

Comment on Niko Kolodny's 'Why be disposed to be coherent?'
Wake Forest Conference on Agency, September 2006

The idea Niko explores in this paper and rejects is this. There are various attitudes we ought to have, and various attitudes we ought not to have. Being disposed to have coherent attitudes (to be coherent, as I shall say) is part of the best way of getting to have many of these attitudes we ought to have and avoiding having many of the ones we ought not to have. So the disposition to be coherent is instrumentally beneficial in this particular way: it promotes your having the attitudes you ought to have and avoiding ones you ought not to have. That's the idea.

By 'coherence' Niko means having various relations obtain among your attitudes: intending what you believe is a necessary means to an end you intend, not having contradictory beliefs – that sort of thing. He includes as a requirement of coherence:

Belief closure: If q is a logical consequence of p , one is required (either not to believe that p or to believe that q).

This is a generous requirement; I doubt anyone would think it a good idea to be coherent to this extent. It requires you to believe Fermat's Last Theorem if you believe the axioms of arithmetic, and perhaps you shouldn't waste too much time working out difficult theorems. But we don't have to take it to that extreme. For the purposes of Niko's argument and my comment, we can restrict our attention to cases where the logical inference is easy. For those cases, at least, let's assume this is indeed a requirement of coherence.

Niko thinks the disposition to be coherent is either redundant or worse. He compares it with the disposition that he calls the disposition 'to conform to reason'. I hope he won't mind if I call it the disposition 'to conform to reasons', which I think is more accurate and less contentious. It is the disposition of a person 'to have an attitude if she has conclusive reason to have it, and not to have an attitude if she lacks sufficient reason to have it'. That is:

To conform to reasons is to have an attitude if you ought to have it, and not to have an attitude if you ought not to have it.

Niko thinks you are better off having this disposition than the disposition to be coherent, and if you have it you do not need the disposition to be coherent.

His idea is that you should be sensitive to reasons, and make your attitudes conform to those. If you do that, you will already have all the attitudes you ought to have, and not have any you ought not to have. You can't get any better off than that. So you don't need a separate disposition to be coherent.

But remember the idea Niko aims to answer is that the disposition to be coherent is part of the best means of getting to have the attitudes we ought to have. That is to say, it is part of the best way of having the disposition to conform to reasons. Actually, I'm prepared to say this more strongly: you

cannot have the disposition to conform to reasons unless you have the disposition to be coherent. That's why it's a good idea to have the disposition to be coherent. That's the idea Niko has to answer. It goes nowhere to point out that, once you've got the disposition to respond to reasons you don't separately need a disposition to be coherent. Niko recognizes that, and says it exactly correctly. He says 'It might be replied that ... a disposition to be coherent is a necessary part of any disposition to conform to reason.'

Before I come to Niko's way of responding, let me fill in a bit more detail about why I say it. Take beliefs as an example. The disposition to conform to reasons in this case is the disposition to believe a proposition if you ought to believe it and not believe it if you ought not to believe it. How can you have this disposition?

Let's assume as Niko does that you ought to believe a proposition if and only if you have conclusive evidence for it, and you ought not to believe a proposition if and only if you don't have sufficient evidence for that. Given that, here's one way you can have the disposition to conform to reasons in the case of beliefs. It can be made up of three distinct dispositions.

Three-part disposition.

- (1) The disposition to believe what you have conclusive noninferential evidence for.
- (2) The disposition to satisfy belief closure.
- (3) The disposition to believe nothing except what you are disposed to believe by either of the dispositions (1) and (2).

The noninferential evidence I'm thinking of is perceptual evidence and perhaps some other sorts, such as testimony and memory.

These three dispositions will do the job. The first will bring you to believe what you've got conclusive noninferential evidence for, the second what you've got conclusive inferential evidence for, and the third will stop you believing anything you don't have sufficient evidence for. And of course, the disposition to satisfy belief closure is part of the disposition to be coherent. So this shows how the disposition to be coherent can be part of a means to have the disposition to conform to reasons.

It doesn't show it's a necessary part. But I think it's pretty obvious that it is. The disposition to conform to reasons requires you to believe what you have conclusive inferential evidence for, without believing things you ought not to believe. But you can't possibly do that regularly without doing the inference. Suppose you have conclusive noninferential evidence for p and for if p then q (evidence from perception, memory or whatever). The first disposition will lead you to believe p and if p then q . Except perhaps in some borderline cases, you have conclusive inferential evidence for q . How can you acquire the belief in q ? If not simply by good luck, it can only be by making the inference. By making

the inference, I mean drawing the conclusion: coming to believe q on the basis of your belief that p and your belief that if p then q . (I don't mean just recognizing that q follows from p and if p then q .) You might draw the inference by explicitly reasoning it out, or through some unconscious process might lead you to believe q because you believe p and you believe if p then q . But whether conscious or unconscious, some process must operate that brings you to believe what follows from the contents of your beliefs. This is nothing other than a disposition to satisfy belief closure (no doubt for easy inference only).

What does Niko say about this? He considers a set of dispositions a bit like these, but more complicated. He points out that a negative disposition like my (3) is an essential part of the trio. Indeed it is; something has to stop you believing just anything. Niko points out that we don't want the negative disposition, whatever it is, acting against the disposition to believe what you've conclusive evidence for. When you have conclusive evidence for something, your disposition to believe it mustn't be subject to the possibility of being overwhelmed by a negative disposition. There mustn't be a battle at that point. That's surely right. So the negative disposition needs to be switched off when there's conclusive evidence for something. Then, if I've understood him right, Niko assumes the only way it can be switched off is by having some independent sensitivity of its own to the evidence, which switches it off. It would have to be sensitive to both inferential and noninferential evidence, since it has to switch off whichever type of evidence you have. So for your negative disposition to work, you've got to have, within in, sensitivity to inferential evidence. So you can't need the sensitivity that comes from belief closure – from doing the inference, as I put it.

