Episteme, 10, 3 (2013) 317–331 © Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/epi.2013.25

IS FOUNDATIONAL A PRIORI JUSTIFICATION INDISPENSABLE?

TED POSTON[1]
poston@southalabama.edu

ABSTRACT

Laurence BonJour's (1985) coherence theory of empirical knowledge relies heavily on a traditional foundationalist theory of *a priori* knowledge. He argues that a foundationalist, rationalist theory of *a priori* justification is indispensable for a coherence theory. BonJour (1998) continues this theme, arguing that a traditional account of *a priori* justification is indispensable for the justification of putative *a priori* truths, the justification of any non-observational belief and the justification of reasoning itself. While BonJour's indispensability arguments have received some critical discussion (Gendler 2001; Harman 2001; Beebe 2008), no one has investigated the indispensability arguments from a coherentist perspective. This perspective offers a fruitful take on BonJour's arguments, because he does not appreciate the depth of the coherentist alternative to the traditional empiricist-rationalist debate. This is surprising on account of BonJour's previous defense of coherentism. Two significant conclusions emerge: first, BonJour's indispensability arguments beg central questions about an explanationist form of coherentism; second, BonJour's original defense of coherentism took on board certain assumptions that inevitably led to the demise of his form of coherentism. The positive conclusion of this article is that explanatory coherentism is more coherent than BonJour's indispensability arguments assume, and more coherent than BonJour's earlier coherentist epistemology.

Laurence BonJour (1998) argues for a rationalist position according to which pure reason can discover substantive truths about the world. Rationalism has been dominant throughout the history of philosophy, but in recent years the development of philosophical naturalism has diminished its prestige. Naturalism holds that reason's putative grasp of these truths can either be explained away in terms of convention or dismissed entirely. The first move explains reason's putative grasp of these claims in terms of definitions and trivial implications between synonyms. This view is associated with *moderate empiricism*. The other naturalist move takes aim against the distinctions and concepts upon which the traditional debate over the *a priori* relies on. BonJour focuses on Quine's *radical empiricism* in this connection. One of the themes I return to is that BonJour doesn't adequately appreciate the depth of Quine's criticism of the traditional rationalist-empiricist debate.I restrict my attention to BonJour's indispensability arguments. He argues that

1 Thanks to Mylan Engel, Ali Hasan, David Henderson, Eric Loomis, Kevin McCain, Matt McGrath, Kevin Meeker, Andrew Moon, Jeff Roland, Bruce Russell, Matthias Steup, Josh Thurow and an anonymous reviewer for comments on a previous draft.

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2013.25 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unless one is a radical skeptic about justification, there must be some substantive *a priori* justification (1998, 3). BonJour refers to this argument as 'the master argument' of his book (2001b, 626). He argues that unless there is some substantive *a priori* justification, then no reasoning is ever justified and no one is ever justified in believing any claim that transcends experience. My primary aim is to rebut these arguments. There is a gap in BonJour's indispensability arguments that undermines their force. This lacuna corresponds to BonJour's failure to mine the depths of explanatory coherentism. My main task will be to explain this explanationist alternative in the context of responding to BonJour's indispensability arguments. In contrast to BonJour's avowals, explanatory coherentism is a coherent and plausible account of the *a priori*.

At the outset I want to make it clear that I will not be arguing for the connection between naturalism and explanatory coherentism. These positions develop within Quine's philosophy, and Quine's naturalism can be seen as developing out of explanatory coherentism. In my estimation, much contemporary work on philosophical naturalism can be interpreted as extending explanatory coherentism. But it is outside the scope of this article to defend these claims.[2] My primary purpose is to defend the coherence of an explanationist treatment of the *a priori* from BonJour's criticisms. I also want to distinguish my argument from a Quinean indispensability argument for the *a priori*. A Quinean indispensability argument aims to show that apparently *a priori* truths are justified by being embedded in a broader theory that has significant empirical confirmation. This kind of argument has come under significant fire.[3] I do not intend to enter the fray over the merits of this Quinean argument. Rather, I argue for a position much closer to Goodman's justification of inductive and deductive rules.[4] We start with various beliefs about the necessity of certain claims and by reasoning in a coherentist fashion come to have justification for believing that these claims are true. The argument I develop is compatible with our being justified in believing various branches of higher mathematics that are not embedded in any successful empirical theory. Our justification for these branches of mathematics consists in their overall coherence.

