

# compos mentis

## Coherent Infinitism as a Hybrid Model of Epistemic Justification

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper I will be arguing for a new theory of justification as a hybrid of coherentism and infinitism which I shall call Coherent Infinitism (CI), with the goal of showing that we can have justified beliefs. This paper will be divided into sections. I will begin with a basic layout of both coherentism and infinitism as separate theories of justification. In the subsequent section major objections to both these theories will be analyzed, which make them implausible by themselves. The third section of this paper will focus on the nature of justification and the properties of the justification relation between epistemic beliefs. The next section will examine the basic justificatory structure of CI combining elements of the two aforementioned theories and integrating the findings of section three to show how we can have justified beliefs. Lastly, I shall investigate possible objections to CI not including skepticism and attempt to provide answers to them.

### **KEYWORDS**

Epistemology, Justification, Coherentism, Infinitism

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will be arguing for a new theory of justification as a hybrid of coherentism and infinitism which I shall call Coherent Infinitism (CI), with the goal of showing that we can have justified beliefs. This paper will be divided into sections. I will begin with a basic layout of both coherentism and infinitism as separate theories of justification. In the subsequent section major objections to both these theories will be analyzed, which make them implausible by themselves. The third section of this paper will focus on the nature of justification and the properties of the justification relation between epistemic beliefs. The next section will examine the basic justificatory structure of CI combining elements of the two aforementioned theories and integrating the findings of section three to show how we can have justified beliefs. Lastly, I shall investigate possible objections to CI not including skepticism<sup>1</sup> and attempt to provide answers to them.

### SECTION 1: COHERENTISM AND INFINITISM AS THEORIES OF JUSTIFICATION

Before any serious conversation about justification can be had, we must first discuss the Regress Argument. This argument claims that all beliefs stem from branched doxastic chains which are non-circular, and do not go on *ad infinitum* (meaning each chain is finite) and therefore, each chain must terminate in an immediately justified belief.<sup>2</sup> The infinite regress is typically seen as a defense of foundationalism which is the dominant view of justification among epistemologists. However, many philosophers who reject foundationalism have developed competing theories of justification, all of which get their start from rejecting a particular premise of the Regress Argument.

The theory of coherentism rejects the premise that doxastic chains are non-circular and therefore, cannot justify themselves. With this understanding, beliefs are considered to be part of circular doxastic chains which can justify themselves. While most serious coherentists would never endorse vicious circularity such as

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1. To adequately engage with possible objections offered by skepticism would require a separate more focused paper, as such I shall not be speaking directly to these arguments in section five.
  2. This version of the regress argument is paraphrased from a more complete version typically used to defend foundationalism.

“p therefore p,<sup>3</sup>” they would endorse something of this sort: A is justified by B, and B is justified by C and D, and D is justified by E which is in turn justified by A. In this way, A can be seen to indirectly justify itself. Different premises are then added to this inherent sort of circularity to support and expand the theory. Lawrence Bonjour in his 1999 paper called *The Dialect of Foundationalism and Coherentism* outlines a particularly influential coherentist theory in opposition to the prevailing foundationalist theory. However, this theory is riddled with issues and hence is largely considered to have failed in gaining widespread support (Olsson 2017).

In 2014 Catherine Elgin presented a more plausible version of coherentism in her paper titled *Non-Foundationalist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability* (for the remainder of this paper all references to coherentism shall refer to the version presented here). In this paper, Elgin images all beliefs to be a part of a coherent set which is defined as:

- (i) s is a coherent set (CS) of S's beliefs if and only if s is suitably comprehensive, consistent, cotenable and supportive.<sup>4</sup>

However, while Elgin does think a CS is necessary for justification, it alone is not sufficient. In this way we can imagine justification on a scale. The more a set of beliefs fits the criteria of (i) and therefore coherence increases, so too does our justification. Elgin uses the example of gathering several testimonies from unreliable sources. In this situation each testimony would be judged as unreliable. If, however, each made similar statements, (i.e. were coherent) they would all have a higher degree of justification when considered as a set. (Elgin 2014).

