REASON & EXPLANATION:
A DEFENSE OF EXPLANATORY COHERENTISM

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Chapter 1

Introduction

‘A coherent Thinker, and a strict Reasoner, is not to be made at once by a Set of Rules.’ (I. Watts Logick 1725)

‘Be plain and coherent.’ (Dickens Dombey and Son 1848)

‘It is reason’s proper work to provide us with a maximum of explanatory coherence and comprehensiveness’ (Sosa Knowledge in Perspective 1991)

Epistemic coherentism has not merited much attention throughout the history of philosophy. Two explanations for this neglect stand out. First, when a statement is challenged one defends it by citing another statement. This aspect of how to respond to challenges in specific contexts leads to the thought that the structure of epistemic justification corresponds to the structure of responding to challenges in a specific context. Socrates’s persistent search for particular reasons or Descartes’s method of doubt manifests this natural tendency. Both search for reason’s proper ground in some unchallengeable propositions whose epistemic merits is independent of any particular perspective. It is natural to extend this pragmatic feature of the activity of justifying belief to the state of being justified in one’s beliefs. This natural search for reason’s proper grounding obscures the plausibility of epistemic coherentism.

The second reason coherentism has been neglected lies in the assumptions undergirding the traditional regress argument. The regress problem presented by Aristotle and subsequent philosophers offers three non-skeptical options to the general question how is any claim justified?: circles, regresses, or foundations. Do we start with some controversial claim and defend it by reasoning through many propositions which
eventually loop back to the original claim? Does reason continue forever? Or, do we reason to some claim which provides a reason without itself requiring a reason? Of these non-skeptical options foundationalism seems the most plausible; a claim is justified by being basic or inferred from basic beliefs. But these reasons support a foundationalist epistemology only if they exhaust the plausible options. Yet as many coherentists have pointed out there is a fourth non-skeptical option: holism, the support of any particular claim is a matter of how well the claim is supported by everything else within the relevant system. Justification is not foundational because any specific claim requires a reason. Justification does not require an infinite regress because holistic support does not require an infinite number of non-repeating claims. And, justification is not circular because holistic support is different from circular arguments. It is up to the specific holist view to say more precisely how justification works. My task in this book is to defend an explanatory coherentist form of holism. I contend that a subject’s propositional justification for any claim is a matter of how that claim fits into a virtuous explanatory system that beats relevant competitors.

1.1 A brief history of coherentism

Holism is a historically curious view. Metaphysical holistic views arose alongside idealism. The idealists resist a dualism of mind and world, insisting that reality is fundamentally mental. Idealists reject the correspondence theory of truth according to which a true statement corresponds to some fact. On idealist views the truth of a statement consists in its coherence with other statements. This metaphysical form of holism, though, has dubious connections with confirmational holism, also known as epistemic coherentism. That epistemological view arose within the pragmatist tradition and upon reflection on the revolutions in the formal and physical sciences of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹

Epistemic coherentism is the view that a statement’s justification—its acceptability for the purposes of getting at the truth and avoiding error—consists in its overall coherence or fit with the rest of accepted statements. Otto Neurath expresses this via with his famous simile of rebuilding a raft at sea. The process of epistemic improvement is like rebuilding a ship at sea. One can improve parts of the ship only by relying on other parts of the ship; there is no dry dock to rebuild on firm ground. The simile suggests that one can improve one’s stock of beliefs only by relying on other beliefs one has; there are no properly basic beliefs whose justification is independent

¹William Alston (Alston 1983, 73) observes that both absolute idealists and the mid 20th century pragmatists argued against immediate awareness.
1.1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF COHERENTISM

of other justified beliefs. All belief revision takes place within an assumed background of accepted beliefs. Neurath’s raft metaphor contrasts with Moritz Schlick’s pyramid metaphor. For Schlick, another member of the Vienna Circle, epistemic justification has a pyramid structure; the justification for some beliefs rests upon the justification for other beliefs whose justification does not depend on the justification of other beliefs. The development of logical empiricism up to Quine and Sellars favored Schlick’s foundationalism over Neurath’s holism.\(^2\)

