

The normativity of rationality

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Structure of the talk

1. Preliminaries
2. Against the structuralist view
3. Against the mixed view
4. Rationality as responding to reasons
5. Explaining structural irrationality

Preliminaries

- Irrationality involves the violation of a standard/requirement of rationality.
- Rationality is normative iff everyone has (decisive) reasons (or ought) to conform to the rational requirements that apply to her.
- Some combinations of attitudes suffice for irrationality, no matter what reasons we have for and against each of the particular attitudes.

(Cf. Broome 2007a, 2013)

Examples of structural irrationality

- (A) *Weakness of will*: If A believes that she ought to ϕ , and A does not intend to ϕ , then A is irrational.
- (B) *Instrumental irrationality*: 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 is irrational.
- (C) *Weakness of belief*: If A believes that she has sufficient evidence that p , and A does not believe that p , then A is irrational.
- (D) *Modus ponens irrationality*: If A believes that p , and A believes that $p \rightarrow q$, and A does not believe that q , then A is irrational.

Restrictions

- (A)-(D) are only approximately true.
- Harman (1986) against (D): There is no point in cluttering one's mind with an endless array of trivial beliefs.
- So (D) should be qualified:

(D)* If A believes that p , and A believes that $p \rightarrow q$, **and A attends to q** , and A does not believe that q , then A is irrational.

Restrictions

- Kamm (2000) against (B): One can rationally refrain from intending the means if one believes that one will take them whether one intends them or not.
- The same point applies to (A).
- Both (A) and (B) can be complemented by the condition that **A believes that she will not perform the action unless she now intends to do it.**
- To keep things as simple as possible, I have to ignore these complications.

Structural irrationality

<i>Structural irrationality</i>	Practical	Theoretical
Second-order	(A) Weakness of will	(C) Weakness of belief
First-order	(B) Instrumental irrationality	(D) <i>Modus ponens</i> irrationality

Structural irrationality involves conflicts between attitude-states that are jointly incoherent:

- (A) and (C) involve “second-order” conflicts between an attitude and a normative belief with implications for the normative status of this attitude.
- (B) and (D) involve merely “first-order” conflicts between attitudes.

Structural requirements of rationality

- If there are *purely structural* sufficient conditions for irrationality, and irrationality involves the violation of a rational requirement, then it is natural to assume that there are structural requirements of rationality.
- For example, (A) will correspond to $(A)_R$:

(A) *Weakness of will*: If A believes that she ought to ϕ , and A does not intend to ϕ , then A is irrational.

$(A)_R$ *Self-governance requirement*: Rationality requires A to intend to ϕ if A believes that she ought to ϕ .

Structural requirements of rationality

- Note: $(A)_R$ explains (A), but does not follow from (A) on logical or conceptual grounds.
- (A) merely states sufficient conditions for it to be the case that *some* rational requirement is violated. It does not follow that there is a particular requirement that prohibits exactly these conditions.
- The assumption of structural requirements of rationality is a natural explanation of, but is not necessitated by, the truth of (A)-(D).

The basic problem

- (1) There are structural requirements of rationality.
- (2) Rational requirements are normative.
- (3) Structural requirements of rationality, if there are any, are not normative.

Each of (1)-(3) seems well-supported, but they cannot all be true.

A range of views

–(3) *The structuralist view:*

There are structural requirements of rationality, and these requirements are normative.

(See e.g. Broome 1999, Bratman 2009, Korsgaard 2009, Southwood 2008)

–(2) *The mixed view:*

There are structural requirements of rationality, but these requirements are not normative.

(See e.g. Broome 2007a, Brunero 2010a, Cullity 2008, Kolodny 2005, Way 2010)

–(1) *The anti-structuralist view:*

There are no structural requirements of rationality.

A range of views

The anti-structuralist view is not to be confused with

The myth view: There are no first-order requirements of structural rationality, and rational requirements are not necessarily normative.

(See e.g. Kolodny 2005, 2007, 2008; Raz 2005, 2010; and probably Scanlon 2007)

To the contrary, proponents of the myth view often presuppose the mixed view.

Aim of this talk

- Show how the structuralist and the mixed view fail.
- Provide a sketch of an alternative account of rationality, which embraces the normativity of rationality at the cost of denying that there are any structural requirements of rationality.
- Outline an explanation of the appearance of structural irrationality in terms of non-structural requirements of rationality.

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2. Against the structuralist view

2.1 The bootstrapping problem

Assume a natural (“narrow scope”) account of the self-governance requirement:

(A)_{NS} If A believes that she ought to ϕ , then rationality requires A to intend to ϕ .

Assuming that rationality is normative, it follows:

If A believes that she ought to ϕ , then A *ought* to intend to ϕ .

