

Coherence as a Test for Truth

ROBERT STERN
University of Sheffield

This paper sets out to demonstrate that a contrast can be drawn between coherentism as an account of the structure of justification, and coherentism as a method of inquiry. Whereas the former position aims to offer an answer to the 'regress of justification' problem, the latter position claims that coherence plays a vital and indispensable role as a criterion of truth, given the fallibility of cognitive methods such as perception and memory. It is argued that 'early' coherentists like Bradley and Blanshard were coherentists of the latter kind, and that this sort of coherentism is not open to certain sorts of standard objection that can be raised against justificatory coherentism.

Like most contemporary philosophical positions, coherentism is seen as having a historical heritage, complete with founding ancestors (such as Spinoza and Hegel), more immediate forebears (such as the British Idealists, and some thinkers in the Vienna Circle), and contemporary descendants (such as Davidson, BonJour,¹ Lehrer and others), along with their close relatives (such as Sellars and Quine). This heritage is usually taken to consist in a fairly unbroken lineage, and while of course some scholars will dispute the legitimacy of certain bloodlines (for example, was Spinoza really a coherentist?),² the conceptual position underlying coherentism is usually felt to be fairly constant throughout its history.

My suggestion in this paper, however, is that this assumption is mistaken, and that an important divergence has been overlooked, which has made the history of coherentism appear more continuous than in fact it is. In particular, I will argue that what we *now* think of as coherentism is fundamentally different from the position of late nineteenth and early twentieth century

¹ BonJour has changed his mind on this issue, however, and has now abandoned coherentism in favour of foundationalism: see Laurence BonJour, 'The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism', in John Greco and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 117-42; and 'Towards a Defense of Empirical Foundationalism' and 'Replies to Pollock and Plantinga', in Michael R. DePaul (ed.), *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 21-40 and pp. 79-86.

² For contrasting views on this issue, cf. Thomas Carson Mark, *Spinoza's Theory of Truth* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1972), especially pp. 33-68, and Ralph C. S. Walker, 'Spinoza and the Coherence Theory of Truth', *Mind*, 94 (1985), pp. 1-18.

coherentists, so that we should question the idea that there is any real continuity in this family history. I will suggest that respecting this divergence means that we can no longer take it for granted that contemporary arguments for and against coherentism will apply equally well to the earlier tradition, and that in fact other issues become relevant in this different context.

I will begin by setting out the current conception of coherentism, and will then try to show how that conception does not fit with that held by earlier proponents of coherentism, especially Bradley and Blanshard.³ To put the difference I want to highlight in a nutshell: on the current paradigm, the coherentist is offering a distinctive position concerning the structure of justification as being like a ‘raft’ rather than like a ‘pyramid’,⁴ whereas on the earlier paradigm, the coherentist is offering an account of our methods of inquiry, arguing that coherence is a ‘mark’ or ‘arbiter’ that enables us to arrive at the truth—so on this earlier paradigm, coherentism is not a theory of justification, but rather an account of how we do and must decide between truth and falsehood. It is thus a theory of what constitutes our test (or criterion) of truth, rather than a theory of the structure or nature of justification.⁵

I

As it figures in the current literature, coherentism most frequently arises as an answer to an epistemological puzzle: the regress of justification problem. The problem takes the following form. If I make a claim, you are entitled to ask me how I know my claim is true. In reply, I will need to offer some other things I believe as grounds or evidence in support of my claim. But then, you can ask whether I have grounds for these beliefs, as otherwise it looks as if I am merely assuming them. But then, if I offer grounds for these grounds, then your question can be reiterated, leading to an apparently infinite regress of justifications. This is the familiar epistemological puzzle which constitutes the regress of justification problem, and which appears to threaten any hope we might have that our beliefs are or can be justified.

³ I think that a possible exception to the current conception of coherentism who is nonetheless a contemporary epistemologist is Nicholas Rescher (where it is then no accident that he is more knowledgeable about and sympathetic to the concerns of the earlier coherentists like Bradley and Blanshard than are many current coherentists). However, even Rescher does not seem to *see* himself as exceptional, or to have properly identified the divergent concerns that make him so; and this is even more true of his critics, who try to assimilate his position to the current preoccupations of coherentism, much as they do (I shall argue) with Bradley and Blanshard.

⁴ Cf. Ernest Sosa, ‘The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5 (1981), pp. 3-25.

⁵ Of course, coherentism may also be thought of as a theory of truth, but this form of coherentism is of much less significance in the contemporary epistemological context. For some further discussion of how this form of coherentism figures in relation to the positions I am discussing, see below, §3.

There are two standard responses to the puzzle. The first is to say that there are some beliefs (sometimes called ‘basic beliefs’) that can be justifiably held without requiring further reference to other beliefs. If the regress of justification reaches these beliefs, it is therefore brought to a halt, as it is not necessary to bring in other beliefs to support them. This is the *foundationalist* account of the structure of justification. The second standard response is to say that justification can be holistic, in the sense that a belief can be justified by being part of a coherent system of beliefs, so that if a belief is fundamental to a system of beliefs, this justifies it, without it needing to rest on any *more* fundamental belief, so that again the regress of justification is brought to a halt. This is the *coherentist* account of the structure of justification.

On this way of introducing coherentism into epistemology, therefore, coherentism is seen as a response to a sceptical worry about justification, where its main rival is foundationalism. Where coherentism is said to be distinctive, is in the way in which it dispenses with the idea of basic beliefs, and instead blocks the regress by appealing to the place of a belief within a system to justify the belief: this allows a belief to be justified without further inferential grounding, but without that belief being immediately justified (justified without *any* reference to further beliefs), as on the foundationalist picture.

There is then a familiar dialectic between these two positions, in which their respective strengths and weaknesses are brought out. Thus, on the one side foundationalism appears suspect because the class of basic beliefs looks hard to specify convincingly, while it is unclear exactly what epistemic status they must have (for example, infallible, indubitable, or *prima facie* justified), where their epistemic authority comes from, and whether this authority requires some commitment to externalism, which the coherentist will then challenge.⁶ On the other side, coherentism looks problematic because it is questionable exactly what a coherent belief-set must amount to, and why being part of it should in itself confer justification on a belief, particularly if it is not shown how it is that coherence relates to truth.

Now, rather than continue by following how this familiar debate proceeds from here, or attempting to push it in one direction or another, I want to step back and ask a more basic question: namely, does this debate concerning the structure of justification relate to and address the concerns that provides *all* forms of coherentism with their original motivation, and thus is this the context in which the success or failure of earlier forms of coherentism should also properly be judged? I will suggest that the answer to this question is negative, and that in this earlier form coherentism should be assessed in a different light.

⁶ Cf. Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 34-57.

II

In order to get at the difference I want to highlight, between coherence as an account of the structure justification and coherence as a test for truth, I am going to proceed indirectly, by looking at an exegetical puzzle. The puzzle occurs in Bradley's essay 'On Truth and Coherence', which first appeared in *Mind* in 1909, and is reprinted in his *Essays on Truth and Reality*.

In the course of that essay, Bradley criticises foundationalism for being based on a 'misleading metaphor':

My known world is taken to be a construction built upon such and such foundations. It is argued, therefore, to be in principle a superstructure which rests upon these supports. You can go on adding to it no doubt, but only so long as the supports remain; and, unless they remain, the whole building comes down. But the doctrine, I have to contend, is untenable, and the metaphor ruinously inapplicable. The foundation in truth is provisional merely. In order to begin my construction I take the foundation as absolute—so much certainly is true. But that my construction continues to rest on the beginnings of my knowledge is a conclusion which does not follow. It does not follow that, if these are allowed to be fallible, the whole building collapses. For it is in another sense that my world rests upon the data of perception.⁷

Bradley's attack here is clearly on an infallibilist form of foundationalism, according to which our belief-system is grounded in basic beliefs, which are infallible. There are several possible motivations for this position, but the one Bradley appears to be focussing on is this: The basic beliefs form the foundation from which all other beliefs are inferred; these basic beliefs therefore cannot be overturned, for if they were ever abandoned this would bring about the collapse of the entire belief system built around them; so, any sort of doxastic revision of this kind is impossible—while we may add to our basic beliefs, we cannot subtract them. According to this argument, basic beliefs are infallible in the sense that they are *incorrigible*: that is, they cannot be found to be false, or replaced within our belief system by a contrary belief.

