

Coherence, First-Personal Deliberation, and Crossword Puzzles

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Abstract: What is the place of coherence, or structural rationality, in good first-personal deliberation? According to Kolodny (2005), considerations of coherence are irrelevant to good first-personal deliberation. When we deliberate, we should merely care about the reasons or evidence we have for our attitudes. So, considerations of coherence should not show up in deliberation. In response to this argument, Worsnip (2021) argues that considerations of coherence matter for how we structure deliberation. For him, we should treat incoherent combinations of attitudes as off-limits in deliberation. Some important questions are left unanswered by both camps. What do we mean by considerations of coherence “showing up” in first-personal deliberation? How do we interpret the divide between reasons-responsiveness and coherence? How should we interpret cases in which considerations of coherence interact with other norms or requirements? In this paper, I show how Haack’s (1993) crossword puzzle analogy sheds light on these questions. Also, the crossword puzzle analogy allows us to evaluate Kolodny’s objection and identify promising avenues for future research.

Keywords: foundherentism, epistemic justification, evidential support, coherence, structural rationality

Suppose Luke has a decisive reason to believe that it is not safe to walk on Quincy street (say, he knows that there is a terrifying flock of turkeys on Quincy street). However, he believes that it is safe to walk on Quincy street. There is a specific sense in which Luke is irrational. That is, Luke is irrational *in the substantive sense*. He does not respond correctly to the epistemic reasons he has. Substantive rationality requires of agents that they respond correctly to their reasons.¹

Now, suppose Luke believes that it is safe to walk on Quincy street, and he also believes that it is unsafe to walk there. Here, Luke is also irrational, but in a different way. Luke still fails to respond correctly to his reasons. After all, he has a decisive reason not to believe one of these propositions. However, his attitudes are also in tension with each other. This is because Luke also violates some putative *structural* requirements of rationality. Structural requirements of

¹ See, e.g., Kiesewetter (2017) and Lord (2018).

rationality are also sometimes called requirements of coherence.² They prohibit inconsistent combinations of beliefs or intentions, or akratic combinations of attitudes, and the like.³ Here is a partial list of putative structural requirements of rationality discussed in the literature:

Inter-Level Coherence. Rationality requires that, if A believes that he or she has decisive evidence to believe P, then A believes P.⁴

Practical Consistency. Rationality requires that, if A intends to ϕ , A does not intend not to ϕ .⁵

Belief Consistency. Rationality requires that, if A believes that P, then A does not believe $\sim P$.⁶

Instrumental Principle. Rationality requires that, if A intends to ϕ , and A believes that ψ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing, then A intends to ψ .⁷

Many philosophers and epistemologists try to determine whether non-evidential considerations are relevant to the norm of belief (e.g., what we are required to believe, what we have a reason to believe, or how we should deliberate when forming and revising beliefs). Naturally, the most discussed non-evidential considerations that could be relevant for belief are *pragmatic reasons*.⁸ That said, the debate is not limited to pragmatic reasons for belief. Considerations of coherence are a good example of non-evidential norms that could govern belief. Specifically, one could argue that our beliefs must satisfy certain structural requirements of rationality, like Inter-Level Coherence or Belief Consistency, and that this demand can't be reduced to what the evidence "supports."

Do we fall under an obligation to satisfy the structural requirements of rationality? At least, do we have a reason to be structurally rational? Philosophers such as Kolodny (2005; 2007;

2 In accordance with Worsnip's (2018a, 2021) terminology, I use the expression "requirement of coherence" as a synonym of "structural requirement of rationality." I will say more on this terminological choice in section 1. See Daoust (2023, sect. 3) on the relationship between coherence and structural rationality more generally.

3 See, e.g., Broome (2013), Kolodny (2005; 2007; 2008a; 2008b), and Worsnip (2018a; 2018b; 2019; 2021). Putative structural requirements can be found in the literature on the normativity of rationality, but also in decision theory and in formal epistemology. See, e.g., Pettigrew (2016).

4 See, e.g., Broome (2013, sec. 9.5), Kolodny (2005), and Worsnip (2018a) on different formulations of Inter-Level Coherence.

5 See, e.g., Broome (2013, 156) and Kolodny (2008).

6 See, e.g., Broome (2013, sec. 9.2), Kolodny (2007), and Easwaran and Fitelson (2015).

7 See, e.g., Brunero (2009), Broome (2013, sec. 9.4), Kiesewetter (2017, chap. 10), Lord (2018, chap. 2), and Kolodny (2005) on the Instrumental Principle.

8 See, e.g., Papineau (2013), McCormick (2014), Reisner (2008; 2009; 2018), Rinard (2019), and Schmidt (2022).

2008a; 2008b) have argued that structural rationality is not normative. Kolodny has raised three important objections against the normativity of structural requirements:

- (1) *Bootstrapping and the scope of structural requirements* (Kolodny 2005, §1). Some requirements of structural rationality seem to be narrow-scope. However, narrow-scope requirements lead to a problematic type of bootstrapping. This lends support against the normativity of structural requirements;
- (2) *The reasons and value problem* (Kolodny 2005, §2; Kolodny 2007). A structurally rational agent can be perfectly wrong or unreasonable. There does not seem to be a privileged connection between structural rationality and value (or reasons). If structural requirements are not conducive of reasons or value, it is unclear why we should care about them;
- (3) *The problem of good first-personal deliberation* (Kolodny 2005, §3). In the debate on the normativity of structural rationality, the notions of permission and obligation that matter have to do with good first-personal deliberation. However, considerations of structural rationality (or coherence) are irrelevant to good first-personal deliberation.

The first two problems have been addressed by many philosophers.⁹ The third problem, however, has received less attention.¹⁰ This paper focuses on the third problem. I will make two claims. First, I argue that recent discussions of this objection leave many important questions unanswered, namely: What counts as considerations of coherence “*showing up*” in first-personal deliberation; how we should interpret the *divide* between reasons-responsiveness and coherence; and how we should interpret cases in which considerations of coherence show up in first-personal deliberation along with other considerations. The possible answers to these questions matter for how we can interpret and solve Kolodny’s third objection.

