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Rationalizing Belief Based Behavior

The focus of my paper will be the relationship between justified beliefs and the role these beliefs play in rationalizing behaviors. Most people behave according to what they believe is right. The average person behaves or reacts upon certain events or situations based upon their beliefs. I believe that people rationalize situations on a daily basis but to varying degrees depending upon what the situations call for. As humans we tend to rationalize situations from the mundane to the unusual. It is possible that we do so regularly without giving it much thought - at least forethought. I would like to achieve an understanding of how people rationalize certain behaviors based on situations that occur, therefore, it would be helpful to arrive at an understanding of how we process information to justify our beliefs, which are an extension of our basic core beliefs.

I would like to define what is meant by rationalization for the purpose of this paper. When an individual is faced with a situation or an incident to which he or she feels compelled to respond. Sometimes the response is questionable and we may wonder how the person arrived at their particular response. What was the individual or group reasoning, or justification for behaving in such a manner. What deeply held justified beliefs did the individual or groups possess that would provide them with the rationalization for a questionable action. Now a questionable action is an action or behavior that is considered unthinkable, reprehensible and intolerable by others while it is viewed as a justified action by the individual or group of others with different perspectives. It is essential to this paper to distinguish between justification and rationalization. Both sides have made or will make decisions based on beliefs they have, and will justify their behavior based upon each group's beliefs. Justification in this particular

instance is knowing the reasons or having knowledge of the facts for believing what you do, understanding why you have the beliefs you have based on these facts and knowledge, whereas rationalization is the act of justifying a particular behavior or action because of your justified beliefs. Both groups will have a point of view or perspective from which they will make decisions based on justified beliefs they hold, and will rationalize their behavior based upon these beliefs.

I would like to present a hypothetical situation in which an individual or a group has perpetrated an action or behavior that has caused a considerable amount of pain, anger and humiliation to a people who found this act to be reprehensible and intolerable and evoked a similar response from the aggrieved party - which from a different perspective could be just as offensive or reprehensible as the original action against them.

Let us suppose that a person or group of persons (let's call them Group one) has intentionally blown up a bridge knowing that a train, transporting hundreds of people, will be crossing the bridge in approximately ten to fifteen minutes. The purpose of blowing up the bridge is because it is carrying weapons of destruction that are to be used in an attack upon them, their people and their land despite the knowledge that there are hundreds of people on this train. As a result of the bridge being blown the train plummets thousands of feet into the ocean and everyone aboard is killed. The people who blew up the bridge rationalized the act and feel justified their behavior is necessary as self protection or possibly retaliation for the aggressions that have been and continue to be perpetrated upon their people and their land. Group two, the relatives of the people killed in the train incident want the perpetrators responsible for this clearly violent action to pay with their lives and feel justified in retaliating with even greater acts of violent aggression. There appears to be a form of circularity in the example: aggression

perpetuates further aggression. Each group feels justified in the conviction of their actions. Why is this? Is this perpetuation or the circularity of each act based upon the rule of cause and effect, or deeply rooted in a system of beliefs that provide a reason for people to behave so reprehensibly? Hopefully, in trying to see how the theories of Foundationalism and Coherentism shed light on basic belief sets I can come to some kind of understanding how humans can be so inhumane to one another.

However, prior to investigating how rationalization effects individual behavior we must first come to understand the justification behind their beliefs. In clarifying justification, it is important to establish whether it is the justification of the Foundationalist or the Coherentist Theories that will best explain the rationalization process of the individual. This can best be accomplished by identifying just what justification means and why it is necessary. Prior to identifying justification we must consider exactly what it means to justify beliefs and why. Justification is a way of acknowledging information as knowledge and giving validity to that knowledge. .

It is justification that gives us the means at which we can arrive at true beliefs. Justification provides the theories or various methods by which we arrive at these beliefs. When it comes to justification there are two different beliefs concerning the validity of justification and whether we can validate the information and its truthfulness, for in order for information to be considered as knowledge it must be true (as far as we know), and verifiable. There is a dichotomy that concerns the validity of justification of beliefs. On the one side you have the view that justification allows the possibility of a false belief and it is still justified. This is referred to as fallibilism. In other words, despite the fact that the information may be flawed, making it fallible, if the individual is unaware that their information is not valid and he or she has

good reason for the belief they are completely justified. On the other hand, there is the view that the belief must be true in order to be justified, and this view is referred to as infallible because it has passed through a rigorous (scientific) process proving its' validity, consequently, it can only be true.

