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Is Theoretical Rationality Derivatively Normative?

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Abstract:

In the recent normativity literature, much attention has been paid to the question of whether rationality is normative. As rationality requires every agent's attitudes to be logically consistent—and prohibits inconsistent attitudes—we might wonder whether we always have a reason to be rational. The normativity of rationality faces a strong skeptical challenge by Niko Kolodny (2005, 2008). Kolodny's "why be rational?" challenge denies that we always have a reason to be rational. Andrew Reisner (2011) takes up this challenge and argues that—at a *minimum*—we necessarily have a strong reason to satisfy requirements of belief consistency and that this reason is parasitic upon evidential reasons for belief. In this paper, I will consider the possibility that some individual requirements of rationality always provide you with reasons to satisfy them. More specifically, I will critique the thesis that rationality issues requirements which are normative *independently* of other rational requirements. It is not clear whether a rational requirement, in isolation from others, always generates a normative reason to satisfy it. I will conclude that Reisner's approach may defuse parts of Kolodny's challenge but only by introducing a problem of excessive justification for beliefs. If Reisner's view is correct, full compliance with belief-consistency requirements will guarantee that nearly *all* of your beliefs—no matter what they happen to be—are justified to some degree.

I. What is rationality?

The charge of irrationality is one that we take seriously. In everyday language, the concept of "rationality" encompasses not only the appropriateness of attitudes but also the appropriate relations *among* attitudes. The sense of "rationality" employed in contemporary epistemology tends to center on the appropriateness of belief in light of an agent's epistemic situation. What one is justified in believing, we might say, depends on the features of one's epistemic situation. Non-epistemological uses of the term "rationality" tend to focus on the logical or structural relations among attitudes. For example, an incoherent set of beliefs qualifies as "irrational" on this view of rationality. This difference in usage generates some confusion about the relationship between *reasons* for attitudes and the *rationality* of attitudes. To resolve this confusion, let us first become clear on what we mean by "rationality".

A helpful way of thinking about the different senses of "rationality" can be found in Niko Kolodny's "Why Be Rational?" (2005). Kolodny claims there are three measures of an agent's epistemic situation which bear on the relationship between reasons and rationality: objective epistemic rationality, subjective epistemic rationality, and true beliefs.

"Objective epistemic rationality" refers to having beliefs which are in fact supported by the evidence available to an agent. The definition of "evidence" used here is quite broad, including not only concrete physical evidence but also perceptual experience and abstract arguments. The beliefs formed on the basis of this evidence may be false, as even misleading evidence can generate reasons which justify belief. An example will help to illustrate this point. Suppose you are confronted with evidence which implicates a

disgruntled co-worker in the theft of office supplies. Suppose also that all available signs point to your co-worker having stolen the supplies, although in fact he had nothing to do with it. In the absence of distorting influences such as bias, believing that your co-worker is the culprit on the basis of this misleading evidence is supported by objective epistemic rationality. The evidence provides you with plenty of reasons to have this specific belief about your co-worker, and that belief is justified to some degree by the evidence, although the belief is false.[1]

Often called "theoretical rationality" in the literature, "subjective epistemic rationality" is what we have in mind when considering the appropriate relations among beliefs. Consider a case in which someone believes *p*, $p \rightarrow q$, and ~*q*. Suppose all of the available evidence supports ~*q*, and perhaps ~*q* is even a true belief. But by believing ~*q* on the basis of the beliefs that *p* and $p \rightarrow q$, an agent is irrational on the standard of subjective epistemic rationality (hereafter, *theoretical rationality*).

The logical or structural sort of rationality is often divided into two components, each of which governs a different part of our psychology. Theoretical rationality governs the appropriate relations among beliefs, whereas practical rationality governs the appropriate relations among attitudes associated with action, such as intentions and beliefs about means and ends. In what follows, I will be referring to objective epistemic rationality simply as "epistemic rationality." Throughout this paper, "rationality" will include both theoretical rationality and practical rationality unless otherwise specified.

