Coherentism and the Justification of Moral Beliefs

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord

What I hope to offer here is an account of epistemic justification that can do justice to the epistemic challenges our moral beliefs face, while leaving room for some of those beliefs, sometimes, to count as justified in precisely the same way our more mundane non-moral beliefs, sometimes, do. I don’t mean to suggest, and I certainly won’t argue, that our moral beliefs are actually as justified as many of our other beliefs are. I think many of them are not; the challenges they face properly induce epistemic humility. But I do think that some of our moral beliefs are justified and justified in the same sense (if not always to the same degree) as are many of our other beliefs.

As a result, what I’ll be doing is primarily defending in general - and without special regard for morality - a theory of the epistemic justification of belief that applies across the board to all our beliefs.

Foundationalism and Coherentism

What does it take for a person to be epistemically (as opposed to morally or pragmatically) justified in holding the belief she does? Under what conditions, for instance, would she be justified in accepting utilitarianism or in rejecting Naziism, or in thinking courage virtuous, or pleasure good?

When concerned with belief in general, with no special focus on moral beliefs, answers have traditionally divide into two camps, one foundationalist, the other coherentist. The foundationalist's account involves appealing to some class of epistemically privileged beliefs (that enjoy their privilege independently of their inferential/evidential connections) and then holding that a belief, any belief, moral or otherwise, is justified if and only if either: (i) it is member of that privileged class; or (ii) it bears an appropriate evidential/inferential relation to a belief that is a member of the class.

Different versions of foundationalism emerge as different classes of belief are singled out as foundational and as different evidential/inferential relations are countenanced as appropriate. Just to mention a few of the familiar suggestions, beliefs might count as foundational in virtue of being certain, or incorrigible, or formed under the appropriate circumstances, while an inferential relation might count as appropriate if it is deductive, or inductive, or abductive, or explanatory. Precisely how the details are filled in will make a huge difference to both the stringency of the requirements imposed and the plausibility of the theory that results. What all the versions share, though, is the view that there is an epistemically privileged class of beliefs that are justified independently of the

---

evidential/inferential relations they might bear to other beliefs and that all other beliefs are justified, when they are, in virtue of the support they receive from foundational beliefs […].

Suppose, then, that some of our moral views are justified. How would our justified moral beliefs (assuming there are some) fit into the foundationalist's picture of justification? Foundationalists who hold that some moral beliefs are justified must hold either that some moral beliefs are epistemically privileged or that, although none are, some moral beliefs are nonetheless justified inferentially by appeal ultimately to some nonmoral beliefs that are.

The vast majority of foundationalists working in moral theory have gone the first route and embraced a moral foundation, holding that some of our moral beliefs qualify as epistemically privileged. Influenced by Hume's observation that one cannot legitimately infer an "ought" from an "is," they've held that our nonmoral beliefs, taken alone, can provide no evidence whatsoever for our moral convictions. There is, they think, an inferentially unbridgeable gap between nonmoral and moral beliefs (or at least between nonevaluative and evaluative beliefs). […]

If this is right, it means that, on a foundationalist's view of justification, the only way any of our moral beliefs could be justified is if some of them are epistemically privileged – otherwise they all are ultimately unjustifiable. The central problem facing such a position is to make plausible the suggestion that at least some moral beliefs are properly viewed as epistemically privileged. And this is no small problem since all the concerns that raise general epistemic worries about our moral views devolve onto any particular proposal one might make to the effect that some subset of those views is epistemically privileged.

Coherentists, in contrast, reject precisely this view, maintaining that whatever justification our moral beliefs enjoy is due entirely to the relations they bear to other things we believe. Those who think the gap between nonmoral and moral beliefs (or at least between nonevaluative and evaluative beliefs) is forever unbridgeable, maintain that all our moral beliefs receive what justification they have only from other moral (or at least evaluative) beliefs. Others, though, hold that, whatever the nature of the "is"/"ought" gap, it does not work to insulate completely our moral judgments from nonmoral (and nonevaluative) considerations. On their view, metaphysical, epistemological, social, and psychological considerations might all be relevant to the justification of our moral views. Significantly, defenders of this version of moral coherentism needn't hold that nonmoral beliefs alone either entail or in some other way inferentially support moral conclusions; they may well hold that our moral views themselves establish the epistemic relevance of nonmoral considerations. This means that a coherentist can accept all the standard arguments for the "is"/"ought" gap without being committed to holding that all the evidence we have for our moral views come from moral considerations. In fact, given just how implausible it is to see any of our moral view's as epistemically privileged, a great attraction of coherentism is its ability to make sense of our moral views being (to a greater or lesser extent) justified even in the face of the "is"/"ought" gap.

