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Weaving the Web of Belief

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Foundationalists consider some beliefs basic. A subject is justified in holding them 'even in the absence of any justifying reason for them' (168)¹. Other beliefs are justified by being suitably related to basic beliefs. Ostensible memories, beliefs about one's current experiences, and the fruits of introspection standardly count as basic. Strong foundationalists consider basic beliefs certain. Moderate foundationalists hold that 'the non-inferential warrant possessed by basic beliefs need not amount to absolute certainty . . . but it must be "sufficient by itself to satisfy the adequate-justification condition for knowledge"' (BonJour, 1985, p. 26)' (169) Weak foundationalists set the level of credibility considerably lower. Despite its title, James van Cleve's paper is not so much a defense of moderate foundationalism as an attack on what he takes to be its chief rivals – coherentism and weak foundationalism. Playing offense rather than defense is a reasonable argumentative strategy; but his failure to defend the position may suggest that moderate foundationalism is epistemologically unproblematic. I will argue that this is not so, and defend coherentism and/or weak foundationalism against van Cleve's objections.

Each component in a coherent system supports and is supported by many others. Foundationalists acknowledge that coherence amplifies credibility, but insist that amplification can occur only where credibility is there to be amplified. If they are right, some measure of initial credibility is needed. Their only question is how much? An unamplified sound retains its original volume. If coherence functions as a credibility amplifier, then a belief that fails to cohere with other beliefs should retain whatever level of credibility it began with. But failure to cohere deprives claims of credibility. Perhaps 'amplification' is a bad metaphor. Still, one wants to know why failure to cohere discredits a claim.

Beliefs satisfying the adequate justification condition can have a probability less than 1. If knowledge is closed under obvious implication, a subject who knows that p and knows that q is evidentially in a position to know that $p \& q$. But if p and q are evidentially independent and each has a probability of less than 1, the probability of the conjunction is less than the probability of each conjunct. The more we conjoin, the lower the probability, eventually falling below the threshold for knowledge. Moderate foundationalism thus has reason to disvalue comprehensiveness. Granted, more complicated relations among propositions can enhance probability. But the closure principle for conjunction, which seems obvious and benign, is threatened.²

Moderate foundationalism might preserve closure by assigning probability 1 to the contents of all beliefs that satisfy the adequate justification standard. Then there is no doubt to aggregate. Adler (250-255) argues that such a move is acceptable if we distinguish between credibility and confidence, and recognize that we can be less than fully confident in a belief to which we assign probability 1. Another alternative is to deny that the probability calculus provides the metric for measuring credence. Whatever solution moderate foundationalists choose, they should acknowledge that their position has untoward consequences.

Weak foundationalism maintains that deliverances – items that present themselves as candidates for belief – have a slight measure of initial credibility, and that credibility is enhanced through their incorporation into a coherent system of beliefs. Coherentism denies that initial credibility is needed. I construed my position as a very weak form of foundationalism, since I was marking out the epistemological difference between deliverances and propositions a subject has no inclination to believe. On van Cleve's characterization, my position is coherentist. Coherentists, he says, maintain 'that beliefs can be justified in virtue of relations of mutual support' (168). If we restrict the considerations we are evaluating to beliefs (or deliverances), we need not introduce initial credibility. Within the realm of beliefs and deliverances, coherence is enough. Inasmuch as van Cleve argues against both coherentism and weak foundationalism, this is a point of clarification not an objection to

what he says. But it is worth noting that the difference between coherentism and weak foundationalism turns on where we start.

Corroboration by independent witnesses can raise probability above the threshold for knowledge, even if the initial credibility of their testimony is slight, so long as there are enough witnesses and they have enough choices. This favors weak foundationalism. But, van Cleve notes, Huemer's (1997) proof applies only to agreement on a single proposition. The sort of coherence we are interested in involves looser relations of support among distinct beliefs. So weak foundationalists cannot assume that Huemer has settled the debate in our favor. Perhaps an analogous theorem could be proved given a suitably rigorous description of the web of beliefs. Perhaps not. But if Huemer's result is relevant to the larger debate, it provides the weak foundationalism with grounds for optimism.

Van Cleve demurs. Even if corroboration vindicates testimony with low initial credibility, he says, we still have to know that the testimony actually takes place. We might after all be dreaming. 'A good case can be made that there must be at least high intrinsic credibility – perhaps high enough to constitute knowledge – attaching to the facts that such-and-such cognitive states (be they experiences, ostensible memories, or beliefs at large) are actually taking place' (173). I am not convinced. If the dream possibility is a skeptical challenge, it applies to van Cleve's position as much as to mine. If not, then, as Descartes argued in Meditation V, we have reasons, albeit less than certain reasons, to believe that we are not dreaming.³ The reasons need not be more than initially credible; for coherence leverages weakly supported deliverances when the best explanation of their occurrence is that things are at least roughly as they seem. Even putatively basic beliefs may be far from sufficient for knowledge. I may be unsure whether I seem to hear a distant train whistle or only imagine that I hear it. If no one else on the platform reacts, no train arrives, and I recall my propensity for wishful thinking, I conclude that I imagined the sound; I did not even seem to hear it.

Van Cleve objects that coherence depends empirical generalizations. Coherence cannot be what generates knowledge, since we need knowledge of particulars to justify those generalizations. But the

tenability of a generalization does not rest on its etiology. A generalization is initially credible if it is a deliverance. If it is true and is suitably interwoven into a comprehensive web of beliefs, it is known. But it need not be already known to be a candidate for incorporation, and in the process of devising a system its credibility may both influence and be influenced by other things the subject is inclined to believe.

