

Rationality is not coherence

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Abstract

According to a popular account, rationality is a kind of coherence of an agent’s mental states and, more specifically, a matter of fulfilling norms of coherence. For example, in order to be rational an agent is required to intend to do what they judge they ought to and can do. This norm has been called ‘Enkrasia’. Another norm requires that, *ceteris paribus*, an agent retain their intention over time. This has been called ‘Persistence of Intention’.

This paper argues that thus understood norms of rationality may at times conflict. More specifically, Enkrasia and Persistence of Intention may place demands on the agent that are impossible to fulfil. The framework of requirements then fails to provide us with norms for reasoning that makes us rational. A rival account, according to which rationality is a kind of responsiveness to one’s available reasons, can overcome the problem.

Keywords: rationality, coherence, enkrasia, reasons, intention, dilemmas, conflict

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1 Introduction

Rationality is typically understood in one of two ways (Fogal 2020; Kolodny and Brunero 2018). Rationality may either be a kind of coherence, or a kind of responsiveness to reasons.

According to the *reasons responsiveness* account, an agent’s rationality is a matter of their responsiveness to what they have reason to do, intend, believe, feel, etc. (Arpaly 2000; Guindon 2016; Kiesewetter 2017; Lord 2018). The

reasons a rational agent is responsive to are normative reasons, i.e. facts or true propositions. For example, that some food is healthy may be a normative reason for a dieter to eat it. Reasons responsiveness accounts typically require that the agent has, in some relevant sense, access to their reasons (Kiesewetter 2017; Lord 2018; Sylvan 2021). For example, a dieter could be mistaken about whether some food is healthy or not. They might erroneously believe that some food is healthy, and that they have a reason to consume it, where in reality the food is unhealthy. Then the dieter would not be irrational if they consumed that food because they would not have access to the relevant reason.

According to the *coherence account* of rationality, rationality is a kind of coherence of an agent's mental states (Broome 2013; Dietrich, Staras, and Sugden 2019; Hussain n.d.; Zynda 1996). It specifies rational norms an agent must abide by to be rational. We shall consider some examples for requirements in the next section. The aim of this paper is to show that reasons responsiveness accounts are superior to coherence accounts in one important respect.

The paper does not consider three other respects in which the coherence account is controversial. One ongoing debate exists over whether or why an agent ought to abide by these rational norms, a question similar to that about moral norms (Broome 2007; Levy 2018; Southwood 2008; Sylvan 2021; Tilley 2008; Way 2010). Another ongoing debate discusses whether the norms have narrow or wide scope (Broome 2007; Brunero 2010). A third debate concerns specific norms; e.g. Beall (2015), Fogal (2020), and Price (2008) argue that some requirements are untenable.

Sidestepping these questions, I argue that, whether or not an agent ought to conform to rational norms as laid out by a coherence approach and regardless of their scope and plausibility, there are cases in which agents *cannot* be rational from this perspective because the norms conflict. In other words, these rational norms do not even specify coherence. If rationality is coherence, then these norms do not account for it.

I show this within Broome (2013)'s framework of norms of rationality. Section 2 presents two norms called 'Enkrasia' and 'Persistence of Intention'. Section 3 describes two situations in which these rational norms place conflicting requirements on the agent. In these situations, the agent cannot be rational. Section 4 discusses what is to be done about such rational dilemmas. Throughout the paper, I argue that reasons responsiveness accounts can address the problem at hand. Therefore, these accounts are superior to the coherence approach to rationality.

2 Requirements of coherence

This section presents two norms of rationality as they feature in coherence approaches.

2.1 Enkrasia

Enkrasia specifies a coherence of an agent's beliefs about what they ought to and can do, and what they intend to do (Fink 2013; Reisner 2013; Wedgwood 2013 but see Núñez 2020b).

Here is Broome's statement (2013, p. 171; my enumeration):

“Rationality requires of N that, if

- (i) N believes at t that she herself ought that p , and if
- (ii) N believes at t that it is up to her herself then whether or not p , then
- (iii) N intends at t that p .”

Setting aside some technicalities, here is how Enkrasia works. Assume that N is a dieter, and that it is dinnertime. N believes that they ought to skip dessert. In our case, ‘ p ’ is shorthand for ‘ N skips dessert.’ Condition (i) is fulfilled: N believes at dinnertime that they themselves ought to skip dessert.

The dieter also believes that it is up to them themselves whether to eat dessert or not. They think that they are free from compulsion and similar constraints. So condition (ii) is fulfilled: N believes at dinnertime that it is up to them themselves whether or not to skip dessert.

However, dessert looks tempting, so the dieter intentionally indulges. Thus they fail to fulfil condition (iii): N does not intend, at dinnertime, to skip dessert.

Because the dieter thus fails to meet Enkrasia, they are irrational.

Note that, if N failed to fulfil either (i) or (ii), then they would not violate Enkrasia. This is so because Broome's Enkrasia is a conditional wide-scope requirement: you can fulfil it by either fulfilling the antecedent conditions and the consequent condition, or you can fulfil it by not meeting the antecedent conditions.

