

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF BONJOUR'S, HAACK'S, AND DANCY'S THEORY OF EMPIRICAL JUSTIFICATION

Dionysis CHRISTIAS

ABSTRACT: In this paper, we shall describe and critically evaluate four contemporary theories which attempt to solve the problem of the infinite regress of reasons: Bonjour's 'impure' coherentism, Bonjour's foundationalism, Haack's 'foundherentism' and Dancy's pure coherentism. These theories are initially put forward as theories about the justification of our empirical beliefs; however, in fact they also attempt to provide a successful response to the question of their own 'metajustification.' Yet, it will be argued that 1) none of the examined theories is successful as a theory of justification of our empirical beliefs, and that 2) they also fall short of being adequate theories of metajustification. It will be further suggested that the failure of these views on justification is not coincidental, but is actually a consequence of deeper and tacitly held problematic epistemological assumptions (namely, the requirements of justificatory generality and epistemic priority), whose acceptance paves the way towards a generalized scepticism about empirical justification.

KEYWORDS: Laurence Bonjour, Susan Haack, Jonathan Dancy, empirical justification, epistemic priority requirement, justificatory generality requirement, scepticism

1. Introduction

Most of our empirical beliefs seem at first sight perfectly justified. For example, ordinary observational beliefs (of the form "the table on which I'm writing is red" or "the chair on which I'm sitting is blue"), mnemonic beliefs ("I was watching television in the morning"), testimony beliefs ("the first world war begun in 1914") and even non-observational, scientific beliefs ("protons consist of quarks") seem to be paradigms of justified empirical beliefs. How can it be then that the justification of our empirical beliefs is considered to be a philosophical problem, which, moreover, seems to be intractable?

This is because since time immemorial¹ a sceptical argument had appeared (nowadays known as the 'infinite regress of justification' argument) which questioned the justification of beliefs *in general*, i.e. of each and every one of them, of every group or type of belief, including, of course, empirical beliefs. Its

¹ See e.g. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 4-6, and Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1933), I.164-69.

basic premise is that a belief p is justified only if it is inferred from another belief q and only if q is an *independently justified* premise which serves as a reason or evidence in an argument with p -the belief under justification- as its conclusion. If this premise is granted, then the justification of beliefs in general seems to end up in an infinite regress, where a further belief is always needed for the justification of any belief whatsoever. Moreover, two familiar ways of attempting to end the infinite regress, namely, 1) circular justification where eventually – somewhere in the justificatory chain – a belief is used as a reason for the justification of itself (for example, belief A is justified by B , B is justified by C , and C by A again), and 2) arbitrary assumption, where the chain of justification ends up in regress-stopping beliefs which supposedly have the ability to justify other beliefs without being themselves justified at all, obviously fail to satisfy the above basic premise of the infinite regress argument. If we take it that the possible sources of justification ought to be completely independent of the beliefs under justification in order to be able to transmit positive epistemic status to the latter, then the only ‘positive’ solution to our conundrum is to posit the existence of certain ‘basic epistemic units’ or ‘epistemic prime movers’ whose justification is not inferentially transmitted to them by other beliefs. (As we shall see below, this is a description of the foundationalist position.)

In this paper, we shall describe and critically evaluate four contemporary theories which attempt to solve the above-mentioned problem of the infinite regress of reasons. Two of them, namely those of Laurence Bonjour² and Jonathan Dancy³ are coherentist theories of empirical justification, which reject the view that there is an absolute foundation which functions as an ‘epistemic prime mover’ of an essential hierarchical structure in our system of empirical beliefs, and hold instead that empirical justification is conducted within a network of mutually supporting beliefs, where some of them are more ‘central’ and others more ‘peripheral’ within the network, but in which all beliefs, central and peripheral alike, are justified solely on the basis of their contribution in the system’s coherence as a whole. Next, we shall be concerned with a foundationalist theory of empirical justification, than of the ‘late’ Bonjour,⁴ according to which our system of

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

³ Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

⁴ Laurence Bonjour, “Foundationalism and the External World,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 229-49; Laurence Bonjour, *Epistemology: Classic Problems and Contemporary Responses* (Maryland: Rowland & Littlefield, 2002); Laurence Bonjour and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemic Justification, Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

empirical beliefs ultimately rests on non-conceptual yet conscious and epistemically efficacious sensory experience; the latter provide the epistemic foundation on which the whole edifice of empirical knowledge is built (by inference from sensory experiential content). And, lastly, we will examine a 'hybrid' theory, that of Susan Haack,⁵ according to which the correct view about empirical justification is one which combines foundationalist and coherentist elements while at the same time rejecting certain problematic features that equally occur to these two opposing views.

As was mentioned above, those theories are initially put forward as theories about the justification of our empirical beliefs; however, in fact they also attempt to provide a successful response to the question of their own 'metajustification' ("do I have any reasons to believe that the criteria of justification provided by my own theory of justification are *true*?"). Hence, it seems that the above theories also attempt to connect empirical justification with empirical knowledge in a non-sceptical manner. Yet, it will be argued that 1) none of the examined theories is successful as a theory of justification of our empirical beliefs, and that 2) they also fall short of being adequate theories of metajustification. That is to say, even if they indeed were adequate as theories of empirical justification, they would fail to provide a non-sceptical connection between empirical justification and empirical *truth* (or empirical *knowledge* – since the truth of our beliefs is a necessary condition for them to constitute knowledge).

After a detailed presentation of Bonjour's, Haack's and Dancy's theory we shall attempt to show, mostly by means of internal critique, that they cannot avoid ending up to certain sceptical conclusions regarding empirical justification. That is to say, they do not succeed in solving an epistemological problem which all of them admit as legitimate, namely that of their own 'metajustification.' It will be further suggested that the failure of these views on justification is not coincidental, but is actually a consequence of deeper and tacitly held problematic epistemological assumptions, whose acceptance paves the way towards a generalized scepticism about empirical justification.

2. Bonjour's Coherentist Theory of Empirical Justification

Bonjour's coherentist theory of justification is presented in his well-known book *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. The basic ideas around which his theory is structured are the following: 1) The holistic nature of empirical justification (the unit of justification is the whole system of beliefs, rather than individual beliefs),

⁵ Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Susan Haack, "Reply to Bonjour," *Synthese* 112 (1999): 25-35.

2) a clarification of the concept of coherence, 3) the idea of ‘doxastic presumption’ (can I grasp my own belief system, and if yes, to what extent?), and 4) the idea of the observational requirement, which is Bonjour’s way of accommodating observation within a resolutely coherentist framework.

According to Bonjour, the holistic coherentist model of empirical justification is precisely what is needed to solve the problem of the infinite regress of reasons. This is so because, according to the coherentist conception, justification is not ‘transferred’ from one belief which is already justified to another which is ‘waiting’ to receive justification, through inferential relations (of epistemic priority), but is instead an epistemically ‘simultaneous’ property of the *whole system* of beliefs, namely the property of the system’s coherence as a whole. Only if one held the former ‘atomistic,’ non-holistic view of empirical justification, which coherentism explicitly and resolutely *rejects*, would it follow what many epistemologists take for granted without much further argument, namely that coherentist justification is viciously circular.

