

## IN DEFENSE OF COHERENTISM

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**ABSTRACT:** Alvin Plantinga and John Pollock both think that coherentism is a mistaken theory of justification, and they do so for different reasons.<sup>1</sup> In spite of these differences, there are remarkable connections between their criticisms. Part of my goal here is to show what these connections are. I will show that Plantinga's construal of coherentism presupposes Pollock's arguments against that view, and I will argue that coherentists need not breathe their last in response to the contentions of either. Coherentism may be a mistaken theory of justification, but if it is, it is not shown to be so by either Plantinga or Pollock.



Ivin Plantinga and John Pollock both think that coherentism is a mistaken theory of justification, and they do so for different reasons.<sup>1</sup> In spite of these differences, there are remarkable connections between their criticisms. Part of my goal here is to show what these connections are. I will show that Plantinga's construal of coherentism presupposes Pollock's arguments against that view, and I will argue that coherentists need not breathe their last in response to the contentions of either. Coherentism may be a mistaken theory of justification, but if it is, it is not shown to be so by either Plantinga or Pollock.

Plantinga characterizes coherentism as follows:

Current lore has it . . . that the coherentist does not object to circular reasoning at all, provided the circle is large enough...

But why saddle him with anything so miserably implausible? There is a much more charitable way to construe his characteristic claim. He should not be seen as endorsing circular reasoning. . . . His suggestion, instead, is that coherence is the sole source of warrant. *He is instead*

*pointing to a condition under which a belief is properly basic. . . . On his view, a belief B is properly basic for a person S if and only if B appropriately coheres with the rest of S's noetic structure. . . .* (p. 77ff.)

Plantinga here asserts that coherentism is the view that claims that all justified beliefs are properly basic ones. In spite of coherentists' long-standing opposition to foundationalism, they affirm a species of the view they oppose. They are zealots about the foundations, going beyond the usual claim of their foundationalist brethren who assert that some justified beliefs are properly basic to the truly radical claim that all of them are.

Such a claim is bewildering. Coherentists have not endorsed such a position, claiming to the contrary that *no* justified beliefs are properly basic. We might think that the difference here is terminological, but that is not so. Plantinga endorses two principles about the basing relation itself:

- (1) If one belief is based on another, then the second is a cause of the first; and
- (2) If one explicitly infers a belief from another, then one bases the first belief on the second. (p. 70)

These requirements on basing are commonplace.

Note, however, that the latter one implies that no inferential beliefs are justified for coherentists. This conclusion follows from claim (2) above together with the claim that no basic beliefs are based on other beliefs.

Later on, Plantinga qualifies the above claims, holding instead that they characterize *pure* coherentism only (pp. 79-80). Impure coherentists can maintain that some beliefs get their warrant by being based on other beliefs, but pure coherentists cannot. This qualification is irrelevant to my concern, however, for it is still bewildering to be told that coherentism in its purest form is a form of foundationalism that eschews the possibility of justified inferential beliefs. This implication of Plantinga's characterization retains all the markings of a *reductio* of his characterization.

In order to escape the *reductio*, Plantinga would have to endorse the claim that some basic beliefs are based on other beliefs. Plantinga worries that a standard clarification of coherentism renders it "miserably implausible;" it would be even worse, I submit, to maintain that some basic beliefs are based on other beliefs. If Plantinga were to endorse such a viewpoint, it would undermine the primary use for which he introduces the concept of basing. Plantinga introduces the concept of basing in order to explain the nature of foundationalism, claiming that foundationalists insist that some beliefs are properly basic. Such an account presupposes the claim that no basic beliefs are based on other beliefs, in the intended sense of basing, for if a properly basic belief can be based on other beliefs, we cannot make sense out of foundationalists' appeal to proper basicity to solve the regress problem. The regress stops, according to foundationalists, precisely because

properly basic beliefs are not based on other beliefs.

One might try to rescue ascribing to Plantinga the view that some basic beliefs are not based on other beliefs by claiming ambiguity about basing.<sup>2</sup> Such a response, however, merely replaces one problem with another. First, it would be bad practice to switch senses of a key term in a text unannounced, and Plantinga nowhere indicates that he thinks there is more than one concept of basing. Furthermore, even if there is more than one concept of basing, the concept Plantinga is interested in is one appropriate for clarifying the nature of foundationalism. For such purposes, only a concept of basing on which no basic beliefs are based on other beliefs will do, for the foundationalists' response to the regress argument would be incoherent if basic beliefs could be based on other beliefs.