Because they will be relevant later on, let me briefly recount some further details about ‘ought’ as it features in condition (i) of Enkrasia. Broome (2013,

chs. 2–3) elaborates that “the ought” (p. 8) as he understands it has at least three important properties. First, it is normative rather than descriptive. That is, it is used in the same sense as ‘ought’ in “You ought to look both ways before crossing the road” and not in the (non-normative) sense as in “These raspberries ought to ripen in June” (p. 9). Second, the ought is “owned” (p. 12) by an agent. For example, it can be assigned to N in Enkrasia. The agent who owns the ought is responsible for doing what it specifies, unlike Alex as described by “Alex ought to get a severe punishment” (pp. 12–3). Third, the ought is unqualified rather than qualified. That is, it is an all-things-considered ought rather than a pro tanto ought. For example, the dieter pro tanto ought to have dessert, given that it is so delicious. Yet all things considered, they ought not have dessert because even though it is so delicious, it is more important for them to stick to their diet. The ‘ought’ in condition (i) refers to this latter kind of ought only.

2.2 Persistence of Intention

The mental states and intentions of a rational agent are, presumably, coherent over time (Bratman 1999; Gauthier 1997; McClennen 1990; Núñez 2020a; Tenenbaum 2018). Broome (2013, p. 178) expresses this intuition formally as a diachronic requirement of rationality called “Persistence of Intention”:

“If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires of N that, if N intends at t_1 that p , and no cancelling event occurs between t_1 and t_2 , then either N intends at t_2 that p , or N considers at t_2 whether p .”

Again setting aside technicalities, let us examine how Persistence of Intention works. Consider our dieter who, at lunchtime (t_1), forms the intention to skip dessert tonight. That is, the dieter intends at lunchtime that they skip dessert tonight. So the first part of the requirement’s antecedent is true: N intends at t_1 that p .

Assume that no cancelling event occurs after lunchtime. Cancelling events are mental events mostly of three types (Broome 2013, pp. 180-1): the first is considering whether p . The second is precipitated by p , such as coming to believe that p . The third type is realising that it is impossible for oneself to make it the case that p . Interestingly, Broome does not mention acquiring new information as a possible cancelling event, although this may but need not precipitate a

cancelling event¹.

The dieter thus fulfils the antecedent of the conditional stated in Persistence of Intention: at lunchtime, they intend to skip dessert, and no cancelling event occurs afterwards.

At dinnertime, the dieter violates Persistence of Intention if they neither intend to skip dessert nor consider whether to do so. Thus, if the dieter’s intention to skip dessert strikes them as absurd at dinnertime, they may well reconsider instead of persisting in it.

3 Conflicting requirements

Enkrasia and Persistence of Intention may place conflicting demands on us, as two examples illustrate.

3.1 Conflicts with one requirement

If the agent believes that they are in a dilemma (Barcan Marcus 1980; Greenspan 1983; Hegel ReI II; Moss 2014; Priest 2002; van Fraassen 1973), Enkrasia is impossible to fulfil.

In a classic case (Williams 1965), Agamemnon believes, at t , that he himself ought to sacrifice his daughter. He also believes, at t , that he himself ought to not sacrifice her. He believes, at t , that it is up to him himself whether to sacrifice her or not. As Enkrasia has it, rationality requires Agamemnon, if he retains all of these beliefs, to intend at t to sacrifice his daughter. It also requires Agamemnon, if he retains the beliefs, to intend at t to not sacrifice her.

Assume that Agamemnon does retain his beliefs: he believes that, all things considered, he ought to sacrifice his daughter. He also believes that, all things considered, he ought to not sacrifice her. In having these two beliefs, Agamemnon is not irrational. He does not violate (Broome 2013, p. 155)

“No Contradictory Beliefs. Rationality requires of N that N does not believe at t that p and also believe at t that not p .”

If Agamemnon believed, say, that he ought to sacrifice his daughter and that he not ought to do so, then he would violate No Contradictory Beliefs. The contents of these hypothetical beliefs could be formalised as ‘ $O(s)$ ’ and ‘ $\neg O(s)$ ’, respectively, which in turn are instances of ‘ p ’ and ‘ $\neg p$ ’.

¹as an anonymous reviewer points out

But Agamemnon does not have these beliefs. His beliefs differ in content from the beliefs in No Contradictory Beliefs. Believing that you ought to not ϕ is not identical to believing that you not ought to ϕ . If you ϕ , you act against your first belief but not against the second.

In contrast, we can formalise the contents of Agamemnon's beliefs that he ought to sacrifice his daughter and that he ought to not sacrifice her as ' $O(s)$ ' and ' $O(\neg s)$ ', respectively. This *cannot* be read as 'p' and ' $\neg p$ ', respectively, because ' $O(\neg s)$ ' is not logically equivalent to ' $\neg O(s)$ '. ' $O(\neg s)$ ' states that s is not permissible whilst ' $\neg O(s)$ ' states that s is not required² (cf. Brink 1994; Goble 2009; McNamara and Van De Putte 2021; Williams 1965). Thus Agamemnon does not violate No Contradictory Beliefs.

Agamemnon's beliefs are beliefs about what he ought to do, all things considered (Ross 1930, p. 20). That is, Agamemnon believes that he ought to sacrifice his daughter, even though there are strong reasons against doing so; these reasons are outweighed or overruled. At the same time, Agamemnon believes that he ought not sacrifice his daughter, even though there are strong reasons for doing so; these are outweighed or overruled.