W.V.O. Quine and Wilfrid Sellars each forcefully argued against the logical empiricist project and advanced a coherence view of justification. Quine argued that the backbone of the logical empiricist attempted reconstruction of acceptable statements depended on the myth of a sharp distinction between analytic statements and synthetic statements. According to logical empiricism, each statement could be determined to be analytic or synthetic solely in virtue of its form. The analytic statements were justified by themselves and the synthetic statements required experience to be justified. The class of synthetic statements itself was divided into statements which report pure experience (the experiential statements) and those which were logical constructions of the experiential statements. Theoretical statements of science were to be treated as logical constructions of experiential statements. These theoretical statements are then analyzed into analytic equivalences of synthetic statements. Quine’s famous paper ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ forcefully attacked the principled analytic-synthetic distinction presupposed by the logical empiricist program. Quine’s contrasting picture was a holistic view in which the justification of any statement depends on its role in the web of belief.

Wilfrid Sellars’ famous paper ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’ attacked the part of logical empiricism that supposed there are pure experiential statements which are directly justified by experience. Logical empiricists claimed that the content of these statements directly match the content of the associated sense experience in such a way that provided a guarantee of their truth. Sellars argued that the exis-

\(^2\)Michael Friedman (Friedman 1999) presents a different view. Friedman argues that the philosophical legacy of logical empiricism, specifically Carnap, has been misunderstood. Friedman observes that the early positivists–Mach, Schlick, and, to some extent, Carnap in the \textit{Aufbau}–held a view similar to the one attributed to the positivists. This is the view that the goal of philosophy is to use the development of modern logic to show how all theoretical statements can be reduced to statements about fleeting subjective experience. Friedman then observes that the many of the positivists–chiefly, Carnap–abandoned this view in response to Neurath’s early criticism of it. Friedman’s overall narrative, though, is that Carnap’s project in the \textit{Aufbau} is constitutional theory, one that isn’t wedded to a traditional empiricist conception. What’s interesting (and surprising) about Friedman’s narrative is that it places the development of coherentist themes earlier within the Vienna Circle itself.
tence of these statements is a myth; it is one form of ‘the myth of the given.’ Sellars argues that sense experience either has belief content or it does not. Belief content is content has a truth-value and can be endorsed in belief. If sense experience lacks any belief content then it is a mystery how sense experience can justify any belief that the world is one way rather than another. In this case it would be a complete mystery why an experience could justify a specific belief. Yet if sense experience has belief content then there must be some reason for thinking that that belief content is true. The claim that the content of a belief would require justification and yet the belief content of experience would not is incoherent; for the content to be justified in one case is the same as the content that doesn’t need to be justified in the other case. The distinction between the belief mode of hosting a content and the experience mode is artificial. If content requires justification and sense content is belief content then their epistemic fates stand or fall together. Sellars, thus, reasoned that the logical empiricist project of ending the regress of justification in pure experiential statement is a myth.

The fate of epistemic coherentism becomes murky after Quine and Sellars. The influence of these seminal philosophers extended from the early 1950s through much of the 20th century. Yet epistemology took a curious turn in 1963 with the publication of Edmund Gettier’s paper ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?’ Gettier argued that knowledge is not justified true belief. Knowledge requires some additional property than justified true belief. Gettier’s paper led to a flourishing of new approaches to knowledge. At the time epistemologists thought that the relationship between knowledge and true belief must be thought out anew. Hence, epistemologists turned their backs on the methodological issues of science which grew out of reflection on logical empiricism and instead focused on finding a solution to the Gettier problem. One dominant approach was the formulation of epistemic externalism, the idea that knowledge should not be conceived in terms of justification or reasons, but rather as a natural relation that one bears to one’s environment. For example, it was proposed that knowledge is the state of believing that p when the belief is caused by the fact that p. The rise of externalist approaches to knowledge led to the vigorous internalist-externalist debate in epistemology.

