

Outline and assess coherentism.

In this essay, the concepts of knowledge and justification will be considered and coherentism's purported role in establishing knowledge (via justification) will be assessed in the light of other competing justification theories and the threat posed by epistemic regress.

Coherentism is a theory (or more precisely a group of similar theories) relating to knowledge and truth, and to what should amount to acceptable justification for a claim to knowledge. The essential feature of coherentism is that rather than a belief being justified by another belief or by some sense data or rational principle, a belief for a coherentist must be justified by a "set" of beliefs that all cohere. Coherentists do not agree on the the relationship between beliefs within a coherent set; some require that all beliefs must entail each of the other beliefs while others accept merely that the beliefs must be mutually supportive. In this essay some example belief sets are considered to determine whether a single relationship type is feasible.

Knowledge

The possession of knowledge has been highly valued by human beings over time. We have been able to advance in a number of areas in the light of sound, truthful knowledge. Examples of these areas include: medical practice; technology (encompassing a variety of disciplines from mechanical and electrical engineering to architecture and computer science); education; agriculture, and so on.

Knowledge has also helped us to understand ourselves and each other via disciplines such as history, political science, law, philosophy and psychology, to the extent that they deal in truths.

However there have been many instances when purported knowledge has proved to be false, for example the belief that the Sun orbits Earth was finally refuted by Galileo in the seventeenth century. In the field of science a method of working has developed that is designed to rigorously test any new hypothesis using experiments but also to see how the hypothesis sits with other, related scientific opinions. The use of scientific models/hypothesis allow scientists the freedom to imagine new theories without having to first establish their truth, and without having to proceed only from truths; while experimentation and checking coherence with other models provide (or deny) veracity.

It seems that particularly in the field of the sciences, because the sciences often deal in systems (i.e. features of the natural world that work in conjunction with each other) the coherence of scientific opinions is particularly important, although the epistemological theory of coherence is not acknowledged to be limited to scientific knowledge.

Importantly, in other fields too, it seems there is much to be gained from accepting an epistemological obligation to have reliable justification for knowledge claims.

Knowledge has long be defined as justified, true belief. A person (A) knows something (X) if:

A believes X;

X is true; and

A has justification for believing X.

Justification

The definition of knowledge came under attack in the 1960s when counter examples to the above theory were suggested wherein a person had justification for a belief, the belief was true, but this was merely by chance. In Jonathan Dancy's book, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, Dancy offers up the case of a person watching television, mistakenly thinking he is watching the Wimbledon Final live when in fact he is watching a recording of the previous year's

final, which involved the same two players as are in this year's final. The same player (JM) won both finals. The viewer forms the belief that JM is this year's champion based on seeing the recording. Viewing the recording is regarded as justification for believing JM is champion, which he is. The problem is that this cannot be accepted as knowledge because the viewer is right just by chance.

It would appear from the reaction of philosophers to the Gettier type counterexamples that "justification" as referred to in the long-standing definition of knowledge had to be merely *reasonable* to be acceptable. The TV viewer's watching of the TV recording could be seen as a *reasonable* basis for forming the belief that JM won the final. Perhaps a more reliable feature of justification used to underpin a knowledge claim should be that it *corroborates* the belief.

The definition of knowledge could then be expressed as, A knows X iff:

X is true,

A believes X

A has *corroborative* justification for believing X.

In Dancy's example, viewing last year's final (suggested as justification) would in no way corroborate the belief that JM won this year's final and so would not count as corroborative justification.

Corroboration is a vital feature of the rule governing admissibility of "similar fact" evidence in criminal cases governed by English Law. Evidence of previous convictions is generally ruled inadmissible because it is more prejudicial than probative. However, where prior convictions reveal a consistent pattern of a particular behaviour (such as wearing a Batman costume and mask during robberies), the repeated behaviour is seen as corroborative, not prejudicial.

It does not seem to be unduly burdensome or cumbersome to require justification to be corroborative if it is to be the justification for purported knowledge. The argument made here is that unless justification is corroborative, it is in fact irrelevant to the claimed belief.

Corroboration is not concerned with causation in the sense of being the cause of the fact, but is material that supports the actual belief. An example of corroborative justification for a belief would be:

A man (A) takes his son to the school bus stop.

One hour later A calls the school and the school clerk says his son's name is ticked on today's register. His son remains at school all day.

A might claim he knows his son went to school today based on (a) taking him to the school bus and (b) the clerk's statement about the register, both of which corroborate and justify the claim, unlike the justification in Gettier cases which though reasonable is uncorroborative of the belief in each case. Uncorroborative justification would subsist in this example if, say, the school clerk had mistakenly looked at the previous day's register and told A that his son's name was ticked for today.

Regress

Many claims to knowledge are based on justification in the form of other beliefs or purported knowledge/beliefs. Justification for these underlying beliefs is then required and this may, in turn, be in the form of still further beliefs. Unless such a chain of beliefs comes to an end with appropriate justification in some other form, it would appear to be infinite, in which case there would be no final justification, effectively bringing down the chain of beliefs making them untenable.

Philosophers have sought to identify a class of beliefs that can be accepted as foundational, in the sense that they are justified by something other than further beliefs, and so strongly that

they can be taken as laying a solid foundation for other beliefs. An example of such a situation would be where a person (A) has learned the formula for the volume of a cylinder:

height x cross section area

and is asked if he knows the volume of water that could be contained in a hypothetical cylinder measuring 400mm high, with a diameter of 100mm. A is aware of the formula, which is a necessary truth. Alongside the information about the dimensions A can state that he knows the volume with certainty, without ever seeing the cylinder. This knowledge is based on the necessary truth of the formula, which could, at least for rationalists, be regarded as a foundational belief as it is true and requires no further justification.

coherence

Other situations are more complex and often involve a number of beliefs with no clear end, leading to the risk of regress, as referred to above. In response philosophers have suggested that where a number of beliefs cohere, this should be seen as adequate justification for each belief in such a system i.e. the beliefs as a set provide justification for each belief in the set. Coherence in this context requires at the very least consistency (in the sense that none of the beliefs contradict each other).

