

# Coherentism in Rorty's Anti-Foundationalist Epistemology

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## ***Abstract***

*The primary objective of this paper is to investigate whether Rorty endorses coherentism, the view that justification is a matter of a belief's coherent relationship with other beliefs. Rorty in his anti-foundationalist epistemology shows a frequent inclination to express his view as coherentist. But does he actually subscribe to coherentism? I argue that he does not.*

## **Introduction**

In the *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty mounted a strong critique against foundationalism. He rejects foundationalism on the grounds that the theory subscribes to an ocular metaphor that construes knowledge as mirroring an objective reality. The point of Rorty's hostility against foundationalism is that this ocular metaphor confuses justification; arguments offered in support of our knowledge claims, with causation, the manner in which external objects impinge on our senses during perception (Rorty 1979:139). Rorty argues that, on the foundationalist criteria, knowledge is seen as a relation between ideas and objects (correspondence) not as a relation between ideas (coherence). On this showing, one might think that once Rorty rejects foundationalism, he endorses coherentism because he frequently makes reference to it as a preferable alternative to foundationalism. But as I will try to show in the following pages, Rorty's endorsement of coherentism is quite misleading.

## **Rorty's Critique of Foundationalism**

In his analysis of epistemology, Rorty mounted a strong critique against foundationalism and the correspondence theory of truth. Rorty argues that foundationalism and correspondence theory of truth invoke what he calls nature mirroring, the idea that our minds copy objective reality (Rorty 1979). This way of thinking, Rorty argues, is the product of the intellectual history beginning with Descartes' invention of the mind and his quest for clear and distinct ideas, proceeding through Kant's empirical realism and transcendental idealism, down to the modern analytic quest for commensuration and for a privileged vocabulary (Rorty 1979: 155-164). Within this Cartesian, Kantian and analytic purview, knowledge is considered as a relation between a subject (idea) and an object (correspondence) and not as a relation between subjects (ideas or propositions).

Rorty argues that the core ingredient of epistemology is justification. He explains justification as the process of advancing argument or evidence in support of our knowledge claims. But as Rorty claims, justification is not a matter of a relation between a subject and a non-human reality. Rather, justification should be conceived as a matter of a relation between propositions so that what justifies a given proposition is another proposition. Rorty argues that if we think about knowledge as a relation between a subject and a non-human reality, we will be embracing knowledge as arising from causation rather than knowledge as arising from justification. In such situations, justification becomes impossible in epistemology since subscribing to this view will mean that we are giving up arguments with our fellow humans in place of confrontation with objective reality (Rorty 1979: 159). To embrace confrontation with physical objects rather than arguments with our fellow humans, according to Rorty, is to reach the foundation of knowledge.

The issue of foundation of knowledge and mirroring, according to Rorty, further culminates in the necessary-contingent distinction of truth (Rorty 1979:157). Rorty explains necessary truth as truth which is certain because of its causes rather than arguments offered for it. The essential feature of this analogy is that knowing a proposition to be true is to be identified with being caused to do something by an object (Rorty 1979: 157). In this case, as Rorty argues, it is the object which the proposition is about that imposes the truth of the proposition. The idea of necessary truth is an indication that the object of perception or mathematical truth or truth of geometry will not allow themselves be misjudged or misreported. The upshot is that such necessary propositions are supposed to have no need for argument, justification or discussion. They are simply untouchable because their test of truth cannot be overridden in the light of new alternative.

Thus, Rorty argues that the foundationalist thesis is misguided because knowledge and justification is not about an idea and its relation to an object. It is rather a relation between ideas or propositions as he urges us to accept that ‘...nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test *other than coherence*’ (Rorty 1979:178; my italics). Following the likes of W.V. O. Quine and W. Sellars, Rorty argued that we should accept the view that knowledge is entirely a social phenomenon and that all standards for what count as justification should be a conventional matter. Rorty claims that truth and justification are socially relative and there is no foundational benchmark for knowledge and truth. What is justified or true depends upon the sets of beliefs held by one’s community (Rorty 1979). Similarly, there is no any necessary homogeneity across social communities. Each community has its contingent point of focus. Concerning truth, Rorty argues that there is

nothing like truth. The nature of truth is an unprofitable topic. Truth is an empty word because there is nothing to say about truth. With this Rorty argues that there is nothing for epistemologists to do - no deep analysis of justification or truth or knowledge. Truth, justification and knowledge have particular significance that different social communities give them (Rorty 1998:2).

