being justified? I will take these questions in order.

The relative coherence of a set of beliefs is a matter of whether, and to what degree, the set exhibits (what I will call) *evidential consistency*, *connectedness*, and *comprehensiveness*.<sup>12</sup> The first, evidential consistency, sets a necessary and sufficient condition for (minimal) coherence, while the second and third, connectedness and comprehensiveness, serve, when present, to increase the relative coherence of a set that is minimally coherent. Each, though, is a property of a set of beliefs, if it is at all, only in virtue of the evidential relations that hold among the contents of the beliefs in the set.

Thus, a set of beliefs counts as (minimally) coherent if and only if the set is evidentially consistent – that is, if and only if the weight of the evidence provided by the various beliefs in the set don't tell, on balance, against any of the others.<sup>13</sup> Given an evidentially consistent, and so at least minimally coherent, set, just how

coherent the set is will be a matter of the connectedness and comprehensiveness it exhibits.

Clearly, a set of beliefs can count as minimally coherent even if none of the beliefs in the set are evidentially supported by any of the others. However, an evidentially consistent (and so coherent) set might contain some beliefs that are, to a greater or lesser extent, evidentially related to others in the set in a way that means they, on balance, receive support from the others, or provide support for them, or both. In these cases, the evidential relations among the beliefs induce in the set some degree of what I've called connectedness. The stronger and more extensive the support, the more connected, and more coherent, the set. Thus, a set will be more or less coherent, assuming it is evidentially consistent, to the extent the beliefs in it enjoy positive support from others in the set. At the same time, for any given set that is at least minimally coherent, its relative coherence, because of comprehensiveness, will increase when other beliefs are added to the set, assuming it remains evidentially consistent. The more comprehensive the set, other things equal, the more coherent it will be.<sup>14</sup>

It goes without saying that virtually no one's total set of beliefs will count as even minimally coherent, although subsets of those beliefs will presumably count as more than minimally coherent. Similarly, virtually no one holds beliefs all of which are justified, although subsets of most peoples' beliefs will presumably count as positively and not just permissively justified.

When it comes to relating the relative coherence of a person's beliefs to their status as justified beliefs, the coherentist's suggestion is, first, that those beliefs of her's that are justified are all and only those that belong to the subset of her beliefs that is maximally coherent and, second, that a belief will belong or not to that subset in virtue of the evidential relations it bears to everything else she believes. A subset of a person's beliefs will count as maximally coherent only if it is evidentially consistent and then if, when compared to all the subsets of her total belief set that are evidentially consistent, it exhibits a greater degree of coherence over-all (thanks to its connectedness and comprehensiveness) than do the others. [ . . . ]



How well a particular belief coheres with the other things the person believes, we can now say, is determined by whether it is a member of the maximally coherent subset of what she believes (it doesn't count as cohering at all if it is not), and if it is, whether, and to what extent, it is evidentially supported by other beliefs in that set (the more support it receives the better it coheres). Any belief in the set will at least be permissively justified, and will be more or less positively justified as it receives more or less evidential support from other beliefs in the set. Thus, to say that a belief is justified only if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things the person believes, is to register the way in which one's justification turns on how one's belief relates evidentially to whatever else one believes.

A full articulation of the coherence theory I've been describing would of course involve developing a theory of what relations count as evidential. And clearly this is not the place to begin that project. But I should emphasize that any plausible theory of justification will require supplementation by an account of evidential relations, since all such theories recognize and rely in some way or other on there being evidential relations that our beliefs might bear to one another [ . . . ]

Against this background, we can also characterize what it would be for a potential belief to cohere well with what a person actually believes. Whether such a belief would cohere at all with the other beliefs a person holds depends on whether, were the person to believe it, it would then be a member of the (perhaps, in light of the new belief, dramatically different) maximally coherent subset of everything she believes. And how well such a belief would cohere with the others depends on the degree to which the resulting maximally coherent set would be more coherent than its predecessor. If such a belief would cohere with whatever else she believes, then should she believe it, the belief would be justified.<sup>15</sup> [ . . . ]

### Some Objections

I can't here do full justice to the range of objections that have been raised to coherentism.