Now, there are many arguments one might give against such infallibilist foundationalism. Bradley's first argument, as we have seen, is that it is mistaken because it uses the metaphor of 'foundations' misleadingly. On the one hand, Bradley says, the foundational metaphor is right in so far as we often do form beliefs (particularly perceptual beliefs) immediately and without inference, and then form other beliefs by inference from them: for example, I form my belief it is raining by just looking out of the window and seeing that it is raining, and from that I infer that my roof will soon start leaking. However, on the other hand Bradley argues that this does not mean that something prevents me from giving up beliefs that are basic in this way, as I might form new immediate beliefs (e.g., that there are midges outside the window), and

⁷ F. H. Bradley, 'On Truth and Coherence', in his *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), pp. 202-18, pp. 209-10.

on the basis of those I can come to reject old ones (e.g., I can decide that what I thought were rain drops were in fact midges). Thus, though these perceptual beliefs are basic in one sense, they are not basic beliefs in the sense the infallibilist foundationalist requires: namely, beliefs that if rejected would bring about a state of complete doxastic collapse, and with this the impossibility of doxastic revision:

[T]here are to-day for me facts such that, if I take them as mistakes, my known world is damaged and, it is possible, ruined. But how does it follow that I cannot to-morrow on the strength of new facts gain a wider order in which these old facts can take a place as errors? The supposition may be improbable, but what you have got to show is that it is in principle impossible. A formulation used at the beginning does not in short mean something fundamental at the end, and there is no single 'fact' which in the end can be called fundamental absolutely. It is all a question of relative contributions to my known world-order.⁸

Bradley also offers a second argument, which seems essentially to work by emphasising that there is a difference between incorrigibility and infallibility proper, and that it is the latter rather than the former which the foundationalist really needs. Thus, Bradley argues that even if the foundationalist was right, that particular beliefs are unrevisable for us, this does not show that they are infallible in an 'absolute' rather than a 'relative' sense, where the former means 'cannot be mistaken as such' and the latter means 'cannot be believed to be mistaken by me'. If all the foundationalist can establish is the latter position, then this is not infallibilism proper:

Conceivably a judgement might be fundamental and infallible for me, in the sense that to modify it or doubt it would entail the loss of my personal identity... [But] I do not see the way by which I am to pass from relative to absolute infallibility, and I do not know how to argue here from an assumed necessary implication in my personal existence to a necessity which is more than relative. Am I to urge that a world in which my personal identity has been ended or suspended has ceased to be a world altogether? Apart from such an argument (which I cannot use) I seem condemned to the result that all sense-judgements are fallible.⁹

We have seen, therefore, that in this essay Bradley presents a critique of infallibilist foundationalism, and, given the dialectic of coherentism and foundationalism that we discussed earlier, there is nothing particularly surprising in that. Here, it may seem, Bradley is deploying a fairly familiar range of arguments to attack one variant in the foundationalist theory, in order to establish coherentism as an alternative to foundationalism as an account of justification: there are no basic beliefs, so that justification must come from being embedded within a coherent belief-system.

Now, of course, if Bradley's position is taken in this way, it is perhaps rather uninteresting. For, many foundationalists would now agree with Brad-

⁸ Ibid., p. 211.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 216-7.

ley that there is something highly problematic in the idea of infallibilist foundationalism; but they would argue that this still leaves foundationalism standing as a theory of justification, because it is possible to be an anti-coherentist with respect to justification, while remaining a *fallibilist* about the basic beliefs that form the terminus of justification. This is the position of so-called *modest* foundationalism.¹⁰ The modest foundationalist can then agree with Bradley's arguments as we have presented them, but still hold that (for example) perceptual beliefs are basic in the sense of not being justified by their relation to other beliefs but by their relation to experience, while allowing that these beliefs are fallible.

But this response to Bradley assumes, of course, that the aim of his discussion is to refute foundationalism by refuting infallibilism, where this response then claims that foundationalism is in fact compatible with fallibilism, thereby deflecting the force of Bradley's argument while conceding its conclusion. And it is natural to take Bradley's argument in this way, because the contemporary debate assumes that the goal of any coherentist is to refute the foundationalist regarding the structure of justification, and the role of basic beliefs. So, by refuting infallibilism, it may seem that that is exactly what Bradley is trying to do.

But when we look more closely at Bradley's position in the paper we are analysing, something peculiar appears to be going on: namely, while we might expect Bradley to be trying to refute infallibilism in order to refute foundationalism, in fact he seems to be refuting foundationalism in order to refute infallibilism. That is, he takes it that one argument for infallibilism is the foundationalist one, that some of our beliefs must be infallible in order to act as basic beliefs, and so to overturn infallibilism, he must overturn this foundationalist argument, which he does using the objections we have outlined. At the beginning of the paper, he identifies this foundationalism as one of two arguments for the existence of 'infallible judgements': the first is that we can just point to unproblematic examples of such judgements (to which Bradley's reply is that on inspection, all such examples prove suspect), and the second is the foundationalist claim that 'in any case [infallible judgements] must exist, since without them the intelligence cannot work',¹¹ where he spells this out as follows: 'I pass now to the second reason for accepting infallible data of perception. Even if we cannot show these (it is urged) we are

¹⁰ Cf. Mark Pastin, 'Modest Foundationalism and Self-Warrant', in George Pappas and Marshall Swain (eds.), *Essays on Knowledge and Justification* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 279-88; Mark Pastin, 'C. I. Lewis's Radical Foundationalism', *Noûs*, 9 (1975), pp. 407-420; C. F. Delaney, 'Foundations of Knowledge—Again', *The New Scholasticism*, L (1976), pp. 1-19; William P. Alston, 'Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?', reprinted in his *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 36-56; Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Bradley, 'On Truth and Coherence', p. 204.

bound to assume them. For in their absence our knowledge has nothing on which to stand, and this want of support results in total scepticism'.¹² Within the dialectic of the paper, then, Bradley's main target is infallibilism, and his attack on foundationalism is merely in order to undermine one possible argument for 'accepting infallible data of perception'.

Now, from the perspective of current debates in epistemology, of the sort with which we began, this is puzzling. For, as we have seen, those debates are framed by a straightforward clash between coherentism and foundationalism, motivated by two different ways of answering the regress problem, and hence of conceiving of the structure of justification; so, within the terms of *this* debate, there is a *direct* confrontation between the coherentist and the foundationalist, within which the question of whether our basic beliefs are or need to be infallible is a further issue. But for Bradley, as we have seen, his main *target* appears to be infallibilism, and he criticises foundationalism only in order to overturn infallibilism, not for its own sake, in so far as foundationalism concerning the structure of justification can be used as an argument for infallibilism. But if Bradley's coherentism is to be equated with contemporary coherentism, this difference in approach is surprising, as the contemporary coherentist would normally attack infallibilism in order to overturn foundationalism, not the other way round; so the contrast between the dialectic running through these debates suggests that they are perhaps framed by different concerns, and that Bradley's coherentism is not *our* coherentism.

What, then, might make Bradley's perspective distinct from our own? How might his form of coherentism differ in form from that of our contemporaries, in such a way as to explain this apparent contrast? The answer, I think, lies in the way in which he takes coherence to be a 'test' or 'criterion' of truth.

III

What does it mean to treat coherence as a test of truth, and how does this differ from coherence as a theory of justification?

Let me begin with a more familiar distinction, between coherentism as a theory of truth, and as a theory of justification. Coherence as a theory of truth claims that truth consists in, or can be defined as, coherence: that is, a belief is true iff it coheres with other beliefs. Coherence as a theory of justification claims that a belief is justified if and only if it forms part of a coherent belief system. As is often pointed out, these two positions are distinct and separable: for example, one could be a coherentist about justification, while adopting a correspondence theory of truth, and many coherentists have taken this

¹² Ibid., p. 207.

path.¹³ That is, one could hold that what makes a belief true is its correspondence with reality, while what makes it justified is that it forms part of a coherent belief system.

Now, while one can reject a coherence theory of truth, while still being a coherentist in this sense, it seems to me one can reject the coherence theory of truth, while being a coherentist in *another* sense: namely, by holding that coherence is a *test* or *criterion* of truth, that is, a way in which we *discover* truth, rather than what truth *consists in*. So, the coherentist in this sense will claim that coherence is a ‘mark of truth’: in order to tell whether something is the case, we can and must consider how far believing it to be the case would make our belief-system or view of the world more or less coherent (where by ‘coherent’ the theorist usually means ‘consistent, comprehensive and cohesive’).¹⁴

Taken in this third way, the position of the coherentist may be usefully compared to the theorist who treats certain explanatory virtues, such as simplicity, as constituting a test or criterion of truth. According to the theorist of the latter kind, we can and even must use simplicity as a guide to truth, and this forms an important and perhaps indispensable element of our method of inquiry. I would claim that just as the question of whether simplicity is a criterion of truth raises different issues from whether the structure of justification rests on basic beliefs, and so is orthogonal to the debate between justificatory foundationalists and justificatory coherentists, so the question of whether coherence is a criterion of truth is equally distinguishable from the latter debate: coherentism of the one sort is distinct from coherentism of the other. That is, for someone who holds that simplicity is a criterion of truth, their concern is with what tests we can and do use to decide whether a particular theory is true given certain features of our cognitive position as they understand it (such as underdetermination of theory by data); but to hold that simplicity is a criterion in this way is not to engage with the regress of justification problem, and so not to engage with the debate between the justificatory foundationalist and the justificatory coherentist. Similarly, I would suggest, if one holds that coherence is a criterion of truth, one is likewise

¹³ Cf. Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 88.