So it would be an overwhelmingly implausible account of foundationalism if that view were identified as the view that some beliefs are properly basic, while at the same time maintaining that some basic beliefs are based on other beliefs. Yet, as we have seen, such a cost is the only available response Plantinga could make in response my argument above, for the other premises of the argument are all claims which he explicitly endorses.

Plantinga thus faces a dilemma. First, he might endorse that some basic beliefs are based on other beliefs, and thereby undermine his construal of foundationalism. Second, he might endorse the more sensible claim that no basic beliefs are based on other beliefs, and thereby undermine his construal of coherentism. For, given what else he says about basing, his construal of coherentism implies that coherentists must deny that there are any inferential warranted beliefs.

Suppose, however, that Plantinga bites the bullet and accepts the conclusion of this argument I have characterized as a *reductio* of his construal of coherentism. Suppose, that is, that Plantinga claims that in spite of their protestations, coherentists must swallow the consequence of the impossibility of inferentially warranted beliefs.

On the face of it, it would appear that the cards are stacked against Plantinga on this score. His analysis of the nature of coherentism in the earlier quote seems to confuse two quite different aspects of the theory of justification. He first correctly notes that the coherentist's "suggestion . . . is that coherence is the sole source of warrant." In the very next sentence, however, he also claims that the coherentist "is . . . pointing to a condition under which a belief is properly basic." Since his discussion of coherentism focuses on this second claim, Plantinga may think that the two claims are equivalent, or that the second follows from the first.

No such connection exists. The first remark (that coherence is the sole source of warrant) is a claim about propositional warrant, the kind of warrant that accrues to the content of what one believes (or to the content of a claim one does not believe). According to a coherentist, only coherence with an appropriate system is capable of generating such warrant. The

concepts of basing and proper basing employed in the second claim above (that the coherentist is pointing to a condition under which a belief is properly basic) are quite another thing. These concepts have to do with doxastic warrant, the warrant a belief has when its content is propositionally warranted and the belief is properly based, when the reasons for which one believes are appropriately related to the elements which propositionally warrant the content of the belief. So it would appear that Plantinga has made a mistake in characterizing coherentism, one that arises by failing to recognize the distinction between propositional and doxastic warrant.

This argument presumes that coherentists can wield this distinction every bit as skillfully as other theorists, but perhaps Plantinga would deny this claim. Even if he would deny it, we'd have cause for complaint since he provides no such denial or defense of it in his work. Yet, Plantinga may have some excuse if this is his view, for there is available in the literature an argument to just this conclusion. John Pollock thinks holistic coherentists cannot explain the distinction between a properly based and an improperly based belief. Pollock claims that holistic positive coherence theories cannot countenance such a distinction because the source of warrant for holistic coherentists is an entire belief system and it is hopelessly implausible to require that every belief is based on the entire system of beliefs in order to be justified (p. 81).

This criticism supports Plantinga's characterization of coherentism in the following way. If Pollock is right, some coherentists must hold that no belief ever fails to be warranted by failing to be properly based. To claim otherwise requires holding the hopelessly implausible claim that everything in one's belief system is causally responsible for belief in order for the belief to be doxastically warranted. Yet, if the coherentist must maintain that no belief ever falls into epistemic disfavor by being improperly based, the coherentist must admit that every belief is automatically based properly, i.e., that it passes any legitimate basing test for (doxastic) warrant. So we get the Plantingian characterization if Pollock is right: for a true coherentist, every warranted belief is properly basic because no belief ever has to be based on other beliefs in order to be doxastically warranted. So Plantinga's construal of coherentism leads us to Pollock's arguments, for without such arguments, Plantinga's characterization cannot be sustained. I will argue, however, that the support Pollock's arguments provide is no comfort at all to Plantinga's characterization of coherentism, and thus that it must be rejected.