II. The normativity of rationality

[1] This account presupposes at minimum a weak form of evidentialism, according to which there are *at least* evidential normative reasons for belief. Believing in accordance with one's actual reasons for belief is ideal, but we often do not live up to the standard.

In the recent normativity literature, much attention has been paid to the question of whether rationality is normative. As rationality requires every agent's attitudes to be logically consistent—and prohibits inconsistent attitudes—we might wonder whether we always have a reason to satisfy these requirements. While some philosophers have focused on the question of whether rationality as a whole (that is, as a distinct source of requirements) is normative, Niko Kolodny and Andrew Reisner have considered the possibility that some rational requirements are normative whereas others are not. I will begin by sketching this issue as it is described by John Broome.

In Chapter 11 of *Rationality Through Reasoning*, Broome attempts to answer what he calls the "Normative Question" about rationality: whether, if an agent is rationally required to *F*, that fact necessarily counts as a reason for the agent to *F*.[2] Many of the major parties to this debate accept some form of "factualism" about reasons. - According to the "factualist" view of reasons, there are facts about what one ought to do.[3] When an agent ought to *F*, that fact is explainable in terms of the reasons she has to *F*. In other words, in understanding why an agent ought to *F*, a number of reasons would jointly explain the "ought" of the statement, "*N* ought to *F*." These reasons can issue from a number of sources, including prudence, morality, and perhaps others. Such sources are said to be "normative" because they provide an agent with normative or justifying reasons which count in favor of either *F*ing or not *F*ing. Another way of saying

[2] Broome, J. (2013), p. 202. Here and throughout, I will use "*F*" as a universal verb which includes "believe," "intend," etc.

[3] In this paper, I will be following standard practice in using "ought" as shorthand for "ought, all-things-considered"; that is, in every case in which one ought to *F*, one ought to *F* because the balance of reasons conclusively supports *F*ing. Likewise, I will use the phrase "have most reason to *F*" synonymously with "ought to *F*". When it is not clear that one conclusively ought to *F*, but something stands in favor of *F*ing, I will simply note that there is a reason to *F* or that one "has reason to *F*". So, by "reason", I mean a *prima facie* or *pro tanto* reason rather than an *ultima facie* or *pro toto reason*.

this is that prudence *requires* you to *F* in certain circumstances; morality *requires* you *F*, etc. The way these normative requirements stack up determines whether an agent ought to *F*. Rationality is also a source of requirements, although it is not clear whether rationality issues normative requirements. The Normative Question asks whether rationality gives you a reason to satisfy these requirements.

If we answer the Normative Question positively, we are committed to the thesis "Normativity of Rationality". But we needn't adopt such a strong view of the reasons attached to rationality, because there are two ways in which a source of requirements might be normative, either *derivatively* or *non-derivatively*. If rationality is *non-derivatively* normative, an agent necessarily has a reason to satisfy rational requirements simply by virtue of being required by rationality, according to Normativity of Rationality. Morality and prudence are two sources of requirements which many take to be non-derivatively normative. If rationality is *derivatively* normative, then an agent has a reason to satisfy rational requirements because of some normative source apart from rationality. The latter possibility, if true, would force us to accept something weaker than Normativity of Rationality. This is because the fact that rationality requires an agent to *F* would not in itself constitute a reason to *F*. The weaker principle is what Broome calls "Weak Normativity": "Necessarily, if rationality requires *N* to *F*, there is a reason for *N* to *F*."[4] This reason could stem from any normative source, as long as there is *always* a reason to satisfy each rational requirement.

[4] Broome (2013), p. 203

The normativity of rationality as a whole is an open question and one which I am unable to answer.[5] But given our collective discomfort with having incoherent attitudes, it may seem that at least some rational requirements are normative.[6] In the next section, I will argue that the most promising approach to this question would establish the normativity of *individual* rational requirements, in isolation from other rational requirements. I will then consider a similar proposal Andrew Reisner (2011). Reisner argues for a thesis even more qualified than Weak Normativity, namely that the rational requirements governing belief consistency are normative by virtue of the reasons for belief provided by evidence. In other words, Reisner argues that several individual requirements of theoretical rationality are derivatively normative. Ultimately, I will conclude that Reisner's approach helps to defuse a prominent skeptical challenge to the normativity of rationality—but only by introducing an implausible view of how beliefs are justified.