This distinguishes Agamemnon's situation from a Buridan case. In a Buridan case, an agent has equally strong reasons to act in several ways but they lack overriding reasons to act in one particular way (Chislenko 2016; Zupko 2011). E. g. an agent may believe that one food is as valuable as another, yet that they cannot choose both. They believe that they ought to eat the first, and they also believe that they ought to eat the second. These are beliefs about what the agent ought to do, pro tanto. In a Buridan case, the agent plausibly believes that they ought to choose *either* option, all things considered. In contrast, Agamemnon believes of each option that he ought to choose it, all things considered (Brink 1994)³.

So, if Agamemnon rationally retains these two beliefs, then Enkrasia requires him to both intend to sacrifice his daughter and intend to not sacrifice her. Let us set aside the question of whether it is psychologically possible to have such conflicting intentions. For even if it were possible, it would be irrational. Rationality requires you to not have conflicting intentions (cf. *No Contradictory Intentions*, Broome 2013, p. 156).

²as an anonymous reviewer reminds me

³This distinction cuts across another distinction that some authors have drawn between judgements about equally good options and judgements about incommensurable options (Broome 1997; Broome 2001; Chang 2001; Raz 1986).

Hence, it seems impossible for Agamemnon to rationally retain his beliefs about what he ought to do. Inevitably, he would violate Enkrasia or No Contradictory Intentions. It seems that Agamemnon has to give up at least one of his beliefs. He can do so by either ceasing to believe that he both ought to sacrifice his daughter and that he ought to not sacrifice her, or he could stop believing that it is up to him whether to sacrifice her or not. Then he would no longer fulfil the antecedent condition of Enkrasia and meet that requirement of rationality.

What if it is psychologically impossible for Agamemnon to give up one of the beliefs? What if he thinks that his moral obligations conflict? Or, what if his evidence favours each of his beliefs? He is under a requirement to believe what he has evidence for (Broome 2013, ch. 5). Then it seems that, on a coherence account, we have to regard him as irrational.

Generalising from Agamemnon's example, it seems to show that, if someone believes that their obligations conflict, then they are irrational on a coherence account. Whether obligations can clash or not, whether morality or normativity allow for such conflicts—if we believe that we face conflicting norms, then we are irrational.

To draw an interim conclusion, so far I have argued that, in certain circumstances, a coherence account of rationality places demands on the agent that are impossible to fulfil. To prevent this unwelcome result, advocates of coherence accounts are committed to a requirement of rationality that they have, to my best knowledge, not yet stated (cf. Nair 2014):

No Dilemmas. Rationality requires of N that N does *not* believe, at t , that she herself ought that p , that she herself ought that not p , and that it is impossible both p and not p .

This requirement is not implied by No Contradictory Beliefs because the two requirements concern beliefs with different contents: No Contradictory Beliefs concerns beliefs that p and that $\neg p$; No Dilemmas concerns beliefs that $O(p)$ and that $O(\neg p)$.

Broome's coherence account implies No Dilemmas, and anyone who is committed to this account seems to be committed to this specific requirement. In other words, if this coherence account is correct, then agents are required to never believe that they ought to do two things that are jointly impossible⁴

⁴As an anonymous reviewer points out, this is a *structural*, not a *substantive* requirement of rationality.

(Broome 2013, ch. 4; Kieseewetter 2017, pp. 131–2; Titelbaum 2015; Worsnip 2018).

However, such a requirement seems controversial. Countless authors accept that agents can rationally have beliefs as characterised by No Dilemmas (Barcan Marcus 1980; Bessemans 2011; Forrester 1995; Guttenplan 1980; Hansson 1998; Heinzelmann 2021; Horty 2003; Leonard 2020; McCain, Stapleford, and Steup 2020; Moss 2014; Sinnott-Armstrong 1988; Vallentyne 1989; Williams 1965). Note that having these beliefs does not require the agent to believe that inconsistent or contradictory obligations, norms, duties, or oughts exist. Many authors, notably ethicists, have denied that obligations or norms can conflict (e.g. Brink 1994; Conee 1982; Gowans 1994; Kant 6; Mill 1998; Nagel 1979; Ross 1930; Vallentyne 1989). Instead, we are concerned with two conflicting mental states.

Interestingly, Broome (2007) acknowledges a highly similar problem during a debate on a different issue, viz. on whether requirements of rationality have wide or narrow scope. He discusses an agent who believes that they are in a deontic dilemma, and consequently finds themselves under three requirements they cannot satisfy together: to intend to do one thing, to intend to do another thing incompatible with the first, and to not have contradictory intentions (Broome 2007, p. 364). Broome observes that this does not imply that “rationality specifically requires you not to have this pair of beliefs” that generate the dilemma, yet it requires you that “if you have this pair of beliefs, you must be failing to satisfy some requirement or other of rationality” (pp. 364–5). However, he omits to point out that rationality thus requires you to not have a pair of beliefs that generate a dilemma, which is precisely what No Dilemmas states.

Broome goes on to argue that it is possible for the agent to fulfil all three requirements, namely by giving up either of the two beliefs that generate the dilemma. He does not consider the possibility that an agent might not be able to do that: “you do not actually satisfy all three requirements. But it is possible for you to do so” (p. 365). Broome has since acknowledged this issue in personal communication, agreed that in cases like Agamemnon’s, the agent cannot be rational, and accordingly accepted No Dilemmas.