The heart of the difference between foundationalism and coherentism, as the distinction applies generally, is found in coherentism's rejection of the view that there is an epistemically privileged subset of beliefs (moral or not), and its rejection of the view that all other beliefs are justified only in virtue of the relations they bear to such privileged beliefs. This difference turns on what foundationalism asserts and coherentism denies. Yet coherentism goes beyond the denial and offers a positive account of what it takes for a person's belief to be epistemically justified.

The coherentist's positive account involves articulating a conception of what it is for one belief to cohere with others, and then arguing that a person's belief is epistemically justified only if, and then to the extent that, the belief in question coheres well with her other beliefs. There is, on the coherentist's view, no subset of beliefs that counts as epistemically privileged (at least none whose privilege is independent of the inferential connections its members bear to other beliefs). Instead, beliefs, moral and otherwise, enjoy whatever epistemic credentials they have thanks to the evidential/inferential relations they bear to other beliefs. The more and better the relations, the greater the degree of coherence enjoyed by the set and the stronger the justification. Predictably,
different versions of coherentism emerge as different evidential inferential relations are
countenanced as appropriate. Also predictably, precisely how the details are filled in will make a
huge difference to both the stringency of the requirements imposed and the plausibility of the theory
that results. What all the versions share, though, is the view that the extent to which a belief is
justified turns simply on the evidential/inferential relations it bears to other beliefs […]

I am going to put off, for a time, offering a positive account of coherence and its relation to
justification, turning first to one argument, the regress argument, that is commonly thought to show
that no version of coherentism has a chance of being right regardless of the specific account of
coherence it offers. I will, in the next two sections, argue that a coherentist can consistently
recognize the force of the regress argument and yet satisfyingly stop the regress without having her
position collapse into a version of foundationalism. […]

The Regress Argument

The regress argument is by far the most influential argument against both coherentism in general
and coherentism as applied to our moral beliefs. As this argument would have it, if any beliefs are
justified at all, some must be justified independently of the relations they bear to other beliefs. In
other words, coherentism has got to be false.

The argument begins with the assumption that one belief provides justification for another only
if it is, itself, justified. For any given belief, then, the question arises: what sort of justification does
it enjoy? If it is justified by other beliefs from which it is inferable, then the beliefs on which its
justification depends must themselves be justified and we can raise the same question about them,
and then again about whatever beliefs justify those. If we are to avoid an infinite regress, there are
only two possibilities (compatible with holding that the initial belief is justified). Either:

(i) The path of justification from one belief to those from which it is inferable, to those from
which they are inferable, leads back to the initial belief, in which case the justification comes
objectionably full circle; or

(ii) There are some justified beliefs that are justified independently of the support they might
receive from others (say, because they are self-justifying or because they are justified by something
other than a belief, perhaps an experience), in which case the regress can be satisfyingly stopped.

Foundationalists have taken comfort from this argument thinking, first, that coherentism is
saddled with defending some version of the apparently indefensible (i) and, second, that the kind of
beliefs their theories identify as epistemically privileged would play just the role that (ii) makes
clear needs to be filled.

Coherentists hold (at least) one of three things: that the way in which one's justification for a
belief might come full circle is not, after all, objectionable; or that a coherentist might, despite
appearances, acknowledge that there are some justified beliefs that are justified independently of the
support they might receive from others; or that there's some third option. Although I am tempted by
the first option, in the course of what follows, I shall defend the second as available to a coherentist
[…]

Whether the regress can actually be stopped […] depends on how the assumption that starts the
regress is interpreted. As originally put, that assumption was: one belief provides justification for
another only if it is, itself, justified. We can distinguish two relevant readings of this assumption.
On one reading, the assumption is: One belief provides positive justification for another only if it is,
itself, positively justified. On the other, it is: One belief provides positive justification for another
only if it is, itself, [where a belief is positively justified only if the available evidence counts in its
favor, while a belief is permissively justified as long as the balance of available evidence does not
count against it]. […] [T]he second reading of the assumption is both strong enough to get the
regress going and weak enough to allow the regress to come to an end in beliefs that require no others for their justification [...]

