1. Whether or not one abandons a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification in favor of a coherence theory of justification, it is still tempting to think that considerations of coherence do play, and ought to play, an important role in determining what it is reasonable for us to believe. Even as thoroughgoing a foundationalist as Roderick Chisholm explains how important kinds of statements about the external world come to be beyond a reasonable doubt by appealing to the fact that they fit together in sets of propositions that exhibit the property he calls “concurrence” (Chisholm 1977, pp. 82-84).\(^1\)

It is not hard to see the intuitive appeal of the idea that when perceptions or pieces of evidence “hang together like links in a chain”\(^2\) they lend rational support both (a) to propositions that no one of them supports individually to any significant degree and (b) to each other. Consider, for example, the way a prosecutor tries to build a criminal case, assembling items of testimony and physical evidence that, if accepted and interpreted as she wants us to interpret them, will point to the guilt of the accused. Typically, the force of each individual item lies in the contribution it makes to an overall story, a story that can be told only if all or most of the items are taken together and taken to be interconnected in the way the prosecutor wants us to see them interconnected. And typically most of the items considered individually will be open to challenges that can be overcome by appeal to other bits of concurring evidence which themselves are open to challenge if considered only individually.

Consider, as another example, reports of Elvis sightings. When they occur, as they seem to, in no discernable order, they are easily dismissed as fabrications or delusions. But suppose such reports occurred on 40 successive days, each report emanating from a different city, but always a city within 100 miles of the city from which the previous day’s report had come. In that case the reports couldn’t be readily dismissed as fabrications or delusions. Most of us, I suspect, would try to explain them by positing the existence of an Elvis look-alike or impersonator traveling from city to city over the 40-day period. Such a reaction, to my mind a rational one, would be motivated by two facts: (i) the sitings reported cohere or concur with each other in definite and discernable ways, and (ii) the existence of a real Elvis in those cities at those time does not cohere or concur with a host of other things that most of us currently believe.

\(^1\)See also C. I. Lewis’ account, in *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, of the role that coherence or concurrence plays in the knowledge derived from memory. That account seems to be a model for the role that Chisholm accords to concurrence in the knowledge derived from perception.

\(^2\)To use a phrase which Chisholm (1977, p. 69) quotes from Carneades.
Of course, examples like these don’t prove that coherence as such plays a role in determining what it is reasonable for us to believe. There may be other, better ways of explaining or describing what happens in cases like these, explanations that don’t appeal to anything that could be called coherence as a distinct and decisive factor. I have no way to show that that isn’t so. And as I am about to indicate, I think there are considerable problems in rescuing the notion of coherence from vagueness and imprecision. Nevertheless, in the remainder of this paper, I assume that the concept is a valuable one and try to point toward a direction for pinning it down.

2. What is coherence? Gilbert Harman in recent years has insisted on coherence as a central factor in rational belief change. In *Change in View*, increasing the coherence of one’s view is virtually the only justification for changing one’s view. Yet in that book, about the only passage that attempts to say what coherence is runs as follows:

> Coherence in a view consists in connections of intelligibility among the elements of the view. Among other things these include explanatory connections, which hold when part of one’s view make it intelligible to one why some other part should be true. In such cases one believes not only P, Q and R but also R because P and Q. [Harman 1986, p. 65.]

Though most of Harman’s examples of coherence are examples of explanatory coherence, and though he suggests that perhaps all relations of coherence which support inference might turn out to be explanatory (see p. 75), he leaves open the possibility that there are relations of coherence which aren’t. The official notion is that of “connections of intelligibility”—a notion that remains very general and very imprecise. Moreover, even if we narrow our focus to cases in which the connections of intelligibility are in some sense explanatory, explanation remains a theme to be developed rather than a notion that has been articulated with sufficient precision that it can play the role of an unambiguous criterion.

My aim here is not to criticize Harman for failing to give a more precise account of coherence or to condemn him for appealing as centrally as he does to a concept that he hasn’t articulated more fully. If those are sins, you will see that they are sins of which I am guilty as well. I am simply calling attention to what I consider to be the state of play. And my aim in what follows won’t be to fill in the gaps, but rather to make sense of the fact that there are gaps to be filled.

Of course, the literature contains not a few attempts to give more detailed and more precise accounts of coherence. Rescher’s *Coherence Theory of Truth* is a pluralistic, exploratory account of coherence that is rich in detail and full of promising suggestions. In addition, Lehrer’s *Knowledge* and BonJour’s *Structure of Empirical Knowledge* are noteworthy among attempts to articulate coherence theories of justification in more precise detail. Yet despite these and other efforts, I am inclined to think that Harman’s reticence about making his account of coherence more precise is wise.

---

3 Harman had earlier defended the view that “all inductive inference infers the truth of an explanation” (Harman 1968), but had presumably been forced to acknowledge counterinstances to that generalization by the time he wrote *Change in View*. 