However, even after increasing the degree of justification we still do not have a justified belief, because all the sources could have agreed to share the same false testimony. Elgin argues that for a CS to be justified, its truth must be its best explanation. This means that if upon closer examination, all the sources' statements fit into a CS, and the best explanation of them all fitting together and being suitably comprehensive, consistent etc. is that they are all true, then, we have justified belief. Moreover, if the CS is justified, then justification is also

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3. An exception to this would be the belief “I am believing something” which does appear to justify itself in this way.

4. This is paraphrased from *Non-Foundationalist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability*.

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conferred from the whole to each individual belief in that set. Note that the whole confers justification to the parts, but the reverse is not true. Each individual belief is, therefore, said to be initially tenable.

Let us look at an example of how Elgin's system might help us arrive at the belief:

- (ii) *It is Fall in Michigan.*

We may have an array of initially tenable beliefs: we see the leaves are changing from green to red, the corn and apples are becoming ripe and are ready to pick, and the weather has begun to get colder. Suppose we have certain beliefs about the time of year and have memories of people telling us about fall and the months in which it occurs. These beliefs can then be put together in a coherent set as described in (i), gaining coherence and a higher degree of justification. Then we would consider their truth as being the best explanation. Meaning that given our CS, it is more likely that (ii) is true, rather than the season being winter or even some skeptical scenario in which we are deceived into thinking it is only fall-like. Therefore, according to Elgin with our CS and truth as the best explanation, we are justified in believing (ii) and, by extension, are each other belief within our CS.

Having looked at coherentism as presented in its strongest form, we can now turn our attention to infinitism. In reply to the Regress Argument, infinitists deny the premise that doxastic chains are finite, arguing instead that they can indeed go on *ad infinitum*. Peter Klein is the only well-known staunch defender of infinitism. He lays out his defense of the theory in his 1999 paper- *Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Ideas*. An important assumption that Klein makes in this paper is that we do not have immediately justified beliefs. Instead, he claims that only a reason can justify a belief. Thus, our doxastic chains must be infinite. In an attempt to prove his assertion, Klein states two important principles, the first being the principle of avoiding circularity (PAC).

- (iii) PAC: For all  $x$ , if a person,  $S$ , has justification for  $x$ , then for all  $y$ , if  $y$  is in the evidential ancestry<sup>5</sup> of  $x$  for  $S$ , then  $x$  is not in the evidential ancestry of  $y$  for  $S$ .

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5. Meaning the links in the chains of reasons that support beliefs

In so many words, Klein asserts that beliefs cannot justify themselves in a circular (or question-begging) manner. Recall the example of circularity endorsed by coherentists above on page 3. Klein would argue that A cannot be used to justify E, because E is in the evidential ancestry of A. In his paper, Klein does not defend PAC, instead, stating that it is an “obvious presupposition of good reasoning” (Klein 1999).

By stating this, Klein also seems to assume that justification is an anti-symmetrical relation, meaning that for a given  $x$  which has a relationship  $R$  to  $y$ ,  $y$  cannot have that same relationship  $R$  to  $x$ . This holds true for relations such as the “taller than” relation, e.g., if Greg is taller than Rick, then Rick cannot be taller than Greg. By assuming justification to be similar to the “taller than” relation circularity also appears to be avoided and thus appeals to many people.

The second important principle Klein uses to defend his theory is the principle of avoiding arbitrariness (PAA).

- (iv) PAA: For all  $x$ , if a person,  $S$  has a justification for  $x$ , then there is some reason,  $r_1$ , available to  $S$  for  $x$ ; and there is some reason,  $r_2$ , available to  $S$  for  $r_1$ ; etc. and there is no last reason in the series.