III. The "why be rational?" challenge

It is commonly accepted that there is a clear conceptual distinction between rationality and normativity. This distinction is motivated by the thought that one might be under certain normative requirements which are not identical to the requirements of rationality. For instance, if morality requires you to keep your promises, you are under a normative requirement to keep your promises. And it seems that this requirement says

[5] I will not consider the possibility, discussed by Nicholas Southwood in "Vindicating the Normativity of Rationality" (2008), that "the normativity of rationality is a matter of reasons that are internal to rationality, not reasons that are external to it" (18). Southwood echoes the response of H. A. Prichard to moral skeptics of his time: one cannot give an independent justification for morality—morality is *self-justifying*. This response in the context of the current debate is less than satisfying, so I will not pursue it.

[6] At least intuitively, one would be more or less rational by virtue of complying with more or fewer rational requirements. It may be that some rational requirements are "weightier" than others, but I'm unsure how one might determine the weight of a rational requirement.

nothing in itself about the *logical* relations among your attitudes. Accordingly, rationality is often taken to be supervenient on an agent's attitudes, such as beliefs and intentions, rather than on features of the world outside of the mind. According to factualists about normativity, reasons are supervenient on the features of one's actual situation rather than *entirely* on one's attitudes.[7] Hence, what is rational to do in a given situation is sometimes not what one has most reason to do, if reasons are, as factualists contend, not strictly supervenient on the mind.[8] Let's look at an example from John Broome which shows that rationality and normativity are conceptually distinct. The principle under discussion in Broome's example is called "Enkrasia", a principle of practical rationality which requires that [if you believe you ought to *F*, you intend to *F*]:

> Often when rationality requires you to *F*, *F*ing achieves nothing you have any reason to achieve, stemming from any source apart from rationality. For example, suppose you believe you ought to sell your car, but your belief is false and actually you have no reason to sell it. You can satisfy Enkrasia on this occasion by intending to sell your car. If you do, as a result you will probably sell it. But you have no reason to sell it. Satisfying Enkrasia on this occasion achieves nothing you have any reason to achieve, stemming from any source beyond rationality.[9]

Let us assume that it is psychologically possible to be completely mistaken about one's reasons in this context and remain rational. Suppose you have the mistaken belief that you ought to sell your car. Rationality permits you to intend to sell your car, without giving you a reason to do so. In fact, prudence and perhaps other normative sources give you most reason not to sell your car. The reasons which determine that you ought not to

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[7] Of course, this sort of account presupposes a satisfying answer to error theories about normativity in general. Given that error theories about *epistemic* normativity appear self-defeating, I accept that normative claims aren't systematically false.

[8] This is not to say that *no* rational requirements are normative requirements. At this point, to assert that rationality and normativity never intersect would be to beg the question against the normativity of individual rational requirements.

[9] Broome (2013), p. 207

sell your car do not count in favor of doing something which rationality permits. Intending to sell your car in this case would satisfy Enkrasia *sans* any obvious moral or prudential reason to do so. Broome concludes that Enkrasia cannot be derivatively normative, because no source other than rationality gives you a reason to satisfy it. This sort of example can be constructed for many rational requirements and will produce similar results.

So, a theory which defends the normativity of rational requirements must meet the "why be rational?" challenge outlined in Kolodny (2005). For the purposes of this paper, I will consider two major components of this challenge:

> The net result of revising my attitudes in accordance with rational requirements might be to adopt many attitudes for which I have no reason, and to abandon many attitudes for which I have. In any event, even if it is true that we have this reason to comply with rational requirements as a rule, it does not follow that we have this reason to comply with them in any particular case.[10]

The first component concerns having a reason in every particular case to be rational, which I will call the Universality Constraint. Unlike the rules of chess or the driving laws in Great Britain, rationality has jurisdiction over all agents at all times. So, if rational requirements are necessarily normative, they would—always and everywhere—provide us with reasons to satisfy them. A common response to the "why be rational?" challenge has been to draw attention to the moral and prudential reasons we have to maintain rational dispositions, i.e., to be *disposed* to satisfy rational requirements. Dispositional theories of this sort are unable to meet Kolodny's challenge, because they do not satisfy the Universality Constraint. In some cases, it seems that acting contrary to a rational disposition may be prudent, morally obligatory, etc. As a result, most contributors on the subject would find the following principle unsatisfactory:

[10] Kolodny (2005), p. 543

D: More often than not, an agent has reason to be rational.