Now, Bonjour explicates the crucial concept of ‘coherence’ as follows: 1) A conceptual system is coherent only if it is logically consistent (although he eventually changed his mind and came to the view that a) logical consistency need not be an absolutely necessary condition of a system’s coherence, and b) a system of beliefs can well have a high degree of coherence in spite of the presence of ‘local’ incoherence within it.⁶ 2) The coherence of a system of beliefs is proportional to the degree of its probabilistic consistency, which can be understood as the demand that the system, besides the belief *p* ought also to include the belief that *p* is *probable*. 3) The coherence of a system of beliefs is increased if those beliefs are inferentially related, and this increase is directly proportional to the number and strength of the inferential relations in question. 4) The coherence of a belief-system is decreased if there exist within it several subsystems of beliefs which are relatively unconnected (i.e. inferentially unrelated). Only inferential relations can provide mutual epistemic support among beliefs. Two or more beliefs are inferentially related if one can serve as a premise of an argument for the justification of another. 5) However, the mere fact that certain beliefs are inferentially related is not sufficient for obtaining ideal coherence since it does not exclude the possibility that two or more conceptual systems may be well be coherent considered in isolation from one another, i.e. without being *themselves* inferentially connected. Intuitively, it seems that an ideally coherent system is one in which its relatively independent subsystems are

⁶ Laurence Bonjour, “Replies and Clarifications,” in *The Current State of the Coherence Theory*, ed. John Bender (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), 284.

inferentially connected by higher level explanatory laws and principles. 6) The coherence of a belief-system is decreased to a degree which is directly proportional to the presence of unexplained anomalies within it.⁷ This means that for a proper definition of the concept of coherence we must take into account the existence of *explanatory* relations among beliefs (over and above their mere inferential connections).

As was mentioned above, a further important element of Bonjour's coherentist theory is the doxastic presumption. According to it, our beliefs about the contents of our own beliefs, i.e. our conception of our own system of beliefs, is for the most part true. This presumption cannot itself be justified by appeal to its relations of coherence with other beliefs of the system since that would presuppose what is in question, namely the truth of one's (meta)belief about the contents of one's own beliefs. Our epistemic practices can get off the ground only if they already take it for granted that one's beliefs about the contents of one's own beliefs are for the most part true; otherwise our epistemic practices would lose their point, and the very attempt to raise a question about the justification of any of our beliefs would be pointless.

Next, Bonjour attempts to provide a plausible response to one of the most pressing questions that every coherence theory sooner or later has to face, namely that of making room for a plausible concept of observation within the confines of a coherence theory. How can observation function as an independent epistemic check of other, non-observational, empirical beliefs of the system in the context of a generalized coherence theory of empirical beliefs? Absent this crucial epistemic function of observation, it seems that there is nothing in a coherence theory of justification which necessitates that the content of empirical beliefs within the system is ultimately provided by the external world, i.e. a world that exists and has certain structural and qualitative properties independently of their representation from within our system of beliefs. Bonjour's response to this problem is that, provided that we accept the doxastic presumption, it is possible to identify a sub-class of beliefs, namely that of *cognitive spontaneous* beliefs (i.e. beliefs which are non-inferential in origin) and to infer that *some* kinds of those cognitive spontaneous beliefs – e.g. introspective or observational ones, as contrasted with cognitively spontaneous beliefs that are the result of wishful thinking, 'hunches' or unfounded irrational dogmas- are, from the standpoint of the system of beliefs of which they are part, highly reliable, therefore probably

⁷ A conceptual system is plagued with theoretical anomalies if some of its beliefs entail the existence of a state of affairs which cannot be explained on the basis of other beliefs of the system.

true. The belief in the reliability of the above groups of cognitively spontaneous beliefs is based on the fact that the individual members of the group are in agreement with one another as well as with members of other groups of spontaneous beliefs. And this 'agreement' consists in the absence of anomalies between them, in their 'hanging together' with other theoretical principles which contribute to the formulation of an ever-increasing coherent picture of an independent, objective reality, and, crucially, in the existence of a hypothesis which *explains* their reliability. Cognitively spontaneous beliefs which fulfil the above requirements can justifiably be considered as *observational* – while the non-observational beliefs of the system can only be justified if they cohere with precisely those observational beliefs.⁸

However, BonJour himself observes that at this stage of his argument his coherence theory allows only for the *possibility* of external, 'independent' input to the 'internal' process of coherentist justification of our empirical beliefs; it does not guarantee that this is actually the case. This is because it is possible that a system of beliefs which entails that certain recognisable kinds of cognitively spontaneous beliefs are very likely to be true can nonetheless *fail* to imply that the content of those beliefs is reliably correlated to external worldly causes. Therefore, a coherentist theory which purports to be an essentially (and not just accidentally) reliable guide to empirical truth ought to require that the individual beliefs of the system can be candidates for empirical justification only if the system includes laws which ascribe a high degree of reliability to an extended variety of cognitively spontaneous beliefs. In BonJour's terminology, this is the 'observational requirement,' which is necessary for the viability of any coherence theory of empirical justification.⁹

However, BonJour's coherence theory is not without its problems. Its major problematic elements (which, interestingly, remain as such even in his 'late' foundationalist turn) stem from his deep-seated commitment to a *strong internalism* combined with an *argumentative/inferential model* of understanding empirical justification. Those epistemological commitments seem to seriously undermine his theory since they seem to imply that empirical justification is actually a process without end. This is because, according to BonJour's theory, one's empirical belief (whatever its content may be) can be justified only if one can explicitly grasp and justify inferentially (from prior justified beliefs), first, its own content (i.e. the fact that its content is what the subject believes it to be), and, second, its relations of coherence with the contents of the beliefs with which it is

⁸ BonJour, *Coherence Theory*, 138.

⁹ BonJour, *Coherence Theory*, 141.

inferentially connected. To his credit, Bonjour does not ignore this potentially devastating sceptical consequence of his commitment to internalism, and he attempts to deal with the problem by introducing his 'doxastic presumption.' Does this move solve the problem of epistemological scepticism?

A direct consequence of the above-mentioned combination of internalist-argumentative model of justification is that the justification of a cognitively spontaneous belief (however obvious its content may seem to us) *presupposes* an epistemically prior justification of the (meta)belief to the effect that the content (and origin) of the cognitively spontaneous belief in question is what the subject thinks it is and not something else. But this latter (meta)belief can be justified only if the doxastic presumption is *itself already justified* (and not just *true*) since, according to the above internalist-argumentative model of justification, an empirical belief can be justified only if one has a good reason for believing it, and a reason for believing something is a good – i.e. non question-begging – reason only if it is epistemically prior to the belief under justification. Bonjour himself accepts that the doxastic presumption cannot be itself justified since its truth is a necessary condition of the possibility of the justification of any belief whatsoever. But, from this it follows either that 1) the part of the justification of a spontaneous belief which depends on the doxastic presumption is conferred to this belief only from the fact (if it is a fact) that the doxastic presumption *happens* to be true (not from the fact that we have *good reasons* to believe that it is true), or that 2) since the doxastic presumption is not itself justified, then neither are our spontaneous beliefs about the contents of our beliefs nor our further, spontaneous or not, first-level empirical beliefs of ours (since the justification of the latter is conditional on the justification of the former).

If we take the first option, it follows that this way of justifying the doxastic presumption is not internalist at all since the subject does not possess good (non question-begging) reasons to believe that the doxastic presumption is true. The only reason to believe such a thing would be that if the doxastic presumption were false, the enterprise of empirical knowledge could not even get off the ground. Yet, this kind of 'reason' does not seem to be genuinely epistemic by Bonjour's own lights (since it presupposes that there actually is empirical knowledge), but is rather an expression of a deep human 'desire' for empirical knowledge or of a practical inability to conceive the epistemic possibility of the non-existence of any empirical knowledge whatsoever. If, on the other hand, we take the second option, then, given Bonjour's commitment to a strong internalism combined with an argumentative-inferential model of justification, we end up to a radical scepticism regarding the justification of each and every empirical belief of ours.