Bootstrapping

- But this licenses unacceptable bootstrapping (see esp. Bratman 1987, Broome 1999).
- The same happens for all structural requirements corresponding to (A)-(D).
- Therefore, structural requirements cannot be normative (Kolodny 2005).

The wide-scope response

$(A)_{NS}$ *Self-governance requirement, narrow-scope:*

If A believes that she ought to ϕ , then rationality requires A to intend to ϕ .

$(A)_{WS}$ *Self-governance requirement, wide-scope:*

Rationality requires A to [not believe that she ought to ϕ , or intend to ϕ].

$(A)_{WS}$ does not license bootstrapping. So all we have to do is substitute $(A)_{WS}$ for $(A)_{NS}$.

The wide-scope response

- Not so. Suppose that in a particular situation intending to ϕ is a necessary means to satisfying $(A)_{WS}$ (e.g. because you are psychologically incapable of giving up your belief).
- Then it *does* seem to follow from $(A)_{WS}$ that you ought to intend to ϕ .
- And this means that the wide-scope account still allows for detachment of unacceptable normative conclusions (see Setiya 2007, Brunero 2010b).

2. Against the structuralist view

2.2 The why-be-rational challenge

If there are reasons to be rational, what are these reasons? (Kolodny 2005)

- To answer this question in the affirmative, we either have to assume that there are instrumental reasons to be rational, or that rational requirements provide reasons in themselves.
- But we usually do not, and often cannot, conform to rational requirements *for* any instrumental reason or *for* the reason that doing this is rationally required.

The why-be-rational challenge

- For example, we can never adopt a belief-state for the reason that this would be (structurally) rational.
- But if R is generally not the kind of thing for which we can ϕ , then it seems implausible to think that R is a reason to ϕ .
- Therefore, there are no reasons to be rational.

Buckpassing?

- Attractive response to the why-be-moral challenge: buckpassing.
- Requirements are not reasons, but verdictive statements to the effect that there are reasons of a particular kind (different from the requirement) that decisively favour the relevant response.
- But structural requirements of rationality cannot be verdicts about ordinary reasons for attitudes, because they hold independently of whether such reasons occur.

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3. Against the mixed view

The mixed view: There are structural requirements of rationality, but these requirements are not normative.

Problem 1: the normativity of rationality

- Ordinary ascriptions of irrationality involve criticism, and criticism presupposes that the agent should have acted differently.
- Denying the normativity of rationality thus commits one to a revisionary error theory about ordinary irrationality ascriptions.

Against the mixed view

Problem 2: The obscurity of non-normative requirements of rationality

It seems that we can understand requirements in either of two ways:

1. As verdicts about reasons of a certain kind (cf. moral, prudential, epistemic requirements).
2. As standards that are set up by some convention or practice (cf. requirements of etiquette, grammar, games, perhaps the law).

Against the mixed view

- According to the mixed view, rational requirements are not to be understood along the lines of (1).
- But rational requirements also cannot be understood along the lines of (2). They are not conventional, but rather necessary truths that are detectable through non-empirical modes of understanding such as reflective equilibrium.
- The mixed view thus leaves it obscure what rational requirements are supposed to be.

Against the mixed view

Problem 3:

There is no tenable interpretation of structural requirements of rationality, independently of whether or not they are normative.

- Structural requirements take either narrow or wide scope.
- But neither of these interpretations is viable.

Narrow vs. wide scope

- *Basic situation of structural irrationality:* If A is in the antecedent state (a), and A is not in the consequent state (c), then A is irrational.
- *Narrow-scope account:* If A is in (a), then A is rationally required to be in (c).
- *Wide-scope account:* A is rationally required [not to be in (a) or to be in (c)].

Against the narrow-scope account: Bootstrapping

(C)_{NS} *Evidence-belief requirement, narrow-scope:*

If A believes that she has sufficient evidence that p,
then rationality requires A to believe that p.

- Example: Jane
- (C)_{NS} implausibly entails that Jane is rationally required to believe a contradiction p, just because she believes (out of wishful thinking) that she has sufficient evidence for p.
- Thus, the narrow-scope account licenses implausible bootstrapping of rational requirements.

Against the wide-scope account: The rational process constraint

(A)_{WS} *Self-governance requirement, wide-scope:*

Rationality requires of A to [not believe that she ought to ϕ , or intend to ϕ].

- One can always satisfy this requirement by ceasing to believe that one ought to ϕ . But often this is not a rationally acceptable way to proceed.
- Example: John knows that he ought to ϕ , he's just very lazy and therefore does not intend to ϕ . He has no beliefs or evidence on the basis of which he could discard his ought-belief.

Against the wide-scope account: The rational process constraint

- WS-account implausibly entails: John satisfies a rational requirement if he gives up his belief that he ought to ϕ .
- WS-account violates:
- *Rational process constraint*: A response ϕ should count as way to satisfy a rational requirement for A only if there is a rational process available to A that leads to ϕ -ing.