In order to fully appreciate this principle, we must first analyze what Klein means by an available reason. While Klein himself talks of a reason as being objectively and subjectively available, he himself claims there are many accounts by which these two conditions can be met. I will be using the following:

- (v) A reason  $r$  is an available reason to  $S$  for believing  $p$ , if and only if  $r$  makes  $p$  more epistemically probable for  $S$ , and  $S$  would affirm  $r$  if asked<sup>6</sup>.

The last important piece to understanding PAA, is to note why there must be an infinite chain of available reasons. Klein argues that if there is not, then we must arbitrarily stop the doxastic chain at a particular belief. It then seems highly subjective as to where an individual chain ends, and what would be considered immediately justified beliefs, something which Klein thinks should be avoided. Combining PAC and PAA, Klein concludes that justification must involve non-

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6. Here I would like to thank and credit Jeff Snapper with this definition of available reason, which I find to suitable and concisely meet the two criteria presented by Klein in his 1999 paper

circular chains of belief, with each belief being justified by a reason with no arbitrary stopping point, meaning the chains continue *ad infinitum*.

To get a firm grasp on infinitism let us once again consider (ii) above. The infinitist would claim they have infinitely many reasons available to believe (ii). They might even begin by listing the same propositions we did above. If questioned further regarding “the leaves are changing color” the infinitist may reply with something about how changes in temperature cause color change due to different processes inside the leaf, which she learned from testimony, and which he trusts etc. This sort of reasoning would continue in this way. Thus, the infinitist would claim to be justified in believing (ii).

## **SECTION 2: IMPORTANT OBJECTIONS TO COHERENTISM AND INFINITISM**

The theories I presented above each have several important objections to them, making either seem rather implausible by itself. While the inherent circularity of coherentism does worry some epistemologists, as long as vicious circularity (as mentioned above) is excluded, this worry is not as significant as many others. The first major objection is often called the “coherent fairy tale,” which argues that if justification only requires beliefs to be coherent and comprehensive with each other, then people would be justified in believing that suitably written fictions, such as Alexandre Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo* are true.

Another objection to coherentism is this: by claiming justification requires truth as its “best” explanation, it appears to be highly subjective. For example, if Sadie and Ben were presented with information about climate change from various sources, they may disagree about which truth provides the best explanation for justification. Let us assume Sadie believes climate change is caused by human beings, while Ben believes climate change is caused by God as a punishment. In this case both use a different “best” explanation based on perceived truth to interpret the same body of information.

Coherentism also argues that all our beliefs are revisable, meaning nothing is unchangeable. Van Cleve raises an objection to this assertion. He claims there are some beliefs which are not revisable, and if they were, our world would look very different. Here Van Cleve is concerned primarily with fundamental logical laws, such as modus ponens or the law of non-contradiction. Additionally, even if Van

Cleve is wrong, this raises another objection: coherentism relies on a coherent set of beliefs to lend to justification. This holistic view requires all beliefs in the set to be mutually supportive. However, since our beliefs are subject to revision, a change in one belief may threaten the integrity of the whole web, by not mutually supporting seemingly unrelated beliefs in a different part of the web.

We shall now turn our attention to the problems facing infinitism. The first objection is against PAA, rejecting the claim that only a reason can justify a belief. Reliabilism and foundationalism will argue that having a reason be required to justify a belief is assuming that one must show they are justified. Rather, they would contend that we can be justified in a certain belief without showing it, by way of immediately justified beliefs. Take, for example, the fact I am writing with my pen. According to reliabilism/foundationalism, I need not provide a reason (and therefore show I am justified) to in fact be justified. My own sense perceptions (my pen-ish perceptions) immediately justify my belief that I am writing with a pen.