This distinction between permissive and positive justification, and the resulting appeal to permissively justified beliefs, has at least three advantages. First, it can explain how the regress might be stopped; it comes to an end if and when we arrive at beliefs that are permissively justified. Second, it leaves room for regress-stoppers that, despite their "regressstopping" role, might be both over-ridable and underminable; permissively justified beliefs will lose their status when, for instance, new evidence is acquired that tells against them. Third, it avoids saying that among a person's reasons for believing as she does are reasons constituted by considerations that are unavailable to her; whether a belief counts as permissively justified turns only on whether the other things she believes provide, on balance, evidence against the belief. [ ... ]

Strikingly, though, coherentists can admit permissively justified beliefs, and rely on them to stop the regress in just the way the foundationalist is proposing, without abandoning coherentism. Such a coherentist will still deny that there is an epistemically privileged set of beliefs that enjoy their privilege independently of their inferential connections - since which beliefs count as permissively justified depends upon the evidential/inferential relations they bear to others. Moreover, such a coherentist can continue to hold that what positive reason we have for any belief will still always depend solely on what other beliefs a person has. This sort of coherentism, then, grants the regress argument's initial assumption: that a belief can provide (positive) justification for another belief only if it is, itself (permissively) justified. It grants as well that, to the extent an unacceptable regress threatens, it can be brought to a stop with the recognition that beliefs can be justified in either of two senses. What it denies is foundationalism's characteristic - and defining – claim that some beliefs (the regress stoppers) are epistemically privileged independently of the inferential/evidential relations they bear to other beliefs. It insists instead that whether a belief can serve to stop the regress, whether it counts as permissively justified or not, is fully determined by the evidential relations it bears to other beliefs, and that when it does so count it itself enjoys no positive justification, even as it is available to provide positive support for other beliefs.

The coherentist won't hold that the permissively justified beliefs that bring the regress to a stop have anything else to recommend them independently of how they relate to other beliefs; their primary role is to provide the epistemic input – the initial bits of evidence – one justifiably relies upon in seeking out views that are positively justified.

Nor will the coherentist say that every belief spontaneously formed will count as permissively justified. Even if one forms a belief noninferentially, say as a direct result of some experience, whether it counts as permissively justified will depend on what else one believes. If I turn my head and come to think there's a dog at my feet, the proven past reliability of beliefs of this kind gives me reason to trust this belief as well, and it will count as one I am positively (and not just permissively) justified in believing, even though it is cognitively spontaneous. Whereas, if I find myself yet again confident that this time, finally, I will win the lottery, I have ample reason to distrust the belief, and if I believe it any way, it will count as unjustified (and not permissively justified at all). In the great majority of cases, we might expect, people will have various background beliefs that serve either to support or to undermine the new beliefs they just happen to find themselves with.

And, standardly, any belief's status as merely permissively justified will be comparatively unstable, in that it is likely either to emerge as positively justified as it becomes intertwined with, and in various ways supported by, other beliefs or to become unjustified as one discovers reasons not to trust it. Looked at other time, one's initially merely permissively justified beliefs will regularly get swept up by others so as to become positively justified (as we find reason to think them true) or get sifted out as unjustified (as we find reason to think them suspect).
Permissively justified Beliefs and Positive Support

As long as beliefs that are merely permissively justified can provide positive justification for other beliefs, foundationalists and coherentists alike can successfully stop the regress, and the regress argument will tell not at all against coherentism. However, if permissively justified beliefs cannot provide positive justification, an appeal to permissively justified beliefs won't help either the coherentist or the foundationalist, when it comes to stopping the regress.

So we need to ask: Can beliefs we have no reason to accept really provide positive support? The temptation is to think not. Even if some permissively justified beliefs (say, the visually prompted belief that there's something red in front of me) can serve to justify others (say, that there's something colored in front of me), it looks as if not all permissively justified beliefs can play this role. In fact, people often seem to hold beliefs that are apparently permissively justified (since they seem to have on balance no reason to reject them) that pretty clearly couldn't serve to justify any other belief. Wild hunches, weird forebodings, and spurious superstitions are, after all, commonplace; and permissively justified though they may be, such beliefs seem not at all able to justify those beliefs that are based on them.