However, I would like to indicate the extent to which some of the more common objections miss their mark, at least when it comes to the version of coherentism I am advancing. The objections I have in mind are that coherentism has got to be false because the mere fact that a set of beliefs is coherent is no reason to think they are true; that coherentism is objectionably conservative and inappropriately privileges one's actual beliefs; and that coherentism fails to recognize sufficiently the importance of experience. I will take these objections in order and suggest that each either misunderstands coherentism or underestimates the resources available to it.

Aside from the regress argument, the most common objection to coherentism turns on noticing that for any coherent set of beliefs a person might actually hold, there's another possible set of beliefs that is equally or more coherent. This observation raises two concerns: First, isn't coherentism committed to the obviously false view that the mere coherence of a set of beliefs is reason to think them true; and second, isn't the coherentist consequently unable to account for the fact that we can justifiably reject views we recognize to be more coherent than our own? These concerns are all the more pressing because it looks as if we have exceedingly strong inductive grounds for thinking that any coherent set of beliefs, our own included, is likely to be false.<sup>16</sup>

To respond to these worries we need to distinguish two questions: What is it for a belief to be justified? and What is it that justifies a belief? Coherentism, of the sort I am defending, is addressed to the first question but not the second – a belief is justified if and then to the extent that it coheres well with a person's other beliefs, but it is not *justified by* the fact that it is a member of a coherent set of beliefs. What a person's beliefs are justified by are her other beliefs – or, more accurately, by the facts, as she takes them to be, so far as they provide evidence for her view.

A useful analogy can be found in the expected utility theory of rational choice. According to that theory, a person's choice is rational if and only if, given the available options, the choice maximizes her expected utility. But the fact that the option maximizes her expected utility is not

an extra reason for the person to choose it – rather it's status as the option that maximizes expected utility is a reflection of (what the theory supposes to be) the reasons the person has for choosing it.<sup>17</sup> Now of course one might have all sorts of objections to this theory, and I don't rest my case for the coherence theory on the acceptability of rational choice theory. Far from it. Still, I do want to suggest that the relation between expected utility and the reasons an agent has for making one choice over another (according to this theory) provides a nice analogue to the relation between relative coherence and the reasons a person has for holding one belief rather than another. As the analogy would have it, the fact that a belief coheres better than do the available alternatives with a person's other beliefs is not an extra reason for the person to hold it – rather it's status as the belief that maximizes coherence is a reflection of the reasons the person has for holding it. So thought of, the coherence theory is not committed to saying that the coherence of our beliefs is a reason to think they are true. Instead, what evidence we have for the truth of our beliefs is found in, and only in, what else we believe [about experience as a course of information about the world]. This means a coherentist can and should admit that the mere fact that a set of beliefs is coherent provides one with no reason to think they are true, even though, if the beliefs in question are one's own, their relative coherence will reflect the extent to which one's evidence gives one reason to think they are true.

Just as the maximizing theory of rationality doesn't offer substantive reasons for a person to act, so too the coherence theory doesn't offer substantive reasons for a person to believe or not. In both cases, the theories are offered as accurate and informative characterizations of the link between what we value or believe and the rationality or justification of what we do or believe. In each case, the plausibility of the theory depends, of course, on whether it actually captures the conditions under which someone counts as having chosen rationally or believed with justification. While I have my doubts about the theory of rationality on that front, I think the coherence theory of justification does a surprisingly good job.

What, then, does the coherentist say about those situations in which one recognizes that someone else holds a view that is more coherent than is one's own? If justification is a matter of coherence shouldn't I abandon my beliefs if I discover there is an alternative set of beliefs that are more coherent? The coherentist does have to hold that, if the person's beliefs really are more coherent, then that person has more justification for believing as she does, given her evidence, than one has for one's own view. However, acknowledging this is not yet to say that one has any reason to reject one's views in favor of hers, not least of all because the mere fact that her view is more coherent is no reason to think it true, but also because her evidence, such as it is, might justifiably be rejected by you as misleading, ill informed, or otherwise unacceptable (even if the other person is justified in relying on it).