Another objection that is raised against PAA is called meta-justification. The idea behind this objection is that beliefs which have some property F are probably true, or at least acceptable. As such, they need not be shown to be true with an additional reason. An example of such a property F may be "I felt it with my hand." In which case, most things one feel with his hand are probably true and she needs not provide additional reasons. Another example may be testimony from a particularly trustworthy individual<sup>7</sup>, such as a parent or doctor.

The finite mind objection raised against infinitism claims that, given the nature of our mind, doxastic chains cannot continue *ad infinitum*. Human minds are finite and, therefore, cannot consciously believe infinitely many things. However, according to infinitism, infinitely many beliefs must be available for justification. Since we clearly have many justified beliefs at any given moment, infinitism appears to be false. This is because it is not possible for a finite mind to hold infinitely many reasons for multiple justified beliefs at a particular point in time.

Another objection raised PAC, seems to assume the justification relation is anti-symmetrical. However, there are pairs of beliefs which appear to justify each other, thereby showing the relation is not, in fact anti-symmetrical. Take for example the beliefs God exists and angels exist. If we are justified in believing one, it appears that belief, then, would justify the other. For if we are justified if

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7. This would of course depend heavily on the individual and how much they truly trust the testimony.

believing God exists, it would stand to reason that we are also justified in believing He created the angels. Likewise, if we are justified in believing angels exist as heavenly beings, we would be justified in believing their heavenly creator also exists. Therefore, it seems there are at least some instances of justification which are not anti-symmetrical.

A final objection against infinitism combines a temporal concern and a worry that justification is too easy. Let us say, for instance that I am standing outside at ten in the morning, and I see a car go past me at 100mph. Why do I not need something in that moment to justify my belief about the car? If all I need is an infinite chain of reasons, how could I have the time to justify my belief at ten if the chain of justification is infinite? If this concern is combined with Klein's definition of available reason (v), justification becomes too easy. Take, for example, the belief "I am a genius." This is a belief that is not intuitively justified. However, according to infinitism one could very easily be justified in holding such a belief. She needs only begin to list off some premises: "I can speak three languages" or "I am good at organic chemistry" "I know 100 -1 and 99-1" etc. Then he might claim that infinitely many reasons are available if she were to sit down and think about it. Thus, making him justified in her belief. In this way the infinite chain seems to require little in the way of actualization or articulation of reasons to justify a belief.

### **SECTION 3: THE NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION AND ITS RELATION TO EPISTEMIC BELIEFS**

Having laid out the groundwork for both infinitism and coherentism, there is one more matter to which we must attend before we can articulate the structure of CI. We must first define justification and what it means to say we have justified beliefs. Additionally, we must analyze and define the properties of the relation of justification between beliefs, as both of these concepts will undergird the justificatory structure of CI and play a major role in its overall structure.

Firstly, I shall argue that all justification is inferential, meaning that justification for a belief can only come from a reason. This is to deny we have immediately (or non-inferentially) justified beliefs. In stating this I must contend with two problems: various emotional states and basic sense perceptions. I would like to begin with a simple observation, that we can (and often do) live by things which we are not justified in believing. In response to the objection raised above, I would also like



to state that having a reason does not require us to articulate it to others. We can have a reason for a belief without showing it.

We as individuals have complex webs of beliefs,<sup>8</sup> which are built from the time we are born and never stop growing and developing. Beliefs become justified in so far as justification is conferred to them, as it emerges from the structure of the web as a whole. As such, each new piece of incoming information or "incoming belief" will have, as Elgin argues "initial tenability." This means the belief is there, but we are not yet justified in believing it, until the web is developed enough to include the concepts needed. Let us now examine how this sort of tenability and emergent justification works in each of the cases mentioned above.

I shall first begin with emotional states. A necessary distinction to establish is the difference between the act of "being angry" and "belief about being angry." A person may be in a particular emotional state, but that does not mean she is justified in believing he is in such a state. A baby may be "angry," but would not be justified in believing it is indeed angry. This is because its cognitive web has not yet developed the concepts needed to justify such a belief (namely the concept of anger). Likewise, when I was a teenager, I did not know what it felt like to be in love or to feel heartbreak. At the time I knew I felt something but had not yet developed my web to include such emotions. So, while I did feel those emotions, I was not justified in believing I felt them.