1 BONJOUR'S INDISPENSABILITY ARGUMENTS

BonJour argues that substantive *a priori* justification is indispensable for three reasons. First, there are putative *a priori* truths like $2 + 2 = 4$ and *nothing can be both entirely green and red at the same time*. BonJour argues that only a rationalist view of the *a priori* can account for their justification. Secondly, there are claims that transcend immediate experience. Nothing in my current experience indicates that *I was asleep last night*, but I am currently justified in believing this. BonJour contends that only a rationalist conception of the *a priori* can account for the justification of these claims. Thirdly, BonJour claims, reasoning itself requires robust *a priori* justification. Even a simple application of *modus ponens* requires a grasp of its goodness, and only a rationalist view can provide suitable justification for it.

2 See Quine and Ullian 1970; Lycan 1988; Hylton 2007.

3 See, for example, Jeffrey Roland's recent article (Roland 2009).

4 See Goodman 1965.

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Each indispensability argument raises significant challenges for an explanationist who claims that the justification of any claim is a function of how well the belief fares with respect to the explanatory virtues – simplicity, testability, fruitfulness, scope and conservativeness. In the following I tackle BonJour's indispensability arguments. I begin with his argument concerning observation-transcendent claims, because our discussion of these issues will carry over to the other indispensability arguments.

1.1 Observation-transcendent inference

Many beliefs concern matters removed from present experience. I believe that *the Battle of Hastings occurred in 1066*, that *it will rain somewhere in England over the next week* and that *many people are presently asleep*. These beliefs are not based on current observation, but concern matters in the distant past, in the future and about presently unobserved events. Call beliefs like these 'observation-transcendent beliefs' or simply 'transcendent beliefs'. How are transcendent beliefs justified? BonJour claims that these beliefs are justified only if some substantive *a priori* beliefs are justified. What is his argument for this claim?

BonJour begins with the supposition that some beliefs are justified entirely on the basis of present experience. Call beliefs of this kind 'immanent beliefs'. According to this assumption, one's belief that there is a red, circular disk directly ahead is justified entirely on the basis of one's current visual experience; one need not have justification for any transcendent beliefs to be justified in this belief. BonJour assumes that immanent beliefs provide the starting points for the justification of transcendent beliefs. He then assumes that the inferences from immanent beliefs to transcendent beliefs must be based on principles that are justified *a priori* (BonJour 1998, 4). According to BonJour, the only way to resist this conclusion is by thinking that experience provides the links between immanent beliefs and transcendent beliefs. But transcendent claims require something besides experience to have justification, which BonJour concludes must be supplied by the *a priori*.[5]

BonJour's argument assumes a traditional foundationalist view, according to which some beliefs are properly basic, and the remaining (non-basic) beliefs are justified only if they are properly related to the basic beliefs. Within this conception of justification, it is difficult to see how the transitions or inferences involved in observation-transcendent inference could come from experience. However natural BonJour's line of reasoning appears, his conclusion depends crucially on the assumptions that (1) there is a clear distinction between observational and non-observational beliefs and (2) non-observational beliefs are justified by being inferred from observational beliefs. These assumptions lend more credibility to BonJour's argument than it actually has.

Consider the distinction between observational and non-observational beliefs. BonJour glosses over this distinction by way of a rough characterization of beliefs based on direct experience. These beliefs are 'particular rather than general in their content and are confined to situations observable at specific and fairly narrowly delineated places and times' (1998, 3–4). This characterization implies that when one observes a piece of litmus paper turning red and believes that *this liquid is acidic*, then that belief is a direct observational belief. But, plainly, this is not a direct observational belief.

5 See BonJour 2001a, 625–26 for a concise statement of this argument.

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What, then, is a direct observational belief? This is a difficult question, and BonJour cannot simply assume there is a principled distinction between observation and inference in an argument for traditional rationalism. One source of resistance to traditional foundationalism involves precisely this point. Wilfrid Sellars has argued that a subject must have theoretical beliefs in order to entertain observational beliefs (Sellars 1963, Sections 3, 8 and 12). Furthermore, evidence from cognitive psychology and the history of science strongly suggests that higher-level cognition significantly influences lower-level information processing (Brewer and Lambert 2001). BonJour's indispensability argument gains considerably more plausibility than it has by ignoring this crucial issue. If transcendent beliefs are necessary conditions for immanent beliefs, then the justification of immanent beliefs is not simple and straightforward. Moreover, if it is true that the content of every belief is influenced by theory, then there is no basis for identifying a subset of our beliefs as the epistemically privileged ones by which all other beliefs must be justified. In place of this, one may adopt Neurath's claim: each belief has some presumption in its favor and should be abandoned only to improve one's overall doxastic position.[6] It is therefore no surprise, in this connection, that epistemic conservatism arose alongside the realization that theory was always involved in any attempt to determine what one should believe.