Someone sympathetic to this kind of dispositional theory might respond by agreeing that we may not have a reason in every particular case to be rational. But one always has a reason to *maintain* a rational disposition, and the surest way to maintain a rational disposition by always being rational. The following observation should cast doubt on that kind of response: Dispositions usually aren't threatened by individual instances in which we act or believe contrary to them. An agent might *sometimes* violate a principle of practical rationality without threatening her capacity for practical rationality. Similarly, an agent might sometimes have incoherent beliefs without threatening her capacity to make her beliefs coherent. And even if a disposition to *F* is generally more beneficial than a disposition not to *F*, it simply does not follow that one always has a reason to *F*. It suffices to say that even if there are reasons for dispositions, that fact does not entail having a reason in every case.

A dispositional theory which might circumvent these worries could contend that one always has reason to be more rational than not.[11] Might an agent have reason to do what rationality *on balance* requires? For example, consider two requirements which plausibly issue from theoretical rationality:

> *Positive Evidence:* Theoretical rationality requires that, [if you believe the evidence conclusively supports *p*, you believe *p*].
>
> *No Contradictory Beliefs:* Theoretical rationality requires that, at time *t*, you do not [believe *p* and also believe ~*p*].

Suppose you are irrational on both counts. You believe the evidence overwhelmingly supports *p* yet you believe both *p* and ~*p*. When you violate the first requirement, you could come to satisfy it by simply dropping your belief that the

[11] Niko Kolodny rejects dispositional arguments of this type in "Why Be Disposed to Be Coherent?" (2008).

evidence conclusively supports *p*. Another option, one which would satisfy both requirements at once, would be to simply drop your belief that ~*p*.[12] If an agent has reason to do what rationality requires *on balance,* it seems that she has reason to do what will satisfy the maximum possible number of rational requirements.

This understanding of the normativity of rational requirements rests on confusion about how reasons operate. When a normative source such as morality gives you a reason to satisfy a moral requirement, you possess that reason independently of your moral reasons to satisfy *other* requirements. Consider a straightforward moral case. As your only available driver, your friend has promised to give you a ride to the airport at noon, but your friend has also, forgetfully, committed to drive a different friend to a different airport at noon of the same day. It is clear that your friend, recognizing these conflicting duties, has a reason to fulfill each promise, regardless of what your friend *ought* to do, all-things-considered. Your friend does not only have reason to do what morality requires of her *on balance* but to satisfy each *particular* moral requirement. So, if the aforementioned requirements of theoretical rationality are themselves normative, we would expect to have a reason to satisfy each of them, independently of our reasons to satisfy the other. I will call this condition the "Local Constraint". Both the Universality Constraint and Local Constrains must be satisfied for any individual rational requirement to provide us with necessary reasons to satisfy them.

The second component of Kolodny's challenge concerns the effects of revising one's attitudes in order to satisfy rational requirements, and this aspect of Kolodny's objection leads us to the heart of the problem facing the normativity of rationality: An

[12] Of course, beliefs normally do not admit of being dropped at will. This point will become important in section IV of this paper.

agent with inconsistent attitudes can revise his attitudes in ways which satisfy rational requirements yet violate epistemic rationality. It is important to note that this problem affects both wide-scope and narrow-scope formulations of rational requirements. So, before turning to the difficulties facing individual normative requirements of rationality, I will quickly sketch the difference between wide-scope and narrow-scope requirements. This will help to clarify some points made in later sections of this paper. The simplest example of a wide-scope rational requirement is *No Contradictory Beliefs*. *No Contradictory Beliefs* states that an agent is rationally required, at time *t*, not to both believe *p* and believe ~*p*. At time *t*, an agent can satisfy the wide-scope requirement by believing *p*, ~*p*, or neither, but violates the requirement only by believing *p* and also believing ~*p*. The wide-scope version of this principle can be reformulated as a conditional: At time *t*,