A similar line of reasoning can be used to argue against sense perceptions. Once again, since justification emerges from the structure of our web, it must be developed enough to encompass the belief and confer justification upon it. In this way, we may think of each sense perception, as with emotions, as initially tenable. I know that I see something or feel something, but neither of those beliefs could non-inferentially justify the belief "I am typing." Rather, some part of our web must help us make sense of "typing" and what that means. Let us say, for example, we were to give someone from the 16<sup>th</sup> century a cell phone. She would be justified in believing that she is talking and that she can hear someone, but she would not be justified in believing that she is talking on a cell phone.

As babies and toddlers, I think we have many initially tenable beliefs, which are not justified. Yet, as we grow and begin to construct our web, justification emerges. Without that piece we simply believe we feel or see something<sup>9</sup>. As

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8. This idea will be better established in section 4

9. This could be taken even further as babies do not really understand what it means to "see" or

adults, this sort of background is so deeply ingrained that it seems obvious, and it may even seem silly to say what I explained above. Because our web is well developed enough that we know when we see something or something, we are able to properly identify it.

Now, we must address the objection that, in the cases above, it seems we must “show “we are justified. Yet, I do not think this is necessarily true. In this case, I think to show is nearly synonymous with articulate, and having a reason does not seem to be the same as articulating that reason. Our reason is our own deep cognitive webs which provide the underlying structure, which is not always articulable. Nevertheless, there is a reason for our beliefs. As I argued above, each belief needs to be justified by a reason. So now, we turn to what this justificatory relation between beliefs looks like. I believe this relation to be non-transitive, non-symmetric (without being anti-symmetric), and what I shall call “minimally circular.”

To be transitive is to have such a relation as “greater than” meaning if  $x$  is greater than  $y$  and  $y$  is greater than  $z$ , then  $x$  is greater than  $z$  by a transitive property. However, I do not hold justification to be a relation having such a property. For example, let us imagine a disease called ROVID20. Let us assume I am justified in believing that ROVID20 is deadly. We then use this belief to justify the belief that ROVID20 can kill people, which we then use to justify the belief that some people may have died from ROVID20. If the justification relation is a transitive property, then we would be able to say “my justified belief that ROVID20 is a deadly virus justifies my belief that some people may have died from it. However, this seems like an abrupt jump without the second premise. We could imagine that ROVID20 is a deadly disease for sharks, but not humans, or that it is caused by a virus that was synthesized and known to be deadly but is sealed in a test tube and therefore not introduced to the public. It then appears that justification is a non-transitive relation.

The justificatory relation is also non-symmetrical, meaning it is not the case that for any two beliefs  $x$  and  $y$ , that the same relation must exist between  $x$  and  $y$  and  $y$  and  $x$ . It is important to note this is not synonymous with anti-symmetry, which claims that for every  $x$  and  $y$ , if  $x$  has a given relation to  $y$ , then  $y$  does not have that relation to  $x$ . An example of such a relation is *loves*. Luka can love Renee, and Renee can love Luka (in this case the relation holds in both ways), but Luka

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“feel” anything, they act more on survival instinct.

can love Shawn and Shawn does not have to love Luka. In this second instance, a particular x and y do not have the same relation, but in the first example, for a different x and y, that relation does hold.

These two properties build into the last one, which I call minimal circularity. In any sort of theory in which coherentism is used, as a web or something of the like, in which beliefs rely on mutual support, there is at least some degree of circularity inherent. However, it need not be vicious in that a belief justifies itself. For example, let us consider the flat earther Isabelle. When asked how she knows the earth is flat, she launches into an explanation about infinite planes, non-existent gravity, and light reflections, which make the horizon only appear rounded<sup>10</sup>. However, upon further questioning regarding how she knows these things, she states "because the earth is flat." It would seem then, that the explanation of the premises comes from the conclusion itself, thereby creating a viciously circular web of beliefs.