Narrow vs. wide scope

- NS-account states: *Whenever* you are in the antecedent state (a), you're required to be in the consequent state (c).
- WS-account states: *Whenever* you give up the antecedent state (a), you are satisfying a rational requirement.
- Examples show: both accounts overgeneralize.
- Neither does refusing to be in (c) always constitute a violation, nor does discarding (a) always constitute the satisfaction of a rational requirement.

The myth of structural rationality

Two common arguments in the literature:

1. Since the NS-account is false, the WS-account is correct (e.g. Broome 1999, Brunero 2010a).
2. Since the WS-account is false, the NS-account is correct (e.g. Kolodny 2005, Schroeder 2004).

It's time to conclude that neither account is correct: There is no viable interpretation of structural requirements of rationality.

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4. Rationality as responding to reasons

Two tasks:

1. Sketching an alternative (non-structural) account of rationality that is compatible with the normativity of rationality.
2. Explaining structural irrationality in terms of this account.

Suggestion for (1): Rationality requires us to respond correctly to reasons.

Rationality as responding to reasons

A response conception of rationality is attractive, because it provides:

1. a clear answer to both the question of the content and the question of the authority of rational requirements
2. an elegant response to the why-be-rational challenge
3. a unified picture of what holds rational requirements together

Broome's objection

“The fish on the plate in front of you contains salmonella. This is a reason for you not to eat it, and let us assume all your reasons together require you not to eat it. But you have no evidence that the fish contains salmonella. Then you might eat it even though your reasons require you not to, and nevertheless you might be rational.” (Broome 2007b, 352)

Available reasons

- Response to Broome: Rationality requires us to respond to *available* reasons.
- Common assumption: agents have a body of evidence at their disposal, and rationality requires them to respond to their evidence (see e.g. Williamson 2000).
- Assumption: Knowledge is sufficient for evidence.
- So if A knows that p, then p is part of her evidence and might figure as an available (or evidence-based) reason.

Rationality as responding to reasons

(RRR):

- *Intention*: If A has decisive evidence-based reason (not) to intend to ϕ , then A is rationally required (not) to intend to ϕ .
- *Belief*: If A has decisive evidence-based reason (not) to believe that p, then A is rationally required (not) to believe that p.

➔ Broome's objection is ineffective against (RRR)

The evidence-relative view

- Broome assumes: What we have all things considered decisive reason, or ought to do, can depend on facts that are not available to us.

Contrast:

The evidence-relative view (ERV):

A ought (or has overall decisive reason) to ϕ if, and only if, A has decisive evidence-based reason to ϕ (cf. Kieseewetter 2011, Zimmerman 2008).

The evidence-relative view

- If ERV is true, then RRR generates rational requirements that are necessarily supported by overall decisive reasons.
- If ERV is false, then RRR still generates rational requirements that are necessarily supported by a significant subgroup of reasons.

Response requirements (theoretical)

RRR Belief: If A has decisive evidence-based reason (not) to believe that p, then A is rationally required (not) to believe that p.



TR Theoretical rationality: If A has sufficient evidence that p, then A is rationally required to believe p. If A lacks sufficient evidence that p, then A is rationally required not to believe p.

Background assumption: Reasons for beliefs are provided by evidence for the truth of their contents.

Response requirements (practical)

RRR Intention: If A has decisive evidence-based reason (not) to intend to ϕ , then A is rationally required (not) to intend to ϕ .



PR Practical rationality: If A has sufficient evidence that she ought to ϕ , then A is rationally required to intend to ϕ . If A has sufficient evidence that she ought not to ϕ , then A is rationally required not to intend to ϕ .

Response requirements (practical)

Background assumptions:

1. If A's evidence is sufficient for her to believe that she ought (not) to ϕ , then it also provides decisive evidence-based reasons (not) to ϕ .
2. Decisive evidence-based reasons (not) to ϕ provide decisive evidence-based reason (not) to intend to ϕ .

Therefore, RRR entails PR.

Restrictions

Just as (A)-(D) need to be qualified, TR and PR also have to be qualified for analogous reasons:

*TR** *Theoretical rationality*: If A has sufficient evidence that p, **and A attends to p**, then A is rationally required to believe p. (...)

*PR** *Practical rationality*: If A has sufficient evidence that she ought to ϕ , **and A has sufficient evidence that she will not ϕ unless she intends to ϕ** , then A is rationally required to intend to ϕ . (...)

