

THE STRUCTURE OF EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE*

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In *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Laurence Bonjour presents the central elements that a coherence theory of empirical knowledge must possess if it is to offer a viable alternative to both foundationalism and externalism. These elements are also required for coherentism to be able to meet traditional objections, sustain a commitment to a strong conception of epistemic justification that ties justification to truth, and avoid skepticism. The task of refining coherentism in view of these multiple, important, and difficult objectives is thus ambitious and praiseworthy. The attempt is carried out by restlessly exploring alternatives to major and minor points, and honestly offering criticisms, objections to the criticisms, counterobjections to the objections, and so on. The whole journey is made easier by a very clear style of exposition, and by the avoidance of cumbersome and idle definitions or lists of necessary and sufficient conditions that frequently plague contemporary discussions in epistemology. The ground covered is extensive, but sometimes at the price of sacrificing depth and thoroughness. This sacrifice is felt more acutely by the end of the book in the discussion of realism and the correspondence theory of truth. In general Bonjour offers his proposal for a coherentist theory of empirical knowledge by laying down a large sketchy picture; at some points the lines are so quick and rough that his arguments may appear naive. Nevertheless, the attempt is very serious, original, and worthy of careful study.

Part One of the book starts with a presentation of Bonjour's conception of the notion of epistemic justification and of the task expected from a theory of knowledge. The rest of the first part consists of three chapters where Bonjour criticizes different versions of foundationalism, including externalist foundationalism. The second part of the book, on the other hand,

* Critical Study of Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985.

contains the constructive proposal for a coherence theory of empirical knowledge. It has been almost always the case, after the demise of the all-encompassing metaphysical systems of the past, that the negative, critical phase of a philosophical work has been vastly more successful than the positive theories offered to replace or reconstruct what has been demolished at the negative stage. This book is no exception to this problem of contemporary philosophy.

The critical part can also constitute a very useful pedagogical tool. The survey of recent epistemological theories is extensive, extremely clear, and very fair. BonJour starts this survey by criticizing foundationalism. This is done by first characterizing the foundationalist's attempts to deal with the epistemic regress argument. The threat of an infinite and apparently vicious epistemic regress that arises from relying exclusively on inferential justification is, according to BonJour, the central motivation for foundationalism and, in general, "the most crucial [problem] in the entire theory of knowledge" (p. 18). The answer to this threat, common to all versions of foundationalism, is that some empirical beliefs—"basic beliefs"—have a degree of noninferential justification of their own. BonJour distinguishes three versions of this thesis which he calls respectively, strong, moderate, and weak foundationalism. He regards moderate foundationalism as the most viable and healthy version, and thus the one worthy of more attention. A basic belief, according to moderate foundationalism, need be only adequately justified, not infallible. Strong foundationalism requires that a basic belief be infallible—which means, according to BonJour's definition, that "it is impossible for a person to hold such a belief and for it nonetheless to be mistaken, where the impossibility might be logical or nomological" (p. 26). BonJour rightly thinks that strong foundationalism is an overkill, since nothing about the regress requires that basic beliefs be more than adequately justified. Weak foundationalism, on the other hand, advocates the view that basic beliefs are only "initially credible" rather than fully justified; thus the degree of noninferential justification they possess on their own is insufficient to stop the regress of justification. Consequently, weak foundationalism attempts to increase the justification of basic and nonbasic beliefs by appeal to the notion of coherence of the system of beliefs. Weak foundationalism, however, has never offered a precise characterization of the trade-off between coherence and the initially low degree of justification of basic beliefs. Moreover, according to BonJour, the most important objection against foundationalism cannot be avoided by weak foundationalism. This objection goes against any form of foundationalism and is as follows.

