Embracing Incoherence[1]

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ABSTRACT: Incoherence is usually regarded as a bad thing. Incoherence suggests irrationality, confusion, paradox. Incoherentism disagrees: incoherence is not always a bad thing, sometimes we ought to be incoherent. If correct, Incoherentism has important and controversial implications. It implies that rationality does not always require coherence. Dilemmism and Incoherentism both embrace conflict in epistemology, albeit in importantly different ways. While Dilemmism embraces the possibility of genuine dilemmas, Incoherentism says that we are sometimes required to be incoherent, but being subject to this requirement is not a dilemma. After identifying some important differences between these two ways of embracing conflict, I offer some reasons to prefer Incoherentism over Dilemmism. Namely, that Incoherentism allows us to deliberate about what we ought to believe using ordinary epistemology, and it does a better job of accommodating the positive features of incoherence.

Incoherence is usually regarded as a bad thing. Incoherence suggests irrationality, confusion, paradox. Incoherentism disagrees: incoherence is not always a bad thing, sometimes we ought to be incoherent. If correct, Incoherentism has important and controversial implications. It implies that rationality does not always require coherence.

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, I motivate the idea that we should embrace the possibility of rational incoherence in epistemology. I argue that sometimes incoherence is rationally permissible, and a particular kind of incoherence – *level*-incoherence – is sometimes rationally required. Level-incoherence occurs between beliefs about what we ought to believe, and the rest of our beliefs. The view that it is sometimes required by rationality not only enables us to solve a puzzle arising from rational mistakes about what rationality requires[2], but it allows our normative beliefs to have more-or-less the same epistemology as the rest of our beliefs.

Second, I point out how incoherence more generally has various underappreciated epistemic benefits. In some cases it can help progress inquiry, enable us to have true beliefs, and allow

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[1] Thanks are due in particular to Nick Hughes and Giada Fratantonio for extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts.
[2] I argued for this elsewhere, so the argument for this here will be minimal (Field, forthcoming, 2020).

us to deliberate about what we ought to believe in a way that is minimally disruptive to the rest of our beliefs. With this in mind, we should not be particularly worried by the idea that sometimes rationality requires level-incoherence.

Third, I argue that Incoherentism is importantly different from an alternative view with which it agrees on some points – Dilemmism (Alexander, 2013; Hughes, 2019). Both views deny that what we are required to do, epistemically, is always coherent. However, they do so in different ways, with different motivations, and with different theoretical backgrounds. Dilemmism says that the requirements of epistemology sometimes generate dilemmas – situations in which the agent is subject to two incompatible requirements. In such situations, the agent ought to comply with each of the requirements but cannot because they are incompatible. Dilemmists are pessimistic about the possibility of resolving these dilemmas. Incoherentism is more optimistic. Incoherentists say that there is a way to resolve these conflicts of requirements – it is to acknowledge that epistemic rationality sometimes generates a univocal requirement to be incoherent.

After identifying some important differences between these two ways of embracing conflict, I offer some reasons to prefer Incoherentism over Dilemmism. Namely, that Incoherentism allows us to deliberate about what we ought to believe using ordinary epistemology, and it does a better job of accommodating the positive features of incoherence.

The following section outlines one way that requirements of rationality appear to conflict. Most solutions to this conflict have assumed that rationality requires coherence. Section 1 outlines the conflict. In Section 2 I argue that widespread emphasis on coherence in rationality is misguided, and in Section 3 I bolster this by offering some reasons to think that incoherence sometimes has independent epistemic benefits. In Section 4 I distinguish some different ways of embracing incoherence in epistemology, focussing on some underappreciated differences between Incoherentism and Dilemmism. In Section 5 I give some reasons to prefer Incoherentism to Dilemmism.

1. The Conflicting Demands of Rationality

Sometimes, the demands of rationality appear to conflict. A good example of this is situations in which your evidence about what is rationally required is misleading.

Suppose that according to the true requirements of rationality, you are required to φ - to believe P, perhaps[3]. However, suppose you also have very good evidence that, in fact, you are required to *not* φ. What now? Should you φ or not? On the one hand, the true requirements of rationality seem to require that you φ. On the other hand, your evidence (which you have no reason to dismiss) indicates you are required *not* to φ. So, it appears you are subject to conflicting requirements of rationality. You appear to be required to both φ and *not* φ.

It's worth noting that not everyone would agree this is possible. For example, some would argue that if you have good (all-things-considered) evidence that you are required not to φ, then you are not required to φ. On this view your evidence that you are required not to φ defeats any reason that might otherwise require you to φ. However, this picture of epistemic defeat brings problems. On this view, evidence about what is rationally required of you has significant normative power, more power even than the putative rational requirements themselves.[4] Although we might have thought there were rational requirements applicable universally to all rational agents, in fact these are defeasible with the right combination of evidence.

Meanwhile, others would argue that the epistemology of rational requirements is such that it is just not possible to have all-things-considered evidence that supports false beliefs about what the requirements of rationality are, because we are, in fact, always propositionally justified in believing the truth about what rationality requires.[5] On such views, it is not possible to be rationally mistaken about the requirements of rationality (Titelbaum (2015: 253)). This view of the epistemology of rational requirements involves some contentious theoretical commitments. For example, it requires us to assume that every agent, regardless of the further details of her epistemic situation, possesses vast resources of propositional

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[3] This could be any requirement of rationality you like. For example, perhaps you are required to not believe contradictions, but then you take a logic course from a dialetheist and acquire evidence that, sometimes, believing contradictions is required. Or, perhaps you read this paper and are convinced that Incoherentism is true. In fact, it's not but you now have evidence that sometimes you ought to be incoherent. I have discussed such cases in more detail elsewhere (Field, forthcoming, 2019, 2020).
[4] As Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) points out, a view like this one would involve an error theory of traditional rational requirements.
[5] Littlejohn (2018) offers a related yet slightly different argument for the impossibility of rational mistakes about what rationality requires, based on rational incompetence. I respond to this argument in (Field (2019)).

justification capable of defeating any possible misleading evidence for false views of what epistemic rationality requires.

Setting these two views aside, situations in which you appear to be required to both φ and *not* φ can arise in any context in which we deliberate about the epistemic status of our beliefs: ordinary first order deliberation about what the evidence supports, philosophical deliberation about which epistemic theory is correct, or deliberation by a jury about what their evidence supports.

Here is the Incoherentist view: you should both believe what your evidence supports, and you should comply with the true requirements of rationality. So, in the example above, you should believe "I ought not φ", because this is what your evidence supports, but you should also comply with the true requirements of rationality. So, you should also φ.