Second, I show how a central example in the literature on epistemic justification helps us partially answer these three questions. I focus on Susan Haack’s (1993) crossword puzzle

9 See, e.g., Broome (2007), Brunero (2010), Fink (2018), Lord (2014), Schpall (2013), and Titelbaum (2015) on issues surrounding the scope of rational requirements. See, e.g., Mildenerger (2019) and Wedgwood (2017) on the reasons and value problem. See also de Bona and Staffel (2018), Joyce (1998) and Pettigrew (2016) on dominance arguments in favour of some putative structural requirements, like Probabilism. See Thorstad (forthcoming) on how, for non-ideal agents, coherence can come at the cost of accuracy.

10 With the exception of a detailed discussion in Worsnip (2021).

example. Haack is not primarily interested in good first-personal deliberation, but her observations are helpful to clarify Kolodny's argument. Specifically, the crossword puzzle analogy allows us to see interesting ways in which considerations of coherence can show up in good first-personal deliberation. This allows us to partially evaluate Kolodny's third objection.

In section 1, I present Kolodny's and Worsnip's views. In section 2, I present three important questions that are left unanswered by both camps. In section 3, I summarize Haack's defense of foundherentism and the crossword puzzle analogy. In section 4, I analyze how Haack's view can help us make progress in the debate, by clarifying how considerations of coherence can show up in first-personal deliberation, how we should interpret the divide between reasons-responsiveness and coherence, and how the interactions between coherence requirements and other considerations matter. This leads me, in section 5, to partially evaluate Kolodny's objection and identify promising avenues for future research.

To be clear: My goal is not to figure out whether Haack's foundherentism is plausible. This would go well beyond the project of this paper. I am interested in foundherentism because it is an intuitive and well articulated account of epistemic justification that relies, in part, on considerations of coherence. Analyzing this theory of justification will allow us to make some interesting observations, like the following ones:

- (1) Coherence can have many different faces in first-personal deliberation. For instance, it can show up implicitly through epistemic justification;
- (2) Coherence might be difficult to neatly separate from evidence-responsiveness;
- (3) Considerations of coherence can make perfect sense, in first-personal deliberation, when they show up along with other things;
- (4) If we want to deny (1) to (3), we need to assume that considerations of coherence are *entirely irrelevant* to our accounts of justification, reasons, or evidential support. While this assumption could be right, it is fairly strong and goes well beyond Kolodny's third objection.

So, we can disagree with Haack's foundherentism. Yet, her view allows us to better grasp the above claims and make progress in active debates on the normativity of coherence.

1. The Place of Coherence in First-Personal Deliberation

In this section, I present a charitable reconstruction of Kolodny's (2005) third challenge concerning the relationship between structural rationality and good first-personal deliberation (§1.1). Then, I present Worsnip's (2021) solution to the problem (§1.2).

Before we start, a methodological clarification: The vocabulary used in this debate has slightly evolved since the publication of "Why Be Rational?" in 2005. What Kolodny calls "subjective rationality" is now typically referred to as "structural rationality," or "requirements of coherence." Accordingly, Worsnip often refers to the putative requirement of "Inter-Level Coherence," even if this expression is unheard of in Kolodny's work.¹¹ Also, Kolodny uses the expression "state-given reason" to refer to considerations that shows that having an attitude would be good, but not in a way that is related to its object. Worsnip and others typically use the expression "wrong kind of reason" to refer to these considerations (or something in the ballpark). For simplicity, I will stick to Worsnip's terminology throughout the paper. I hope this eases the reader's job.

1.1. A Charitable Reconstruction of Kolodny's Challenge

For Kolodny, first-personal deliberation should be sensitive to reasons. For instance, I should form the intention to ϕ because my reasons support ϕ -ing. What kind(s) of reasons could considerations of coherence be? For Kolodny, if there were reasons to be coherent, they would be reasons of the "wrong kind." That is, these reasons would not recommend an attitude by saying something about its object. The fact that you will give me money to believe that Donald is smart might be a reason to believe it, but it's not a reason that supports the *conclusion* that Donald is smart, or that makes it more likely that Donald is smart. Call this a "wrong kind of reason." Similarly, if the reason not to believe P and disbelieve P simultaneously is that this combination of beliefs is incoherent, this kind of reason doesn't say anything about the object of my beliefs. That is, it doesn't say anything about the truth of P (or \sim P). So, facts like "this combination of beliefs is incoherent" are, at best, wrong kinds of reasons.

11 Inter-Level Coherence is similar to what Kolodny calls "B+" (Kolodny 2005, 521).

Kolodny then says that there are no wrong kinds of reasons for belief. For him, this is a consequence of the view according to which we should be able to reason with the reasons we have. However, considerations of the wrong kind can't show up in reasoning for having a belief. This is so, because we can't reason to a doxastic attitude from the recognition of a wrong kind of reason (Kolodny 2005, 550). Of course, Kolodny acknowledges that "people sometimes do form beliefs as a causal consequence of entertaining" wrong kinds of reasons (ibid.). But these beliefs are not related to wrong kinds of reasons "as links in a single chain of reasoning." (ibid.) Thus, there are no reasons of the wrong kind for belief.

If this is correct, then at least with respect to doxastic deliberation, considerations of coherence have no place in good first-personal deliberation. They can't be reasons of the right kind, and they can't be reasons of the wrong kind.

Now, since the publication of "Why Be Rational?" in 2005, the claim that there are no reasons of the wrong kind for belief has been widely challenged on various grounds (see, e.g., Reisner 2009, Papineau 2013, McCormick 2014, and Rinard 2019. See Schmidt 2022 for a reply). And so, it is a live possibility that there are reasons of the wrong kind for belief. Suppose there can be reasons of the wrong kind for belief. Where does that leave us with respect to Kolodny's objection?

Worsnip offers a charitable reconstruction of the objection that avoids this possible caveat. Even if there were wrong kinds of reasons for belief, considerations of coherence would not fit the description of these reasons. As Worsnip says:

There is a challenge here [with the suggestion that considerations of coherence are, at best, reasons of the wrong kind].... the paradigmatic wrong-kind reasons for believing P are those that show believing P to be valuable (for example, cases where one is offered a large sum of money to believe P). But it isn't clear that it is (especially) valuable to have coherent attitudes, at least not intrinsically or in all cases. So coherence considerations seem to fit neither the mold of right-kind reasons, nor the mold of wrong-kind reasons. (Worsnip 2021, 6)

Thus, the reconstructed argument goes as follows: Considerations of coherence are, at best, wrong kinds of reasons. But it is implausible that considerations of coherence are reasons of the wrong kind. This is so, because having coherent attitudes is not particularly valuable. So,

considerations of coherence fit neither the mold of reasons of the wrong kind, nor the mold of reasons of the right kind.