BonJour's basic presupposition in his argument against foundationalism is the constraint that he proposes in Chapter I regarding the notion of epistemic justification: epistemic justification is a *means* to truth. For a foundationalist account to be acceptable therefore, the features which distinguish basic empirical beliefs from other empirical beliefs must be such that possession of those features make beliefs highly likely to be true. The claims that those features are highly likely to lead to truth and that basic beliefs possess those features are presented by BonJour as two reasons or further premises that must be justifiably believed by a person if she is justifiably to hold basic beliefs. The difficulty with this part of BonJour's argument is that no reason is given for the foundationalist to regard the issue as involving further premises. In any case, BonJour also argues that since these premises justify an empirical belief, they cannot be both a priori. It follows that there are no basic beliefs after all, for the putative basic beliefs depend for their justification on further empirical beliefs. The following two chapters discuss the two strongest foundationalist rejoinders to this antifoundationalist argument. Some traditional foundationalist approaches reject the premise of the above antifoundationalist argument that requires that the justification of basic beliefs involve further empirical beliefs. Rather the justification involves, according to these views, basic cognitive states that are not beliefs and not in need of further justification. They are states such as intuitions, immediate apprehensions, and the like. BonJour discusses these views in Chapter 4 where he argues against the doctrines of the given of C. I. Lewis, Moritz Schlick, and Anthony Quinton, and also against a related position which attempts a purely a priori justification of basic beliefs. The other major foundationalist rejoinder relies on externalism, a more recent and more fashionable epistemological approach. Chapter 3 discusses externalist versions of foundationalism.

In this chapter BonJour is concerned only with externalist views that do not reject epistemic justification as a requirement for knowledge and for which, therefore, the epistemic regress problem arises. The discussion addresses for the most part the view presented by David Armstrong in his book *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge*. Like all externalists, Armstrong makes the justification of beliefs depend on an external relation between the believer and the world, a relation that need not be within the cognitive grasp of the believer and that makes it at least highly probable that the belief is true. BonJour's argumentation explicitly avoids the attempt at a direct refutation of Armstrong's externalism, and of externalism in general, since he rightly thinks that such an attempt would rely on assumptions that

externalists would not accept. Instead BonJour tries to avoid relying on such assumptions by appealing to our intuitions in considering a series of examples of clairvoyance. These examples suggest the need for some modifications to Armstrong's views and, more importantly, that externalism goes against a fundamental intuition regarding epistemic rationality. This intuition is, according to BonJour, that "external or objective reliability is not enough to offset subjective irrationality" (p. 41). I believe that here the externalist can reply that the issue is objective knowledge or objective justification, not subjective rationality. Thus the externalist can still persuade us that the acceptance of certain beliefs is reliable and thus justified. Nevertheless the persuasiveness of externalism diminishes when we acknowledge that in most cases the beliefs in question are appreciated as reliable only by an external observer who knows all the relevant facts and laws. BonJour's examples exploit this fact and hence show that in many important cases externalism makes the acceptance of true beliefs accidental, or worst, irrational and irresponsible. BonJour's proposal is that the rationality or justifiability of a subject's belief not be judged from a perspective that is unavailable to the subject. This, of course, is what the externalist wants to deny.

In order to reinforce the antiexternalist proposal beyond counterexamples of specific subjects under special circumstances, BonJour considers an analogy with moral philosophy and the connection between knowledge and rational action. These considerations—in spite of their briefness—make his case very strong, although again the externalist would probably regard the discussion as relying on premises externalism rejects. The main point in both the moral and the action cases is that in judging the reasonableness or rightness of a subject's action, what the subject believes or intends is a crucial factor—regardless of the objective consequences of her actions or of the objective state of affairs.

The discussion of externalism, together with the earlier first chapter where BonJour presents his general strategy, shows very clearly that BonJour is concerned with epistemological questions in the way most modern philosophers were. From Descartes on, perhaps with the exception of Leibniz, philosophers of the modern period were concerned with understanding the possibilities and limits of *human* knowledge. Their enquiries started from—even though not always ended with—the human perspective. Moreover, also like the traditional philosophers, BonJour attempts to ask hyperbolic questions, that is, questions of the utmost generality about the conditions and limits of the whole of our knowledge.

These are the questions that force us to take philosophical skepticism seriously. For, once we raise questions about the *whole* of our knowledge, we thereby assume a standpoint outside the body of our common-sense and scientific beliefs. We cannot then take for granted that any of these beliefs constitutes knowledge, since answers that simply rely on their correctness fail to address the scope of hyperbolic questions. Traditional philosophers therefore saw no other way to answer such properly philosophical questions about our knowledge—and thus no other way to answer philosophical skepticism in epistemology—than by means of a priori theories of knowledge offered from a standpoint outside our common-sense and scientific beliefs. Thus, for example, Descartes appealed to a priori arguments about God, and Kant to the philosophical theory of transcendental idealism. I believe that no such traditional concerns are shared by contemporary externalism.

