

Coherence and Basic Capabilities

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with problems of acceptance and justification of principles of justice by people whose conceptions of what is right and what is good are different. My idea is to approach this question endorsing the capability approach combined with the justificatory device offered by coherentism.

When we think about (general and abstract) principles regulating basic social institutions, we start from elements such as *basic beliefs* and particular *conceptions of good life*. If we want to extend principles to different societies or cultures, taking such elements as starting point could affect our theory.

In order to justify those principles we could pay attention to coherence relations among general and particular elements, say principles and basic beliefs. In my reading, an holistic interpretation of coherentism, as a study of constraint satisfaction, can offer an interesting answer to questions justification if combined with capability approach, first stated by Amartya K. Sen and then by Martha Nussbaum.

1. Introduction

This communication is a work in progress and it represents a part of a larger work on theories of justification in moral and political philosophy. The central question that I am going to present is not directly related to philosophical foundation of capability approach, but rather to problems of justification and acceptability in moral theorizing. I contend that *a coherence theory of justification* combined with basic capabilities can play a key role in such a topic.

The point is more or less this: when are we justified, from a philosophical point

of view, in holding a judgement or a principle, whichever they are? We could think that the answer to this subject matter of moral and political philosophy is based on a theoretical account of truth or on a concept of person, or on social and anthropological considerations. We could find someone believing that a principle or a judgement are justified, roughly speaking, by something as thought experiment; someone else because of their mirroring something of metaphysically superior or because they point out what people need or deserve by their nature and so on.

What I claim is that for being justified in holding a judgement or a principle we need to verify that they are coherent with our system of beliefs. A system of belief could incorporate all those considerations previously mentioned, including moral intuitions, considered convictions of good life, general and abstract principles of background theories, empirical and factual claims etc. I will maintain that if we construct a cognitive model of practical reasoning based on coherentism and basic capabilities, we shall find a method of justification able to consider and to combine different elements.

One of the most famous theories of coherence justification is Rawls' reflective equilibrium. N. Daniels, explaining what "wide reflective equilibrium" is, maintains that principles of justice are justified when they match our considered convictions (or sense) of justice, on one hand, and background theories on the other. But which kind of relation is "matching"? It is trivial to say that it is a coherence relation. But, still, what does coherence mean?

2. A Theory of Justification: Coherentism

In epistemology, coherentism represents the main alternative of foundationalism. In a foundationalist approach, an element within a system of knowledge derives, through an inferential relation, its justification from other presumed justified elements, and these from other and so on. At the end of this chain we will find foundational elements, which do not derive their justification from other further elements. Roughly speaking, they are something like self-evident elements of a system.

We can start from a non-foundationalist position, denying the existence of indubitable truths about what people should believe in ethics or in political philosophy.

But we know that we can neither found a theory on indubitable truths coming from sense experience. We should find a *system* where beliefs, empirical hypothesis and general principles fit together in a “well constructed and coherent whole”. So, we have to think about a system where the justification of the system itself is prior, from a logical point of view, of the one of its elements. And the justification of the system is a matter of internal coherence, say, how each element entails and is entailed by all the other elements. Moreover, we can add that an element is coherent with other elements and with the whole system, when *a series of positive constraints are satisfied*.

This interpretation of coherentism expresses an attempt to keep together a lot of elements that we often take separately. We can define this kind of approach as *internalist*, since, epistemologically, the justification is based on cognitive capacity of a subject. There is not any remind to some philosophical account of truths that we can theoretically know. An individual, in this reading, can refer only to the elements of a system.

But, what does “coherence” mean? We can say that it is a way of fitting together in a variety of logical, inferential and explanatory relations, the elements of a system. A perfectly coherent system should be that one where every component entails and is entailed by all the others. But we do not have to take the logical relations in such a strictly sense, because no system will be justified.

One of the main problems of philosophers who choose to endorse coherentism is to *define* coherence. Indeed, there are many possible definitions, but nobody of them is unproblematic. I think that we can begin taking coherentism as system divided in two subcategories, *accepted* and *rejected* elements. For making coherent a system we have to maximize the satisfaction of constraints.

What does “coherentism as *constraint satisfaction*” mean? It is a way of making sense of a state of affair given the available information. *To make sense* means, for instance, to choose an interpretation which fits with a state of affairs *better than* other possible ones. The constraint satisfaction, so, is a way for evaluating the explanatory or deductive or deliberative role of each elements. In the negative case, that is *incoherency*, we will speak of inconsistency or incompatibility of the elements.