Often, of course, the alternative coherent views [ . . . ] will be ones that we ourselves see some reason to accept, even if we think on balance the evidence tells against them. To take a moral example: Suppose that concerning various matters I am inclined to think consequentialist considerations are relevant and often decisive. I think, for instance, that when it comes to public policy the fact that one policy would produce more happiness for all than some other policy is a reason to choose it, or I think the fact that some present would ease someone's sorrow is a reason to give it, or whatever. Suppose too, though, that I resist the utilitarian view that some action is right if and only if it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number, on the grounds that there are some things one cannot legitimately do to another person no matter how much happiness would be produced. In this situation I might well recognize that the utilitarian's position, given her other beliefs, is more coherent than mine. And I may have no single overarching moral principle to propose in place of the utilitarian's. Am I then required to accept utilitarianism? Is a coherentist committed to saying I am? The utilitarian and I share a good number of beliefs concerning the sort of considerations that might be relevant to moral evaluation, and to this extent we both have some grounds for thinking utilitarianism is

true. Yet we differ on crucial points; in particular, I think (say) that willful murder is always wrong, no matter what, and that a sadist's pleasures are utterly worthless, and I think the rightness of an act depends as much on why it was performed as on the effects it happens to produce. She believes that I am wrong about these things (and others). I may, of course, be brought around to the utilitarian's view if she offers compelling grounds for seeing my own beliefs as explicable but false. And part of her argument in defense of utilitarianism will reasonably be that the utilitarian view does a good job of accounting for a number of things we both believe, which itself provides some evidence for the principle. Still, and even as I give due weight to the fact that the utilitarian principle captures well a number of considerations, I will justifiably reject it if (but only if) the weight of the evidence provided by what else I believe (some of which she denies) tells on balance against her view.

In the end, whether one is justified in retaining one's original view in light of another depends on whether one's own evidence tells in favor of the other view or not. In the face of (even) coherent alternatives, one justifiably rejects the others, when one does, on the basis of what one justifiably believes.<sup>18</sup> Often, the weight of one's evidence will tell against views one recognizes would be more coherent, and one justifiably rejects them on the grounds that one has reason for thinking them false. Given what else one believes, the alternative views do not after all count as coherent alternatives for you despite their being recognizably coherent when held by others. This means, of course, that had one's initial beliefs been different, had one believed one thing rather than another, one would have justifiably rejected the views that one actually (and with justification) accepts. But this doesn't mean that the fact that one believes as one does is one's reason for rejecting the alternative; rather one's reason is that the alternative clashes with the facts (as you take them to be).

Recognizing the crucial role played by one's actual beliefs naturally raises two more worries about the coherence theory: that it will have objectionably conservative implications and that it inappropriately privileges the beliefs

one merely happens to have. The conservatism of the view, however, goes just as far as, but no farther than, the conservatism that comes with allowing that one must base one's beliefs on the available evidence. This inevitable limitation requires acknowledging that throughout our epistemic endeavors we will be appealing to what we believe, because what evidence one has is limited to that provided by one's beliefs (and other relevantly similar cognitive states). We are never able to stand fully apart from those beliefs without then losing all grounds for believing anything at all. Yet this reliance on what we happen to believe has no seriously conservative implications, since those beliefs themselves, especially in light of the new evidence experience and reflection regularly provide, won't stand as fixed points but will instead shift in response to the new evidence (if they are to continue to count as justified).

When it comes to privileging actual beliefs, it is no part of this coherence theory that the mere fact that one believes something, considered alone, provides any reason whatsoever for thinking the belief true; that evidence must come from other things one believes, if it is to come at all. Absent such a background, a person will take the content of her belief to be true, but that is a reflection of what it is for an attitude to count as a belief. And the content of that belief does serve as evidence for other things she might believe, but in relying on that evidence, she is not taking the fact that she believes it to be evidence for something else, rather she is taking what she believes (say, that the coffee is hot, or that willful cruelty is wrong) as her evidence.<sup>19</sup> [ . . . ]

Still, because the coherence theory treats as evidence only what we already believe, it might seem to ignore a crucial impetus for change: experience. On the one hand, the theory may seem unable even to accommodate experiential input and observation. On the other hand, although it might be able to accommodate such input, it may seem not properly to recognize its importance. And surely any adequate theory must acknowledge the role and importance of experience and observation when it comes to the justification of belief.

