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

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

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

In addition to Harman and Lycan, Keith Lehrer and Paul Thagard defend coherentism. Keith Lehrer’s *Theory of Knowledge* (2000, 2nd ed.) argues that beliefs are justified either by explaining or by being explained. Lehrer explicitly rejects the conservative elements in some coherentist views. Paul Thagard has defended central coherentist themes for several decades. His *Coherence in Thought and Action* (2000) brings together much of his superb work on
coherentism. Thagard’s wide-ranging discussion develops coherentist themes in the context of psychology and cognitive science.2

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

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

The remaining papers extend the discussion of the impossibility results concerning formal measures of coherence. Erik Olsson and Stephan Schubert aim to extend the argument in Olsson’s Against Coherence (2005) that coherence

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2 Another significant publication was John Bender’s edited collection entitled The Current State of the Coherence Theory (1989).

3 See Kvanvig 2008 for an overview.
is not truth-conducive by considering the impact, if any, of higher-level beliefs about the reliability of lower-level beliefs. Olsson and Schubert argue that these higher-level beliefs can affect the truth-conduciveness of coherence, but only if one assumes access to facts about the reliability of one's beliefs. Gregory Wheeler discusses Olsson's (2005) impossibility results, argues that these results have limited value, and sketches an alternative view of coherence that avoids the impossibility results. William Roche considers the role of witness agreement in modeling how coherence is truth-conducive. Roche argues that this result does not itself show that coherence is never truth-conductive.

REFERENCES


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