The burst of activity on the Gettier problem shifted attention away from the methodological issues pertaining to theory construction which engaged the logical empiricists and subsequently Quine and Sellars. However, important developments on methodology still occurred. In the mid 1970’s epistemologists realized that several prominent arguments against foundationalist views wrongly assumed that the foundational beliefs must be infallible. For example, D.M. Armstrong’s ‘distinct existence’ argument contended that experience is not an adequate ground for be-
belief because experiential states are ontologically distinct from belief states; the one can exist without the other. Consequently, Armstrong reasoned, experience cannot provide an indubitable ground for belief. William Alston and Mark Pastin both independently observed that foundationalist views need not be committed to the thesis that experience is an infallible ground for belief. This defeasible foundationalist view held that basic beliefs are justified but can be undermined by additional information. Even so, Alston and Pastin contended that experience is still a proper stopping point in the regress of reasons.

Such was the current state of play when Laurence BonJour published his well-regarded defense of coherentism in 1985. BonJour’s book *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* defends a coherentist account of empirical knowledge by way of two prominent arguments. First, BonJour argued that epistemic justification required more than simply a reason why the belief is likely to be true; a subject must be in cognitive possession of such a reason. BonJour argued that this requirement with conflicts with externalist views of knowledge and justification. Second, BonJour argued via the Sellars dilemma that experience is unable to provide such a reason. This argument attacks internalist foundationalist views. The view left standing after BonJour’s arguments is a form of epistemic coherentism.

BonJour’s arguments for epistemic coherentism are clear and forceful. However, his overall coherentist view is curious for two reasons. First, BonJour restricts his coherentist account to empirical knowledge, explicitly adopting a traditional rationalist foundationalist view of the a priori. His foundationalism about the a priori is at odds with the arguments he offers for resisting a foundationalist account of empirical knowledge. More recently, BonJour has renounced coherentism because of this problem. Second, related to his bifurcated epistemology, BonJour’s development of epistemic coherentism does not fit with the coherentism of Quine, Sellars, Harman, Goodman, and Lycan. In his Appendix B ‘A Survey of Coherence Theories’ BonJour notes that he will not discuss the views of Quine, Sellars, and Harman because they all ascribe to epistemic conservatism. Conservatism is the thesis that belief is an epistemically relevant factor and, under some conditions, can provide a sufficient condition for justification. BonJour argues that conservatism is a form of weak foundationalism and thus not a coherentist view. In contrast to BonJour’s argument, though, conservatism runs deep in the pragmatist tradition, and the mid-century coherentist were all pragmatists. Thus, BonJour’s coherentist view is considerably

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3 These two arguments don’t eliminate an infinitist view. BonJour argued that infinitism was implausible since it is impossible for a human being to possess an infinite number of empirical beliefs (BonJour 1985, 24)

4 See (BonJour 1997)
different from the confirmational holism espoused by philosophers writing in the
tradition of Quine and Sellars. BonJour’s coherentist view shifted discussion away from
the pragmatist coherentist view of the mid 20th century epistemologists.

Even so, excellent work on coherentist themes continued. Keith Lehrer’s books
\textit{Knowledge}\textsuperscript{5} and \textit{A Theory of Knowledge}\textsuperscript{6} argued for a novel form of epistemic co-
herentism based on the idea of a competing system. Lehrer argued that a belief’s
justification is a matter of its membership in a subject’s veritic system of beliefs
which beats all competitors. Gilbert Harman’s superb books \textit{Thought}\textsuperscript{7} and \textit{Change
in View}\textsuperscript{8} developed the Quinean coherentist project by focusing on justified change
in belief. Harman is less concerned with defending an analysis of epistemic justifica-
tion and more concerned with defending a conservative, non-skeptical epistemic view
that gets human inference right. William Lycan’s second half of his book \textit{Judgement
and Justification}\textsuperscript{9} defends a pragmatist explanationist view which is explicitly rooted
in a broadly Quinean epistemology. Lycan advances the thesis that a belief’s justi-
fication consists in its membership in a virtuous explanatory system. Lastly, Paul
Thagard has steadily developed a broadly coherentist epistemology aimed at tying
that approach into recent discoveries in cognitive science.\textsuperscript{10}

