

On Behalf of the Coherentist

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In a recent article in *ANALYSIS*, Peter Klein and Ted A. Warfield say:

...coherence, *per se*, is not truth conducive; that is, we will argue that by increasing the coherence of a set of beliefs, the new, more coherent set of beliefs is often less likely to be true [i.e., less likely to contain all and only true beliefs] than the original, less coherent set. ([3], p. 129)

And this, they add:

...is an important result, if one of the desiderata of a theory of epistemic justification is to reveal the connection between justification and truth. ([3], p. 129)

I agree with Klein and Warfield that they prove:

...a more coherent set of beliefs resulting from the addition of a belief to a less coherent set of beliefs is less likely to be true [i.e., less likely to contain all and only true beliefs] than the less coherent set of beliefs. ([3], p. 130)

This conclusion is treated by Klein and Warfield as entailing the claim that coherence is not truth conducive. So their argument depends upon evaluating the truth conduciveness of a theory of justification at the system level—justification is truth conducive only if, according to them, the more justified a set or system of beliefs is, the more likely it is that the *set* or *system* contains no false beliefs.

But this a rather odd way to evaluate truth conduciveness. To see why, note that their argument against the coherentist turns on the fact that the more logically independent beliefs a system has, the less likely it is to contain only true beliefs. So Klein and Warfield are committed to the claim that if justification is truth conducive, then systems of belief cannot *possibly* become more justified as they grow (in logically independent beliefs). This entails, of course, that systems of belief cannot become more

justified by the addition of new beliefs which could serve as evidence for the original beliefs in the system. But that seems to be a mistake, no matter what one thinks of coherence theories of justification. Increase of size *alone* ought not to preclude increase of justification. How justified I am is one thing; how many beliefs I have is another.

There is a much more plausible way of evaluating how well a theory of justification satisfies the requirement that it be truth conducive. Truth conduciveness should be evaluated—not on the level of systems or sets of beliefs—but on the level of particular beliefs. After all, it is having true *beliefs* that is our central epistemic goal, not having *systems* which contain no false belief. One might think these two goals are really one, but they are not. In fact, these two goals even seem to be opposed to each other: a good way to gain true beliefs is to form beliefs that seem very likely to be true; but a good way to keep a system of beliefs pure from all falsity is to withhold belief in almost every instance, even when the belief would *almost* certainly be true.

So I suggest we endorse:

(1) Justification is truth conducive just so long as, *ceteris paribus*, the more justified a particular belief is, the more likely it is that that belief is true.

That Bonjour—the main target of Klein and Warfield’s piece—also thinks of justification as making particular beliefs likely to be true is evidenced by remarks he makes as early as 1978. Consider:

To insist that a *certain belief* is epistemically justified, while confessing in the same breath that this fact about *it* provides no good reason to think that *it* is true, would be to render nugatory the whole concept of epistemic justification. ([1], p. 5) [My emphasis]

And we can even find Bonjour endorsing evaluating truth conduciveness at the level of particular beliefs in a passage quoted by Klein and Warfield:

...it must somehow be shown that justification as conceived by [any adequate] theory is *truth-conducive*, that one who seeks justified *beliefs* is at least likely to find true ones. ([2], p. 109) [Second emphasis mine]

Given that he has said things that clearly support (1), I think that when Bonjour talks as if a true system of beliefs is one's epistemic goal (as he seems to in one passage Klein and Warfield quote), we ought to assume either that he is speaking a bit loosely, or that he is conflating this with the goal of having true beliefs.¹ At any rate, (1) is the most reasonable way to understand the truth conduciveness said to be enjoyed by justification.

If we endorse (1), there is nothing in Klein and Warfield's argument that forces us to conclude that coherence is not truth conducive. Let me illustrate this with the very story Klein and Warfield use in defense of their conclusion:

A detective has gathered a large body of evidence that provides a good basis for pinning a murder on Mr. Dunit. In particular, the detective believes that Dunit had a motive for the murder and that several credible witnesses claim to have seen Dunit do it. However, because the detective also believes that a credible witness claims that she saw Dunit two hundred miles away from the crime scene at the time the murder was committed, her belief set is incoherent (or at least somewhat incoherent). Upon further checking, the detective discovers some good evidence that Dunit has an identical twin whom the witness providing the alibi mistook for Dunit. ([3], pp. 130-131)

Now consider two beliefs sets. The first, B, includes the following beliefs:

- b1. Dunit had a motive for the murder.
- b2. Witnesses claim to have seen Dunit do it.
- b3. A credible witness claims to have seen Dunit two hundred miles from the scene of the crime at the time of the murder.
- b4. Dunit committed the murder

Now consider B* which has the members of B, plus the following:

- b5. Dunit has an identical twin which was seen by the credible witness two hundred miles from the scene of the crime during the murder.

¹Bonjour is committed to the claim that increasing (or decreasing) the justification of one's overall *system* is how one increases (or decreases) the justification of one's individual beliefs. However, it does not follow from this that an evaluation of the *truth conduciveness* of justification must take place at the system level.

B* is more coherent than B. And Klein and Warfield will rightly insist that B* is—because it contains an additional belief—more likely to contain a false belief than B. But, *pace* Klein and Warfield, this doesn't show that coherence is not truth conducive. The important question is whether any *particular belief* is less likely to be true when part of the more coherent B* than when part of the less coherent B. Let's ask whether this is so of b4. Suppose we follow Klein and Warfield and understand "likelihood of truth" in terms of objective probability. Since it seems that b4 has a higher objective probability on b1, b2, b3 and b5 than it does on b1, b2 and b3 alone, Klein and Warfield's story provides evidence for, not against, the claim that coherence is truth conducive.

It is also worth asking how coherence fares with respect to the *subjective* probability of b4. After all, many coherentists want coherence to serve as a *guide* to truth, so presumably increase in justification as understood by the coherentist ought to increase the degree to which a belief seems likely to be true. Should one who believes b1, b2, b3 and b5 feel more certain of the truth of b4 than one who believes—in addition to b4—b1, b2 and b3 alone? Obviously, the answer is "yes".

And the most important fact to note is that *none* of b1 through b4 is rendered *less* likely to be true (objectively or subjectively) by the addition of b5.

Klein and Warfield show only that one can increase the coherence of a system of beliefs while, at the same time, increasing the probability that the *system* contains a false belief. But this does not entail that coherence is not truth conducive.

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References

- [1] Laurence Bonjour, 'Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978) 1-13.
- [2] Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1985).
- [3] Peter Klein and Ted A. Warfield, 'What Price Coherence', *Analysis* 54 (1994) 129-132.