

## Rationality and Normativity

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Suppose I point out to some person some way in which he's irrational (see [Rationality](#)). Perhaps I show him how his beliefs about the outcome of the recent election are the product of wishful thinking and fly in the face of the available evidence. Or perhaps I show him how his resistance to getting vaccinated is based on a poor calculation of the expected costs and benefits of doing so. Or perhaps I point out how his theological beliefs are full of inconsistencies. Or perhaps I show him how he's instrumentally irrational in intending (see [Intention](#)) to pass his final exams, believing that studying is necessary for passing, and yet not intending to study. Or perhaps I point out how he's akratic (see [Weakness of Will](#)) in believing that he ought to get some exercise, but not intending to do so. Most likely, he'll take offense. (Criticizing people for being irrational isn't a good way to make friends.) And he'll likely try to show that the criticism is misplaced – that the inconsistencies are only apparent, that there's really a rational basis for refusing the shot, and so forth. If I'm lucky enough to convince him at the end of the day that there is indeed some way in which he's irrational, that's likely to bring about some change of mind – perhaps leading him to resolve the inconsistencies in his theological beliefs, or make more prudent decisions about his health, and so forth. What he's *not* likely to do is to concede that the criticism is on target, but then shrug it off by saying something like, "I'm irrational. So what? What reason do I have to be rational?" That would certainly strike us, at least at a first glance, as an odd reply.

But it's not clear exactly what's wrong with that dismissive reply. It won't help for us to say in response that rationality issues *requirements* – in particular, that it *requires* that our beliefs be responsive to the available evidence, and *requires* that our beliefs be consistent, and so forth. That's because the person making the dismissive reply would then simply ask why he should care about those requirements. After all, there are all sorts of requirements. Fashion requires that you not wear socks with sandals. The precepts of Roman Catholicism require that you attend Mass on Sundays. But you might reasonably wonder, as you are out for your Sunday walk in your socks and sandals, whether there's any reason to care about those requirements. Our "rationality skeptic" might just insist that the requirements of rationality are on a par with the requirements of fashion and Catholicism. He might demand that we provide some reason to take the requirements of rationality seriously (Kolodny 2005).

The challenge posed by the skeptic who asks "Why be rational?" might have a familiar ring to it. The well-known debate over moral rationalism (see [Rationalism in Ethics](#)) is traditionally set up as an attempt to respond to a skeptic about *moral* requirements who asks, "Why be Moral?" (see [Why be Moral?](#)). This skeptic fully understands what the requirements of morality are, but he's looking for some reason to comply with those requirements. Likewise, our imagined skeptic fully understands what the requirements of *rationality* are, but he's looking for some reason to comply with those requirements. Those philosophers who think that this skeptical challenge can be met – that is, those who believe in what's come to be known as the "normativity of rationality" (see [Normativity](#)) – will aim to provide the skeptic with those reasons.

In defending the normativity of any set of requirements – be they requirements of morality, rationality, or fashion – one could adopt one of two views. First, one could hold that the requirements are *weakly normative* – that is, one could hold that there is always a reason (see [Reasons; Reasons, Motivating and Normative](#)) for compliance with the relevant requirements, but that reason could be outweighed by competing reasons. When that reason is outweighed, it wouldn't be the case that one *ought* (see [Ought](#)) to do what is required. Second, one could hold that the requirements are *strongly normative* – that is, one could hold that there is always a reason for compliance with the relevant

requirements and the reason, or reasons, are always *decisive* or *conclusive*, and so one always *ought to* comply with the relevant requirements.

In everyday contexts, when we criticize people for their irrationality, we seem to presuppose that rationality is strongly normative (Kiesewetter 2017: Ch. 2). For instance, when I call you out for having inconsistent theological beliefs, I don't seem merely to be proposing that you have *a reason* not to have inconsistent beliefs – a reason that could be outweighed by competing reasons. Rather, I seem to be suggesting that there is some way in which you are not as you *ought* to be; I seem to be presupposing the strong normativity of rationality. But perhaps it will come out that our ordinary practices of criticism here rest on a mistake.