The satisfaction of a positive (or negative) constraint is given by the coherence (or *incoherence*) among two or more elements. We will separate the accepted elements from the rejected element on the base of such relations, trying to implement coherence,

maximizing the number of satisfied constraints: we will choose that distribution of accepted and rejected elements where the number of constraints in each subcategory is the highest.

A final clarification: I will not take into account a linear version of coherentism (that is a system where an element e_1 is justified by e_2 , e_2 justified by e_3, \dots , e_{n-1} justified by e_n), because it leads to a vicious circle (if e_n is justified by e_1) or to a regressum *ad infinitum* (if n is infinite). I will consider a *holistic* version of coherentism where all the elements stand in a relation of mutual support. Coherence justification could be graphically represented by a “network”, where each node is linked with the others as the representation of a neuronal net. So, positive constraints are similar to an excitatory link between two nodes, and negative constraints are similar to an inhibitory link.

3. A normative framework: Capability Approach

I will now consider the argument offered by Sen and Nussbaum about capabilities and functions. I will do this very shortly assuming that the readers are acquainted with this topic.

It is a classical definition to maintain that capability approach is a *normative framework* for assessing, *latu sensu*, well being of persons. It focuses on what people are effectively able *to do* and *to be*. In political philosophy a state of affair should be evaluated taking as standard the aptitude to promote freedoms of achieving functionings that people think valuable. In Sen's words, «a person's capability to achieve functionings that he or she has reason to value provides a general approach to the evaluation of social arrangements, and this yields a particular way of viewing the assessment of equality and inequality»¹.

What Sen has proposed is to focus not on the intensity of desire satisfaction or people's happiness, but enlarge people's freedoms to do and to be what they want if it is good for them. And we can take as a measure of this people's capabilities to function, that is, to have actual opportunities to do what they want to do and to remove obstacles

¹ A. K. Sen, *Inequality Re-examined*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992, p. 5

to be what they want to be.

«A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead»².

What is in my aims, it is, more or less, to start from a minimum set of social arrangements for making every life valuable. And in this sense I will take advantage of a more substantial interpretation of the issue. Sen's version is not, of course, a theory of justice, but a way of assessing some normative issues. If I want to find that minimum set based on people's basic needs, I need something more than Sen's proposal. I need a basic-capability set, which should be not only a cut-off point for question such poverty, but also a theoretical support for guarantee biological and social needs.

Sen speaks about basic capabilities in *Equality of what?* [1980], and also in later works. He seems trying to narrow down this concept to the possibility to do basic things necessary for people's survival. It is interpreted as a sort of threshold of poverty and deprivation.

Nussbaum has a different conception of basic capabilities: «the innate equipment of individuals that is the necessary basis for developing the more advanced capabilities and a ground for moral concern»³. In this sense they are more rudimentary natural endowments, and not a cut-off point for question such as poverty.

So, I will consider basic capabilities in their meaning of *basic elements* composing *general capabilities*. More particularly, as those elements on which we can model our deliberations and decisions about political, but also moral, matters. For example a general capability as “health well-being” is made of more basic capabilities as “be fed” or “be cared”, but also something as “be educated” and so on. What I have in mind, is a set of capabilities, which are important for basic biological and social reasons or because they instrumentally allow functionings.

I prefer capability approach over other approach because it is able to give us a description of such elements. Capabilities and functionings are the most suitable vectors not just for measuring improvement in a society, but also for fixing the starting-points of

2 A. K. Sen, *The Standard of Living*, in G. Hawthorn (ed.) *The Standard of Living*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, p. 36.

3 M. C. Nussbaum, *Woman and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 84

acceptability about theories of justice or policies.

4. Multi-coherentism

In this last part I will try to clarify in which sense a coherence theory and capability approach can be combined in a model of practical reasoning.

What I am trying to do is, more or less, this: I would like to find a standard of justification for normative political theories. I have in mind something like a procedure of practical reasoning, where we insert principles, judgments, factual claims, goals and a minimum set of conditions, the basic capabilities. The procedure will provide a final deliberation about the problem at the hand. The two basic rules that are to follow, as we said before, are the internal *coherence* and the normative framework provided by Sen's basic capabilities account.

The bald assumption is that we can find a general consensus on this core set. So, if we agree on the facts that a system should be coherent and we agreed about basic capabilities, we shall construct a model of practical reasoning able to take into account what people think about a valuable life, giving the fact of pluralism of values.

What we need, I suggest, is to implement a *multi-coherence* system, which implies four kinds of coherence relations. As I said before, a coherent approach to such a topic is a valid alternative to foundationalism, because it is able to provide a justificatory device and a decision-making device without appealing to metaphysical conceptions of good or justice. Men and women are able to assess the best available solution, giving a certain range of choices. And the best solution is the one that achieves the major degree of coherence with the other elements of the system.