3.1.1 Revising Enkrasia

We might try and revise Enkrasia in such a way that it does not apply to situations where the agent believes that she herself ought that p and that she

herself ought that not p . Consider three ways in which this can be done. First, a revised statement of Enkrasia could be:

Rationality requires of N that, if

- (1) N believes at t that she herself ought that p , and if
- (2) N does not believe at t that she herself ought that not p , and
if
- (3) N believes at t that it is up to her herself then whether or not
 p , then
- (4) N intends at t that p .

However, this solution faces two problems. First⁵, (2) does not seem justified apart from providing an ad-hoc solution to the issue at hand (Grünbaum 1976; Hempel 1966; Popper 1959, sections 5, 19, 46). Now, ad-hoc solutions are not problematic per se because they may be supported post hoc by empirical or conceptual evidence (Feyerabend 1970; Hunt 2012; Putnam 1977). However, evidence for (2) does not seem to be forthcoming. To date, there are no arguments in its support in the literature, and it seems questionable that they could be provided (cf., e. g. Fink 2013; Reisner 2013; Wedgwood 2013).

Perhaps it could be justified along the following lines: imagine an agent is, in some sense, theoretically irrational because their judgements about what they ought to do conflict. One could argue that being irrational in this way must not necessitate being practically irrational. Generally, by violating a norm of theoretical rationality, one does not automatically violate a norm of practical rationality as well. Yet precisely this claim is controversial; for one thing, there may not even be a strict distinction between theoretical and practical rationality (Foley 1987; Harman 1997; Kelly 2003; Velleman 1989). Moreover, even if the distinction could be drawn, it would be unclear whether a coherence approach like Broome's would be able to accommodate it. After all, on this view, if you violate a requirement of rationality, you are irrational. Whether this is a supposedly practical or theoretical requirement, and whether you fulfil other requirements is irrelevant (Broome 2013, e. g. pp. 91, 93, 175, 177, 182).

A second issue is that, with (2), Enkrasia is now too strong. Whereas it was previously the case that an agent in a dilemma always violates Enkrasia, the revised requirement makes it necessary that an agent in a dilemma never

⁵I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me to develop this argument.

violates Enkrasia. But it is unclear why an agent should necessarily never violate Enkrasia when they are in a dilemma. Consider an agent who judges that she ought to do volunteer work for Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and that she also ought to do volunteer work for Amnesty International, yet that it is impossible for her to do both. Mulling her situation over, she judges that she faces a dilemma: she ought to volunteer for MSF, and she also ought not to volunteer for MSF because she ought to volunteer for Amnesty instead. Thus the agent is not in a Buridan case; she does *not* believe that she ought to volunteer for *either* charity.

This agent fails to meet (2):

- (1) She believes at t that she herself ought to volunteer for MSF,
- (2) she does not believe at t that she herself ought not to volunteer for MSF,
- (3) she believes at t that it is up to her herself then whether or not to volunteer for MSF or not, and
- (4) she does not intend at t to volunteer for MSF.

So far, this is precisely what we had hoped for: the agent is not necessarily violating Enkrasia merely because she has the conflicting beliefs stated in (1) and (2).

However, now imagine the agent repeatedly postpones making up her mind, meanwhile tagging along to a friend's local political charity where volunteers get free cake but do work that strikes her as ethically dubious. Plausibly, the agent is irrational, and she seems irrational precisely because she fails to intend to do what she believes she ought to do. She might have a further belief that she *does* act on, viz. the belief that she ought to refrain from skipping out on volunteer work altogether. But this does not ensure that she intends to do what she believes she ought to do regarding MSF⁶.

The example further indicates that whether the agent is irrational or not crucially depends on the *reasons why* she fails to intend to do what she believes she ought to do. If she fails to volunteer for MSF for the *reason* that she procrastinates and volunteers for a dubious charity, she seems irrational. If she failed to volunteer for MSF for the *reason* that she volunteered for Amnesty, then she would not seem to be irrational. However, the revised account of Enkrasia sketched above cannot account for this. Thus this account is too strong.

⁶I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me develop this case.

Another way in which we might revise Enkrasia makes use of a suggestion developed by Wedgwood (2007). It builds on the observation that in a dilemma, the agent is normatively *uncertain* about what to do (Feldman n.d.; Sepielli 2009). For example, our agent is uncertain about whether to volunteer for MSF or for Amnesty. Note that they are not uncertain about whether they ought to do volunteer work in the first place.

Now, the proposal goes, we restrict Enkrasia to situations with no relevant uncertainty. That is, Enkrasia does not apply in cases where the agent is uncertain about what to do. In our example, the agent is not uncertain whether to do volunteer work. Thus, if the agent fails to intend to do volunteer work and watches sitcoms instead, Enkrasia applies to her and she violates it. Yet if she fails to intend to volunteer for MSF or for Amnesty, then Enkrasia does not apply to her because she is uncertain about which charity she ought to volunteer for. Thus it seems, if Enkrasia is restricted in this way, the problem does not arise.

However, this impression is flawed. It is true that the agent is not uncertain about whether to do volunteer work. But neither is she uncertain about whether to do volunteer work for Amnesty. She is certain that she ought to. She is also certain that she ought to do volunteer work for MSF. So Enkrasia restricted to situations without uncertainty applies: it requires the agent to intend to volunteer for MSF, and it requires her to intend to volunteer for Amnesty.