Whether we believe in the fallibility or infallibility of justification of beliefs we need to understand how these two views incorporated in both theories of Foundationalism and Coherentism allows for the rationalization of behaviors based upon our belief sets, and which theory can best accommodate rationalizing negative actions or behavior. I have selected both Foundationalism and Coherentism and will try to formulate an idea or hypothesis of how both foundationalism and coherentism and their respective processes, properties or systems of validating truth that each theory contains will reflect on the justification of our belief set, thereby, ultimately influencing our rationalization process. I will begin with the Foundationalist theory of knowledge, but first I must clarify a term or set of terms that will define what I mean by beliefs.

The terms I need to clarify or define are beliefs and belief sets. We all have beliefs which we feel are justified, although we may not know how we come to have these beliefs or explain our justification for these beliefs, we all have a basic set of beliefs or core beliefs: I exist, I am human, I work, I am a student, doctor, engineer, I live in a particular country, state, city, etcetera, as well as educational and scientific theories and data about our existence, where we as a species came from, where we as a species are going to, the direction we are headed in or what we are aspiring to, etcetera, which comprise our belief sets. Many of our belief sets are interconnected to our basic and core beliefs; for example our belief about our existence is relative to our core belief of where we as a species originated. Some people will believe in the creationist theory,

some Darwinism, while others may believe in other additional theories like we evolved from a microorganism that came from the ocean, or we were transported from another universe and left her to multiply, ad infinitum. Another example would be where we, as a species, see ourselves in the future depending upon our perspective, like what are we striving for as a species are we on a path - to somewhere - based on the self interest of a few powerful people, or are we as a species striving for a higher purpose? Whatever we think we are or whatever direction we think we are headed in or striving for will depend upon our core beliefs.

Subsequently, foundationalism is a theory or set of theories that consist of basic beliefs, and these beliefs are justified and in the case of classical foundationalism these basic beliefs have the capacity to justify other beliefs. With foundationalism beliefs are justified, 1) because they are basic beliefs - which are justified, and 2) these basic beliefs justify one another; each belief builds on a prior belief. There is also the thought that “beliefs” are justified by foundational beliefs through the art of deduction (Audi, 179). Ultimately, foundationalism is about the justification of beliefs, and how we justify these beliefs - which is very important. It is important to know what these basic beliefs are that are justified and how these belief sets justify one another. It would appear that in believing that justified beliefs can justify other beliefs this possibly leaves room for error; justification of beliefs that are unjustifiable. Justifiably so, fallibility is very prevalent in this particular assertion because it allows for errors, subsequently this proposition allows for the strategy of a belief being caused by a faulty belief-forming process (Goldman, 9). If we were to hypothesize about the action of the offending group based upon this particular assertion it would be necessary to understand what the belief systems were, how they were justified and whether any beliefs were found to be incorrect. Because there is an allowance for ambiguity or error it leaves room for us to assume that it is possible for the belief

sets of both groups to have one or more mistaken beliefs. I want to clarify that this assumption, that their belief set may have one or more wrong beliefs, could influence the justification of their belief sets in such a way it does allow for rationalization of such aggressive actions. Because of the fallibility of this assertion or its allowance for uncertainty if one belief is wrong within the entire set of beliefs then it is possible that your entire belief set could be faulty or there is the possibility that your belief set is not affected at all. Hypothetically speaking, if the belief set is faulty it could provide the basis for rationalizing such an aggressive action, by either group. Those who are blowing up the bridge and those who wish to exact revenge or retaliate. On the other hand, regardless of whether the belief set is justified, or that there may be one or more errors in the belief set, is it enough to provide a rationale for such behavior?

