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INTRODUCTION: “EPISTEMIC COHERENTISM”

TED POSTON, Guest Editor

Epistemic coherentism is a view that has languished in the history of philosophy. The traditional regress argument includes a simple form of coherentism by considering whether a circular chain of reasons ever justifies some proposition. This simple form of coherentism understandably never received any serious attention. Perhaps the lack of a plausible model of coherentism explains the curious absence of the view from the history of philosophy. Apart from its dubious connection with Hegel and the subsequent idealist tradition, coherentism did not receive any significant consideration until the dawn of the twentieth century.

At the beginning of the last century, the revolutions in the formal and physical sciences breathed new life into the debates over scientific methodology. Pierre Duhem successfully argued that there are no crucial experiments of a theory; experimental verification or falsification takes place within a background of other theoretical commitments. Otto Neurath compared scientific and mathematical inquiry to a raft that is built at sea. In place of the traditional Cartesian method of first philosophy in which inquiry begins with universally valid principles and then is tested by experience, Duhem and Neurath argued that inquiry aims for holistic coherence and is not reducible to piecemeal verification or falsification.

By the middle of the twentieth century, most major epistemologists were coherentists. Nelson Goodman (1965, 1978), Willard Van Orman Quine (1960; Quine and Ullian 1970), Hans Reichenbach (1938), and Wilfrid Sellars (1963) had developed and defended coherentist positions. However, coherentism began to wane in the 1970s. The Gettier problem and the ensuing development of externalist views in epistemology undermined the traditional emphasis on the importance of reflection and awareness, as well as undercutting interest in methodological debates about how inquiry should proceed. Moreover, the development of modest forms of foundationalism by

1 William Alston (1976a, 1976b) and Mark Pastin (1975a, 1975b) threatened
2 some of the pro-coherentist arguments. Post-1970 coherentism has not been
3 an influential epistemological view.

4 Even though epistemic coherentism has not been a leading view since the
5 days of Quine and Sellars, coherentism has witnessed significant develop-
6 ments over the past twenty-five years. In 1985, Laurence Bonjour published
7 *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* in which he argues for coherentism on the
8 basis of an epistemic regress argument and the Sellarsian dilemma. Bonjour's
9 regress argument requires that one possess a good reason for thinking that a
10 claim is true in order to be justified in believing the claim. The Sellarsian
11 dilemma attacks the rejoinder that one can possess a good reason simply by
12 having the right kind of experience (i.e., it attacks the traditional idea of "the
13 given"). Bonjour's positive view is that an empirical belief is justified for a
14 subject in virtue of being coherent with the subject's other beliefs. The
15 ensuing discussion on Bonjour's coherentism reveals that Bonjour lacked an
16 adequate response to how the data used in coherence reasoning was justified,
17 and it also reveals the tension inherent in Bonjour's attempt to separate his
18 treatment of empirical knowledge from an account of *a priori* knowledge. In
19 the face of these criticisms, Bonjour (1997) has subsequently repudiated his
20 coherentist views.

21 Several other books defending coherentism stand out. Gilbert Harman's
22 *Thought* (1973) and *Change in View* (1986) develop central themes in the tradi-
23 tion of explanatory coherentism. Harman's view grows out of the coherentist
24 tradition coming from Quine.¹ Harman focuses on the role of reasoning and
25 shows how reasoning aims for improving one's overall explanatory position.
26 The second half of William Lycan's *Judgement and Justification* (1988) defends
27 explanatory coherentism (also known as "explanationism"). Like Harman's
28 explanatory coherentist position, Lycan's view fits well with the tradition of
29 the mid-century coherentists. Lycan argues for a form of coherentism that
30 gives a central place to the explanatory virtues. Among these virtues is
31 conservatism, the thesis that the mere holding a claim bestows a presumption
32 of rationality on it. Lycan's conservative epistemology permits him to get
33 around the circularity objection that plagues Bonjour's view.