Now a foundationalist might step in at this point hoping to re-establish a raise for epistemically privileged beliefs. Unlike coherentists, she is able to distinguish those permissively justified beliefs that can justify others from those that can't, by treating some as epistemically privileged and others not. She might hold that the difference is found in whether the person is being epistemically responsible in holding the belief or in whether the belief is properly caused by experience, or in whether it is suitably concerned with one's private experience. It is open to the foundationalist to hold that epistemic responsability, or proper etiology, or appropriate content, might mark the difference between those permissively justified beliefs that can, and those that can't, provide positive justification for other beliefs. A coherentist, in contrast, has to say that all permissively justified beliefs can serve to justify other beliefs, if she is to avoid a surreptitious appeal to privileged beliefs.

Problems arise for the foundationalist, however, as soon as one turns to the question: Why do the specific features identified (whatever they are) make a difference to one's justification? Any attempt to distinguish between permissively justified beliefs that will and those that won't provide positive evidence seems inevitably to face a dilemma.

In every case, the proposed grounds for drawing the distinction will either involve considerations that are potentially unavailable to the person in question or not. If they do, then the account will involve, I'll argue, an implausible kind of [what has come to be called] externalism; if they don't, then by adducing considerations that are available to that person, the view will in the end not be able to mark a difference among permissively justified beliefs in a way that counts only some as capable of providing positive support for other beliefs.

Suppose the foundationalist embraces externalism and (for instance) takes the etiology of the particular belief to be crucial to its ability to justify other beliefs. In a particular case, a person might then hold a belief that lacks the proper history and yet be unaware of that fact. And so far as her evidence is concerned, the belief will be no different from other beliefs of hers that enjoy the proper history. When it comes to the evidence she has, her merely permissively justified beliefs are indistinguishable. That the difference would nonetheless make a difference to her being able justifiably to rely on her belief to justify others seems quite implausible.

It's easy to imagine situations in which two people have the very same beliefs, rely on them identically in reaching various other beliefs, and so are apparently equally justified in what they believe, even though they differ (unbeknownst to them) in what originally caused their permissively justified beliefs. One of the two might be in the hands of an evil demon or entranced by a virtual reality machine while the other is not, or one might be experiencing a drug-induced hallucination.
while the other is really living the life the first imagines, or one might be undergoing an optical illusion indistinguishable ("from the inside") from the accurate visual experiences the other is having. In each of these cases, if we were to assume that only those beliefs with the proper etiology will serve to justify other beliefs, we would be committed to holding that those who have no reason whatsoever to think they are victims of deception, manipulation, drugs, or illusion, though they are, differ substantially, in the justification they have for believing as they do, from those others who are not victims but who have exactly the same grounds available to them for believing as they do. No doubt they are not equally well-placed epistemically. No doubt too we have reason to distinguish between them. Yet when it comes to the justification each has for her own view, they appear to be identically situated. Similar concerns plague any other externalist proposal a foundationalist might offer as grounds for distinguishing among permissively justified belief when it comes to their ability to contribute positively to the justification of other beliefs.

Alternatively, and for good reason, the foundationalist might avoid externalism and suggest marking the distinction between permissively justified beliefs that can, and those that can't, provide positive support, by appealing to considerations the person in question has available. But then the considerations adduced will either tell against certain putatively permissively justified beliefs, and so establish the beliefs as not permissively justified at all, or tell in favor of certain beliefs, and so establish them as positively justified. If the first, if the person herself has reason not to hold the belief in question, then coherentist and foundationalist alike will rightly resist seeing the beliefs that are at issue as capable of establishing positive justification, since the beliefs are not even permissively justified. If the second, if the person has reason to rely on the belief, then the belief is positively justified and we simply shift the issue back to the status of the considerations the foundationalist identifies and ask of them whether they can provide positive support, At some point, if an infinite regress is to be avoided, we will inevitably appeal to some permissively justified belief as providing positive support for others, but at this point with no grounds for saying that only some such permissively justified beliefs can play this role [...]

Resistance to the idea that permissively justified beliefs might provide positive support for other beliefs is bolstered substantially by the cases of wild hunches, weird forebodings, spurious superstitions, etc, that I have already mentioned. These seem to be cases where a person's permissively justified beliefs pretty clearly couldn't serve to justify others. Yet the appearance is misleading, not usually because the beliefs can serve to justify others but because (when the cases are compelling) the beliefs are not actually permissively justified. A great many of the supposedly permissively justified beliefs we reject as unable to support others are beliefs we think the person herself has reason to suspect (even if she doesn't in fact suspect them). In fact, cases of wild hunches, weird forebodings, and spurious superstitions, count as wild, weird, or spurious, precisely because we think of the beliefs in question as ones the person has reason to reject. [...]