3. BonJour's Foundationalist Theory of Justification

BonJour eventually came to the conclusion that the above critique regarding the epistemic status of the doxastic presumption is eminently plausible, and acknowledged that, given his commitment to a strong internalist and argumentative-inferential model of empirical justification, only a *foundationalist* interpretation of this presumption could block the way to a radical scepticism. Accordingly, in a series of articles from 1998 to 2003¹⁰ he ended up advocating a pure foundationalist theory of empirical justification in a more or less traditional form of this view which has its origins in Locke's and Berkeley's empiricism. BonJour thereby attempted to resuscitate a version of the traditional epistemological concept of the Given, as the latter was used for providing a foundation to empirical knowledge in the works of Russell¹¹ and C.I. Lewis.¹²

According to this new, foundationalist theory of justification, a certain subset of our empirical beliefs, namely that of 'basic' beliefs, are non-inferentially justified, i.e. justified in a way which automatically makes them intrinsically reliable independently of any epistemic support from other beliefs. This is possible because the justification of basic beliefs is internally related to the (non-conceptual) content of sensory and introspective experience, and, more specifically, to the *immediate apprehension* of the content of sensory experience.¹³

Now, according to BonJour, there are two kinds of basic beliefs: Meta-beliefs about the content of first-order beliefs (notice that these are precisely those meta-beliefs which constitute BonJour's 'doxastic presumption,' which are now foundationally justified), and beliefs about sensory experience. The latter purport to (conceptually) describe – in physical object appearance terms ("it looks as if there is a blue book in front of me") – the non-conceptual, 'phenomenal' content of sensory experience, and they are true if they provide an *accurate description* of that content. This description can be correct or incorrect (unlike the immediate apprehension of sensory experience which is neither correct nor incorrect), but the subject is in an ideal epistemic position to grasp the correctness of incorrectness of the description due to the fact that the content to be described is

¹⁰ Laurence BonJour, "The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, eds. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (London: Blackwell, 1998), 117-44; BonJour, "Foundationalism and the External World"; BonJour, *Epistemology*; BonJour and Sosa, *Epistemic Justification*.

¹¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

¹² Clarence Irving Lewis, *Mind and the World Order* (New York: Dover, 1929); Clarence Irving Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1946).

¹³ BonJour, *Epistemology*, 63-64.

itself a *conscious* mental state of the subject. Bonjour acknowledges that there is always the possibility of error in descriptions of this kind (empirical justification is defeasible) but, precisely because in this juxtaposition of the conceptual content of the description with the non-conceptual content of sensory experience the subject is in an ideal epistemic position to judge the accuracy of this description, empirical justification at this level can lose its *prima facie* reliability only if there is a special, specific reason for one to believe that the description in question is inaccurate (e.g. distraction, inattention etc.); the abstract possibility of the existence of such a defeating reason is not sufficient for putting the *prima facie* reliability of basic beliefs into question.¹⁴

Unfortunately, Bonjour's foundationalist theory of justification faces serious problems, in spite of the fact that (or rather, as we shall see in section 6, *precisely because*) it is diametrically opposed to his former coherentist view. More specifically, it is unclear how, on this view, empirical justification is generated in the case of basic beliefs.

As regards the question of the generation of the empirical justification of basic beliefs, the problem in Bonjour's foundationalism is that it goes hand in hand with a strong form of epistemological *Givenness*, according to which the self-presenting properties of the act of immediate apprehension of the content of sensory experience are sufficient to guarantee that the conceptually structured basic belief which purports to describe that non-conceptual, sensory content are intrinsically *prima facie* justified. Yet, in our view, Bonjour's own understanding of those 'self-presenting' properties of the non-conceptual act of immediate apprehension is such that it deprives another related, and most fundamental, epistemic act, that of the *direct comparison or juxtaposition* of the conceptual and the non-conceptual content of perceptual experience, of its very *normativity*, i.e. of a necessary condition for a basic belief be considered as *prima facie* justified (or unjustified) at all. This latter epistemic act of 'direct comparison/juxtaposition' can be considered as capable of being correct or incorrect (justified or unjustified) only if there are *independent criteria* of distinguishing between cases in which it *seems* that this 'direct comparison' has the content we think it has (while in reality, its actual content is not what we think it is) and cases in which it *actually has* the content we think it has.¹⁵ This absolutely crucial distinction for the viability of Bonjour's whole foundationalist epistemological project cannot be drawn in the Bonjourian allegedly 'epistemic' act of 'direct comparison' since the very content

¹⁴ Bonjour, *Epistemology*, 213-15; Bonjour and Sosa, *Epistemic Justification*, 72-75.

¹⁵ See also Wilfrid Sellars, "The Structure of Knowledge," in *Action, Knowledge and Reality*, ed. Hector-Neri Castaneda (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1975), §24-25.

of the latter is such (phenomenal) that the notion of an independent identification of its correct or incorrect recognition and application cannot find any foothold.

If, on the other hand, as Bonjour suggests in a reply to his critics,¹⁶ the epistemic act of 'direct comparison' is in fact partly conceptual and clearly distinct from the contents under comparison, namely those of the perceptual belief and the non-conceptual sensory experience, then it seems that, ironically, Bonjour falls prey to a critique that he himself levelled against foundationalism in his coherentist period. If one introduces semi-judgemental or semi-conceptual states in an attempt to provide an independent epistemic criterion or foundation for the justification of empirical beliefs one just does not recognise the plain fact that "to whatever extent such a state is capable of conferring justification, it will to that very same extent be itself in need of justification."^{17,18}

It seems therefore that the foundationalist idea of a level of intrinsically justified basic beliefs is highly problematic in the radical sense that it cannot even get off the ground.

4. Haack's 'Foundherentist' Theory of Empirical Justification

It seems that Bonjour's foundationalism fares no better than his older coherentist theory in solving the problem of empirical justification. But there are at least two further theoretical positions in the vicinity which could be worth pursuing: The first is the return to coherentism, albeit of a different form than Bonjour's former 'impure' coherentist theory (such as Dancy's 'pure' coherentist theory, which will be examined in section 5) while the second is that of some kind of synthesis or 'fusion' of foundationalism and coherentism. In this section, we will discuss Susan Haack's attempt to provide such a theoretical fusion in her book *Evidence and Inquiry*.¹⁹

Haack terms her theory 'foundherentism' in order to stress that this view incorporates central elements from both foundationalism and coherentism. She further believes that although those theories are diametrically opposed to one another, they are not absolutely dichotomous, that is, they do not exhaust the

¹⁶ Laurence Bonjour, "Reply to my Critics," *Philosophical Studies* 131 (2006): 743-59.

¹⁷ Bonjour, *Coherence Theory*, 78.

¹⁸ For further, but in many ways similar arguments against Bonjour's foundationalism (which, moreover, point out that an adherence to the doctrine of the Given conflicts with the requirements of epistemological internalism) see Byeong Lee, "Bonjour's Way Out of the Sellarsian Dilemma and his Explanatory Account," *Dialogue* 52, 2 (2013): 287-304, and Ted Poston, "Bonjour and the Myth of the Given," *Res Philosophica* 90, 2 (2013): 185-201.

¹⁹ Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*.

theoretical space of possible philosophical responses to the central problems of epistemology (such as the 'infinite regress argument').

According to Haack, the primary source of empirical justification is evidence, which can be either propositional or non-propositional in character. That is, empirical justification is not only a matter of having reasons to believe something – since, according to Haack, reasons can be only propositional in form.²⁰ For example, sensory experiences of which we are aware about what *seems* to be the case (sensory 'seemings') can well function as non-propositional evidence for an empirical belief. Haack terms those sensory seemings "S (state)-evidence (as contrasted to 'C (content)-evidence" which are explicitly propositional and function as reasons). Indeed, it seems that the notion of 'S-evidence' can provide the key for a proper response to the problem of the infinite regress of justification since S-evidence are in part epistemically efficacious (i.e. they can justify other beliefs) without themselves being further beliefs (in need of further justification).

