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# Contemporary Epistemology of Nationalism: Faltering Foundationalism Contrasted with Holistic Coherentism

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## **Abstract**

*This inquiry examines the structure of knowledge of nationalism. While numerous studies on nationalism focus on the nature and defining elements of nations, this research explores nationalism discourse from a purely epistemological viewpoint and asks two overarching questions: what are the constitutive beliefs in these various theories and how are they structured? The first section outlines a contemporary foundationalist argument and analyzes two widely accepted theories of nationalism from this theory of knowledge. The study finds that the linear constraints of a foundationalist approach, resting on the existence of non-inferentially justified beliefs, provide a weak framework for understanding the knowledge structures of nationalism. No single element alone can be deemed to be a sufficient basic belief of nationalism that is self-justified. The second part of this research utilizes contemporary coherence theory to assess the interconnected beliefs embedded in nationalism. Examining several theories of nationalism which arguably adopt coherentism, this particular theory of knowledge is shown to provide a more holistic approach. The study concludes that the very definition of nationalism incorporates interconnected beliefs and ideas about ideology, ethnic basis, shared culture and history, as well as unity and autonomy which imply a befitting epistemological refocus away from foundationalism and towards coherentism.*

**Keywords:** *nationalism; foundationalism; coherentism; coherentist theory of justification*

## I. Framing the structure of knowledge concerning nationalism

The structure of knowledge as it relates to the topic of nationalism is ambiguous at best. While the subject of nationalism has long been debated, the epistemology of nationalism has received minor attention.<sup>1</sup> My purpose in this study is to attempt to uncover the structure of knowledge of nationalism, moving away from foundationalism and refocusing on coherentism. I first outline a contemporary foundationalist argument for the study of nationalism. From there, I present an approach to nationalism based on a four-part system of coherentism as outlined by Laurence Bonjour. The argument shows how coherentism, as presented by Bonjour, provides a sufficient basis for nationalism discourse. This comes in stark contrast to foundationalism, which is, arguably, an inadequate approach but somehow the default perspective on this phenomenon.

Conceptually, nationalism has several features, including the “process of formation of nations, the consciousness of belonging to a nation, the language and symbolism of the nation, and the sociopolitical movement on behalf of the nation.”<sup>2</sup> Nationalism is understood in terms of the nation, where themes of language and symbolism, sociopolitical movement, and ideology intersect. Hence, nationalism is commonly defined as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation.”<sup>3</sup> From this broad definition, issues of ideology, ethnic basis, and the inner world of *ethnies* (reconstructed ethnic cores that include collective myths, values, and traditions) lie at the heart of any discussion concerning nationalism. In contrast to the ever-increasing process of globalization, nationalism recalls various ethno-histories, an ‘authentic’ form and recollection of culture that is extremely politicized, to increase solidarity of a community which claims a homeland and believes in a shared destiny in order to preserve its identity for the future.

Understanding the basic structure of knowledge of nationalism that combines the multitude of intersecting features, as outlined above, is imperative. I contend that the very definition of nationalism,

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<sup>1</sup> A limited number of authors have sought to address the subject of epistemology in nationalism such as Eugene O'Brien's article “The Epistemology of Nationalism” and, to a certain extent, Nenad Miscevic's comprehensive text *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Philosophical Perspectives*.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

which incorporates ideology, an ethnic basis, a shared culture and history, as well as unity and autonomy, requires an epistemological shift away from foundationalism and towards coherentism. I argue that foundationalism provides a weak and limited framework through which to understand nationalism discourse. In other words, the constraints that a foundationalist perspective places on the structure of knowledge concerning nationalism will be critically assessed and found lacking. In its place, an epistemological refocus on coherentism will be presented as the more appropriate approach to analyzing nationalism discourse. Ultimately, an emphasis on coherentism will not only prove its utility in revealing the structure of knowledge concerning nationalism, but it will also imply the necessity for the further epistemological study of such a controversial topic.