Kolodny also gives another argument against the claim that considerations of coherence should show up in first-personal deliberation. Very roughly, Kolodny claims that, once we take our reasons into account in first-personal deliberation, considerations of coherence become *superfluous*. Here is a simple example illustrating this. Suppose that you have conclusive evidence to believe P. Suppose also that you (correctly) believe that it would be structurally irrational for you not to believe P. Since you have conclusive evidence to believe P, you may believe P. And once you form a belief in response to your evidence, the fact that you believe that it would be structurally irrational for you not to believe P has *nothing to add to your deliberation*. Good deliberation starts and ends with the reasons (or evidence) one has. Kolodny says:

If he then goes on to form the belief that P..., he does so on the grounds of the evidence he believes there is, not on the grounds of his recognition that... it would be [structurally] irrational of him not to believe that P. This second reason would seem superfluous from his point of view.... What could the thought that [structural] rationality requires it add? (Kolodny 2005, 547)

Now, why think that responsiveness to superfluous considerations is a problem in first-personal deliberation? Consider the following cases. A student is solving a logic problem. She finds a proof for a theorem, and she takes a credence of 1 in the proposition “the theorem is sound.” Then, a logic professor tells her that the theorem is sound. The professor’s testimony counts in favour of the conclusion “the theorem is sound.” But this testimony is superfluous for her, since she already has a proof of the theorem. Or suppose a juror has to determine whether the defendant is guilty. In the morning, five witnesses say that the defendant was at a bar at 10PM. Then, in the afternoon, ten other witnesses say exactly the same thing. The first five testimonies lead the juror to believe that the defendant was not at the crime scene that night. The next ten testimonies were superfluous: By noon, the juror already believed that the witness was at a bar, and not at the crime scene.

In cases like this, superfluous considerations show up in first-personal deliberation. Even if you have a proof that the theorem is sound, there is nothing wrong with listening to a logic professor telling you that the theorem is sound. Even if you are already convinced that the

defendant was not at the crime scene, there is nothing wrong with listening to ten other witnesses telling you this. So, in general, we have no problem with superfluous considerations showing up in first-personal deliberation. Why make an exception for coherence?

Once again, Worsnip makes a useful suggestion for how we can interpret Kolodny's argument. He says:

[T]o say that I have two reasons to believe P – first, the fact that my evidence decisively supports believing P, and second, the fact that, since I believe that my evidence decisively supports believing P, believing P would make me coherent – seems to be engaging in an illicit kind of “double-counting”. Again, assuming that the first, evidential consideration is a reason to believe P, this suggests that the second, coherence consideration is not a second, additional reason to believe P. (Worsnip 2021, 6)

So, the problem is not merely that considerations of coherence are superfluous. Rather, it is that, in first-personal deliberation, taking into account both considerations of coherence and reasons would be illicit double-counting. That is, taking into account considerations of coherence in deliberation would be some sort of *error* concerning the weight we give to certain putative reasons.

In view of the foregoing, here is how we can summarize the challenge from first-personal deliberation:

(P1) If considerations of coherence are normative, then they should show up in first-personal deliberation.

(P2) Considerations of coherence should not show up in first-personal deliberation:

(P2A) Reasons should show up in first-personal deliberation. Now, suppose that, in addition to responding to their reasons, agents also took considerations of coherence into account in first-personal deliberation. Then, they would do *problematic double-counting*.

(P2B) Reasons can either be of the “right kind” or of the “wrong kind.” Putative reasons to be coherent are not reasons of the “right kind.” Accordingly, if there were such reasons, they would be of the “wrong kind.” However, reasons of the wrong kind usually have to do with the practical value of having some attitudes. Having coherent

combinations of attitudes is not necessarily valuable. So, putative reasons of coherence fit neither the mold of reasons of the wrong kind, nor the mold of reasons of the right kind.

(C) So, considerations of coherence are not normative.

1.2. Worsnip's Response to the Challenge

Worsnip grants that there is a limited sense in which considerations of coherence should not show up in our deliberation for or against specific attitudes. When I deliberate correctly about whether to believe P, what should come to my mind are the reasons supporting P, and the reasons counting against P (and not whether it is coherent, for me, to believe P). However, he thinks that there is more to good first-personal deliberation than that. Considerations of coherence matter for structuring deliberation in certain ways (Worsnip 2021, §5).

His argument roughly goes as follows. An important step in deliberation consists in identifying which options are legitimate, or available to us. For instance, when I need to decide how I will spend my day, I first identify the options I have, like: Spend time with Maria, go to the park with my friends, etc. Then, I analyze the reasons for and against each of these options. Here is a simplified way to represent these different steps of deliberation:

Step 1: Identify a set of available or legitimate options $\{O_1, O_2, \dots, O_n\}$,

Step 2: Identify the reasons for or against each option in $\{O_1, O_2, \dots, O_n\}$,

Step 3: Choose a reasonable option in $\{O_1, O_2, \dots, O_n\}$.

Worsnip argues that considerations of coherence matter at Step 1 (*ibid.*). That is, considerations of coherence will lead us to exclude structurally irrational options from $\{O_1, O_2, \dots, O_n\}$. These options are “off-limits,” and thus are precluded from deliberation at Step 1. Suppose, once again, that you need to decide how to spend your day. One combination of options could be: “Go to the park and do not go to the park.” However, this combination of options is incoherent. So, the combination “Go to the park and do not go to the park” should be excluded from the options you consider. You should treat it as off-limits.

Thus, Worsnip's argument allows us to make sense of Kolodny's intuitions and objections. Considerations of coherence should not show up in the identification of reasons for or against each option in $\{O_1, O_2, \dots, O_n\}$. This is, in essence, Kolodny's worry. But for Worsnip, the identification of reasons for and against our options is just *one aspect* of first-personal deliberation. Worsnip's point is that there is more to first-personal deliberation than just weighing the reasons for and against having some attitudes. Considerations of coherence matter for identifying the legitimate options we have.