In the last fifteen years two groups of literature on coherentism have breathed
new life into the discussion on epistemic coherentism. First, alongside the general
emergence of Bayesianism, there has been focused interest on probabilistic measures
of coherence. This literature has produced an important impossibility result, ac-
cording to which there is no probabilistic measure of coherence on which coherence
is truth-conducive.\textsuperscript{11} More recent discussion has uncovered that the impossibility
result may be less significant than initially advertised.\textsuperscript{12} The interest in probabilistic
measures of coherence is a mixed blessing. Bayesian coherentism provides a model
of confirmation, according to which the confirmation of any statement is dependent
on an entire probability function. This is one way of making sense of holism. Yet
Bayesian coherentism finds its roots in logical empiricism with its sharp distinc-
tion between framework considerations and empirical considerations. Contemporary
Bayesian views have more affinity to Carnap’s project of explication. Carnap held
that empirical inquiry could not properly begin until one had selected a language

\textsuperscript{5}(Lehrer 1974)
\textsuperscript{6}(Lehrer 2000)
\textsuperscript{7}(Harman 1973)
\textsuperscript{8}(Harman 1986)
\textsuperscript{9}(Lycan 1988)
\textsuperscript{10}See (Thagard 2000)
\textsuperscript{11}(Olsson 2005)
\textsuperscript{12}(Huemer 2011; Roche 2012; Wheeler 2012)
which involved rules for justified and unjustified moves within that language. The choice of one language over another was entirely pragmatic. Quine vigorously opposed this by arguing that the distinction between pure pragmatic choices and proper epistemic choices was not sharp. I consider the role Bayesianism can play with respect to an explanatory coherentist view in the final chapter.

The second group of literature on coherentism focuses on replying to historically prominent objections to the view. After Alston’s and Pastin’s development of a fallible foundationalism, the tide turned against coherentism. Several standard objections to the view—the input, isolation, and alternative systems objections—were taken to be decisive. Yet recent development now demonstrates that these objections rest on issues that either misrepresent a coherentist view or afflict more than coherentism. The present state of coherentism is that these objections are no longer obstacles to the plausibility of the view.

1.2 Two traditional objections to coherentism

Coherentism faces several standing objections: the input objection, the isolation objection, the alternative systems objection, and the objection from the truth connection. These, however, are not four distinct objections. Rather they organize around two common objections. The input and isolation objections center on problems attending to the role of experience within a coherentist account. The alternative systems and truth connection objections focus on an allegedly problematic relationship between coherentist justification and truth. Recent developments show that these objections are not troublesome for a properly formulated coherentist view.

1.2.1 The Input Objection

The input or isolation objection finds its root in the traditional understanding of coherence as a relation between beliefs. BonJour explains,

Coherence is purely a matter of the internal relations between the components of the belief system; it depends in no way on any sort of relation between the system of beliefs and anything external to that system. Hence if, as a coherence theory claims, coherence is the sole basis for empirical justification, it follows that a system of empirical beliefs might be adequately justified, indeed might constitute empirical knowledge, in

\[13\text{For an overview see (Kvanvig 2008)}\]

\[14\text{See (Kvanvig and Riggs 1992; Kvanvig 1995a,b, 2008)}\]
spite of being utterly out of contact with the world that it purports to
describe. Nothing about any requirement of coherence dictates that a
coherent system of beliefs need receive any sort of input from the world
or be in any way causally influenced by the world.¹⁵

This input objection arises because the traditional understanding of coherence
limits the relata of the coherence relation to a subject’s beliefs. This understanding
of coherence sets no epistemic role for experience. At times it seems that coherentists
endorse this implication. Donald Davidson claims that “nothing can count as a
reason for holding a belief except another belief.”¹⁶ Alvin Plantinga appeals to this
standard feature of coherentism to argue that the view is ‘clearly mistaken’.¹⁷ He
presents the following colorful counterexample.