The reason Pollock's arguments fail is that they assume that the coherentist must clarify the concept of proper basing in terms of a causal relation between that which propositionally warrants a belief and the holding of the belief. This assumption involves two requirements. The first is that the basing relation is a species of causal relation; I will grant that point in what follows. The second concerns the *relata* of the basing relation, what the

basing relation is a relation between. According to Pollock, it must be a relation between *that which propositionally warrants a belief* and *the belief itself*. This claim coherentists can legitimately reject. Coherentists can maintain that propositional warrant is a completely systemic affair and yet that doxastic warrant depends nonetheless on some special components of the system. For there are a variety of logical relationships that can obtain between parts of a system of beliefs and a particular belief, implying that some parts of the system are epistemically relevant to a belief even though they do not propositionally warrant it. I will focus on one such logical relation that is particularly fecund in this context, one used by J.L. Mackie in his work on causation.<sup>3</sup> According to Mackie, a cause of an effect is an INUS condition: it is an *Insufficient* but *Non-redundant* element of a larger condition which is itself *Unnecessary* but *Sufficient* for the occurrence of the effect. For example, my throwing the ball causes the window to break, even though the first event is hardly sufficient in any strong sense for the breaking of the window (an equal and opposite force on the other side of the window at the time the ball strikes the window would have prevented the breakage). Nonetheless, according to Mackie, there is a larger condition including the causal field in which my throwing of the ball occurs, and that larger condition is sufficient, though not necessary, for the breaking of the window. Furthermore, my throwing of the ball is a non-redundant component of that larger condition: take my throwing of the ball out of that condition and the window will not break.

The coherentist can use the concept of an INUS condition to show that epistemic relevance and propositional warrant are distinct. We assume the coherentist viewpoint that propositional warrant is systemic; on that assumption, some parts of a belief system are epistemically relevant to a belief without propositionally warranting it because they are INUS conditions for the warrant of that belief. An INUS condition for warrant is insufficient for the imparting of warrant, and hence is not a warrant-imparter, not a defeasible reason, for belief. It is, however, a non-redundant part of a larger condition which is itself a reason for belief (a warrant-imparter).

Furthermore, a coherentist can use this distinction between warrant impartation and epistemic relevance to explain the basing relation. Instead of assuming as Pollock does that the *relata* of the basing relation are the belief itself and what propositionally warrants it, the coherentist can say that the basing relation is a relation between the belief in question and other elements that are *epistemically relevant* to it. One way a belief can be epistemically relevant to another belief is by being an INUS condition for the warrant of it, so a coherentist can maintain that proper basing holds when a belief is caused in part by some other belief which is an INUS condition for warrant of that belief.

An example or two might help see how this account works. Consider subjective versions of coherentism. Such versions can maintain that one's

system of beliefs contains a (subjective) theory of epistemic relevance that places constraints on appropriate basing. On such a theory, having an appropriately based belief (i.e., a belief that is not disbarred from candidacy for doxastic warrant because of some defect with regard to how it is based) might require that the explanation (the best one and perhaps the one the person in question accepts or would accept on reflection) of why one holds the belief conform to that theory of relevance.

Imagine, for another example, a Bayesian account of warrant in terms of degrees of belief. The version I imagine requires updating by conditionalization, so that one's warranted degree of belief tomorrow is a function of one's conditional degrees of belief today, conditional on what future experience might teach.<sup>4</sup> Such a theory is fully holistic because warrant obtains on such a theory only when the entire set of beliefs is probabilistically coherent. Nonetheless, one's conditional probabilities today contain an implicit theory of epistemic relevance, a theory according to which some new information is relevant to some degrees of belief and not others. Because the system contains such a theory of relevance, the Bayesian can explain proper basing in terms of a causal relation between a particular degree of belief and elements in the system that are epistemically relevant to it, perhaps by being INUS conditions for its warrant.

Moreover, such a Bayesian view is quite amenable to supplementation by an account of basing in terms of INUS conditions. One's probability for *p* given *q* constrains one's opinion about *p* upon learning *q* in part because what is conditioned on is not simply *q*, but rather *q* plus all of one's background information. So what is sufficient for the warrant *p* acquires when *q* is learned is some larger condition (*q* plus background information) of which *q* is a non-redundant component (because the background information alone does not warrant *p*). Further, the larger condition, though sufficient for the warrant of *p*, is not itself necessary. So the Bayesian view is already three-fourths of the way toward *q* being an INUS condition for warrant with respect to *p*; all that needs to be affirmed is that *q* on its own never imparts any degree of warrant. Certainly, that option is open to Bayesians, and if it is taken, the conditional probabilities of today that constrain future opinion do so by specifying INUS conditions for warrant, where those INUS conditions are natural candidates on which to impose a basing requirement for doxastic warrant. By doing so, Bayesianism affirms a holistic version of coherentism that can easily distinguish properly from improperly based (degrees of) belief.