### **Rationality: Structural and Substantive**

Before looking at the question of whether rationality is weakly or strongly normative, we first need to say more about what exactly rationality requires of us. In the first paragraph of this entry, I mentioned five different manifestations of irrationality. Some of those involved *theoretical* irrationality – that is, irrationality when it comes to our beliefs. (One involved inconsistent beliefs. Another involved beliefs that aren't responsive to evidence.) And some of those involved *practical* irrationality – that is, irrationality when it comes to our intentions and actions. (One involved instrumentally irrationality – failing to intend means that are believed to be necessary for one's ends. Another involved akrasia. Another involved decision-making based on a poor calculation of the expected costs and benefits.)

But one might also wish to draw another distinction, one which cuts across the practical / theoretical divide, between *structural* and *substantive* rationality. (See Kolodny 2005, Scanlon 2007, and Wornsip forthcoming). Some of these examples of irrationality seem to involve a failure of *coherence* – that is, a failure for one's attitudes to “hang together” in the right way. This is clear in the case of someone having inconsistent beliefs – say, your believing that P, believing that Q, and believing that  $P \rightarrow \sim Q$ . In pointing out the inconsistency, I'm not assessing the merits or faults of any particular belief. I haven't even told you what the contents of these beliefs are! But you already have enough from this schematic presentation to know that, given the logical relations among the contents of the beliefs, there's a rational failure here. We might here say that the problem is *structural*, since it concerns the structure of your attitudes – in particular, how well or poorly they hang together – as opposed to whether any particular attitude is well or poorly supported by reasons. Likewise, there would be a structural problem when someone intends E, believes M-ing is necessary for E-ing, but doesn't intend to M, and when someone believes she ought to  $\phi$  but, akratically, doesn't intend to  $\phi$ . (As these last two examples illustrate, sometimes the structural conflict is due to the presence of some attitudes and the absence of others.) In these cases, we can find failures of coherence without having to look at the particular attitudes involved and the reasons for them.

But some of the other manifestations of irrationality in our first paragraph are different. The problem with the person who has irrational beliefs about the election outcome is that he has beliefs that fail to be responsive to the available evidence. Likewise, the problem with the person who refuses to be vaccinated is that he fails to be responsive to the available reasons for doing so – namely, the greater medical risks he's taking in being unvaccinated. In both of these cases, we are looking at particular attitudes and how well, or poorly, those attitudes are supported by the available reasons. The failure is *substantive*, rather than structural.

More would need to be said to make the structural / substantive distinction precise, but this provides us with enough for our purposes here. It's worth noting that philosophers interested in the “Why be rational?” challenge have primarily been interested in *structural*, not substantive, rationality. That's because it's easier to see what the reasons to be rational are in our examples of substantive

irrationality. In the case of the person who refuses to believe in the outcome of the election, the various ballot tallies (and court decisions on election challenges) provide conclusive reasons to believe Biden won the election. The medical risks of remaining unvaccinated provide conclusive reason to make an appointment for a shot. It's not hard to find the reasons to have these specific responses.

In these cases of substantive irrationality, we can say that being rational is a matter of responding to available reasons. The qualification "available" is important. It's commonly thought that there can be reasons of which one is unaware. Suppose you slip a poison into my morning coffee without being detected. There's a reason for me not to drink the coffee: I'll get sick. But this reason isn't *available* to me, since there's no way I could have known about the poison in my coffee. After all, I don't have any evidence of you having poisoned the coffee. Here, we wouldn't say that I'm *irrational* in drinking the coffee; rationality doesn't require responsiveness to reasons which are *unavailable* to us (Lord 2018, Kiesewetter 2017). But in our examples, it's easy to identify available reasons to which the relevant agent fails to be responsive.