However, with the theory of Cartesian or Classical Foundationalism the only foundational beliefs are those that are self evident. Cartesian foundationalism is synonymous with infallible foundationalism because all propositions are self-evident: clearly they are indubitable as objects of foundational beliefs (Audi, 179). Based on Cartesian or classical foundationalism beliefs are or should be self evident, however, self evidence can only bestow justificational status on relatively few beliefs (Goldman, 4). If we assume that the beliefs of each group are self-evident and there is no room for error, then hypothetically speaking, both sides have right on their side. The belief forming processes that intuitively justify beliefs are standard perceptual processes, remembering, good reasoning and introspection (Goldman, 9 - 10). However, on the other hand, processes that can lead to false beliefs or faulty conclusions, but are still justified, are: confused reasoning, wishful thinking, reliance on emotional attachment, mere hunch or guesswork and hasty generalization (Goldman, 9). Therefore, both groups are justified in their beliefs and it would only be natural to conclude that their belief sets are correct. Here

again, beliefs and belief sets do not have to be in error to create conflict, all you need is two groups to believe that they are justified in their beliefs and have 'right' on their side to provide another possible rationale for aggressive behavior. I am sure this is not what the philosopher's had in mind when they were creating these hypothesis for defining what constitutes knowledge. However, the hypothesis does provide a structure for beliefs and the validity of these beliefs. Some structures more flexible than others. I find moderate foundationalism more liberal in defining what constitutes knowledge and its validity than classical foundationalism which is very rigid. While moderate (fallibilist) foundationalism is not dogmatic, it does presuppose we are aware of cognitive pluralism which ascertains that if both groups are justified in their beliefs and these beliefs are at odds with one another a conflict could arise (Audi,181). The last point of Cartesian foundationalism is that any foundational knowledge or justified beliefs arrive from the actual physical or empirical experience and inference: these justified beliefs relative strengths, changes, mutual interactions are explicable within moderate foundationalist assumptions (Audi, 180).

According to Goldman, justification is a process or properties that justify a belief: it is an argument or a set of reasons that support a belief that incorporates a process or properties that provide justification for the particular belief. If we assume Goldman's theory of justification, then we have to assume that each group has already subjected their beliefs to this process or properties that provide accurate justification for their beliefs (9,10). There is also the proposition that truth guarantees belief which is the idea of self-presentation, because for justification belief must guarantee truth. The question, however, If each group has the belief that each proposition presented before them to be true for example: Group one believes that a) our people are being killed and our homes are being destroyed; Group two believes that b) our people are being killed.

Both groups view these propositions as being 'self-evident' then it is reasonable to assume they are both correct in their beliefs. Although, the self-evident propositions believed by both Groups one and two are valid there is the possibility that the processes that lead to faulty conclusions are at play here. The belief forming process leading to faulty conclusions (confused reasoning, wishful thinking, reliance on emotional attachment, etcetera) produces errors a major portion of the time, while the intuitively justified belief forming processes produce beliefs that are generally true (Goldman, 9/10). Therefore, if I accept the proposition that intuitively justified belief forming processes 'generally' produce beliefs that are true then the 'self-evident' propositions believed by both Groups one and two are valid.

The justificational status of a belief is a function of the reliability of the process or properties that cause the belief, and reliability consists in the tendency of these processes or properties to produce beliefs that are true (Goldman, 10). The process of justification appears to be a function of how a cognizant being deals with input from his or her environment and a justified belief is one that results from cognitive operations that are good or successful (13). Given the previous proposition I think it is safe to say that each group is cognizant of the acts of aggression that have been committed against one another. The information processed is valid and justified based on successful cognitive operations. It would be very hard to claim that the acts of aggression perpetrated by both Groups did not happen. I believe that Goldman was right on the button when he stated "the process of justification appears to be a function of how a cognizant being deals with input from his or her environment: all this to say, that there is more than just a process of justification at work here.

Since foundationalists tend to see experience as a mirror of nature we must look at how this effects our ability to rationalize (176, Audi). Because foundationalism tends to

mirror our external experiences it would appear to be very influential in how we perceive and respond to events in our life. These external experiences are viewed as causal and precipitate a response, and it is necessary to take into consideration whether these external influences reflect our reality (176). It is our reality, based upon our beliefs that provides the individual with a base for rationalization of justified beliefs. If I accept Audi's proposition then it would validate my claim that there is more at work here than just the process of justification which would be another paper in itself.