It is worth saying something about what I mean by the 'true requirements' here. Obviously, there is something platitudinous about saying that 'according to the true requirements, you ought to φ'. That is precisely what is at issue – what the true requirements are, in this case. However, it is important that the puzzle is stated in this way. The conflict arises only on the assumption that there is some fact of the matter about what the true requirements of rationality are, and it is possible to be mistaken about what they are. Incoherentism says that being mistaken, even rationally, about what the true requirements are does not change the facts about what they are.

Incoherentism recommends this because it endorses two key assumptions about rationality: that it requires that you believe what is supported by your epistemic situation, and there is at least one further requirement of rationality applicable to all agents, in all situations. When we combine these two assumptions with the more controversial claim that rationality does not always require coherence, we get the result that Incoherentism permits rational belief combinations that involve both beliefs of the form *I ought to φ*, and *not-φ*. This is unusual in epistemology: most views have assumed that rationality requires coherence. The following section examines this idea that rationality requires coherence and argues that it is misguided.

2. Coherence is overrated

It is widely thought that evaluations of rationality involve, either entirely or in part, an evaluation of whether an agent is *coherent*. In evaluating whether an agent is coherent, we might ask whether their attitudes are consistent, whether their credences are probabilistically coherent, whether their reasoning obeys rules of closure, or whether their first order attitudes cohere with their higher order attitudes. If rationality were primarily about coherence, then this narrows down the possible answers to the problem of conflicting requirements: you should either do what you believe you are required to do (and violate the requirements of rationality), or you should do what you are required to do and also believe that this is what you are required to do. In other words, you should comply with the following wide-scope principle:

Enkratic Principle: O (BOΦ → Φ)

Reading O as "rationally required", and Φ as representing an epistemic attitude, the Enkratic Principle says that rationality requires *either* having the attitudes you believe you ought to have, *or* giving up the belief that you ought to have those attitudes. It prohibits combinations of attitudes that include the belief that believing P is required, but not the belief P.

Incoherentism denies that the Enkratic Principle is a requirement of rationality. This is because Incoherentists think that there are some situations in which the rational thing to do is to believe that you ought to have some epistemic attitude, but not actually have that attitude. This is a violation of the Enkratic Principle. As Incoherentists see it, we are sometimes required to violate the Enkratic Principle because rationality requires that we believe what is supported by our epistemic situation, and it also requires that we obey the true requirements of rationality, whatever they are. So, if S is in a situation that supports false belief about what is rationally required, Incoherentism will say that she is required to violate the Enkratic Principle.[6]

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[6] In this paper, I remain silent about the value of other kinds of coherence. Here, I am concerned only with the specific kind of coherence prohibited by the Enkratic Principle. The Incoherentist view that I defend here says that akratic incoherence is sometimes required. Later in this section, I argue that some first order incoherent beliefs are *permissible* – when one's (incomplete, or flawed) evidence supports them (as in FORUMS, p.6). However, I do not think that these beliefs are *required.*

I am not the first to wonder if coherence might be overrated as a rational ideal. There are many other examples of scepticism about the value of coherence. For example, Broome and Kolodny begun a distinct debate asking whether there might sometimes be good reasons to be incoherent[7]. Others have questioned whether the demands of logical consistency are normative for belief[8]. Dialetheist logicians have thought that logic *is* normative, but that semantic paradoxes such as the Liar mean that the correct logic permits rational incoherence[9]. And, some evidentialists have thought that the possibility of misleading higher order evidence means that sometimes our evidence supports incoherent combinations, such as both "P" and "my evidence does not support P"[10].

However, those who have argued against coherence requirements of rationality have, for the most part, done so negatively. They have offered reasons to be incoherent that outweigh the value of being coherent – semantic paradoxes, eccentric billionaires willing to pay you to be incoherent, or evidential support. These debates tend not to disagree that coherence is, in general, rationally valuable. They just think it is not quite as good as other epistemic goods that might sometimes be on offer[11]. Incoherentists, in contrast, hold that incoherence can sometimes be a positive thing, from the point of view of rationality.

One of the main reasons coherence has been thought rationally required is that rationality has been taken to be primarily concerned with having a perspective on the world that is internally consistent. On this view, rationality is a property that supervenes entirely on an agent's internal mental attitudes. Coherence is an essential property of rationality if in evaluating an agent we are considering only her mental attitudes and not how those attitudes match up with the facts. On this view, coherence is always rationally valuable[12]. Since the Enkratic Principle preserves a particular kind of coherence between attitudes, the Enkratic

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[7] See (Broome, 1999, 2007, 2013; Kolodny, 2005, 2008; Raz, 2005). This debate is distinct from the one I am engaged with here. This other debate has usually identified 'rationality' with 'coherence' and characterised the guiding question as 'could there be a reason to be irrational?'. Here, I am not assuming that rationality requires coherence, so a better way to characterise this debate is as asking whether there could be reasons (particularly, reasons of the 'right kind' – that is, epistemic reasons) to be incoherent.

[8] See in particular (Harman, 1986), as well as (Besson, 2012; Hjortland, 2017; Macfarlane, 2004).

[9] See (Priest, 1979, 1985, 2005, 2006).

[10] See (Lasonen-Aarnio, forthcoming, 2020, 2014; Weatherson, 2010, 2019).

[11] For example, Priest views consistency as one among many desirable qualities that a rationally acceptable theory should have, others being: 'simplicity, problem-solving ability, non-adhocness and fruitfulness' (2004: 32).

[12] See (Gibbons, 2013; Kvanvig, 2014; Lord, 2018; Zimmerman, 2008).

Principle is just a consequence of being committed to this internalist idea that epistemic rationality primarily concerns coherence. There is no getting around this.

Incoherentism does not think that coherence is an essential property of rationality, nor even particularly rationally valuable. Although, it often accompanies instances of doxastic rationality, it is not valuable in itself.

There are various familiar reasons to worry about purely coherentist accounts of epistemic rationality. For example, if coherence were all that mattered, this would imply that any attitude at all could, in principle, be rational. This makes a mystery of the value of rationality[13]. Early objections to coherentism pointed out that entirely false belief sets can count as justified when all that is required for justification is coherence (see Sosa (1980: 19)). This possibility makes the value of rationality particularly mysterious for agents with many false beliefs. If attitudinal coherence were the only requirement of rationality, there would be no reason to expect that being rational would lead to valuable epistemic goods such as truth and knowledge. This would exasperate the epistemically negative consequences of false belief. Agents would be incentivized to adjust their belief sets to maintain coherence with a false belief, thus taking themselves ever further away from belief sets that accurately reflect the world[14].