1.2 *Putative a priori truths and the parade argument*

The strongest case for a substantive doctrine of the *a priori* appeals to apparently self-evident *a priori* claims. Consider the following list of putative *a priori* claims.[7]

1. No surface can be uniformly red and uniformly blue at the same time.
2. No statement can be both true and false at the same time and in the same respect.
3. Everything is identical to itself.
4. If the conclusion of an inductive argument is contingent, it is possible for the premises of that argument to be true and its conclusion to be false.
5. $2 + 3 = 5$ is necessarily true.

This is an impressive parade of seemingly obvious *a priori* truths. Indeed, BonJour remarks, 'it is no accident that the vast majority of historical philosophers, from Plato on down to Leibniz and Locke, would have regarded this general line of argument as both obvious and conclusive, so much so that the issue of whether there is *a priori* justification scarcely arises for them at all' (BonJour 1998, 2). Yet, what is this 'line of argument'? BonJour intends to elicit the response that there is substantive *a priori* justification by parading before one's view standard cases of *a priori* truths. Let us call this 'the parade argument'. BonJour recognizes that this argument is not entirely convincing given the formulation of non-Euclidean geometries and the rise of moderate and radical empiricist accounts of the *a priori*. To properly appreciate the force of the parade argument one must clear away confusions that encumber the argument. BonJour seeks to accomplish this task by arguing against moderate and radical empiricism.[8] After having

6 See Harman (2001, 657–58) for a similar point.

7 See Beebe (2011, 583) for a longer list.

8 This is BonJour's task in BonJour 1998, ch 2, 3.

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removed obstacles to the parade, BonJour holds that one can grasp, directly and immediately, that these claims are true in such a way that requires substantive *a priori* justification.

What should the explanationist say about the parade argument? The explanationist should preface an answer with two general remarks. First, because the parade argument is intended to support rationalism it is not sufficient that the examples illustrate the necessity of non-experiential justification. As we saw above the distinction between observational truths and transcendent truths is philosophically dubious. Each claim is justified only if some non-experiential claims are justified. It comes as no surprise to the coherentist that there must be non-experiential justification. This is a central coherentist theme: every belief, insofar as it is justified, requires non-experiential justification. But the justification comes not from some mysterious faculty that supposedly directly grasps necessary features of reality, but rather from explanatory considerations. Thus, BonJour needs to argue that once the conceptual terrain is clarified, we clearly see that we grasp these truths with direct immediate insight.

Second, discussions over the status of putative *a priori* truths are often confused with whether putative *a priori* claims are possibly false. Of course, to show that a putative *a priori* claim is possibly false is to thereby show that one did not grasp the necessity of the claim. Harman (2001), for instance, raises possibilities that threaten the necessity of various examples of the putative *a priori*. BonJour replies that Harman is not making any sense or is changing the subject. This quick descent to brute intuition about whether a statement is genuinely necessary (or, even cognitively significant) should be avoided if possible. My strategy is to grant to the rationalist that many putative *a priori* claims are necessary truths (or, at least that the balance of evidence indicates so). I then inquire about the epistemology of putative necessary claims. I argue, however, that the parade argument does not support a foundationalist epistemology.

The pivotal issue is over the autonomy, or singularity, of rational insight. BonJour claims that the rationalist is committed to the autonomy of rational insight. He writes, 'According to the moderate rationalist position, each instance of apparent rational insight or apparent self evidence, each alleged case of *a priori* justification, should be construed as *epistemically autonomous, as dependent on nothing beyond itself for its justification*' (1998, 146, emphasis added). The autonomy of apparent rational insight does not imply that apparent rational insight is indefeasible. Rather, as BonJour acknowledges, apparent rational insight can be undermined 'by further a priori reflection, by considerations of coherence, or by (partly) empirical considerations' (1998, 146). Even so, an initial, apparent grasp of the necessity of a claim is sufficient, all by itself, to justify one in believing the claim.

What exactly is an autonomous rational insight? Is it a matter of thinking that a claim *must* be true without having any idea *why* it's true? Is it as if one has the thought that, e.g. 'nothing can be both entirely red and green at the same time' along with an indescribable conviction that this must be so? This is Alvin Plantinga's conception of basic *a priori* beliefs. Plantinga holds that basic *a priori* beliefs are ones in which you are utterly convinced that they are true and could not be false (1993, 105). Furthermore, these convictions are accompanied by an indescribable feel that is often indicated by saying one 'sees' it (1993, 105). BonJour resists Plantinga's characterization of basic rational insights, writing that the conviction based on rational insight is not 'as Plantinga seems to suggest, a matter of a conviction of necessity accompanied by some peculiar, indescribable

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phenomenology' (BonJour 1998, 108, fn12). Rather, BonJour explains that 'I at least seem to myself to see with perfect clarity just why this proposition holds and even to be able to articulate this insight to some extent' (1998, 108). BonJour expands, writing about the proposition that *nothing can be both entirely red and green at the same time*:

> It is in the nature of both redness and greenness to exclusively occupy the surface or area that instantiates them, so that once one of these qualities is in place, there is no room for the other; since there is no way for the two qualities to co-exist in the same part of a surface or area, a red item can become green only if the green replaces the red (1998, 108).

