

LAURENCE BONJOUR

## HAACK ON JUSTIFICATION AND EXPERIENCE

*Evidence and Inquiry*<sup>1</sup> is a wonderfully rich and insightful book. It contains compelling analyses and critiques of a wide variety of epistemological and anti-epistemological views pertaining to empirical knowledge, including recent versions of foundationalism and coherentism, Popper's "epistemology without a knowing subject", Quine's naturalized epistemology, Goldman's reliabilism, the scientific views of Stich and the Churchlands, and the "vulgar pragmatism", as Haack quite appropriately refers to it, of Rorty and the more recent Stich. All of this material is valuable, and much of it seems to me entirely decisive. In particular, the critical discussion of reliabilism is by far the best and most complete in the literature; and the analysis and refutation of the various recent efforts to evade or dismiss the traditional epistemological projects and issues is nothing short of devastating. Indeed, it is its resolute refusal to be diverted from the pursuit of the traditional epistemological issues that seems to me the most valuable feature of the book.

In this spirit, while applauding Haack's demolition of the various anti-epistemological views – it was dirty work, but someone had to do it – I will focus here on her discussions of the views that attempt to solve rather than dissolve the traditional epistemological issues concerning empirical knowledge. I will begin by considering Haack's critique of recent versions of coherentism and foundationalism. I will then turn to a more extended exposition and evaluation of her own proposed third alternative, which she dubs *foundherentism*.

### 1.

I begin with the view that has, until fairly recently, been closest to my own heart, namely coherentism. Here I will simply say without further ado that Haack's critique of coherentism in general and of my own version of coherentism in particular has helped, in company with many other critical discussions, to finally convince me of what many have no doubt suspected

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from the beginning: that there is no way for a genuinely coherentist position, no matter how many clever bells and whistles may be built into it, to provide standards for empirical justification whose satisfaction really guarantees the input from the extra-conceptual world that seems so clearly to be necessary for genuinely empirical knowledge. While I am not sure that her development of the point is as perspicuous as it might be, her underlying instinct here seems to me to be entirely sound.

One way to put the central point is to say that while a carefully crafted coherentist view can contain, as it were, a semblance of empirical input, there is no way consistent with a thoroughgoing coherentism to guarantee that this will not be a *mere* semblance that fails to really deliver the genuine article. Thus, for example, my own version of coherentism, presented in *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*,<sup>2</sup> attempts to provide for observational input by appealing to the idea of a *cognitively spontaneous belief*, one that is not derived inferentially from the cognitive system but instead apparently caused from without. The suggestion is that such a belief might still be *justified* from within the system, by appeal to the fact of its spontaneous occurrence and to the apparent track record of spontaneous beliefs of that specific kind as regards frequency of truth. Such a belief would thus have at least some of the key features of an observational or perceptual belief. By imposing what I called the Observational Requirement, to the effect that any justified system of empirical beliefs must contain cognitively spontaneous beliefs that are in this way are likely to be true according to the system itself, I attempted to provide a coherentist account of observational input.

Unfortunately, however, the alternative coherent systems objection, which this account of input is aimed in part to meet, recurs all over again: as long as it is only specified *within* the system that these features are present, that cognitively spontaneous beliefs occur and that the Observation Requirement is satisfied, there will be indefinitely many other competing coherent systems containing analogous specifications but characterizing the world in more or less any arbitrarily chosen way one likes. In my book, I attempt to meet this objection<sup>3</sup> by saying that in order to genuinely be justified such a system must actually be believed and applied, with the suggestion being that an arbitrarily constructed system would not remain coherent in actual application, and in particular that its allegedly cognitively spontaneous beliefs would not genuinely be found to occur in that way. Unfortunately, however, as I somehow managed not to see, this sort of response seems to succeed only by appealing to the sort of introspective awareness of one's own beliefs and their occurrence that is not legitimately available to a coherentist. And as long as the occurrence of cognitively spontaneous beliefs and the satisfaction of the Observation Requirement

is assessed only in terms of the coherence of beliefs to that effect with the rest of the system, which is all that the coherentist legitimately has to go on, the objection stands.

There is much more that could be said about this issue – and about other problems with coherentism. I certainly do not expect all of my erstwhile coherentist allies to be convinced this easily. But for present purposes, while emphasizing that I still think (as indeed does Haack) that the correct view will contain a major coherentist component, I want to concede the untenability of a thoroughgoing coherentism and see where this leads us.