Why should we need basic capabilities? Coherence is not enough for justifying a theory. In other words, we need something more, otherwise coherence would be just an epistemic value emerging from a system. I take coherence in a normative sense, within the normative framework offered by capability approach, for maintaining that a policy, for instance, should improve opportunities and choices available to people in leading valuable human lives.

Why should we need coherence? Because coherentism, considering alone from

other theories, is a justificatory device able to take into account also background theories, as N. Daniels suggests⁴. What I think coherentism could be is a way of selecting elements *in order to* create system, whose primary feature is to be a coherent “whole”. It is clear that coherence has a normative concern. But coherentism alone can tell us how to run the process, without any starting point. And this is to provide the largest basket of freedoms without saying which one is to be preferred. That is, it is required to offer basic capabilities that people, according their particular conceptions of good life, will convert in functions.

Moreover, we can avoid objections about paternalism taking a basic interpretation of the matter: acceptable principles or judgments will be those that respect just basic opportunities of well-being development (and of course coherence relations).

What I am going to present is not a complete theory, but normative approach to justification in ethics and political philosophy.

P. Thagard identifies four kinds of coherence relations in ethical reasoning⁵: *deliberative, explanatory, deductive* and *analogical*. Deductive coherence takes into account relations between principles and judgements; explanatory coherence does it between principles and judgements with empirical hypothesis; deliberative coherence between judgements and goals, and analogical coherence among judgements in similar cases. What we should do now is to specify all these relations in more details and to explain how basic capabilities can be insert in the process.

So, we will start by the first one, *deliberative coherence*. In this kind we are assessing epistemological relation between two components: actions and goals. A judgement about which action has to be performed is justified when this action facilitates the achievement of a goal. We will say that the system is coherent if a positive constraint, *facilitation*, is satisfied; that is, if an action facilitates a goal, that action is coherent with that goal, in a given system. On the opposite case, a negative constraint is represented by incompatibility between the two elements. Of course, here we need a criterion for selecting goals and for making a “priority rank” among them. This criterion can be based upon biological or social reasons. And, giving a better account of these reasons, we can endorse capability approach: speaking about intrinsically important ends or people’s basic needs, it is possible to formulate the question in terms of

4 N. Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 76, n. 5, (May, 1979), p. 256-282.

5 P. Thagard, *Coherence in Thought and Action*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2000.

maximizing capabilities to function, starting from basic ones. So, we may say that it is required to choose those actions which facilitate more capabilities to function and make a life valuable for an individual. Deliberative coherence pays particularly attention to consequences of actions and finds theoretical support in reason of empirical character, such as human essential needs and so on.

Deductive coherence, on the other hand, expresses a simple relation between principles and judgements, that is, general applicable norms and norms applied in particularly case. So a judgement is justified if it can be deduced by a principle. Between them there should be a positive constraint, which is *deducibility*, in order to be coherent. By the term “deducibility” I do not mean a formal logic relation, but a weaker one: a logical consistency relation, typical of practical reasoning, where a statement is entailed by another one. For example, “starving is morally unacceptable” entails a judgement as “a disadvantaged people should be favored by alimentary support”. The problem is not to leave room for forms of rational intuitionism, which try to derive general principles from thought experiment. Capability approach offers us the possibility of taking seriously some real aspects of human life without starting from thought experiments which have a weak justificatory force. Thought experiments are useful for testing our considered convictions about morality. But often they put individuals in definitely unreal contexts, where the outcome of our deliberations is given by the same conditions imposed on the situation.

We do not need to start from hypothetical case, but from factual claims and basic capabilities in order to assess how the elements of a system are coherent with theoretical approach, such as theories of justice, or political policies. This relation is clearly defined by explanatory coherence. Often in political and moral philosophy, principles are supported by factual or empirical claims: the fact that providing a certain amount of liberties make a people better-off from a social point of view, is based of such evaluations. So, for explanatory coherence a judgement is justified if it is supported or explained by evidences whose nature is empirical or factual. These evaluations play a fundamental role combined with deductive coherence: principles and empirical evidences can entail judgements. In addition to this, explanatory coherence can help us to fix priority among practical available solutions: the ones which better cohere with other elements will obtain a higher degree of coherence in overall evaluation of the system. For instance, if a factual claim gives reasons for a policy, we shall prefer this

one over others because of its coherence with the system.

