

A coherentist response to Stoneham's reductio

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In his acute and provocative paper, Tom Stoneham's key charge against coherentists is that they are committed to rejecting the theorem from probability that $\text{pr}(p \ \& \ q)$ is always less than or equal to $\text{pr}(q)$ (I rely on Stoneham 2007 for presentation of the details of the argument). This does not seem to be right. When a subject's set of beliefs is S (where S does not include any support for $b(p)$, for $b(q)$ or for $b(p \ \& \ q)$), then the subject's credence for $b(p)$ may be 0.5 (and likewise for $b(q)$). Relative simply to S , the subject's credence in $p \ \& \ q$ will be lower as required. The credence he or she attaches to $p \ \& \ q$ by adding both beliefs will be higher than 0.5 (where $b(p)$ and $b(q)$ are mutually supporting). However, in those circumstances, that is when, for $b(p)$, the subject's set of beliefs is $S + b(q)$ and for $b(q)$, the subject's set of beliefs is $S + b(p)$, the credence for $b(p)$ and for $b(q)$ would be higher too, indeed, higher than the credence for $b(p \ \& \ q)$. The coherentist will counsel that subjects should believe $p \ \& \ q$ rather than p alone or q alone because the credences for p , q and $p \ \& \ q$ would all be higher. They are not committed to holding that, relative to some set of beliefs, credence in the conjunction will be higher than the conjuncts.

Stoneham seems to consider this possible response when he discusses the rejection of the inference from (4) and (5) to (6). He rejects it on the grounds that it is not in general true that the mere fact that I believe something can make it more reasonable for me to believe it. I have two worries about this dismissal. First, the only point that the coherentist needs is that believing that p and q makes it more reasonable to believe that p (likewise for believing that q). Second, if S is an independent set of mutually supporting propositions, then coherentists will hold that the fact that I have the big belief that S (rather than some less coherent set) makes it more reasonable for me to have the belief. Coherentists don't look outside the stock of beliefs for support. Thus, the grounds he uses to reject the response look suspiciously like something to which he is not entitled to appeal in a *reductio* of coherentism.¹

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Reference

Stoneham, T. 2007. A *reductio* of coherentism. *Analysis* 67: 254–57.

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