## II. Foundationalism and nationalism

According to Robert Audi, foundationalism assumes the possibility and existence of non-inferentially justified beliefs. In this case all other knowledge is dependent upon, and justified on, the basis of non-inferential knowledge. Audi claims that,

Foundationalism considers knowledge – and indeed justified belief, which is commonly regarded as a major part of knowledge – to be possible only through *foundational beliefs*. These beliefs are construed as non-inferential in the way perceptual beliefs are: based on experience rather than inference. The underlying idea is in part this: If knowledge or justified belief arises through inference, it requires belief of at least one premise, and that belief can produce knowledge, or justified belief of a proposition inferred from the premise only if the premise belief is itself an instance of knowledge or at least justified.<sup>4</sup>

Audi presupposes an axiomatic starting point for belief and, ultimately, knowledge. While classical foundationalism would presuppose an infallible starting point, moderate and weak foundationalism does not require non-inferential beliefs to be infallible to the point of embracing beliefs that have relative epistemic value. Moreover, such a

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Audi, "Contemporary Foundationalism," in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Louis P. Pojman, 206-213 (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999), 207.

weak foundationalism even takes into account inferences that are not strictly deductive. This is the fallibilistic foundationalism at the heart of Audi's approach. This fallibilistic foundationalism presupposes,

Conceptual requirements for the possession of knowledge, epistemic dependence on some appropriate inferential connection, via some epistemic chain, to some non-inferential knowledge, and the traceability of inferential knowledge to some non-inferential knowledge through the interaction of epistemic chains.<sup>5</sup>

Fundamentally, Audi seeks to resolve the epistemic regress argument that plagues knowledge. For Audi and other foundationalists, this epistemic regress is problematic for ever arriving at any solid basis of knowledge since everything is contingent on some other belief. Audi's contemporary view of foundationalism seeks to skip regress for justification for some sort of beliefs – those that are deemed foundational beliefs. In this regard, Audi argues in support of an epistemic chain “terminating with a belief constituting direct knowledge” rather than infinite regress.<sup>6</sup> An epistemic chain is simply a chain of beliefs, with at least the first constituting knowledge, and each successive belief being based on the previous. Moreover, in line with his empirical foundationalism, Audi presents what he considers the four basic sources of knowledge: perception, consciousness, reflection and memory. All four sources of knowledge constitute elements of human experience but are also fallible according to Audi. Therefore, combining the two elements – sources of knowledge and epistemic chains – Audi contends that justified knowledge can only come from epistemic chains that are based on common sense and causally, empirically-evidenced, direct perceptual beliefs. To this effect, he argues that “epistemic chains that originate with knowledge end in non-inferential knowledge: knowledge not inferentially based on further knowledge (or further justified belief). That knowledge, in turn, is apparently grounded in experience.”<sup>7</sup> Adopting such a position, Audi concludes that the infinite regress problem can only be resolved if one adopts the position that regression to inferentially justified beliefs is finite, terminating in non-inferentially justified beliefs. Yet, as per his fallibilistic foundationalism, Audi does allow for the possibility that basic

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 211.

beliefs are revisable. As such, the possibility that justification of beliefs can be defeated is omnipresent as per Audi's fallibilistic foundationalism.

Audi's defense of foundationalism, specifically fallibilistic foundationalism, is arguably at the core of much of the literature on nationalism. Seeking to discover the most basic non-inferential belief that may be defeated lies at the core of nationalism discourse. All other inferential beliefs and knowledge are surely derived from one such non-inferential belief that would render the regress of justification of nationalism finite, with the epistemic chain eventually ending somewhere, preferably in a direct perceptual belief that connects common sense 'realities' in the right way.

With this in mind, Benedict Anderson is among the most prominent scholars to embark on a project of discerning the most basic non-inferential belief/knowledge upon which all discourse of nationalism lies. As outlined in his highly influential work, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson presents a foundationalist argument for the definition of nationalism. By defining the concept, Anderson inadvertently discerns the basic non-inferential belief upon which the entirety of nationalism hinges upon – that of the nation. Adopting a historical reductionist approach to nationalism discourse, Anderson comes to define the most basic belief encapsulated in the phenomenon of nationalism. Anderson considers three complex paradoxes:

- (1) The objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists.
- (2) The formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept – in the modern world everyone can, should, will 'have' a nationality, as he or she 'has' a gender – vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, 'Greek' nationality *is sui generis*.
- (3) The 'political' power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence.<sup>8</sup>