From the for-going, we realize how Rorty rejects foundationalism for coherentism. But does Rorty really subscribe to coherentism? Coherentism is a principal alternative to foundationalism. It holds that the justification of belief derives from the coherence of the agents beliefs (Crumley 1999: 121). But before coherentism is discussed in detail, I shall offer a brief expose of foundationalism. The upshot is to locate the problem inherent in foundationalism and why Rorty advocate its rejection.

As indicated earlier, foundationalism is the view that there are certain privileged representations that are self-justifying and provides justification for the other beliefs in the chain of justification. These privileged representations mirror exactly the external reality. Foundationalist account of justification claims that justification involves two types of propositions. First, there are some propositions that are independent, self-justified not deriving their source of justification from other propositions. The second type of propositions are dependent and deriving their source of justification ultimately from the self-justified propositions. The former propositions are often called “basic” propositions and they serve as foundation and again confer justification on other non-basic propositions (Pollock and Cruz 1999:4). Justification of propositions within the foundationalist perspective is ultimately one directional with non-basic propositions tracing their way back to the foundational basic belief. Justification thus has a stopping point in the structure

of justifying reasons. The foundational or basic belief provides the stopping point and starting point of justification. We can say that the basic structure of foundationalism is hierarchical and terminal.

Metaphorically, foundationalism is conceived as a pyramid or skyscrapers where the superstructures are erected on firm foundation which constitutes the foundation of the structure. The essential principle of foundationalism is that it rests on the principle of correspondence. It requires that basic beliefs are given privileged epistemic status and this epistemic privileged beliefs mirror external reality. In short, these privileged beliefs reveal to us how reality really is. Foundationalism could also imply representationalism or realism. Representationalism is the view that there is a mind independent world which is represented on our minds as copies while realism asserts that there is a mind independent world. The difference is that realism is a metaphysical doctrine and representationalism, an epistemological theory. Being representationalist, foundationalism is considered as a picture theory of knowledge and justification. It is actually this point in foundationalism that attracts criticisms from Rorty. We shall consider in brief some Rorty's objections to foundationalism.

The principal objection to foundationalism from a Rorty's perspective is that the doctrine confuses justification with causation. Rorty questions why the ways we come to develop belief of the external world be construed as the justification of the belief (Rorty 1979). Sellars in a similar fashion, waging assault on the "given" in the foundationalist epistemology, argues that epistemology should be done within a logical space of reason. This is because there is nothing like unconceptualized propositions or awareness and even if they (unconceptualized propositions) exist they cannot be considered within our concept of providing evidence for our

knowledge claims. This is because justification is purely a logical concept, not a causal concept (Sellars 1963; Rorty 1979). Having shown why Rorty rejects foundationalism, I will discuss the coherence theory. Such a discussion will provide the reasons why Rorty seems to subscribe to the coherence theory.

A coherent theory is anti-foundationalist thesis in the sense that it rejects the view that justification has a terminating hierarchical structure. Justification to the coherentist is typically held to be either solely a matter of networking of propositions of coherent and harmonious integration or, on a pragmatist account, harmonious and coherent integration cum the utility principle. Metaphorically, coherentism is conceived in terms of webs or rebuilding raft at sea which is different from the pyramid or skyscrapers the foundationalist subscribe to (Pollock and Cruz 1999:3).