But it's less clear that we're in a position to identify available reasons to be *structurally* rational. Let's return to our main examples of structural requirements. So far, we mentioned a consistency requirement on belief, a requirement of means-ends coherence, and an anti-akrasia requirement. Perhaps there are *instrumental reasons* to comply with these requirements – that is, perhaps there's some good or goods that would be promoted by compliance in every case (see Instrumental Value). But it's unclear what those instrumental reasons would be. After all, sometimes compliance with the relevant requirements might leave us worse off than we would be by continuing to violate them. Suppose I believe I ought to get some exercise right now, but, akratically, don't intend to do so. But suppose that my wise doctor has clearly and strictly forbidden exercise right now. If I were to proceed by coming to intend to exercise, I would comply with the anti-akrasia structural requirement, but likely be significantly worse off. It's hard to see what good would come from compliance in this way. (If I were to instead trust my doctor and get rid of that belief, then there would be an improvement.) So, it's not clear that there's always some good or goods that would be promoted by compliance with structural requirements.

Perhaps one could argue that compliance with these requirements is *intrinsically* good (see Intrinsic Value), and so there's a reason to comply even when compliance isn't instrumental to some further good. But that suggestion may reasonably seem to involve a misguided fetish for "psychic tidiness." After all, your standard list of objective values will often include things like friendship, pleasure, justice, and autonomy; very seldom would "being structurally rational" appear on that list (Kolodny 2005, 2007).

In summary, while there's little difficulty identifying reasons to be substantively rational, it's not clear what the reasons to be structurally rational are. Compliance with structural requirements doesn't always bring about something good, and it doesn't seem to be good in itself. So, it may turn out that the requirements of rationality (at least the structural variety) are on a par with the requirements of fashion, in that there's not always a reason for compliance.

### **Skepticism about Structural Rationality**

One way of avoiding the problem would be to adopt skepticism about structural rationality. The skeptic about structural rationality will deny that there really are requirements of consistency governing our intentions and beliefs, requirements of means-ends coherence, anti-akrasia requirements, and so forth. It's natural to find this view attractive. For one thing, if we're sincerely doubting that there's a reason for compliance with these requirements, it's very natural reaction to say that what we thought were genuine requirements turned out not to be genuine requirements at all. (Of course, we don't say the same thing for the requirements of fashion or Roman Catholicism. But those requirements have

their source in certain social practices and rules: our cultural conventions about style, the established doctrines and dogma of the Church. So, it's easy to see how these requirements could exist even in the absence of a reason for you to comply with them. But rational requirements aren't thought to have their source in certain social practices and rules, which might make the skeptical option more attractive.)

The skeptic about structural rationality could remain a firm believer in *substantive* rationality, and take the requirements of substantive rationality to be normative. Moreover, she could propose a theory about the *relationship* between the (merely apparent) structural requirements and (genuine) substantive requirements – a theory which could help explain how we were conned into mistakenly thinking structural requirements were genuine. Let me explain. Let's start with an observation about cases of alleged structural irrationality. Let's return to our example of akrasia from the previous section, and discuss two variations on the case. In both cases, I believe I ought to exercise but don't intend to do so. In the first case, my belief is perfectly fine: I indeed ought to exercise and I've got good evidence for this. Here, the problem is with my lack of intention: I ought to intend to exercise but don't. In the second case, my belief is problematic: my trustworthy doctor has forbidden exercise, and yet I believe I ought to exercise anyway. Here, the problem is with my belief: I shouldn't believe I should exercise. In both cases, we can point to some more specific *substantive* failure. The thought is that this is true in general: whenever one is akratic, then *either* one ought not to believe one ought to  $\phi$  and one does so, *or* one ought to intend to  $\phi$  and one doesn't. In other words, being akratic *guarantees* some substantive rational failing. The mistake we've made, as philosophers, is mistaking a guarantee of a substantive rational failing for a structural rational prohibition on akrasia. (Kolodny 2007, Kolodny 2008, Kieseewetter 2017, Lord 2018)