A non-viciously circular web of beliefs must have what I call minimal circularity. Let us consider the economist Pearce. When asked why he believes capitalism is superior to many other economic systems, he begins by stating certain properties of each system, combining certain elements and propagating different outcomes, drawbacks etc. for each system. In this example Pearce's beliefs exist in a web and mutually support each other. However, if justification is non-transitive, being justified in knowing facts about capitalism and about socialism does not necessarily lend justificatory power to larger conclusions about either system. Likewise, if justification is non-symmetrical, then certain beliefs cannot justify themselves and must instead be considered as part of the whole. In this way beliefs can exist in the same web (or sub-web as we shall see) but need not be direct reasons for justifying other beliefs.

#### **SECTION 4: COHERENT INFINITISM: BASIC GROUNDWORKS**

Having established my views on justification, I will now lay out the basic foundations of CI. As I mentioned in section 3, each individual has a unique and complex web of beliefs, which grows and becomes more complex as we do, stretching and growing infinitely. In order to better explain the particular justificatory structure of CI, how justification emerges as the result of the particular

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10. These ideas were paraphrased from The Flat Earth Society FAQ page.

structure of the web, and how all of our beliefs can be justified I will be introducing and using four terms: the center web, the inner web, the outer web, and sub webs.

Each individual web of beliefs begins at the center web. This web can be imagined as taking the shape of a circle and holds all of our most central beliefs, without which none of our other beliefs could be possible. Examples of beliefs found in this circle may include, I can trust my perceptions, I have a body, I am a being, our "sensus divinitatis", or even that God exists. All of these beliefs exist in a tight web mutually supporting each other and lend explanatory and justificatory power to one other. However, each of the beliefs stated above has its own sub-web, consisting of all the evidence<sup>11</sup> we have for that belief.

To better understand the importance of these sub-webs, let us take a specific example from above; "I can trust my perceptions." In this particular case, evidence would consist of all the times we saw something and were able to trust in it, i.e., all the times I have seen this item or that, this evidence may also include testimony from others agreeing with what we see and can easily stretch on to infinity, as we see infinity many things, or even the same thing again and again. However, we need not continue *ad infinitum*. Rather, we need only continue until we have established a coherent set, as defined by Elgin,<sup>12</sup> while remembering we could provide even more reason if needed. Yet, the sort of infinite reasons may start to look quite similar, at which point the difference between 1000 and 1001 reasons means little. This coherent set built from a number of reasons from our infinite chain to create the sub-web gives us reason to believe a center belief, such as "I can trust my perceptions." However, full justification does not come until the belief is considered in respect to and mutually supported by the other center beliefs.

The inner web is dependent upon and sprawls outwards from the center web. This is where the webs begin to differ more significantly from individual to individual. The beliefs found in the inner web shape how we view and interact with the world and others, playing a major role in our lives. Beliefs here may be, for example, I am a human, God created the world, I cannot breathe underwater or laws of logic to name a few. Each of these beliefs themselves have sub-webs as

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11. This can refer a variety of different things, such as testimonies, various sense perceptions etc. which we believe to be evidence, whether true or false.

12. See Elgin's 2014 paper mentioned above.

defined above. Again, these inner beliefs only attain full justification after being mutually supported not only by the rest of the inner web, but also the center web.