On the coherentist account, what justifies any given belief is its harmonious relationship with a comprehensive set of other beliefs. The belief in question does not have to be itself infallible (immune from error), indubitable (immune from doubt) or incorrigible (immune from a mistake). Neither does this belief require that we infer it from other infallible, indubitable or incorrigible beliefs. In coherentism, the system of beliefs as a whole is the unit of justification. Any system of belief is justified only when it is in a harmonious relationship with other comprehensive set of beliefs. The justification of all beliefs is dependent upon all the others for their justification. There is no linear or hierarchical order of justification as shown on the foundationalist criteria of knowledge. According to the coherentists, we come to have lot of beliefs due to perceptual experiences. Perception as it were is a major source of knowledge. But perception does not provide any justification for our knowledge claims. This is precisely the argument of Rorty and Sellars against the

foundationalist position that the mechanical cause of a percept is the justification of one's knowledge. So, coherentists believe that perception is the cause of our beliefs but not their justification.

At this point we need to highlight the difference between justification and causal conditions since it is quintessentially the argument of Rorty against foundationalism and the correspondence theory of truth. Justification arises out of mutual consistency of beliefs. The beliefs perception causes may be regarded as true candidates for knowledge and has some initial plausibility. Through inferences and explanations one is able to come out with a maximally coherent system of beliefs. Those items that cannot be integrated are written off. The remaining belief that fit in the web of other beliefs are said to cohere with the system of belief in the sense of 1. entailment of and 2. having explanatory relation to other beliefs.

The intuitive characterization of beliefs cohering with other system of beliefs can be seen from two different perspectives discernable in (Keith Lehrer 1974) and Laurence Bonjour (1985), (See also Pollock 1986 and Bender 1989). According to Lehrer, coherence is a relational property. For Lehrer, coherence depicts a special kind of relation among beliefs. According to this view, a belief is justified only if it coheres or fits with at least some of the agents other beliefs. For instance, my belief that Mr. Wiredu took a loan at the bank coheres with my other beliefs that I saw the application letter for the loan on his table and also heard him discussing with the bank manager the issue of the loan. Thus, my belief that Mr. Wiredu took the loan coheres with my other beliefs. The task of the relational view of coherence is to try to articulate the kind of coherent relationship that holds among an agent's beliefs. Lehrer calls this coherence relationship comparative reasonableness (Lehrer 1974). To explain

comparative reasonability, Lehrer identifies three concepts: acceptance, an acceptance system and comparative reasonability. Acceptance is explicitly an epistemic notion which is distinguishable from a belief. For Lehrer, belief states are first psychological state. But the content of that belief is what the epistemic agent accepts. Thus, acceptance is restricted to epistemic agent's practice of pursuing the cognitive goal of truth. So when a person accepts a proposition, the person is trying to ascertain which beliefs will best serve the cognitive goal of gaining truth and avoiding falsehood (Lehrer 1989). Closely associated to the concept of acceptance is the idea that justification is related to the agent's acceptance system. The acceptance system is a set of statement describing what a person accepts at a particular time (Lehrer 1996:1-4). The above construal leads us to two additional concepts: the concept of epistemic competitors and the concepts of comparative reasonableness.

For an epistemic agent to specify which of her beliefs adequately fit into the system of beliefs, she must have available to her competing beliefs or propositions. These beliefs or propositions are termed epistemic competitors. For instance, supposing Vic has the belief that her father will travel the next day. "Father will not travel tomorrow" is a proposition that denies the proposition that Vic is considering. Another proposition "father has an urgent meeting to attend tomorrow" cast doubt on Vic's belief. Suppose that these are the only epistemic competitors. Obviously Vic will be justified in believing her father will travel tomorrow only if it will be epistemic better for her to believe this than any other competitors. In essence, the principal element of Lehrer's theory of justification has it that, relative to what else an epistemic agent accepts, we are justified in accepting a belief if the belief in question is comparatively more reasonable than any of its competitors.

For BonJour, unlike Lehrer, coherence is fundamentally a global or holistic property. Global or holistic coherentism is simply the idea that within an agent's total set of beliefs, the individual beliefs are interrelated in various ways (Crumley 1999:124). On this account, individual beliefs are connected or hang together in a coherent system to an organized structured system of beliefs (BonJour 1985:93). For example, think of a building comprising several individual blocks, iron sheets and so on. A single block or single piece of iron sheets cannot provide the warmth a complete house can provide. It is the entire system that can provide the warmth we require. Meanwhile, every particular element in the building is very important in producing that warmth we require from the complete building. Analogously, BonJour's holistic coherence could be compared to a complete building. Sub-groups of beliefs may be connected together, but if these are not connected tightly in a holistic system, the whole system may not be connected. It is only within an entire system that coherence occurs.

