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BonJour on explanation and skepticism

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ABSTRACT

Laurence BonJour, among others, has argued that inference to the best explanation allows us to reject skeptical hypotheses in favor of our common-sense view of the world. BonJour considers several skeptical hypotheses, specifically: (i) our experiences arise by mere chance, uncaused; (ii) the simple hypothesis which states merely that our experiences are caused unveridically; and (iii) an elaborated hypothesis which explains in detail how our unveridical experiences are brought about. A central issue is whether the coherence of one's experience makes that experience more likely to be veridical. BonJour's recent treatment of "analog" and "digital" skeptical hypotheses is also discussed. I argue that, although there are important lessons to be learned from BonJour's writings, his use of inference to the best explanation against skepticism is unsuccessful.

Peter Lipton literally wrote the book on inference to the best explanation (IBE). However, one topic about which he said little was the use of IBE to address the traditional problem of skepticism regarding the external world. The idea, very roughly, would be this: the skeptical problem arises insofar as we are faced with competing hypotheses as to how sensory experience comes about. We ordinarily assume that we are normally situated subjects, veridically perceiving our environments. Ranged against this ordinary view are various hypotheses, according to which our sensory experience is unveridical, arising as the upshot of processes that are massively deceptive. The challenge of skepticism is to establish why we are justified in accepting the ordinary view and in rejecting hypotheses of massive sensory deception. IBE might provide just what is needed here. If the ordinary view explains various facts about sensory experience better than hypotheses of massive sensory deception do, IBE would license us in favoring the ordinary view, and the problem of skepticism would be resolved. Call this the *explanationist* approach to skepticism. Some important work by Laurence BonJour may be read as contributing to a solution of the skeptical problem along these lines.[1] This paper is devoted to an examination and appraisal of the explanationist approach to skepticism, as BonJour articulates it.[2]

1. Preliminaries

BonJour's (1985) treatment of skepticism is set within an overarching elaboration of a coherentist approach to epistemology, which he has since abandoned. Nevertheless, the anti-skeptical arguments presented there are largely free-standing, and may be

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[1] I will focus on BonJour's treatment of this topic (1985), with some attention to his later work (1999, 2003). It should be noted that BonJour no longer subscribes fully to his earlier position. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my agreement with BonJour on a number of important points. Like BonJour, I believe that it is necessary to distinguish different skeptical hypotheses, such as the simple demon hypothesis and the isomorphic skeptical hypothesis (see later), and to deal with them in different ways. Also, I concur that the explanatory role we ordinarily give to spatial properties is the source of deep difficulty for the skeptic. It happens that I arrived at these views independently, before encountering BonJour's writings on the subject (see Vogel (1986), Vogel (1990)). Subsequently, I have benefitted a good deal from reading BonJour's work.

[2] BonJour's own evaluation of the use of IBE against skepticism involves some qualifications. He endorses it (1985, p. 171; 2003, p. 95), but raises doubts regarding the connection between explanatory criteria such as simplicity, one the one hand, and truth, on the other (see 1985, pp. 181–182; compare 1999, pp. 245–246). Still, BonJour is widely recognized as a proponent of the explanationist response to skepticism (see, for example, Beebe, 2009).

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profitably addressed on their own.[3] At the center of the discussion is what BonJour calls the *correspondence hypothesis*. This hypothesis has two parts: First, our perceptual beliefs "are systematically caused by the sorts of situations which are depicted by their content" (1985, p.171); and, second, our "entire system of beliefs corresponds, within a reasonable degree of approximation, to the independent reality it purports to describe" (1985, p. 171). Obviously, the second claim is a much more ambitious claim than the first. But a skeptic would deny that we're justified in accepting even the more limited, former claim, which I'll abbreviate as VER. VER is the thesis that our experience is (generally) caused in a veridical way. Henceforth, my concern will be with the status of VER.

Overall, BonJour is concerned to establish that "The best explanation, the likeliest to be true, for a system of [perceptual] beliefs remaining coherent (and stable) over the long run is that [perceptual beliefs] are systematically caused by the sorts of situations which are depicted by their content" (1985, p. 171). That is, VER explains the "coherence and stability" of experience better than hypotheses according to which VER doesn't hold. The latter would include familiar skeptical alternatives such as the possibility that your perceptual experience and beliefs are the upshot of your dreaming everything, or the possibility that you are a brain in a vat who is fed deceptive neural inputs by a computer, and so on. In short, the explanatory superiority enjoyed by VER is such that it is more likely to be true than hypotheses of massive sensory deception. Whether BonJour's defense of this thesis succeeds is our central question.

BonJour proceeds as follows. He introduces various hypotheses relating to the source of perceptual beliefs, which he calls the *simple chance hypothesis* (SCH), the *elaborated chance hypothesis* (ECH), the *simple demon hypothesis* (SDH), and the *elaborated demon hypothesis* (EDH).[4] These are all alternatives to VER, and BonJour argues that none of them is as likely to be true as VER is.