Consider the Case of the Epistemically Inflexible Climber. Ric is climbing
Guide’s Wall, on Storm Point in the Grand Tetons; having just led the
difficult next to last pitch, he is seated on a comfortable ledge, bringing
his partner up. He believes that Cascade Canyon is down to his left, that
the cliffs of Mount Owen are directly in front of him, that there is a hawk
gliding in lazy circles 200 feet below him, that he is wearing his new Fire
rock shoes, and so on. His beliefs, we may stipulate, are coherent. Now
add that Ric is struck by a wayward burst of high-energy cosmic radiation.
This induces a cognitive malfunction; his beliefs become fixed, no longer
response to changes in experience. No matter what his experience, his
beliefs remain the same. At the cost of considerable effort his partner
gets him down and, in a desperate last-ditch attempt at therapy, takes
him to the opera in nearby Jackson, where the New York Metropolitan
Opera on tour is performing La Traviata. Ric is appeared to in the same
way as everyone else there; he is inundated by wave after wave of golden
sound. Sadly enough, the effort at therapy fails; Ric’s beliefs remain fixed
and wholly unresponsive to his experience; he still believes that he is on
the belay ledge at the top of the next to last pitch of Guide’s Wall, that
Cascade Canyon is down to the left, that there is a hawk sailing in lazy
circles 200 feet below him, that he is wearing his new Fire rock shoes, and
so on. Furthermore, since he believes the very same things he believed
when seated on the ledge, his beliefs are coherent. But surely they have

¹⁵(BonJour 1985, 108)
¹⁶(Davidson 1986, 126)
¹⁷(Plantinga 1993b, 80)
little or no warrant for him. ... Clearly, then, coherence is not sufficient for positive epistemic status.¹⁸

Plantinga’s vivid case assumes coherentism cannot include experience in the elements over which coherence is defined. If the coherence of a subject’s informational system includes belief and experience then Plantinga’s case easily fits within a coherentist epistemology.¹⁹ There is nothing about the relation of coherence that prevents it from being defined over experiential states. For example, if the coherence relation requires consistency between propositional contents then this relation can be defined over the propositional contents of both beliefs and experiences. The one constraint that does arise within coherentism is that experience is not sufficient on its own to justify belief. But a coherentist may hold that experience is necessary to justify certain kinds of beliefs. A coherentist view of this kind is a non-doxastic coherentism. In fact, the focus on belief in BonJour and Davidson is ambiguous between the state of believing or the content of the state. If we take the emphasis to be on belief-content then their remarks do not conflict with non-doxastic coherentism. In any case, if coherence is a relation over propositional content and experience has this kind of content then the input objection to coherentism vanishes. The view I defend is a non-doxastic form of explanatory coherentism. Experience is necessary, but not sufficient, for the justification of certain kinds of beliefs.

### 1.2.2 Alternative Systems Objection

The other class of common objections to coherentism concern the allegedly problematic relation to truth. A good work of fiction may be highly coherent but that gives us no reason to believe that it is true. The alternative systems objection raises the specter of multiple incompatible sets of beliefs for which one has good reason to accept. The objection assumes that coherence is an internal relation between a set of propositions. If a subject has a good reason to believe a coherent set of propositions then, given the fact that there are an infinite number of incompatible coherent systems, a subject has justification for believing an infinite number of incompatible sets of propositions. The alleged conclusion is that coherentism is false; epistemic justification require more than internal coherence.

Ernest Sosa provides an engaging and novel example of this objection. Sosa himself is considerably sympathetic to coherentist themes, assigning a prominent role to coherence for reflective knowledge. But he maintains that coherence alone is not sufficient for adequate epistemic justification. He explains:

¹⁸(Plantinga 1993b, 82)
¹⁹(Kvanvig and Riggs 1992) make this point.
Coherentism seems false. Each of us at any given time believes a set of propositions, some of them consciously or explicitly, some subconsciously or implicitly. Many of these will be about the believer as himself and many about the time of belief as the time then present. In English one would express these beliefs respectively by such sentences as those of the form “...I...” or “...me...” and by such sentences as those of the form “...now...” or in the present tense. The self-abstract of such a set is obtained by removing any self-concept of the believer from every one of its appearances in any proposition in the set. The present-abstract of such a set is similar obtained by removing any concept of the temporary present (as such) from every one of its appearances in any proposition in the set. The problem for coherentism is that the self-abstract and present-abstract of one’s set of believed propositions at any given time would seem uniformly instantiable with respect to a personal individual concept $P$ and temporal individual concept $T$ in such a way that the result is nearly enough as coherent and comprehensive as the original without being cognitively justified in the sense relevant to knowledge.\footnote{(Sosa 1991, 202)}

