

# Are Rationalists Philosophically More Ambitious than Instrumentalists?

Thomas Schmidt, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

## 1. Introduction

The instrumental principle (IP), instrumentalism (I), and rationalism (R)

- (IP) One ought to take the suitable means to one's ends.
- (I) The instrumental principle (IP) is the only valid principle about practical oughts.
- (R) In addition to (IP), there are substantial criteria for the normative acceptability of ends.

A structural asymmetry?

“Instrumental rationality is within the intersection of all theories of rationality (and perhaps nothing else is). In this sense, instrumental rationality is the default theory, the theory that all discussants of rationality can take for granted, whatever else they think. [...]. The instrumental theory of rationality does not seem to stand in need of justification, whereas every other theory does.” (Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality*, 1993: p. 133)

Claim of this talk

Rationalism is not, for purely structural reasons, philosophically more ambitious than instrumentalism.

Preliminaries

- Structural vs. other differences between rationalism and instrumentalism.
- “A ought to  $\phi$ .” – “A has most (or best) reason to  $\phi$ .” – “It is rational for A to  $\phi$ .”

## 2. Rationalism is not logically stronger than instrumentalism

Differences in logical strength

- (i) A theory  $T_1$  is logically stronger than a theory  $T_2$  if  $T_1$  implies  $T_2$ , but not *vice versa* (consider, e.g., “the planets revolve around the sun on ellipses” vs. “the planets revolve around the sun”).
- (ii) Such a difference in logical strength generally involves differences in burdens of justification.

## Rationalism, instrumentalism, and logical strength

- (i) It might seem that rationalism adds something to and, consequently, is logically stronger than, instrumentalism.
- (ii) Both (R) and (I) share (IP), but strengthen it in different ways:
  - (I) (IP) & *that's it*.
  - (R) (IP) & criteria about ends.This is why rationalism is not logically stronger than instrumentalism.
- (iii) Since (R) and (I) contradict each other, this is ultimately trivial.

## Outlook

Even though rationalism is not the logically stronger *theory*, it might be the theory involving the logically stronger *ought claims*.

- Is this really so? [Sections 3 and 4]
- Suppose this were so – would this involve a difference in philosophical ambition? [Section 5]

## 3. *Wide-scope vs. narrow-scope*

The narrow-scope (IP<sub>N</sub>) and the wide-scope (IP<sub>W</sub>) interpretation of (IP)

- (IP<sub>N</sub>) If one has an end, then one ought to take the suitable means.
- (IP<sub>W</sub>) One ought to see to it that, if one has an end, then one takes the suitable means.

Instrumentalism, rationalism, (IP<sub>N</sub>), (IP<sub>W</sub>)

- (i) *Instrumentalism and (IP<sub>N</sub>)*. Instrumentalists typically adopt (IP<sub>N</sub>) since (IP<sub>N</sub>), unlike (IP<sub>W</sub>), is a way of expressing the standard instrumentalist idea that all practical normativity is grounded in individual ends.
- (ii) *Rationalism and (IP<sub>W</sub>)*. Rationalists ought to adopt (IP<sub>N</sub>), since only this is consistent with the rationalist project of amending the instrumental principle by a criterion for the normative acceptability of ends.

## Upshot

Since (IP<sub>W</sub>) does not imply (IP<sub>N</sub>), versions of rationalism subscribing to (IP<sub>W</sub>) do not involve logically stronger ought claims than the standard version of instrumentalism, i.e. instrumentalism subscribing to (IP<sub>N</sub>).

#### 4. Rationalism and the instrumental principle

##### Rationalist difficulties with the instrumental principle

- (i) (IP<sub>w</sub>) cannot be given a straightforward normative rationale within rationalism.
- (ii) In order to avoid a normatively fragmented theory, there is, therefore, reason for rationalists either to give up the instrumental principle as a normative principle of rationality, or to restrict it.

##### Restricting the instrumental principle to rationally permissible ends

Instead of (IP<sub>w</sub>), rationalists have reasons to adopt something along the lines of

- (\*) one ought to take those, and only those means that are (i) means to those of one's ends which are rationally permissible or (ii) means to ends which one ought to pursue (no matter whether one does in fact pursue them or not).

This principle, and relevantly similar ones, can be given a normative rationale within a rationalist framework.

Since (\*) does not imply (IP), rationalists subscribing to (\*) are not committed to logically stronger ought claims than instrumentalists.

##### Abandoning (IP) has implications which one might find counterintuitive

Consider how Stupid Killer (SK), Clever Killer (CK), Stupid Philanthrope (SP), and Clever Philanthrope (CP) satisfy ('+') or violate ('-') the principles mentioned above:

		SK	CK	SP	CP
Instrumentalism	(IP <sub>N/W</sub> )	-	+	-	+
Rationalism	has permissible ends	-	-	+	+
	(*)	+	+	-	+

Note that, according to rationalism in the version which accepts (\*),

- (i) there is no difference in rationality between SK and CK.
- (ii) SK and SP are not for the same reason rationally defective.

(This is true for every version of rationalism not involving an unrestricted variant of the instrumental principle.)

##### Upshot

- (i) If rationalists go for (IP<sub>w</sub>) and instrumentalists adopts (IP<sub>N</sub>), then rationalism's oughts do not imply instrumentalism's oughts. The same is true if rationalists abandon (IP) altogether and go for something along the lines of (\*).
- (ii) Even so, there might be forms of rationalism and forms of instrumentalism such that rationalism's oughts are logically stronger than instrumentalism's oughts.

## 5. Demandingness

### A remaining issue

Assume that rationalism's oughts are logically stronger than instrumentalism's oughts. One might hold that there is a sense in which rationalism, then, is more demanding than instrumentalism in a way leading to an asymmetry in burdens of justification.

### The idea ...

According to a wide-spread idea, oughts express, or are, demands. Demands interfere with individual liberty. Actions interfering with individual liberty are specifically justifiable. This is why a theory involving more, or logically stronger, oughts faces, at least *ceteris paribus*, the burden of justification.

### ... and why it is misleading

Theories don't demand, and oughts are not demands. If anything, speech acts of the form "you ought to  $\phi$ " are demands – but in general not even that is true.

## 6. Conclusion

[t.schmidt@philosophie.hu-berlin.de](mailto:t.schmidt@philosophie.hu-berlin.de)  
Institut für Philosophie, Universität Wien  
27.04.2015