This ability to articulate the content of a rational intuition is not peculiar to the red-green case; for BonJour remarks that one can give similar accounts of other rational insights (1998, 108).

To what extent is rational insight autonomous or singular, capable of justifying a claim 'all by itself'? Plantinga's characterization has the virtue of rendering the autonomy of rational insights intelligible; one has a thought accompanied by an indescribable feel that things have to be this way and couldn't have been otherwise. This bare conviction need not be articulated to any extent at all to justify belief. Yet BonJour resists this line because it makes it difficult to understand how one could be justified in believing on the basis of indescribable feels. However, BonJour distinguishes his view only at the cost of significantly muddying the waters. Given what he says about how it is possible to articulate the content of the intuition, it is hard to recover the thought that a rational insight can stand alone and still justify. What's more, one natural paraphrase of BonJour's remark that he is 'able to articulate this insight' is that he can explain the insight. An explanationist may be forgiven for understanding BonJour's remarks as contradicting his avowal that rational insights are autonomous. The explanationist sees matters thusly: BonJour has a strong belief that *nothing can be entirely red and green all over at the same time* and this belief fits with his other beliefs. He can explain this belief by embedding it in a story about the nature of redness and greenness, the nature of space, what it is for a space to instantiate a quality, the nature of qualities, co-existence and so on. As the explanationist sees things, all these features of BonJour's story support (to an impressive degree) that BonJour's intuition is true. The intuition does not stand alone and does not justify, apart from its impressive coherence with other elements of the story. In short, BonJour's position seems to support coherentism rather than annihilate it.

1.3 Reasoning

BonJour's third indispensability argument focuses on principles of reasoning and the process of reasoning. He argues that a substantive rationalist position is indispensable for a justification of both the principles and process of reasoning. BonJour's most sustained remarks on this occur in a later section in response to the mysteriousness objection that unarticulated rational insights cannot provide justification. As we just saw, BonJour's response was to stress the context in which these insights can be filled out and articulated. In this passage BonJour backtracks and defends a view much closer to Plantinga's. BonJour focuses on the objection that singular rational insights cannot provide justification by themselves 'precisely because of their unarticulated character, there can be . . . no genuine basis for ascribing rational cogency to them – and in particular no reason to think that beliefs adopted in

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accordance with them are likely to be true' (BonJour 1998, 131). BonJour replies that this objection overlooks the necessity of immediate, rational insights involved in the process of reasoning (1998, 131). Any operation of reasoning 'must ultimately rely on immediate insights of the very same kind that the objection is designed to impugn' (1998, 131). BonJour provides two reasons for this judgment (1998, 131). First, any criterion or rule that legitimizes reasoning must itself be justified, and, apart from immediate rational insights, there would be a vicious regress. Secondly, one needs discernment to see that a rule is applicable to a situation. But this discernment requires 'the very same sort of rational insight or intuition that the rationalist is advocating' (1998, 131).

BonJour's first reason that simple rational insights are inescapable raises the specter of the regress of reasoning. Any attempt to justify a rule will have to provide reasons, and then those reasons can come under scrutiny. The examination of those reasons requires further reasons, which themselves need additional reasons, and so on. To escape this vicious regress, one must stop with an immediate insight. But the coherentist objects that a linear regress of reasons is not the only option for justifying the rules or criteria. The coherentist holds up the coherence of her rules and criteria with her other judgments and claims that the overall coherence of these rules and judgments provides her with an excellent reason to believe them.

BonJour's second reason that simple rational insights are required for the process of reasoning does not conflict with coherentism. BonJour writes, 'There is no apparent alternative to the reliance on immediate, non-discursive insights of some sort as long as any sort of reasoning or thinking that goes beyond the bounds of direct observation is to be countenanced' (1998, 133). The alternative to this is 'a mode of intellectual process that is entirely a function of criteria, rules, or steps, that is somehow purely discursive in character, requiring no immediate insight or judgment of any kind' (1998, 132). The explanatory coherentist can accept that 'the reliance on immediate, non-discursive insights' is about the psychological process of reasoning. Some reasoning is explicitly discursive in character, but even that sort of reasoning relies on immediate judgments. Those immediate judgments, though, are justified along coherentist lines. Reasoning cannot continue forever. As the coherentist understands this situation, we all start with beliefs and dispositions. Reasoning is a combination of what you believe and what you are disposed to do. One can justify the rules of reasoning by their coherence, and this justification may attempt to justify certain dispositions we have to reason in certain ways. But none of this requires a substantial rationalist view of the *a priori*.[9] After all, as BonJour recognizes, if psychologically immediate judgments simply amount to a contextless thought accompanied by an indescribable feel, then it is difficult to understand how that could justify one in believing that the thought is correct.[10]