Still, one might be inclined to think that any belief one has, on balance, no reason to hold can't possibly serve to justify anything else. This will seem reasonable, even unavoidable, as long as we think of evidential relations roughly on the model of logical relations as simply justification preserving in the way logical relations are truth preserving. If evidential relations among beliefs serve merely as conduits of justification, one belief will receive positive support from others only to the extent those others themselves have some positive support to convey. On this view, some belief may, thanks to the support it receives from several other beliefs, itself enjoy more positive justification than any of the others, yet the total positive justification it can enjoy is limited nonetheless by the positive justification those other beliefs collectively have to offer. Underwriting this view of evidential relations is the intuition that one belief can be seen as epistemically valuable in light of the relation it bears to others only if the others are themselves epistemically valuable. Just as one action will count as good because of its consequences only if its consequences are good, so too some belief will count as positively justified by other beliefs only if those others are positively justified, Clearly, if this view, is right, then beliefs that are merely permissively justified will be
useless when it comes to providing positive support for others and an appeal to them won't serve to stop the regress on behalf of either foundationalists or coherentists.

What the coherentist must say (and the foundationalist will have reason to say as well) is that the intuition, and the view of justification it underwrites, are mistaken. Fortunately, in ethics and in epistemology, there's an alternative view, that has its own appeal: that the value of an action or a belief depends upon both what it is related to and, more importantly for our purposes, how it is related to them. The intuition here is that the value of the whole may not be a function of the value of its parts considered independently of how they are related. Just as things that are valueless considered in isolation may come to be related in such a way as to constitute something of significant value, so too beliefs that enjoy no positive justification considered in isolation may come to be evidentially related in such a way as to constitute a set of positively justified beliefs.

The appeal of this alternative view depends upon our ability to see the evidential relations themselves as making a difference to the justificatory status of the beliefs they relate. They might be seen as making a difference in either of two ways: The relations themselves might work to enhance and not merely preserve justificatory value; or they might serve as a condition for the justificatory value of the beliefs they relate. The first suggestion, which is the more straightforward (but I think in the end less attractive) one, would enable us to appeal to the justificatory value of the evidential relations when it comes to explaining how it is that a belief supported by another that is merely permissively justified may in light of the relation they bear to one another count as positively justified. The second suggestion would pick up on the fact that the common distinction between things that are good in themselves and things that are good for their consequences, can be supplemented with a distinction between things that are only conditionally good and those that are unconditionally good. The idea, then, would be that our beliefs, to the extent they are justified, are only conditionally justified – the condition being set by their being appropriately related to other beliefs the person has. Significantly, this latter view needn't be accompanied by any commitment to there being beliefs (or evidential relations) that are unconditionally justified; it would be enough if some beliefs might be conditionally justified. In any case, either account would serve to explain how it is that a belief's being properly related to another that is only permissively justified might render it positively justified.

A full story following up either suggestion would involve explaining the distinctive epistemic contribution the evidential relations are supposed to play. However the details go, the epistemic role of such relations – their status as evidential relations – will presumably be bound up with their having a systematic if indirect connection to truth. Of course, evidential relations won't be such that, when they hold among beliefs, the beliefs are thereby sure to be, or even likely to be, true. Rather, I suspect, the relations that are in fact evidential will be those determined by cannons of reasoning that are truth conducive (and not just truth preserving) in that systematically respecting them would have the tendency of shifting views towards the truth in the long haul, given accurate information. Obviously, a person might respect the relevant cannons of reasoning over time and so hold beliefs that are evidentially related (on this view) and yet, because of lack of evidence, or misleading evidence, actually consistently have evidence for false views. But in these cases, as well as happier ones, if the beliefs are in fact supported by the weight of the evidence available to the person, they count as justified, at least according to the coherentist. In any case, while coherentism is committed to there being a fact of the matter as to whether, and to what extent, two beliefs are evidentially related, it is not wedded to any particular account of those evidential relations […]

The Nature and Role of Coherence

To address several of the concerns one might have about the coherence theory of justification. I need now to say something more specific about the connection between the relative coherence of a
set of beliefs and the evidential/inferential relations that hold among the beliefs. According to coherentism, I’ve said, a belief is justified only if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things the person believes. Along the way, though, I’ve also attributed to the coherentist the view that a belief is: (i) permissively justified if and only if the weight of the evidence available to the person does not, on balance, tells against the belief; and (ii) positively justified if and only if the weight of the evidence, again on balance, tells in favor of the belief (just how positively justified it is will be a matter of how strong the evidence, on balance, is). Seeing how these characterizations of justification relate to one another is crucial to seeing the sort of coherence theory I am advancing.