¹⁴ Cf. A. C. Ewing, *Idealism: A Critical Survey* (London: Methuen, 1934), p. 250: ‘I am thus inclined to accept the coherence theory or something very like it as an account of our criterion of truth, and therefore as an account of the nature of the world... But I am not able to accept the theory as an account of the nature of truth.’ It is of course an important part of the coherentist’s position to get clear on what exactly the criterion of coherence amounts to, and coherentists have differed on this point. For a further discussion of this issue, see e.g., Nicholas Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) and Paul Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000). For reasons of space, I cannot go into this question any further here.

arguing for a position that treats coherence as method of inquiry, rather than as an account of the structure of justification; this form of coherentism should therefore be seen as distinct from coherentism of the justificatory kind, which of course *is* such an account. As Mackie has put it, ‘philosophers have wanted...not just to say in a broad way what it is for a statement to be true and what we are saying when we call a statement (or sentence or belief or utterance and so on) true, but to provide a criterion of truth, a set of rules or a standard procedure by the application of which we can decide, in each particular case, whether a statement (or sentence etc.) is true or not’.¹⁵

Now, once this distinction between coherence as a theory of justification and as a test of truth is introduced, I think it is easier to see what Bradley was trying to do in the paper we have discussed, and why it differs from current approaches. For, Bradley was trying to defend coherence as a test of truth, *not* as a theory of truth,¹⁶ *nor* as an account of justification. That is, he was claiming that there must be a role for coherence as a test in determining how things are, and that it is an indispensable part of our cognitive method: ‘What I maintain is that in the case of facts of perception and memory the test which we do apply, and which we must apply, is that of system’.¹⁷ Bradley argues that if perception and memory provided us with information about the world that was infallible, then we would not need to rely on any other method but these, so that with respect to beliefs formed using these methods, coherence as a test would be redundant. But, as we have seen, he takes himself to have shown that perception and memory *are* fallible with respect to what they tell us about the world,¹⁸ and in that case, he thinks we *also* have to use

¹⁵ J. L. Mackie, *Truth, Probability and Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 22. Cf. also Michael R. DePaul, ‘Reflective Equilibrium and Foundationalism’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986), pp. 59-69, p. 68:

I see the [coherence] method of reflective equilibrium as being first and foremost a method. It is a heuristic device for organizing our moral beliefs, a manner of conducting our moral inquiries. Foundationalism, on the other hand, is primarily a type of account of the epistemic status of our beliefs. Hence, foundationalism and reflective equilibrium are not really positions on the same topic, although they are surely positions on related topics.

¹⁶ That Bradley did not have a coherence theory of truth is now the standard view in the specialist literature: see e.g., Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth*, pp. 23-24; T. L. S. Sprigge, *James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1993), p. 345; W. J. Mander, *An Introduction to Bradley's Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 37-38. However, although there is agreement that this *wasn't* his theory of truth, there is less agreement over what it *was*.

¹⁷ Bradley, ‘On Truth and Coherence’, p. 202.

¹⁸ Like many coherentists, Bradley accepts that if the relevant beliefs are sufficiently stripped of worldly commitments, then perception *may* be enough to establish these beliefs infallibly: but then perception loses its status as a method of inquiry about the *world*. Cf. ‘On Truth and Coherence’, p. 206:

coherence as a test, to help us decide when what perception and memory tell us really is the case. For, he argues, the fallibility of perception and memory mean that they will tell us things that cannot *all* be true, because they are incompatible;¹⁹ we therefore need a further test to tell us which of these incompatible things is actually true, and this is the test of coherence—if by accepting one putative ‘fact’ as true your belief-system or world-picture is made more coherent than accepting the putative ‘fact’ with which it is in competition, then coherence as a method of inquiry works by telling you that you should accept the former as true and the latter as false, as better meeting the test of coherence:

Now it is agreed that, if I am to have an orderly world, I cannot possibly accept all ‘facts’. Some of these must be relegated, as they are, to the world of error, whether we succeed or fail in modifying and correcting them.²⁰ And the view which I advocate takes them all as in principle fallible. On the other hand, the view denies that there is any necessity for absolute facts of sense. Facts for it are true, we may say, just so far as they work, just so far as they contribute to the order of experience. If by taking certain judgements of perception as true, I can get more system into my world, then these ‘facts’ are so far true, and if by taking certain ‘facts’ as

[B]anish the chance of error, and with what are you left? You then have something which (as we have seen) goes no further than to warrant the assertion that such and such elements can and do co-exist—somehow and somewhere, or again that such and such a judgement happens—without any regard to its truth and without any specification of its psychical context. And no one surely will contend that with this we have particular fact.

¹⁹ As a referee has pointed out, strictly speaking this may not be true, since fallibility does not entail incompatibility, as a set of beliefs that contains false beliefs can be consistent, so that if perception and memory produced false beliefs in this way, the need for coherence as a further test would not arise. But I think it is still reasonable for Bradley to argue that in fact perception and memory do not operate in that way, and that they do in fact produce beliefs that are incompatible with one another (as when memories conflict, or when one sense tells us one thing, and another sense tells us another and so on).

²⁰ Cf. ‘On Memory and Judgement’, in his *Essays on Truth and Reality*, pp. 381-408, p. 387 (my emphasis):

I am unable to understand how an infallible memory can possibly correct itself. It is to me on the other hand intelligible that diverse memories can and do radically conflict, and that such a collision, *if we have no higher criterion*, leads inevitably to scepticism.

Cf. also Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth*, p. 57:

We in general *know* that data cannot be identified with truths—that some of them must indeed be falsehoods—because they are generally incompatible with one another. Truth-candidates—like rival candidates for public office—can work to exclude one another: they are mutually exclusive and victory for one spells defeat for the others. Candidate-truths are not truths pure and simple because it is of the very nature of the case that matters must so eventuate that some of them are falsehoods.

errors I can order my experience better, then so far these ‘facts’ are errors. And there is no ‘fact’ which possesses an absolute right.²¹

It is now clearer, I hope, why Bradley focuses on the question of infallibility, and seeks to undermine the foundationalist argument for infallibilism, and why from his perspective, this infallibilism is his main rather than subsidiary target. For, if the infallibilist were right concerning our cognitive methods like perception and memory, then this would make them error-proof, and if they were error-proof, then there would be no *need* for coherence as a test (at least at this level) to help us determine which ‘facts’ to believe and which to reject: we could just rely on perception and memory to tell us that directly (and hence consistently), and coherentism would be redundant. It is because Bradley does not think such infallibility attaches to any of our belief-forming methods, that he thinks that coherence as a criterion will be needed to play a role at *every* level; and in this context, the commitment of his opponent to infallibilism is fundamental to the debate, while undermining this infallibilism is crucial to Bradley’s own argument, in a way it wouldn’t be if the debate concerned justification, rather than our criterion of truth.

Here, again, a comparison with the theorist who adopts simplicity as a criterion of truth may be helpful. One way to motivate acceptance of simplicity as a criterion is via fallibilism: if our observational data were infallible, then it might make sense to claim that simplicity need not play a role in assessing whether a theory is true, as all that would matter would be empirical adequacy; but we know that the observational data are fallible, so we use simplicity as a guide, where this means accepting a theory because it is simple, although the theory we accept does not fit all the data (which we may then regard as misleading), or fits the data less well than another theory. As with coherence, fallibilism therefore plays an important role in underpinning the case for simplicity as a criterion of truth: without fallibilism, other tests of truth (such as observation) would have a priority that would make simplicity redundant.

The position opposed to Bradley’s, then, is not the justificatory foundationalist’s view that some beliefs are basic to the structure of justification, but the *critical* foundationalist’s view that coherentism can be undermined as follows: coherence as a test would not work (would not get us to the truth) unless some of our belief-forming methods were infallible, because otherwise the gap between how things appear to us and how things are would be too great to allow coherence to guide us to the truth; but if our belief-forming methods are infallible, then the test we should adopt is how well our higher-level beliefs fit beliefs formed using these methods, as a *critical* foundation or independent yardstick, that themselves do not need the test of coherence to

²¹ Bradley, ‘On Truth and Coherence’, p. 210.

determine whether these infallible foundational beliefs are true or false. This is Stout's foundationalist argument in the article Bradley is responding to in 'On Truth and Coherence':

This being so, when we have to determine whether a certain doubtful proposition is true or false, we may assume that if we can acquire a knowledge of certain other propositions which are true, our problem will be solved. But the essential presupposition of this procedure is that there must be a way of ascertaining truth otherwise than through mere coherence. In the end, truth cannot be recognised merely through its coherence with other truth. In the absence of immediate cognition, the principle of coherence would be like a lever without a fulcrum.²²

A similar view is expressed by Schlick as part of his defence of foundationalism²³ against the coherentist position of Neurath, and the dispute between them over Carnapian protocol statements:

For us it is self-evident that the problem of the basis of knowledge is nothing other than the question of the criterion of truth. Surely the reason for bringing in the term 'protocol statement' in the first place was that it should serve to mark out certain statements by the truth of which the truth of all other statements comes to be measured, as by a measuring rod. But according to the viewpoint just described this measuring rod would have shown itself to be as relative as, say, all the measuring rods of physics. And it is this view with its consequences that has been commended as the banishing of the last remnant of 'absolutism' from philosophy.

But what then remains at all as a criterion of truth? Since the proposal is not that all scientific assertions must accord with certain definite protocol statements, but rather that all statements shall accord with one another, with the result that every single one is considered as, in principle, corrigible, truth can consist only in a *mutual agreement of statements*.²⁴

Here, then, we have foundationalism not about the structure of justification, but concerning the test of truth: in order for us to arrive at truth, we must be able to begin with some beliefs that are certain, in the light of which others can be tested.²⁵ Against this, the coherentist like Bradley or Neurath argues that there are no such infallible beliefs, so that our test for truth must involve

²² G. F. Stout, 'Immediacy, Mediacy and Coherence', *Mind*, 17 (1908), pp. 20-47, pp. 32-3.