Coherence certainly does not seem valuable when it appears in the absence of other epistemic goods. Consider the following example:

> FORUMS: Billy stays up all night reading nonsense on forums frequented by conspiracy theorists. He acquires a coherent web of beliefs that support various deranged conspiracy theories. The deeper he goes into the conspiracy theorists' forums, the more coherent and false beliefs he adds to his web. In the morning, he wakes up and reads a report from the BBC that conflicts with his web of nonsense. Noticing the conflict, he dismisses the BBC report as misleading.

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[13] A mystery that has gone unsolved for some time (see Broome (2013), Kolodny (2005), Raz (2005)).
[14] This is particularly worrying in light of the observation that those who believe conspiracy theories often have coherent belief sets (see Nguyen (2018a, 2018b)).

Billy's beliefs, after he dismisses the BBC report, are coherent. However, they are also false and completely detached from reality. In becoming coherent in the way that he does, Billy takes himself further away from truth and knowledge, and deeper into the clutches of falsity and conspiracy theory. In epistemically evaluating Billy, how should we count his beliefs' coherence? If coherence were rationally valuable in itself, we should approve of it – we should think that it is one good thing to say about Billy's attitudes (albeit the *only* good thing). However, FORUMS also illustrates how coherence can be dangerous when in the wrong hands. In this case, coherence does not seem to be a particularly good thing – it leads Billy astray, reinforces his conspiracy theories, and causes him to end up believing more falsehoods.

One way to explain what is going on here is that, usually, coherence goes together with other epistemically valuable things. For example, being coherent is often a way of believing true things, manifesting success-conducive dispositions[15], responding correctly to our (possessed) reasons[16], or respecting the evidence[17]. However, while this explains why we tend to associate coherence with rationality, it does not tell us that coherence is valuable in itself, because it does not show that coherence is also valuable when these other epistemic goods are absent. At best, this might give us an error theory that explains why we thought that coherence was required by rationality[18].

Coherence is most useful when we begin from beliefs that are true. Suppose I know P, and I know that I know P. Suppose that I am trying to decide whether to believe Q or not-Q, and I have no reason to think that either is more likely to be true than the other. If Q is inconsistent with P, then I can rule it out and infer not-Q, since this is the only remaining option. I have used coherence to increase my knowledge. However, this strategy is successful only when we begin from knowledge that we know we have. Unfortunately, ordinary non-ideal beings are often not in this situation. When we use this method beginning from unknown beliefs, we risk ending up with even more false beliefs. So, at least for fallible and non-ideal agents like us, coherence is of limited value for epistemic inquiry. Exactly the same applies to non-ideal inquiries about what we ought to believe. If S believes that she rationally ought to believe P,

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[15] Lasonen-Aarnio (2020).
[16] Lord (2018).
[17] Feldman (2005), Worsnip (2018).
[18] This is something I argue for elsewhere, so I won't dwell on it here (Field, forthcoming, ms).

and this is true, then coming to believe P is an improvement. However, if this is false, and P is rationally prohibited, then it worsens her epistemic situation by causing her to believe something irrational.

One might be tempted to think that coherence requirements on rationality are justified not by the value of coherence, but rather the disvalue of incoherence. Classical logic prohibits contradictions in large part because of the trouble contradictions cause, and we might think that something similar applies to other kinds of incoherence. Not only are contradictions obviously false, but standard classical disjunction rules mean that anything follows from a contradiction. It cannot be rational to believe contradictions, because it cannot be rational to believe everything – this would make our beliefs trivial. Additionally, barring quantum strangeness, we know that logically inconsistent sets of propositions cannot be true. This means that someone who believes obviously inconsistent propositions can easily know that they have at least one false belief. This means that if they continue believing the inconsistent set, they would be knowingly believing at least one false thing, as well as something that they know they cannot know. This seems bad, and one good thing to say about coherence is that it protects the agent from this bad situation[19]. However, as the following section argues, it is not so clear that incoherence is *always* bad.

3. Incoherence is Underrated

Those who have argued against coherence requirements of rationality have usually done so in a negative way. They have offered reasons to be incoherent that outweigh the requirements of coherence, without saying that there is anything good about incoherence. In this section, I suggest that there are some positive things to be said in favour of incoherence, at least sometimes, for some non-ideal agents with incomplete information.

3.1 Signals

The first positive thing to say about incoherence is that it promotes better inquiries by signalling to the inquirer that they need to gather more evidence or double-checking their

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[19] This is perhaps what Lord (2018) has in mind when he says that coherence protects agents from rational criticism.

reasoning.

For Socrates, alerting people to incoherence in their philosophical views was an essential teaching tool, and the resulting *aporia* an important step on the road to truth and knowledge. Proof by contradiction also makes use of incoherence as a way of furthering inquiry. A derived contradiction acts as a signpost that means 'stop, something has gone wrong!'. Incoherence is also useful in argumentative interactions – mutually acknowledged inconsistency can help interlocutors with disparate commitments to agree on when theories should be rejected. Whatever else has been called into dispute, rational interlocuters will typically agree that believing contradictions is unacceptable[20].

Incoherence can alert individuals to problems with their beliefs, prompting them to subject them to closer scrutiny, or seek out more evidence[21]. This is usually an epistemically better thing to do than merely reconcile the incoherence without undertaking further inquiry. For example, compare Billy to another frequenter of dodgy forums:

> FORUMS 2: Sanjay stays up all night reading nonsense on forums frequented by conspiracy theorists. He acquires a coherent web of beliefs that support various deranged conspiracy theories. In the morning, he wakes up and reads a report from the BBC that conflicts with his web of nonsense. He believes the report, notices the conflict, and is puzzled.

Whereas Billy remedied his incoherence quickly, by immediately dismissing the evidence from the BBC report, Sanjay does not. This puts Sanjay in a better situation to Billy, because he has an epistemic tool that Billy lacks. His puzzlement is a signal – it gives him reason to scrutinise his beliefs further. Billy does not have this reason – from his perspective all is well, there is no incoherence, and so no reason to inquire further. Furthermore, retaining the inconsistent belief allows Sanjay to revisit the matter later. As he receives further information, he may even be able to dig himself out of his web of conspiracy theory. For example, if he reads more

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[20] Assuming that both parties accept classical inference rules, and therefore that anything follows from a contradiction, then both will agree that believing *all* statements would be irrational, so neither should believe a contradiction. If one party in the argument believes all statements, then they also believe the other party's theory, and so the argument breaks down.

[21] As Lasonen-Aarnio (2020) puts it, incoherence can be a striking and 'conspicuous' reason to revise our beliefs.

trustworthy sources that cohere with the BBC report and conflict with the conspiracy theories, the epistemic weight of the conspiracy theories will be gradually outweighed.

In cases like this, incoherence is a healthy part of rational inquiry that has a non-ideal starting point. This would be difficult to capture if we thought that Sanjay was always rationally required to maintain a coherent perspective.