In light of these recurring contradictions, Anderson believes that nationalism cannot be understood separately from the nation, which he understands to be a social construction – a figment of collective imagination of vernacular print communities that historically develop a national consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Fundamentally, Anderson asserts that a nation is an imagined community. An imagined community, unlike an actual community, is void of actual face-to-face interactions between members of a community. A nation, according to Anderson, is the most basic unit of analysis for understanding nationalism. This belief in community which is wholly based on collectively shared 'imagination' is the basic non-inferential belief upon which Anderson's foundationalist argument for nationalism rests upon. Such emphasis upon imagination as basic knowledge defines Anderson's fallibilistic foundationalism as it is susceptible to perpetual defeat, since people may continually reimagine and modulate their perceptions of what group they belong to. In this sense, Anderson claims that "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."<sup>10</sup> Hence, he comes to the conclusion that the only basic belief that is non-inferential is belief in an imagined community.

Holding a basic belief in a nation, the defining characteristic of his modernist (constructivist) perspective on nationalism, Anderson comes to define the features of the imagined community. Firstly, Anderson argues that a nation is imagined as limited since "even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind."<sup>11</sup> Here Anderson contends that an exclusionary principle is encapsulated in the basic knowledge of the imagined community. There must exist the 'other' in order to differentiate the self. For a nation to exist it must be exclusionary – at least somebody must not be part of it. Furthermore, Anderson envisions the concept of sovereignty to lie within the imagined community. The nation is:

Imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm [...] nations dream of being free.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Anderson contends that another major component of the nation is the imagined bonds holding the community together. To this effect, Anderson states that,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 7.

It [nation] is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, Anderson emphasizes the prerequisite necessity of human imagination in order for people to perceive their association with a constructed (print-language) group. Imagined affinity to, and identification with, a social construct forms the foundation for nationalism discourse. All other concepts, theories, and dilemmas build upon this basic belief of imagination of political community according to Anderson.

It may be argued that an imagined political community is a more complex inferential belief, but the fact that its focus is on a social construction rather than the material attributes of an actual community still relegates it to the level of basic knowledge because it is pure non-inferential imagination, rather than pragmatic realization. After all, imagining is so basic, so fundamental to conscious being, that it can be nothing other than a fundamental belief upon which discourse concerning nationalism can rest. However, this begs the question whether an imagined basic belief in the nation and nationalism is not prone to further regress – even to the point of making it impossible to justifiably defeat. Is there something more basic than imagination of community as a social construct? If so, what would be more basic than collectively shared imagination? Does Anderson's foundationalist project resolve the infinite regression of the structure of knowledge regarding nationalism? The answer is a resounding no. Even when adopting Audi's empirical foundationalism, the question remains: what is Anderson's source of knowledge concerning the belief in a so-called imagined community? It would seem to rest only on consciousness rather than incorporating the other three elements of experience (perception, reflection, and memory) that Audi refers to. However, the issue then becomes how one is to make a logically sound jump from a foundationalist conscious imagining of a community as the basis of a nation, which also serves as the starting point for nationalism discourse, to the more pragmatic expression of nationalism's empirical features.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>14</sup> Please refer to the section entitled "Coherentism and Nationalism" for a detailed discussion



Finally, even if Anderson's foundationalist argument for an imagined community is adopted, the question remains whether it is transferable to fallibilist foundationalism that would allow us to address issues of truth claims. Simply put, can imagining ever be 'justifiably' defended or defeated? Anderson's basic belief of imagined political community based on mental affinity is extremely abstract, if not relativistic, and as such it is difficult to find cause for reversal. Political communities of all sorts can be imagined, but which one is correct and true?

To highlight the problem of any foundationalist approach to discourse concerning nationalism, one must look no further than to an equally persuasive basic belief presented by Ernest Renan in his famous essay aptly entitled *What is a Nation?* In his work, Renan asserts that the basic belief defining the nation (and nationalism) is the idea of solidarity. Renan claims that,

A nation is therefore a vast solidarity, constituted by the sentiment of the sacrifices one has made and of those one is yet prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is, however, summarized in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation's existence is an everyday plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.<sup>15</sup>

Once again, Renan rests his foundationalism on consciousness as the source of knowledge. However, where Anderson's basic belief is imagining a (national) community, Renan's is solidarity. Renan understands solidarity to be the most basic non-inferential belief in the epistemic chain of nationalism as the impetus for commonality between people sharing the same consciousness. But there is the remaining issue of what type of solidarity. Can solidarity of any kind be justified, or is it a particular solidarity that is shared by a specific group? Moreover, the issue arises as to who is to determine whether the imagining of the abstract political community is the basic non-inferential belief, or whether solidarity is the most basic non-inferential belief upon which nationhood and nationalism rest? If both are based on human consciousness, are we to suppose that one supersedes the other?