Haack's theory combines elements of foundationalism and coherentism without being reduced to either of them. On the one hand, she accepts the foundationalist view that purely causal factors can make a contribution to the justification of an empirical belief, while, on the other hand, she contends that the justification of our empirical beliefs *as a whole*, including basic beliefs, cannot be adequate unless at least some conceptual evidence, i.e. evidence that belong in the 'space of reasons,' are used as premises in a justificatory argument. In this sense, Haack is not a foundationalist since she rejects the epistemic significance of the divide between basic and non-basic beliefs.²¹

In another conciliatory move, Haack also purports to show that the dichotomy between reasons and causes – exactly like that between foundationalism and coherentism – is not absolute. She does that by maintaining that certain kinds of evidence within the space of reasons, namely 'experiential C-evidence,' can adequately capture the justificatory power that certain kinds of non-conceptual states situated within the 'space of causes' (experiential S-evidence) are supposed to possess. If this justificatory connection between the conceptual and the non-conceptual level could indeed be demonstrated, Haack's further claim to the effect that propositions which describe experiential C-evidence are all true (i.e. propositions of the form "I undergo a sensory or perceptual experience of a such-and-such kind") would be eminently plausible; and in this way, Haack could claim that her theory can successfully anchor our conceptual system of empirical beliefs to the non-conceptual structure of sensory

²⁰ Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, 70.

²¹ Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, 19.

experience, and eventually, to the extra-conceptual structure of the external world. Haack suggests that the way in which experiential C-evidence can capture the justificatory relevance of experiential S-evidence is by (conceptually) ascribing or positing the occurrence – under normal conditions – of a specific (non-conceptual) sensory experience which has definite subjective experiential features, but whose content can be described in terms of external physical objects and events.²²

However, at this point one can raise the following objection: What reason do we have to believe that the conceptual description of experience can capture exactly those properties of our non-conceptual experience which are relevant to its justificatory power? How do we know that our general beliefs with regard to the ultimate causes of the occurrence or the structural and qualitative properties of our non-conceptual sensory experience are justified?²³ Haack's responds by invoking our common sense concept of evidence and by noting that at this stage of her argument she only purports to describe our pre-theoretical criteria of empirical justification, rather than evaluating them as regards their capacity to be reliable indications of empirical truth. (This latter project is that of the 'ratification' of our existing criteria of empirical justification.) Haack therefore suggests that a successful response to the abovementioned serious BonJourian objection goes hand in hand with the provision of an illuminating answer to the further question of the ratification of her own (purely descriptive, commonsensical) criteria of justification.²⁴ But before we examine Haack's attempt to solve the 'metajustification' problem, we should first get a clearer (if only sketchy) grasp of her first-level 'descriptive' or 'commonsense' theory of empirical justification.

Can we provide a plausible account of our pre-theoretical criteria of justification? What conditions must be met in order for our evidence to count as *good* evidence for believing something about the empirical world? We can better understand what these condition are if we use as our analogy the model of the *crossword puzzle*. The clues of the crossword puzzle correspond to one's experiential C-evidence while the already filled-in entries correspond to the C-reasons one has for believing something about the world. The clues that are initially given in the crossword puzzle do not depend on its already filled-in entries, while the latter's accuracy does depend on the accuracy of the other filled-in entries. In exactly the same sense, the justification of experiential C-evidence

²² Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, 80-81.

²³ Laurence BonJour, "Haack on Justification and Experience," *Synthese* 112 (1997): 13-23.

²⁴ Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, 17.

for believing something does not depend on the C-reasons that one may possess for it, but the justification of the C-reasons themselves does depend on the justification of other C-reasons we have for that belief.²⁵ The clues of the crossword puzzle correspond to our conceptual responses to our sensory experience (as the former are formulated in propositions about our own perceptual experience) which ultimately results from the causal triggering of non-conceptual informational states of the (pre- or extra-subjective) world; the already filled-in entries of the crossword puzzle correspond to the conceptually structured reasons which, by their coherence relations to each other provide justificatory support to our empirical beliefs, while the current status of the process of puzzle-solving, i.e. the degree in which it has been filled-in and the correctness or incorrectness of the completed entries correspond to the current status of our conceptual system of empirical beliefs with respect to the degree in which it accurately represents the external world.

Now, based on the above analogy of the crossword puzzle, Haack suggests that the justification of empirical beliefs ultimately depends on 1) the degree of supportiveness which is given to an 'entry' (belief) by the initial 'clue' (S-evidence) as well as from any intersecting entries that have been already filled in (reasons), 2) how reasonable, *independently* of the entry in question, one's confidence is that those other already filled-in entries are correct, and 3) how many of the intersecting entries have actually been filled in.²⁶

But how are Haack's criteria of empirical justification *themselves* justified? Do we have any reason to believe that those criteria are a reliable guide to empirical truth? As was mentioned above, this is the project or ratification or metajustification of the criteria of justification. Haack herself describes the most central and general difficulty that any theory of justification is bound to face as regards its own metajustification as follows: Let 'R' abbreviate all the direct reasons that can be offered in a ratificatory argument, from the standpoint of a 'foundherentist' (or, for that matter, any) theory of justification. Even then, there remains the question 'how do we know that R?' To this question one can respond either by begging the question – i.e. by using what from the standpoint of the theory in question (Haack's foundherentism) are standards of good (i.e. truth-indicative) evidence and then showing that the foundherentist standards for R satisfy the standard of good evidence – or one can use an externalist argument to the effect that even if one does not know that one's evidence for R are indeed good (i.e. supportive and independently secure) one can nonetheless be justified in

²⁵ Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, 81-82.

²⁶ Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, 82.

believing them since they may well *be* good evidence. Haack opts for the externalist response to the ratificatory question.²⁷

However, it seems that Haack's externalist response to the ratificatory question cannot be satisfactory since it is patently question-begging even from the standpoint of her own first-order 'foundherentist' criteria of empirical justification. Specifically, Haack's externalist argument to the effect that the only thing that is sufficient for one to know that one's belief about R is justified is just the actual truth of one's belief about R (rather than its independent justification) obviously violates her own (first-order) justificatory standard of *independent security*.

Another serious objection against Haack's foundherentism, which is targeted against its own conceptual core, is the following: As was shown above, Haack suggests that there is a middle ground between foundationalism and coherentism, in which the justification of *every* empirical belief essentially involves doxastic as well as non-doxastic sources of justification. Yet, as it appears to be the case, Haack holds that no empirical belief whatsoever can be epistemically efficacious (i.e. transmit justification to other beliefs) unless it is justified from *both* sources of justification, it follows that the doxastic sources of justification cannot be usefully distinguished from non-doxastic ones with respect to their capacity to render an empirical belief epistemically *efficacious*. Hence, it seems that Haack's insistence that the non-doxastic factors of justification provide a 'positive epistemic status' to an empirical belief all by themselves (even if only in part) is not adequately motivated since she also explicitly holds that this 'partial' justification is never sufficient for making a belief capable of being epistemically efficacious. Why should we take it that non-doxastic sources of justification provide positive epistemic status to an empirical belief all by themselves (rather than, say, always with the aid of doxastic factors) if this positive epistemic status does not even suffice for enabling it to be epistemically efficacious?

This objection to Haack's foundherentism seems even more pressing if we consider Haack's own response to BonJour, in which she takes up the exact same question we raised above about the proper way to distinguish basic from non-basic beliefs in very weak forms of foundationalism (where this distinction seems to be blurred).²⁸ Haack correctly observes that if a version of weak foundationalism allows for a form of justificatory dependence of basic beliefs on non-basic beliefs which is so pervasive that without this support basic beliefs cannot justify other beliefs (i.e. they are not epistemically efficacious), then why not allow this

²⁷ Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry*, 221.

