

Explain and illustrate one criticism of the view that a belief is knowledge if it coheres with other accepted beliefs

Coherentism is the Philosophical idea that truths should not be looked at individually. They should rather be looked at, as a whole. The coherence theory can be put into two parts. These are the coherent theory of truth and the coherent theory of justification.

The coherent theory is that truth is different to justified belief. Truth is infallible. It is, what it is, that being correct. Whether it is contingent truth, which may, or may not, be true at a certain time; or a universal truth, which is taken to be always true, everywhere.

In contrast the theory of justification, only involves beliefs; although these beliefs have to be coherent when looked at together as a whole. As an example of this, we can look at the example of my Aunt Dotty.

An envelope comes to my House. However, there is no letter inside of it. I come to the conclusion that the only person absent-minded enough to forget to put the letter inside the envelope is my Aunt Dotty. However, she lives in Exeter; when looking at the postmark, I see it comes from Edinburgh; also the handwriting on the envelope is not that of my Aunt Dotty. My theory that the envelope came from my Aunt Dotty, who just forgot to put in the letter does not cohere. The separate beliefs do not seem to form together in a coherent way. However, I also remember that my brother was taking my Aunt Dotty to Edinburgh. Furthermore, the writing on the envelope seems to be that of my brother. From this I come to the conclusion that my Aunt Dotty forgot to put the letter in the envelope, and then asked my brother to write the address for her.

I would be justified in my son you're a whale belief of this, as all of my beliefs relating to it fit together in a coherent way. However, that is not to say that my coherent belief is the truth. It may not be the truth. It is just a justified belief. This theory of coherent beliefs perceived and regarded as a whole is called holism.

Coherentism dictates that if we want the greatest understanding of what could be considered to be the real world possible, then our beliefs need to be as comprehensive as possible. Furthermore, for Coherentism to work successfully, our beliefs must be non-contradictory and consistent.

In traditional Coherentism it is not the set that is justified, but rather the beliefs that make them up. It is from this that the most common flaw, with Coherentism is found.

There may not be just one set of justifiable beliefs, relating to a certain number of beliefs. There can be multiple sets. Furthermore, internally all of these beliefs may be individually coherent.

One example of this is the science fiction film. In such a film there can be many coherent worlds. However, these worlds are far from the reality of the perceived real world. The problem with the theory of coherence is that if we can only take one thing to be true – as if there were more than one they would undoubtedly be contradictory – it then follows that only one thing can be completely justified as being adequate to believe. In contrast in Coherentism, there can apparently be many sets of justified beliefs.

In response, Coherentists argue that there can only be one coherent set. F.H. Bradley, the noted Coherentist, writes:

*'My object is to have a world as comprehensive and coherent as possible, and, in order to attain this object, I have not only to reflect but to perpetually have to recourse to the materials of sense. I must go to this source both to verify the matter which is old and also to increase it by what is new. And in this way I must depend upon the judgements of perception.'*

This shows that it is Bradley's aim to find the most coherent and therefore, hopefully, the only truly coherent set. Richard Wollheim later goes on to say that Bradley thought that Coherence should be a test of justification, rather than a test of any individual belief.

Although, only *'those that have some initial inclination or motive to believe in,'* so as a result of this coherence has the *'function... to discriminate within those judgements and to eliminate some in favour of others'*.

In line with Bradley's defence of Coherentism is that of Jonathan Dancy. He says *'in general, if we find ourselves scrutinising something we believe, we retain it unless we find something against it, just on the grounds that it is a belief already'*.

So, if we take Bradley's response, together with that of Dancy, we are shown that Coherentists do not intend for there to be multiple sets of coherent beliefs, as a result of the coherent theory. Rather, Coherentism is intended as a means of testing existing beliefs, as well as those that can be later added.

Donald Davidson, another noted Coherentist, also attempted to defend Coherentism. To do so, he gave as an example, the case of the Radical Interpreter. Imagine that there is a speaker of English, who comes across a group of people speaking a language that no one outside of that group understands. The language is called *L*. How can our speaker of English, the Radical Interpreter, be able to understand *L*. Davidson's answer is that he will have to use what is called the Principle of Charity. The Principle of Charity dictates that the Radical Interpreter will have to assume that what the speakers of *L* say are true. That is to say, true by the standard of the Radical Interpreter. The speakers of *L* and the Radical Interpreter have to share the same standards of truth in order to have something in common. If this were not the case, it would be difficult for the Radical Interpreter and speakers of *L* to see where they disagree.

Although, even if they do share the same standards of truth, they may, however both be wrong. The question then arises of what guarantee the Radical Interpreter has, that his and the speakers of *L*'s standards are not mistaken.

Davidson gives the answer to imagine an interpreter to our Radical Interpreter. This interpreter is the Omniscient Interpreter. If the Omniscient Interpreter is to successfully interpret our Radical Interpreter, then he must use the same standards of truth used by our Radical Interpreter and the speakers of *L*. So the Omniscient Interpreter, like our Radical Interpreter, will have to assume that they use the same standards of truth. However, because the Omniscient Interpreter knows everything, it must follow that his standard of truth is true. Therefore, it follows that if the standards of truth used are roughly common to all parties, then neither the Radical Interpreter nor the speakers of *L* can be completely mistaken.

As a result of this, our interpreter can assume that the majority of his basic beliefs are justified, as are those of the speakers of *L*. It then follows that there can be no place to believe that there can be more than one set of coherent Beliefs. From this, Davidson believes the Coherentist can dismiss the argument against him.

It seems that in the previous defences of Coherentism, the Coherentists have adapted their argument, to suit the criticism of those attempting to undermine it. That is to say, that they are adapting the argument to suit the focus of the criticism. For

example, when criticised that Coherentism allows for multiple sets of belief, Bradley, showed that the aim is to have only the most coherent belief. This may show the simple sophistication of the argument. It allows for only the most coherent argument and therefore the most likely to be the truth, to be accepted. Rather, the Coherentist would normally only accept the most coherent argument, rather than the least.

To give an example of this; say I woke up one morning. My window was smashed and my television was gone. One set of coherent beliefs is that I have been burgled and my television stolen. My Dad has gone, so he may be contacting the Police. Another set of coherent beliefs, may be that my dad has lost his mind and jumped out of the window with the television. One of these beliefs is more coherent than the other. My father has not history of mental illness, so I can suppose that we have been burgled. Although, both sets are coherent, one is more coherent than the other, so I accept the most coherent as my Belief.