

Judging Coherence in the Argumentative Situation

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1. Intro: Coherence and Consistency

Things are coherent if they ‘stick together’, are connected in a specific way, and are consistent in thought. At least, these are traditional ways of understanding coherence. From the perspective of argumentation, though, this leaves open the question of what it is that sticks things together, forms the connectedness or underlies the consistency. As a logical criterion, the importance of coherence is repeatedly stressed. But treatments invariably tie it together with consistency and an avoidance of contradiction. So we need first to think about these different concepts and their relationship.

To be coherent in one’s ideas or statements is broadly to make sense, and more narrowly, to be consistent and avoid contradiction. Consistency requires remaining true to the same idea or view over the course of an argument or narrative (I use these two—argument and narrative—because they best illustrate the ideas associated with coherence). So a logical flaw like equivocation, where the meaning of a key term or phrase is changed, is a case of inconsistency. Again, to propose contradictory statements is a more serious way of not making sense. Both inconsistency and contradiction are types of incoherence, and so we might say that they are subsumed under it. Consistency, for example, is a type of coherence, but the latter involves more. It exceeds logical consistency and involves theory coherence and ‘position coherence’, where the position one puts forward must be free from inconsistencies between its parts. Michael Scriven speaks of the ideal relationship between premises and conclusions in an

argument being one of forcing the acceptance of the conclusion on the basis of the premises. The sense of “force” here is “the force of wishing to avoid contradiction, or inconsistency of a weaker kind” (1976:33).

Robert Pinto has given some thought to the question of coherence, arguing that the notion suffers from vagueness and imprecision (Pinto, 2001:65). To show this he draws on Gilbert Harman’s (1986) claim that coherence “consists in connections of intelligibility”. On these terms, one part of a view makes it intelligible to a person why some other part should be deemed true or acceptable. Here, coherence offers some kind of mutual support or confirmation between parts of a view or position. This perhaps tells us what coherence does, but not how it works; not how the parts appear intelligible. To that end, Pinto pushes the matter further. His core idea is that “reasoning takes place against the background of and on the basis of an understanding of the domain that we are reasoning about, and understanding that involves an overview of that domain as a whole” (Pinto, 2001:66). It is this “understanding” that is ultimately too vague for Pinto. In drawing his own definition of “coherence,” Pinto moves from discussions of domains to those of stories, understood as narrative wholes. These are useful correlates to argumentation because understanding narratives does involve grasping the parts of a whole and seeing them as related. He concludes: “The unifying mental grasp is the *understanding* presupposed by our interpretations of individual story items. The narrative unity is the *objective correlative* of that understanding” (2001:71). From this he derives a definition of coherence as that objective correlative of understanding; elements are coherent when they are understood.

Several ideas can be usefully drawn from this earlier work. Principally, Pinto has drawn attention to the *experience* of coherence as a kind of understanding, and has introduced “domain”

as the thing that is understood (and is in some way coherent).

In a further chapter, Pinto provides the useful example of the Socratic dialogue as being an occasion or environment in which the interlocutor's understanding of a domain is tested (2001:79), thus suggesting a way of illustrating "coherence." Indeed, we can view Socratic *elenchus* as an example of employing coherence at a rhetorical level. Some of Socrates' interlocutors see the incoherence of their reasoning as they stumble upon contradictions. Well-designed, the Socratic *elenchus* is a powerful tool to lead someone to the *experience* of their own inconsistencies. A person like Crito, for example, who believes that the just thing for Socrates to do is escape from jail, is brought through an examination of his own ideas to their contradictory—that it is not just to escape ('Crito' 50a). Incoherence is so powerful when experienced in this way that it reduces the reasoner to silence (there is nothing in my mind, says Crito). We might assume that coherence is the norm, the standard out of which we fall. But the lessons of Socrates suggest otherwise. Only the accomplished reasoner has statements which stay the same, adhere with the beliefs that guide them.

The ideas of consistency and coherence, as logical criteria, also give us the sense that coherence requires consistency in the reasoning of an argument, where no part contradicts another but the parts mutually support each other. This involves a narrow sense of "argument," as we might appreciate. And it also now involves a narrow sense of "coherence," as the previous discussion would indicate. Turning our attention to the argumentative situation requires that we expand both notions.