RR[B(*p*) → ~B(~*p*)]

That is, at time *t*, you are rationally required that [if you believe *p*, then you do not believe ~*p*]. This rational requirement lends itself to contraposition without any difficulties:

RR[B(~*p*) → ~B(*p*)]

All that is required of you is to make the conditional true, and this can be done by simply not believing *p* or ~*p*. By contrast, the narrow-scope version of *No Contradictory Beliefs* would restrict the acceptable ways of satisfying it to only one. In cases where an agent believes *p*, she is required not to believe ~*p* on the narrow-scope requirement. The requirement, reformulated as a conditional, would appear as follows:

B(*p*) → RR[~B(~*p*)].

In cases where the agent believes ~*p*, she is required not to believe *p*:

B(~*p*) → RR[~B(*p*)]

In other words, the narrow-scope requirement would be triggered every time an agent has the belief in the antecedent of the conditional. The scope of the requirement is narrow, because the requirement ranges only over the consequent of the conditional. Wide-scope rational requirements, by contrast, do not have to be triggered in this way in order to place requirements on rational agents. This is because the requirement ranges over the entire conditional.

For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that wide-scope formulations of rational requirements are more appropriate than narrow-scope formulations. Quite apart from the Normative Question, I believe that the objections to wide-scope rational requirements can be adequately answered.[13] However, there has been less success in defending the *normativity* of individual wide-scope requirements. I will call this thesis "Individual Derivative Normativity" (*IDN*):

> *IDN*: Some individual wide-scope requirements of rationality are derivatively normative.

Much has been said about the implausible results of combining the normativity thesis with either wide- or narrow-scope formulations of rational requirements. My analysis of *IDN* will focus primarily on wide-scope formulations, due to the objectionable bootstrapping that immediately arises from narrow-scope requirements, if normative.

[13] For a strong defense of the wide-scope instrumental requirement, see John Brunero's "Instrumental Rationality, Symmetry, and Scope" (2012). Brunero answers objections to (non-normative) wide-scope requirements of practical rationality and generalizes his defense to cover various requirements of theoretical rationality. Brunero draws a distinction between local and "all-attitudes-considered" rationality. It seems right to consider rational requirements in isolation from others in order to determine whether one is locally rational, so I am concerned here primarily with reasons to be locally rational.

The bootstrapping problem for a narrow-scope rational requirement is that once the requirement is "triggered"—i.e., once you have the belief or intention in the antecedent of the conditional—you are required to do what follows. Once you believe *p*, you are *required* by rationality not to believe ~*p*. If this requirement is normative, then you always have a reason not to believe ~*p* every time you believe *p*. And when you believe ~*p*, you would suddenly have a reason not to believe *p*. If this were how normative rational requirements operated, a reason would be "bootstrapped" into existence by the bare fact of having a belief or intention. These reasons would exist apart from the prudential, moral, epistemic, and perhaps other reasons we generally take to support our attitudes. But, on the factualist view, reasons are not completely dependent on one's mental states. By exchanging narrow-scope for wide-scope requirements, we do not immediately face the bootstrapping problem.

However, the wide-scope "solution" to bootstrapping presents problems of its own. First, wide-scoping does not completely remove the potential for bootstrapping. This is most evidently a problem for practical rationality in cases of fixed ends and unalterable instrumental beliefs.[14] Suppose you have a fixed end *E* and you are unable to drop the belief that to achieve *E* you must take means *M*. It appears to you, after much careful deliberation, that the only way to achieve *E* is through *M*. In such cases, the only way to be instrumentally coherent is to intend to take means *M*. But this is functionally equivalent to a narrow scope requirement for agents with these fixed attitudes, reintroducing the bootstrapping problem. So, normative wide-scope requirements of practical rationality seem suspect.