Sorry that I have to ignore these qualifications here!
(But see Kieseewetter 2013)

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- Aim: Explain claims about structural irrationality, such as (A)-(D), in terms of the non-structural response requirements TR and PR.
- This would amount to an explanation of the appearance of structural irrationality that
 - avoids the problems of structural requirements of rationality, and, most notably,
 - vindicates the normativity of rationality, because it proceeds in terms of requirements of rationality that are necessarily normative

Explaining structural irrationality: the general idea

“A man who falls into inconsistency does not incur the further evil of a special sort of wrongness, logical wrongness; it is only that logic suffices to show that somewhere or other (logic does not say where) he is wrong in a non-logical way.” (Geach 1977, 166)

Generalization: Structural irrationality does not involve a special failure to be structurally rational, it only suffices to show that somewhere or other, the agent has failed to be rational in a non-structural way.

Structural vs. non-structural explanations

- *Basic situation of structural irrationality:* If A is in the antecedent state (a), and A is not in the consequent state (c), then A is irrational.
- *Narrow-scope account:* If A is in (a), then A is required to be in (c).
- *Wide-scope account:* A is required [not to be in (a) or to be in (c)].
- ***Non-structural account:* A is required not to be in (a), or A is required to be in (c).**

Contrast to Kolodny's view

- Kolodny (2007, 2008) explains some rational requirements in similar ways.
- Most important difference: Kolodny takes rationality to consist in responding to **beliefs about** reasons, not to reasons themselves.
- While Kolodny denies that there are first-order structural requirements, he is committed to second-order requirements, which are not normative.
- For this reason, Kolodny's explanation *undermines* the normativity of rationality, while my explanation *vindicates* it.

Explaining weakness of will

1. A has sufficient evidence that she ought to ϕ , or A lacks this evidence (logical truth).
 2. If A lacks sufficient evidence that she ought to ϕ , then A is rationally required not to believe that she ought to ϕ (TR).
 3. If A has sufficient evidence that she ought to ϕ , then A is rationally required to intend to ϕ (PR).
 4. Therefore, A is rationally required not to believe that she ought to ϕ , or A is rationally required to intend to ϕ (from 1, 2, 3).
- (A) *Weakness of will*: If A believes that she ought to ϕ , and A does not intend to ϕ , then A is irrational (from 4).

Objection

- There are some intuitive satisfaction claims that the non-structural account cannot capture.
- *Example:* Tim believes upon insufficient evidence that he ought to stay on a diet, but lacks the intention to do so. After reflection, he comes to have the intention, basing it on his sincere but unjustified belief.
- Intuitively, Tim satisfies a rational requirement “in the wrong direction”. But according to the non-structural account, he does not satisfy a rational requirement at all.

Response

Alternative explanations for the satisfaction intuition:

1. Tim manifests a valuable disposition.
2. Tim satisfies a requirement to review and reassess his reasons.
3. Tim reasons correctly. It is correct to base an intention on an ought-belief.

Response

- Tom is like Tim, except that he does not take account of his incoherence at all and comes to intend to stay on the diet by mere accident.
- Tom neither manifests a valuable disposition, nor reasons correctly, nor responds to second-order evidence.
- There seems to be no pretheoretical reason to think that Tom satisfies a requirement.

Explaining instrumental irrationality

(B) *Instrumental irrationality*: 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 is irrational.

- If A lacks sufficient evidence for the means/end-belief, then she violates TR.
- If A has sufficient evidence for the means/end-belief, then there are three possibilities:

Explaining instrumental irrationality

1. A has decisive evidence-based reason not to intend to ϕ . In this case, A violates RRR.
2. A has decisive evidence-based reason to intend to ϕ . In this case, A plausibly also has decisive evidence-based reason to intend to ψ , and thus violates RRR.
3. A's intention to ϕ is *underdetermined* by her reasons (or “merely permissible”).

Challenge: explaining why means/end-incoherence is irrational in underdetermined cases.

The underdetermination problem

Some (problematic) answers in the literature:

- *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).

The underdetermination problem

- *Normativism*: Intentions involve normative beliefs. Means/end-incoherence is irrational because it involves akrasia (Scanlon 2007, Schroeder 2009).
- *Cognitivism*: Intentions involve beliefs about one's future behaviour. Means/end-incoherence is irrational because it involves *modus ponens* irrationality (Harman 1976, Setiya 2007, Wallace 2001).

The underdetermination problem

An alternative approach:

- Intentions are partly constituted by dispositions for further deliberation and planning, and for taking means (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.

The underdetermination problem

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 evidence-based reason to make a decision between ϕ -ing and not- ψ -ing.

RTD explains why means/end-incoherence violates RRR even in cases of underdetermination.

Instrumental rationality as a system of categorical imperatives

- 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.

Conclusion

- Claims to the effect that there are sufficient structural conditions for irrationality (A-D) can be explained in terms of requirements to respond to available reasons.
- This enables us to respond to the basic problem by rejecting the assumption that there are structural requirements of rationality.
- This is independently motivated by the problems that these requirements pose.

Conclusion

- All rational requirements that are needed to vindicate our intuitions about irrationality are necessarily normative.
- So: Yes, we should indeed be rational.

Many thanks!

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