²³ Some scholars have recently questioned whether Schlick should be seen as a foundationalist in the justificatory sense: but that is not how I am using foundationalism here. On this see Thomas E. Uebel, 'Anti-Foundationalism and the Vienna Circle's Revolution in Philosophy', *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 47 (1996), pp. 415-39.

²⁴ Moritz Schlick, 'The Foundations of Knowledge', trans. David Rynin, in A. J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 209-27, pp. 213-4.

²⁵ This is also C. I. Lewis' position: cf. *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1946), p. 186: 'If what is to confirm the objective belief and thus show it probable, were itself an objective belief and hence no more than probable, then the objective belief to be confirmed would only probably be rendered probable... If anything is to be probable, something must be certain'. Contrast this with Bradley: "'Then no judgement of perception will be more than probable?'" Certainly that is my contention' ('On Truth and Coherence', p. 211).

coherence.²⁶ On this account, then, it is clear why Bradley has infallibilism as his target.

Turning now to Blanshard, similar considerations apply. For Blanshard too, the focus of his coherentism is on verification, and coherence as a test for truth. In order to establish this, he considers and argues against four other alternatives: authority, mystical insight, self-evidence, and what Blanshard calls ‘correspondence’, but which is more like immediate perceptual experience. Of these alternatives, the last two are the most important, and Blanshard therefore devotes the greater part of his discussion to them. Let me briefly summarize what he says about each.

On ‘correspondence’, he makes several points. First, he argues that for many things we believe, verifying them by appeal to perceptual experience is impossible, because they relate to past facts, and so in reality the test we actually use is how well embedded these beliefs are within a coherent system of beliefs: ‘What really tests the judgement is the extent of our accepted world that is implicated with it and would be carried down with it if it fell. And that is the test of coherence’.²⁷ Second, even with respect to judgements concerning how things are in our present environment, he argues that there is still room for error here, and that as a result (as scientific practice shows) ‘observation of this kind is never taken by *itself* as conclusive, as it ought to be if correspondence with perceived fact is to be our test. In case of conflict it is accepted only if the consequences of rejecting generally the sort of evidence here presented would be intellectually more disastrous than those of accepting it. And this is the appeal to coherence’.²⁸

On self-evidence, Blanshard’s main argument is that in fact, where we often seem to be using self-evidence as a test, we are in reality using coherence:

Ask the plain man how he know that a straight line is the shortest line between two points or, what seems to him equally axiomatic, that $2+2=4$, and he will probably answer that such things wear their truth on their face. But if this were challenged, would he not naturally say something like this: ‘So you doubt, do you, that a straight line is the shortest line? But you can’t really

²⁶ Cf. Otto Neurath, ‘The Lost Wanderers and the Auxiliary Motive (On the Psychology of Decision)’, in his *Philosophical Papers 1913-1946*, ed. and trans. Robert S. Cohen and Marie Neurath (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), pp. 1-12, p. 3:

Whoever wants to create a world-picture or a scientific system must operate with doubtful premisses. Each attempt to create a world-picture by starting from a *tabula rasa* and making series of statements starting with ones recognized as definitely true is necessarily full of trickeries.

²⁷ Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*, 2 vols (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939), II, p. 227.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-7. For more on how Blanshard thought that scientific practice was coherentist in nature, see ‘Interrogation of Brand Blanshard’, in Sydney and Beatrice Rome (eds.), *Philosophical Interrogations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. 201-57, pp. 214-6.

live up to such a doubt. If a straight line isn't shortest, why do you cut across a field? Why are roads built straight? For that matter, is there anything we have been taught to believe about space and motion that wouldn't have to be given up if we gave up belief in the axiom? As for the 2+2 example, it is really the same thing again. Try making the sum anything but four, and see where it takes you. If 2+2 were 5, 1+1 would not be 2, and then 1 would not be 1; in fact not a single number, or relation between numbers, would remain what it is; all arithmetic would go.' That is the sort of defence, I think, that the plain man would offer; at any rate he would recognize it as reasonable if offered by someone else. And that means that his certainty does not rest on self-evidence merely. He is appealing to the coherence of his proposition with an enormous mass of others which he sees must stand or fall with it.²⁹

Blanshard is thus arguing that while it may appear that 'the plain man' uses the test of self-evidence to certify the truth of some propositions, in fact the test he is really using is coherence, so that here as elsewhere Blanshard is concerned with coherence as a *criterion*, not as an account of justification.

IV

So far, then, I hope to have provided some textual support for my claim, that the earlier coherentists were coherentists about truth-testing, rather than coherentists about justification. Now, however, I want to consider an objection to that view, which is that I have exaggerated the distinction between contemporary coherentism and this earlier tradition, in so far as some contemporary coherentists do end up treating coherence as a test for truth, much like these earlier coherentists.

This objection might run as follows. For contemporary coherentists, justification is not *sui generis*, but is tied to the notion of truth: for, it is widely accepted that nothing can be a standard of justification unless it is truth-conducive, that is, unless conforming to that standard means one is likely to arrive at truth (or, more weakly, unless in conforming to that standard one has *some reason to think* one is likely to arrive at truth). Thus, contemporary coherentists like Davidson and Bonjour go out of their way to argue that 'coherence yields correspondence',³⁰ in order to establish that coherence as a standard of justification is truth-conducive. But then, coherence on this view *does* end up being a test for truth, and not *merely* a theory of justification, as I have tried to claim.

Now, my response to this objection is not to deny that in the end, contemporary coherentists like Davidson and Bonjour do end up proposing

²⁹ Ibid, p. 244. Cf. also pp. 430-1.

³⁰ Cf. Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, p. 158: 'a satisfactory metajustification of our envisaged coherentist theory of empirical justification must involve showing in some way that achieving coherence in one's system of beliefs is also at least likely to yield correspondence'. For Davidson's argument that 'coherence yields truth', see his 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', reprinted in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 137-58.

coherence as a test for truth, for the reason given in the objection.³¹ Nonetheless, I do not think this makes ‘early’ and contemporary coherentists indistinguishable, because there is still an important difference in the route each takes to this conclusion, and thus in the dialectic of their respective positions.

The difference in route is this: While the contemporary coherentist comes to treat coherence as a test of truth, he does so *indirectly*, having started with the question of justification, whereas the ‘early’ coherentist comes to it directly. Why does this make a difference? Well, because the contemporary coherentist bases his claim that coherence is a test for truth on a *prior* argument for coherence as the structure of justification, plus the claim that justification involves truth-conducivity. This indirectness means that the contemporary coherentist arrives at criterial coherentism via two further contentious steps, which introduce complexities into the debate which the ‘early’ coherentists avoid. Thus, first of all, the contemporary coherentist must defend coherence as the structure of justification, along the lines familiar in the current debate, which largely hinges on whether experience can serve as a reason for belief on its own, or whether it requires further reason for its support. To put this issue in the kind of Sellarsian terminology that has characterised this controversy: If perceptual experiences are sufficiently distinguished from beliefs and judgements, then they can serve only a causal role in relation to beliefs, and so fall outside the ‘space of reasons’ and fail to confer justification;³² on the other hand, if we give experiences enough conceptual content to locate them within the ‘space of reasons’, they constitute just another dox-

³¹ It may be worth noting, nonetheless, that not *all* contemporary coherentists make this move. A prominent counter-example would be Rorty, who seems happy to dissent from the consensus that justification must be truth-conducive, because he is suspicious of the kind of ‘inflated’ and ‘realist’ view of truth this would involve. As ever, he tries to enlist Davidson in his support here, whereas I think Davidson is more properly seen as part of the consensus Rorty is opposing:

Passages such as this [from ‘The Structure and Content of Truth’] suggest that Davidson would categorically repudiate the suggestion that philosophers need to explain why an increase in justification leads to an increased likelihood of truth, as opposed to acceptability to more and more audiences.

(Richard Rorty, ‘Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright’, in his *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 19-42, p. 24).

³² Cf. Davidson, ‘A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’, p. 143:

The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in *this* sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation for a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified.

astic state, and so are no more basic than other beliefs, and hence require their own kind of justification. Secondly, if the contemporary coherentist can settle this debate in his favour, he must then show how justification is linked with truth, such that coherence as a theory of justification leads to coherence as a criterion of truth. For some, this step must involve engagement with the sceptic, because they take seriously the demand that we *establish* that our standards of justification are truth-conducive. Thus, as a result, both Davidson and BonJour try to offer a priori arguments to establish that coherence leads to truth, and so that coherence is truth-conducive as a test for our beliefs. For other coherentists, however, that our standards of justification are truth-conducive is *not* something we have to establish, as they arrive at coherentism as a theory of justification by internal investigation of our doxastic practices, having taken it for granted that those practices are in order and that the sceptic is in error.³³ Such coherentists might therefore claim that because coherentism is the proper account of justification, and because we are not required to *argue against* scepticism, we can just assume that our (coherentist) standards of justification are also truth-conducive. Thus, some coherentists see this step from justificatory coherentism to coherence as a test for truth as something that needs to be argued for *in addition* to the first step regarding coherentism as a theory of justification, while others might see it as a step that just follows from the first without the need for further argument (although, of course, this *in itself* requires some argument, regarding the relative significance of scepticism, for example).