[14] See "Problems for Wide-Scoping" (2013), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationality-instrumental/supplement.html>.

Andrew Reisner considers the possibility that, despite these issues, there is always a very strong reason to be *theoretically* rational. Reisner attempts to ground the normativity of theoretical rationality in the reasons provided by epistemic rationality. If evidence provides us with reasons to believe, Reisner argues, we always have reason to be coherent. One may be privy to only partial evidence supporting proposition *p*, but the available evidence always either does or does not support *p*. So in every case of contradictory beliefs, we can be certain that at least one of the beliefs is false. Let's explore this argument in more detail.

IV. State-given reasons to be rational

Reisner's defense of what I have called "Individual Derivative Normativity" (*IDN*) begins by introducing Derek Parfit's distinction between "object-given" and "state-given" reasons. A reason is "object-given" when it stands in a certain kind of support relation to the *object* or *content* of an attitude. Evidential reasons are commonly thought to be object-given reasons for belief, because the evidence supports the content of the belief. An agent possesses a "state-given" reason when something stands in favor of (or against) having the attitude itself rather than the content of the attitude. The most common examples of state-given reasons are moral or prudential reasons for belief. If it would *benefit* an agent in some way to believe *p*, then the agent could have a state-given reason to believe *p* despite having evidential (object-given) reasons against believing *p*. Some philosophers have argued that the reasons of rationality must be state-given reasons, i.e., reasons to have certain configurations of mental states.[15]

[15] For example, Broome (2013), pp. 87-88; Kolodny (2005), p. 550

Against this theoretical backdrop, Reisner argues that we always have a state-given reason to satisfy consistency requirements (e.g. *No Contradictory Beliefs)* of theoretical rationality. Here is a brief overview of the argument: As contradictions are necessarily false, evidence will never support belief in a contradiction. This fact generates a strong, wide-scope evidential reason not to believe a contradiction. Conjunctions of contradictory beliefs are also necessarily false, which produces a *state-given*, wide-scope evidential reason not to have contradictory beliefs. The avoidance of contradictory beliefs is a wide-scope consistency requirement of theoretical rationality. Therefore, wide-scope consistency requirements of theoretical rationality are derivatively normative.

On its face, this argument seems plausible. As evidential reasons *necessarily* undermine belief in contradictions as well as sets of contradictory beliefs, we always and everywhere have evidential reasons against having these beliefs. And this fact appears to support a specific type of rational requirement, namely consistency requirements of theoretical rationality. So, both the Universality Constraint and Local Constraint appear to be satisfied by Reisner's account. But there are several ways an opponent could object to this argument, and the remainder of this paper will focus on the three most powerful objections. The first objection straightforwardly denies the existence of state-given reasons for belief. While I will argue that this objection is inconclusive, it is crucial to understanding the second and third objections that we cover the terrain. The second objection questions the inferential leap from non-contradiction to *No Contradictory Beliefs*, and the third objection focuses on the problems of wide-scope justification which are generated by Reisner's account. The latter two objections, I will argue, are effective in casting serious doubt on *IDN*.

The first serious objection rejects the premise that there are state-given reasons for belief. Recently, there has been a trend in favor of calling object-given reasons the "right kind of reasons" and state-given reasons the "wrong kind of reasons". Some authors allege that there is a kind of conceptual fit between reasons and the content of the attitudes which they support and that this fact constitutes a normative standard by which we can designate reason-types as being *right* or *wrong*.[16] Reasons for belief and reasons for action apparently occupy different domains, as beliefs do not fall under rational control as obviously as actions.[17] One reason we may want to relegate state-given reasons to the sphere of action is that evidential concerns are well-suited to the sphere of belief, whereas non-evidential concerns seem better suited for determining the best course of action. The lack of evidential reasons for action seems to confirm this suspicion. It has been argued that the concept of belief itself makes the existence of state-given reasons for belief implausible. Furthermore, Niko Kolodny and Nishi Shah have argued that purported state-given reasons for belief are actually object-given reasons for intentions.[18] They are reasons to intend, because an agent believes that it is worthwhile to *cause* herself to believe something independently of the evidence. And causing herself to believe is a process comprised of *actions*.[19] But how we initially construe what a belief is *for* and how we interpret the difference between evidential and non-evidential reasons will largely determine the plausibility of the state-given reasons theory. Ultimately, I will conclude that the two most influential strategies for doubting the existence of state-given