The only hope for Pollock's criticism would be if such theories somehow counted as linear rather than holistic on his account of that distinction because of their appeal to INUS conditions, but they do not. He says that a linear coherence theory "embraces essentially the same view of reasons and reasoning as a foundations theory," one according to which "P is a reason for S to believe Q by virtue of some relation holding specifically between

P and Q. A reason for a belief is not automatically the set of *all* one's beliefs." He says a holistic coherence theory claims that, "in order for S to have reason for believing P, there must be a relationship between P and the set of *all* of his beliefs (where this relationship cannot be decomposed into simple reason relationships between individual beliefs)" (p. 73). This latter claim, however, is precisely what the above theories hold. They hold that reasons are always systemic. INUS conditions for warrant are not systemic, but they are not reasons for belief, defeasible or otherwise. A reason for believing *p* is something that imparts (perhaps defeasible) warrant to *p*, yet an INUS condition for warrant is *Insufficient* for the impartation of any warrant whatsoever. So the above response does not founder by ignoring Pollock's precise characterization of the linear/holistic distinction.

One might grant the technical point that appeal to INUS conditions avoids Pollock's criticism and yet have worries about the plausibility of the maneuver. For example, one might worry that this INUS condition response is implausible on grounds that everything in the relevant system will be such an INUS condition. Such a worry can be allayed easily. I'd have the same warrant for thinking that I exist even if I didn't believe my grandmother is quirky, or even if I believed the opposite. So the latter belief plays no important explanatory role regarding the warrant of the former belief, and hence is not a Non-redundant part of the belief system. So not every element of a belief system is an INUS condition of warrant for every belief.

One still might worry that *too much* of a belief system will be INUS conditions, and hence that the coherentist will have to hold that a belief will have to be based on a substantial part of the system. This concern highlights the need for something I lack: a good theory of the basing relation. The force of the criticism can nevertheless be blocked, for the difficulty is not unique to coherentism. According to Pollock's own theory and other versions of foundationalism,<sup>5</sup> *p* can be a reason for *q*, be subject to defeat by *d*, where this defeater is itself overridden by a further claim *o*. In such a case, there are at least two reasons for believing *q*: *p* and *p&d&o*. Furthermore, this hierarchy of defeaters and overrides is potentially unlimited, yielding the result that there can be a potentially unlimited number of reasons for believing any particular claim. The question for such theories is, which reasons should the belief be based on? This question raises precisely the worry faced by the coherentist that too much of the system will be INUS conditions for warrant. Furthermore, both kinds of theorists will answer the worry in one of two ways: either isolate some of the INUS conditions or defeasible reasons as privileged when it comes to basing, or argue that there is nothing especially implausible about insisting that one base one's belief on the entire collection of INUS conditions or defeasible reasons (for, as all should recognize, belief formation is a very complex thing and it should not surprise us if very much of our belief system is causally responsible in one way or another for belief). We can thus legitimately ignore the worry that too

much of the system will be INUS conditions for warrant, for the difficulty posed is not unique to coherentism and the coherentist can approach the problem in much the same way as other theorists.

So the point stands that in the subjective and Bayesian examples above, accounts of the basing relation are possible that are not psychologically implausible. The adequacy of any such theory is, of course, another question. But the mere possibility of formulating them shows that Pollock is mistaken. And if Pollock is mistaken for reasons cited above, coherentists can appeal to the distinction between doxastic and propositional warrant. Doing so allows an explanation of where Plantinga erred in divining the character of coherentism. Coherentists, pure or corrupted, simply do not maintain nor are they committed to the view that all justified beliefs are properly basic.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986). Page references in the text are to these works.

<sup>2</sup>This suggestion was developed by Stew Cohen in his comments on an earlier version of this paper at the Pacific Division meeting of the APA in March, 1995. I wish to thank him for his exceptionally useful comments and discussion.

<sup>3</sup>J.L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe: A Study of Causation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>For explication and discussion of such versions of Bayesianism, see Bas van Fraassen, *Laws and Symmetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), especially Part II.

<sup>5</sup>Pollock denies that his theory is foundationalist, on grounds that foundationalists and coherentists are committed to the Doxastic Assumption, according to which all beliefs are warranted by their relation to other beliefs. Even though there are subtle issues to be addressed regarding the relationship between coherentism and this assumption, it is patently obvious that foundationalists are not committed to it. Typically, foundationalists hold that some beliefs are justified directly by sensory experience, thus denying the assumption. Pollock says he is not a foundationalist because he denies the doxastic assumption. Once the connection between the two is broken, however, it is obvious that Pollock is just a foundationalist with an incorrect metatheory about it.