Now, as I see it, the dialectical situation of the earlier coherentists is very different. They come to the claim that coherence is a test of truth *directly*, based on the argument against infallibilism, rather than *indirectly*, via the question of justification, and of how justification yields truth: their claim is independent of debates on these issues, and thus they are not required to engage in them. In my view, this puts them in a different, and stronger, dialectical position in respect of the question concerning coherence as a test of truth, than contemporary coherentists. So, while I would allow that contemporary coherentists can find their own way to engage with the question of whether or not coherence is a test of truth, the earlier coherentists had a different (and dialectically stronger) way of doing so, in a manner that once again brings out the contrast between these two strands in coherentist thought.

³³ Cf. Gilbert Harman, *Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), especially pp. 3-19. For an acknowledgement of the difference I am highlighting here between types of coherentism, cf. BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, p. 249, note 1:

Harman's position, although having a number of interesting features of its own, quite deliberately begs the question regarding scepticism and thus has little to say to the main issues under consideration here.

It might be said, however, that this claim is itself exaggerated, as it overstates the difference in focus between the earlier and contemporary coherentists; it could be argued that in fact, these earlier coherentists address many of the same issues as contemporary coherentists, so I am wrong to suggest that there is any dialectical difference between the two positions. I will briefly consider two examples that raise objections of this sort.

First, a critic might point out that Bradley is as much an enemy of ‘the given’ as any contemporary coherentist, and so it might appear that he is merely foreshadowing the contemporary concern with whether or not perceptual experience can serve *on its own* as a source of justification (which is what the justificatory foundationalist claims and the justificatory coherentist denies). Bradley is then here taken to be arguing that because human experience is judgemental, then our experience cannot be basic—and so as arguing much as a contemporary coherentist would do.³⁴ But, I would contend, to interpret Bradley in this way is to see him through the perspective of the contemporary debate, and that in fact his position is not the one attributed to him, but rather one which fits with his main focus of interest, which is in directly establishing coherence as a test for truth. As we have seen, his strategy for doing so is to attack infallibilism; and, his attack on ‘the given’ is part of *this* attack, rather than on the suitability of perceptual experience to serve as a basis for justification. For, his argument is that because all experience involves an element of judgement, it involves the possibility of *error*, and hence fallibility, in our perceptual experience of the world, and so cannot be used by the criterial foundationalist, to make perceptual awareness a privileged test for truth:

And why, I ask, for the intelligence must there be datum without interpretation any more than interpretation without datum? To me the opposite holds good, and I therefore conclude that no given fact is sacrosanct. With every fact of perception and memory a modified interpretation is in principle possible, and no such fact therefore is given free from all possibility of error.³⁵

I would claim, then, that what is striking here is that although Bradley denies that experience ever involves a pure ‘datum’, he does so *not* in order to ques-

³⁴ Cf. David J. Crossley, ‘Justification and the Foundations of Empirical Knowledge’, in James Bradley (ed.), *Philosophy After F. H. Bradley* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), pp. 307-29, pp. 308-9:

...if the foundationalist’s basic experiences occur ‘below’ the level of judgement, how, Bradley asks, could they be *used*; how could they be or express facts (*ETR [Essays on Truth and Reality]* 204)? This is similar to Bonjour’s worry about how non-cognitive mental states lacking propositional content could ever justify other beliefs in one’s belief system, and thereby presents one horn of the foundationalist dilemma.

Cf. also Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 29-30.

³⁵ Bradley, ‘On Truth and Coherence’, p. 204.

tion the justificatory role of experience (as the contemporary coherentist does), but to emphasise the consequent *fallibility* of experience, in order to defeat *criteria* foundationalism; and this shows, I think, that the dialectic of ‘early’ and contemporary coherentism is distinct on this issue, as I have claimed.

A second example that might be used to criticise my position is that of Blanshard. For, it could be argued, Blanshard’s position is rather like those contemporary coherentists (such as BonJour and Davidson) who try to move from coherence as a theory of justification to coherence as a test of truth via an a priori argument to show that coherence is truth-conducive—so, once again (the objection would run) my emphasis on the difference between the dialectical positions of early and contemporary coherentism must be exaggerated. The claim here is that, after all, Blanshard takes coherence to be the *nature* of truth, and he does so in order to guarantee that coherence is truth-conducive in a way that is designed to answer scepticism, and so move *from* coherence as a theory of justification *to* coherence as a test for truth—so on this view, it would seem that there is no difference between Blanshard on the one side, and BonJour and Davidson (for example) on the other. This is how BonJour sees Blanshard’s position, though he himself thinks it is not necessary to adopt a coherence theory of truth in order to establish that coherence is truth-conducive, and that this can be established in another way:

Having concluded on this basis that ‘coherence is our sole criterion of truth’ ([Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*, II] 259), that is, the sole standard of epistemic justification, Blanshard proceeds to consider the problem of how this standard is related to truth itself. The basic idea here is that a correct test of truth (or standard of justification) must somehow be capable of being shown to be intelligibly connected with that of which it is to be the test, with truth itself. Now it is obvious that substantially this same idea, construed as a *challenge* to any proposed account of epistemic justification, has shaped [BonJour’s] discussion above... The problem is that Blanshard concludes far too quickly that the only way to solve the problem of connecting a coherence *test* of truth with truth itself is to adopt the view that coherence, rather than correspondence, is also the *nature* of truth... Since Blanshard’s sole argument in favor of a coherence theory of justification is that it is the only alternative to skepticism, it is obviously question-begging to respond to skeptical doubts about the truth-conduciveness of coherentist justification by appealing to a coherentist conception of truth whose only rationale is that it is appropriately related to the very standard of justification in question. Thus Blanshard’s response...is quite inadequate.³⁶

According to BonJour, therefore, Blanshard comes to adopt a coherence theory of truth in order to offer a ‘metajustification’ of the kind BonJour thinks is needed: ‘such a metajustification of one’s proposed standards of justification constitutes the only cogent response to the skeptic who, while perhaps conceding that the standards in question are those we actually follow in our cognitive practice, questions whether following them is really epistemically

³⁶ BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, pp. 214-5.

rational, whether the beliefs we regard as justified really are justified in an epistemically relevant sense'.³⁷

However, as Bonjour himself notes in the discussion of Blanshard just cited, taken in this way Blanshard's arguments look particularly unpromising in relation to scepticism. For, Blanshard's argument for adopting the coherence theory of truth is to *assume* coherence as test for truth, and to argue that because our belief-system would be *less* coherent if we held a correspondence theory rather than a coherence theory of truth, then the coherence theory of truth is correct:

Now, if we accept coherence as a test of truth, does that commit us to any conclusions about the *nature* of truth...? [T]here [does not] seem to be any direct path from the acceptance of coherence as the test of truth to its acceptance as the nature of truth. Nevertheless there is an indirect path. If we accept coherence as our test, we must use it everywhere. We must therefore use it to test the suggestion that truth *is* other than coherence. But if we do, we shall find that we must reject the suggestion as leading to *incoherence*. Coherence is a pertinacious concept and, like the well-known camel, if one lets it get its nose under the edge of the tent, it will shortly walk off with the whole...

[T]he attempt to combine coherence as the test of truth with correspondence as the nature of truth will not pass muster by its own test. The result is *incoherence*. We believe that an application of the test to other theories of truth would lead to a like result. The argument is this: assume coherence as the test, and you will be driven by the incoherence of your alternatives to the conclusion that it is also the nature of truth.³⁸

Now of course, if we take it (as Bonjour does) that Blanshard is here trying to offer a 'metajustification' of coherence as a test of truth, by arguing for coherence as the nature of truth, using coherence as a test, then his response to the sceptic on this score is indeed peculiarly 'question-begging' and 'inadequate'. But, in my view, this is precisely to misconstrue the dialectics of the situation in the way I have suggested. Blanshard is *not* trying to move *from* coherence as a theory of justification *to* coherence as the test for truth, and so is not trying to answer the sceptical regress of justification problem. Rather, he takes himself to have already shown how in our practices of inquiry, we generally use coherence as a test for truth,³⁹ and assuming the reliability of

³⁷ Ibid., p. 157. For another commentator who takes it that Blanshard comes to defend his coherence theory of truth in order to have a better response to the sceptic, see Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 231-6.

³⁸ Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*, II, pp. 266-9.