2. Some Questions Left Unanswered by Both Camps

As we just saw, both parties in this dispute agree on certain things. Minimally, Kolodny and Worsnip agree on what I'll call the Common Ground:

Common Ground. Considerations of coherence should not show up in the identification of reasons (or evidence) for or against the options we have. This is so, because the fact that having some attitudes would be incoherent, or structurally irrational, is not a good reason not to have these attitudes.

Kolodny and Worsnip disagree on whether the Common Ground lends support against the normativity of coherence. Worsnip thinks that the Common Ground is compatible with the normativity of coherence. Kolodny doesn't.

However, the Common Ground calls for a closer inspection. In this section, I present three issues that need to be clarified concerning the Common Ground. These issues matter for how we can interpret and solve Kolodny's objection.

2.1. *The Faces of Coherence*

First, what do we mean by considerations of coherence "showing up" in deliberation? Kolodny and Worsnip focus on propositions like "believing P and disbelieving P simultaneously would be incoherent," or "believing P and disbelieving P simultaneously would violate a structural requirement of rationality." But is it the only way that considerations of coherence can come to an agent's mind in first-personal deliberation?

In many important philosophical traditions, considerations of coherence are justified, or vindicated, by other criteria. For instance, in pragmatist Bayesian epistemology, requirements of coherence are the consequence of sure-losses arguments. These arguments roughly say that agents should be coherent, because being incoherent entails a problematic vulnerability to exploitation (i.e., Dutch Books, Money Pumping, etc.).¹² So, for the pragmatist, the central criterion justifying coherence is *anti-exploitation*. More recently, some purely epistemic arguments in favour of coherence say that incoherent agents have dominated combinations of credences—that is, combinations of attitudes that are epistemically worse off than others at every possible world.¹³ So, in these “epistemic” arguments, the central criterion justifying coherence is *non-dominance*.

If we take these traditions seriously, then it seems that considerations of coherence can show up under different faces in first-personal deliberation. Consider the following cases. Neil loves to bet on the outcome of presidential elections in the United States. He has a credence of 0.9 in the proposition “Clinton will win” and a credence of 0.2 in “Clinton will not win.” His betting odds reflect his credences. He goes on a bookie website for U.S. elections. However, when placing bets, Neil realizes that he is vulnerable to a Dutch Book. “This is a bad sign,” he thinks. This leads Neil to revise his credences in “Clinton will win” and “Clinton will not win.” Similarly, suppose Julia is a convinced epistemic consequentialist. She thinks that epistemic norms aim at maximizing expected accuracy. She simultaneously believes that Clinton will win and that Clinton will not win. However, Julia comes to the realization that this combination of beliefs is dominated—that is, she would be better off to suspend judgment on whether Clinton will win at every possible world. “This is a bad sign,” she thinks. Julia thinks that, at some point, she should re-evaluate whether Clinton will win. In the meantime, the least she can do is suspend judgment on whether Clinton will win.

In the above situations, what shows up in first-personal deliberation are propositions like “I have combinations of attitudes that are vulnerable to exploitation,” or “I have dominated combinations of attitudes.” Neil and Julia do not explicitly refer to considerations of coherence in

12 See Davidson, McKinsey, and Suppes (1955) and de Finetti (1937; 1974).

13 See, e.g., de Bona and Staffel (2018), Easwaran and Fitelson (2015), Joyce (1998), and Pettigrew (2016).

their deliberation. So, one could say that considerations of coherence do not show up in their deliberation. However, anti-exploitation and non-dominance are the *grounds on which* we justify norms of coherence. These considerations come to their minds because they are incoherent. So, it seems that considerations of coherence implicitly show up in their first-personal deliberation. Neil and Julia do not refer to the concept of coherence explicitly, but they refer to criteria that are closely related to the prohibition of incoherence.¹⁴

To make a long story short, Kolodny and Worsnip agree that considerations of coherence should not “show up” in the identification of reasons (or evidence) for the options we have. But it’s unclear what that means exactly. In the above cases, it’s unclear whether considerations of coherence “showed up.” So, the first thing we need to clarify is this:

Q1. What do we mean, exactly, by considerations of coherence “showing up” in first-personal deliberation? Or: When we deliberate, what forms can considerations of coherence take?

2.2. *The Clean Divide Between Evidence-Responsiveness and Coherence*

The Common Ground relies on a sharp distinction between being requirements of responsiveness to the evidence and requirements of coherence. But depending on what “evidence” means, there might be no sharp distinction between the two. Here is why.

Suppose that one’s belief that P is part of one’s evidence only if one’s belief that P is justified.¹⁵ Now, what is justification, exactly? According to a long tradition in ethics and epistemology, justification is, in part, a matter of the *coherence* between an agent’s attitudes (e.g., Amaya 2015; Audi 2015, 154-58; BonJour 1985, 1999; Davidson 2001; Ekstrom 1993; Lewis 1946, 338; Thagard 2002). Here, “coherent attitudes” can mean “mutual support among our

14 Here is an objection against this suggestion. The debate on the place of coherence in first-personal deliberation usually revolves around reasons “of the right kind.” Exploitation and dominance are about the *value* of having certain attitudes. Accordingly, these considerations seem closer to reasons of the *wrong* kind. So, it seems that my examples miss the target. My response to this objection goes as follows. At this point in my argument, I merely want to point out that there is an ambiguity with the idea that coherence “doesn’t show up” in first-personal deliberation. That is, there is an ambiguity worth clarifying concerning the faces of coherence in first-personal deliberation. Also, the examples pertaining to epistemic justification, explored in sections 3 and 4, won’t be about the value of having attitudes.

15 This claim is compatible with the common assumption that one’s evidence is one’s knowledge. If E=K, then an unjustified proposition can’t be part of one’s evidence (assuming, of course, that knowledge entails justification). Thus, one’s belief that P is part of one’s evidence only if one’s belief that P is justified. See also footnote 18.

attitudes,” but it can also mean something logically weaker, like “attitudes that are consistent with each other” (more on this point in section 3). Of course, perhaps there is more to justification than mere coherence. For instance, if you accept a weak form of foundationalism about justification, you think that there is more to justification than mere coherence. But in various intellectual traditions, justification is *in part* a matter of coherence.