The narrative view of coherence is best captured in the work of Walter R. Fisher, who takes up what can be judged to be the Aristotelian insight that the human being is a story telling

animal. Humans are story-telling animals (or *homo narrans*¹) and it is this, rather than our nature as reasoning animals (according to the standards of classical rationality) that best defines rationality. Accordingly, he contrasts the “logic of reason” with what he calls “good reasons” and promotes the latter. It is the coherence (along with the fidelity) of a story which determines the rationality of a narrative. For example, probability is a matter of coherence between structure, matter and character. On these terms, coherence is, again, the degree to which the story hangs together or makes sense. It is measured in part by the structure of the story, and requires an internal or argumentative consistency. It also requires an external consistency, between this story and other stories. A narrative also requires characterological coherence which has to do with the believability of the characters. I will return to some of these ideas later. A question that may arise for us is whether this approach really pits narrative rationality against a traditional logical rationality (validity against what Fisher calls “good reasons”), or if, as the Aristotelian root would suggest, the two are much closer integrated. Also, is the ‘hanging together’ of a story a better explanation of what we mean by ‘coherence’ than anything we have seen elsewhere, from Pinto, for example?

2. Coherence in the Argumentative Situation:

A “situation” is the way in which something is placed in relation to its surroundings. With respect to coherence, we have seen Pinto focus on domains as the relevant “surroundings.” I am interested in the argumentative situation, in which an argument emerges in relation to its surroundings. The focus of much work on argumentation has been on the audience and arguer

¹Walter R Fisher (1989), *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. University of South Carolina Press.

and the relations between them, but not enough on the situation in which they meet and by virtue of which they stand in relation.² It is the situation that calls argumentative discourse into existence, and the argumentative situation will involve a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance.³

In the argumentative situation, each of the principals involved, “argument”, “arguer” and “audience”, needs to be understood in terms of the situation that binds and “creates” them. So what rhetoric scholars think of as “situational coherence” brings these features into relation with each other. But as Pinto discovered in his studies, what it is that coheres situationally, that forms the bond, is vague and imprecise.

The situation which underlies this bond of components is already rich with a history of claims and meanings, coherence must involve these background features. They rob the arguer of much of her traditionally-supposed autonomy (to control the terms of the discourse and decide her audience), since she finds these things already there and coherence would demand that she address them.

A core aspect of the argumentative situation is, to borrow from Bakhtin, “addressivity”. Utterances are addressed to someone. They assume and accommodate that audience in their very organization (and “choice”) and they include an anticipated response. This will greatly affect how we must think of “coherence,” because the concern is not simply with the consistency of a participant’s position or statement, but also (and largely) with the co-authored argument that

²In a previous paper, “The Argumentative Situation,” (NCA 2004) I have grounded the ideas related to the argumentative situation in Lloyd Bitzer’s work on the rhetorical situation, since argumentation is essentially rhetorical.

³These features reflect those of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation.

develops from this cooperation, and the different belief sets that precede it. From the perspective of “addressivity”, the arguer and audience each exists (as arguer or as audience) only in relation to other constituents of the argumentative situation. Moreover, the exchange is dynamic and so will involve change. The perspectives involved will be modified by the argumentation; the argument will develop and alter. Coherence must be a controlling factor in this modification. An argument is not an exchange of views from isolated, unaffected, positions. It is a moving exchange of engaged positions.

In terms of addressivity there seems no distinction between the audience and the ‘counter opinions’ which a discourse must consider. Like the arguer, the addressee/audience is personalized in the argument and contributes specific actual and anticipated responses to a situation which is “for them.” Here there is more than the simple accommodation of a reply and the anticipation of objections to one’s position. We can imagine here two people in dialogue, anticipating and responding in a way that makes their argument a common venture and precludes the isolation of positions, speaking back and forth across a gulf. At a deep level our social interactions assume an argumentative potential formed by the atmosphere of debates, fed from other debates, which create an anticipation of involvement in such discourses.

The argumentative situation, then, encompasses a dialogue characterized by anticipation, involvement and response, and is not simply a site of successful or failed persuasion, but of self-discovery, insight and agreement. It is a space in which we come to realize how we are always “in audience,” connected to the social world through argumentation because it is audience-forming and audience-directed. While each of us may not be specifically addressed by a particular argument, we understand what it means to be addressed, and so we understand how an

argument can be experienced.

Somewhere in the argumentative situation is an argument. But it will be an argument deeply affected by the other constituents and unlike the logical argument of our tradition. Consequently, we must also revise how we understand the coherence of this argument. We are concerned not just with the consistency of its parts but how it is placed in relation to its surroundings. The argument is alive with the meanings contributed by the argumentative situation that gives rise to it and its arguer/audience collaborators. In a very general sense, an argument is the discourse of interest that centres the argumentative situation and develops in it. But it is distinguished from its traditional namesake by its *connectedness* to the other principals of the situation.