²⁸ Susan Haack, "Reply to BonJour," *Synthese* 112 (1997): 25-35.

pervasive justificatory support to extend to the initial 'positive epistemic status' which basic beliefs allegedly receive solely from non-conceptual sensory experience? Any prohibition of this extension cannot but be totally *ad hoc*, artificial, and, ultimately, epistemically arbitrary since it does not seem to explain anything at all, beyond our desire to continue to call our theoretical position 'foundationalism.' But exactly the same objection can be levelled against Haack as regards the necessity (epistemic function) of her distinction between doxastic and non-doxastic sources of empirical justification. Haack believes that this epistemic distinction ought to be preserved at all costs because only in this way can we solve a problem which is fatal for all forms of coherentism, namely that of accounting for the possibility of epistemically representing the external, extra-conceptual world from the inside of our conceptual system of beliefs and solely on the basis of their internal epistemic relations of coherence. Yet, in our view, Haack's foundherentism does not succeed in solving this problem, save only verbally. This is because Haack's non-doxastic sources of justification (experiential S-evidence) – which supposedly ensure that our conceptual system is epistemically anchored to external, extra-conceptual reality by providing an epistemic source outside beliefs that can function as an independent check of the latter- are in fact epistemically *idle* since they cannot even transmit their supposed 'partial' justificatory power (their 'positive epistemic status') to our beliefs (i.e. to the conceptual level) without justificatory recourse to the *doxastic* or conceptual level. Hence, they cannot play the role (not even in part) of an extra-conceptual level, outside all beliefs, which can provide a (partly) independent epistemic check of our conceptual system of empirical beliefs.

5. Dancy's Pure Coherentist Theory of Justification

It starts to seem that neither Bonjour's coherentism or foundationalism, nor Haack's 'hybrid' 'foundherentist' theory can provide a viable solution to the problem of empirical justification. Haack's foundherentism seems on careful inspection to collapse to a kind of coherentism, and, as was shown in section 3 Bonjour's foundationalism cannot even get off the ground (unless it appeals to essentially coherentist considerations). Hence, it seems reasonable to suppose that a coherence theory of empirical justification which could avoid the pitfalls of Bonjour's version of coherentism could stand a chance of being a correct view about empirical justification. To this end, we shall proceed to an examination of

Dancy's pure coherence theory, as the latter is developed in his book *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*.²⁹

According to Dancy, a belief *p* is justified to the extent to which it is a member of a coherent system of beliefs. That is, if the coherence of one's system of beliefs would be increased by abandoning the belief and by replacing it by its opposite, the belief is not justified, whereas if one's system of beliefs is more coherent with the belief that *p* as a member rather than with any alternative, the belief is justified. The basic feature of this coherentist view of justification is that it rejects the view that there is an important (i.e. asymmetric) epistemic distinction to be made between basic (non-inferentially justified) and non-basic (inferentially justified) beliefs. *Each* of the beliefs which are members of a coherent system is justified in an epistemically '*simultaneous*' manner, as it were (which is not to say that they are *inferentially* justified, in the foundationalist preferred interpretation of the term -itself essentially based on an asymmetric notion of justification), to the extent to which each belief contributes to the coherence of the system as a whole. Moreover, a system of beliefs cannot be coherent unless the contents of its beliefs are connected with relations of mutual explanation and do not produce any inconsistencies.³⁰

The fact that in Dancy's version of coherentism all empirical beliefs of the system are symmetrically justified deprives the question of the metajustification of basic first-level coherentist criteria of justification³¹ of any sense. It is precisely at this crucial point that Dancy's coherentism is far more 'resolute' than Bonjour's 'impure' coherentism, in which the above question of metajustification is considered as perfectly legitimate and, precisely for this reason, by Bonjour's own lights, it can only be answered by appeal to epistemic standards and principles which are *not themselves* coherentist in nature (think e.g. of Bonjour's key non-coherentist notions of the doxastic presumption and the observational requirement). However, in this way Bonjour reintroduces the (essentially foundationalist) *epistemic priority* requirement as a necessary condition of empirical justification (albeit, not on the level of individual beliefs, but at that of belief *systems*) and thereby his (supposedly coherentist) position eventually becomes foundationalist in character -which, moreover, explains why Bonjour's problems with coherentism led him directly to *foundationalism*, rather than 'foundherentism' or another version of coherentism. Dancy's coherentism avoids

²⁹ Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

³⁰ Dancy, *Contemporary Epistemology*, 111-12, 116-18.

³¹ Those first-order coherentist criteria of justification are, for example, simplicity, unification, empirical adequacy, minimization of ad hoc hypotheses or explanatory anomalies etc.

the above pitfall, but, as we shall see in what follows, it is vulnerable to an objection that can be levelled against all forms of pure coherentism (i.e. forms of coherentism in which justification is exclusively symmetrical).

Now, Dancy is not only a pure coherentist about empirical justification, but is also a coherentist about empirical *truth*. According to the latter, a belief is true if and only if it is a member of a coherent system of beliefs – albeit, not of any old system of beliefs, but of an *ideally* coherent system (notice that this is a view about the criterion of truth, not a definition of truth). It does not follow that every time that there is an increase in the degree of the system's coherence the latter better approximates how the world really is, but, according to Dancy, it does follow that the increase in the system's coherence gives us a reason to believe that its beliefs are true (and Dancy thinks so because, in his view, although justification is not the same concept as truth, both justification and truth are internal relations of mutual explanation among the members of a belief set).³² Dancy also believes that coherentism about truth can be combined with a *robust realism* about truth, namely with a sense in which truth exceeds all evidence we could possibly have for it. More specifically, Dancy suggests that an ideally coherent system of beliefs *transcends* every possible system of beliefs -however large and coherent this might be- and for every such set of beliefs there is a possibility that its beliefs are false. This results from the fact that there is a *logical, or better, epistemic gap* between the epistemic *finitude* which cannot but characterize every possible belief set and the *infinity* which is inherent in the notion of the ideally (i.e. fully comprehensive) coherent system.³³

Yet, if Dancy's realism about truth is such that it is possible for what is true to exceed *all possible* evidence which can be offered for it from the standpoint of our epistemic practices then Dancy seems to have opened an unbridgeable epistemological gap between justification and truth, which cannot be bridged by their supposed 'internal relation.' This epistemological gap is unbridgeable because it can be opened even in the limiting case in which we consider 'all possible' evidence for believing something. Even in this epistemically ideal case, our necessary epistemic 'finitude' deprives us of the right to reasonably believe that what is internally justified is true of the external world. What reason do we have to believe that essentially 'finite' reasons can ever be reliable indications of the true nature of an 'infinite,' radically external reality? It seems that this epistemological gap is a result of Dancy's radically different conceptions of what a conceptual system is. Considered as a criterion of empirical justification, a

³² Dancy, *Contemporary Epistemology*, 112, 116-17.

³³ Dancy, *Contemporary Epistemology*, 138-39.

conceptual system is always epistemically within our reach; yet, considered as a criterion of empirical truth, it is something that (rather mysteriously) can always be outside of our epistemic reach in the radical sense that it transcends our very epistemic 'human condition,' namely our '*constitutive*' *epistemic finitude*. Does it not start to seem that, ironically, Dancy's supposed 'internal relation' between empirical justification and truth ends up being pretty compatible with a correspondence theory of truth according to which the relation between our justified beliefs and states of affairs of the external world is *external* through and through?

Moreover, a major problem for the viability of Dancy's pure coherentism – which is a consequence of his basic thesis to the effect that all empirical beliefs of the system are justified in the same (i.e. symmetrical) manner – arises when one realizes that there is an inherent ambiguity in the determination of the epistemic status that the theory attaches to a special kind of beliefs in the system, namely our beliefs about *what coherence itself really is*. For example, according to those beliefs about coherence, relations of coherence are inferential relations, and more exactly, a proper subset of them: relations of mutual explanation. These, in turn, are understood in terms of general methodological criteria of simplicity (i.e. unification of individual beliefs of the system by appeal to the smallest possible number of unrelated ultimate theoretical principles ('unexplained explainers') needed for their explanation), empirical adequacy, minimization of *ad hoc* hypotheses and of the system's anomalies and so on. Now, it follows from these very methodological principles which determine the meaning of the concept of coherence that any belief of our conceptual system can be *revised*. And this means that this possibility holds equally for these methodological principles *too*. But if the coherentist criteria of justification are not themselves stable, unrevisable, and can, instead, be revised, altered or rejected, then the very *meaning* of the concept of coherence becomes wholly indeterminate for epistemological purposes. If, on the other hand, we suppose that these coherentist criteria cannot be revised, then our beliefs about them cannot any more be considered to be justified in a coherentist manner and become instead *foundationalist basic beliefs*. Thus, the core coherentist position about the symmetrical nature of the justification of all our empirical beliefs is wholly undermined and the supposedly 'coherentist' theory is transformed into a kind of foundationalism.³⁴

³⁴ For a similar kind of argumentation against coherentism see Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 134-35. It should also be noted here that coherentism falls victim to the above argument only if it holds that the methodological principles about coherence are justified *in the same (i.e. symmetrical) manner* as any other

6. Is There a Sense in Which All the Above Theories of Empirical Justification Share the Same Background Problematic Epistemological Assumptions?