The first concern, I think, is undercut by the role cognitively spontaneous beliefs are able to

play within coherentism. It's true, coherentism doesn't allow experience as relevant to justification unless and until the experience comes into the person's cognitive economy. Yet, especially in its recognition of cognitively spontaneous beliefs, coherentism leaves room for experiences to enter that cognitive economy unbidden, either thanks to the experiences themselves having a cognitive content (in which case it is the content of the experience that serves as evidence) or by their being the content of an appropriate cognitive attitude (in which case it is the fact that such an experience occurred that serves as evidence). [...] [C]oherentists, no less than foundationalists, are able to recognize these beliefs, and other noninferred beliefs, as a regular source of new evidence that plays a crucial role in determining what we are justified in believing. What is distinctive about coherentism is its claim that the epistemic credentials these beliefs, and all others, enjoy is dependent on the evidential/inferential relations they bear to others. And a belief can bear the appropriate sort of relation to others even if, as it happens, it was caused directly by experience or is concerned directly with experience.

The second concern is encouraged by the thought that the coherence theory is committed to treating a set of beliefs as justified as long as it is coherent, regardless of whether those beliefs have been properly informed by experience. Even if the coherence theory can allow experiential input, the concern is that it treats such input as incidentally important rather than crucial.

The worry can be brought out with an example. Imagine that someone holds an exceedingly coherent set of beliefs, as coherent as any coherentist could demand. But imagine too that because of some neural accident, or a Mad Scientist's mucking about, or God's intervention, her beliefs become insensitive to experience. Her beliefs remain in a coherent stasis, although now they are uninfluenced one way or the other by her accumulating experience. Surely, one is inclined to say, she is no longer justified in holding her beliefs despite their continued coherence and this shows that, as the foundationalist can hold, the status of our beliefs as

justified depends on their being properly responsive to experience and not on their being coherent.<sup>20</sup>

So far, the case is crucially underdescribed. We need to distinguish between: (i) the person whose experiences continue to provide her with evidence that she unfortunately fails to take into account; and (ii) the person who may in a sense continue to have experiences although the link between her experience and her cognitive states is severed in a way that keeps her from acquiring new evidence from those experiences. In the first case, she is clearly unjustified in holding her beliefs precisely for the reasons a coherentist can acknowledge: She violates the basing requirement. Whatever explains her continuing to hold the beliefs she does, it is not the evidence available to her. What she believes may or may not be justified; whether it is depends on whether the evidence provided by her experiences (to which she is unresponsive) tells against them, on balance. But because she doesn't believe as she does because her beliefs cohere well with her evidence, she is not justified in holding those beliefs even on the coherentist's view. In the second case, though, the coherentist will say that the person may in fact be justified in holding her beliefs, though she is in an epistemically sad situation. For in this case she is, by hypothesis, not receiving new evidence from her senses and so her failure to respond to those experiences by changing her beliefs is no reflection on the justification she has for them. To think otherwise is to fall back on the sort of externalism that holds people strictly liable for what they believe even in cases where they have no reason to believe otherwise.<sup>21</sup> Either way, I think the example doesn't support the idea that coherentism ignores the importance of one's being properly responsive to one's experiences.

Nonetheless, coherentism requires experience only to the extent experience (broadly construed) is the source of new evidence. It imposes no specific requirement on the nature of that experience (on either its source or content) nor on how a person must see her views as being related to experience. And it's liberalism on these matters may be problematic. There are two plausible claims that together

suggest that peoples' beliefs are justified only if they see those beliefs as grounded in their experience. The first is that a person's beliefs are justified only if the supposition that they are true figures as part of the best explanation that person has of her holding the belief. The second is that such an explanation will inevitably, at some point, appeal to that person's experiences. The first claim gets its plausibility from the conviction that we would have reason to rely on our beliefs only if we thought they were responsive to the facts they concern, just as we would have reason to rely on someone else's beliefs only if we thought their beliefs responsive to the facts they concern. The second gets its plausibility from the general conviction that only experience establishes an appropriate link between our beliefs and what they are about [ . . . ]

The important thing to notice about both the explanatory requirement and the empiricist assumption, is that they represent at most substantive restrictions on what we can justifiably believe, given what else we believe. And coherentism can perfectly well acknowledge these restrictions as ones we justifiably believe appropriate; they are more or less justified, according to the coherentist, to the extent to which they are actually supported by the evidence available to those who hold them. All that coherentism denies is that satisfying them represents a necessary condition on justification. On the coherentist's view, even if, on balance, we have reason to reject any belief not properly grounded in experience, other people may, depending on what else they believe, be justified in holding their beliefs even when they have no explanation of them or no explanation of them that links them to experience.