Incoherentism has no trouble capturing this. It says that not all incoherence is irrational, indeed, sometimes agents *should* have incoherent beliefs. Incoherentism is thus able to accommodate the rationality of Sanjay's incoherent puzzlement. It is worth clarifying that Incoherentism does not say that Sanjay ought to *remain* incoherent. Ideally, this incoherence would be the beginning, not the end of inquiry. The point is that at the moment of puzzlement, before inquiry has continued, Sanjay is rational.

Of course, we might wonder whether there is a way of capturing these benefits of incoherent puzzlement without endorsing the view that it is sometimes rational to have incoherent attitudes. For example, perhaps Sanjay should *suspend* on the conflicting BBC report, rather than believe it (Lord and Sylvan, forthcoming). As a first pass, the idea that Sanjay could choose to suspend judgment rather than believe suggests a degree of doxastic control that it is not clear we have. However, even if we did have such control, there are at least three further problems with this suggestion.

First, it is not clear that suspension would be able to generate the same benefits as incoherent beliefs. Incoherent beliefs are useful because they are signals that prompt further inquiry. To be good signals, they need to be striking. Requiring the agent to adopt a weaken attitude would be detrimental to this purpose. If Sanjay suspends on the report, but continues to believe the conspiracy theories, then the conspiracy theory beliefs will occupy a stronger epistemic position in his epistemic perspective. He will have reasons to prioritise them over other conflicting information he might receive, and this will exasperate his problems[22]. Second, it is not clear that suspending will always be a rational response that will save us from incoherence. If I believe P, but merely suspend on not-P, this also exhibits incoherence – if I think that P is true, basic logic tells me that not-P must be false. So, it's not clear that

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[22] Could he suspend on both the report and the conspiracy theories? This would put the beliefs on an equal footing, but it would be an impractical strategy over time.

suspending would solve the problem. Third, if we think that there are positive epistemic duties to believe propositions that we have sufficient evidence for, then suspending on the BBC report may be a violation of those duties[23].

Both Billy and Sanjay immediately notice the incoherence between their conspiracy-theoretic beliefs and the BBC report. The difference between them is in how they respond to this incoherence. Billy dismisses the report, embarking further into a dark web of conspiracy theory; Sanjay remains puzzled, and (we hope) uses this puzzlement to improve his beliefs. We might wonder how to evaluate unnoticed incoherence. Traditionally, philosophers have thought more positively about unnoticed incoherence than noticed incoherence. This makes sense if we precede from the assumption that incoherence is always irrational. If the agent has not noticed the incoherence, it is perhaps unreasonable to expect her to amend it, and unfair to blame her for the failure. If she has noticed it, but not amended it, then she is responsible for the irrationality. However, noticing the potential epistemic benefits of incoherence might push us to think differently. Billy and Sanjay are better off in virtue of having noticed their incoherence – noticing it allows them to do something about it. Although Billy precedes in the wrong way, noticing the incoherence at least gave him the opportunity to move towards the truth. Of course, if there were independent reason to think that coherence was epistemically good, this argument would be suspicious – one epistemic wrong does not make a right. However, if the most important reasons to like coherence are its connection to truth, and sometimes being incoherent can be a more positive influence on whether we believe the truth, then we should acknowledge that incoherence is sometimes a positive epistemic influence, and all the more positive when it is recognised by the agent.

One might wonder whether this is really an argument for the epistemic value of incoherence. After all, doesn't the fact that incoherence can function as a useful indication that further inquiry is needed in fact show that there is something wrong with incoherence? Is this argument not akin to suggesting that an engine fault in one's car is a good thing because it prompts the driver to get the car checked properly by a mechanic? In response, it is worth distinguishing epistemic rationality from other epistemic goods such as truth and knowledge.

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[23] As Simion (2023) argues. Of course, that depends on whether we think that the BBC report constitutes 'sufficient evidence' for these agents, which will depend on the stance we take on what evidence is. This is somewhat beside the point here, but on at least the more factive conceptions of evidence, the report does constitute evidence.

Epistemic rationality is an evaluation of an agent's epistemic state *given* her epistemic situation. So, while it would be *best* to have beliefs that are both coherent and true, this is not always an option that is rationally available to the agent. When this option is not rationally available, it is better to have incoherent beliefs than beliefs that are coherent and *false.* Incoherent beliefs give the agent better prospects for inquiry, since they at least have a reason to inquire. Incoherence is not, itself, a problem. Falsity is a problem, and it can be noticed more easily when the agent is incoherent. To return to the car analogy, incoherence is not like an engine fault, but rather like a warning light on the car dashboard. The light itself is not a problem – it is the fault indicated by the light that is the problem. Incoherence indicates epistemic problems, but according to Incoherentism it is not itself an epistemic problem.

Of course, ideally we would not need incoherent beliefs to prompt us into managing our beliefs well. Ideally, we would always be in a position where we were able to find the error, work out what to do about it, and reach a conclusion that is both true *and* coherent. But, we are not ideal. In the absence of further information or immediate opportunities to investigate further, incoherence is often epistemically valuable.

3.2 Epistemic Goods

Sometimes, adopting incoherent attitudes can be a way to get epistemic goods directly. For example, sometimes incoherent states are true. Akratic combinations can be true because matching first and higher order propositions do not entail each other. Suppose that you parked your bike in the shed last night, as usual, and you have no reason to suspect that it is anywhere else now. The following proposition is true: *you ought to believe that your bike is in your shed* (you remember putting it there, your memory is reliable, you live in a safe neighbourhood, and so on). However, none of this *entails* the proposition *your bike is in your shed* – I might have stolen it without your knowledge. Of course, truth is not the only epistemic good, and there might be other considerations (such as what your evidence supports) that would count against the rationality of believing an incoherent combination.

However, at least on some views, incoherent attitude combinations can be supported by one's total evidence. According to some, such situations arise when your evidence supports P but is not sufficient for justification or knowledge – you have evidence for P, but it's not clear that you ought to believe P. Misleading higher-order evidence provides examples of this

– in such cases, both P and _my evidence is unlikely to support P_ can be true.[24] This is even clearer in the case of credences (rather than full beliefs). A tiny reduction in evidential support for _you ought to believe P_ will not necessarily immediately have a corresponding impact on the evidential support you have for P itself. Suppose you correctly prove some logic theorems. You are justified in having very high credence in their solutions. Then, you receive evidence that there is a small chance that your coffee was spiked with a bad-reasoning drug. If it was, then you should not be confident in the logic theorems, because the drug causes your proofs to be fallacious. So, you should have some credence in the proposition that you ought not believe the theorems. However, because these are logical theorems, this is a problem. If you are justified in them, you are justified to a maximal degree[25]. If not, then you are not justified at all. Reconciling the evidence you have about the possibility of spiked coffee, and your evidence about the theorems is difficult, at least if we want to preserve both level-coherence among credences and a traditional view of a priori justification for logic[26].