In Part Two of the book, Bonjour presents his own version of coherentism. Bonjour is concerned here with a coherence theory of empirical justification that purports both to answer philosophical skepticism and to avoid externalism. Bonjour proposals for a modified version of coherentism are ingenious but, as I will argue below, they do not fully succeed in achieving these two goals. Bonjour starts by rejecting what he calls a 'linear' version of justification in favor of a nonlinear one. The attribution of a linear form of justification is what is behind a common and very effective criticism of coherentism. According to this criticism, the coherentist view that justification proceeds in a circle or multidimensional closed curve implies that at some point of the regress of justification some of the beliefs that were taken earlier as conclusions are now taken as justifying premises. The obvious objection to this is that the justification of such beliefs depends, indirectly but nonetheless viciously, on their own logically prior justification. According to Bonjour the tacit assumption in this form of criticism is that inferential justification involves a one-dimensional sequence of beliefs ordered by the relation of epistemic priority. Since this linear conception of justification generates the epistemic regress problem in the first place, coherentism can succeed as a response to this problem and at the same time meet the above criticism, only if it repudiates the linear conception.

Bonjour proposes the nonlinear conception for the *global* level of justification, that is, for the problem of the justification of the entire system of beliefs—as opposed to the problem of justification that arises at the *local* level for specific beliefs within the context of a system whose overall

justification is taken for granted. At the local level inferential justification appears to be linear since one can easily reach what Bonjour calls 'contextually basic beliefs.' With the distinction between global and local epistemological issues Bonjour is following—without explicitly acknowledging it—the tradition of Descartes, Hume, Kant and others who distinguished philosophical from nonphilosophical standpoints with respect to knowledge and justification. Once again Bonjour sides with this tradition in demanding philosophical understanding, and he advances a nonlinear holistic conception to resolve the global issue of justification. According to this conception there is not a linear dependence among particular beliefs, rather there is a relation of mutual or reciprocal support in the sense that the justification of a particular belief depends not on other particular beliefs but on the justification of the overall system and on its coherence. Although Bonjour is not explicit about this, I take it that the latter is true when a particular belief is considered from the global perspective. In any case, the fully explicit justification of a particular empirical belief involves several steps that include among others a reference to the whole system and its coherence. The transitions from one step to another raise important problems for coherentism. The most crucial of these transitions is, as Bonjour rightly claims, the transition from the coherence of the system to its epistemic justification: Why, if a system of beliefs is more coherent than others, is it thereby justified in the epistemic sense, thus more likely to be true (where truth is not identified with coherence but is understood along the lines of a correspondence theory of truth)? To answer this question Bonjour goes about considering some major objections to coherentism.

First there is the objection that if a system of beliefs is epistemically justified solely in virtue of its internal coherence, it follows that it is impossible to make a nonarbitrary choice of a unique justified system of beliefs, since there are always different and incompatible systems that are equally coherent. The second objection is that if coherence is the sole basis for empirical justification, a system might be justified in spite of being completely out of contact with the world. The third objection is that a coherence theory will be unable to show that its proposed standard of justification is more likely to lead to truth unless it also adopts a coherence theory of truth and the idealist metaphysics associated with it. If this objection is correct then whatever appeal coherentism has is shown to rely on circularity: the rationale for adopting the proposed coherentist standard of justification is that it is truth-conducive, but truth is construed as long-run ideal coherence in order to secure the link between justification and truth. In other words, if truth is long-run ideal coherence, it will likely be truth-

conducive to adopt the most coherent system of beliefs; but there would be no independent motivation for adopting either the coherentist standard of justification or the theory of truth.

In Bonjour's account, the answer to the second objection leads the way to answering the other objections. Bonjour holds the common sense, anti-idealist view that there is a real nonconceptual world that is completely independent of our system of beliefs; hence that coherentism must give some role to observation to accommodate the fact that a system of empirical beliefs must receive some input from this independent world.

According to Bonjour, the fact that observational beliefs are noninferential does not contradict the essential tenet of coherentism that all justification is inferential. For observational beliefs are noninferential with respect to their genesis or origin but not with respect to their epistemic justification or warrant. Observational beliefs are arrived at in a direct or immediate way, but they are justified in virtue of standing in appropriate inferential relations to other beliefs in a coherent system of beliefs. In general the needed input in a coherentist conception are, according to Bonjour, beliefs arrived at in a noninferential way and only justified by appeal to their coherence with the rest of the system, but whose coherentist justification depends somehow on their noninferential origin.