Incidentally, I do think that the truth of our moral beliefs often plays a role in explaining both why we hold them and why we have the experiences we take as evidence for them. Thus we might appeal to the injustice of certain institutions to explain the social unrest we observe; to the value of an activity to explain why it regularly gives rise to satisfaction; to the evilness of a character to explain a person's willingness to act as we learn someone has. Yet these explanations rely on our justifiably

believing institutions of that type unjust, or activities of that sort good, or characters of that kind evil; they go through only if, in giving them, we can legitimately invoke other background moral views in accounting for the relation between morality and the experiences we hope to explain. If instead we had to build up, piecemeal, and without recourse to background views, an explanation of moral beliefs relying initially only on certain privileged beliefs (say concerning our sensory experiences) we would, I suspect, never find ourselves having to appeal to the truth of our moral views to explain our holding them. At the same time, though, I suspect as well that were we similarly obliged to explain our nonmoral views in this piecemeal fashion the truth of few of them would figure in an explanation of our holding them.

An important advantage of the coherence theory is that it can make good sense of our legitimately relying in this way on background assumptions, whether moral or not: If these assumptions cohere well with the other things we believe, then when it comes time to show that our particular beliefs, say, some of our moral beliefs, are properly responsive to our experiences, the background assumptions are among the beliefs we may legitimately take into account. If everything comes together appropriately, and the explanations actually go through, we can justifiably believe that our moral beliefs play a role in explaining our experiences. Of course, everything might not come together appropriately; even as we find ourselves initially justified in relying on moral assumptions in trying to explain our experiences, we may discover the explanations are not good. In that case, we need to weigh the justification we have for those beliefs against the recognition that they might be explanatorily impotent. While I think the bulk of the justification we have for our moral beliefs really has nothing to do with their playing an important role in explaining our experiences, I am inclined to think that we would not be justified in believing of some moral principles, that they were true, unless we also thought their being true made some difference to, and so contribute to an explanation of, our believing them.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Most of this chapter has been given over to articulating and defending a version of the coherence theory of justification. As that theory would have it, a belief is justified if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things a person believes. And a person is justified in holding some belief if and only if the belief itself is justified and she holds it because it is justified. In various crucial ways the theory differs from most versions of the coherence theory. First of all, rather than dodging the regress argument by embracing a holistic theory of justification, this version meets the argument head on and, with the foundationalist, acknowledges that certain beliefs may serve as suitable regress-stoppers. Unlike foundationalism, however, it insists that these regress-stoppers – the beliefs that count as permissively, but not positively, justified – enjoy no special epistemic privilege and are themselves characterizable only in terms of the evidential connections they bear to other beliefs. When beliefs are permissively justified it is only in light of the relations they bear to other beliefs. Second of all, while it treats the coherence of one's beliefs as a criterion of justification, it treats coherence itself not as a justifying property of those beliefs but rather as a measure of the evidential support the beliefs enjoy. In every case, what evidence a person has for her beliefs is found not in their relative coherence, but in the contents of her other beliefs.

Thus there is in coherentism a built-in commitment to relativism about justification. What a person in fact believes, and so what evidence she happens to have available, is crucial to whether her views are justified, and a belief one person is justified in accepting may be such that others would be justified in rejecting it. The relativism doesn't collapse, of course, into the view that anything one takes to be justified is. The coherentist says a person's belief is justified only if it coheres well with her other beliefs; whether it does is independent of whether she thinks it does (except as such a belief might be countenanced as eviden-

tially related to other things she believes). In any given case, according to coherentism, there is a fact of the matter about whether someone is justified and they, as well as anyone else, might get that fact wrong.

There is as well a deep seated recognition of fallibilism. Not only does a coherentist treat each belief as open to revision in light of others, she recognizes also that even a fully coherent, and so wonderfully justified, set of beliefs might turn out to be false. Justification's link to truth, such as it is, is not provided by coherence itself, but instead by the evidential relations that bind beliefs together into coherent sets. Thus the theory makes good sense of how we can look back on our own earlier beliefs as having been justified and yet now justifiably thought wrong; and it makes good sense out of how we can distinguish among others as between those who are justified in holding their differing (and as we see it false) views and those that aren't.