The last layer of an individual's web of beliefs is the outer web. This web is perhaps the most complicated and variant, being highly individualized. There are infinitely many outer webs possible, each focusing on something particular. Examples of outer webs may include, philosophy, chemistry, languages, cars. These webs may, themselves, branch off even further, to things such as electrochemistry, organic chemistry and biochemistry. There are a few important characteristics to note about outer webs. They all rely on both the inner and the center webs for any sense of meaning or justification. Certain beliefs may appear in more than one web and need not have sub-webs to build up a degree of justification. Rather, justification is built by the very sprawling nature of the webs themselves with full justification, coming only from the particular outerweb as a whole fitting, being mutually supported by the combined structure and in proper relation to the inner and center webs.

Two final considerations must be made regarding CI as a theory of justification. I stated above that the inner and center webs must be structured and mutually supported in the right sort of way to arrive at full justification. To this end I am inclined to agree with Elgin that coherence is necessary for this, but not sufficient. I think truth as a best explanation is also necessary for full justification for any given belief. Also, I would like to note that these webs are by no means stagnate, and that any particular belief may change, and, depending on its location, may have a huge impact on our overall justification for any given belief. An example of this would be if a theist were to become an atheist, God's existence as (a belief which lives at least in the inner web) would be ripped out. After this, the atheist must now begin to reconstruct the many aspects of the web which were damaged by the removal of this belief. Conversely, a belief, which was part of an outer web, may become more important and move into the inner web. I personally have experienced this movement more I have studied philosophy, as my worldview becomes increasingly shaped by my philosophical studies.

While we have already answered many of the objections listed in section 2 with the structure of CI as well as considerations of the nature of justification from section 3, there are a few less obvious ones I would like to mention explicitly. Elgin argues that all ideas are reversible, even those which dwell in the inner and center webs. To rationalize this point, we need only look at history. For many years

people thought the earth was the center of the universe. When it was discovered that it was not, many people were forced to begin reconstructing many of their views about the world.

Another key objection answered by CI is the finite minds objection against infinitism. Klein's initial response to this objection was to state that there need only be infinitely many reasons available to have justification. This weakening of available reasons seemed to make justification too easy, as was seen in section 2. My response to this objection begins as Klein's does but adds another condition. I agree that infinitely many reasons are available, but to simply say "if I had enough time, I am sure I could come up with more reasons" seems irresponsible and indeed makes justification too easy. The condition that I add is that all the reasons we do state, out of the infinitely many possible, must be comprehensive, cotenable, mutually supportive and consistent. While it may seem arbitrary where we stop, as I stated above when discussing sub-webs, as the listing continues on, the reasons begin to sound very similar to each other and are no longer significantly unique. For instance, the testimony of one friend is not much different from the five others stated. In this way, the set defined by 100 testimonies is not so different from the set defined by 1000 testimonies, if each one is not so different from the last. So, while infinitely many reasons are available, we need only articulate as many as are significantly unique to build a coherent set, which is possible for a finite mind.

## **SECTION 5: POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS TO COHERENT INFINITISM NOT INCLUDING SKEPTICISM**

I will now address three possible objections to CI as I have laid out above. The first objection may arise against my argument for justification being inferential. An objection may be posed such as this: is a baby not justified in its basic sense perceptions, such as seeing its mother or drinking milk? My answer to this question would be no it is not. It believes it sees someone, or consumes something, but it has no idea what it sees or consumes. Its webs of belief have not yet developed enough to lead to full justification. However, this objection extends beyond just babies to everyone who has sense perceptions.

Take, for example a teenager who is walking down the hallway at his school.<sup>13</sup> He seems to believe non-inferentially that he is walking in a hallway without going

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13. I would like to thank Jeff Snapper for helping bring up this important objection.

through an argument in his head to arrive at that conclusion. Yet, I would maintain that there is a level of inference still occurring in this example. First, he must believe that he can trust his own sense perceptions, which as you will recall was a belief in our central web. For if he did not believe he could trust this sense he would not believe he were walking in a hall. Additionally, if his web was not developed enough to hold beliefs about hallways, how could he believe they were indeed walking in a hallway as opposed to a room? So, it seems our perceptual beliefs do require a reason to be justified, namely that we believe (and are justified in believing) we can trust our sense perceptions. This inference, of course, needs not develop into an argument every time we have a sense perception, for we already hold the belief, which is justified by being a part of our central web.