Although Quine contends that any commitment can be revised, he does not maintain that all are equally good candidates for revision. He advocates a principle of minimal mutilation: in revising, we should retain as many of our central beliefs as possible. But even central beliefs may require revision. 'Inanimate objects are identical when their parts are identical' is a fundamental metaphysical principle. But if it holds universally, then 'F=ma' does not. Molecules in a viscous fluid move at different rates. In prototypical applications of 'F=ma', forces act on objects like billiard balls that have a well defined boundaries. In viscous fluids, the 'forces' on the 'object' are effects on momentum of molecules moving in and out of that 'object'. Retaining 'F=ma' requires continually redefining what constitutes a single particle, letting different molecules comprise it at different times. Fluid mechanics preserves the law. Rather than insisting that all component molecules of a particle be the same from one instant to the next, they let the individual molecules come and go, but keep the average enclosed mass constant. (Wilson, 158-9). 'F=ma', evidently, is a so central a law of physics that scientists are willing to radically revise the criteria for the identity of a fluid particle over time in order to preserve it. Quine's position explains why this is reasonable.

What about the law of non-contradiction? Could it ever be rational to revise it? Paraconsistent logicians say 'yes' (Priest). They contend that the benefits of rejecting the law of non-contradiction outweigh the costs. I disagree, not because I think the law is unrevisable, but because I think that other revisions better accommodate the problem cases.

Even if the law of non-contradiction lies at the very center of the web of belief, so that it is always preferable to make revisions elsewhere in the system, the same does not hold of all the

principles of classical logic, much less of the principles of evidence. The history of logic is rife with debates about which principles ought to be accepted. The law of excluded middle remains the subject of controversy. Evidential principles are even less secure. We endorse visual deliverances and reject premonitions not because the former are basic and the latter are not, but because visual deliverances have, and premonitions lack, impressive track record, and we have an acceptable theory of vision, but no clue how premonitions could connect to their subject matter. The support by an overarching, tenable system vindicates vision and discredits premonition.

Contra van Cleve, fantasy poses no threat to coherentism. So long as the fantasizer realizes that he is fantasizing, the thoughts he entertains are not deliverances, hence lack initial credibility. Confabulation is a more serious worry. A confabulator composes a coherent narrative by unconsciously ignoring, bracketing, or downplaying considerations that detract from the account he seeks to construct, and accepting unwarranted considerations that support it. Clearly a confabulated account has no claim to epistemically respectability. But self-deception undermines coherence (Adler, 74-101). Confabulators achieve local coherence by sacrificing coherence across a broader range of beliefs. Suppose a father deceives himself into thinking that his daughter's dismal grades result from her teachers' failure to recognize her quirky brilliance. To sustain his belief, he overlooks factors he otherwise considers relevant to student performance – terrible study habits, unfinished homework, ignorance of the most basic facts about the subject matter. He violates his otherwise accepted methodological beliefs about how to judge such matters. He would not invoke such considerations to account for his paperboy's poor grades. He thus weakens the overall coherence of his belief-system by carving out exceptions for a special case. Because self-deception weakens coherence, it does not undermine the contention that epistemic justification is grounded in coherence.

Delusions might seem to pose a stronger challenge, for they are more coherent than self-deceptive beliefs. A mental patient who believes he is Napoleon in exile interprets all his experiences in terms of his delusion. He takes nurses, doctors, and aides to be lackeys, courtiers, and guards;

visitors to be loyal subjects; those who refuse to do his bidding to be traitors; those who tell him he is ill or mistaken in his beliefs to be part of the plot to prevent his retaking the throne. Unlike the self-deceptive father, he does not carve out special exceptions. He explains all his experiences in terms of the delusion. Whenever a tension occurs, he rejects the deliverance that conflicts with his identification with Napoleon. Although his beliefs are more coherent than the self-deceptive father's, his delusion would have to be extensive to achieve any reasonable level of coherence. He would, for example, have to believe that he and everyone around him was speaking French rather than English. He would have to believe that oil lamps or candles rather than electric lights were illuminating the area. He would have to believe that the vehicles he sees are horse-drawn carriages rather than cars and trucks. Still, there would be many everyday experiences for which he had no explanation – riding an elevator, watching television, or using a telephone. Such gaps deprive his worldview of the level of coherence that normal epistemic agents regularly achieve. Self-deception and delusion might seem to undermine coherentism. People, it seems, can manipulate themselves into believing nearly anything. But they cannot easily incorporate self-deceptive or delusive beliefs into a comprehensive, coherent belief system. Coherence, which might look like an unduly weak constraint turns out to be a very strong one.⁴

I conclude that van Cleve's objections weak foundationalism and coherentism are not compelling. There is good reason to believe that through systematizing, we weave initially tenable deliverances into epistemically tenable webs of belief.⁵

References

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- ¹ Page numbers in parentheses refer to James van Cleve, 'Why Coherence Is not Enough: A Defense of Moderate Foundationalism' in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, Blackwell (2005), pp. 168-180.
- ² In discussing the lottery paradox, Kyburg (1997) argues that because of the aggregation of doubt, we should reject closure under conjunction. So perhaps the principle is not so benign as it looks.
- ³ I am grateful to Jonathan Adler for strengthening my argument here.
- ⁴ I am grateful to Jonathan Adler for helping me to articulate this point.
- ⁵ I am indebted to Jonathan Adler and Samuel Elgin for useful comments on early drafts of this paper.