At the same time, the theory finds a good place for the thought that, while we recognize that any of our beliefs might be wrong, that fact about us and our beliefs doesn't in and of itself count as strong reason to reject our view – certainly not nearly as strong as would be our coming to think we actually had made a mistake (in which case we've got reasons precisely as strong as the support that view has, for changing the view in question). Thus the coherentist responds to the sceptic neither decisively nor simply by deciding not to worry about her challenge, but by advancing a positive view about what sort of evidence the mere possibility of error constitutes. Each suggestion that a person might have made a mistake is appropriately countered, when it can be, by appeal to the evidence available that supports the view. A person might of course be wrong in the positive view she advances – a possibility the sceptic will push – but that fact too tells only so far against the weight of the evidence the person might be able to marshal in defense of her own view. Whether, concerning any particular issue, a person is justified in accepting scepticism will turn (as does the justification for all beliefs) on the weight of the evidence available.



## Notes

1. See William Alston's "Two Types of Foundationalism," in the *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), pp. 165-85.
2. See David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 469.
3. Compatible with this crucial difference, coherentism may have a great deal in common with foundationalism. It might, for instance, recognize different classes of belief (even as it rejects the suggestion that any class is epistemically privileged), or embrace the same inferential principles, or even allow that justified beliefs take on, for instance, a pyramid structure.
4. Although foundationalism and coherentism, as I have characterized them, are mutually exclusive, they clearly don't exhaust the possibilities. Someone might well reject foundationalism's commitment to an epistemically privileged class of beliefs and yet resist coherentism's positive account of justification in terms of coherence. One might hold, for instance, that one's beliefs are justified if they are reliable indicators of the facts they concern, or, alternatively, if they are the product of a reliable belief-forming mechanism. In neither case would their justification turn on their cohering with one's other beliefs, except to the extent the relevant sort of reliability is related to coherence.
5. Clearly there are two other possible readings: (i) one belief provides (permissive) justification for another only if it is, itself, (permissively) justified; and (ii) one belief provides (permissive) justification for another only if it is, itself, (positively) justified. The first of these is weaker even than the weak reading defended in what follows, and would in any case be irrelevant to establishing that we ever have positive reason to believe as we do; and the second would, like the strong reading rejected in what follows, make an appeal to permissive justification useless when it comes to stopping the regress.
6. Although permissively justified beliefs can serve to stop the regress, presumably only positively justified beliefs enjoy the sort of support that knowledge is usually thought to presuppose. In any case, a belief that is *merely* permissively justified will be a belief one has, on balance, no reason to believe - it enjoys no positive justification.
7. Whether these cases are ultimately intelligible is open to question. It's arguable (but I think not true) that the beliefs we are able to attribute to two people so differently situated must always be different. If so, then the supposition that they share beliefs can't be sustained. What matters, though, is not so much whether these represent real possibilities; what matters is that, were they possible, we would normally count the people involved as being equally justified, though not equally well-situated epistemically.
8. G. E. Moore articulates this idea as he spells out what it would be for something to exhibit *organic unity*. See *Principia Ethica*.
9. If this suggestion is to be worked out in a way that is compatible with the version of internalism I've defended, the justification enhancing role of evidential relations cannot be that of giving a person more reason to believe as she does (since the presence of the relation may be something about which she has no beliefs even when it holds).
10. Incidentally, even if the relations themselves are seen as being valuable, the value they have might itself be conditional on their relating real evidence. Thus while the relations will presumably be characterized in terms that allow them to stand among propositions (whether believed or not), the evidential value of these relations might depend upon the status of those propositions as evidence - which status they will have, I've argued, only as they become the content of the relevant person's beliefs.
11. How well, and whether, a belief coheres with the others a person holds will depend, in part, on what alternatives are available to her. Before Newton came on the scene, people were justified in believing things about the workings of the world that later they would have been unjustified in accepting in light of the evidence and options available. So we might say, a bit more precisely, that a belief is justified only if, and then to the extent that, it coheres *better than does any competitor belief* with the other things the person believes (where two beliefs will compete with one another if either might, but both can't, be held by the person in question).
12. Although here I will be characterizing the coherence of a set of beliefs, the same considerations of evidential consistency, connectedness, and comprehensiveness, will serve to characterize the relative coherence of sets of propositions directly. So, for instance, a set of propositions that constitute a theory will

