



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



Internalism and Coherentism: A Dilemma

Author(s): Paul K. Moser

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Analysis*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Oct., 1988), pp. 161-163

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

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3328490>

Accessed: 07/12/2011 10:10

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oxford University Press and *The Analysis Committee* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Analysis*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

INTERNALISM AND COHERENTISM: A DILEMMA

By PAUL K. MOSER

IN *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), Laurence Bonjour has argued that only an internalist coherence theory of justification can solve the epistemic regress problem, the problem of explaining how one empirical belief can be justified on the basis of another empirical belief. Bonjour's theory is internalist given its implication that one must have some sort of *access* to the justifiers of one's justified beliefs (pp. 10, 23, 31); and it is coherentist given its implication that every justified empirical belief is justified by coherence with the set of one's other beliefs (p. 92). This paper shows that Bonjour's combination of internalism and coherentism generates a fatal dilemma.

Bonjour's coherentism relies on the familiar coherentist assumption that the basic source of empirical justification is one's *entire system* of beliefs. On this assumption, a particular empirical belief derives its epistemic justification from its cohering with (i.e., sustaining an appropriate inferential relation, such as an explanatory or implication relation, to) one's overall belief-system. Thus, Bonjour holds that 'the primary justificatory issue is whether or not, under the presumption that I do indeed hold approximately the system of beliefs which I believe myself to hold, those beliefs are justified' (p. 103).

However, given its internalism, Bonjour's coherentism must also specify the sort of required access to one's overall belief-system. A troublesome question is whether this required access is 'cognitive' in Bonjour's sense; that is, whether it essentially involves one's *judging* that something is the case, such as that certain beliefs constitute one's overall belief-system. If, on the one hand, the access is not cognitive in this sense, then, given Bonjour's coherentism (and its rejection of the traditional doctrine of givenness), it cannot provide a source of justification (p. 69); nor, given Bonjour's version of internalism, can it provide the needed possession of, or access to, a justifying reason for a justified belief. According to Bonjour's internalism, an empirical belief, *P*, is epistemically justified for a person, *S*, only if *S* is in *cognitive* possession of a reason making *P* likely to be true; and 'the only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe *with justification* the premisses from which it follows that the belief [that *P*] is likely to be true' (p. 32;

cf. pp. 43, 123). Thus, BonJour claims that 'if a particular belief *B* is to be justified for a particular person by virtue of possessing [a certain] property, then (if externalism is to be avoided) that person must believe with justification that *B* does in fact have this property' (p. 80; cf. pp. 31, 50). Such internalism underlies BonJour's rejection of foundationalist solutions to the regress problem, according to which a foundational empirical belief can be justified independently of the justification of any other belief. The rejection of such internalism leaves BonJour without a challenge to foundationalism.

If, on the other hand, the required access to one's overall belief-system is cognitive in BonJour's sense, an equally serious problem arises. In keeping with BonJour's internalism, suppose the cognitive access relevant to my justified belief that *P* is a further belief, specifically the belief — call it '*A1*' — that the members of my overall belief-system are *B1*, *B2*, ..., *Bn*, and that *P* coheres with those members. Given BonJour's internalism, *A1* by itself cannot provide the needed cognitive possession of a justificatory argument for *P*. For that purpose, according to BonJour, *A1* must itself be justified, since otherwise it would not be a preventive against 'epistemic irresponsibility' by preserving the essential connection between justified belief and high likelihood of truth (cf. pp. 31, 43, 80, 123). But this means that there must also be a justificatory argument supporting *A1*, an argument whose premisses I must believe, according to BonJour's internalism. Call the latter belief (that the relevant premisses are true) '*A2*'. Just as *A1* could not provide the needed cognitive possession of a justificatory argument for *P*, so also *A2*, on BonJour's internalism, cannot provide by itself the needed cognitive possession of a justificatory argument for *A1*. For the latter purpose, *A2* must itself be justified. But this means that we need an *A3* in support of *A2*, and an *A4* in support of *A3*, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Thus, BonJour's internalism leaves us with an infinite regress of required justified beliefs, an endless regress of the following form:

- A1*: My belief-set is *B*, and *P* coheres with *B*,
- A2*: My belief-set is *B*, and *A1* coheres with *B*,
- A3*: My belief-set is *B*, and *A2* coheres with *B*,...

This regress is endless because at no point do we arrive at a member that is already justified by an earlier member in the series. Each member in the series is a logically distinct belief; and, on BonJour's internalism, each such member requires a logically distinct justifying *and justified* belief concerning its coherence with one's overall belief-system.

However, it is implausible to suppose that the justification of every empirical belief requires an infinity of additional justified beliefs. A justified belief concerning a proposition's coherence with one's overall belief-set is not a mere *disposition to believe*; it is

an actual, distinct belief-state. Presumably, the formation of a distinct belief-state concerning a proposition's coherence with a belief-set takes time, given that a belief-state requires assenting, which, of course, takes time. If this is so, we have good reason to deny that every justified empirical belief requires an infinity of additional justified beliefs. And, even aside from this point, there is, contrary to BonJour's internalism, no reason to think that any of us has the sort of endless series of justified beliefs noted above. The members of such a series involve increasingly complex, iterated levels of coherence assessment, and thus require a degree of conceptual sophistication that goes beyond the requirements of simple, non-iterative justification.

One might try to avoid the present threat of an endless regress by simply stipulating that the belief providing cognitive access to one's overall belief-system is not in need of justification. In fact BonJour evidently favours this move (pp. 106, 147). However, it is *ad hoc* and troublesome. It is *ad hoc*, because its sole purpose is to save BonJour's coherentism from the aforementioned infinite regress problem generated by its internalism. And it is troublesome for two main reasons. First, it leaves us with the mystery of how justified belief can derive ultimately from *unjustified* belief, thereby raising the question whether BonJour's coherentism preserves the essential connection between justified belief and high likelihood of truth. And second, it conflicts with BonJour's anti-foundationalist internalist stricture that a judgemental cognitive state requires justification if it is to play a role in epistemic justification. In relaxing that stricture for his own account, BonJour undercuts the main motivation for his coherentism, given that he thereby removes the basis for his rejection of foundationalist solutions to the epistemic regress problem.

We have, then, a straightforward dilemma for internalist coherentism as developed by BonJour: either its internalism generates an implausible endless regress of required justified beliefs, or it loses its motivation as a coherentist alternative to foundationalism. Both horns of this dilemma are fatally sharp: they imply that BonJour's internalist coherentism is either implausible or unmotivated. The general positive lesson of this dilemma is threefold. First, coherentists should drop BonJour's internalist notion of cognitive access in their effort to challenge foundationalist solutions to the epistemic regress problem. Second, internalists need to identify a type of cognitive access to justifiers that does not itself consist in justified belief. Third, and finally, we still need a viable solution to the notorious epistemic regress problem that has troubled epistemology since the time of Aristotle.