How then does the relative coherence of a set of beliefs reflect the evidential relations that hold among those beliefs? And how does the relative coherence of one's beliefs relate to their being justified? I will take these questions in order.

The relative coherence of a set of beliefs is a matter of whether, and to what degree, the set exhibits (what I will call) evidential consistency and comprehensiveness. The first, evidential consistency, sets a necessary and sufficient condition for (minimal) coherence, while the second and third, connectedness and comprehensiveness, serve, when present, to increase the relative coherence of a set that is minimally coherent. Each, though is a property of a set of beliefs, if it is at all, only in virtue of the evidential relations that hold among the contents of the beliefs in the set.

Thus, a set of beliefs counts as (minimally) coherent if and only if the set is evidentially consistent – that is, if and only if the weight of the evidence provided by the various beliefs in the set don't tell, on balance, against any of the others. Given an evidentially consistent, and so at least minimally coherent, set, just how coherent the set is will be a matter of the connectedness and comprehensiveness it exhibits.

Clearly, a set of beliefs can count as minimally coherent even if none of the beliefs in the set are evidentially supported by any of the others. However, an evidentially consistent (and so coherent) set might contain some beliefs that are, to a greater or lesser extent, evidentially related to others in the set in a way that means they, on balance, receive support from the others, or provide support for them, or both. In these cases, the evidential relations among the beliefs induce in the set some degree of what I've called connectedness. The stronger and more extensive the support, the more connected, and more coherent, the set. Thus, a set will be more or less coherent, assuming it is evidentially consistent, to the extent the beliefs in it enjoy positive support from others in the set. At the same time, for any given set that is at least minimally coherent, its relative coherence, because of comprehensiveness, will increase when other beliefs are added to the set, assuming it remains evidentially consistent. The more comprehensive the set, other things equal, the more coherent it will be.

It goes without saying that virtually no one's total set of beliefs will count as even minimally coherent, although subsets of those beliefs will presumably count as more than minimally coherent. Similarly, virtually no one holds beliefs all of which are justified, although subsets of most peoples' beliefs will presumably count as positively and not just permissively justified.

When it comes to relating the relative coherence of a person's beliefs to their status as justified beliefs, the coherentist's suggestion is, first, that those beliefs of her's that are justified are all and only those that belong to the subset of her beliefs that is maximally coherent and, second, that a belief will belong or not to that subset in virtue of the evidential relations it bears to everything else she believes. A subset of a person's beliefs will count as maximally coherent only if it is evidentially consistent and then if, when compared to all the subsets of her total belief set that are evidentially consistent, it exhibits a greater degree of coherence over-all (thanks to its connectedness and comprehensiveness) than do the others. [...]

How well a particular belief coheres with the other things the person believes, we can now say, is determined by whether it is a member of the maximally coherent subset of what she believes (it doesn't count as cohering at all if it is not), and if it is, whether, and to what extent, it is evidentially
supported by other beliefs in that set (the more support it receives the better it coheres). Any belief in the set will at least be permissively justified, and will be more or less positively justified as it receives more or less evidential support from other beliefs in the set. Thus, to say that a belief is justified only if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things the person believes, is to register the way in which one's justification turns on how one's belief relates evidentially to whatever else one believes.

A full articulation of the coherence theory I've been describing would of course involve developing a theory of what relations count as evidential. And clearly this is not the place to begin that project. But I should emphasize that any plausible theory of justification will require supplementation by an account of evidential relations, since all such theories recognize and rely in some way or other on there being evidential relations that our beliefs might bear to one another. […]

Against this background, we can also characterize what it would be for a potential belief to cohere well with what a person actually believes. Whether such a belief would cohere at all with the other beliefs a person holds depends on whether, were the person to believe it, it would then be a member of the (perhaps, in light of the new belief, dramatically different) maximally coherent subset of everything she believes. And how well such a belief would cohere with the others depends on the degree to which the resulting maximally coherent set would be more coherent than its predecessor. If such a belief would cohere with whatever else she believes, then should she believe it, the belief would be justified. […]