Sosa claims that the self and present abstract of one’s beliefs will be just (or nearly) as coherent as one’s original belief but lacking in justification. Consider instantiating for the personal concept $Donald Trump$ and the time $May 1, 2025$. Currently I believe that ‘I am now seated’. The operation Sosa envisages changes this belief to ‘Donald Trump is seated on May 1 2025’. Is such a belief justified? Our natural judgement is that it is not. But given the complete transformation Sosa envisions, that belief is incorporated into an allegedly highly coherent story. A coherentist, therefore, may be saddled with this problematic implication.

But is the self and present abstract of one’s belief system instantiated for some $P$ and $T$ highly coherent? Two points suggest not. First, I believe that $I$ am not $Donald Trump$ and $I$ am a philosopher but Trump is not. But Sosa’s objection lands me with the following beliefs $Donald Trump$ is not $Donald Trump$ and $Donald Trump$ is a philosopher but $Donald Trump$ is not a philosopher. We had coherence before the operation but after it there are massive incoherences of this sort.

A second issue with this operation focuses on the role of $de se$ beliefs. $De se$ beliefs are beliefs about oneself as oneself. Consider Sam who, when looking through a mirror, sees a guy whose pants are on fire. Sam believes that that guy’s pants are on fire. Sam doesn’t realize that he is that guy. When the realization hits him, he acquires a new belief ‘My pants are on fire!’ Sam acquires a $de se$ belief.
De se beliefs place oneself as oneself at the center of one’s experience. They are crucial for connecting information from experience with personal action. When one sees an oncoming bus, one doesn’t simply believe that ‘an oncoming bus is seen’, but rather one believes of oneself ‘I now see an oncoming bus.’ When one hears an alarm one believes not simply ‘an alarm is heard’; rather one believes that ‘I myself hear with my ears that an alarm is near’. It is difficult to imagine a person with no de se beliefs. Such a person would like proprioceptive awareness, the kind of awareness of one’s current bodily position in space. Such awareness (together with justified background assumptions) allows one to come to know things like ‘I am now seated’ and ‘I now see (with my eyes) a cup on the desk.’ Proprioceptive awareness is distinct from the kind of awareness we have of other people.

Sosa’s self and present abstract instantiated to some $P$ and $T$ is incoherent with proprioceptive awareness. For any property one is proprioceptively aware of one would believe that this is oneself at the present time and yet one would also believe that a distinct individual at a distinct time has precisely those properties. To focus on just one sort of incoherence, one would believe the following incoherent propositions: This is my body, this is Donald Trump’s body, my body isn’t Donald Trump’s body. The problem for Sosa’s thought experiment is that either the self and present abstract removes all proprioceptive awareness in which case the operation significantly reduces the comprehensiveness of one’s beliefs, or the operation does not disturb it in which case the operation lands one in massive incoherence.

Sosa takes the upshot of his self and present abstract argument to be that coherentism needs, but evidently can’t have, that “the subject who holds that view place himself within it at the time in question with awareness both of his own beliefs at the time and of his possible means of access to himself and the world around him at that time and in the past.”

I’ve argued that any coherentism that gives proper place to proprioceptive awareness satisfies this requirement. The input objection showed that coherentism needs to appeal to experiential states; this present objection shows that it should include proprioceptive awareness as well. Again, a non-doxastic coherentism survives traditional objections to the view.

1.3 Overview

The judgment that coherence is an important epistemic factor is widespread and yet the presence of the Gettier problem has stunted the natural development of a full-fledged coherentist view. The common objections to coherentism rely on an im-

\[\text{(Sosa 1991, 210)}\]
provised conception of the view. I aim to take several steps to develop an explanatory coherentist view of justification. The first three chapters develop an explanationist view of justification and reason. The next three chapters examine arguments against the view. In the following I offer a brief summary of the overall argument.