If these accounts of justification are correct, then it is unclear how we can neatly distinguish considerations of coherence from responsiveness to evidence. The Common Ground says that we should deliberate with our evidence. But if having evidence is related to justification, and justification is, in part, a matter of coherence, then it appears that responsiveness to the evidence and considerations of coherence are related. So, the next question we need to address is this:

Q2. Should we accept a clean divide, in first-personal deliberation, between (i) norms of responsiveness to the evidence and (ii) norms of coherence?

2.3. The Issue of Interactions

Another thing that calls for clarifications concerns the interactions between norms of coherence and other norms. To give some context, consider the following case. Suppose Stephen presents his work in progress to his thesis advisor. He presents a new hypothesis that he thinks is worth investigating. His supervisor says that the hypothesis appears to be incoherent with various known scientific observations. They debate whether the science is consistent with Stephen’s hypothesis.

We’ve all had discussions like the one between Stephen and his advisor, where we try to figure out what is coherent with what we know. Considerations of coherence show up explicitly in this case. Yet, these considerations do not show up alone. Stephen is not merely trying to be coherent. Rather, he is trying to be coherent with what scientists *know*.

Someone could object that “coherence with what we know” is evidence-responsiveness in disguise, and that I am shifting the discussion. We are no longer concerned with pure structural rationality, or structural rationality in isolation from other requirements. Since we depart from pure structural rationality, the example is irrelevant. I have two responses to this objection. First,

we could make the same point with other (non-factive) attitudes. Stephen could care about coherence with common scientific assumptions. These assumptions could turn out to be false. Science is not infallible. Yet, Stephen might still care about being coherent with these assumptions, because some of them are likely to be true. Formulating an hypothesis that is coherent with various common assumptions increases robustness, understood as the insensitivity to strong background assumptions or points of departure. The point I am trying to make is that coherence can show up along with other things. Perhaps we care about coherence, but only when this requirement is in interaction with other desiderata. Second, I think we need to deconstruct the central place that *pure* structural rationality, or structural rationality *in isolation from other requirements*, takes in this debate. Perhaps structural rationality is normative, but in a way that can't be separated from other desiderata (I'll say more on this suggestion in section 4, when addressing the methodological objection). We need to be open to the possibility that the normativity of structural rationality is inseparable from other requirements.

The debate between Kolodny and Worsnip seems to presuppose this: In first-personal deliberation, considerations of coherence are especially problematic when they show up alone. For example, just thinking “believing that P and disbelieving P simultaneously is inconsistent” doesn't seem to give us a reason of the right kind to avoid this combination of attitudes. However, when we try to form attitudes that are coherent *with our knowledge*, or with common assumptions, the situation appears to be different. In these cases, it seems that considerations of coherence could be reasons of the right kind.

Thus, these observations raise the following question:

Q3. Could it be that considerations of coherence should show up in good first-personal deliberation, but along with other things? That is, could “legitimate” considerations of coherence be intertwined with other considerations?

2.4. Taking Stock

If we want to make progress concerning the objection from first-personal deliberation, we need to clarify at least three things: What counts as considerations of coherence “*showing up*” in first-personal deliberation; how we should interpret the *divide* between reasons-responsiveness and coherence; and how we should interpret cases in which considerations of coherence show up in

first-personal deliberation *along with other considerations*. In the next two sections, I present and analyze Haack's (1993) crossword puzzle example. This will allow us to give partial answers to the three above questions.

3. Crossword Puzzles and the Structure of Justification

In *Evidence and Inquiry* (1993), Haack is concerned with the debate, in theories of epistemic justification, between coherentism and foundationalism. For coherentists, epistemic justification is a matter of the relations between our attitudes (e.g., beliefs and credences). Most coherentists think that, in order to be justified, one's attitudes should mutually support each other (Haack 1993, chap. 3). The more an agent's attitudes mutually support each other, the more the agent is justified. This view also presupposes that our attitudes satisfy some minimal coherence requirements, such as avoiding to believe P and disbelieve P simultaneously (Haack 1993, 17).

Foundationalists endorse a different structure of epistemic justification. For them, we have some basic attitudes, like experiences, that are the ultimate grounds of justification. They are the foundation of all our justified beliefs. That is, our other attitudes are justified in virtue of being based on these basic attitudes (Haack 1993, 11-16). For instance, my belief that P might be justified by my experience that Q, and my experience that Q is part of the ultimate grounds for my justified attitudes.

Haack raises various objections against pure coherentism and pure foundationalism (Haack 1993, chaps. 2-3). Yet, her own account of epistemic justification combines some aspects of coherentism and foundationalism. For Haack, justification is in a part a matter of the coherence between one's attitudes. But she argues that this is compatible with thinking that some basic attitudes, like experiences, are grounds for the justification of our beliefs. She simply denies that experience is the *exclusive* source of justification.¹⁶ She says:

16 A couple of remarks concerning the secondary literature on Haack's view: See Peels (2016) on a problem for applying Haack's view to scientific warrant. See Atkinson and Peijnenburg (2010) on foundherentism and the truth-conduciveness of coherence. Some deny that Haack's foundherentism is significantly different from weak foundationalism. See, e.g., Haack (1997), BonJour (1997), Ruppert et al. (2016), Shogenji (2001), and Tramel (2008) on this issue. I remain neutral on this issue. What matters, for present purposes, is that Haack's theory of epistemic justification has partly to do with coherence.

The goal is an explication of epistemic justification which conforms to the [following] desiderata...: to allow the relevance of experience to empirical justification (which will require an articulation of the interplay of causal and evaluative aspects); and to allow pervasive mutual support among beliefs (which will require an account of the difference between legitimate mutual support and objectionable circularity). (Haack 1993, 73)

For illustration purposes, consider how we do crossword puzzles. When we do crossword puzzles, our individual answers are based on clues. We wouldn't put "ruby" in 4 across if we didn't have a clue supporting this answer, like "she's a jewel." However, there are other considerations that we take into account when we do crossword puzzles. For instance, suppose that 4 across and 3 down intersect (say, the second letter of 4 across is the second letter of 3 down). So, my various answers are subject to a "coherence constraint." If my answer to 3 down is "put," then the second letter of 4 across will be "u." So, for each of the answers we put in the crossword puzzle, we consider two things:

1. The clue we have for the individual answer;
2. The match, or mismatch, between a possible answer and the other ones.

The clues are analogous to brute facts or experiences. They provide basic justification for each individual answers in the crossword puzzle. However, the clues are, on their own, underdetermined. Distinct incompatible answers are compatible with the clue. If we only cared about the clues we have, we wouldn't go very far for solving the crossword puzzle. The (mis)match between our answers is analogous to considerations of coherence. However, the criterion of (mis)match between our answers is also underdetermined. There are many different matching answers in a crossword grid. Also, filling the grid with words without considering the clues we have would be an awful way to finish the crossword puzzle. The magic happens once we figure out the answers to a crossword puzzle in accordance with clues *and* considerations of (mis)match. Combining these two considerations allow us to successfully finish the crossword puzzle.