## 2.

Where it might seem to lead us is back to some version of foundationalism, according to which all empirical justification depends on basic beliefs that are supposed to represent the input from the world that is missing in coherentist views. According to Haack, however, such a conclusion is at best too hasty and turns out in fact to be mistaken. What the anti-coherentist argument establishes on her view is instead the correctness of *experientialism*, the view that empirical justification depends essentially on experience. While experientialism has usually taken a foundationalist form (even though not all versions of foundationalism are experientialist), it can also, she claims, take an importantly different, foundherentist form. And since the arguments against all versions of foundationalism, even the experientialist ones, are in her judgment fatal, it is foundherentism that finally emerges as the most defensible view.

Haack's discussion of foundationalism involves an elaborate taxonomy of foundationalist views. On the basis of this, she formulates the leading objections to the various alternatives and isolates on this basis the version of foundationalism that is, by her lights, the most adequate. She then argues that even this last, best foundationalist view is unacceptable. I have no space here for a full account of this discussion. The essential points, however, are the following.

First, as already suggested, the most defensible forms of foundationalism, according to her, are the experientialist forms, which hold that the basic or foundational beliefs are justified by reference to *experience*, where this includes sensory, introspective, and memory experience. In particular, she rejects those views that appeal to an external causal or lawful relation to justify the basic beliefs, on the ground that "what justifies a belief should be something of which . . . the believer is aware", (p. 28). (As this quotation suggests, it seems clear that Haack comes down on the internalist side of the internalism-externalism controversy, although, for reasons that

do not seem to me to every be adequately explained, she officially rejects the standard dichotomy, or at least the standard way of formulating the dichotomy, as “not robust enough to carry any serious weight” (p. 2.)

Second, in her view the most defensible versions of foundationalism have two other features. They are *weak* rather than *strong*, in that they hold that the basic beliefs have only a relatively weak and defeasible degree of justification, rather than being completely or conclusively justified. And they are *impure* rather than *pure*, in that they hold that the derived, non-foundational beliefs may derive some support from each other, rather than having all their support come from the basic beliefs. Both of these features thus reduce, in different ways, the strength of the claim made on behalf of the foundations. Haack’s reason for thinking that these weaker versions of foundationalism are preferable is a familiar but to my mind rather fuzzy line of argument to the effect that the claim of independent justification on behalf of the basic beliefs is easier to sustain if the strength of the justification claimed is lessened.

Thus the version of foundationalism that emerges as the most plausible on the basis of Haack’s discussion is an experientialist foundationalism that is both weak and impure. Such a view would hold (i) that basic beliefs are justified by appeal to experience, (ii) that this justification is incomplete and/or defeasible, and (iii) that other justified beliefs must receive some, but not necessarily all, of their justification from these foundational beliefs. What then is the objection to even this seemingly quite modest version of foundationalism?

At this point Haack appeals to what she calls “the up and back all the way down arguments”, which are aimed at the one-directional aspect of foundationalism, according to which justification always flows from basic to derived beliefs and never in the reverse direction. In effect, the point is, first, that a weak foundationalist cannot deny that the justification of basic beliefs is weak enough to benefit from strengthening by appeal to non-basic beliefs, if the latter had any support to give; and, second, that an impure foundationalism cannot apparently deny that non-basic beliefs do have support to give, since according to it they are capable of supporting each other. It seems to follow that a position that is both weak and impure is left without any rationale for one-directionality. And to abandon one-directionality is, according to Haack, to embrace foundherentism.

The issues raised by this last argument seem to me both difficult and at least somewhat obscure, however, rendering the argument itself inconclusive at best. As far as I can see, no weak foundationalist need deny that basic beliefs can lend support to each other, or that they may do so via the connecting medium of non-basic beliefs. The more or less standard

conception of weak foundationalism, after all, is one in which basic beliefs have some relatively weak initial degree of justification, which is then enhanced by something like coherence to a level sufficient for knowledge. Though the logic of the “enhancement” process is admittedly more than a little obscure, it seems clear that any interesting notion of coherence would involve other beliefs in addition to the basic ones. Thus the issue is whether it is plausible to suppose that basic beliefs can receive support from non-basic beliefs that goes beyond that which is, as it were, merely transferred from other basic beliefs. To this I can only say that no clear case for thinking that this is so seems to me to emerge from Haack’s discussion and examples.