This broad analysis of Anderson and Renan's works on nations highlights the numerous issues and problems that arise when applying

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of the features that are encapsulated in nationalism discourse.

<sup>15</sup> Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation? And other Political Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 261.

foundationalism to the discourse on nationalism. Clearly, a structure of knowledge concerning nationalism based on foundationalist premises is insufficient. Hence the need to adopt a coherence theory of knowledge concerning nationalism discourse, which provides a more all-encompassing approach to the subject.

### III. Coherentism and nationalism

Coherence theory has been developed as a counterpoint to foundationalism and focuses on the “totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs.”<sup>16</sup> Coherentism seeks to resolve some of the weaknesses that plague foundational knowledge claims in foundationalism. Coherentism rejects the foundationalist premise that empirical knowledge must have a foundation. According to its major proponent, Laurence Bonjour, foundationalism actually fails to resolve the epistemic regress problem. While foundationalists such as Audi acknowledge the epistemic regress argument and attempt to solve it by terminating it in experience, contemporary coherentists such as Bonjour claim that the regress problem survives. Essentially, Bonjour finds fault with foundationalism’s linear path of dependence of justification. Instead, coherence as presented by Bonjour understands justification to be circular. To this effect, Bonjour asserts that “coherence theories attempt to evade the regress problem by abandoning the view of justification as essentially involving a linear order of dependence.”<sup>17</sup> Coherentists, like Bonjour, reject the notion of basic beliefs attributed to knowledge at any time. All these basic beliefs necessarily require reference to further empirical beliefs which themselves require further justification, hence the infinite regress problem continues due to the impossibility of determining the ultimate non-inferential belief based on experience. Coherence theory of knowledge then becomes the only alternative solution to the regress argument emphasizing a “non-linear conception of justification.”<sup>18</sup>

As presented in his work entitled *The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge*, Bonjour outlines the basic tenets of contemporary coherentism as an alternative to foundationalism. Fundamentally, coherentism replaces linear justification with a nonlinear view. Basic

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<sup>16</sup> Louis P. Pojman, *What Can We Know?: An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2000), 115.

<sup>17</sup> Laurence Bonjour, “Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1978): 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

beliefs are rejected, and instead coherentism presents the view that beliefs are justified by being inferentially related to other beliefs that are simultaneously held. According to Bonjour, coherentism presents a “holistic or systematic conception of inferential justification: beliefs are justified by being inferentially related to other beliefs in the overall context of the coherent system.”<sup>19</sup> A belief is analyzed in terms of two levels of justification: local and global justification. Any singular belief depends on local justification to adjacent beliefs, and the overall global system of beliefs. To this effect,

Justification of a particular belief would involve four distinct steps of argument, as follows: 1. The inferability of that particular belief from other particular beliefs, and further inference relations among particular beliefs. 2. The coherence of the overall system of beliefs. 3. The justification of the overall system of beliefs. 4. The justification of the particular belief in question, by virtue of its membership in the system.<sup>20</sup>

These four steps for the justification of an empirical belief are based on what Bonjour defines as the coherence criteria. According to Bonjour, this four-step argument represents the culmination of a holistic process that is circular in nature, and that stresses the importance of beliefs being inferentially related to other beliefs in an overall coherent system. What this four-part coherentism implies, therefore, is that a system of beliefs is coherent only if it is logically consistent. The level of coherentism of a particular set of beliefs depends on the level of probabilistic consistency, which is, in turn, dependent on the number and strength of inferential connections both on the local and global level of justification.