It seems that all the above theories of justification, whether they be coherentist (early BonJour, Dancy), foundationalist (late BonJour) or somewhere in between coherentism and foundationalism (Haack) are equally problematic. Why is that so? Is it that the problems that plague both foundationalism and coherentism originate from a common root (notwithstanding the radical opposition between these theories in a surface level), or are they unconnected?

In my view, the fact that those otherwise radically different theories of justification are all deeply problematic is not coincidental, but is rather a necessary consequence of their largely unacknowledged adherence to certain background problematic epistemological assumptions.

The most important epistemological assumption of this kind is probably the requirement of *justificatory generality*, according to which justification can be satisfactorily obtained only if it is *completely general*. Justification is completely general if a whole set of beliefs with a common subject-matter (e.g. empirical beliefs) can be justified only from an epistemic standpoint which is a position to explain how any knowledge of a set of beliefs with the subject-matter in question is possible at all. And the required justificatory generality, in turn, can be obtained (that is, vicious justificatory circularity can be avoided) only if another related epistemological requirement is satisfied, namely that of *epistemic priority*. According to the latter, a reason can justify beliefs with a common subject-matter (e.g. empirical beliefs) only if it is *itself justified* from an epistemic source whose content is *independent* of the content of the (set of) beliefs under justification.³⁵

We claimed above that if one attempts to satisfy justificatory generality without accepting epistemic priority would end up in a vicious justificatory circle. But why exactly the circularity that would arise by attempting to satisfy justificatory generality without accepting epistemic priority must be vicious? To see why, consider the well-known example of the problem of justifying everyday

particular empirical belief of the system (that is, by their coherence relations to those particular beliefs). What then if we suppose that these methodological principles are not justified by virtue of coherence relations holding between them and the particular empirical beliefs of the system, but in some other, non-coherentist, manner? In that case, the resulting position is immune to the above objection, but, unfortunately, at the expense of not being a recognizable coherentist position at all (as was the case with BonJour's impure coherentism which turned out to be a version of foundationalism).

³⁵ Barry Stroud, *Understanding Human Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99-101.

knowledge of the objects around us. If one asks how anyone can know anything at all about objects around us it would be obviously inadequate to reply that, for example, I know that my neighbour is at home by seeing his car in front of the house. And the problem with that answer would not be that it is not true; it could be a perfectly good explanation by ordinary standards. The problem would be that it is an ‘explanation’ of how we know some particular fact in the area we are interested only by appeal to knowledge of some other fact *in that same domain*. Hence, that kind of answer could not be *generalized* into a satisfactory answer to the question of how we know anything at all about objects around us, since this way of knowing *already* presupposes knowledge of the subject-matter which was supposed to be under investigation. And if we simply assume from the outset that one has already got some knowledge of the subject-matter under investigation we will not be explaining *all* of it.³⁶ Hence, it seems that this kind of circularity can be considered as ‘harmless’ (not vicious) – e.g. by externalist views of justification – only at the cost of being constitutively incapable of satisfying the demand for justificatory generality.³⁷

³⁶ Stroud, *Understanding Human Knowledge*, 101-103.

³⁷ It has been argued that certain externalist theories of justification can indeed satisfy the demand for justificatory generality without being viciously circular due to their rejection of an epistemological principle that creates the vicious circularity in the first place, namely the internalist view according to which one can know something only by having a reason or argument at his disposal for believing it (William Alston, “Epistemic Circularity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (1986): 1-30; William Alston, *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Ernest Sosa, “Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 68 (1994): 263-307). If we reject this internalist principle and hold instead that a belief is justified if it is based on adequate grounds irrespectively of whether the subject knows or justifiably believes this, we can satisfy the demand for justificatory generality with the use of epistemically ‘harmless’ circular arguments (for example, an argument for the justification of my perceptual beliefs can be epistemically circular in that in forming perceptual beliefs I assume in practice that my perceptual experiences are reliable, but this circularity need not be vicious since I do not have to be justified in making this assumption in order to be justified in the perceptual beliefs that give me my premises). However, I think that this externalist account fails to satisfy the demand for justificatory generality because it cannot discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources of knowledge (William Alston, *Beyond ‘Justification’* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006)), failing thereby to offer a satisfactory understanding of the world and our place in it. It also implausibly implies in this regard that whether one understands how one’s knowledge is possible or not depends only on whether the theory he holds about how he came to believe it is true or not. In this way, even if we grant that the externalist account of justification is non-viciously circular, we can do this only at the cost of failing to satisfy justificatory generality, since this account does not enable us to understand that what we have got is reasonable belief in

I argued that justificatory generality can only be obtained in a way that is not viciously circular by satisfying the epistemic priority requirement. I would now want to suggest that the well-known concept of the epistemological *Given* is a *theoretical construct* or '*placeholder*' which is created by philosophers (rather than just 'pre-theoretically' 'found' in experience, 'intuition' or 'rational insight') precisely in their attempt to *satisfy* the above epistemological requirements.³⁸ According to this epistemological picture, there exist certain 'ultimate epistemic atoms' (to which one may or may not have epistemic access) that are justified independently of other 'epistemic units' (i.e. epistemically efficacious conceptual contents), and which, moreover, need not be epistemically supported from evidence provided by the latter in order to be able to transfer their justification to them.³⁹ The Given, far from being an absolutely transparent, theory free and self-evident concept, is, in essence, a concept laden with philosophical theory which is tailored to satisfy controversial and certainly not self-evident philosophical requirements. Its legitimacy (explanatory power and plausibility) as a concept wholly depends on the legitimacy of the epistemic priority requirement.

However, the epistemic priority requirement can only be 'satisfied' by *scepticism*. The aforementioned theoretical/philosophical constructs which are created for that purpose end up to scepticism, since according to them there exist certain propositional or, in general, representational contents with specific

the world's being a certain way (Stroud, *Understanding Human Knowledge*, 146-51)). Notice, for example, that if I am explicitly wondering whether a source is reliable, being told that *if* it is, *then* I have good grounds to believe that it is will be of no help and would certainly not satisfy the requirement of justificatory generality. (For a discussion on the benign nature of certain kinds of circular arguments (those that are rehearsed in a context in which the trustworthiness of a source of knowledge is not put into question) see Michael Bergmann, "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69, 3 (2004): 708-26. Yet, the epistemic contexts in which circular arguments are benign do not satisfy justificatory generality nor do Bergmann's arguments about the non-malignant nature of circular arguments in certain contexts purport to establish any connection between benign epistemic circularity and justificatory generality.)

³⁸ For a thorough examination of the concept of the Given see Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997).