1.4 Taking stock

BonJour's indispensability arguments do not support rationalism over coherentism. His observation-transcendent argument assumes a principled distinction between

9 See Goodman (1965) for a coherentist justification of the rules of deductive and induction.

10 See Boghossian (2001, 639) for similar remarks and BonJour (2001b) for a rejoinder. BonJour's reply either lapses back into the errors of Plantinga's view or reiterates the point that reasoning requires psychologically immediate judgments.

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observational and theoretical beliefs which lends undue credence to BonJour's strict foundationalist view of how transcendent beliefs are to be justified. BonJour's parade argument does not require rationalism because the putative examples of simple *a priori* beliefs turn out, on BonJour's preferred analysis, to be embedded in a coherent story. His final argument about reasoning begs the question against a coherentist justification of the rules of reasoning and conflates the issue of the justification of reasoning with the psychological process of reasoning. At one point, BonJour recognizes that a coherentist justification of the *a priori* may succeed in very many cases, but replies that a complete coherentist theory of the *a priori* is impossible (1998, 118). In the next section I consider this argument.

2 BONJOUR'S ANTI-COHERENCE OBJECTION

BonJour has consistently held that a coherence theory of the *a priori* is inadequate. In the appendix to *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, entitled 'A Priori Justification', BonJour argues that a thoroughgoing coherentist view is impossible because '*a priori* knowledge is essential to provide the very ingredients of the concept of coherence (one of which is logical consistency) and thus could not without vicious circularity be itself based on coherence' (1998, 193). In his book *In Defense of Pure Reason*, BonJour repeats this charge:

> Any conception of coherence, however restricted, will presuppose certain fundamental premises or principles that define the conception in question and thus cannot be assessed by appeal to it (1998, 118).

BonJour recognizes that some might be tempted to offer a coherentist justification of the *a priori*, but replies that 'this overlooks the fact that coherence depends essentially on principles, such as the principle of non-contradiction and others, that must be justified in some other way' (1998, 148, fn 12). My aim in this section is to answer these charges. Coherentism, specifically explanatory coherentism, escapes BonJour's criticisms. In the first subsection, I briefly lay out an explanationist theory of justification and explain how an explanationalist may view the justification of the law of noncontradition. The second subsection addresses BonJour's charge that coherentism cannot offer a non-circular justification of logical principles. The third subsection addresses BonJour's charge that any conception of coherence presupposes the law of noncontradiction. The result of the arguments in this section is that logical principles do not pose any special problem for explanatory coherentists.

2.1 *Explanationism*

Explanationism is the view that explanation and the explanatory virtues provide the ingredients for an account of epistemic justification. James Cornman (1980) introduced the term explanationism to describe explanatory coherentism. Peter Lipton (2004) uses the term explanationism to refer to the view that our inductive practices are largely guided by inference to the best explanation, and that inference to the best explanation is a means of justification. William Lycan has been the most vocal proponent of explanationism, advocating it in a book and several subsequent papers.[11] According to Lycan,

11 Lycan 1988, 1996, 2002, 2012.

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explanationism is 'the doctrine that all justified reasoning is fundamentally explanatory reasoning that aims at maximizing the "explanatory coherence" of one's total belief system' (1988, 128). In Lycan's hands, explanationism is the view that explanatory considerations are ultimately what justifies any belief (1988, 133).

For our purposes, we can consider a generic form of explanationism, according to which a subject's belief that *p* is propositionally justified if and only if, given the subject's doxastic system, *p* is rated highly overall by the canons of theory preference. The explanationist holds that all of our beliefs are justified by virtue of how well they fare with respect to the canons of theory acceptance, given the rest of a subject's beliefs. For any specific belief, one may consider whether it is simple, testable, fruitful, great in scope or conservative. One central explanationist theme is that the justification of any belief involves theoretical considerations. Even the justification of a mundane belief like 'I have hands' quickly involves theoretical considerations pertaining to the fruitfulness and economy of taking our basic belief-forming mechanisms to be reliable. Explanationists stress that the justification for any belief involves other justified beliefs a subject holds. There is no purely autonomous justification.

