



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Analysis*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Oct., 1988), pp. 164-165

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of [The Analysis Committee](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3328491>

Accessed: 07/12/2011 10:10

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REPLY TO MOSER

By LAURENCE BONJOUR

PAUL K. MOSER (ANALYSIS above, pp. 161–3) argues that the combination of internalism and coherentism represented by my account of empirical justification in *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985 — hereafter *SEK*) ‘generates a fatal dilemma’. My response is that the supposed dilemma and the quite genuine problem underlying it were already dealt with explicitly and at length in *SEK*. The solution offered there may or may not be finally acceptable, but since Moser neither explicitly objects to nor indeed even takes any clear notice of it in his paper, I can do little here but reiterate the essential points, referring the reader to *SEK* for more details.

The underlying problem, of course, concerns the epistemic status of my representation of my own system of beliefs in the context of a coherence theory of empirical justification. Clearly the metabelief that I have such-and-such a system of beliefs is contingent and thus seemingly in need of empirical justification. But for a coherence theory, all empirical justification depends on the fact that the justificandum belief coheres with an overall system of beliefs, where for any plausible version of such a theory, the system in question must be the one that the believer actually holds. The inescapable consequence is that such a metabelief (or system of metabeliefs) cannot be justified along coherentist lines — not, primarily at least, because of the regress which Moser constructs, but simply because any such justification would be hopelessly and unavoidably circular, dependent on the acceptability of the very representation of my system of beliefs whose justification is at issue (*SEK*, p. 102). And this result threatens to undermine the whole project of a coherentist account of empirical justification.

The response to this problem which is suggested in *SEK* centres around what is there referred to as *the Doxastic Presumption*. Reduced to its barest essentials, the suggestion is that for a coherence theory, all empirical justification must be understood as relativized to or conditional on the presumption that my representation of my system of beliefs is at least approximately correct (only approximately correct because the issue of whether I have some particular belief or relatively small set of beliefs, unlike that pertaining to my whole system of beliefs, is capable of being settled on coherentist grounds (p. 104)). If *P* is the claim whose empirical justification is at issue, then what a successful coherentist justification shows is that *if* this presumption is correct, then *P* is likely to be true (pp. 104–106, 147).

This sort of solution attempts in effect to go between the horns of Moser’s dilemma, though not without paying a price. The

obvious question which it raises is why the need to appeal in this way to the Doxastic Presumption does not show that the coherentist justification in question is simply inadequate because it fails to show that the belief in question is genuinely likely to be true. The answer I would offer is that this result follows only if adequacy requires that likelihood of truth be established in a way which requires no background assumptions of any sort (or, which comes to the same thing, in a way which can meet any possible sceptical challenge). Unfortunately, however, as argued in *SEK* (pp. 13–15), any imaginable epistemological view is inadequate when judged by such a standard. The interesting question, I suggest, is whether there is any alternative epistemological position, similar in structure at least to foundationalism, which can get by with a weaker presumption and which is otherwise at least approximately as adequate as the coherentist view in question. I have argued in *SEK* (pp. 79–84) that there is not, but that argument is admittedly less than fully conclusive, and it is always possible that further positions will be forthcoming.

I will conclude with a brief look at Moser's threefold 'general positive lesson'. I have already suggested my response to part three of the "lesson": the solution to the regress problem offered in *SEK* may not be viable, but Moser has not shown it not to be viable because he has not even discussed it. As regards the first part of the "lesson", the suggestion that coherentists should abandon internalism, I will say only that, as also discussed in *SEK* (pp. 101–102), internalism is needed to give coherentism any point: if externalism were acceptable, then a foundationalist version would be vastly more straightforward. The other part of the "lesson" is the suggestion that 'internalists need to identify a type of cognitive access to justifiers that does not itself consist in justified belief', thereby avoiding any need for further justification. Presumably this is a veiled allusion to Moser's own internalist foundationalist account in his book *Empirical Justification* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985). Though I cannot undertake a detailed discussion of that account here, let me offer the opinion that a careful study of it will suggest strongly that it achieves a kind of 'access to justifiers' that avoids the need for further justification only by depriving that access of any content which can do justificatory work. Moser's "lesson" thus seems to me spurious on all counts.