³⁹ At first sight, one might think that only traditional foundationalist concepts (such as the empiricist's 'sense data') can function as 'ultimate epistemic atoms.' But, as a matter of fact, even conceptual systems which are structured according to *coherentist* principles (or, more precisely, the methodological principles which specify the meaning of the concept of coherence in those systems) can perform that function. That is to say, even whole systems of beliefs which at first sight seem to be justified in a thoroughly *holistic* manner, can, in fact, function as 'ultimate epistemic atoms' which are justified independently of the coherence relations in which they may stand to the particular empirical beliefs of the system.

epistemic properties (which can be normative or non-normative in nature and to which the subject may or may not have epistemic access) that are allegedly individuated completely independently of the material inferential relations in which they stand to other epistemic contents (i.e. epistemic contents that are individuated on the basis of their functional role they play in our epistemic practices). Now, if it is assumed that a level of epistemic appraisal can exist which radically *transcends* (i.e. which does not in the least presuppose) that constituted – ‘immanently,’ so to speak – from the inside of our epistemic practices, it follows that we can never know whether and to what extent our epistemic practices conform to the requirements of the former, inasmuch as a certain *logical gap* necessarily occurs between the *epistemic properties* of the two epistemic levels (level of appraisal and level under appraisal), as a consequence of the fact that the epistemic properties of the former are conceptually *absolutely independent* of the epistemic properties of the latter.

But does this not imply that in the last analysis scepticism is indeed the correct answer to the problem of empirical justification? That would be so if scepticism could indeed count as a genuine and legitimate answer to the problem of empirical justification. Yet, the very definition of the ‘atomistically individuated epistemic contents’ that was given above is such (radically transcending the epistemic contents which are holistically individuated on the basis of their functional – material-inferential – role in the ‘game of giving and asking of reasons’) that those ‘practice-transcendent’ epistemic concepts become explanatorily *idle* (or, to use a Wittgensteinian turn of phrase, they become ‘an idle wheel in the mechanism:’⁴⁰ any alteration of these ‘transcendent’ epistemic properties could have no impact whatsoever in the structure of the epistemic contents that are holistically individuated on the basis of the functional role they play in our epistemic practices. Whether the former were constantly changing or did not exist at all, the latter could remain exactly the same. However, in this way *scepticism itself* becomes absolutely idle as a (negative) thesis or stance about the justification of our epistemic practices as a whole, for it is premised – if it is to be regarded as an *epistemic* stance at all – on the possibility of the existence and explanatory relevance of the aforementioned *transcendent epistemic viewpoint*. Only if such a viewpoint genuinely exists and is epistemically connected to our practices can scepticism be considered as a view about the *justification* of the latter, for only then can it *assess them negatively* (i.e. consider them as unjustified) in a meaningful way. Consequently, scepticism cannot really be an *epistemic* view or stance at all; it cannot be the expression of a genuine (negative) judgement

⁴⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §270-71.

about our epistemic position within reality, for this could only be possible if the above transcendent epistemic viewpoint could really function as a premise in an argument whose conclusion would be that we do not have good reasons to think that our epistemic practices (our conceptual systems of empirical beliefs) are justified.

However, it must be noted that there are certain forms of scepticism – e.g. Pyrrhonian scepticism – which do not make claims in support of the viability or truth of their views; they use arguments not to express or justify a certain (sceptical) philosophical viewpoint but in order to expose the problematic premises of the 'dogmatic' philosophical view they wish to undermine.⁴¹ It seems therefore that our above argument against scepticism cannot be applied to this form of resolutely 'non-dogmatic' scepticism since the latter does not put forward any specific or 'positive' epistemological view (not even the view that we cannot know if we ever have good reasons for our empirical beliefs) but is instead functioning 'parasitically' upon certain epistemological views about knowledge and justification, trying to expose the problematic logical consequences of the basic premises those theories themselves (explicitly or implicitly) espouse. Yet, I think that, at the end of the day, even this form of resolutely 'non-dogmatic' scepticism, which withholds judgement about all other stances, cannot escape criticism and is ultimately problematic. Of course, this criticism will not be levelled against the sceptic's epistemological view (for s/he does not have any) but it can be levelled against the sceptic's general epistemological *stance*, which, by staunchly denying to commit to the truth (or the probable truth) of the 'seemings' or 'impressions' that constitute it, ends up being an autobiographical process of recording our subjective impressions, which takes place at a radically non-normative (e.g. causal) level, and therefore cannot be epistemically or, more generally, normatively assessed at all. But if this is so, how can the supposedly 'resolute' 'anti-dogmatic' stance of the Pyrrhonian sceptic be understood (i.e. *assessed*) as anti-dogmatic? Is not being 'anti-dogmatic' a *normative* concept? The sceptical stance of withholding commitment about the truth or probable truth of the subject-matter of the sceptic's beliefs (or his opponents' beliefs) seems to entail a rejection of the very 'game of giving and asking for reasons,' where we commit ourselves to the truth of our beliefs and are in turn be held epistemically accountable if our beliefs is not supported by good reasons. This sceptical stance of withholding endorsement seems, at the end of the day, to turn the sceptic into a

⁴¹ Michael Frede, "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge," in *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, eds. Michael Burnyeat and Michael Frede (London: Hackett, 1998), 127-51.

completely 'passive' epistemic subject who refuses to participate in the game of 'giving and asking for reasons.' Yet, this does not make the sceptic resolutely 'anti-dogmatic' but in fact undermines the conditions under which alone can one be considered as 'anti-dogmatic' or as someone who 'withholds judgment' in the first place.

Hence, if, as we argued above, the requirements of justificatory generality and epistemic priority do indeed lead to scepticism, then so much the worse for the former since scepticism does not seem to be an unproblematic thesis or stance whether in modern or ancient guise.

We shall draw this paper to a close by attempting to show the way in which the above sketched explanatory schema can be applied to BonJour's, Haack's and Dancy's theories of justification and explain, at a deeper level, their inevitable inadequacies.

In BonJour's case, things are relatively straightforward: he explicitly accepts the challenge posed by the epistemic priority requirement and attempts to provide a straight solution to it, not only in his 'late' foundationalist period (as one might expect), but also in his 'early' coherentist phase. More specifically, the acceptance of the epistemic priority requirement leads BonJour to the view that the question of metajustification – i.e. of the justification of a whole system of empirical beliefs – is perfectly legitimate, and accordingly creates a certain theoretical pressure towards the view that the an effective response to the question of metajustification could only be formulated from an epistemic standpoint outside coherence altogether. This is also why he thinks that only a robust correspondence theory of truth can provide a successful answer to the question about the nature and function of truth.⁴² Again, it is for this same reason that he considers one of his key epistemological concepts, that of the doxastic presumption, to be a failure; it fails to vindicate coherentism about empirical justification because, ultimately, it cannot be itself justified independently of coherence considerations. Indeed, BonJour's radical change of epistemological perspective, namely his conversion from coherentism to foundationalism, is readily explained, as he himself suggests, by his persistent efforts and ultimate failure to justify the doxastic presumption independently of coherence considerations. And, as BonJour correctly recognises, the only way to do this without violating the epistemic priority requirement is to opt for a purely foundationalist justification of the doxastic presumption.⁴³

⁴² BonJour, *Coherence Theory*, 171.

⁴³ See e.g. BonJour, "The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism"; BonJour, "Foundationalism and the External World," 229-49.

Now, in contrast to BonJour (both 'early' and 'late'), Dancy's aim is to develop a (coherentist) view of justification which explicitly *rejects* the epistemological requirements of justificatory generality and epistemic priority. However, although Dancy indeed seems to resolutely reject those 'twin' problematic epistemological requirements in his philosophical practice, in my view, at the end of the day, he does not succeed in being completely immunized from their subterranean theoretical influence. For example, a strong indication of the subliminal influence that the epistemic priority requirement exerts over Dancy's coherentism (despite his avowed intentions to the contrary) is that he takes it that a necessary corollary of his pure coherentism about justification is a notion of empirical truth which, on the one hand, is supposed to be defined in terms of (explanatory) coherence – i.e. in terms of an 'ideally coherent system of beliefs' – (hence, no sceptical epistemic gap seems to have been opened between empirical justification and truth), while, on the other hand, it is also defined in a way that leaves open the possibility that the ideally coherent system, being essentially something irreducible to our epistemic 'finitude,' can transcend every possible (essentially 'finite') coherent system which purports to represent reality; worse, given the definition of 'ideally coherent system' it is always possible that an increase in the system's explanatory coherence will not be accompanied with an increase of the system's reliability in representing external reality. It is my contention that this eventual unexpected sceptical turn of Dancy's coherentism is in large part the result of his unintended adherence to the view that only something radically independent of coherence relations among beliefs could function as their truth-maker. That is, he seems to be pressed in certain central points of his own version of 'metajustification,' and despite his protestations to the contrary, to accept the legitimacy of the epistemic priority requirement. This is why although he officially has to hold that justification (explanatory coherence) is internally related to truth, at the end of the day, when he explicates what this amounts to, this internal relation can hardly be distinguished from an external relation between justification and truth, of the form that classic correspondence theories of truth.