Bonjour regards Wilfrid Sellars's view of observation in "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" as approximating these requirements. Bonjour's interpretation of Sellars's view is that the justification of some empirical beliefs (the credibility of empirical sentence tokens, in Sellars's words) derives from their origin, but not because they rest on self-authenticating, intrinsically authoritative episodes of awareness, as in the doctrine of the given. Rather, their justification relies on the fact that the beliefs are formed (the sentences are produced) in the presence of certain objects, and constitute a manifestation of a tendency to form such beliefs (or sentences)—given certain circumstances—if the subject is in the presence of such objects. The tendency in question is an empirical law which applies to the subject in virtue of her previous education and training. This resembles externalism. However, Sellars rejects externalism since he requires that for the beliefs in question to constitute knowledge, the fact that they are lawfully correlated with the actual presence of objects must be recognized by the subject. In this way the justification of observational beliefs always depends on general beliefs regarding the relevant correlations between specific beliefs about the presence of objects and the actual presence of objects. Moreover, these general beliefs are justified on the basis of further

observations which in turn are justified by more general knowledge, and so on; and all of these beliefs must fit together in a coherent system. To sum up, observational beliefs are caused from outside the system of beliefs but justified only from within the system in relation to the background and context provided by other beliefs with which they cohere. Furthermore, this justification depends on their having been caused in that way. According to Bonjour, it is thus possible to guarantee that a system receives genuine input from outside the system, therefore that there is an external check on the internal workings of coherence.

In order to work out some of the details of this view Bonjour specifies a general form of argument for the justification of putatively observational beliefs—which he calls at this stage of the discussion ‘cognitively spontaneous’ beliefs. The paradigmatic example used is: as I sit at my desk (or so I believe) I come to have the belief that there is a red book on the desk. The account is further generalized to all cases of observation, to what he calls ‘negative observational knowledge’ (e.g., looking at the desk I come to have the putative knowledge that there is no blue book on the desk), and to introspection.

One of the crucial premises in the justificatory argument for a cognitively spontaneous belief is the subject’s further belief that the cognitively spontaneous belief of the kind she has is likely to be true since it does occur (or that it is likely that it occurs under the conditions in which it is true). Such a premise is a belief in a putative empirical law concerning the behavior of certain observers under certain conditions. With respect to the justification of this kind of laws Bonjour says:

A coherentist account of observation need offer no special account of the justification of such laws. It is clear that laws of this kind are widely accepted by both common sense and scientific psychology, and that anything which either the man-in-the-street or the psychologist can appeal to in justifying them can also be employed, *if properly interpreted*, within the context of a coherence theory... The rider that such justificatory appeals must be properly construed is important, however: if a relapse into some sort of foundationalism is to be avoided, the laws in question must be justified from within the observer’s system of beliefs, not by appeal to anything outside it.

(pp. 124–25).

Considering these claims it appears that Bonjour has lost sight at this point of the antiskeptical character of his project. The reliability of the laws in question is a central element in the justification of observational beliefs which in turn are supposed to insure that the whole system of beliefs can be checked against an independent reality and hence that the system is more likely to be true than its competitors. To rely for the justification of these

laws on putative knowledge possessed by the man-in-the-street or the psychologist is to beg the question against the skeptic. In this respect BonJour is in the same boat with the externalist vis-à-vis the skeptic: he has now adopted a standpoint from which some empirical knowledge is taken as unproblematic and thus not in need of justification. Here BonJour, like the externalists, is applying the standards of enquiries into local, as opposed to global, questions of justification. However, what is at stake with the introduction of a significant role for observation is the justification of the whole system of beliefs, and only a global answer can address the skeptical challenge. Furthermore, BonJour's proposal—in making the reliability of the laws connecting beliefs with objects or state of affairs in the world a matter of internal judgment within a system of beliefs—carries the burden of showing that internal reliability is an acceptable indicator of objective (external) reliability. Externalism, obviously, does not have such an additional burden.

Another important premise in the justificatory argument for the truth of a cognitively spontaneous belief is the further belief on the part of the subject that she has a cognitively spontaneous belief of a certain kind. The most important aspect of this further belief is the claim that the justificandum belief is cognitively spontaneous, namely, that no relevant discursive process took place at the time the belief occurred. This claim is in turn in need of justification. BonJour believes that an appeal to introspection at this point would involve a vicious regress, since introspective beliefs must themselves be known to be cognitively spontaneous in order to be justified. Moreover, beliefs are often judged to be cognitively spontaneous even when no introspective process accompanies them. BonJour proposes two lines of justification for the claim that the justificandum belief is cognitively spontaneous: first, the absence from one's cognitive system of any beliefs that could serve as premises in a discursive derivation of the belief in question, and the absence of any positive belief that the justificandum belief is inferential; second, the fact that the justificandum belief has a content that almost always is noninferential when it occurs. Both lines of justification appeal to some extent to introspection but ultimately to what BonJour calls the 'Doxastic Presumption.' This is a fundamental and inescapable component in BonJour's conception that makes the whole approach vulnerable to skeptical attack.

