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## Commentary on Pinto

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# COMMENTS ON PINTO

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Pinto wants to promote a coherence approach to the reasonableness of belief, but to deny that we do (or can) have a tight grasp on the nature of coherence. Pinto's paper is much less a defense of these claims than a programmatic statement pointing to doctrines or inquiries thought to lend them support, or potentially so. As such, it is hardly susceptible to detailed, critical commentary.

However, some of his declarations of the programmatic nature of our study of the subject, as well as his conclusions that coherence remain "elusive", seem to me markedly premature, and among the few specific claims he makes, one in particular strikes me as repeating an important and influential error.

After declaring that we lack a "successful logic of nondeductive support", Pinto writes summarily

what is missing is an articulated account or theory of coherence that will explain both (a) our intuitive judgements of when coherence obtains and (b) the role that coherence appears to play in determining what it is reasonable for us to believe.

But whether or not we have a complete, ultimately successful logic of nondeductive support, we surely have a wide variety of promising ones in philosophy of science, epistemology, and artificial intelligence (Levi, Cohen, Gardenfors, Glymour, Jeffrey, etc.)

More importantly, Pinto does not even put forward some explicit proposals to test his conditions (a) and (b). Here are some obvious candidates:

Let B = an agent's corpus of beliefs or salient beliefs on an occasion, and "reasonable to believe" be short for "prima facie reasonable to believe" then consider

1. If p coheres with B, then it is reasonable to believe that p.
2. If p is inconsistent with B, then it is not reasonable to believe that p.
3. If p does not cohere with B, then it is reasonable not to believe that p.
4. If B is not coherent, then it is reasonable to modify the contents of B to restore coherence, and the modification should be a minimal one.

I am not proposing any of these, except as fairly evident initial passes. Well before declaring the field wide open, such proposals should be systematically examined.

Pinto refers a number of times to Harman's work as offering a coherence theory, and one of the most valuable features of *Change of View*[1](#) is its explicit formulation and defense of realistic principles such as the Principle of Positive Undermining:

One should stop believing P whenever one positively believes one's reasons for believing P are no good.2

If Harman's principles and the previous ones are susceptible to rational dispute and application, then it diminishes the concern that animates Pinto's paper, which is to give an account of coherence. Pinto begins by noting that Harman's appeal to explanatory coherence hardly provides a precise or "unambiguous criterion". Nevertheless, we may have good intuitions and enough overlap in our conceptions of coherence to move ahead with specific, testable proposals. To think ourselves beholden to first obtaining a precise notion of coherence or understanding before advancing specific proposals is to commit the "Socratic fallacy" that one cannot know of any object x whether it is an F unless one has a definition of F.

Turning to one of the few places at which critical engagement is possible, Pinto draws a conclusion from the Kuhnian account of scientific revolutions which he endorses, though recognizing its controversial nature. Of arguments offered during a scientific revolution, Pinto is "tolerably clear" that

typically they are not and cannot be conclusive; they can invite but not compel a change in view (or invite but not compel retaining a current view).

This seems to me to repeat the influential confusion between conclusive reasons or arguments and knowing or being certain that one has conclusive reasons or arguments. Galileo's arguments in support of Copernicus' theory were (or could have been) conclusive, even if given the state of debate he shouldn't be certain that they were conclusive. The evidence of this is that subsequent to the revolution these arguments are precisely the ones that could be offered for the heliocentric theory. The fact that a conclusion is one to which many respected peers dissent, that the issue is complex, that one has been convinced before wrongly, or that the history of the subject is a history of failed arguments are all reasons to lack confidence that one's argument is conclusive. But it may be conclusive nevertheless, and so one thereby may come to know its conclusion.

Pinto's view of coherence turns on a dependence on a full understanding of a field, and here he offers three ideas which I briefly summarize:

First, "reasoning always takes place against the background...understanding of the domain that we are reasoning about, an understanding that involves an overview of that domain as a whole." Second, "the required overview is something for which there is no adequate propositional...representation" And third, "the processes by which such understanding is generated..., though rational..., are currently not well understood."