Ultimately, Bonjour’s four-part account of the fully explicit justification of a particular empirical belief highlights the importance and interconnectedness of both coherency and justification. The starting point is justification in a subset of beliefs. From there, global justification and global coherence are introduced in order for the complete justification of the particular belief. This shift from local to global levels allows for the truth of beliefs to be judged in accordance with how they fit into other beliefs that are held. Bonjour claims that

<sup>19</sup> Laurence Bonjour, “The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 30, no. 5 (1976): 286.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

a belief compatible with coherency must be reliable since it coheres with the overall system.<sup>21</sup> As far as the connection between truth and justification in coherence theory of empirical knowledge is concerned, however, Bonjour claims that coherentism can only point to the likelihood of correspondence in the long-run.<sup>22</sup> It is this link between coherence, correspondence to the real-world, and ultimate truth that is evasive for coherentism, but might prove to be sufficient to point towards the likelihood of truth to be attained. Adhering to the view that if a belief coheres with other theories of truth it can therefore be deemed as true, might be problematic for Bonjour, but it does move one step forward in linking coherentism with judgment of truth claims.

Coherentism provides a more complete basis for discourse concerning nationalism since it dispels basic beliefs regarding the nation that are usually relative and highly contentious. Instead, a focus on how a single belief regarding nations and nationalism coheres with the entirety of the global system of beliefs encompassing this discourse is more appropriate. In this regard, Bonjour's four-part holistic coherentism is well suited to provide the epistemological lens through which to investigate discourse regarding nationalism. Understanding the structure of knowledge regarding nationalism through Bonjour's coherence criteria refocuses attention on how the multiple beliefs and features embedded in nationalism discourse are inferentially related in the wider scope of a coherent system.

The widely adopted definition of nationalism as "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation" warrants examination using Bonjour's four-step holistic coherentism.<sup>23</sup> An epistemological focus on coherentism when analyzing Smith's definition of nationalism highlights the multitude of inferential connections between different beliefs of unity, identity and autonomy. Moreover, Bonjour's four-step holistic coherentism emphasizes the varying degrees of logical consistency between different beliefs that are equally valuable in this defined structure of knowledge of nationalism. The argument follows that Bonjour's four stages stress the importance that specific beliefs concerning nationalism are inferentially related to other nationalism beliefs in an overall coherent system. Only by acknowledging the manner in which these different beliefs are inferentially connected in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 285-286.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, 9.

a coherent system will an epistemological account of nationalism be satisfied. Hence the relevance of Bonjour's holistic coherentism to the epistemological analysis of nationalism discourse.

In his all-encompassing text, *Nationalism*, Anthony D. Smith hints at the need for coherentism when addressing the subject of nationalism. Smith understands nationalism in terms of the nation, where themes of language and symbolism, sociopolitical movement, and ideology all intersect. Smith bases his discussion of nationalism on the notion of nation as a group of people with a common political striving. Conceiving of nations exclusively in terms of people is in direct contrast to the institution-centric idea of the state. According to Smith, the nation is characterized by two interconnected concepts: autonomy and unity. All other concepts, ideas, and beliefs concerning nationalism must cohere with these two elements. For example, ideas of language, symbolism, homeland, ethnicity all have to cohere with the overarching idea of a nation as a group of people united and striving for autonomy.

Bonjour's four-step coherentism applies well to assessing the coherence of interconnected beliefs about language, symbolism, shared history, manifest destiny, and even religion which intersect and constitute the body of knowledge on nationalism. All of these elements first have to be locally justified, however. For example, the idea of shared history and language, attributed to a nation, has to be locally justified as important for the subset of the nation. Shared history and language bring people together through information communication, but all set them apart from other groups. From there, ideas of shared history and language globally cohere with the tenants of unity and autonomy. Unity and autonomy cohere with a subcategory of unity that shared history and language incite. From there, shared history and language are globally justified by facilitating further cohesion-building (as well as exclusivity) among members of the nation. In this way, ideas of shared history and language become completely justified as beliefs of nationalism discourse.

Smith's continual emphasis on the intertwining of *ethnie* and homeland as major components of nationalism can only be analyzed from the perspective of epistemological coherentism. Concepts of *ethnie* and homeland have to cohere internally and externally in order for them to be justified beliefs in the holistic scheme of nationalism discourse. As Smith notes, an *ethnie* is a "named human community connected to a homeland, possessing common myths of ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of shared culture,

and a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites.”<sup>24</sup> Ethnicity is not synonymous with nationhood since it alone is far too culturally restrictive and politically passive. Yet, both ethnicity and homeland in Smith’s definition, cohere with the broader definition of nationalism as an ideology of a united group of people striving for self-determination.