If level-incoherent combinations can be both true and supported by the evidence, we might wonder whether they can also be known. Here is a possible example:

> _Kids These Days._ Epistemologists in the future have developed a device, the Excellent Evidence Evaluator™, which can perfectly evaluate what one's evidence supports at any particular time. Everyone uses these devices and comes to depend on them. Your great-granddaughter has one of these devices, and uses it to manage her beliefs. One day when she checks it, her device indicates that her evidence supports both P and that the evidence does not support P, a level-incoherent combination[27]. She believes, on this basis, both "P" and "my evidence does not support P".

Does your great-granddaughter know both P and that her evidence does not support P? If the Excellent Evidence Evaluator™ is good enough, then this is plausible. Her beliefs are true, they

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[24] See Christensen (2010), Lasonen-Aarnio (2014, 2020), Weatherson (2019), Worsnip (2018).
[25] At least, that is the standard view. In fact, I have offered some reasons to be suspicious of this in previous work (Field, forthcoming, 2019, 2020). I think those reasons also support incoherentism.
[26] See (Christensen, 2010; Schoenfield, 2015; Sliwa & Horowitz, 2015; Brian Weatherson, 2019).
[27] It does not matter here whether we interpret the Excellent Evidence Evaluator™ as also taking into consideration the evidence it generates itself, by making recommendations. If it does, then your grand-daughter gets extra evidential support for both <P> and <the evidence does not support P>. If it does not, then your-grand-daughter simply gets information about what other evidence in her situation supports.

are properly based on evidence that supports them, they are safe (we can assume that if the evidence was otherwise, the Excellent Evidence Evaluator™ would not have said it was, and your great-granddaughter would not have believed that it was). Note that it does not matter here whether we interpret the Excellent Evidence Evaluator™ as also taking into consideration the evidence it generates itself, when it makes recommendations. If it does, then your great-granddaughter gets extra evidential support for both P and that her evidence does not support P. If it does not, then your great-granddaughter simply gets information about what other evidence in her situation supports.

So, in some (unusual) cases, level-incoherent beliefs can give us epistemic goods. They can be true, supported by the evidence, and even known. If this is right, then this makes incoherence more epistemically valuable than we might have thought.

3.3 Normative Deliberation

The third, and perhaps most significant, reason that incoherence is sometimes rationally valuable is that permitting incoherence between our normative beliefs about what we ought to believe, and the rest of our beliefs, facilitates healthy rational deliberation about what we ought to believe. This should be particularly welcome news for epistemologists, but not only epistemologists. Juries considering a defendant's guilt, or scientists considering what to conclude must also sometimes consider whether their beliefs are well-supported. Views that permit incoherence between normative and everyday beliefs can allow agents to rationally respond to evidence about what they ought to believe in the ordinary way, without completely overhauling their beliefs every time they encounter new evidence.

Views that require coherence at all times cannot do this – they cannot allow agents to respond appropriately to evidence about their normative beliefs while leaving the rest of their beliefs unaffected. If they receive evidence for a false normative belief about how beliefs ought to be manage, then they must either act on that false belief by overhauling their first-order beliefs so that they conform with this new, false, normative belief about how to manage beliefs, or dismiss the evidence supporting the false normative belief. If they are in no position to dismiss the evidence, this can be highly destructive,[28] the normative belief is false, so there was potentially nothing wrong with the first-order beliefs. As Alexander puts it, "for

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[28] As I have argued elsewhere, I do not think this is plausible (Field (2019)).

philosophers who spend their time puzzling over the nature of epistemic justification, higher-order doubt is an occupational hazard." (2013: 2-3).

Some who endorse the Enkratic Principle have thought that the way around this problem is to argue that we are, in fact, always in a position to dismiss misleading evidence about what rationality requires (Ichikawa & Jarvis, 2013; Littlejohn, 2015; Smithies, 2012, 2015; Titelbaum, 2015). This view rules out the very possibility of having evidence that could support false views about what rationality requires. As I have argued elsewhere (2019), I think this claim about which evidential situations are possible is highly implausible. In ordinary cases, it would be highly inappropriate to dismiss evidence in this way, even if it is misleading. So, we would need a very good reason to think that misleading evidence about what rationality requires is to be treated differently to ordinary cases. The important point here is how detrimental this is to inquiry about normative beliefs. If misleading evidence about what rationality requires was impossible, no one could ever hold a false view about what rationality requires rationally.

In fact, I think there are plenty of examples of healthy deliberation about normative matters of epistemology in which we should evaluate an incoherent agent more positively than a coherent agent.

Consider two students studying epistemology. Both are studying some false epistemic view about what rationality requires. The view says _rationality requires that you always ϕ_.[29] I like to imagine that ϕ stands for "comply with the Enkratic Principle", but readers are free to imagine something else – perhaps "conciliate in response to disagreement", or "believe only what you know". The students are taking a class in which they receive various kinds of evidence for this false view. For example, they receive testimony from someone who seems like an expert, and they study all the best arguments for the view. Importantly, these are students – at this stage in their philosophical education they lack the ability to see through the arguments, and we should not expect them to exert excessive effort trying.

The first student, Andy, does not pay much attention in class or do the homework exercises. He exerts minimal intellectual effort, largely ignoring the arguments and testimony he

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[29] Similar cases have been discussed by various others, including Barnett (2021), Christensen (2010), Field (2019, 2020), Weatherson (2019).

receives in class and would have nothing to say in response to them. He considers what rationality requires of him with respect to φ-ing, finds the idea of φ-ing "silly", and so refuses to believe that he is required to φ[30]. Although his beliefs are true and comply with the Enkratic Principle, this is not an example of rational deliberation about what rationality requires. Andy reasons "upstream"[31], disregarding his evidence, and he does so for insufficent reason (he just thinks the view is "silly").

The second student, Anna, violates the Enkratic Principle but intuitively deliberates more rationally. Anna considers what her teacher says and the arguments studied in class. She sees how the arguments lead to the conclusion that rationality requires φ-ing, and she sees no way to refute them, so she believes this. However, when she tries to actually φ, she finds this difficult – it seems so very counterintuitive. So, she has level-incoherent beliefs. However, she has managed her beliefs well. She believed the conclusion of a convincing argument, and she refrained from believing what seems counterintuitive. She is incoherent, but this incoherence stems from good epistemic dispositions. What this shows is that while we might have thought that complying with the Enkratic Principle was an example of good epistemic disposition, in virtue of promoting epistemic goods such as truth and knowledge, this is not always true. Sometimes, incoherent belief is a better route to these epistemic goods[32]. In absence of independent reason to think that the Enkratic Principle is a requirement of rationality, we should not assume that violations of the Enkratic Principle are always irrational[33].