The Doxastic Presumption concerns one's grasp of one's own system of beliefs, and it is required in order to avoid externalism. In other words, by means of this presumption BonJour attempts to give an account of how the

fact that a belief coheres with the believer's system of beliefs can constitute a reason *for the believer* to accept the belief. The believer's grasp of her own system of beliefs, whether explicit or implicit, is construed as a set of empirical metabeliefs. Bonjour claims that:

the raising of an issue of empirical justification *presupposes* the existence of some specifiable *system* of empirical beliefs - or rather, as I will explain below, of *approximately* that system; the primary justificatory issue is whether or not, under the presumption that I do indeed hold approximately the system of beliefs which I believe myself to hold, those beliefs are justified.... the grasp of my system of beliefs which is required if I am to have cognitive access to the fact of coherence is dependent...on this Doxastic Presumption...rather than requiring further justification.

(p. 103)

The qualifier 'approximately' is supposed to allow one to raise questions about whether one has a certain particular belief or small set of beliefs, even though it is not possible to question whether one's grasp of one's system of beliefs might be wholly or largely mistaken. Another qualifier is that the Doxastic Presumption cannot function as a premise, since in that case it would rely on further premises to the effect that one has the relevant metabeliefs, premises which in turn would require justification.

According to Bonjour, rather than being a premise within the cognitive system, the Doxastic Presumption characterizes from outside the system our cognitive *practice*: the process of justification cannot even start unless our metabeliefs regarding our system of beliefs are presumed to be for the most part correct. This is true about our cognitive practice; nonetheless, why should we accept that it is true that our grasp of our system of beliefs is for the most part correct? Bonjour concedes that the appeal to the Doxastic Presumption cannot answer a form of skepticism that would question the accuracy of our representation of our own system of beliefs. Bonjour thinks that this does not threaten the success of his antiskeptical strategies since, even if our metabeliefs cannot be justified, it may be possible to show that our beliefs are justified in a sense that makes them likely to be true—relative to the presumption that our metabeliefs are largely correct. Accordingly, the significant epistemological issue is the justification of our beliefs, not of our metabeliefs.

Yet in Bonjour's proposal, as it is explicitly stated, the justification of cognitively spontaneous beliefs relies ultimately on the Doxastic Presumption, that is, on the approximate correctness of our grasp of our system of beliefs. Consequently, if the skeptic were right regarding the doubtfulness of our metabeliefs we would not be able seriously to use the Doxastic Presumption; hence the justification of the premise regarding the

subject's belief that she has beliefs of a certain kind would collapse. But there would be then no justificatory argument of the sort envisaged by Bonjour for the likelihood of truth of the cognitively spontaneous beliefs themselves. This shows that in Bonjour's presentation not only the correctness of our grasp of our cognitively spontaneous beliefs depends on the Doxastic Presumption, but also the correctness of those beliefs themselves. The moral from the vulnerability of the Doxastic Presumption is that we have to eliminate, in the justificatory argument for cognitively spontaneous beliefs, any reference to the subject's beliefs; this leaves us with externalism and local questions of justification. Otherwise, if we still insist in gaining understanding from the subject's point of view of the global justification of whole systems of beliefs we must embrace skepticism. The kind of skeptic who can claim victory here is not one who simply calls into question only our metabeliefs concerning our system of beliefs; but one who—by calling into question our metabeliefs—calls into question the very beliefs that are supposed to insure that our system is connected with an independent external world.

The detour through the coherentist account of observation culminates in the last two chapters of the book with answers to the objections to coherentism that motivated Bonjour's introduction of that account. These answers include the addition of what Bonjour calls the 'Observation Requirement'. The requirement says that "in order for the beliefs of a cognitive system to be even candidates for empirical justification, that system must contain laws attributing a high degree of reliability to a reasonable variety of cognitively spontaneous beliefs (including in particular those kinds of introspective beliefs which are required for the recognition of other cognitively spontaneous beliefs)" (p. 141). In order to answer the third objection—and thus to show that his account does not need to identify truth with long-run, ideal coherence—Bonjour attempts to provide a metajustification of his coherentist standards of justification. This metajustification makes an essential appeal to the Observation Requirement and is supposed to provide an argument for believing that adhering to the proposed coherentist standards is truth-conducive (where truth is understood as correspondence with a mind-independent reality). The presentation of the metajustificatory argument is preceded by a defence of the correspondence theory of truth.