One central challenge to explanationism comes from simple logical principles like the principle of noncontradiction. As BonJour alleges, any conception of coherence requires this principle, and yet any coherentist justification of this principle is circular. Yet, against BonJour's contention, explanationism offers an elegant justification of the law of noncontradiction. The principle scores high on the explanatory virtues: it is simple, testable, fruitful, great in scope and conservative. The explanationist may continue to laud the principle as one of the guiding axioms of first-order logic, the virtues of which lie in its accessibility and simplicity. The principle is confirmed over and over again in experience; to this date, no one has managed to both order an expresso and not order an expresso. To deny the principle is unfruitful. If there are true contradictions, then this may well undercut the very project of rationality. In short, on purely explanationist grounds, the principle of noncontradiction has the highest level of justification.

I take this to be a significant reason that BonJour's charge against explanatory coherentism lacks a proper foothold. I now turn to two specific objections. First, any coherentist justification of the law of noncontradiction is circular. Secondly, any conception of coherence requires the law of noncontradiction.

2.2 *Coherence and circularity*

BonJour charges that any coherentist justification of the law of noncontradiction is circular. If the conception of coherence presupposes that contradictions cannot be true then it would be circular to justify the principle by its coherence. Is this charge well placed? I think not. Michael Bergmann (2004) has argued that any non-skeptical epistemology must own up to some epistemic circularity. Bergmann argues that in at least some cases, epistemic circularity does not undermine one's justification or knowledge (2004, 711). Bergmann observes that it's overwhelmingly plausible that subjects can acquire justified beliefs from perception and memory. Yet given those justified beliefs, one can use simple deductive and inductive reasoning to come to justifiably believe that perception and memory are reliable. Yet this argument depends on the reliability of perception and memory in order to justify that perception and memory are reliable!

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Bergmann's argument can be wielded against BonJour's rationalism. BonJour argues that the justification for any belief that extends beyond the directly observable requires *a priori* justification. Yet, unless BonJour denies that one can ever have any justification for thinking that rational insight is reliable, he must approve of an epistemically circular argument for the reliability of rational insight. This argument is exactly parallel to the argument Bergmann offers to show that any non-skeptical epistemology must come to grips with some epistemically circular arguments. Hence, BonJour's charge that any coherentist justification of the principle of noncontradiction is circular must appeal to specific considerations pertaining to coherentism that show the ensuing circularity is both importantly different from the kind Bergmann discusses and epistemically vicious.

We can show that there is no special problem for coherentism by examining a simple coherentist view, according to which a belief is justified if and only if it is logically consistent with a subject's other beliefs. According to this simple view, logical consistency is *the* source of justification. Perceptual beliefs are justified if consistent. The justification of these beliefs does not depend on any theoretical beliefs, nor does it depend on any beliefs about the source of perception. Furthermore, beliefs about logical consistency are themselves justified if consistent. Like other non-skeptical epistemologies, the simple view must come to grips with some epistemic circularity; one may rely on the fact that logical consistency is a source of justification to come to believe that logical consistency is a source of justification. But this circularity is exactly parallel to the circularity of relying on the reliability of perception to come to believe that perception is reliable.

What goes for the simple view goes for explanationism as well. Explanatory coherentism upholds the explanatory virtues as the materials for a belief's justification. Just as BonJour's rationalist view and the simple view approve of some epistemic circularity, explanationism will also approve of some circularity. One can come to be justified in believing that the explanatory virtues are a source of justification by relying on the virtues themselves. Epistemic circularity poses no special problem for coherentism.[12]

2.3 *Coherence and presupposition*

Let us turn to BonJour's claim that any conception of coherence presupposes the principle of noncontradiction (1998, 118). As BonJour conceives of the situation, *before* a coherence view of justification can get up and running, one must first specify the nature of coherence. This specification will involve certain principles that themselves cannot be abandoned without giving up the coherence view of justification. Furthermore, while some principles may be more peripheral to the notion of coherence, the law of noncontradiction is at the core. Thus, BonJour concludes, a coherence theory of justification requires some unrevisable logical principles. This criticism feeds into BonJour's general criticism that coherentist views neglect the importance of the *a priori*. In the following I tackle this charge: the notion of coherence need not presuppose the principle of noncontradiction. Our conception of coherence is itself driven by our desire for adequate explanation, which can put pressure on the principles we use to specify our conception of coherence. I will follow BonJour by focusing on the principle of noncontradiction. I assume that our

12 Explanatory coherentism eschews premise circularity, but, like other non-skeptical epistemologies, must come to grips with some rule circularity.

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conclusions regarding the role of this principle also hold for other principles involved in specifying the nature of coherence.