³⁹ For evidence that a coherentist like Blanshard is simply trying to provide an accurate account of our practices of inquiry, cf. *The Nature of Thought*, II, p. 219:

If an opponent is to be convinced [that something is a criterion of truth], then, it must be by a process, not of proving one's own criterion or of refuting his, but of showing him that what he thinks he holds he does not really hold, since the supposition that he does is inconsistent with the facts of his intellectual practice.

those practices (which he seems entitled to do in this *non-sceptical* context),⁴⁰ he can take it that coherence is a reliable truth indicator; that being so, he then applies the test to the question ‘what is truth?’, to see what answer delivers the most coherent result, and claims that the test favours the coherence theory of truth as an answer, because it gives us the most satisfying explanation of why coherence is reliable as a test for truth.⁴¹ Unlike BonJour, therefore, Blanshard is not trying to establish against the sceptic that coherence *is* reliable as a test of truth; he is trying to show that coherence as the nature of truth best helps us understand *why* it is, and so in terms of this criterion, should be accepted as our account of truth, as well as its test. The difference in the dialectic of BonJour’s coherentism and Blanshard highlights the distinction I have wanted to draw attention to, superficial similarities notwithstanding.⁴²

⁴⁰ In a later article, Blanshard refers to it as a ‘postulate’, which ‘is progressively confirmed in experience’, while there are also some metaphysical arguments in its favour: see Brand Blanshard, ‘Reply to Nicholas Rescher’, in Paul Arthur Schlipp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1980), pp. 589-600, p. 592.

⁴¹ It would seem that later reflection led Blanshard to change his mind on this, where he came round to thinking that all that is necessary for this explanation is that reality form a coherent system, rather than truth itself consisting in coherence. This allows Blanshard to go back to adopting something very like a correspondence theory of truth: see ‘Reply to Nicholas Rescher’, p. 590. He had discussed this more modest kind of coherentism in *The Nature of Thought*, but there had argued that the coherentist needed to go further: see *The Nature of Thought*, II, p. 267.

⁴² This also suggests a way of taking Rescher’s position, that would enable him to escape BonJour’s charge that this position involves circularity. BonJour argues that Rescher cannot use pragmatic success as grounds for thinking coherence as a standard of justification is truth-conducive, as this is an empirical claim about the adoption of that standard, which then is itself either (1) unjustified; (2) justified by a circular appeal to coherence as a standard of justification; (3) justified by appeal to some other standard of justification (see BonJour, *The Structure of Knowledge*, p. 10 and pp. 222-229; ‘Rescher’s Epistemological System’, in Ernest Sosa (ed.), *The Philosophy of Nicholas Rescher* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), pp. 157-172; ‘Rescher’s Idealistic Pragmatism’, *Review of Metaphysics* 29 (1976), pp. 702-726). If Rescher is seen as trying to resolve the regress of justification problem (as he sometimes presents himself as doing), then this may indeed be a real difficulty. But if, rather, Rescher is seen as simply trying to identify coherence as a criterion that is fundamental to our method of inquiry (as he also sometimes presents himself as doing), then I see nothing circular in going on to claim that in so far as these inquiries seem to be pragmatically successful we have every reason to think that this method is reliable. Cf. Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth*, pp. 256-7:

Our strategy is this: to show that a great part of scientific method, of information processing theory, and of the general theory of knowledge, can be successfully accommodated within the framework of the coherence criterion. Hence the successful record of these disciplines in their established routines can be invoked on behalf of the coherence theory itself. In so far as these cognitive disciplines have proved themselves successful in the governance of our conduct of affairs and in so far as they can be incorporated within the province of the coherence criterion of factual truth, an appeal to successful experience can be made on behalf of our coherence theory itself.

V

We have therefore seen how assimilating early coherentists like Bradley and Blanshard too closely to contemporary coherentism can lead to a misunderstanding of their position. I will now argue in conclusion that respecting this distinction also means that current debates concerning coherentism do not carry over straightforwardly to the position of these coherentists, so that arguments against the former are not necessarily so strong when applied to the latter. I will focus on two points.

V.1 A first, and obvious, way in which the distinction I have drawn makes a difference concerns the issue of ‘moderate foundationalism’, and how this provides an attractive alternative to justificatory coherentism. The moderate foundationalist, as we have seen, denies that foundationalism needs to be committed to infallible (or incorrigible, or indubitable) basic beliefs as constituting the block to the regress of justification: for example, a moderate foundationalist might take these basic beliefs to be intrinsically credible beliefs, or reliably caused beliefs, while accepting that beliefs of these sorts are fallible.⁴³ This allows the moderate foundationalist to claim that one of the coherentist’s best arguments against foundationalism—that to be a foundationalist one must be an infallibilist—is misdirected, as in fact the former does not require the latter.⁴⁴

Now, this foundationalist strategy is persuasive as a response to *justificatory* coherentism, for it does indeed seem plausible to say that justification does not require certainty, and that perhaps there is a class of (say) intrinsically credible beliefs which a person is warranted in believing without further support, provided he has no grounds on which to doubt them. An ‘innocent until proven guilty’ strategy of this kind would seem to leave the way open for a moderate foundationalist response to the justificatory regress problem, which provides a distinctively foundationalist response to it, while avoiding the problematic appeal to infallible beliefs, which gives impetus to the justificatory coherentist.

⁴³ It should be noted, therefore, that I am using the term ‘moderate foundationalist’ in the narrow sense of someone who holds that fallible beliefs can be foundational; I am not using it in the broader sense, of someone who is prepared to accept coherentism as an aspect of justification *alongside* foundationalism.

⁴⁴ Cf. Mark Pastin, ‘C. I. Lewis’s Radical Foundationalism’, pp. 418-9:

No question is of more importance in evaluating foundationalism than the question of whether or not a foundationalist must be a radical foundationalist. For the main objection raised to foundationalist views is that there are no absolutely certain propositions, or at least not a sufficient supply of them, to support all empirical knowledge... But this objection applies only to radical foundationalism and not to modest foundationalism.

But of course, while the foundationalist can respond to the *justificatory* coherentist in this way, he is not able to reply to the *critical* coherentist so easily. For, in this context, in allowing for the possibility of fallibilism, the foundationalist is in effect conceding their position to the coherentist: for, this is to admit that there are no certain beliefs that can be used as a test for the truth of other beliefs, so that any belief may have to be revised in the light of the overall coherence of our belief-system, which serves as the ultimate criterion. Thus, in the contemporary (justificatory) context, the moderate foundationalist can accept fallibilism while still being a foundationalist, because he can still argue that these fallible basic beliefs are justified even though they do not get their justification from their inferential relation to other beliefs, so that coherence is not necessary for justification; but in the earlier (critical) context, if the foundationalist endorses fallibilism, then it seems he can no longer claim that coherence is redundant as a test for truth, as it will now be needed to sort accurate from inaccurate input, in a way that is not required if that input is infallible (or if it can be tested against some other infallible input). It seems, then, that moderate (or fallibilist) foundationalism leaves the justificatory foundationalist with a position that is still recognizably at odds with the corresponding form of coherentism, whereas this is not true of the critical foundationalist.

This, I think, also suggests an historical point concerning foundationalism. Contemporary moderate foundationalists have often been puzzled as to why more traditional foundationalists have felt the need to be committed to infallibilism, usually diagnosing some sort of conceptual confusion or extra assumption as a kind of pathological explanation.⁴⁵ But on my account, a philosophical motivation for this commitment to certainty emerges, as required for *critical* foundationalism; for if the foundationalist rejects coherence as a 'final test' for truth, then he is required to hold (as we have seen) that there are infallible beliefs which will not require this test, and this makes infallibilism a core commitment of the position, rather than something that arises from a non-foundationalist assumption, or a mistaken implication that could easily be dropped.

⁴⁵ Cf. Alston, 'Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?', p. 41: 'Though foundationalists have often taken their foundations to be incorrigible, they need not have done so in order to be distinctive foundationalists'. Cf. also Anthony Quinton, *The Nature of Things* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 142-71, and Mark Pastin, 'Modest Foundationalism and Self-Warrant', p. 280:

Many foundationalists undoubtedly would hold that core propositions are not only self-warranted, but also absolutely certain, incorrigible, or infallible. I believe that we may regard this as following not from the foundationalism of these philosophers *per se*, but from their accepting some principle such as: If propositions in the empirical core were not absolutely certain (incorrigible, infallible), then no empirical propositions could be probable to any degree.

A case study of this is C. I. Lewis. In the current literature, Lewis is treated as an archetypal ‘immodest’ or ‘radical’ foundationalist, who held that foundationalism requires infallibilism. On the other hand, it has been argued that Lewis goes much further than he needs to with his commitment to certainty, having been misled by his notorious argument from probability: ‘unless something is certain in terms of experience, then nothing of empirical import is even probable’.⁴⁶ This argument is now widely felt to be unpersuasive,⁴⁷ so that nothing seems to stand in the way of weakening Lewis’s position. Indeed, it is agreed that Lewis himself came close to a modest foundationalism in places, when he recognized the role of memory in justification, and acknowledged its fallibility.⁴⁸ Taken as a justificatory foundationalist, therefore, it seems easy to dispense with his infallibilism and so weaken his foundationalism, and thus to render his position more plausible to contemporary tastes.⁴⁹

Now, while this re-working of Lewis’s position might succeed if he is viewed as merely a justificatory foundationalist, I think it cannot apply so easily to the other side of his foundationalism, which is criterial; but that there are these *two* aspects to Lewis’s foundationalism has been overlooked, along with the distinction itself. In fact, however, the distinction is marked quite clearly in Lewis’s own terminology, by his talk of *verification* on the one hand, and *justification* on the other.⁵⁰

To understand this distinction, it is important to note that Lewis has a particular view of belief: namely, that to believe something is very much like entertaining a hypothesis or making a prediction about future experience. For example, to believe that ‘there is a doorknob in front of me’ is to believe that ‘if I were to reach out my hand, it would seem to me that I was touching a doorknob’. Now, if entertaining a belief is like forming a hypothesis, we can ask two questions: was it rational to form this hypothesis, and, is the hypothesis true? The first, for Lewis, is the question of justification: does the believer have reasonable grounds on which to form the hypothesis, for example, does it appear to him that there is a doorknob in front of him, is he in good lighting conditions etc.? The second question is the question of verifica-

⁴⁶ Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, p. 235.