Third, Enkrasia could be modified such that the contents of *N*'s beliefs no longer concern what *N* ought to do but rather what they have *conclusive or decisive reason* to do (cf. Wedgwood 2007, p. 24)⁷. Thus re-stated, Enkrasia* would require that Agamemnon, if he believes that he has conclusive reason to sacrifice his daughter, that it is up to him himself to do so or not, to intend to sacrifice her; it would also require, if he believes that he has conclusive reason to not sacrifice his daughter, that it is up to him himself to do so or not, to not intend to sacrifice. As I have described the case so far, Agamemnon does not have these beliefs, thus Enkrasia* would not apply to him.

However, the challenge may arise for a modified case: Agamemnon could at the same time believe that he has conclusive reason to sacrifice his daughter and also believe that he has conclusive reason to not sacrifice her. For one thing, Agamemnon may rightly or wrongly believe that moral reasons are always conclusive. In Wedgwood's words, Agamemnon might think "that if it is morally

⁷I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

wrong for one to ϕ , then ϕ -ing is also something that, all things considered, one ought not to do—that is, something that there is conclusive reason for one not to do” (2007, p. 258; cf. Baier 1978; Greenspan 2007; Phillips 1979). Assume that Agamemnon believes it is morally wrong for him to disobey divine command and also believes it is morally wrong for him to harm his child. Then he plausibly believes that he has conclusive reason to sacrifice his daughter and believes that he has conclusive reason to not do so. Then Enkrasia* applies and the problem arises.

3.1.2 Solution: rationality as reasons responsiveness

A reasons responsiveness account of rationality can address the problem. To see how, let us take a closer look at what, precisely, that problem is. Take Agamemnon again: he faces *two* issues. On the one hand, there is the question of decision-making: what ought he to do? Should he sacrifice his daughter or should he not sacrifice her? I think that this is what we should regard as the agent’s main and perhaps only problem. However, on the other hand, there is the issue of rationality: if rationality is a matter of coherence, then Agamemnon is necessarily irrational. How ought he to change his mental states in order to avoid irrationality? This is the problem that has dominated our discussion up to this point.

On that issue, Broome (2007, p. 365) writes: “We should expect rationality to require you to get out of your irrational state”. In Agamemnon’s case, we would expect rationality to require him to get out of the condition by giving up either of the two beliefs that generate the dilemma. We could say to Agamemnon: “Look, you are in an irrational state. The reason why you are in that state is because you believe that you ought to sacrifice your daughter and also believe that you ought to not sacrifice her. Your predicament will be solved if you just give up one of these two beliefs.”

For argument’s sake, assume that Agamemnon might actually be able to give up either of the beliefs. Assume that he would even give up one belief, and get out of his irrational state. From the point of view of a coherence account, this would solve the problem.

However, even if we grant all that, the question remains why we conceive of this solution as a solution to a problem to begin with. Allegedly, the problem was Agamemnon’s irrational state, or so the coherence account has it. Yet we might plausibly think that this very verdict is mistaken in the first place. Instead

of ascribing a problem of irrationality to Agamemnon, we might very well think that the coherence account has the problem: it erroneously ascribes irrationality to Agamemnon. For, it is quite plausible that Agamemnon responds adequately and rationally to the situation at hand. His belief that he ought to sacrifice his daughter is justified, and so is his belief that he ought to not sacrifice her. A cruel goddess has placed him in this mortifying predicament. It seems just as cruel for a theory of rationality to require him to give up his beliefs that the situation is as bleak as it actually is. Moreover, if he fails to give up these beliefs, it appears inadequate that he should necessarily be irrational.

Moreover, there is Agamemnon's first problem of deciding what to do. The coherence account of rationality cannot help us with this problem at all. In contrast, the reasons responsiveness account of rationality can.

According to the reasons responsiveness account, an agent is rational or irrational to the degree to which they respond adequately to their available reasons. Agamemnon has reasons for sacrificing his daughter: he needs to fulfil his duties as a commander, he must assuage the goddess he has offended, and so on. He also has reasons against sacrificing his daughter: she is his child, she does not want to die, she is innocent of her father's offence, etc. It seems to be an entirely adequate and thus rational response to all those different reasons to believe that you are in a dilemma.

Thus, a relevant difference between reasons responsiveness and coherence accounts becomes apparent: the former allow for rationality despite conflicting reasons but the latter do not allow for rationality despite conflicting requirements. According to the former, an agent may fail to respond to some of their reasons but still be fully rational (Davidson 1980, pp. 33-4). According to the latter, if an agent violates a requirement, they cannot be fully rational (Kiesewetter 2017, p. 132). The former is not challenged by conflicting reasons but the latter is challenged by conflicting requirements. Thus, on the reasons responsiveness account, if Agamemnon decides to act one way or another—as he does, eventually—it may be entirely adequate to do so, and it may be adequate for him to regret and lament that he did not and could not act otherwise (cf. Barcan Marcus 1980; Williams 1965). On this view, Agamemnon seems to rationally believe he is in a dilemma about what he all-things-considered ought to do: he must perform two mutually exclusive actions. But the reasons responsiveness account does not entail that he is, therefore, irrational regardless of what he does. This seems to account for this case in precisely the right way.

3.2 Conflicts between different requirements

A second challenge for Broome's coherence account is that Enkrasia can clash with Persistence of Intention.

For example, assume that a dieter has been invited to a fancy banquet by their boss. By lunchtime that day, the dieter needs to communicate their choice between a two- and a three-course option. The dieter deliberates about whether to have dessert tonight. They believe that it is up to them themselves whether to have dessert or not, and they believe that they ought to not have dessert. So they fulfil conditions (i) and (ii) of Enkrasia:

- (i) *N* believes at lunchtime that they themselves ought to skip dessert tonight, and
- (ii) *N* believes at lunchtime that it is up to them themselves then to skip dessert tonight.