In the moral domain, the idea that our beliefs about morality can diverge from the facts about what we ought to do is much less controversial. Various philosophers have thought that moral virtue and praiseworthiness comes apart from having true beliefs about what morality requires. These philosophers have thought it possible for agents to act akratically – doing something right while believing it is wrong – and nevertheless be fully praiseworthy. For example, (Arpaly, 2002; Harman, 2011; Brian Weatherson, 2019) endorse this conclusion

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[30] Compare cases of reliable clairvoyants (see Bonjour (1985)) – Andy gets it right, but does not have good reason to believe that he is getting it right. In fact, he may be doing even worse than the clairvoyents – he has *bad* reasons to think he is getting it right.

[31] As Kolodny (2005: 529) puts it. See also Schroeder's 'symmetry' objection to thinking of the practical Enkratic Principle as wide scope (Schroeder (2004: 339)), which points out that only some of the ways one could bring oneself in line with the Enkratic Principle intuitively seem rational.

[32] As (Lasonen-Aarnio, 2014, 2020; Brian Weatherson, 2019) have also argued. See also (Lasonen-Aarnio, forthcoming) on the role of dispositions in epistemic evaluation.

[33] I argue elsewhere that there is no such independent reason (Field, ms).

about Huck Finn. In Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck Finn famously does a good thing (freeing a slave) while believing that he is doing something wrong (stealing property). Their view is that Huck responds correctly to his reasons at the first order, and does the right thing, while being justified in believing that he is doing the wrong thing, because of his misleading evidential situation. Some have thought there are possible parallel epistemic cases (see Barnett, 2020). If this is right, and if rationality is, as some have thought[34], a kind of epistemic praiseworthiness, then the possibility of rational level incoherence should not be thought so strange in the epistemic domain.

Some philosophers have attempted to accommodate the possibility of rational incoherence. The following section discusses these attempts, focusing on distinguishing the differences between Incoherentism and Dilemmism.

4. Accommodating Conflict

In this section, I discuss strategies for accommodating conflicts between epistemic requirements. Of the four I mention, Dilemmism and Incoherentism are the most successful. I identify some important differences between the two views, before going on in §5 to argue that there are reasons to prefer Incoherentism – at least as a way to deal with higher-order conflicts between requirements.

4.1 Making Exceptions

First, some have attempted to accommodate cases in which incoherent attitudes seem rational by simply bracketing them. For example, Horowitz argues that level-coherence is necessary for rational belief in the majority of cases, but there are some cases in which the higher- and first-order evidence support incompatible propositions, and rationality does not require level-coherence in these cases (2014: 735-40)[35].

This view denies that requirements of rationality apply universally. They apply in most, but not all, cases and they admit of exceptions. The problem with this is that it relies on there being not too many exceptions. But, the conflicts under discussion, those that arise from misleading evidence about what rationality requires, may occur fairly often – especially if one

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[34] See e.g. Lord (2018).
[35] The example she gives is a version of Williamson's unmarked clock case (see Williamson, 2011).

is a philosopher. Even if they were not common, it would be nice if our epistemic theories applied in all cases, including the strange ones.

Of course, Horowitz takes there to be principled reasons why some cases are exceptions to the Enkratic Principle. Horowitz points out that in ordinary cases level-incoherent belief seems to licence bad reasoning practices. Someone who believes both P and "my evidence does not support P" can seemingly rationally regard their belief as inexplicably luckily true and on this basis dismiss good evidence suggesting otherwise. "I thought I was going to judge falsely", Horowitz's akratic agent says to himself, "but I must have lucked out! I judged that P, and P is true" (2014: 726). But, this is not how we should want agents to respond to the possibility that their evidence is misleading. Surely, the rational thing to do would be to reduce confidence in P. However, Horowitz acknowledges that in less ordinary cases, such as cases involving austere unmarked clocks in which evidence is likely to be misleading, a level incoherent belief combination could be a rational response to the situation. According to Horowitz, such cases have two features: they are cases in which there is uncertainty about what your evidence is (rather than what it supports), and they are cases in which the agent can tell that her evidence will not be truth guiding. In circumstances like this, it can be good reasoning to believe both 'P' and 'my evidence is unlikely to support P'.

Incoherentists can agree with Horowitz that level incoherence can be good reasoning in these cases, but they need not agree that these are the only such cases. Consider the previous cases in which the students receive evidence for some false philosophical view about what rationality requires. It's not clear that such cases are helpfully described using the distinction between uncertainty about 'what your evidence is' or 'what your evidence supports'. We can interpret the students as clear about what their evidence is, and what it supports. Nor can they tell in advance that their evidence is not truth guiding – it seems to be a case in which evidence behaves in the ordinary way. The problem is rather than what it supports is a false view that they ought not allow to influence the rest of their beliefs.

4.2 Division

Others have approached conflicts between requirements by making divisions. Division strategies attempt to dissolve the conflict by indexing apparently conflicting requirements to separate domains, contexts, or senses of normativity. An early example of this strategy is

Lewis' proposal for understanding apparently inconsistent belief sets. He suggests that inconsistent propositions can be 'quarantined' to separate belief sets, thus limiting their potential problematic effects (1982: 435). Various philosophers have attempted to dissolve apparent conflicts between epistemic requirements by postulating an objective and subjective sense of rationality, and arguing that the ought of epistemic rationality generates conflict when it is used in a way that is ambiguous between these[36]. This approach allows us to understand agents who have misleading evidence about what rationality requires as 'objectively rationally required' to do whatever the true requirements of rationality require, and 'subjectively rationally required' to do whatever their misleading evidence indicates they should do. Some have fleshed out this strategy by arguing that `ought' is context-dependent[37]. Contextualism about ought says that to ask what the agent `ought' to do is to ask a question that does not make sense until we specify the context of the ought. So, there is one context in which the agent ought to have the attitudes demanded by the true requirements of rationality, and another in which she ought not. Similarly, some have distinguished distinct senses of 'rationality requires': structural and substantive senses; evidential and coherence-based senses[38]; or a `content-orientated' sense and a `disposition-orientated' sense[39].