Both ethnicity and homeland globally cohere with nationalism discourse whose definition is intertwined with beliefs concerning a united community who share an autonomous territory. Part three of BonJour’s system is satisfied as both ethnicity and homeland can be globally justified within the concept of nationalism. In this regard, the complete justification of ethnicity and homeland as components of nationalism is satisfied. Nationalism, therefore, has no basic self-justified beliefs. Instead, the intersection of interconnected and coherent concepts of ethnicity, homeland, language, shared history and religious background, and symbolism all have to cohere in order to define the overarching justified belief of what nationalism is. No single trait alone can be deemed to be a basic belief of nationalism that is self-justified.

A coherentist perspective on nationalism is also shared by Ernest Gellner. As a modernist it would be easy to misinterpret Gellner’s reductionism to also imply foundationalism. On the contrary, Gellner’s sociocultural theory employs coherentism to unveil the interlinking truths embedded in nationalism. In his text *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner defines nationalism as a product of modernization that expresses itself as a sociological condition and serves the purpose of creating cultural homogeneity. Rather than grounding his theory of nationalism in a single foundational belief, Gellner’s approach to nationhood rests on interlinking components of will and culture under the notion of polity. Gellner explains that,

Nations can indeed be defined only in terms both of will and of culture, and indeed in terms of the convergence of them both with political units. In these conditions, men will to be politically united with all those, and only those, who share their culture. Polities then will to extend their boundaries to the limits of their cultures, and to protect and impose their culture with the boundaries of their power. The fusion of will, culture, and polity becomes the norm, and one not easily or frequently defied.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 55.

Such a perspective on nationalism clearly ascribes to coherentism because Gellner's theory is not grounded on any single, self-evident, basic belief. Instead, it is the intersecting beliefs concerning will and culture, fused under the umbrella of polity, that cohere and constitute what is understood as the phenomenon of nationalism.

Possibly the clearest example of epistemological coherentism of nationalism discourse comes to fruition through the work of Michel Seymour in his piece entitled *On Defining the Nation*. Seymour inadvertently shows that no basic beliefs are inherent in the concept of nationalism. Instead, a variety of coherent concepts come to confluence in a more robust epistemic understanding of nationalism. Seymour argues that nationalism, first and foremost, involves considering the nation as a "political community composed of a national majority, and very often of national minorities and ethnic communities. All share a certain national consciousness on the same territory."<sup>26</sup> Contrary to Anderson, Seymour shows that a foundationalist premise of consciousness, specifically that of the imagined community, is insufficient as a basic belief. Instead, Seymour understands nationalism to focus on a type of epistemic coherentism in which four key notions of political community, national majority, national consciousness, and territory must interact and unequivocally cohere. By political community, Seymour conceives of a "sociopolitical group" that differentiates itself from another political community by both subjective and objective factors.<sup>27</sup> For Seymour, the political community arises out of a pluralist process pitting the ethnic versus the civil. This, then, ushers in the idea of national majorities. The national majority is defined as a "group of people with a specific language, culture, and history."<sup>28</sup> Of course, Seymour contends, this national majority must occupy a territory with which it associates – a homeland per se. Seymour argues that the fourth feature of nationalism in regard to national consciousness naturally arises out of the other three and is based on a subjective sense of belonging. When people show a "will to live together and belong together" they voluntarily choose to be a part of the nation.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, Seymour's argument highlights the need for coherence between the four elements of the nation when addressing the epistemology of nationalism discourse.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Seymour, "On Redefining the Nation," in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Nenad Miscevic, 25-56 (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 39.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 41.



I argue that Seymour's four factors both singularly and mutually cohere to the discourse of nationalism. More specifically, the elements of political community, national majority, national consciousness, and territory have to singularly comply with Bonjour's four-part coherentism in order to be justified as part of the definition of nationalism. At the same time, these elements can together be understood to fulfill Bonjour's four-part holistic coherentism. Territory can be understood as part of local justification, national consciousness as a part of global coherence, national majority as part of global justification, and political community as complete justification of nationalism.