Call this requirement 'Enkrasia I'. To meet it, the dieter has to either intend to skip dessert tonight or give up any of their antecedent beliefs.

However, the dieter violates Enkrasia I, which makes them irrational. They cannot resist the temptation and order a three-course dinner.

Assume, furthermore, that it is impossible to change the order: the booking system does not allow it, so the dieter would have to find out how to get in touch with the kitchen, find the right person in charge and implore them to change their order. This would be a waste of time and nerves and impolite towards the host on whom the dieter depends for their career. Acutely aware of all this, the dieter believes that they ought to not consider whether to have dessert or not once the order is placed. They also believe that it is up to them themselves whether to consider to have dessert. Again, they fulfil the conditions of Enkrasia:

- (i*) *N* believes at lunchtime that, henceforth, they themselves ought not *consider* whether to skip dessert tonight, and
- (ii*) *N* believes at lunchtime that it is up to them themselves then whether or not to *consider* whether to skip dessert tonight.

Call this requirement 'Enkrasia II'. Assume that the dieter fulfils it: they do not consider or reflect on whether to skip dessert tonight and they intend to not do so.

Assume that, after lunchtime ($=t_1$), none of the dieter's beliefs or intentions change, and no cancelling event occurs. E. g. they do not gain new information about, say, anticipated guilt or regret (Bratman 2014). They also do not learn that they do not have sufficient reason to skip dessert or that they cannot fulfil all their intentions because they already knew that before t_1 , when they formed their intentions (Broome 2013, p. 181). Then Persistence of Intention applies:

If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires of N that, if N intends at t_1 that she has dessert, and no cancelling event occurs between t_1 and t_2 , then either N intends at t_2 that she has dessert, or N considers at t_2 whether she has dessert.

At any time t_2 after lunchtime, Persistence of Intention requires the dieter to intend that they have dessert tonight or to consider whether to do so.

At t_2 , the events mentioned in the antecedent conditions of Persistence of Intention are in the past. As Broome says (p. 125), “a past event counts as necessary”. Thus it is necessary that the dieter has, at lunchtime, intended to have dessert. It is also necessary that no cancelling event has occurred since then.

Then the following requirement applies (Broome 2013, p. 123):

“Necessary Detachment. ((Necessarily p) & ([a source of requirement] S requires of N that $p \supset q$)) \supset (S requires of N that q).”

It is necessarily the case that the dieter has, at lunchtime, intended to have dessert, and that no cancelling event has occurred since then. So the first conjunct of Necessary Detachment is true. In addition, Persistence of Intention states that rationality requires of the dieter that, if they intended to have dessert at lunchtime and no cancelling event occurred, that they also intend to have dessert at any time after lunchtime or that they consider to do so. As rationality is a source S of a requirement, the second conjunct of the antecedent in Necessary Detachment is fulfilled, too. So the antecedent of Necessary Detachment holds. This entails that rationality requires the dieter to intend to have dessert after lunchtime or to consider doing so. Thus, after lunchtime, the dieter is required to intend to have dessert for dinner or to consider whether to do so.

Assume that, at dinnertime, the dieter has—rationally—retained all of their lunchtime beliefs: they believe that they ought to skip dessert, and they believe that they ought to not consider whether to do so.

Then they should not consider whether to have dessert: they believe that they ought to not consider this question, they believe that it is up to them to do so, and they intend to not consider. Enkrasia II requires them to not consider, and they meet this requirement. Also, given their belief that they ought to skip dessert, and given their further belief that it is up to them themselves whether to do so, Enkrasia I requires them to intend to skip dessert. However, Persistence of Intention, together with Necessary Detachment, requires the dieter to intend to have dessert. Taking all the requirements together, rationality seems to place the dieter in a difficult predicament.

What is the best way out of this jungle of requirements? I see two options. The first is to give up the intention to have dessert. In this way, the dieter would be able to meet the demand of Enkrasia I.

Because of Persistence of Intention, the dieter cannot straightforwardly give up their intention to have dessert. All they can do is to *consider* whether to intend to have it. But the dieter believes that they ought to not consider this question, and given this fact, Enkrasia II requires them to not consider it. Thus the dieter first has to give up their belief that they ought to not consider whether to skip dessert. This would allow them to consider, and to eventually abandon, their intention to have dessert.

A second way out of the jungle is for the dieter to give up their belief that they ought to skip dessert and to intend to have it.

Taken together, then, the dieter has these options:

- (a) give up the belief that you ought to skip dessert (fulfilling Enkrasia I), intend to have dessert (fulfilling Enkrasia II and Persistence of Intention)
- (b) give up the belief that you ought to not consider whether to have dessert (fulfilling Enkrasia II), intend to consider whether to have dessert (fulfilling Enkrasia II) and actually do so (fulfilling Persistence of Intention)

As far as Broome's requirements can help us, these options are equally challenging. The dieter is both required to intend to skip dessert and to not consider whether to have it, given their beliefs in (a) and (b).