There are challenges facing this theory, however. For one thing, it's not clear that it works for means-ends coherence – specifically, for cases in which one is incoherent with respect to some end that is permissible but not required (Way 2013). Suppose I intend to improve my department's webpage. (This is entirely supererogatory, and hence a good example of an end which is permissible, but not required.) But suppose I'm means-ends incoherent: I believe that to improve the website, I must contact Tech Support immediately, and I don't intend to contact them immediately. According to the theory on offer, there is a guarantee of some more specific substantive failure: either I ought not intend to improve the webpage (and I do intend this), or I ought not believe contacting Tech Support immediately is necessary (and I do believe this), or I ought to intend to contact them immediately (and I don't intend this). But none of these options seem to be true of me: intending to improve the webpage is a *permissible* end; and, we could suppose, there's also very good evidence that I need to contact Tech Support to do this, and so my belief is perfectly fine; and, since contacting Tech Support *isn't* something I *ought* to do (since this whole project is merely permissible, and hence not required), there's nothing wrong with my not intending to contact Tech Support. In short, we can't point to some specific attitude (or lack of a specific attitude) which is out of line. The theory seems incorrect.

But even if this theory *were* correct, it's not clear that we would want to use it to support skepticism about structural rationality. Consider a pair of examples drawn from Kant's discussion (Kant 1785) of hypothetical imperatives (See Imperatives, Categorical and Hypothetical). First, a physician intends to heal his patient, but, being distracted, doesn't intend to prepare the medicine he knows he must prepare. Second, a murderer intends to poison his victim, but, being distracted, doesn't intend to prepare the poison he must prepare. Intuitively, both the murderer and the poisoner exhibit the same rational defect. However, if we limit ourselves to substantive criticism, their failures are rather different: the poisoner has an end he ought not have, while the physician ought to intend the means but doesn't. Believing in the structural requirement of means-ends coherence will allow us to

account for how both the physician and poisoner go wrong *in the same way*: both violate the requirement of means-ends coherence (Brunero 2020). Moreover, believing in that structural requirement allows us to account for the intuition that there are *two ways* in which our poisoner has gone wrong: he has an end he ought not have, and, in being distracted, he fails to intend the means. If we limit ourselves to substantive rationality, we can only account for one of these failings. But those who believe in structural rationality can easily account for there being two problems here: there's the problem of substantively irrational end, and the structural problem of means-ends incoherence (Way 2013).

### Structural Rationality: Narrow-Scope and Wide-Scope Alternatives

If we're not skeptics about structural rationality, however, we'll face the challenge of formulating the requirements of structural rationality. Philosophers have divided on the question of the logical scope of "requires" in the formulations (see [Practical Conditionals](#); [Practical Reasoning](#)). Consider the following two formulations of the anti-akrasia requirement:

*Anti-Akrasia Narrow*: If you believe that you ought to  $\phi$ , rationality requires that you intend to  $\phi$ .

*Anti-Akrasia Wide*: Rationality requires that [if you believe that you ought to  $\phi$ , you intend to  $\phi$ ].

In Anti-Akrasia Narrow, "requires" appears in the consequent of the conditional. There's only one way to comply with Anti-Akrasia Narrow: by intending to  $\phi$ . In Anti-Akrasia Wide, in contrast, "requires" has logical scope over the bracketed conditional. There are two ways you could comply with Anti-Akrasia Wide: by intending to  $\phi$ , and by not believing that you ought to  $\phi$ . In doing either, you would be doing what rationality requires of you (Broome 2000, 2013).