For Haack, epistemic justification is like doing crossword puzzles. Experience is indispensable for justification, but it underdetermines the beliefs we should form. There is more to justification than just forming beliefs in accordance with our experiences. Considerations of

coherence are too weak, *on their own*, to provide justification for our beliefs. But once we combine the two, we can get the right picture of justification.

Haack is primarily concerned with the nature of epistemic justification. She is not concerned with the norms of good first-personal deliberation.¹⁷ But her observations are relevant to how we should deliberate. On a plausible view about first-personal deliberation, the attitudes that matter in first-personal deliberation are *justified*.¹⁸ Since Haack proposes a theory of justification, her thesis is relevant for how we should conduct first-personal deliberation.

Once again, just think of the crossword puzzle example. This example allows us to see interesting ways in which considerations of coherence can play a role in our deliberation. Suppose you just finished a crossword puzzle. You want to make sure that your answers are correct, and so you revise them one by one. You answered “ruby” in 4 across. Part of your revision is to make sure that this answer fits with the clue you have. That is, “ruby” in 4 across is a good answer partly because your clue, for 4 across, is “she’s a jewel.” But your revision is also sensitive to other factors, like the relations among your various answers. For instance, you might think that “ruby” is a good answer in 4 across because it is compatible with your answer in 3 down. Here, you care about the relations between your various answers.

There seems to be nothing wrong with revising your answers like this. Your revision process is conducive of knowledge. And yet, considerations of coherence seem to show up, at least implicitly, in such a process (after all, you are looking for answers that “fit together”).

Some might think that foundherentism is irrelevant for understanding structural rationality. Foundherentism is primarily interested in a specific notion of coherence—namely, mutual support. Structuralists about rationality are interested in a logically weaker notion. Requirements of structural rationality calling for the mutual support among one’s attitudes are

17 In *Evidence and Inquiry*, the notion of deliberation only appears once, on p. 178.

18 See, e.g., Feldman (1988) and Gibbons (2013). See Schroeder (2011) on the various explanations of the justification condition on having evidence. Some authors go a step further and argue that the attitudes that matter in deliberation are the ones we are in a position to know. For instance, you should deliberate with your evidence, and your evidence is your knowledge (or the propositions you are in a position to know). Call this the Factive View. Since knowledge entails justification, the Factive View entails that the attitudes that matter in first-personal deliberation are justified. See, e.g., Kieseewetter (2017), Littlejohn (2012), Lord (2018), and Williamson (2002).

unheard of.¹⁹ So, why think that foundherentism is relevant for debates on the normativity of structural rationality?

I have a couple of reactions to this worry. First, we need to make a distinction between the issues surrounding the exact nature of coherence and its place for epistemic justification. Haack thinks that coherence has to do with mutual support (Haack 1993, 1). However, her view says that the relations between the combinations of attitudes we have matter for epistemic justification. Structural rationality generally has to do with the (mis)match between certain combinations of attitudes. So, even if she thinks that coherence is somehow related to mutual support, her point generalizes to requirements of structural rationality. Second, for Haack, mutual support is not the only coherence relation between our attitudes that matter. The satisfaction of minimal coherence conditions, like the ones discussed in the literature on structural rationality, is also an important aspect of foundherentism (*ibid.*, 25, 79). So, the study of foundherentism is relevant for understanding what kind of role structural requirements of rationality can play in a theory of justification.

4. Crossword Puzzles and the Debate on the Place of Coherence in Deliberation

The crossword analogy helps us shed light on the three issues presented in section 2, namely: what it means for considerations of coherence to show up in deliberation; whether we should accept a clean divide between responsiveness to evidence and coherence; and whether considerations of coherence can interact with other norms or requirements. In this section, I explain why.

4.1. The Faces of Coherence

What do we mean when we say that considerations of coherence “show up” in first-personal deliberation? We already saw, in section 2.1, that coherence can show up under different forms, like an aversion to exploitation or dominance. The crossword puzzle analogy suggests that there are other ways in which considerations of coherence can manifest themselves first-personal

¹⁹ See Daoust (2023, 181).

deliberation. We want the content of *justified* beliefs to show up in first-personal deliberation.²⁰ Under the assumption that justification has something to do with the coherence between one's beliefs, then responsiveness to justified attitudes is one way in which considerations of coherence show up in first-personal deliberation.

Here is another way to put it. Suppose you are reviewing your answers to a crossword puzzle. You know that “ruby” is the right answer in 4 across. This, in turn, constrains your answer for 3 down (since 3 down and 4 across intersect). When you are asked why you know that “ruby” is the right answer in 4 across, you say this: “well, this answer fits with the clue. And the answer “ruby” does not conflict with my other answers.” These considerations lead you to know that ruby is the right answer. Your knowledge that ruby is the right answer in 4 across is based, in part, on the fact that this answer is coherent with your other answers.

So, considerations of coherence can show up implicitly in first-personal deliberation. That is, considerations of coherence might implicitly show up in responsiveness to knowledge. Naturally, agents might not mention these considerations explicitly. When we do crossword puzzles, we do not constantly tell ourselves “I need to find coherent combinations of answers.” But there are implicit ways in which these considerations can show up in first-personal deliberation.