These beliefs may be psychologically impossible to give up or even rationally required by a body of other beliefs and by beliefs based on new evidence. For instance, the host might be expectantly observing the dieter, reinforcing their belief that they ought not consider whether to have dessert. At the same time, nutrition information on the menu may reinforce their belief that they ought

to skip dessert. Given the requirement of rationality to believe what one has evidence for (Broome 2013, ch.5), the dieter may be required to retain the beliefs specified in (a) and (b).

3.2.1 Revising Persistence of Intention

In response to the problem, one may try and revise Persistence of Intention. We might restrict it to those intentions that were not irrationally formed. The idea is that it is rational for an agent to have coherent intentions over time only if these intentions were coherent with the agent's other mental states to begin with.

Conveniently, we can build on Bratman's work on intentions here. Bratman (1999) suggested that the history of an intention determines its rationality in the present. In most cases, it is rational for an agent to intend to act a certain way at some point in time t just in case it was rational for them to previously form this intention and to not reconsider it until t (ch. 6).

Persistence of Intention could be amended thus:

If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires of N that, if N *rationaly* intends at t_1 that p , and no cancelling event occurs between t_1 and t_2 , then either N intends at t_2 that p , or N considers at t_2 whether p .

However, Bratman argues that it is sometimes rational to persist in an intention even though it was irrationally formed. Imagine an agent decides between attending either concert A or concert B (p. 93). The agent irrationally chooses A , and travels in its direction. Then they stop and reconsider their intention and, because they are now closer to A , recommit themselves to going to concert A . Bratman (pp. 93-5) argues that, in cases like these, it is rational for the agent to persist in an intention even though that intention was irrationally formed and even if it was not rational to reconsider it. Thus the revised version of Persistence of Intention would be too restrictive.

Bratman claims that, by stopping and reconsidering at t_2 , the agent "blocks the link from [their] intention at t_2 to its initial formation" (p. 94). They bracket their intention and form it anew. Then only their present situation is relevant for assessment of their rationality. This paves the way for a reasons responsiveness solution to the problem.

3.2.2 Solution: rationality as responsiveness to reasons

Like Agamemnon, the dieter seems to have two problems: one is the problem of deciding what to do, the other is the problem of irrationality. Again, it seems that the main issue is the first one, especially if we take the agent's perspective. The coherence account does not target this problem. It merely targets the second.

In contrast, according to the reasons responsiveness approach, the dieter is rational if they adequately respond to their reasons. They have reasons to not consider whether to have dessert, reasons to skip dessert, and their lunchtime order may provide them with a reason to have it⁸. What is an adequate response to this multitude of partially competing reasons? It seems to crucially depend on how we imagine the details of this case. For example, if enjoying dessert would seriously jeopardise health, then the reasons against having dessert seem stronger. However, if the risk of offending the host is greater, the reasons for eating dessert appear weightier. Whatever the reasons are, the dieter may respond appropriately to them.

The reasons responsiveness approach thus allows for them to act rationally, unlike the coherence account. It also informs their decision-making, thereby helping them to address the second problem. Because it does not lead the dieter on a time-consuming route of reasoning through a jungle of requirements, it helps them decide on the spur of a moment whether to eat dessert.

In this way, the reasons responsiveness approach promises to address the two issues simultaneously. It can do so because the reasons that help the agent decide between their options are also the reasons that determine whether the agent is rational in responding to them.

Overall, the reasons responsiveness account thus seems to address the problem generated by conflicting requirements. Importantly, it does so in a way that appears more promising than the options available to the coherence account.

4 Rational dilemmas

In at least two situations, an agent cannot fulfil all requirements of rationality. According to a coherence account as Broome defends it, this agent cannot be rational. Thus they are in a rational dilemma.

⁸The intention itself is arguably not a reason because of bootstrapping concerns (Bratman 1999; Broome 2001).

Some philosophers accept rational dilemmas (Brouwer 2014; Hughes 2019; Leonard 2020; Priest 2002; Ross 2010; Slote 1986; and, arguably, Christensen 2010). Others, though, deny that rational dilemmas are real, let alone conceivable (e.g. Caie 2012; Lasonen-Aarnio 2014; Schoenfeld 2015; Turri 2012). Although we cannot enter this debate here, a coherence account of rationality seems to commit us to the first camp. This section discusses ramifications and closes by pointing out that they, once more, seem to favour a rival reasons responsiveness account.

Broome has accepted rational dilemmas in personal communication, and stated that they do not cast doubt on the coherence view. In Broome's view, if an agent believes that conflicting obligations apply to them or forms an akratic intention, then so much worse for the agent (cf. Kieseewetter 2017, pp. 130–1).

Thus, for at least some cases a coherence view does not guide our reasoning. As some have put it, the framework does not exert pressure or force on us (Fogal 2020; Kieseewetter 2017, pp. 148–9; cf. Shpall 2014). It confines itself to providing us with criteria by which to judge whether an agent is rational or not. It does not aim to motivate us to act as we think we ought to, instead it tells us whether an agent is rational, given a God's-eye view (Arpaly 2000). This might strike us as plausible: when you cannot be rational, there is no point in trying to be.

We could compare this stance to a similar one in virtue ethics: if an agent puts themselves into a situation a virtuous person would never get themselves into, then this is the agent's fault, not the fault of virtue ethics.

We should resist this conclusion for at least four reasons. First, it seems to be an advantage of a theory if it can offer guidance even in situations that would not arise if the agent followed its guidance in the first place. Consider the ethical case. Even if an agent finds themselves in a situation that a truly virtuous person would never put themselves in—perhaps a situation where they must keep conflicting promises—virtue ethics can helpfully offer guidance. For, there clearly is a virtuous way of acting, and a less virtuous one: breaking one promise and making amends could be virtuous; spitefully breaking both promises would not be.