The metajustificatory argument is supposed to provide premises for the derivation of the conclusion that: "A system of beliefs which (a) remains coherent (and stable) over the long run and (b) continues to satisfy the

Observation Requirement is likely, to a degree which is proportional to the degree of coherence (and stability) and the longness of the run, to correspond closely to independent reality" (p. 171). The intuitive idea behind the premises is that the coherence and stability of a system is complicated and vulnerable to disruption or destruction. Hence a system that permanently receives the input guaranteed by the Observation Requirement is likely to lose its coherence in time or need constant revisions which would preserve its coherence but destroy its stability. The crucial part of the argument is that the best explanation for why a system continues to satisfy (a) and (b) against the odds is that: (1) the cognitively spontaneous beliefs which are claimed within the system to be reliable are caused by the facts they purport to describe, and (2) the whole system corresponds to a large extent to the independent reality to which it refers.

One of the questionable assumptions of this argument concerns the stability of the system. Bonjour says: "It is only in the latter sort of case—the case in which the belief system converges on and eventually presents a relatively stable long-run picture of the world, thus achieving coherence over time as well as at particular times—that the coherence of the system provides any strong reason for thinking that the component beliefs are thereby likely to be true" (p. 170). This claim should be restricted to common-sense beliefs about familiar medium size spatio-temporal objects including some low-level generalizations about such objects. What degree of disruption or change would count as within the limits of the desirable stability in the case of theories in physics, for example?

Another more important questionable assumption is that it is unlikely that a system of beliefs which receives the sort of input assured by the Observation Requirement can simply by chance continue to remain both coherent and stable over the long run; and that therefore an explanation is required for the fact that such a system satisfies (a) and (b). It seems however that a system that would continue to satisfy the Observation Requirement but lose its coherence and stability over the long run would be only one which would fail accurately to describe or explain the world even though cognitively spontaneous beliefs regarded as reliable within the system would in fact be *caused* by that same world. It is in fact implausible that a system that receives and takes into consideration input caused by the world—a world that has an orderly character of its own—can remain coherent and stable in the long run, if it systematically produces wrong accounts of that world. Nonetheless a system that would not receive input caused by the world could avoid incoherence and instability if sufficient adjustments in the higher level beliefs were made in order to accommodate a more easily

manipulable putative input. Thus, we are asked by BonJour to accept that an explanation is required, but this explanation is needed only if we assume that the cognitively spontaneous beliefs are in fact caused by the external world. Furthermore, this further assumption is offered as an essential ingredient in the best explanation of what, due to this assumption, is supposed to require an explanation. This shows that the whole work in the argument is done by the assumption that the input the system receives is caused by the spatio-temporal external world it purports to represent. Once we have granted this, it is easy to accept that the explanation of the system's coherence and stability is that the system is likely to correspond to reality. This argument is supposed to have antiskeptical force. But why should the skeptic accept that the cognitively spontaneous beliefs that are judged as reliable from within the system are thus caused?

BonJour discusses at the end of the last Chapter the skeptical view that does not accept the above causal claim. He does not introduce such a view in the way I do here, but rather as a competing explanation to his own putative best explanation presented above. BonJour attempts to show that the skeptical explanatory hypothesis has a lower antecedent probability of truth than BonJour's explanatory hypothesis, and that the antecedent probability in question is entirely a priori in character. Leaving aside the controversial notion of a priori probability, I object to regarding the Cartesian skeptical possibilities as putative competing explanatory hypotheses of experience. They could be interpreted as competing explanatory hypotheses only if they included the claim that our experience is best understood as caused by an evil demon, by electrodes in our heads, by a pervasive universal hallucination or by a permanent state of dreaming. I believe that no such claim is contained in traditional Cartesian type of skeptical hypotheses. They are meant to raise possibilities that challenge our explanations, and it is our burden to rule out such possibilities—if we accept that such possibilities need to be ruled out. Yet it is highly commendable that BonJour takes skepticism seriously, and, rather than offering a quick or dogmatic dismissal, he sketches an elaborate response.

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