One further question is perhaps also worth asking, though I cannot pursue it very far here. I have been assuming so far that the idea of impure foundationalism is at least initially tenable. But it is in fact unclear that this is so, assuming that one version of Haack’s main argument against coherentism, not so far mentioned here, is compelling. She argues, following Lewis, that beliefs get no support from each other by virtue of coherence alone. But this conclusion makes it doubtful that non-basic beliefs have any support to give each other that is not ultimately derived from basic beliefs: where, after all, would it come from? And if impure foundationalism is unacceptable for this reason, so *a fortiori* would be foundherentism.

### 3.

I turn now to a more direct consideration of foundherentism itself – or rather, to give the view its full name, *double-aspect foundherentism*. The “double-aspect” part of the label reflects Haack’s response to a familiar argument against experientialist views, advanced, e.g., by Popper and Davidson. This argument claims that states of experience, in virtue of being non-propositional in character, can stand only in causal relations, not in logical relations, to beliefs, and argues on this basis that such experiential states cannot be a source of justification for beliefs. The rationale for this conclusion is the idea that justification is essentially a matter of logic, involving something like reasoning or inference, and that only propositions can stand in logical relations. The further conclusion drawn is that justificatory relations can obtain only between beliefs, in which case no version of experientialism would be tenable (p. 29).

Haack’s reply is that while this argument is correct in its claim that experiential states as such can play only a causal role, it errs in thinking that justification is exclusively logical in character. On the contrary, she claims, justification involves a causal aspect in addition to the logical or quasi-

logical aspect, and it is the explicit attention given to these two aspects and their interrelation that constitutes the “double aspect” component of her view. In brief, it is *states* of experience, and analogously also states of belief and memory, that play the causal role; while it is the *contents* of those states that play the logical or quasi-logical role (pp. 29, 74).

This view is elaborated by means of a distinction between two different notions of evidence that allegedly pertain to the justification of a belief: *S-evidence* and *C-evidence*. A person’s *S-evidence* for a belief consists of those evidentially relevant states of the person that are causally operative, directly or indirectly, in producing, sustaining, or inhibiting the belief in question. According to Haack, this will standardly include states of belief, current states of perceptual and introspective experience, and “memory traces” of previous experiential states of these kinds.

It is on the basis of the *S-evidence* for a belief that the *C-evidence* that finally determines justification is to be specified. Whereas the *S-evidence* consists of a collection of states of the believer, the *C-evidence* will consist of a set of “sentences or propositions” that can stand in logical and quasi-logical relations, relations of consistency, coherence, confirmation, or explanation, to each other and to the propositional content of the belief whose justification is at issue. These sentences or propositions are supposed to reflect the contents of the states that make up the *S-evidence*. But, as we shall see, there is a serious problem lurking here as to how some of those contents are properly to be characterized.

For the belief states that are included in the *S-evidence*, the correlated *C-evidence* will consist simply of the propositional content that is believed. This seems straightforward enough. But it is, to say the least, substantially less clear just how the *C-evidence* corresponding to the various experiential states and memory traces of such states included in the *S-evidence* is to be formulated. The main motive for the double-aspect component of the position was, after all, the fact that experiential states do not have propositional content or anything very much like propositional content in the way that beliefs do. So how then is a propositional equivalent or correlate that will somehow capture the evidential force of experience to be arrived at?

While Haack shows some awareness that there is a problem here, her consideration of it strikes me as extremely sketchy. Her solution, for which little in the way of explanation or defense is offered, is that the *C-evidence* corresponding to experiential states and memory traces will consist simply of sentences or propositions ascribing those states to the subject in question. Such an ascription will characterize a state of perceptual experience in terms of the object or situation that the experience would normally be

taken to be a perception of, qualified by an indication of the conditions of perception where this is relevant. Thus, for example, a typical ascription might say that the subject “is in the sort of perceptual state a person would be in, in normal circumstances, when looking at a rabbit three feet away and in good light” or “is in the sort of perceptual state a normal subject would be in, in normal circumstances, when getting a brief glimpse of a fast-moving rabbit at dusk” (p. 80).