Haack's 'hybrid' foundherentist theory of justification, exactly like Dancy's coherentism, does not explicitly accept the justificatory generality requirement (and its corollary – the epistemic priority requirement), since her preferred solution to the problem of the infinite regress of justification essentially involves *coherentist* elements (which are not fitted to satisfy the epistemic priority requirement). Hence, in contrast to BonJour, Haack, like Dancy, does not seem to think that the epistemological requirements in question are legitimate and in need

of an urgent answer. She would probably argue that her conciliatory epistemological position provides answers which conceptually transform the traditional epistemological puzzles (infinite regress of justification, metajustification) that appear as meaningful and urgent questions precisely by rejecting the epistemological requirements of justificatory generality and epistemic priority. Now, I would not want to dispute Haack's willingness to move towards this direction, neither do I want to downplay the important insights offered by her foundherentist theory as the latter progressively unfolds in her seminal book *Evidence and Inquiry*. But I think that she is not as resolute in her rejection of those twin problematic epistemological requirements as she should be. For example, Haack attempts to solve the problem of securing that our conceptual system of beliefs actually receives input from extra-conceptual reality with the use of essentially foundationalist or 'Givenist' conceptual tools (namely, the initial positive epistemic status which non-conceptual S-evidence possess independently of their justificatory support from conceptually structured reasons) without attempting at the same time to change the meaning of those foundationalist epistemic features of her theory so as to extinguish their 'Givenist' connotations. I take it that this just shows that she has not in fact overcome or transcend the conceptual frame in which the justificatory generality requirement is formulated, gets its meaning and (accordingly) demands an urgent and direct answer (or else a withdrawal to scepticism). Despite the fact that Haack would in all probability not want to consider this requirement as legitimate and in need of an urgent answer, her own philosophical practice does not successfully support this claim at least to the extent to which she does not radically transform – as she must if she really had exorcised the epistemic priority requirement – the very meaning of foundationalist conceptual tools on the basis of which she attempts to solve the problem of securing that our conceptual system actually receives input from extra-conceptual reality. And it is in large part for this reason that Haack's solution to this traditional epistemological problem cannot be considered as fully successful.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See e.g. the critique of Haack's foundherentist theory in section 4 where I argue that the foundationalist inspired 'non-doxastic' sources of justification (sensory S-evidence), which Haack thinks are necessary for a proper solution to the problem of external input, in fact only provide a verbal 'solution' to this problem. Those non-doxastic epistemic sources end up being epistemically idle in the overall context of Haack's theory; they cannot transmit their 'partial' (but supposedly independent) justification to the conceptual-doxastic level (i.e. to our belief-system) without themselves receiving justificatory support from (doxastic) epistemic sources of the latter. This is because on the one hand, Haack wants to preserve a radical independence of the 'evidence of the senses' from the conceptual level of our system of empirical beliefs (this is why she thinks it is necessary to interpret them as resolutely non-doxastic, non-conceptual

7. Concluding Remarks

How can we properly conclude our examination of the thorny philosophical issue of empirical justification after all the above critical remarks to Bonjour's, Haack's and Dancy's theory? Do the problematic epistemological assumptions that as we argued are intimately involved in all four theories that were examined in this paper lead to any positive results or proposals about empirical justification or are they only useful for the provision of a thoroughly 'negative' critique of the problem in question? Within the confines of the present paper, whose arguments were of a purely negative character, such a positive proposal obviously cannot be adequately developed. However, it can be stressed that the unacknowledged background epistemological assumptions that were unearthed in the theories of justification under examination (i.e. the requirements of justificatory generality and epistemic priority as well as the concept of the epistemological Given) and the arguments that were used against them do indeed point towards the formulation of a positive proposal about empirical justification. An example of this is what might be called 'contextualist functionalism,' according to which the justificatory status of one's empirical belief (e.g. whether this belief can be epistemically efficacious without being inferred from other beliefs or only by being inferred from the latter) depends on the *functional role* of this belief within an essentially socially structured *logical space of reasons*. This view completely rejects the epistemological requirements of justificatory generality and epistemic priority as well as the concept of the epistemological Given in all its forms,⁴⁵ and thereby

epistemic sources), while on the other hand, she also believes that the justificatory contribution of doxastic-conceptual and holistic epistemic sources to the non-doxastic level is necessary in order for the latter to be able to transmit whatever justification it possesses to the former. She makes this latter move (which, at first sight, seems to imply a *rejection* of the epistemic priority requirement) in order to avoid a traditional foundationalism, but in the end, she does not succeed in solving the problem at hand since, by maintaining that experiential S-evidence must have a positive epistemic status independent of all conceptually structured reasons, she seems to want to *preserve* or at least not wholeheartedly reject the epistemic priority requirement, which, in turn, as we saw, can be satisfied only by pure foundationalist positions. That is to say, she does not seem to really change the meaning of the foundationalist and coherentist elements that are preserved in her theory in a way that would avoid the above radically ambivalent stance towards the need to satisfy the epistemic priority requirement in a successful theory of empirical justification.

⁴⁵ Note that the rejection of the requirements of justificatory generality and epistemic priority is not equivalent to the rejection of the (correct) view that an explanans can properly account for the explanandum only if its content is independent of the latter. Consider the case of scientific causal explanations: although their content is (and ought to be) independent of the phenomena to be explained, this does not mean that the former are thereby understood as independent of

differs from foundationalism, (pure or impure) coherentism and foundherentism alike.⁴⁶ However, the proper development and defence of this alternative view about empirical justification will have to wait for another paper.

the latter in a foundationalist sense of the term (according to which a reason for believing something can be good, non question-begging only if its content satisfies the requirements of justificatory generality and epistemic priority). For example, it can be argued that scientific causal explanations can function as reasons (for placing the phenomena they explain in ‘the logical space of causes’) due to their contribution in the diachronic process of the *self-correction* of our system of empirical beliefs (i.e. a correction based on potentially revisable standards that are internal to the practices in question) -and not because they are ‘independent’ in an absolutely presuppositionless sense of the term (see e.g. Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), §38).

⁴⁶ Notice, for example, that unlike (pure or impure) coherentism and foundationalism, this alternative view does not construe the epistemic *dependence* of a belief on certain conditions in terms of this belief being *inferable* from the presence of those conditions – or being *coherent* with beliefs about the conditions in question (see also Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, §32). More specifically, there is a distinction between a background of epistemic practices being required for the possibility of my knowing e.g. that something is red and my inferring that it is red from a belief about those background practices. Any piece of knowledge may depend on a whole host of background conditions such as an agent’s perceptual or linguistic skills or her implicit knowledge of generalities but it does not follow that this kind of dependence is to be understood as inferential in nature (see also Matthew Burstein, “Prodigal Epistemology: Coherence, Holism and the Sellarsian Tradition,” in *The Self-Correcting Enterprise: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. Michael P. Wolf and Mark Norris Lance (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 202-207). Indeed, if the above background conditions are satisfied one can have direct, non-inferential justification of, say, the presence of certain objects and events in his surroundings, while, at the same time, this justification can well be dependent on our motor, perceptual or linguistic skills, and most importantly, on the application of a certain (non-sacrosanct) categorial framework (or theoretical paradigm) in the world.