For what analogical coherence is concerned, it has no justificatory and normative force on its own, but it helps to increase the degree of coherence of the whole system. We will say justified a judgment if it is applied in similar cases.

Mapping a system through these kinds of logical relations, implementing the number of the positive constraints satisfied, rejecting those elements which do not fit with the system, we can evaluate the degree of coherence of the system itself.

The problem arising here is related to how to weigh the “importance” of each constraint. Maybe someone has a different perception of mine own; so we need to frame our model of practical reasoning in a non-arbitrary way. Sometimes peoples maximize just one kind of coherence: if we endorse a Kantian framework we will maximize, for example, deductive coherence relations; is consequentialist framework we will maximize, differently, deliberative coherence relations.

For making my point, I would like to suggest this: let us imagine that we are in front of a picture, which is divided in several small pieces like a *puzzle*. We want to compose it putting together all the pieces in the proper way. In other words, we can say that we are trying to make sense of the imagine fitting together all the elements, each of them representing a part of the whole imagine. The problem is that every section has a different shape, but the parts will fit perfectly if we compose them in the right order.

So, making sense of a picture means to put each part of the puzzle in the right position. We have to do it taking into account, basically, two aspects: firstly, *coherence*, fitting the parts in a harmonized way; secondly, *framework*, so that the picture can take an accepted form.

This is, more or less, the situation that I would like to propose: justification and acceptability are philosophical issues similar to solve a puzzle, where the pieces are elements such as beliefs, moral intuitions, general principles, particular judgments, empirical hypothesis, factual claims, actions and goals. Following this analogy, the imagine corresponds to a *system*, a set made of all the elements previous mentioned. We have to compose all them in the proper way. For achieving a justified and accepted system, for making sense of such a picture, we should follow, in my reading, the same two basic rules: *coherence* in the composition within a *normative framework*.

In this paper I am concerned with problems of justification as a problem of coherence relations among the elements of a theory, endorsing capability approach as

the basic structure of a normative theory. I do not want to give a sketch of all the elements, but to propose a cognitive model of practical reasoning, through which organizing those elements. In this way, coherentism give us the opportunity to examine their possibility of “staying together”, given some fixed points, that in my view are like Sen’s basic capabilities.

If we want to make sense of a theory, in my reading, we have, among other things, “to measure” the degree of coherence between concepts, beliefs, goals and actions on one hand, general and abstract principles on the other hand. What I want to propose is a study of coherence justification endorsing Sen-Nussbaum’s capability approach.

Coherentism, as justificatory device, offers the possibility of fitting such elements into a well constructed pattern of individual mental representations. *Capability approach* is a normative framework for evaluating individual well being. Constructing a coherent pattern based on basic capabilities could give us a system of decision-making as a *constraints satisfaction model*, as an algorithm.

The theoretical problem of this approach is to select some fixed points, provided of initial credibility. And I take basic capabilities as the starting points. They should be considered the first elements. Coherentism can give us a model of practical reasoning, but it is not enough. Leaving it alone, it is an empty model. So, we put elements inside, we formulate then principles or judgments that satisfy the largest number of coherence relations, looking at how an element entails and is entailed by others; we choose finally that solution that achieves the higher overall degree of coherence. In this sense we are justified on holding outcome of the procedure as justified.

Clearly this process of construction can be implemented, but I am hopeful that the combination of these two theories would be possible. I have to note that the question I will deal with relays on a normative level and not on a descriptive one: it is concerned to *what* people should think and not to *how* they think. In this sense justification is my primary concern.

5. Conclusion

If we should keep all these kinds of relation into account, it will result a very complex pattern of practical reasoning. Probably, it is quite impossible to apply in everyday deliberations. By an empirical analysis maybe we could discover that usually people try to maximize just one kind of coherence, giving more weight to the satisfaction of some constraints rather than another, for example.

What I have tried to argue here is that we could construct model of practical reasoning, based on inference relations, where the elements can be assessed also in a computational way. Thagard suggests that: «[f]rom the constraint-satisfaction view of coherence...inference is not a matter of step-by-step argument, but rather of assembling a set of constraints whose satisfaction is to be maximized in parallel»⁶. This “assembling” is not a naturalistic approach to such a topic, because it is not question of reducing moral judgments to empirical questions.

Indeed, we should think about something like a “network” that represents all the elements, where we can find excitatory or inhibitory links that lead us to an acceptable conclusion. In this way Thagard thinks to a computational model for computing coherence by an algorithm: a decision making network-like standard by which we can accept or reject elements of the system. This standard could be planned following a rule of coherence but within a normative framework provided by basic capabilities approach.

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⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

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