Therefore, a theory of rationality should, if it can, offer guidance even in situations that would never arise for a rational agent. However, a theory like Broome's coherence account seems unable to do so. Consider the dieter. From the perspective of coherence accounts, the dieter is irrational regardless of whether they smear dessert into their host's face or whether they politely decline it. It is just too bad that they irrational formed an intention violating

Enkrasia in the first place. One would expect a theory of rationality to do better than that. Thus, even if coherence accounts are unable to offer guidance, it is conceivable that some theory of rationality could.

A second worry about relinquishing guidance is that doing so requires Broome to give up a key ambition of “*Rationality through reasoning*”. Its first words are (p. 1):

“When you believe you ought to do something, your belief often causes you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. How does that happen? I call this ‘the motivation question’. I shall try to answer it in this book.”

Broome’s coherence framework thus aims to specify how we can motivate ourselves to do what we believe we ought to do. His answer is, in a nutshell: by reasoning in accordance with the coherence norms of rationality (Broome 2013, chs. 1, 13, cf. Bratman 2009, p. 417; Kolodny 2007, pp. 371-2).

On this view, reasoning is an activity (Broome 2013, pp. 1–3, 237). Conforming to requirements of rationality need not require reasoning⁹, just like virtuous agents do not need guidance for acting virtuously (pp. 3–4). For instance, it may be impossible to violate No Contradictions, the requirement to not believe p and $\neg p$ at the same time (pp. 155–6).

However, Broome intends coherence norms to motivate and provide guidance where needed. Rationality may demand effort and active rule-following (p. 173). A rational norm does “not merely cause you to behave in a particular way”, it also *motivates* and “*guides* you” (p. 237, cf. p. 3). As guidance involves criteria for rightness or correctness, most of Broome’s monograph is devoted to them. Coherence requirements are thus crucial not only for understanding rationality but also for the activity of reasoning.

However, in the situations I have described, it is impossible for the coherence account to provide rules to guide and motivate the agent. The problem is not so much that the rules might be incorrect and thus lead the agent to reason incorrectly. Instead, the rules fail to guide the agent in any way whatsoever. This lack of guidance also prevents the agent from pursuing the activity of reasoning, and from motivating themselves.

Third, Broome’s framework could be amended to offer guidance after all. There are various suggestions in the literature that could come to its rescue. For one thing, some authors have suggested to adopt theories of ‘the second best’

⁹as an anonymous reviewer kindly reminds me

or meta-requirements that resolve conflicts between requirements of rationality (Titelbaum 2015). For example, Leonard (2020) suggests an indeterminacy principle that requires the agent to satisfy as many requirements as possible. When there is more than one option to do that, the situation is indeterminate and there are several permissible ways of resolution.

Nevertheless, this approach could ultimately remain unsuccessful. It is conceivable that, at least in some situations, the meta-requirements or principles of second best could conflict. Then the problem we have discussed would arise again on a different level. At this point it is unclear whether or not an amendment of a coherence approach along those or other lines would succeed. Therefore, I leave this question open for future research.

Fourth, if a coherence view refuses to offer guidance for agents in rational dilemmas, this suggests that agents better avoid these dilemmas. This is what No Dilemmas states and what Broome seems to imply when he restricts his account to worlds where dilemmas need not arise (Broome 2007, p. 365). Thus the coherence view may seem to offer the limited guidance to avoid dilemmas. However, this particular piece of guidance strikes me as implausible.

To see why, let us return to research into moral dilemmas. Here, it has been debated whether agents ought to avoid moral dilemmas (Barcan Marcus 1980; Greenspan 1983; Hansson 1998). An avoidance strategy is analogous to Broome's: even if the normative code is conflict-free and can be adhered to, there may still be some situations in some worlds where an agent does face conflicting norms. Therefore, an agent should strive to avoid that dilemmas arise.

However, it need not be the case that it is problematic to act in a way that generates dilemmas, let alone that an agent who acts so is immoral or irrational (Hansson 1998). A medical doctor who declines working in an overcrowded Coronavirus ward in order to avoid difficult trade-offs about allocating ventilators, say, would probably not be acting ethically and perhaps not rationally either. If the world is messy and chaotic, presenting us with conflicting and impossible demands, it may be rational to believe that one ought to do two things that are incompatible.

I close by assessing reasons responsiveness accounts once more. It is possible that we could conceive of circumstances in which reasons responsiveness accounts struggle to provide us with guidance or with information about what is rational. Reasons responsiveness accounts may have to accept rational dilemmas, too.

However, rational dilemmas seem to be less of a problem for reasons responsiveness accounts than they are for coherence accounts. For, according to reasons responsiveness accounts rationality is a matter of *responding* adequately to reasons. Even if those reasons conflict, the agent can still be rational or irrational depending on how they respond to them. A similar stance is not available to proponents of the coherence account: on their view, rationality is a matter of abiding by requirements of coherence, and if those requirements conflict, the agent is unable to meet them.

Again, reasons responsiveness accounts seem superior. If it is rational to respond adequately to our reasons, we need not avoid dilemmas. Even if we cannot abide by all of them, we can still adequately respond to conflicting requirements, conflicting reasons, and even conflicting moral norms.

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