The degree to which beliefs in a coherent system support each other is not agreed among all coherentists. As noted in Dancy's book, Blanshard considered that every belief in a system must be entailed by all the others jointly and by each of them individually. This is clearly setting a very high standard and it is difficult to envisage examples where it could ever happen. Ewing required only that each belief in a system should be entailed by all the others jointly.

Dancy goes on to note that, for Lehrer, to have a coherent system all beliefs must be coherent, complete and mutually explanatory. For Dancy himself, in a coherence theory, consistency should be symmetrical. The philosophers who Dancy mentions seem to be trying to identify a theory of coherence that would then be applicable to all systems that purport to produce knowledge. However it seems that in practice, as belief systems can subsist in such a wide variety of circumstances, one single theory is unlikely to work appropriately in all situations and Dancy himself suggests Blanshard's theory would be unlikely ever to work in relation to a particular belief system.

An example could be considered to see how coherence might work in practice, say, in the context of a public inquiry into the deaths of a number of people attending a sporting venue. The original conclusion reached at inquest at the time of the incident was that the deaths were caused by drunken and violent behaviour that resulted in many being crushed to death because they were unable to escape from the violent individuals. These conclusions were based upon statements made in police notebooks and allegations from senior police officers who attended the event.

The inquiry reconsidered the contemporary testimony of police officers and ambulance crew, stewards and members of the public who survived the event. However, at the inquiry, junior police officers came forward to say they had been ordered to change their notebooks to support the senior officers' allegations. These police officers confirmed there were in fact no relevant instances of drunkenness or violence and that the crush was caused by allowing too many people into the venue, a decision taken by the senior police officer on the day.

For many years the original belief of the government and the public more widely was that the deaths were caused by the misbehaviour of the sports fans. This belief was based on the highly credible evidence of the police, which was reported in the media over a long period of time. Considering all the sources of evidence available, which all consistently suggested the sports fans were to blame, it is unsurprising that blame was placed on them. The testimony of dozens of police officers, the complete and enthusiastic acceptance of that testimony by journalists and editors all summed up to a coherent, mutually consistent set of beliefs and supporting justifications, to the effect that the fans were at fault.

Justification for believing the fans were at fault came in the form of written police statements that corroborated each other and the claims of senior officers. All the justificatory material pointed to panic induced by drunken and violent behaviour. The inquiry heard however that police officers had been ordered to alter their statements and this (together with an acknowledgement from the officer that he gave that order) brought down the entire web of justifications and beliefs. The order affected all the junior officers and so made all their statements unreliable, and so they ceased to provide justification for believing the fans were at fault.

Assuming each original junior officer statement said something like:

“I saw the fans at the back attacking people, they were drunk and when people at the front could not get away they panicked and there was a crush”.

Each officer's statement does not *entail* the other officers' similar statements as each statement is no more than a personal claim to have seen something: one officer does not assert that a different officer saw the same thing. However, the officers' statements do support each other as they all assert that the same thing occurred. Although the statements proved to be false and should not have been relied upon, they do show the relationship between different beliefs within a system. The relationship here is one of mutual support but not entailment. (At the inquiry the police statements were effectively reversed and so supported the opposite conclusion.)

Another example of a system of beliefs, leading to a finding of fault, could be a motorway crash involving several vehicles. The crash was viewed from above by a pedestrian (A) standing on a bridge. A describes what he saw:

“There was a line of traffic moving slowly in the inside lane. A large lorry appeared at the back and seemed to be going very fast. The lorry crashed into a car and squashed it. The car was thrown forward into the next car and this happened many times until there were ten wrecked cars.”

The car drivers each gave similar statements saying something like:

“ I was hit from behind by [a truck; car1; car 2 etc.]. My car was thrown forward into the car in front. The driver behind me wasn't at fault because the car behind had crashed into him and I could not do anything about being pushed into the car ahead.”

On reading these statements it seems likely that blame would be ascribed to the lorry driver. The pedestrian's statement seems to support all the others. Each car driver's statement seems to entail the next drivers statement and to support the previous driver's statement.

These examples seem to show that in practical situations, beliefs can have different kinds of relationships with each other; also the fact that belief relationships may involve entailment and or support does not seem to prevent the beliefs from functioning as a coherent set.

It is clearly accepted among coherentists that all the beliefs in a set must be consistent before a set can be treated as justifying each of the beliefs in the set (and therefore preventing epistemic regress). The further requirements of different theorists, such as mutual entailment of *all* beliefs, or symmetry seem to be unrealistic and possibly in the latter case irrelevant.

It is concluded that in any set of beliefs, for coherence, the weight, or compelling force of justification derived from the set for each individual belief, must be derived from with the nature of the relationship between beliefs, but this nature may vary from set to set and from belief to belief within a set. The justificatory strength or weight of the set must be derived from weighing up these relationships and coming to an overall view of the strength of the set. If the relationships are not compelling enough, that would simply lead to the set failing to provide justification.

Bibliography

Plato, Meno, trans B Jowett, The Dialogues of Plato (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892)

Plato, Republic, Book V, trans B Jowett, The Dialogues of Plato (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892)

Russell, B, The Problems of Philosophy 2nd Edition (Oxford: OUPS, 1998)

Dancy, J, Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985)