Let us approach this issue by considering Graham Priest's *dialetheism*, the view that some contradictions are true. Priest argues that it is rationally acceptable to believe some contradictions.[13] He writes, 'I believe, for example, that it is rational (rationally possible – indeed, rationally obligatory) to believe that the liar sentence is both true and false' (1998, 410). In addition to the liar sentence, Priest considers other logical paradoxes such as the Russell set, truths of our own making and contradictions arising in physics, and then argues that the best explanation of the enduring difficulties with alternative accounts aimed at avoiding contradictions is that the theories are true, and consequently, we have a sound argument for some contradictions.

Priest's strategy in arguing for dialetheism is admirable. Consider our very best theory of some set of phenomena. If it is well confirmed and its explanatory merits far outstrip any alternative theory, then we have a good reason to accept that the theory is true. If the theory implies that some proposition is true, then we have a reason to accept that proposition; by our present lights, we have a sound argument for some claim. Priest applies this to contradictions; if a sound argument implies that a contradiction is true, then we should accept that some contradictions are true. Why should we not accept this argument? Priest considers several arguments that there cannot be true contradictions and argues that they are unpersuasive.[14] We do not have space to repeat these arguments other than to say that he defends the overall coherence of a position that maintains true contradictions by developing and defending a paraconsistent logic that prevents contradictions from entailing everything (Priest 1998).

Even so, dialetheism seems incoherent. Priest explicitly acknowledges that dialetheism is extremely odd. He writes:

> I . . . believe that the Russell set is both a member of itself and not a member of itself. I do not deny that it was difficult to convince myself of this, that is, to get myself to believe it. It seemed, after all, so unlikely. But many arguments convinced me of it (1985–1986, 103).

Are we to dismiss dialetheism as incoherent, as a position that no one could rationally hold? David Lewis appears to think so. He replies to Priest: 'No truth does have, and no truth could have, a true negation. Nothing is, and nothing could be, literally both true and false. This we know for certain, and *a priori*, and without any exception for especially perplexing subject matters' (Lewis 1982, 434). Lewis acknowledges that his response is dogmatic, and, further, that the principle of noncontradiction is indefensible against Priest's challenge because it calls so much into question that there are no grounds to argue against it (Lewis 1982, 434). But, Lewis holds that the principle of noncontradiction is not only *a priori* but certain.

Is Lewis right that the principle is apodictic? Explanationists hold that the principle has the highest level of justification we can imagine. Arguably, the law of noncontradiction is so central to the very nature of reasoning, thought and representation that its denial amounts to a position that denies our conception of cognition. This justification of the law ties its justification to its role in human cognition. Given our understanding of

13 Priest 1985–1986, 1998.
14 Priest 1985–1986, 1998.

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evidence, we can acquire evidence against a proposition by acquiring evidence for its negation. When a subject asserts a proposition, we understand the subject as implying that its negation is false. Furthermore, the nature of representation confirms the law of noncontradiction. One cannot represent, at least by way of a picture, a truth and its true negation. This is all so close to our common cognitive practice that it is hard to take seriously the thought that some truths may also have true negations. But the nature of the justification proceeds along explanationist grounds. The law of noncontradiction is so central to our cognitive practice that restricting or revising it is unthinkable.[15]

Explanationists resist taking the law as genuinely apodictic for three reasons. First, the notion of purely autonomous rational insight is baffling. How are human creatures able to latch onto modal space with a singular act of rational insight? Perhaps creatures can do this by triangulating their position in modal space by other claims they have some justification for believing, but it is mysterious how this can occur apart from having other justified beliefs.[16] Secondly, human cognition is deeply fallible. Within the history of science, apparent cognitive improvements turned out to be illusory. The change from an Aristotelian view of science to that of Cartesian physics ruled out explanations of natural phenomena in terms of 'occult' and 'non-picturable' powers. Gradually, the empirical success of Newton's mathematical theory of nature and the 'occult' force of gravity led to a renewed appreciation of Aristotelian powers within science. Current debates over the proper interpretation of quantum mechanics straightforwardly involve the universal validity of classical logic. At some level, it seems prudent to leave open the possibility that classical logic may have a limited domain. If, however, the law of noncontradiction is apodictic, there is no level at which we may leave open the possibility that it is false. Thirdly, and related to the fallibility of human cognition, it is possible that there are intractable blindspots to human cognition. Some philosophers hold that conceivability does not imply possibility, but if there are deep blindspots in human cognition, it may be that inconceivability does not imply impossibility. This view is consistent with Priest's dialethism. Arguably, contradictions are not conceivable. But perhaps the inconceivability of true contradictions does not entail the impossibility of true contradictions. Nonetheless, an explanationist can hold that the law of noncontradiction has the highest level of justification, and given our current epistemic situation, it is unreasonable not to have the fullest confidence in the law.

