Instrumental rationality as a system of categorical imperatives

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(BA) *Basic assumption:* If A intends to φ, and A believes that ψ-ing is a necessary means to φ-ing, and A does not intend to ψ, then A goes wrong in some way.

Question: What norm do agents violate when they are means/end-incoherent?

1. The hypothetical imperative

Hypothetical imperative: a purely structural ought-claim/imperative that is directly concerned with means/end-coherence as such.

Problem: Both available interpretations of the hypothetical imperative face severe objections.

(NS) *The narrow-scope view:* If A intends to φ, and A believes that ψ-ing is a necessary means to φ-ing, then A ought to intend to ψ.[1]

$$I\phi \land B(\phi \rightarrow \psi) \supset O(I\psi)$$

(NS) explains (BA), but is vulnerable to decisive objections:
- *Bootstrapping:* (NS) licenses unacceptable bootstrapping (Bratman 1987; Broome 2001).
- *Inconsistency:* (NS) generates inconsistent requirements (Broome 2007).

(WS) *The wide-scope view:* A always ought to (not intend to φ, *or* not believe that ψ-ing is a necessary means to φ-ing, *or* intend to ψ).[2]

$$O(\neg I\phi \lor \neg B[\phi \rightarrow \psi] \lor I\psi)$$

(WS) explains (BA), but is also vulnerable to decisive objections:
- *Bootstrapping:* (WS) licenses inacceptable bootstrapping if we stipulate that A cannot give up her end and means/end-belief (Setiya 2007).
- *Asymmetry:* (WS) implausibly entails that we can always satisfy the norm of instrumental rationality by giving up the end or the means/end-belief (Schroeder 2004).
- *Guidance:* (WS) requires that there is a reason for which we could either give up a belief *or, alternatively,* adopt an intention. But there is no such reason.[3]

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[1] Compare e.g. Korsgaard (1997; 2009) and Schroeder (2004).

[2] Compare Bratman (2009), Broome (1999), Darwall (1983, 16), Gensler (1985), Greenspan (1975), Rippon (2011), Wallace (2001, §3). According to Hill (1973) and Rippon (forthcoming), Kant (1785) is to be interpreted as an advocate of (WS), while according to Schroeder (2005), he is to be interpreted as an advocate of (NS).

[3] See Kiesewetter (2013, ch. 6) for an extensive discussion of the guidance objection. For further objections to (WS), see Bedke (2009, §2), Dreier (2009), Evers (2011), and Raz (2005, §2).

2. The disjunctive view

(DV) *The disjunction view:* Either A ought not to intend to ϕ, *or* A ought not to believe that ψ-ing is a necessary means to ϕ-ing, *or* A ought to intend to ψ.[4]

$$O(\neg I\phi) \vee O(\neg B[\phi \rightarrow \psi]) \vee O(I\psi)$$

→ Means/end-incoherence shows the agent to go wrong not because it violates a hypothetical imperative that requires means/end-coherence *as such*, but because it *indicates* that the agent violates some categorical imperative that is not concerned with means/end-coherence at all.

(DV) explains (BA) while avoiding the problems generated by (NS) and (WS). But (DV) is in need of explanation itself.

My explanation takes for granted that what an agent ought to do/believe/intend is determined by the reasons that are part of A's available evidence (cf. Kiesewetter 2011).

(1) If A lacks sufficient evidence for her means/end-belief, then *A ought not to have the belief.*
(2) If A does not lack this evidence, then there are three logical possibilities:
    (2a) A's reasons count decisively against ϕ-ing. In this case, *A ought not to intend to ϕ.*
    (2b) A's reasons count decisively in favour of ϕ-ing. In this case, *A ought to intend to ψ.*
    (2c) A's reasons count neither decisively in favour, nor decisively against ϕ-ing.
        (= A's ϕ-ing is *underdetermined* by reasons)

Provided that these claims can be defended, this gives us:

(DV)* *Unless A is in an underdetermined case,* either A ought not to intend to ϕ, *or* A ought not to believe that ψ-ing is a necessary means to ϕ-ing, *or* A ought to intend to ψ.

But (DV)* does not fully explain (BA). So (DV)-proponents face a challenge: What explains that means/end-incoherent agents go wrong in underdetermined cases?

3. The underdetermination problem

Some answers (that I think are unsuccessful):

- *Intention-based reasons:* Adopting an intention provides an additional reason (Cheng-Guajardo 2014), at least in underdetermined cases (cf. Chang 2009; Raz 1998).
- *Intentions as investments*: Changing one's mind is an unnecessary cost in underdetermined cases (Kolodny 2011; Scanlon 2004).
- *Normativism:* Intentions involve normative beliefs. Means/end-incoherent agents go wrong because they act against their own normative judgments (Scanlon 2007; Schroeder 2009).
- *Cognitivism:* Intentions involve beliefs about one's future behaviour. Means/end-incoherent agents go wrong because they have inconsistent beliefs (Harman 1976; Setiya 2007; Wallace 2001).

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[4] Related ideas are expressed in Kolodny (2008), Scanlon (2004), Raz (2005).

An alternative approach:

- Intentions are partly constituted by dispositions for further deliberation and planning, and for taking means (cf. Bratman 1987).
- Therefore, by intending an action but not intending the necessary means, one increases the risk to deliberate and plan in unnecessary ways and take means to actions that one will not perform.
- One generally has good reason to avoid increasing the risk of wasting one's resources in pointless activity.

These economical considerations support:

Reason to decide (RTD): If A intends to ϕ, A has sufficient evidence that ψ-ing is a necessary means to ϕ-ing, and yet A does not intend to ψ, then A usually has a strong reason to make a decision between ϕ-ing and not-ψ-ing.

→ RTD explains why means/end-incoherent agents go wrong even in cases of underdetermination.

4. Conclusion

Common position: all (practical) normativity has to be explained in terms of the normativity of instrumental rationality. See e.g. Foot's "Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives" (1972).

To the contrary, I argued: The assumption of hypothetical imperatives is ultimately untenable, and the irrationality of means/end-incoherence should be explained in terms of "categorical" reasons or imperatives.

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