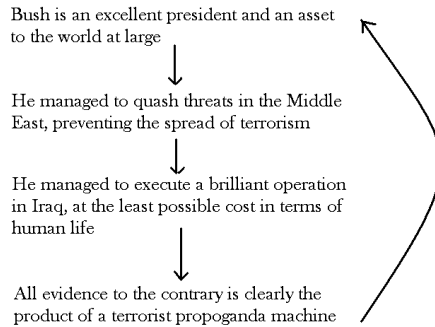


Knowledge and Reality A: Lecture Four

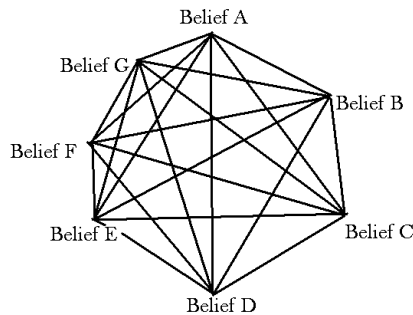
1. Agrippa's Trilemma (again)

Last lecture I suggested that a response to the Trilemma would be to say that some beliefs justified themselves. But it looks like this won't work:



Whether the beliefs are true or not, this structure offers no *justification* for them. You shouldn't think someone who believed those things for those reasons has justified beliefs. So circular justification won't help!

2. Non-Linear versus Linear Justification



Note that here the justification runs *both ways*

But perhaps the problem is with thinking justification is *linear*: that each belief is justified by one other belief, or a small handful of other beliefs. Which are in turn justified by a one/a handful of beliefs.

Coherentists think that justification is *non-linear*: *every* belief in your system is partially justified by *every* other belief in your system

So to determine whether a belief is justified we have to *look at the system as a whole*.

Here are some analogies to help you get a better grip on the notion. Foundationalism

thinks there are foundational beliefs – like the foundations of a house. On top of these beliefs are built non-basic beliefs – like the walls and rooms of a house. Where Foundationalists see comparisons with a house, Coherentists see a comparison with a wigwam. No one piece of the structure is more important to holding it up than any other.

Or another analogy. A crossword. As you fill in a crossword, your answers in one place can make you more confident of your answers elsewhere. Similarly for Coherentist belief. One belief can make you more confident of (justify!) the other beliefs. So for the (caricature) Coherentist there aren't any basic beliefs. Everything is (partially) justified by another belief.

So for the coherentist justification is analysed thus:

Agent *S* justifiably believes *p* iff *S*'s belief system is coherent and *S* believes *p*.

So I am justified in believing there an audience of first years in front of me as it coheres with the rest of my belief structure. For instance, 'I am a lecturer', 'I am giving a lecture', 'First year students attend lectures.'

But I would not be justified in believing that famous comedian Frankie Howerd is President of the USA as it *doesn't* cohere with other beliefs e.g, 'Frankie Howerd is a comedian, not a politician', 'Frankie Howerd is British', 'Frankie Howerd is dead'.

3. Motivating Coherentism

Motivation One

It allows us to avoid Agrippa's Trilemma. Not by endorsing one of the options, but by saying that the dilemma was set up wrong in the first place. As justification is non-linear, those options turn out not to be exhaustive.

Motivation Two

Recall last week on foundationalism. One option was that justification could descend infinitely. I said one reason not to believe it was that our brains couldn't be wired that way. We couldn't believe an infinite amount of things, ergo that option must be false. If it being the case that we *don't* justify beliefs like that means then we *shouldn't* believe that's how justification works doesn't that indicate that if we *did* justify our beliefs in a certain way that means we *should* believe that's how justification works? And this is what some coherentists say. They say that we *do* justify in this coherentist fashion. That, as a matter of fact, when you believe something you do justify it on the grounds of how well it fits in your web of beliefs. So this is a good reason to think coherentism is true.

Problem for motivation two

Just because we *do* justify our beliefs in this fashion mean we *should*? Maybe we shouldn't, but we do it anyway. That is, we shouldn't derive *normative* facts (about what we *should* do) from *descriptive* facts (about what we do do).

4. Against Coherentism I: What the heck is coherence?

What exactly *is* coherence? What conditions are there for a set of beliefs being coherent? In other words, what *analysis* can we give of coherence?

You might think coherence has something to do with *consistency*. Two propositions are consistent iff it is possible that their conjunction be true.

Example: $2+2=4$ and $2+3=5$.

Example: Me being a lecturer and the moon being made of cheese.

Example of inconsistency: Charles Lindbergh as the first solo Transatlantic pilot and Charles Fern as the first solo Transatlantic pilot.

So we might say:

Set *a* of beliefs is coherent iff every belief that is part of that set is consistent with every other belief.

But using consistency has problems. First, it doesn't seem to be necessary. *Example:* The Lottery Problem

But it gets worse when we consider whether it's *sufficient* for coherence that the system be coherent. There can clearly be sets of consistent belief, but where we don't want to say those beliefs *cohere* with one another. *Example:* The small set of random beliefs.

5. Against Coherence II: Competing Coherent Systems

It's possible for there to be multiple coherent belief systems, containing radically different beliefs. *Example:* The detective and the suspect. *Example:* The existence of fossils.

Indeed, for just about any belief we can imagine it contained within a coherent system. So, given that any belief could be justified, wouldn't it be *irrational* to think your belief was justified and true, whereas everyone else was wrong? Essentially, we seem to lose justification as a guide to *truth*. Whilst we admit that *sometimes* justified beliefs are wrong, surely *normally* they take us to true beliefs. But now any belief, even a false belief, can be justified. That *normative* element of justification is lost.