⁴⁷ Cf. Hans Reichenbach, ‘The Experiential Element in Knowledge’, *The Philosophical Review*, 61 (1952), pp. 147-59; Nelson Goodman, ‘Sense and Certainty’, *The Philosophical Review*, 61 (1952), pp. 160-7; Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 42-46.

⁴⁸ Cf. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, Chapter XI.

⁴⁹ Cf. Pastin, ‘C. I. Lewis’s Radical Foundationalism’; Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, especially pp. 34-51; Susan Haack, ‘C. I. Lewis’, in Marcus G. Singer (ed.), *American Philosophy*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series: 19 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 215-38.

⁵⁰ Cf. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, pp. 257-8. For a helpful discussion of this distinction in Lewis, see Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America*, 2 vols (New York: Capricorn Books, 1977), II, pp. 916-30.

tion: does his future action show that the hypothesis is true, for example, when he reaches out, does he indeed seem to touch a doorknob?

Now, given this distinction, the motivation for Lewis's infallibilism can be seen to come not just from his view of justification, but also from his view of verification: namely, that no *confirmation* of a hypothesis (and thus no *verified* belief) would be possible unless our perceptual experience was (at some level) certain. It is notable, I think, that Lewis talks as much about conformation, corroboration, and verification as he does about warrant and justifying evidence, in the well-known passage from *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* where he insists on certainty:

If what is to confirm the objective belief and thus show it probable, were itself an objective belief and hence no more than probable, then the objective belief to be confirmed would only probably be rendered probable. Thus unless we distinguish the objective truths belief in which experience may render probable, from those presentations and passages of experience which provide this warrant, any citation of evidence for a statement about objective reality, and any mentionable corroboration of it, will become involved in an infinite regress of the merely probable—or else it will go round in a circle—and the probability will fail to be genuine... Two propositions which have some *antecedent* probability may, under certain circumstances, become *more* credible because of their congruence with one another. But objective judgments *none* of which could acquire probability by direct confirmations in experience, would gain no support by leaning up against one another in the fashion of the 'coherence theory of truth'. No empirical statement can become credible without reference to experience.⁵¹

Lewis can be read here as proposing a standard foundationalist response to the question of justification: that in order to be justified, the regress of grounds for a belief must end in certainty. But I think he can *also* be read as proposing a foundationalist response to the question of verification: that in order to test the truth of a belief (which may or may not be *antecedently* justified), then this must at some level be measured against data that is certain, otherwise verification could not occur. Thus, even if the modest foundationalists seeking to revise Lewis's position here are right with respect to justification, this would not address Lewis's concern about verification, and about how truth can be established within a fallibilistic framework.⁵²

⁵¹ Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, pp. 186-7.

⁵² In this respect, I think Lewis's position is to be contrasted to the infallibilism of H. H. Price, which was focused only on justification. Cf. H. H. Price, *Belief* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), pp. 101-2:

We all think that some questions can be conclusively settled by means of sense-perception... If so, it is perfectly proper to speak of observed facts, as we all do in practice, whatever philosophical theories we hold. And this is one way (the most familiar way) in which the regress of beliefs supported by other beliefs comes to an end. This regress—the regress of evidence for our evidence, as I called it—is terminated sometimes by an observed fact, that is by a fact ascertained or discovered by means of sense-perception.

If I am right about this, it also shows that the way in which Lewis's critics have used his views on memory to attack his infallibilism is also less effective than it may seem. The difficulty here appears to come from Lewis's acknowledgement of the epistemological significance of memory, as well as present experience. For Haack, this acknowledgement again betrays a 'tension' in Lewis' position: she argues that Lewis is forced to allow memory a role, because he sees that one's present experiences are insufficient to justify one's beliefs, without further evidence from what one remembers; but he is also forced to admit that memory is fallible, and so his infallibilism is fatally compromised: 'In effect, then, Lewis is being forced to retreat from strong to weak foundationalism by the pressure of something like the swings and roundabouts argument—apprehensions of one's present experience are, or so Lewis thinks, certain, but they are insufficient to form the basis, and while the addition of memorial judgements about past experience might provide a sufficient basis, it is at the price of the sacrifice of certainty'.⁵³

Now, once again, I think the situation is more complex. For, while Lewis may indeed be obliged to move towards a modest foundationalism with respect to justification by his views on memory, this does not compromise his *critical* foundationalism. On the one hand, Lewis's critics may be right to argue that Lewis wants to give memory a role in justifying beliefs, in so far as predictions about one's future experiences (which is what beliefs are for Lewis) are in part grounded on one's memory of past experiences; and if he is a fallibilist about memory (as he appears to be) then this suggests his justificatory foundationalist framework should also be modest or weak. But on the other hand, Lewis does not appear to think that memory needs to play a role in the verification or confirmation of a belief, as this can be done by immediate experience, so that his fallibilism about memory need *not* compromise his infallibilism about verification. Once we are clear about the distinction between justification and verification, therefore, we can be clearer about the role infallibilism plays in Lewis's position, which is more complex than his modest foundationalist critics have seen.

V. 2 Secondly, let me point to another issue where it seems to me that drawing the distinction between the two kinds of coherentism I have identified shows how in fact each raises different questions, this time concerning how what is taken to be a standard problem for coherentism should be treated. The standard problem concerns what role (if any) the coherentist can give to experience or observation within his picture, conceived of as some sort of input by the world into our belief system (so this has come to be known as the

⁵³ Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, pp. 48-9. Lewis's views on memory have been widely felt to create difficulties for his more general epistemological outlook: cf. Pastin, 'C. I. Lewis's Radical Foundationalism', p. 415: 'Lewis's views concerning memory are notoriously difficult to integrate into his overall position'.

‘input objection’), and so how he can prevent our belief system being cut off from the world (so it has also been called the ‘isolation objection’). The problem is that unless the coherentist *can* accommodate experience or observation in some way, then it looks as if coherentism must treat empirically grounded belief systems and belief systems that are in no experiential contact with reality (e.g., fairy stories) as somehow on a par, as long as both are coherent, which seems problematic; but then, how is it possible for the coherentist to make this accommodation of experience, without compromising his coherentism?

Within the contemporary debate, this problem is seen as an issue concerning justification, where it comes to this: on the one hand, can the coherentist claim that an empirically grounded belief system is more justified than one that is not, without on the other hand giving experience some intrinsic justificatory force that has nothing to do with coherence? Attempts have been made by various contemporary coherentists to show that the latter difficulty can be avoided, where perhaps the most elaborate strategy is offered by Bonjour;⁵⁴ but by his own recent admission attempts of this kind have proved unsatisfactory on closer inspection.⁵⁵

The question here, however, is whether earlier coherentists faced this problem in the same way.⁵⁶ My suggestion is that they did not, in so far as for them the issue was not justification, but truth. For them, then, the problem was this: on the one hand, how can coherence as a test be reliable, unless the system of beliefs is somehow anchored or related to the world via perception; but on the other hand, if it *is* so related, how can just coherence be the test of truth, and not also perceptual experience? Schlick puts this objection as follows:

If one is to take coherence seriously as a general criterion of truth, then one must consider arbitrary fairy stories to be as true as a historical report, or as statements in a textbook of chemistry, provided the story is constructed in such a way that no contradiction ever arises. I can depict by help of fantasy a grotesque world full of bizarre adventures: the coherence philosopher must believe in the truth of my account provided only I take care of the mutual compatibility of my statements, and also take the precaution of avoiding any collision with the usual description of the world, by placing the scene of my story on a distant star, where no observation is possible. Indeed, strictly speaking, I don’t even require this precaution; I can just as well demand that the others have to adapt themselves to my description; and not the other way round. They cannot then object that, say, this happening runs counter to the observations,

⁵⁴ Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, especially pp. 111-138. Cf. also Jonathan Dancy, ‘On Coherence Theories of Justification: Can An Empiricist Be A Coherentist?’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1984), pp. 359-65.

⁵⁵ See Laurence Bonjour, ‘Haack on Justification and Experience’, *Synthese* 112 (1997), pp. 13-23, pp. 13-15, and ‘The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism’, pp. 129-30.

⁵⁶ In standard treatments, it is assumed that they did. For example, on Bradley, see Crossley, ‘Justification and the Foundations of Empirical Knowledge’.

for according to the coherence theory there is no question of observations, but only of the compatibility of statements.