However, there are problems for the dividing strategy. Dividing strategies dissolve the conflict, preserving the elements that contributed to it while denying that they genuinely conflict. One problem with this is that the rationale for dividing can seem *ad hoc*. For example, Worsnip argues that the requirements of evidence and the requirements of coherence represent distinct senses of rationality with distinct, non-conflicting sets of normative requirements (2018: 39). He compares the distinction between the demands of evidence and coherence to the distinction between the demands of morality and prudence. Although they both bear on actions, morality and prudence are not demands of the same kind. Likewise, he argues, the requirements of evidence and coherence both bear on beliefs, but do not make

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[36] See, for example, Alston (1985); Feldman (1988a); Gibbard (2005); Gibbons (2013); Goldman (1986); Kvanvig (1984); Pollock (1979); Schroeder (2009); Unger (1986)).
[37] See Björnsson & Finlay (2010), Pittard & Worsnip (2017), Worsnip (forthcoming).
[38] Worsnip (2018).
[39] This is the distinction made by Williamson (2017). The 'content-orientated' sense is that according to which it is rational to believe p iff one's evidence supports p, while the 'disposition-orientated' sense is that according to which it is rational to believe p iff `in the same circumstances with the same evidence someone disposed to conform their beliefs to what their evidence supports would believe p'. This appeal to dispositions owes much to Lasonen-Aarnio's work, for example (Lasonen-Aarnio, 2010, 2014).

demands of the same kind. However, it is not as clear as it needs it to be that the demands of evidence and coherence are distinct in the way that the demands of morality and prudence are. Evidence and coherence at least seem to both be demands that govern evaluations of epistemic rationality. While it would, perhaps, be convenient to separate them we need a good reason to do this. We also need some idea of how to individuate normative domains. Without this, it is difficult to decide when conflict is reason to divide, and when not.

One way to individuate normative domains is by reference to the kind of force that a set of requirements has. The requirements of morality have a moral force – one is required to comply with them for moral reasons, such that failing to do so would be morally wrong, or morally blameworthy. Prudential requirements do not have this force. One should comply with the requirements of prudence for prudential reasons, such as that to fail to do so would be against one's best interest. However, the demands of evidence and coherence, if they have any force, seem to have epistemic force. For both, it seems that one should comply with them for epistemic reasons, such as that failing to do so would be epistemically irrational[40]. That a pair of requirements lead to conflict is not a reason, on its own, to think that they must belong to different normative domains.

4.3 Dilemmism and Incoherentism

Dilemmism makes a more serious attempt to accommodate incoherence within our epistemic theories. Dilemmism and Incoherentism agree on various points. For example, they agree that sometimes, when it seems that you are subject to conflicting requirements, this reflects a genuine feature of normative reality that is, in some sense, incoherent. However, there are important differences in how they accommodate this feature.

Dilemmism says that there are epistemic dilemmas – situations where you are "damned if you do, damned if you don't" (Hughes, forthcoming). In such situations, the agent is subject to two conflicting requirements. Each requirement is equally real, and neither takes precedent over the other. There is no way for the agent to proceed without violating at least one of the requirements.

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[40] This sidesteps a vast literature on whether we have reason to be rational. There is much more to be said about whether and why one should comply with the demands of epistemic rationality, but this is not the focus of the discussion (see Broome (1999; 2013); Kolodny (2005)).

For example, consider the case in which the reasonable thing to believe is that your bike is in the shed. That is where you left it, there is no reason to suspect it has been stolen, you left it locked up, etc. However, your bike *has* been stolen and it is not in the shed. Hughes (2019) argues that this is an epistemic dilemma. On the one hand, you ought not believe that your bike is in the shed, because that is not true. On the other hand, you ought to believe that your bike *is* in the shed, because that is what it would be reasonable to believe (given your available evidence). It is a dilemma because there are two genuine epistemic requirements that are equally important and equally binding – the requirement not to believe falsehoods, and the requirement to believe what is reasonable. No matter what you do, you will be violating one of these requirements. So, no matter what you do, you will be failing to do what is required of you.

Dilemmists can accommodate the conflict involved in cases of misleading evidence about what rationality requires by treating them as epistemic dilemmas. Dilemmism might plausibly recognise the following requirements:

EVIDENCE: Believe what your evidence supports.

ANTI-AKRASIA: Do not have level-incoherent beliefs.

As we have seen, if your evidence misleadingly supports a false belief about what rationality requires, then these requirements conflict. By EVIDENCE, you ought to believe what your evidence supports, which in this case is something false about what rationality requires. By the true requirements, you ought not do whatever your new false belief about rationality recommends. By ANTI-AKRASIA, you ought not have level-incoherent beliefs. These requirements are incompatible: you cannot fulfil them all at once. Dilemmists can say that this is an epistemic dilemma (or, to be accurate, a trilemma): whatever you do, you will fail to comply with at least one requirement.

Relatedly, Alexander (2013) argues that higher order doubt produces epistemic dilemmas because it means that *no* attitude is justified. Suppose you doubt whether believing P is justified. Alexander argues that this puts you in an epistemic dilemma, because it means that whatever attitude you take (believing, disbelieving, or suspending belief), it will be unjustified.

There is no way for you to take an epistemic attitude towards P and be epistemically justified in doing so[41].

Incoherentism is importantly different from Dilemmism. Incoherentism says that there are some situations in which the agent is required to have incoherent attitudes. In such cases, the agent is not subject to conflicting requirements. Instead, rationality issues a single requirement – a requirement to, in this particular situation, be incoherent. Incoherentism does not imply that whatever the agent does, she will fail to meet a requirement. On the contrary, adopting the incoherent attitude combination is what is required of her.

Incoherentism also has different motivations to Dilemmism. Dilemmism sees its conflicts arising from epistemic norms that are independently plausible and do not conflict in most cases. For example:

> TRUTH: Believe P only if P is true

> EVIDENCE: Believe what your evidence supports

Often, these will not conflict. Believing the evidence often helps with the goal of believing only what is true. However, in many cases they do conflict. For example, when evidence misleadingly supports something false. In these cases, agents will find themselves in epistemic dilemmas.

Incoherentism, in contrast, is motivated by a need to accommodate these cases. It sees the epistemic landscape, at least for us non-ideal beings, as *frequently* supporting incoherent beliefs, and in need of norms equipped to deal with this.

Finally, and relatedly, the only kind of incoherence that Incoherentism *requires* is *level-*incoherence – incoherence between beliefs about what we ought to believe, and the rest of our beliefs. This requirement is motivated in large part by the epistemic ordinariness of our normative beliefs, and takes the view that normative beliefs have more-or-less the same epistemology as the rest of our beliefs. Incoherentism also allows that other kinds of incoherence are sometimes permitted – for example when this will lead to epistemic improvement, as in FORUMS. The conflict embraced by Dilemmism, however, is more

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[41] See also Christensen (2010), and Feldman (2005). Both hint at the idea that higher order doubt generates dilemmas, without fully developing the idea.

general. It is motivated by the observation that various epistemic norms that are independently plausible conflict in specific cases.