Chapter two ‘Epistemic conservatism’ defends the claim that attitude of believing can generate some epistemic justification for the content of belief. Conservatism is a standard explanatory virtue. Goodness in explanation is constrained by how well an explanation fits with accepted beliefs. Epistemic conservatism is widely criticized on the grounds that it conflicts with the main goal of epistemology to believe all and only truths. My primary aim is to argue that conservatism does not conflict with this goal. I argue that the objection to conservatism from the truth goal fails. Next, I examine several forceful challenges to conservatism and argue that these challenges are unsuccessful. The first challenge is that conservatism implies the propriety of assertions like ‘I believe p and this is part of my justification for it.’ The second challenge argues that conservatism wrongly implies that the identity of an epistemic agent is relevant to the main goal of believing truths and disbelieving falsehoods. The last two challenges are the ‘extra boost’ objection and the conversion objection. Each of these objections helps to clarify the nature of the conservative thesis. Finally, I consider the extent to which conservatism is supported by argumentation. I argue that conservatism is supported by the perspectival nature of epistemic internalism. The upshot of this chapter is that epistemic conservatism is an important and viable epistemological thesis.

The next chapter ‘Reasons without first philosophy’ develops a coherentist account of reasons—the framework theory of reasons—in the context of epistemic conservatism. A ongoing soft spot for coherentist views is the necessity of permitting some non-inferential justification while also arguing against foundationalist accounts of basic reasons. I formulate a general dilemma—the basic reasons dilemma—and explain how this afflicts existing coherentism views. I then turn to developing an account of reasons that responds to this dilemma. The framework account of reasons avoids the Scylla and Charybdis of arbitrariness and circularity. On this view a reason for another proposition requires a body of justified commitments. These commitments may be justified in part by conservatism, but crucially no single commitment can provide a reason for another distinct belief. Only by working together can justified beliefs provide reasons. Epistemic conservatism coupled with explanatory coherence turns propositions into reasons.

Chapter four ‘Explanation & justification’ addresses the nature and role of explanation and its virtues in an account of epistemic justification. Explanatory coherence is a valuable cognitive goal. Human beings desire not simply to know, but to possess
knowledge that produces understanding. The epistemological tradition coming from Quine, Sellars, and Harman stresses the centrality of explanation and coherence to valuable human cognition. My goal in this chapter is to turn the plausible idea that one’s normative standing in the space of reasons is determined by one’s explanatory position into a specific theory of epistemic justification, Ex-J. I begin by discussing the nature of explanation and its virtues. I argue that the nature of explanation lacks an informative analysis into necessary and sufficient conditions. The nature of explanation is simple and it is grasped early on in cognitive development by way of ‘because’ answers. I then briefly discuss the main epistemic virtues of explanation: conservativeness, explanatory power, and simplicity. In the second section I formulate a specific explanationist view, arguing that it is an instance of a mentalist, evidentialist theory of justification. In the final section I consider supporting cases for my view and putative counterexamples. Explanatory coherentism is often misunderstood. My discussion of the putative counterexamples clarifies the role of explanation in an explanatory coherentist view. The upshot of this chapter is that explanationism is a feasible theory of epistemic justification. It provides a natural home for the valuable cognitive goal of explanatory coherence; it is an instance of a plausible, general evidentialist view; and it is supported by natural judgments and it survives putative counterexamples.