If Anti-Akrasia Narrow is the correct formulation, it's hard to see how rationality could be normative. According to Anti-Akrasia Narrow, whenever you believe that you ought to  $\phi$ , you are rationally required to intend to  $\phi$ . But if rationality were *strongly* normative, then it would follow that whenever you believe that you ought to  $\phi$ , you ought to intend to  $\phi$ . But this is deeply counterintuitive. It's possible for people to have false beliefs about what they ought to do. I might believe I ought to speed through a school zone. Here, it's neither the case that I ought to speed through a school zone, nor the case that I ought to intend to speed through a school zone. The view that rationality is *weakly* normative would only entail that one has *a reason* to intend to speed through a school zone in such cases. But that's also counterintuitive: how could having a false belief about what one ought to do "bootstrap" into existence any reason to intend to do it? (Bratman 1987: 24-7)

In light of such concerns, those who defend the normativity of structural rationality have tended to work with wide-scope formulations, like Anti-Akrasia Wide. If we held that rationality is strongly normative, we would have to accept that when one believes that one ought to  $\phi$ , one ought to *either* not believe one ought to  $\phi$  *or* intend to  $\phi$ . And if we held that rationality is weakly normative, we would have to accept that there's a reason to *either* not believe one ought to  $\phi$  *or* intend to  $\phi$ . But these claims are far less counterintuitive than their narrow-scope counterparts.

But challenges have been raised against the view which combines wide-scope formulations with the strong normativity of rationality. Suppose that someone is *unable* to revise an attitude (Setiya 2007). Perhaps there's nothing I can do to change my belief that I ought to  $\phi$ . In such a case, intending to  $\phi$  would be the only way of complying with the wide-scope prohibition on the combination of

believing I ought to  $\phi$  and not intending to  $\phi$ . So, plausibly, if I ought to comply with that wide-scope prohibition, then I ought to intend to  $\phi$ . But this would generate the implausible result which proponents of the wide-scope view had hoped to avoid. Suppose that we work with our earlier example, in which I (falsely) believed that I ought to speed through a school zone, but we now add that I'm unable to revise that belief. If rationality were strongly normative, it would follow that I ought to intend to speed through a school zone. We would end up with the same implausible consequence that was troublesome for the narrow-scope formulation.

Another challenge comes from the plausible idea that we have reasons to take sufficient means to doing what we ought to do. While it isn't plausible to think we *ought* to take sufficient means to doing what we ought to do – perhaps some particular sufficient means would be excessively costly or immoral – it is plausible to think we have *a reason* to do so. But, as Joseph Raz (2005) has observed, this generates trouble when combined with the view that rationality is strongly normative. Suppose, for example, I ought to cease to be means-ends incoherent. I could do this in three ways: by dropping my intention, by dropping my belief about the necessary means, or by intending the means. Since any of these three ways of proceeding is sufficient for doing what I ought to do, I would have a reason to drop my intention, a reason to drop my instrumental belief, and a reason to intend the means. But these might strike us as counterintuitive results. (For instance, this supposed reason to drop the instrumental belief isn't based on any evidence against it. And there doesn't seem to be a pragmatic benefit in dropping it; it's not like I'd be any better off for doing so. So why think there is such a reason?)

## Conclusion

We've seen the ways in which skepticism about structural rationality is difficult to maintain. But the existence of structural requirements poses challenges for the normativity of rationality. For one thing, it's not clear that we can specify instrumental or intrinsic reasons to comply with these requirements. Additionally, both the narrow-scope and wide-scope formulations of the requirements generate implausible results when combined with the view that rationality is strongly normative. This generates significant pressure to reject the normativity of rationality, especially in its strong variety. Because of this, we may not be able to give a satisfactory answer to our skeptic who wonders, "Why be rational?"

*See also:* [Imperatives, Categorical and Hypothetical; Instrumental Value; Intention; Intrinsic Value; Normativity; Ought; Practical Conditionals; Practical Reasoning; Rationalism in Ethics; Rationality; Reasons; Reasons, Motivating and Normative; Weakness of Will; Why be Moral?](#)

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