Given this account of *C*-evidence, the degree of justification pertaining to a particular belief then depends, according to Haack, on three main considerations: first, on how favorable the person’s *direct C*-evidence is with respect to the proposition believed, where this will depend on the degree of *explanatory integration*, at least approximately the same thing as explanatory coherence, that results when the believed proposition in question is added to the direct *C*-evidence; second, on how well the beliefs contained in the direct evidence are themselves supported apart from any appeal to the belief originally in question, with this question being repeated for any further beliefs that support the directly evidential beliefs, and so on; and third, on the comprehensiveness of the *C*-evidence. Haack adds the further requirement that the *C*-evidence cannot consist merely of propositions corresponding to beliefs, but must include some experiential evidence.

Haack’s overall account of empirical justification, which of course includes many refinements and details which there has been no room to include here, seems to me on the whole extremely promising in its general contours. It seems quite plausible that some view of this general kind, combining both experientialist foundationalist and coherentist elements, will be both more plausible and more dialectically defensible than most or all of the existing alternatives – though for reasons already briefly suggested above, the question as to whether the best view will be foundationalist or foundherentist in character seems to me difficult to answer and perhaps not even clearly defined. But despite my sympathy with the general shape of Haack’s approach, I have serious doubts about her treatment of an issue that lies at the very heart of her position: the issue of the relation of experience, especially sensory or perceptual experience, to propositionally formulated beliefs about the world. I will devote the final section of this paper to a consideration of this pivotal problem.

#### 4.

On Haack’s view, as we have seen, the evidential force of experience is given by a proposition ascribing that experience to the person in question,

with the experience itself being described in terms of the sort of physical situation that would typically produce it. Thus the evidential force of my experience at the present moment might be described by saying that I am in the sort of perceptual state a normal subject would be in, in normal circumstances, when looking at a room full of people. My concern is to understand how such a claim comes to be available to the believer as evidence that can play a justificatory role.

One aspect of the problem is that I might simply fail to have the concepts in question or might not know how they apply to experience. To recur to Haack's earlier example, if I do not possess the concept of a rabbit or do not know what rabbits look like, either in general or in the relevant perceptual circumstances, then I can hardly be aware that my experience is the sort that would result from a rabbit. But even where this specific sort of problem does not arise, more needs to be said about how I come to be justifiably aware that my experience can correctly be described in this way, or else about how the description offered can serve as evidence for me even if I am not justifiably aware that it applies.

I might of course have a *belief* with the indicated content about my experience. But there is no apparent reason why such a belief would not itself require justification of some sort. To be sure, some philosophers have held that beliefs about my own experience simply require no justification, that they are as it were self-justifying. But Haack seems to reject any such view (p. 28), and in any case it was never claimed to apply to the sort of belief about experience that would be at issue here, viz. one about how the experience is typically caused.

To be sure, we are no doubt aware in *some* way of the nature or content of our experience simply by virtue of having it. Sensory experience is after all a conscious state. This basic or primordial awareness of experience does not seem, however, to be couched in propositional or conceptual terms, nor does Haack seem to want to say that it is. That is, after all, the whole point of the double-aspect view. But then the problem remains: how is it that by virtue of having a non-propositional experience of a particular sort, a propositional description of the sort indicated by Haack becomes available to the believer for purposes of justification?

The issue of how what has often been described as raw or unconceptualized sensory experience relates to propositional judgments, especially those pertaining to the physical world, has of course been central to the epistemology of empirical knowledge from the very beginning. Indeed, it was the seeming intractability of this problem that motivated in different ways such seemingly desperate views as phenomenalism and, alas, coherentism. My basic complaint is that Haack deals with this fundamen-



tal problem essentially by fiat, simply stipulating a characterization of the evidential force of experience, but giving no real account of where it comes from.

There are really two problems here, which it is useful to separate, even though they are closely related. The first is whether and how non-propositional perceptual experience can confer justification on *any* propositional claim. To say, as Haack seems to do, that the experience itself is merely a cause, having no content that can stand in anything like a logical relation to a propositional claim, makes it mysterious at best how any justification can result.