For the first idea he alludes to holistic views of meaning, but, sidestepping the challenges to them, he instead points us to two assumptions around which he "would develop a case". The "would" here is dominant since Pinto does not develop any such case.

Both assumptions seem troubling on their surface. He tells us that to make good inferences we need to grasp the alternatives, and "we can't have that without some general understanding of the field we are reasoning about" Can't we? Imagine a 400 year old ancestor resurrected, who time travels to visit me. He knows nothing about cars. But I tell him that the main alternative to the car's being black is its being pink. He learns that the car is dark. He nondeductively infers that it is black. The other assumption is that "intelligent deductive inferences" require that our conclusion not "run counter to propositions that are more entrenched than the premisses". But if the deduction is very difficult, then that will be an intelligent deductive inference, yet I cannot see it depending

either on a survey of other propositions nor again on a "general understanding of the field."

These criticisms appear cheap shots, attacking Pinto's words, but not his intent. But surely I have little more to go on than Pinto's words? The term "intelligent" is left hanging, and so is the absolutely crucial term "understanding". In particular, is "understanding" short for "true or objective" understanding, so that my ancestor's not knowing chemistry would imply that he could not understand water, or "subjective understanding", understanding sufficient for one's purposes and beliefs?

But not only does Pinto not give us any help with some crucial implications, not a definition, of this term, but he does not indicate what's troubling him. For him, our practices of reasoning or argument cannot be successful unless one has one general view of a domain. But why not—what's troubling him? On its surface, and using understanding more objectively, it's natural to say that we engage in reasoning or argument in a domain in order to come to an understanding of it, so that our reasoning or argument cannot presuppose it.

The complaint continues with "coherence". As I said, appeal to Harman's work is problematic for Pinto. He takes Harman to be a coherence theorist along with others he mentions like Lehrer, Rescher and Bonjour. But Harman is not working in that tradition, and he cautions us early on to avoid reading his contrast between coherence and foundations as the traditional one.

In fact, Harman suggests dissatisfaction with the epistemological project that these accounts are about. He is concerned with belief revision, but "I am not sure what these philosophical theories of 'justification' are supposed to be concerned with."<sup>3</sup> His explications of these two theories is not connected with the traditional contrast.

I think that even if we understand coherentism and foundationalism roughly along traditional lines, while freeing them from the standard epistemological problematic, their nature alters. By the standard epistemological problematic I refer to the (skeptical) infinite regress problem of which foundationalism and coherentism offer conflicting answers. If we are interested in belief revision or conditions of reasonable belief, then we should not take that problematic as preemptive.

Now if we do so, then the fundamental coherence claim will be that coherence among a suitably large and relevant subset of a natural corpus of beliefs is close to both a necessary and sufficient for its being reasonable to hold those beliefs. Foundationalism claims that some beliefs are effectively unrevisable, and these provide the basis for most of our inferences about other beliefs. So stated I make four claims: First, there is no conflict between them. Second, I accept them. Third, so do you. Fourth, foundationalism and coherentism are complementary. Borrowing from Quine, I would say that I am a foundationalist and a coherentist in the same way that everyone in his or her right mind is.

For we have a vast number of background beliefs that are certain, and it is hardly imaginable that they would be wrong. These include that cats are animals; that trees do not eat tuna fish sandwiches; that the earth existed for many years before my birth; that the World Trade Center is bigger than a baseball. These vast background beliefs underlie our most basic expectations, and so play a fundamental, though tacit, role in our inferences.

But I am also a coherentist, who requires these foundational beliefs for his coherentist assessments, particularly their rootedness in the world. Since our beliefs claim truth, what better reason to believe something could there be than that it bears a coherence relation to a suitably large and varied set of other relevant beliefs? From my point of view, the standard objection to coherentism does not make sense. This is the objection that a set of beliefs, however comprehensive, could be coherent, but false. But this is to assume a gap between my beliefs

and the world, which I do not recognize from within my beliefs. It is only a criticism a third party could cast. The standard error is to treat that third party perspective as a proper first party view.

### *Notes*

1. Gilbert Harman, *Change of View* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986). 

2. *Ibid.*, p. 39. 

3. *Ibid.*, p. 29. 

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