34 In addition to Harman and Lycan, Keith Lehrer and Paul Thagard defend
35 coherentism. Keith Lehrer's *Theory of Knowledge* (2000, 2nd ed.) argues that
36 beliefs are justified either by explaining or by being explained. Lehrer explic-
37 itly rejects the conservative elements in some coherentist views. Paul Thagard
38 has defended central coherentist themes for several decades. His *Coherence*
39 *in Thought and Action* (2000) brings together much of his superb work on

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41 ¹ See Harman's (1967a, 1967b) famous papers on Quine.

1 coherentism. Thagard's wide-ranging discussion develops coherentist themes
2 in the context of psychology and cognitive science.²

3 In the past fifteen years, two groups of literature on coherentism have
4 developed. One group focuses on replying to historically prominent objec-
5 tions to coherentism, such as the problem of experience (the isolation and the
6 input objections), the problem of the truth connection (the alternative system
7 objection), and the problem with the basing relation.³ The other group
8 focuses on the relationship between probability and coherence. From its focus
9 on formal measures of coherence, this second group has produced an impor-
10 tant impossibility result: there are no formal measures of coherence according
11 to which greater coherence implies a higher probability of truth (Bovens and
12 Hartmann 2003; Olsson 2005). The subsequent discussion over the formal
13 measures of coherence has revitalized discussion on coherentism.

14 This current volume is based on papers presented at the University of
15 South Alabama's inaugural Orange Beach Epistemology Workshop, held in
16 May 2009. This collection of papers extends the discussion on these two
17 groups of literature, in addition to providing further prospects and problems
18 for coherentist views. William Lycan responds to recent objections to
19 explanatory coherentism, extending the literature on explanationism.
20 Jonathan Kvanvig addresses the problem of justified inconsistent beliefs, a
21 central problem for coherentists who impose a consistency requirement for
22 justification. Paul Thagard responds to Elijah Millgram's arguments that his
23 account of coherence does not provide a suitable response to the problem of
24 the truth connection. Mylan Engel defends an internal, consistency-based
25 approach to the justification of moral beliefs—an approach that does not
26 require any moral theory—and argues that this approach to moral justifica-
27 tion is a novel kind of coherentist approach to the justification of moral
28 beliefs. In response to the ongoing worry that coherentism does not have an
29 adequate account of data (i.e., basic reasons), Ted Poston formulates and
30 argues for a new coherentist account of reasons called the “emergent reasons
31 account.” Bruce Russell rounds off the traditional epistemology papers by
32 arguing that coherentists do not have an adequate account of the justificatory
33 role of experiences and intuitions. Russell presses the problem that experi-
34 ences and intuitions provide a greater role to justification than coherentists
35 can capture.

36 The remaining papers extend the discussion of the impossibility results
37 concerning formal measures of coherence. Erik Olsson and Stephan Schubert
38 aim to extend the argument in Olsson's *Against Coherence* (2005) that coherence
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40 ² Another significant publication was John Bender's edited collection entitled *The Current*
41 *State of the Coherence Theory* (1989).

42 ³ See Kvanvig 2008 for an overview.

1 is not truth-conducive by considering the impact, if any, of higher-level beliefs
2 about the reliability of lower-level beliefs. Olsson and Schubert argue that these
3 higher-level beliefs can affect the truth-conduciveness of coherence, but only if
4 one assumes access to facts about the reliability of one's beliefs. Gregory
5 Wheeler discusses Olsson's (2005) impossibility results, argues that these results
6 have limited value, and sketches an alternative view of coherence that avoids
7 the impossibility results. William Roche considers the role of witness agree-
8 ment in modeling how coherence is truth-conducive.⁴ Roche argues that this
9 result does not itself show that coherence is never truth-conducive.

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43 ⁴ See Olsson 2005 for the role of witness agreement in modeling how coherence increases
44 the likelihood of truth.

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