Since no one dreams of holding the statements of a story book true and those of a text of physics false, the coherence view fails utterly. Something more, that is, must be added to coherence, namely, a principle in terms of which the compatibility is to be established, and this would alone then be the actual criterion.⁵⁷

As I read it, Schlick's version of the input (or isolation) objection is directed squarely at the criterial coherentist, rather than at the justificatory coherentist. That is, the question is why, if the coherentist claims that coherence is a test for truth, the coherentist isn't obliged to treat a consistent fairy story as true, just as much as a historical report, where it is assumed that the coherentist cannot appeal to the observational content of the latter over the former, as this would be to introduce observation as a test over and above coherence, and so would undermine coherentism. Schlick thinks that coherentists have only failed to see this because they have taken it for granted that the statements being tested are the ones we ordinarily get from experience anyway, and so for which the issue does not arise; but of course (Schlick thinks) the coherentist cannot take this for granted without again treating observation statements as criterial, and so without again compromising his coherentism:

The astounding error of the 'coherence theory' can be explained only by the fact that its defenders and expositors were thinking only of such statements as actually occur in science, and took them as their only examples. Under these conditions the relation of non-contradiction was in fact sufficient, but only because these statements are of a very special character. They have, that is, in a certain sense (to be explained presently) their 'origin' in observation statements, they derive, as one may confidently say in the traditional way of speaking, 'from experience'.⁵⁸

Now, Bradley discusses an objection of this kind in detail in 'On Truth and Coherence':

'But,' it may still be objected, 'my fancy is unlimited. I can therefore invent an imaginary world even more orderly than my known world. And further this fanciful arrangement might possibly be made so wide that the world of perception would become for me in comparison small and inconsiderable. Hence, my perceived world, so far as not supporting my fancied arrangement, might be included within it as error. Such a consequence would or might lead to

⁵⁷ Schlick, 'The Foundation of Knowledge', pp. 215-6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215. Cf. also A. J. Ayer, 'Verification and Experience', in A. J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 228-43, pp. 234-35:

We may conclude then that the attempt to lay down a criterion for determining the truth of empirical propositions which does not contain any reference to 'facts' or 'reality' or 'experience,' has not proved successful. It seems plausible only when it involves a tacit introduction of that very principle of agreement with reality which it is designed to obviate.

confusion in theory and to disaster in practice. And yet the result follows from your view inevitably, unless after all you fall back upon the certainty of perception.⁵⁹

Bradley's first response to this objection is to question the counterexample, by arguing that it is inconceivable that our imagination could construct a world more coherent than the one given to us by perception, because for every imagined feature of the world, we could equally imagine a feature with which it would *not* cohere, so 'these contrary fancies will balance the first',⁶⁰ and so will 'cancel each other out', leaving us no grounds on which to doubt the facts of perception. However, he recognizes that perhaps this reply will not have addressed the fundamental worry here:

Again, if the conclusion and the principle advocated here [i.e., coherentism] are accepted, the whole Universe seems too subject to the individual knower. What is given counts for so little and the arrangement counts for so much, while in fact the arranger, if we are to have real knowledge, seems so dependent on the world.⁶¹

To this deeper worry, Bradley gives the following reply:

But the individual who knows is here wrongly isolated, and then, because of that, is confronted with a mere alien Universe. And the individual, as so isolated, I agree, could do nothing, for indeed he is nothing.⁶²

Bradley's point here, I take it, is this. He is allowing that of course coherence as a criterion of truth could not work, unless the knower had some sort of contact with the world, through experience causing him to have beliefs. But what he is denying, is that this coherence is redundant as a test, because experience does not provide us with infallible beliefs, between which there is no conflict, and using which we can decide what to believe at other levels. Thus, as a coherentist, Bradley does not have confidence in coherence as a test because he has unconsciously or illicitly taken it for granted that the beliefs being tested are perceptual ones (as Schlick accuses coherentists of doing): rather, he applies the test to those beliefs because he recognizes that only when so applied will the test work. But (and this is the crucial point), I think that Bradley can consistently allow that coherence as a test will only work if our beliefs are grounded in experience, while still denying that this gives perceptual beliefs any privileged role in the testing procedure as some sort of infallible yardstick or Schlickean 'measuring rod', and so while still rejecting criterial foundationalism.⁶³

⁵⁹ Bradley, 'On Truth and Coherence', p. 214.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 215.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 217-8.

⁶² Ibid., p. 218.

⁶³ A comparison with the method of reflective equilibrium in ethics may be helpful here. Taken as a coherence method of inquiry, proponents of this method can consistently allow that the method of reflective equilibrium will only work (that is, lead us to a correct

Hence, as Bradley insists at the outset of the article, he can be an empiricist *and* a criterial coherentist:

For the sake of clearness let me begin by mentioning some of the things which I do *not* believe. I do not believe in any knowledge which is independent of feeling and sensation. On sensation and feeling I am sure that we depend for the material of our knowledge...

But, if I do not believe all this, does it follow that I have to accept independent facts? Does it follow that perception and memory give me truths which I must take up and keep as they are given me, truths which in principle cannot be erroneous? This surely would be to pass from one false extreme to another.⁶⁴

Likewise, Blanshard is happy to admit that there must be some input into our belief system from 'the data of experience': 'Indeed, escape from it would mean the abandonment of any anchorage not only for common sense, but also for speculative thought, the dancing of an "unearthly ballet of bloodless categories"'';⁶⁵ but at the same time, like Bradley, he argues that data of this sort is not infallible, and so foundationalism cannot replace coherentism as a test for truth: 'Coherence in fact can stand alone only if the fact as given is stable, in the sense of ultimate and incorrigible; for only then do we have a fixed object with which our judgment may be compared. But no such objects are fixed, and no such facts are incorrigible.'⁶⁶

We have therefore seen that as a theory of truth-testing, the coherentist's opponent is the infallibilist, who claims that truth can be arrived at by working out from a set of infallible beliefs. The coherentist denies any such infallible beliefs, and so argues that coherence must be used as a test for truth. But, I have argued, the coherentist can consistently hold that this test would not work unless our beliefs were anchored in experience, because this does not entail having to make experience *infallible*, and thus does not involve

moral outlook) if we begin from considered moral judgements as 'inputs'; but the method is still coherentist, because it is acknowledged that these considered moral judgements are fallible, so that they need to be brought together under a moral theory in order to determine which of them fall into a coherent framework, before we can settle on which to endorse. On this picture, there is no conflict between giving considered moral judgements an important role as inputs, and still taking reflective equilibrium to be a coherentist method of inquiry.

⁶⁴ Bradley, 'On Truth and Coherence', p. 203. Cf. also 'On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience', in *Essays on Truth and Reality*, pp. 159-91, pp. 159-60:

There is an immediate feeling, a knowing and being in one, with which knowledge begins; and though this in a manner is transcended, it nevertheless remains throughout as the present foundation of my known world. And if you remove this direct sense of my momentary contents and being, you bring down the whole of consciousness in one common wreck. For it is in the end ruin to divide experience into something on one side experienced as an object and on the other side something not experienced at all.

⁶⁵ Blanshard, 'Interrogation of Brand Blanshard', p. 211.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

any concession to criterial foundationalism. The criterial coherentist can thus answer the input (or isolation) objection, without compromising his coherentism.

Now, while I think this strategy of acknowledging a role for experience is acceptable for a criterial coherentist, it is more problematic for the justificatory coherentist. As applied by the justificatory coherentist, it would have to go as follows: Coherence confers justification on beliefs within a belief-set, but it only does so if some of those beliefs are based on experience. The problem here, of course, is how the justificatory coherentist can account for this latter clause, consistently with his coherentism: that is, why must some of the beliefs within the belief-system be perceptual? One answer might be an externalist one, i.e., experiential input makes a coherent system of beliefs more likely to be true, and (because justification consists in reliability) therefore justified. But this kind of response would undercut a number of the justificatory coherentist's other arguments, which are internalist. And yet, without an externalist answer, it looks very much as if the justificatory coherentist who adopts this strategy would be conceding that experience is a factor in conferring justification on beliefs, as well as coherence, thereby undercutting his coherentism. Thus, while it appears that the criterial coherentist can adopt the strategy of acknowledging a role for experience to answer the input (or isolation) objection, it seems that the justificatory coherentist cannot; and this, I take it, underlines again why it is important to observe the distinction I have been making, when we consider the debates surrounding the viability of coherentism as a position.

VI

My aim in this paper has been modest. I have merely tried to mark out a distinction between coherentism as a test for truth and coherence as a theory of justification, and to relate this to some of the relevant literature, showing how earlier coherentists like Bradley and Blanshard differ from contemporary coherentists like Davidson and BonJour. There is much I have not done. In particular, I have not shown how this distinction might help the 'early' coherentist avoid all of the standard objections to coherentism (though my discussion of the dialectic with the sceptic touched on aspects of this, and I have discussed the 'input' (or 'isolation') objection); nor have I considered in detail any of the arguments from Bradley and Blanshard in defence of coherence as a test for truth; nor have I explored how far (if at all) their position on this relates to other aspects of their epistemological and metaphysical theories; and nor have I considered objections that might be made against criterial

coherentism as a position in its own right. These must be matters for another occasion.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Earlier versions of this paper were given at seminars at the universities of Hertfordshire and Reading, and at a Forum for European Philosophy conference in Sheffield. I am grateful to those who offered comments on those occasions, and also for helpful suggestions from Paul Faulkner, Christopher Hookway, David Owens, Jonathan Dancy, and two anonymous referees for this journal.