But I can't see anything wrong with the simpler negative disposition I described: the disposition to believe nothing except what you are disposed to believe by the two positive dispositions. This disposition is automatically switched off when either of the other two come into play. It doesn't need to be switched off by any independent sensitivity.

Compare the disposition to do nothing unless you want to. Surely you can have that disposition. Wanting something is a disposition to do that thing. As soon as you want to do something, and so have a disposition to do it, that switches off your disposition not to do it. That's what happens with my negative disposition.

Does Niko offer any alternative to the triple disposition I described? How does he think you can end up believing something when you your evidence for it is inferential? How do you come to believe q when all you have is conclusive noninferential evidence for p and for if p then q ? Niko thinks there is one requirement of rationality that we should be disposed to satisfy: the one he calls

‘believed reason’. Furthermore, he thinks it plausible that this disposition is part of our actual disposition to conform to reasons. So perhaps that’s what he has in mind. An instance of believed reason is:

If one believes at t that one has conclusive reason to believe q , then one is rationally required at t to sustain or form the belief that q , going forward from t , on the basis of the content of this belief.

Perhaps it’s the disposition to satisfy believed reason that will bring you to believe q when you’ve noninferential evidence for p and for if p then q .

But for this disposition to kick in, you must first have the belief that you’ve conclusive reason to believe q . You have no noninferential evidence for that. Once again, the only way you could acquire this belief is by doing an inference. This one would be a lot more sophisticated than the inference that takes you from believing p and believing if p then q to believing q . And anyway, to do any inference you must be disposed to satisfy belief closure. So the principle of believed reason provides no alternative to that disposition

I think we have the disposition to conform to reasons, in the case of beliefs, only through the three-part disposition I described, or something like it. To be a bit grandiose for a moment, I think this is an illustration of what’s distinctive about how we work as rational creatures. It’s easy enough to acquire beliefs by noninferential evidence; you don’t have to be very smart to do that. You need the ability to have beliefs in the first place, whatever that amounts to, and some senses to pick up perceptual evidence. But to acquire beliefs through inferential evidence, you need to be able to do inferences. That requires a disposition to satisfy belief closure (to some extent at least), which Niko includes within the disposition to be coherent.

I have one other comment. Particularly towards the end of the paper, Niko says that, if you conform to reasons, a by-product will be that your attitudes will mostly be coherent. For instance, if you ought to believe p , and q follows logically from p , it’ll generally be the case that you ought to believe q . So if you have the beliefs you ought to have, you’ll believe p and q , which means you end up satisfying belief closure in this instance.

That may be so for beliefs. But remember that great swathes of our lives are underdetermined by reasons. There are lots of things you can either intend to do or not intend to do, and not come into conflict with reasons either way. The reasons leave it open.

Since this is really Michael Bratman’s point, I’ll use a variant of a Bratman example. Suppose it’s not the case that you ought to go to San Francisco and not the case that you ought not to go, but you intend to go to San Francisco anyway. To get there, you have to take either of routes 101 and 280 but it doesn’t matter which. If all you do is conform to reasons, you could perfectly well intend to go

by route 101 and also intend to go by route 280. Or you could intend to go by neither, which means (since you can't get to San Francisco without going by one or the other) you won't intend a necessary means to an end that you intend. So, even if you conform to all the reasons, you may very well be highly incoherent.

I'm not saying that's a bad thing. It does look plausible to me that being incoherent is instrumentally damaging. But I don't insist on that. You might be inclined to say it's obviously a bad thing because, with all that incoherence among your intentions, you won't get much done in your life. But then, perhaps, if you did get things done, they might be things you ought not to do. That's why I don't insist.

All I am saying is that conforming to reasons is not going to make you coherent. But you might doubt that too. You might say I've described the example wrongly. You might think that, in the case I described, you are not really conforming to reasons. If you intend to take 101 and also intend to take 280, surely that in itself is failing to conform to reasons. Maybe it is. But if it is, the reason in question is one of coherence: it's incoherent to have these contrary intentions. But Niko denies there are any reasons of incoherence. So he shouldn't agree with you.

And again, suppose you intend to go to San Francisco, but fail to intend a necessary means. Aren't you there failing to conform to reasons? Haven't you a reason to take a necessary means, if you intend an end? Well, maybe you do. But if you have, once again it's a reason of coherence. It's a reason to have your intentions properly coordinated. Again, it's one of those reasons Niko says don't exist.

Or rather, I thought so until I found Niko giving room to reasons 'to intend a means, provided one intends an end', and reasons not 'to intend an end, provided one does not intend a means', and so on (p. 15). These are apparently not reasons he disapproves of. Nevertheless they do appear to be reasons to have particular relations hold among your attitudes: for example not to have it be the case that you intend an end without intending a means. They really do seem to be reasons of coherence. So perhaps he does think reasons of coherence exist after all.

In a note, Niko says by way of explanation: 'One's failure to intend to M is functioning as an impediment: a feature of the world that prevents one's intention to E from bringing about one's E-ing'. That's right; that's the sort of thing that happens when your attitudes are incoherent. Their incoherence hinders you in getting things done. That was the idea of the instrumental argument: incoherence is instrumentally damaging, and therefore you have a reason to have the disposition of coherence. Perhaps Niko is not so much against reasons of coherence after all.