The second problem arises only if and when the first is somehow solved. If some account can be given of how it is possible in general for “raw” experience to be justificatorily relevant, the problem then arises of specifying in a defensible way the specific propositional claims that can thereby be justified by a particular state of experience. Here a solution might be in some ways easier if it were plausible to view the initial propositional claims as being couched in phenomenological terms that are as close as possible to the apparent character of the “raw” experience itself – something like the pure sense-datum language envisaged by various philosophers earlier in this century. Notoriously this sort of solution would seriously aggravate the further problem of relating the results of experience to the physical-object beliefs that are our ultimate concern. But in any case this sort of solution is seemingly ruled out by the inconvenient but stubborn fact, pointed out by Haack (p. 107) along with many others, that we also do not in general have beliefs about our experience that are couched in such phenomenological terms.

I, along with many others, have argued in the past that these two problems are unsolvable, so that the very idea that non-propositional experience can be relevant to the justification of our beliefs would have to be abandoned. This conclusion now seems to me to be mistaken, and in any case to lead to nothing but skepticism. But while I am now somewhat more optimistic that a solution can be found, my present point is that it will not do to short-circuit the whole issue, as Haack does, by simply stipulating without explanation an account of the evidential upshot of experience that is already comfortably couched in propositional, indeed in physical-object terms.

I have no space here to pursue this issue very far, even if it were presently in my power to do so. But there are two alternative approaches that are perhaps worth distinguishing by way of conclusion.

The first alternative is to hold fast to the idea that the non-propositional content of experience plays merely a causal role, which seems to me to

require abandoning any attempt to appeal to experience for justification (assuming, as I will continue to do here, the internalist perspective that Haack and I apparently share). Such a view could *perhaps* appeal to experiential causation to identify genuinely perceptual or observational beliefs, including even beliefs about the content of experience itself. But the justification of these beliefs would involve no further appeal to experience and so could apparently only derive from something like coherence among themselves and with further, non-perceptual beliefs. Such a position would resemble rather closely my own earlier view, with the important difference that there would be no question as to whether the perceptual beliefs were genuinely caused by the world. This would avoid the alternative coherent systems objection, but whether the content of such beliefs would constitute input from the world in the full sense that empirical knowledge seems to demand now seems to me substantially more doubtful.

The only alternative that I can see is the one that Haack seems to want to avoid, even though her view seems at the same time to demand it: the view that the non-propositional contents of experience, the purely experiential features that we are non-propositionally conscious of merely by virtue of having the experience, can somehow themselves play a justificatory, and not merely a causal, role.

The initial intuitive appeal of this view seems extremely obvious: as I look out at this room, it is the various patterns of color and shape themselves, not some already propositional description of them or of me as experiencing them, that seem to give me my main reason for believing that there are people here before me. To be sure, I also in fact believe that my experience is of the sort that I would have if I were in a reasonably well lighted room full of people. But it seems obvious that this latter characterization of my experiential state is not the epistemological starting point, as Haack's view seems to suggest, but is instead itself justified somehow by the myriad details of the non-propositional and non-conceptual experienced content.

But how can this be? It appears that there must be some tacitly grasped correlation or association between experiential features and propositional beliefs or judgments, one that I am confidently guided by in a way that at least seems to provide justification, even though I am unable even to begin to formulate the correlation itself in propositional terms. It is such a correlation upon which Haack seems in fact to me to be relying in making the transition from experiential *S*-evidence to the corresponding propositional formulations of *C*-evidence. But bringing it into the open both makes clear its highly puzzling character, and also highlights what I

take to be the ultimate question in this area: *how is such a correlation (or our reliance on it) itself to be justified?*

Here we are in the dialectical vicinity of old-fashioned discussions about the relation between sense-data and physical objects. But those earlier discussions are less helpful in relation to our present concerns than one might have hoped, both because of their obsession with the issue of the ontological status of sense-data, an issue whose epistemological significance is far from obvious, and because of their general hospitality to reductive views like phenomenalism, which it is now very hard to take seriously. In any case, perhaps fortunately, I have no space here to try to solve this rather daunting problem.

Summing up, I have argued, first, that Haack has not probed deeply enough into the experientialism that is pretty clearly the central component of her position; and, second, that when one does so, a serious unsolved problem emerges. To repeat, I agree with her that some view along these general lines represents the best hope for a defensible and non-skeptical account of empirical justification. But it seems to me that we have still some distance to go in order to reach one that is really adequate.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). References in the text are to the pages of this book.

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 149–150.

Department of Philosophy  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA  
U.S.A.