3. Judging Coherence:

An argumentative situation may involve contradictory positions and statements. Contradiction defeats coherence. How, then, can an argumentative situation exhibit coherence? Is coherence even a desirable characteristic on these terms? Or is coherence a goal toward which participants in an argumentative situation should work, that is, a normative goal?

Let's take up these questions in turn. The first is probably the most difficult. Logical coherence requires the avoidance of contradiction. But the argumentative situation is characterized by contradictory or opposing positions, and the utterances expressing addressivity accommodate those oppositions. The sticking together or connectedness that is essential to argumentation involves contradictories.

Grice offers an idea similar to that of Bakhtin conveyed above when he expands his

maxims of Manner to include one that proposes to “Frame whatever you say in the form most suitable for any reply that would be regarded as appropriate”; or, “Facilitate in your form of expression the appropriate reply.” It is clear that one of the appropriate replies to something that you have asserted is the denial of what you say’ (1989:273). So the “framing” of the assertion can include its contradictory; its denial is facilitated. No matter how we imagine this working (I will not worry about this for the moment), it has the potential to produce a position or argument that would fail a traditional coherence test. So what it must pass is a broader test of coherence. The things that stick together are now not the propositions of one speaker, united in support of an assertion; but the positions of several speakers, united in support of agreement or resolution. What would appear as a candidate for holding them together, what they cohere around, is the goal or objective to be achieved. Argumentation has a movement, or a series of movements. It has a beginning in the way it interacts with its past and background, drawing and adapting ideas and previous understandings. It has a middle as it moves back and forth between participants. And it has an end as it moves towards a goal. It is not a goal-less activity, but has some resolution in mind, even if that is provisional, emerges during the exchanges, and still leaves things “open.” In so far as we might see the earlier types of movement justified by virtue of this last, “for the sake” of this last, it is the understanding of this goal that would measure coherence for us. Indeed, the orientation towards a goal is like the movement of a narrative towards the climax of a story.

4. Return to the Narrative:

The human is a story-telling animal, the most imitative of all the animals, and the one who

delights in imitation. But the human being is also a rational animal. What might seem distinctive, to us, about Aristotle's approach to narratives in his *Poetics* is that he *does not* distinguish it from other topics or activities that he investigates. He treats them on par, applying the same principles of investigation. Working within a conception of the world as organic and dynamic, he sees things imbued with reason and human activities like story-telling characterized by an inherent logic. Aristotle's understanding of narrative is thus guided by a principle of rationality. His striking metaphor of the animal (1450b) gives real currency to the idea of art imitating life. Art, the narrative, is alive, has a life, and follows the principles of life. Like an organism laid out on Aristotle's "laboratory table" narrative has a beginning, a middle and an end, with nothing extraneous. Its coherence arises within these natural constraints, with the beginning determined by the end, and the middle arising in relation to them. The narrative, then, is ready to be dissected and examined like any other aspect of the world. But it must conform to the standards of a logic. In this the narrative has its correlate in the Aristotelian syllogism, another coherent "text" with a beginning, middle and end, that moves towards a goal, drawn out of itself. Consider these things about the Aristotelian narrative:

1. It is audience-directed: "What is a matter of the art is the limit set by the very nature of the action, namely that the longer is always the more beautiful, provided that the unity of the whole is clearly perceived"
2. It is inherently rational: "such length as will allow a sequence of events to result in a change from bad to good fortune or from good fortune to bad in accordance with what is probable or inevitable."
3. It models the logical syllogism: "the various incidents must be so constructed that, if any part is displaced or deleted, the whole plot is disturbed and dislocated."

Any of these points could be taken up in more detail, but time forbids extending this type of

analysis. Suffice it to say that we have here a notion of narrative, and narrative coherence that is also rational in traditional terms, while at the same time rhetorical. The sense of internal structure is clear here; and it is a structure that sets its own perimeters and establish what can proceed from it. If it cannot be understood, does not follow an internal thread of rationality (probable or inevitable) or is “incomplete”, then it will lack coherence. Coherence, then, is a condition of its parts considered in relation to its end.

We can transfer this understanding to the argumentative situation, given the parallels we have seen between argument and narrative. Both are rational enterprises, but unlike in the case of Fisher’s proposal, we see a similar rationality involved in each. The narrative allows different perspectives in, different voices and characters, without losing its coherence. Likewise, the argumentative situation admits different, competing positions, contradictory in expression, but still exhibits a coherence by virtue of the relatedness and goals involved. I conclude, then, that coherence in the context of argumentation involves a grasp of the aspects of the argumentative situation in relation to the ends, and that parts are coherent insofar as they stand in relation to these ends.

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