Subsequently, an alternative to the Foundationalist theory is the Coherentist theory, which is a completely holistic theory and is intended to be symmetrical vis a vis the asymmetrical theory of foundationalism (Dancy, 110). The Coherence Theory of truth maintains that a proposition is true if and only if it is a member of a coherent set (112). Coherentists start from the data of experience and construct a set of beliefs around that data. The data is then organized in the most systematic way (Dancy, 114). The individual may be required to reject some of the data, but not all and to be able to make sense of the data, consequently, the set of beliefs constructed from the data must be empirically grounded (Dancy, 114). At first glance it would appear that the individual would be able to adjust their beliefs once they have discovered that certain information was faulty leading them to a wrong conclusion, however, we know that this is not always the case. What happens when people are slow to reevaluate processed information, especially when it conforms to views that may be popular among their cohorts or reinforce their core beliefs? This calls into question the basic core beliefs and the justification of these beliefs, as well as the information that initially formed the basic core beliefs. How often do people question their basic and core beliefs that influence the development of their belief sets?

Consistency is also a necessary condition of coherence and a coherent set must either be

complete or comprehensive (Dancy, 110). If consistency, comprehensiveness and coherency are components of the holistic theory of coherentism, then this would include more information - in the way of politics and its broad spectrum of characteristics - aside from both the acts of aggression committed and the basic core beliefs to develop a complete belief set about this particular issue. Since this requires more information be processed than that of the basic and core beliefs, we must allow for the possibility of the additional information being less than self-evident; a characteristic shared with moderate foundationalism. The coherentist theory also allows for the notion of entailment: when **p** entails **q** if and only if **q** must be true. The notion of entailment is interesting in that if we provide information in a 'specific light' which could influence the information that is being processed, then the belief set is flawed, generating a false belief. The coherentists would like to give significance to the notion that as one's belief set grows, it improves and becomes more coherent (Dancy, 110). This would be a logical conclusion, that as one's belief set grows it would improve and become more coherent, but if, and only if the information being processed is 'valid' information. Lehrer and Sellars defined a coherent set as one that is consistent, complete and mutually explanatory, and as it increases in size each member of the set is better explained by each succeeding set (Dancy, 110 - 111). If this assertion by Lehrer and Sellars has any validity then could it not also be possible that even false beliefs can justify one another and be defined as a coherent belief set? However, the Coherence theory of justification adopts the position that a belief is justified to the extent to which it contributes to the coherence of the belief set of which it is a member (Dancy, 116 - 127). In Dancy he explains the *link* between justification and truth, acknowledging the possibility that belief sets cannot be further expanded because the expansion decreases the coherence of the growing whole because any further expansion will require revision (Dancy,

116). How does Dancy come to the conclusion that in expanding the belief set we lose coherence thus requiring revision? Would not revision be required despite the expansion of the belief set simply because theories, beliefs and assumptions are constantly adjusted as new information is revealed? Is it not possible that people have the capacity to reform basic core beliefs as new information is provided, and processed or, do people pick and choose which information it is that they tend to process when it comes to re-evaluating their basic core beliefs? True enough justified beliefs should be desired while unjustified beliefs removed from the set, for each belief should be assessed “by considering the effect of its presence on the coherence of the whole,” however, Bradley claims the test for justified beliefs is the system and not any criterion for fitting the evidence (Dancy, 117). Therefore, an individual can have a set of beliefs which may contain data specifically selected to coincide with his or her basic core beliefs that should be revised and result result in a *coherent* new whole, but there is no preconceived procedure to achieve a revised coherent new whole. Furthermore, any belief will remain until the coherentist has some reason to reject it (Dancy, 117,124). Thus, the individuals are inherently fallible but coherentists welcome this deficiency as a strength that motivates continual revision “in the search for greater coherence” but what happens when it does not motivate? (Dancy, 118).

Rescher suggested that coherentism offered an advantage by “directing attention away from the individual’s struggle to construct his or her own epistemology...but instead gives a sense to the notion of knowledge as a social phenomenon” (Dancy, 119). This testimony of others is used to increase the coherence of one’s own belief-set, thereby the individual conceives of himself or herself as a collaborator and a learner contributing to the sum total of knowledge (Dancy, 119). Supposedly, this approach offers a general stance from which a skeptic can be

rebutted or completely defused (Dancy, 119). I beg to differ, if Rescher's assertion is true it is valid if the information is valid and justifiable. What happens when as a collaborator the information which is received from a specific group from within a particular society, and this group controls the flow of information then whatever information that is processed by the group will not be valid because of its predisposition in favor of the proponents views. It is human nature to favor information that promotes your own basic core beliefs or needs. This could also apply to nations, societies and cultures. Would it not be more effective for the individual to search for and acquire unbiased information to process and include in their belief set to help them arrive at as close a approximation of the 'truth' as is humanly possible? Would it not be better to start out, individually, seeking truth and processing the information while revising our belief sets, which may in turn, revise some of our basic core beliefs? Is it not human nature to select the truth that we wish to process? Does that not make truth tailored to the belief set of that particular person despite the fact that other individuals may share common beliefs, on both the basic core beliefs and that of a complete belief sets?-