#### IV. Coherentism and moral considerations of nationalism

Holistic coherentism can also be particularly useful when investigating the structure of knowledge as regards to moral arguments for and against nationalism. More specifically, holistic coherentism addresses the issue of special obligations when discussing national partiality. In his enlightening chapter, *National Partiality: Confronting the Intuitions*, Daniel Weinstock attempts to untangle the complexities involved with defenses of nationalism based on "special obligations towards their compatriots."<sup>30</sup> Acknowledging the powerful appeals to emotion and intuition, Weinstock finds offense with the paradox of 'choosing' one's obligations. Special obligations to compatriots, as a subset of moral obligations, do not necessarily hold if we are free to choose to uphold them according to Weinstock. Instead, Weinstock understands special obligations towards compatriots as limited to "imperfect obligations" that can be chosen to be discharged at the discretion of whoever embraces them.<sup>31</sup> Virtually all arguments put forth by special-obligations theorists (including kinship arguments, gratitude arguments, shared history arguments, proximity arguments, and even mutual advantage arguments) are grounded in some type of foundationalism that considers special obligations to be derived from a (controversial) basic belief concerning the meaning of "obligation" and "compatriot."<sup>32</sup>

Highlighting the weakness of these foundationalist arguments, Weinstock seems to suggest that any and all obligations should be assessed in terms of holistic coherentism, in which grounds for special obligations would be reconsidered in terms of 'may' rather than 'must.' Special obligations, therefore, would not constitute sufficient grounds

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Weinstock, "National Partiality: Confronting the Institutions," in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Nenad Miscevic, 133-156 (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 133.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.



for national partiality since they do not cohere with the overall view of what is meant by compatriot and obligation in the wider scope of nationalism.<sup>33</sup> One may have a special obligation to his/her compatriot in the wider scope of unity and solidarity that nationalism purports. However, the premise that one must have special obligations to his/her compatriot simply does not epistemically cohere either in terms of global coherence or global justification as part of a holistic coherence structure of knowledge concerning nationalism. Hence, national partiality simply does not hold in terms of necessary special obligations, since it does not necessarily epistemically cohere.

#### V. The value of coherentism for nationalism discourse

A foundationalist approach to nationalism discourse is insufficient. Trying to strip down nationalism to a specific basic belief seems to misread the discursive objective and layered complexity of the phenomenon of nationalism. Assertions that have been laid out by Anderson and Renan concerning basic beliefs of imagined community and solidarity seem rather vague, if not controversial. Limiting the scope of nationalism to such basic beliefs fails to take into account a multitude of interconnected beliefs, concepts, and ideas associated with the subject of nationalism.

An epistemological refocus away from foundationalism and towards coherentism bodes well for comprehending nationalism. More specifically, BonJour's four-part holistic coherentism provides a more complete epistemological grounding for nationalism discourse. The structure of knowledge concerning nationalism would greatly benefit from adopting epistemological coherentism as a basic guideline by which to categorize and organize beliefs, theories, concepts, and even dilemmas when addressing this complex subject. This is clearly evident from a critical assessment of the more balanced and holistic approaches to nationalism put forward by Smith, Gellner, Seymour, and Weinstock.

Finally, it must be accepted that there are possible weaknesses to a coherentist epistemological approach to nationalism. As Richard Fumerton duly notes in his text, *A Critique of Coherentism*, the problem arises when one has to judge and choose between equally coherent systems of belief. According to Fumerton, the problem of choosing the "true belief" is extremely difficult to solve and overcome

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 133-156.

with coherentism.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, a coherence theory of truth faces multiple problems with the implicit acceptance of internalism.<sup>35</sup> Despite Fumerton's invaluable critique, however, it must be noted that these criticisms seem to be leveled at individual belief systems, of which nationalism discourse is not necessarily a part. The nature of the structure of knowledge concerning nationalism is more holistic and therefore it is not so constrained by independent individual belief systems. Therefore, these criticisms do not necessarily hold for nationalism discourse, at least.

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Fumerton, "A Critique of Coherentism," in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Louis P. Pojman, 241-245 (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999), 245.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

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