Dilemmism and Incoherentism both constitute serious attempts to accommodate conflicts in epistemology. However, Incoherentism is more successful at accommodating the specific conflict arising from misleading evidence about what rationality requires. The following section outlines in more detail the positive import of Incoherentism, and its key advantage over Dilemmism.

5. Incoherentism

Philosophers, particularly epistemologists, should like Incoherentism. It allows us to entertain bizarre philosophical theories about what we ought to believe without demanding that we reorganise the rest of our epistemic lives in light of them. Hume can be rational in wondering whether induction is justified by day and playing billiards the same evening unworried about how the billiard balls will behave tonight. Incoherentism says that these beliefs are about different subject matters, and need not affect each other. In what follows, I show how Incoherentism has the advantage over Dilemmism in accommodating conflicts arising from rational deliberation about what rationality requires.

First, there are various familiar reasons why Dilemmism has been thought theoretically undesirable, and worth considering as a 'last resort' position only. While none of these reasons are decisive against Dilemmism, it is worth noting that Incoherentism avoids the majority of these[42]. For example, when in an epistemic dilemma, the agent has no rational option. The Dilemmist's response to conflicts between requirements can thus seem to simply restate them unsatisfyingly. This is not the case for Incoherentism. Incoherentism gives agents a clear recommendation for how to be rational when requirements appear to conflict – be incoherent.

However, some might think that this too is an undesirable feature. While it is true that Incoherentism gives a recommendation while Dilemmism does not, its recommendations are difficult to comply with. Some have thought it psychologically impossible to knowingly hold a

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[42] See Hughes (forthcoming) for an argument against thinking of Dilemmism in this way.

level-incoherent belief combination (Greco 2012), there is certainly a kind of Moorean absurdity to believing "P, but I ought not believe P". However, Incoherentism is not alone in issuing recommendations that are difficult to follow. The Knowledge Norm is sometimes just as difficult to follow, and it remains popular among epistemologists. It may even be psychologically impossible – we cannot always believe only what we know. Dilemmism and Incoherentism both put their agents in difficult situations, but Incoherentism does at least give us an answer rather than simply restating the problem. This is an advantage, though it is not decisive.

A more decisive reason to prefer Incoherentism over Dilemmism is that Incoherentism has the resources to account for the positive features of incoherence mentioned earlier. Sometimes, incoherence is an epistemically good thing. Not only can it signal act that one may be in the grip of a false theory, but sometimes level-incoherent beliefs are true. Dilemmism cannot capture this optimistic stance on incoherence, because Dilemmists take the view that when the agent is in an epistemic dilemma, whatever she does will be wrong. Incoherentists, in contrast, think that incoherent beliefs are sometimes required, and appropriate responses to the epistemic situation.

Third, Incoherentism is better equipped to deal with deliberation at the normative level – deliberation about what rationality requires, or which are the correct epistemic norms, or what our evidence supports. Ordinary epistemological views have trouble accommodating this. As discussed, as soon as agents are rationally mistaken about the normative facts, ordinary theories that prohibit coherence are forced into extremes (see §3.3, p. 14). Incoherentism, instead, generates specific recommendations for these kinds of situations that are simply extensions of independently plausible epistemic claims. So, if you think that we are required to believe what our evidence supports, then this is also true at the higher order. This will sometimes generate situations in which you are required to believe something incoherent.

Dilemmism deals with these situations by saying that agents are subject to conflicting requirements. For example, a Dilemmist response to a situation in which an agent's evidence supports both P and *my evidence does not support P* might be to say that the agent ought to both believe P (because that's what the evidence supports), and not believe P (because that's what it would be reasonable to believe). The two requirements are equally real, but have their

sources in different epistemic norms – norms of truth and norms of reasonableness. Both norms are good, but they often conflict. So, while Incoherentism's incoherent recommendation is just a natural extension of the requirement to believe what your situation supports, and the fact that you ought to obey the true requirements, Dilemmism reveals an inconsistency in our overarching theory of epistemic rationality – it reveals it to contain norms that conflict.

Fourth, Incoherentism also deals with a generalized version of the conflict arising from misleading evidence about what rationality requires. Recall that the possibility of rational mistakes about requirements of rationality generalizes to any requirement of rationality. In its general form, the conflict between requirements is a conflict between pressure to obey the true requirements, or not obey the true requirements. On this reading, the Dilemmist response to the puzzle would say that the agent ought to φ (because that's what the true requirements require), and ought not to φ (because that's what they rationally believe the true requirements require). The conflict seems to be between the following two norms:

FIRST-ORDER: Do what the true requirements require

SECOND-ORDER: Do what you rationally believe the true requirements require.

If this is an epistemic dilemma, it is one that operates at a higher order of abstraction that those Dilemmism usually endorses – which usually occur between ordinary first-order epistemic norms such as "Believe only what you know!", or "Believe only the truth!". However, this higher-order epistemic dilemma is not a conflict between particular epistemic norms, but rather a conflict between pressure to obey the norms (whatever they are), and pressure to diverge from them. Dilemmism says that you ought to *both* do what the true requirements require *and* do what you rationally believe the true requirements require. In this situation you cannot do both these things. This kind of epistemic dilemma concerns not just which epistemic norms to obey, but whether to obey the epistemic norms at all. By FIRST-ORDER you ought to, but by SECOND-ORDER you ought not. The problem is that this introduces doubt as to whether rationality is worth obeying at all. A theory of rationality should not, if it can help it, make us doubt whether or not to follow it[43].

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[43] This is similar to the objection Elga raises against conciliationism (2007).

Incoherentism avoids this – when it says you are required to be incoherent, there is no ambivalence about this. Instead, Incoherentism says that when you have misleading evidence about what rationality requires, you are required to both believe the falsehood about what is required, but not actually comply with that falsehood. That Incoherentism recommends this just follows from the assumptions we made about rationality. We assumed that agents are required to believe what their epistemic situations support, and that there are facts about what rationality requires. So, you should always believe what your epistemic situation supports, also when it supports something false about what rationality requires. You should also always obey the true requirements. These requirements do not bear on the coherence between the levels of your beliefs, so you can comply with all the true requirements at the first order without being level-coherent.

This gives us four positive reasons to prefer Incoherentism to Dilemmism as a way of embracing conflicts that arise from the possibility of rational mistakes about what rationality requires.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that our epistemic theories should, sometimes, embrace incoherence. In particular, they should embrace incoherence when our situations support rational mistakes about requirements of rationality. After offering some reasons to think that coherence requirements of rationality are overrated, I distinguished some strategies for embracing the conflict, and argued that Incoherentism does a better job of accommodating the relevant kind of conflict than Dilemmism.

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