Since coherentism clearly feels it can provide a forum from which it can debate or argue effectively by providing valid arguments, counterarguments or belief sets that are justified, in theory, then it should be possible to see what coherentism and rationalization share in the way of commonality or how they may possibly support one another.

In conclusion, I have raised more questions than I have answered and am no closer to understanding how people can perpetrate inhumane acts upon one another. However, the one thing that I was able to observe was that both the foundational and coherentists theories alone are not enough to shed light upon this issue. Knowing how belief sets develop and process information, to justify these belief sets is only a fraction of the causes involved and would

require an indepth analysis of each factor and its various facets contributing to the entire process that would, according to Dancy, initiate an expansion of the belief sets causing a loss of coherence. It requires more than just an understanding of how people acquire their basic core beliefs and process the information to arrive at justification. However, in processing the information regardless if it is a foundationalist or a coherentist theory there are parallels between the two approaches.

Both foundationalism and coherentism provide a basis for processing information that is faulty. Operating on the paradigm that it is possible to be given incorrect information and process it and arrive at an incorrect conclusion, or you can also be given the same incorrect information, process it and it will have no effect on your conclusion or belief sets. Subsequently, in the foundationalist theory it **may** be necessary to re-evaluate your belief set as a whole, and begin again, or if it is possible you can remove the incorrect information with minor or no damage to your belief sets. However, in the coherentist theory the assertion that the data or information prior to inclusion in the belief set should be assessed for its value and correctness in relation to the entire belief set, or upon revision of the information it can be reassessed at a later date and removed from the belief set if it is no longer valid.

This shared feature of both foundationalism (moderate foundationalism in this case) and coherentism is that regardless of how the individual or group processes the information, if the information is incorrect and the individual or group believes that this information is true it is thereby valid until such time as it is discovered, if it is ever discovered. This would suggest that it is possible for the individuals or group to incorporate a non-truth into their belief sets forever, willingly or unwillingly. Thus giving credibility to the individual and group beliefs, and if people are operating under the assumption that their beliefs are correct, under certain

circumstances 'some' people will respond to 'certain' situations depending upon how deeply they feel about the situation based upon their beliefs. The flip side of this assertion is that they would behave the same way given the same circumstances if the belief were a valid truth. So in effect from this fact it is possible to conclude that there are other forces at work here.

The fact that we can process the information or data provided means that we can and think things through. However, it is necessary to be provided with correct data, because our beliefs will influence our behavior - right or wrong. Whether we rationalize positively or negatively it is our behavior that is the end result. I will reiterate Goldman's assertion that "the process of justification appears to be a function of how a cognizant being deals with input from his or her environment," this will greatly influence the information that is processed and include this information in the individual or groups belief sets ultimately affecting their behavior.

With the advance of technology and the abundance of information that is accessible to individuals and groups today it is of the utmost importance that they understand how important it is to obtain 'truth' in the information that is presented to them before it becomes a part of their belief sets. As it is 'truth' is an individual affair, another individuals truth is not necessarily my truth, and this proclamation can be transferred to a group, state, or national level. Information does influence our belief sets, sometimes even our basic core beliefs, which ultimately will affect our behavior. With this understanding, it becomes apparent that other factors are involved. Acts of aggression are a response to other acts of aggression, but an act of aggression can also be a means to an end. Aggression controlled can be used to accomplish specific goals whether it be on an individual, group or national level. Aggression itself can be studied to understand how it is influenced by the processing of information (valid and non-valid) and the inclusion of this information in our belief sets.

Individual human behavior will offer a better understanding of how and why humans can come to the point of committing such violent acts upon another human being, whether it be on an individual, group, or a national basis. If we listen and learn, starting with self, it will become clear how and why. Understanding our emotions and how they influence our behavior may help us understand the connection between our basic core beliefs and the information we process.

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