In section 4, I agreed with Elgin that, while justification emerges from the structure of our web of beliefs, this alone is not sufficient. Rather, we must also add the truth as being the best explanation, which once again invites the objection of this term being too subjective. In order to respond to this objection, I would like to note some important parallels between our method of justification and the scientific method. Let us consider a scientist who has just formulated a hypothesis. This hypothesis is formed on the basis of many years of past research with many of the properties and terms well defined. This hypothesis would then be tested using rather rigorous methods including lots of control groups to isolate particular variables. The scientist would then look at the evidence gathered, consider counterevidence, and competing explanations, finally arriving at a proposed truth as the best explanation of the body of evidence to justify the hypothesis.

Let us now consider how we form a belief which is analogous to the scientist's hypothesis above. While our belief formation does not have the same precision of defined properties and other terms, we do not always start from nothing. Oftentimes, we inherit a history of testimonies and other forms of evidence, which, depending upon how much we trust the sources, we may use as the basis of our belief formation. We then begin the process of trying to justify our belief. While the scientist had many control groups at his disposal to isolate a single variable, we have no such measures in our own justification process. Rather, we have some limits as to what beliefs may be justified. To this effect, beliefs must fit into our coherent set, thereby receiving justification from the truth of the whole. These limits look slightly different depending upon in which web we are operating; justification of inner and outer beliefs looks different (recall section 4). Finally, just

as the scientist, we too look at the information gathered, consider counters, limits, and competing explanations until we too arrive at a truth perceived to provide the best explanation.

Of course, a glaring problem in both of the accounts I have given above is that "best explanation" still appears to be very much subjective in either case, and so the objection remains unanswered. However, I do not think it is possible to completely escape subjectivity. Partly due to the fact that everyone's webs of belief are unique as I discussed in section 4. As such, belief formation, as fitting into a coherent set, will look slightly different for each individual. However, I do not believe that this is as much of a problem as it might seem, as long as beliefs and justification for those beliefs are formed in the correct way. Considering also the fact that all beliefs are revisable (just as in science) and that we are constantly reevaluating the truth we use to provide the best explanation based on our web of beliefs, this limited level of subjectivity seems acceptable.

The fin objection addresses the concern that the bar for justification has been too highly set, by requiring reasons for justification and some sort of understanding. It then seems justification is too difficult to obtain and actually comes after knowledge, rather than being a central part of the process. My response to this objection is that this is not the case. As I have laid it out, only babies and young toddlers are truly excluded from justifications, and this seems of little consequence. As people in these categories act on primitive measures and still lack advanced cognitive function. Furthermore, even they can still have degrees of justification, as they begin to gather evidence and build their webs; they merely lack complete justification. In response to the second part about justification presupposing knowledge, I would argue that this also is not the case. Justification does not require that someone have full knowledge in a strict epistemological sense. Rather, I argue something weaker, with only a belief and an understanding of that belief being required for justification. With these considerations, it appears that all of our beliefs, each possess initial tenability, can gain full justification.

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this paper, I have argued for a new theory of justification, called Coherent Informatism. Beginning by laying out both coherentism and informatism



as separate theories of justification, as well as laying out important objections, I then began building towards my thesis by explaining how I see the nature of justification and its relation to beliefs. I constructed the basic framework of CI, ending by considering some possible objections to my schema. Justification is an important topic within the field of epistemology, following naturally from nearly every discussion of knowledge. For once one carefully analyzes each theory of knowledge it becomes quickly apparent that problems of justification lay at the heart of each theory. Shifting the question from "how do we know" to "how do we know that we know." The history of justification can be traced back to the time of Aristotle. I hope this paper has laid out a satisfactory possible solution to this problem.

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