At the outset, BonJour offers a blanket account of why these various alternatives to VER are unsatisfactory:

> An argument in favor of the greater probability or likelihood of the correspondence hypothesis. . .must argue that such skeptical hypotheses *are antecedently less likely to be true* than is the correspondence hypothesis. And since any appeal to empirical considerations would obviously beg the question in the present context, the antecedent probability or likelihood in question will have to be a priori in character. . .The basic suggestion. . .is that it is the very versatility of skeptical hypotheses, their ability to explain any sort of experience equally well, which renders them less likely to be true, *given the fact of a coherent (and stable) system of beliefs*. (1985, p. 181, emphasis added)

To reach any substantial conclusions, we will have to see how BonJour treats VER and its alternatives in depth. Before we do, we need to address several issues raised by the quoted passage. First, BonJour states that VER has a higher *a priori probability* of being true than its skeptical competitors and, as he himself goes on to acknowledge, "even philosophers who are not skeptical about appeals to the a priori in general are likely to have qualms about the notion of *a priori* probability" (1985, p. 181). The qualm concerns the extent to which the probabilities of propositions can be established a priori, that is, by reference to purely logical or quasi-logical factors. Clearly, logic alone wouldn't fix that Pr(VER) is high while Pr(SDH), say, is low.[5] Proponents of a priori probability have held that there are substantive a priori constraints on probabilities which go beyond and supplement logic—including, most notoriously, the indifference principle.[6] If BonJour means to argue against skepticism by deploying a priori probabilities, and doing so involves some appeal to the indifference principle, he is on shaky ground, to say the least.

Another point concerns the role BonJour assigns to the "coherence and stability" of our perceptual beliefs (hereafter, "COH"). For a body of beliefs to be coherent, according to BonJour's official account, it must satisfy an elusive set of constraints which include logical consistency, "probabilistic congruence", and "explanatory interconnectedness" (1985, pp. 93–101). BonJour notes that a subject might hold a series of different bodies of beliefs at different times, each of which is coherent in itself at that time, but which is grossly at variance with the other bodies of beliefs the subject holds at different times. In BonJour's terminology, an overall sequence of beliefs like that would lack "stability" (1985, p. 170). In the absence of a more precise characterization of coherence (and, by extension, of stability) the strength of BonJour's position would be difficult to assess. Fortunately, he adds this remark: "the sorts of relations which primarily determine coherence, [are] lawful and conceptual connections. . ." (p. 178). Taking this comment as a clue, I will proceed on the assumption that COH holds, just in case the evolution of experience over time (or a body of perceptual beliefs over time) is governed by laws. In that event, the contents of experience will exhibit patterns and correlations which make later experience predictable from early experience (at least in part).[7]

Finally, at the beginning of the quoted passage, BonJour's announces his goal as showing that VER is more probable or more likely to be true than skeptical hypotheses. However, BonJour concludes the passage by stating that skeptical hypotheses are less likely to be true than VER "given the fact of coherent and stable beliefs". Let "COH" stand for that fact. It seems, then, that BonJour's intended conclusion is supposed to be one relating to the difference between various conditional probabilities; for instance, the difference between $Pr(VER \setminus COH)$ and $Pr(SDH \setminus COH)$. However, suppose BonJour can establish that the former is high while the latter is low. He can then make use of the fact that experience is coherent, such that Pr(COH) is 1, or at least very high, to conclude that Pr(VER) is high and Pr(SDH) is low, as desired. As we shall see,

[3] All the same, BonJour formulates various points in ways that incorporate terminology and content from the larger project. I have taken some liberty in re-stating what he says in order to avoid needless distractions. Especially, where BonJour talks about "cognitively spontaneous beliefs satisfying the Observation Requirement" I generally re-phrase that as "perceptual beliefs". BonJour sometimes takes perceptual beliefs, or various facts about perceptual beliefs, to the be the explanandum from which his anti-skeptical arguments proceed. But, at other times, the explanandum is said to be "experience", and at one point BonJour identifies these notions (see 1985, p. 183). While the difference is surely significant, I don't believe that any substantive issues that arise below do, in fact, turn on that difference. So, to ease exposition, I speak variously of "perceptual belief", "perceptual experience" and "experience", as best fits the context.

[4] BonJour discusses a further possibility, which I will refer to as the *isomorphic skeptical hypothesis* (ISH). This is the second of the two so-called "normal hypotheses" that BonJour considers (1985, p.173); see also his later work (2003, pp. 92–93). I will address the ISH in Section 3.

[5] Presumably, "high" means something like well over half.

[6] Carnap offers this statement of the principle: "If the evidence does not contain anything that would favor either of two or more possible events, in other words, if our knowledge situation is symmetrical with respect to these events, then they have equal probabilities relative to the evidence" (1955, p. 3). It should be acknowledged that the principle of indifference is not completely discredited. For recent defense, see *inter alia* Huemer (2009) and White (2010).Thanks here to Brad Weslake.

[7] BonJour writes: "Coherence essentially involves both prediction and explanation" (1985, p.175). He seems to have something like the following in mind. Compare the perceptual experience we normally have with the experience of dreams, or, more extremely, with the experience of a succession of randomly distributed pixels on a screen. For BonJour, ordinary experience is (more) predictable, while the others aren't. He seems to think, further, that predictability is tantamount to regularity; that is, being governed by some kind of law. I go into these matters in more depth in what follows. I note, too, that BonJour's quoted remark is hard to assimilate, if coherence is meant to be synchronic, and stability is meant to be diachronic. In what follows, I will use "coherence" as a blanket term to cover what BonJour refers to by "coherence and stability".