1. INTRODUCTION

Like many others, I take it for granted that considerations of coherence, even if they are not sufficient for making a particular belief or claim credible, provide at the very least important necessary conditions for rational credibility. This chapter is about coherence as a necessary condition of rational credibility. The main idea I advance is that it isn’t possible to explicate the requisite notion of coherence solely on the bases of logic and/or recent mainstream epistemology — as, for example, Roderick Chisholm and C. I. Lewis tried to do—but that explication of that notion will require the clarification of notions which fall within the province of psychology and philosophy of mind.

In my first attempt to deal with this issue (Chapter 7 of this volume) I noted that Gilbert Harman, whose appeal to the notion of coherence is among the most prominent recent appeals, offers only a very sketchy account of that notion in Change in View. Here is the gist of what Harman says:

Coherence in a view consists in connections of intelligibility among the elements of the view. Among other things these include explanatory connections, which hold when part of one’s view make it intelligible to one why some other part should be true. In such cases one believes not only \( P \), \( Q \) and \( R \) but also \( R \) because \( P \) and \( Q \). [Harman 1986, p. 65.]

Harman’s account remains sketchy in several respects. On the one hand, it recognizes but doesn’t discuss types of coherence other than explanatory coherence. On the other hand, it leaves quite open any questions about what “explanatory connections” consist in. Finally, it also (I believe) leaves open questions about what sort of entities comprise the “elements” of a view that can exhibit “connections of intelligibility.”

In Chapter 7, I premissed that no account substantially better than Harman’s is available in the literature. But I didn’t undertake to offer a better account of coherence. Rather I argued that a more adequate account must await future developments, some of which belong to the domain of psychology. The gist of my argument was that the coherence we’re interested in is the objective correlative of understanding and that our inability to give a satisfactory account of coherence is a result of the fact that we don’t yet know enough about understanding and its causes.

As laid out in the Chapter 7, my argument rested on several ideas:
(i) reasoning always takes place against the background of and on the basis of an understanding of the domain that we are reasoning about, an understanding that involves an overview of that domain as a whole

(ii) the required overview is something for which there is no adequate propositional or sentential representation

(iii) the processes by which such understanding is generated and modified, though rational and in principle subject to criticism, are currently not well understood.

(iv) the coherence relevant to epistemic appraisal consists of the relationships in which the objects of a domain are seen to stand when that domain is understood.¹

From these four ideas I wanted to conclude

1) that the notion of coherence will remain wispy until we have a better understanding of understanding, and

2) that since there is no adequate propositional or sentential representation of understanding, understanding understanding will require resources that go beyond those of logic and recent mainstream epistemology, both of which cast their accounts and explanations in terms if relations among propositions and/or sentences.

In this chapter, I’ll comment only very superficially on point (i).² I’ll spend most of my time trying to motivate you to accept points (ii) and (iii).³ And in closing I will offer a sketch of how I think understanding, coherence and evidence are interrelated.⁴

2. UNDERSTANDING A DOMAIN AS NECESSARY BACKGROUND OF ANY REASONING.

The first of the four ideas—that reasoning always takes place against the background of a general understanding—seems to me to be clearly sound. I pointed

¹ I intend this to be roughly equivalent to Harman’s identification of coherence with connections of intelligibility. The equivalence is only a rough one, however, since Harman’s “elements of a view” become “objects in a domain” in my formulation.

² Section 2.

³ Section 3.

⁴ Section 4.