Chapter five ‘BonJour and the myth of the given’ tackles the challenge of phenomenal beliefs. These beliefs are about one’s immediate experience. It is easy to think that our justification for phenomenal beliefs is direct and not based at all on coherence considerations. I argue against this by examining BonJour’s careful discussions on the Sellarsian dilemma. BonJour once defended the soundness of this dilemma as part of a larger argument for epistemic coherentism. BonJour has now renounced his earlier conclusions about the dilemma and has offered an account of internalistic foundationalism aimed, in part, at showing the errors of his former ways. I contend that BonJour’s early concerns about the Sellarsian dilemma are correct, and that his latest position does not adequately handle the dilemma. I focus my attention on BonJour’s claim that a nonconceptual experiential state can provide a subject with a reason to believe some proposition. It is crucial for the viability of internalistic foundationalism to evaluate whether this claim is true. I argue it is false. The requirement that the states that provide justification give reasons to a subject conflicts with the idea that these states are nonconceptual. In the final section I consider David Chalmers’s attempt to defend a view closely similar to BonJour’s. Chalmers’s useful theory of phenomenal concepts provides a helpful framework for identifying a crucial problem with attempts to end the regress of reasons in pure experiential states.
Chapter six ‘Is foundational a priori justification indispensable?’ tackles the challenge to coherentism from the *a priori*. BonJour’s (1985) coherence theory of empirical knowledge relies heavily on a traditional foundationalist theory of a priori knowledge. He argues that a foundationalist, rationalist theory of a priori justification is indispensable for a coherence theory. BonJour’s more recent book *In Defense of Pure Reason* (1998) continues this theme, arguing that a traditional account of a priori justification is indispensable for the justification of putative a priori truths, the justification of any non-observational belief, and the justification of reasoning itself. While BonJour’s indispensability arguments have received some critical discussion, no one has investigated the indispensability arguments from a coherentist perspective. This perspective offers a fruitful take on BonJour’s arguments because he does not appreciate the depth of the coherentist alternative to the traditional empiricist-rationalist debate. This is surprising on account of BonJour’s previous defense of coherentism. Two significant conclusions emerge: first, BonJour’s indispensability arguments beg central questions against an explanationist form of coherentism; second, BonJour’s original defense of coherentism took on board certain assumptions that inevitably led to the demise of his form of coherentism. The positive conclusion of this chapter is that explanatory coherentism is more coherent than BonJour’s indispensability arguments assume and more coherent than BonJour’s earlier coherentist epistemology.

Chapter seven ‘Bayesian explanationism’ argues that Bayesianism and explanationism are compatible. It would be incredibly surprising if it turned out that first-order predicate logic was inconsistent with a substantive epistemological theory. Similarly, I confess, it would be astonishing if the mathematical theory of probability applied to degrees of belief turned out to be inconsistent with substantive views in epistemology. I argue for a new form of compatibilism according to which explanatory reasoning is not simply a heuristic to realizing good probabilistic reasoning. Rather explanatory reasoning undergirds and is required for inductive projection. I begin this chapter by explaining the nature of the Bayesian framework and arguments for it, all with an eye to illustrating its compatibility with explanationism. Second, I argue that inductive confirmation requires explanatory information. This constraint-based compatibilism makes for a powerful merger of Bayesianism and explanationism.

The view I defend in this book is thoroughly explanationist. The justification of a subject’s beliefs consist in the simplicity, conservativeness, and explanatory power of the system of propositions she accepts in comparison with other relevant systems. This is a form of a mentalist evidentialism, but it does not rely on the epistemic priority of either sense experience or a priori intuition. To the extent that my view

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22(Gendler 2001; Harman 2001; Beebe 2008)
relies on any epistemic priority is the priority of our background beliefs, where these
themselves are evaluated by explanatory considerations. This view provides an inter-
nalist, non-skeptical epistemology. Justification, reasons, even knowledge is possible.
Yet this possibility comes with the cost of explanation. If one is justified in believ-
ing in body of information that information needs to do explanatory work for the
subject.

One of the main themes running throughout this book is that there is a neglected
dimension of positive epistemic normativity in which a proper evaluation of a sub-
ject’s beliefs depends on theoretical considerations. Putative cases of immediately
justified beliefs depend for an important normative status on broader theoretical di-
mensons. My goal in defending explanationism is to highlight the broader role of
theoretical dimensions in our normative evaluation, a dimension that is underappreci-
ated by the ascendancy of defeasible foundationalist views of epistemic normativity.
This conclusion holds not just for epistemic justification but also for knowledge.
Knowledge first approaches are a welcome relief to the somewhat tiresome justifica-
tion debates. Yet there is a dimension in which knowledge-first approaches neglect
the broader theoretical evaluations that fill out our understanding of the role of per-
ception, testimony, and inference. My hope is that this book manages to highlight
the important dimension in which the proper epistemic evaluation of our beliefs must
take into account a broader theoretical perspective. Explanationism is a plausible
way of developing the important role of this theoretical perspective.
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