Of course, not everyone will agree that justification involves, in part, considerations of coherence. For instance, an extreme foundationalist about justification could deny this. Still, the crossword puzzle example has the merit of revealing certain things. First, it reveals that the debate on the place of coherence in first-personal deliberation is not neutral with respect to the nature of justification. Arguably, responsiveness to knowledge or justified attitudes has an important place in first-personal deliberation. However, on various theories of justification (including coherentism, foundherentism, and weak foundationalism), being justified presupposes

²⁰ To be clear, in first-personal deliberation, we usually mention first-order facts and propositions, not that we justifiably believe those facts. When I try to figure out who will win the next election, I think of facts like “Trump might go to jail” and “Biden is not getting any younger.” I do not think of facts such as “I am justified in believing that Trump might go to jail”, and “I have conclusive evidence that Biden is not getting any younger.” So, what usually shows up in good first-personal deliberation is the content of (justified) attitudes. My contention is that, if I have no justification for believing P, then the mere fact that I believe P doesn't mean that I should deliberate from that proposition. Good deliberation sets a higher bar. Justification plays a central role in these “higher standards.”

the satisfaction of some coherence requirements. So, those who want to say that considerations of coherence have no place in first-personal deliberation face a challenge. They must tell us why various accounts of justification are mistaken. The burden of proof falls on them to show that considerations of coherence are entirely irrelevant to justification. Second, the example has the merit of showing that considerations of coherence can show up in unexpected ways in first-personal deliberation. We can disagree with Haack's foundherentism. Still, her example reveals something interesting about the possible faces of coherence in first-personal deliberation.

4.2. The Clean Divide Between Coherence and Evidence-Responsiveness

Is there a clean divide, in first-personal deliberation, between responsiveness to the evidence and coherence? The crossword puzzle analogy suggests that the divide is muddier than it seems. What is part of one's evidence, exactly? Many philosophers think that having evidence is closely related to epistemic justification. Now, how do we have access to justification? According to Haack, justification is, in part, a matter of the coherence between our attitudes. In the crossword puzzle example, my justified belief that "ruby" is the right answer in 4 across is based, in part, on the fact that the answer "ruby" does not conflict with my other answers. Since I know that "ruby" is the right answer in 4 across, this fact is part of my evidence. This means that some facts are part of my evidence *partly because* I satisfy some requirements of coherence.

Another way in which the divide is less clear than it seems concerns the relation of evidential support. We often hear that evidence-responsive agents believe what their evidence supports. For instance, John believes that P because his evidence supports believing P. But what is evidential support, exactly? Or: Which factors matter for determining what the evidence supports? The exact interpretation of the notion of "evidential support" depends on how we understand the structure of epistemic justification. As Mittag says:

[Evidential] support has to do with the structure of justification. Evidentialism may be combined with foundationalism, coherentism, a "mixed" view such as Susan Haack's foundherentism, or any other theory of the structure of justification. Each theory may be incorporated into evidentialism by understanding them as providing an account of the proper nature of epistemic support. (Mittag 2004, sect. 2.d)

Under a foundherentist account of evidential support, considerations of coherence partly determine what the evidence supports. Once again, consider the crossword puzzle analogy. Suppose you want to know the degree to which the evidence supports the answer “ruby” in 4 across. For foundherentists, the degree to which the evidence supports this answer would be a function of at least two factors, namely: (i) the clue you have in 4 across and (i) your other answers in the crossword puzzle (Haack 1993, 82). In other words, for foundherentists, degrees of evidential support are in part determined by considerations of coherence. Thus, if we unpack claims like “John’s evidence supports believing P,” considerations of coherence will show up (at least with respect to certain theories of epistemic justification).

If that is correct, then we should not accept a sharp distinction between responsiveness to the evidence and considerations of coherence. The ways we are justified, or the degree to which our evidence supports a proposition, could very well presuppose that we satisfy some coherence requirements. Again, those who deny this must show that considerations of coherence are entirely irrelevant to epistemic justification.

One could raise the following objection: The justification condition on evidence is too strong. We should accept a “low bar” account of evidence. On this account, one’s evidence is one’s beliefs. On this account of evidence, the nature of justification doesn’t matter for having evidence. My response to this objection goes as follows: This account of evidence would entail that “being responsive to one’s evidence” just means “forming and revising beliefs in accordance with one’s other beliefs.” In other words, this account of responsiveness to the evidence would be purely coherentist—all that would matter, for responsiveness to the evidence, would be the relations between one’s beliefs. So, if the objector is right, then all the more reason to reject the clean divide between responsiveness to the evidence and considerations of coherence.²¹

4.3. The Issue of Interactions

Could it be that considerations of coherence should show up in first-personal deliberation, but along with other things? In section 2.3, we saw intuitive cases suggesting that considerations of coherence might be less problematic when they show up along with other considerations. For

21 Of course, there are more general reasons to doubt that one’s evidence is one’s mere beliefs. See, e.g., Lord (2018, sec. 3.4) for an argument against “low bar” accounts of epistemic reasons.

instance, it seems fine to try to be coherent with our *knowledge*. The crossword puzzle analogy confirms this. In the crossword puzzle, considerations of coherence do not show up alone. They show up along with other considerations, such as identifying answers that are supported by the clues we have. However, the clues underdetermine the right answer. And this is why we also have recourse to considerations of coherence in our first-personal deliberation.

One could raise the following objection: Perhaps considerations of coherence sometimes come up in first-personal deliberation along with other things. However, if we analyze considerations of coherence along with these other things, we are no longer able to understand what is specific to coherence. Take the crossword puzzle example. Our goal is to determine whether we have a reason to be coherent, not whether we have a reason to be coherent *and* to respond well to the clues in our possession. Thus, analyzing considerations of coherence along with other things is a kind of “methodological” error. It refrains us from seeing clearly whether we have a reason to be *merely* coherent.

Kolodny makes a similar point. He says:

[Structural rationality] is a matter of the relations among one’s attitudes in abstraction from the reasons for them: that is, in abstraction from the facts of one’s circumstances that might actually favour a given attitude. We should not need any information about the facts of one’s circumstances in order to judge whether one is responding to the conflict in a [way that is coherent]. (Kolodny 2005, 530)

And elsewhere, he says:

It is unclear how formal coherence *in itself* could matter in one of these ways [i.e., what is likely to be true, good, or choiceworthy]. After all, formal coherence may as soon lead one away from, as toward, the true and the good. (Kolodny 2007, 231, emphasis added)

These passages suggest that, for Kolodny, we should analyze considerations of coherence in abstraction, or in isolation, from everything else.

My response to this objection goes as follows: People like Haack are not trying to justify considerations of coherence in isolation from other things. What makes foundherentism interesting is precisely that we do not separate considerations of coherence from other things. In a crossword puzzle, we come to know the correct answers because we are sensitive to the clues

we have *and* we maintain the overall coherence between our answers. We need to take these interactions into account. Otherwise, we misunderstand justification.