3 COHERENCE AND AWARENESS

To this point I have argued that an explanatory coherentist alternative undermines BonJour's arguments that *a priori* justification is indispensable, and that this explanationist alternative is plausible. There is one final consideration to address. Is it enough that

15 See Field (1996) for a similar proposal. Field defends an even stronger proposal, according to which empirical evidence is irrelevant to the epistemic status of classical logic. Field argues for the empirical indefeasibility of classical logic along explanationist grounds. Field argues that there are no clear alternatives to classical logic for use in reasoning, and that classical logic has significant confirmation by use in empirically successful theories.

16 Field's (1996) justification of the empirical indefeasibility of classical logic also avoids appealing to the autonomy of rational insight.

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one's belief *be* coherent, or must one be *aware* of the coherence of one's beliefs? BonJour held that coherence alone was not sufficient for justification; one had to be aware that one's beliefs were coherent. But then it was implausible to think that a person was aware of the entirety of her body of beliefs, let alone the coherence of her beliefs. This problem led BonJour to formulate the *Doxastic Presumption*: the presumption that one does have the system of beliefs one believes oneself to have.[17] BonJour later realized, though, that this presumption was ad hoc, and further thought that the epistemological issues arising from an awareness requirement could not be addressed within the confines of a coherentist epistemology.[18]

One solution to this problem is to adopt an externalist form of coherentism. If a subject's belief are coherent, then regardless of whether a subject is aware of this, her beliefs are propositionally justified. This solution must address the challenging problem of distant, unknown coherences. Richard Fumerton forcefully presses this worry.

> Suppose I believe twenty-eight very complex propositions. Suppose further that I reached those conclusions in an extraordinarily silly way. I was reading a book far too difficult for me and to amuse myself I decided to believe every fifth proposition I encountered. As it turns out, by a remarkable coincidence there is an extremely sophisticated proof that interrelates all these different propositions, a proof that only a handful of logicians in the world would be able to grasp. Is there any plausibility at all in holding that my beliefs are rational?[19]

Fumerton's objection works only against a simple externalist version of coherentism. A better version of coherentism is explanatory coherentism, which holds that propositional justification is determined by the explanatory virtues of a subject's beliefs. In Fumerton's case the subject's new beliefs have little, if any, explanatory value. These new beliefs do not fit with the rest of what the subject believes and do not perform any explanatory work (by either explaining or being explained). The subject's explanatory position is worsened by gaining these new beliefs.

It is commonly held in the literature on explanation that an adequate explanation is constrained by facts about a subject. A good explanation for a brilliant logician differs from a good explanation for an undergraduate. The facts that constrain adequate explanations are mental facts of the subjects. A subject's beliefs and abilities affect the form and content of a good explanation. Thus, on an explanationist account, explanatory virtue does not float free from the mental facts of a subject. In this connection, an explanationist is well positioned to offer a better account of the role of an awareness requirement. Given that goodness in explanation is constrained by the mental facts of a subject, there is no distinction to be made between a subject's beliefs merely having the explanatory virtues and a subject being aware of her beliefs having those virtues. To be sure, one can distinguish between a subject's beliefs having the virtues and a subject having an explicit belief about her belief's having the virtues. But explanationism does not require an explicit meta-belief about the virtuousness of one's beliefs. Rather, a subject can be *recognitionally aware* of the virtuousness of her beliefs. This amounts to a subject being able to use (*de re*)

17 See BonJour (1985, 104).

18 See BonJour (1997) for details.

19 Fumerton 1995, 155. Lycan (2012, 16) addresses this objection. My response is similar to Lycan's.

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the virtuousness of her beliefs to defend them from challenges and to explore their consequences.

4 CONCLUSION

I have argued that BonJour's indispensability arguments for foundationalism about the *a priori* fail. Explanationism offers a coherent and plausible view about the justification for apparently necessary truths. Furthermore, I have argued that there is no fundamental incoherence with a complete coherentist justification of the *a priori*. Even if our reasoning rests on principles such as the principle of non-contradiction, it is possible to give a coherentist justification of this principle. Finally, I've argued that the fact that goodness of explanation is relative to a subject's beliefs and abilities nicely avoids the problems with BonJour's access requirement and his resulting doxastic presumption. The upshot is a coherent and plausible explanationist account of the *a priori*.

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TED POSTON is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Alabama. He works primarily on topics within epistemology including skepticism, the regress argument, and coherentism. He is currently finishing a book on explanatory coherentism, *Reason and Explanation* (Palgrave-MacMillan, forthcoming).

https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2013.25 Published online by Cambridge University Press