- count as minimally coherent if appropriately consistent, and then as more than minimally coherent as the theory is connected and comprehensive.
13. The evidential consistency requirement insists on both more and less than would a requirement that demanded logical consistency from the contents of the beliefs in the set. It demands more because a set that contained only logically consistent beliefs would nonetheless fall short of evidential consistency if the evidence provided by some of the beliefs, on balance, told against one of the beliefs. It demands less because a set that contained logically inconsistent beliefs that were equally well supported by the evidence provided by the other beliefs would count as evidentially consistent (and so minimally coherent). For arguments against requiring logical consistency, see Richard Foley's "Justified Inconsistent Beliefs," in *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1979), pp. 247-57.
  14. I don't suppose that there is any algorithm for determining the relative contributions connectedness and comprehensiveness make to the over-all coherence of a set. It would be a mistake, though, to think that connectedness and comprehensiveness will never compete. While any belief that increases the connectedness of an evidentially consistent set will likewise increase comprehensiveness, and any belief that increases comprehensiveness in such a set will at worst make no difference to connectedness, when it comes to comparing one coherent set with another, we may be faced with one that's more connected but less comprehensive than another and sometimes, at least, comprehensiveness may win out over connectedness or vice versa.
  15. Nice complications emerge when we consider situations in which the person herself is considering various things she might believe, each of which would cohere well with the other things she believes. In that case, which belief would be justified will depend on which of the options would cohere *better* with the other things she believes (including her beliefs concerning which of the options is more justified), and, having considered the options, believing one that coheres less well, but still well, with her beliefs, would presumably be unjustified.
  16. In "Coherence and Models for Moral Theorizing," in Mark Timmons and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (eds.) *Moral Knowledge?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), I raise this objection to the all too common practice, in moral theory, of treating the fact that one theory is more coherent than another as an independent reason to think the theory true.
  17. A person may, of course, be wrong in the probabilities she associates with various outcomes or the value she attributes to those outcomes. Expected utility often differs from actual utility. Yet, according to this theory, so far as the rationality of her choice is concerned, it is rational if given those views the choice she makes maximizes expected utility.
  18. Here the analogy with decision theory may be helpful again. We might well recognize another person as making a choice, from among the same options we face, that maximizes her expected utility, and (if only we could make good sense of interpersonal utility comparisons) we might recognize too that given her expectations and values, the option she takes has a greater expected utility for her than our best option has for us. Nonetheless, that provides us with no reason whatsoever to embrace the option she rationally chooses. We might of course take the fact that she has the expectations or values she does as evidence that ours are misguided, and if so, we will have reason to change ours, but often enough we have good reason to think what she expects or values is irrelevant.
  19. Just as the theory of rational choice is not committed to saying that the fact that something advances one's own interests need be a reason a person has for acting, since people's preferences may all be other-directed, so too the coherence theory is not committed to saying that the fact that one believes something need be a reason a person has for believing, since people's beliefs may all have as their content things other than their own beliefs. Now in fact we can expect people to be interested in their own interests and to have beliefs concerning their beliefs, but these interests and beliefs constitute only a fraction of the interests and beliefs a person usually has and neither the maximizing theory of rationality nor the coherence theory of justification gives them any special weight or importance.
  20. See Alvin Plantinga's *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
  21. We may need yet a third case: It may be that the person has actually had her beliefs "frozen" so that she is not simply insensitive to the beliefs she forms on the basis of experience, nor simply cognitively cut off from her experiences.

In this case, I think the most reasonable thing to say is that she is no longer believing anything. But if we still count her as believing, she will still fail the basing requirement because, once her beliefs are "frozen," what explains her holding of them is no longer her evidence but the fact that they are now unchangeable.

22. For discussion of these issues, see Gilbert Harman's *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Nicholas

Sturgeon's "Moral Explanations," in *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), ed. by David Copp and David Zimmerman, pp. 49-78; as well as my "Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence," *Midwest Studies* XII, ed. by Peter French *et al.*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 433-57, and "Normative Explanations" *Philosophical Perspectives* VII, ed. by James Tomberlin (1992), pp. 55-72.