More generally, in theories of normativity, we can't always vindicate norms or ideals separately from each other. Just think of political ideals, like freedom, security, and equality (Wiens 2020, sec. 3). What can be said in favour of the ideal of security *alone*? Slaves can be perfectly safe. A political regime based on slavery doesn't seem particularly desirable. What can be said in favour of the ideal of equality *alone*? An extremely poor and unsafe society can be perfectly egalitarian. Being poor and in danger is undesirable. What can be said in favour of the ideal of *freedom* alone? In a Hobbesian state of nature, agents enjoy a great degree of freedom. But the Hobbesian state of nature is characterized by insecurity and misery, which are undesirable. Should we conclude, from these observations, that liberty, security and equality do not matter? Absolutely not. Our mistake here is that we have tried to justify these ideals *in isolation from each other*. This is the wrong way to proceed. The ideals of security, liberty and equality make sense together. And just as political ideals get us what we want when we combine them, considerations of coherence can get us what we want when we combine them with other norms.

So, analyzing coherence in combination with other desiderata is not a methodological mistake. The foundherentist framework is interesting precisely because of the interactions between considerations of coherence and other things. Rather, the methodological mistake is to assume that, in order to vindicate the normativity of coherence, we must isolate these considerations from everything else. This methodological choice is not neutral with respect to, e.g., the nature of epistemic justification.

To be clear: Perhaps there is no reason to be *merely* coherent, or to be coherent *in abstraction from everything else*. I am not denying this. But this is just one way among others to think about the normativity of coherence. There are other ways to vindicate the normativity of coherence, and we should not neglect them.

5. Conclusion: Is the Objection from First-Personal Deliberation Convincing?

The analysis of foundherentism allows us to grasp a number of important things in the debate on the normativity of structural rationality. It reveals a number of implicit assumptions in the objection from first-personal deliberation. For instance, the argument is convincing only if we assume that considerations of coherence are entirely irrelevant for understanding justification, reasons, or (sufficient) evidence. This is a strong assumption. It conflicts with many theories of epistemic justification, like weak foundationalism, foundherentism, and coherentism. More importantly, this tells us where we should direct our attention in future research: Once we settle the place of coherence in our accounts of justification, reasons or evidence, we will be able to figure out more clearly whether it plays a central role in first-personal deliberation.

Some epistemologists are skeptical of Haack's proposal.²² For instance, they could argue that, in the crossword example, we can treat relations between our various answers as an evidential consideration (some sort of "structural clue"). That is, in a crossword puzzle, we have clues for each individual answer, but we also have clues regarding the relations between our answers. To be clear, I am not trying to defend Haack's view here. Her arguments and examples are instrumental: They reveal what seems to be the fundamental debate concerning the normativity of coherence. The real issue, in this debate, is whether coherence plays any interesting role for evidence-responsiveness, justification or the weight of reasons.

Foundherentism also reveals some unexpected ways in which coherence can matter in first-personal deliberation. The objection from first-personal deliberation focuses on cases where agents tell themselves "having these attitudes would be incoherent," or "having these attitudes would be structurally irrational." These facts *alone* do not seem to be good reasons for or against the attitudes. But there are other ways in which considerations of coherence can matter to good first-personal deliberation. Notions of "evidential support" or "epistemic justification" are central to good first-personal deliberation. And these notions might very well involve, in part, the satisfaction of requirements of coherence.

The crossword puzzle analogy also allows us to partially evaluate the objection from first-personal deliberation. Recall the main premises on which the objection rests:

²² See footnote 16.

(P2A) Reasons should show up in first-personal deliberation. Now, suppose that, in addition to responding to their reasons, agents also took considerations of coherence into account in first-personal deliberation. Then, they would do *problematic double-counting*.

(P2B) Reasons can either be of the “right kind” or of the “wrong kind.” Putative reasons to be coherent are not reasons of the “right kind.” Accordingly, if there were such reasons, they would be of the “wrong kind.” However, reasons of the wrong kind usually have to do with the practical value of having some attitudes. Having coherent combinations of attitudes is not necessarily valuable. So, putative reasons of coherence fit neither the mold of reasons of the wrong kind, nor the mold of reasons of the right kind.

Begin with P2A. This premise presupposes that there is a neat separation between responsiveness to evidence (or reasons) and coherence. But as we saw, depending on where we stand on epistemic justification, the distinction between the two might be less clear than it seems. For instance, considerations of coherence can show up, in first-personal deliberation, in the form of a precondition on being epistemically justified. The notion of evidential support can also presuppose the satisfaction of some coherence requirements. And so, we can think that coherence shows up in first-personal deliberation without accepting a problematic type of double-counting. Considerations of coherence are not something we “add” to evidence-responsiveness. Rather, *they are incorporated in it*. Thus, if notions of epistemic justification or evidential support are, in part, determined by considerations of coherence, then P2A is off track.

As for P2B, the crossword puzzle analogy suggests that considerations of coherence can play a key role for having reasons of the right kind. Suppose that facts in one’s evidence are reasons of the right kind for belief. That is, your evidence for believing P counts in favour of believing P. As we saw in section 4, on a foundherentist account of evidential support, considerations of coherence will determine, in part, what one’s evidence supports. So, considerations of coherence can (implicitly) show up when we figure out what our evidence supports. To make a long story short: For foundherentists, reasons of the right kind can be a complex construction involving, in part, the satisfaction of requirements of coherence. That is,

considerations of coherence sometimes show up in what we call “having reasons of the right kind.”

In the end, the argument from first-personal deliberation is unconvincing on its own. It might lend support against the normativity of structural rationality, but only if we accept some background assumptions concerning, e.g., the nature of justification and evidential support. These background assumptions do much of the heavy lifting: If we stipulate that coherence is entirely irrelevant to justification and evidential support, we are one step away from denying its relevance for good first-personal deliberation. So, what we really need to figure out is whether coherence requirements are relevant for justification, reasons, evidence, or any other notion that matters in good first-personal deliberation.²³ If we want to make real progress in this debate, this is the central question we should address.

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²³ Of course, another way we can make progress in this debate is to identify vindications of the normativity of coherence that are compatible with the Common Ground (see §1.2 and §2). This is Worsnip’s strategy.

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