The main reason for delving into Lehrer and BonJour versions of coherentism is to drive home the point that traditional epistemic coherent theories have objective and universal rules and precategorized criteria for accepting which belief fits well or otherwise with other beliefs. So with epistemic coherentism, beliefs don't just hang together in a haphazard manner. The epistemic agent has standard benchmarks for asserting the epistemic credibility of beliefs in a coherent system. With this in mind let's turn to the central thesis of this paper. Does Rorty endorse coherentism?

### **Does Rorty Endorse Coherentism?**

From our earlier submission on Rorty's critique of foundationalist epistemology, we realize that Rorty rejects foundationalist theories and correspondence outright because

these doctrines confuse evidential explanations with causal conditions of knowledge. Such a critique of foundationalism offers tacit suggestion that a principal rival theory, coherentism, will carry the day. But does Rorty really endorse coherentism at the expense of foundationalism. My argument is that Rorty does not endorse coherentism. I offer two arguments in support of our claim.

Recall Rorty's claim that there is no final vocabulary, no single way or rational way of capture the meaning of human life. All we need to do is to continue talking without rules and constraints. In short our conversation with our fellow humans should be devoid of any standard disciplinary matrix or benchmark that could constraint discourses. But the coherence theories allows for the use of universal and objective pre-established criteria in order for beliefs to cohere with other beliefs in a system of beliefs. Our earlier submission on BonJour and Lehrer's versions of coherentism suggest that coherence theories require that individual beliefs pass certain universal and objective pre-established test before they could be said to fit harmoniously or comprehensively with other already established system of beliefs. Lehrer's comparative reasonableness and BonJour's holistic or global system are obvious points of reference. So for the traditional coherentist, such as Lehrer and BonJour, for beliefs to pass as legitimate candidates of knowledge, they should pass the test of a methodological procedure set down for determining what belief is justified and what belief is not. Thus, on this account, I conclude that Rorty is not a coherentist in the traditional epistemic sense of the word. So whenever Rorty makes use of coherence, he only employs it in a loose sense strictly not applicable to what we normally mean in traditional epistemology.

Besides, the central point of departure of Rorty from traditional epistemic coherentism is on the subject of truth. In

fact, it is on the subject of truth that Rorty makes a radical shift from coherentism. It is important to note that coherentism as a traditional epistemic theory endorses universal, eternal and objective truth. The traditional conception of knowledge makes truth as essential component of justification. It is against this background that knowledge is traditionally defined as justified true belief. Thus, truth and justification become an inseparable component in traditional epistemology. In seeking a universal truth, coherentism reveals itself as another foundationalist system still looking for all-embracing principles of human knowledge. The radical point of departure for Rorty in traditional epistemology is that not only are there no system-external justificatory connections (here foundationalism is guilty and coherentism is right), there also are no system-external truth justificatory connections (here both foundationalism and coherentism are guilty). The explanation is that traditional epistemic coherentist abandon correspondence account of justification yet it maintains correspondence account of truth, that truth is eternal, ahistorical and not culturally and socially bound. Rorty thus argues that we should abandon or drop together all talks about truth. This is because any attempt made by coherentist in discussing truth will result in foundationalist view that truth is eternal and overarching. On this account too, Rorty rejects coherentism.

## **Conclusion**

The two main traditional theories of epistemology are foundationalism and coherentism. Until recently, most epistemologists who reject one of these theories endorse a rival theory or approve a fusion of both theories. But in Rorty's case, as we have shown in the fore-going, he rejects both theories yet his incessant reference to the coherence theory (on the surface) appears he endorses that theory.

However, from our submission above it becomes clear that Rorty's rejection of foundationalism and the subsequent reference to coherentism does not make him a coherentist of the traditional epistemic stripe. This is because his account of coherentism is inconsistent with the traditional epistemic theory of coherentism.

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