[16] For example, see Jonathan Way (2012)
[17] Although, see Pamela Hieronymi's "Controlling Attitudes" (2006) for the argument that intentions are no more under rational control than beliefs.
[18] Kolodny (2005), Shah (2006)
[19] Reisner (2009a) labels this line of thinking the "causing yourself" argument.

reasons are inconclusive. It should become apparent that these two strategies are closely connected and vulnerable on similar grounds.

Consider the following example from Reisner (2011), a spin on the common "eccentric billionaire" examples from the normativity literature. Suppose that an eccentric billionaire will offer you a fortune if you would admire Alex, who happens to be "a lazy sadist with a poor sense of humor."[20] Alex is not an admirable person, and you recognize this fact. So, your object-given reasons to believe that Alex is admirable do not support such a belief. (Suppose for simplicity's sake that believing Alex to be admirable is interchangeable with admiring him.) As a result, you will have to take some means toward coming to admire Alex if you would like to receive the prize. The prize is awarded for being in the *state* of admiring Alex, not for how one arrives at that state. Reisner concludes from this example that prudence provides you with a state-given reason to *admire* Alex, not an object-given reason to intend or cause yourself to admire Alex. The critics of the state-given reasons theory would conclude from this scenario that you have a prudential reason to *cause* yourself to admire Alex, regardless of how you do so. Moral and prudential concerns seem inherently *action-guiding* and therefore appear to be outside the scope of doxastic deliberation, deliberation about what to believe.

During deliberation about what to believe, we generally inquire into whether *p* is true, not whether it is beneficial to believe that *p* is true. It is fairly obvious that the concept of belief is essentially connected to the concept of truth. Attributing a belief to oneself is equivalent to thinking that one is committed to the truth of a proposition, not the *benefits* of being so committed. In short, the concept of belief itself consists in commitment to the truth of a proposition, however strong or weak that commitment may

[20] Reisner (2011)

be. In Shah's terminology, the "deliberative question" of whether to believe that *p* is *transparent* in that it always gives way to the "factual question" of whether *p* is true.[21] In deliberation about *belief*, we marshal arguments for and against *p*, drawing on whatever evidence is relevant to the truth of *p*.

The deliberative process may conclude in an intention to put oneself in situations where one is susceptible to misleading evidence or psychological pressures from others to believe. Perhaps I intend to become involved with a cult, on the grounds that parts of their belief system would be beneficial for me if I were to adopt those beliefs. But this does not count as doxastic deliberation, according to critics of the state-given reasons theory. It is an example of *practical* reasoning. In other words, because of the intermediary step between deliberating and believing—namely, *intending*—it may seem as though so-called "state-given reasons" are outside the jurisdiction of theoretical rationality and therefore cannot count as necessary reasons to be rational.

The "strong evidentialist" view of reasons seems to undergird these reactions to the state-given reasons theory. Put generally, strong evidentialism is the view that there are *only* evidential reasons for belief. As reasons seem to come in multiple varieties, the strong evidentialist claim can be interpreted in a number of ways. Let us start with the least compromising version of this view, one that entails "doxastic involuntarism" or the total inability to modify one's beliefs at will. According to this strain of evidentialist thought, evidence (or what we take to be evidence) causally determines our beliefs. If doxastic involuntarism were true, then all claims about having pragmatic reasons for belief would be mistaken. On this basic picture of belief-formation, we involuntarily believe *p* to the degree to which the evidence appears to support *p*.

[21] Shah (2006), pp. 481-2

Altering beliefs at will—in any radical sense of "at will"—may be psychologically impossible, but it nevertheless seems *beneficial* in some cases to believe contrary to (or without sufficient) evidence. However, even the benefits of a belief do not generate pragmatic reasons for belief, according to the strong evidentialist. As Shah notes, "telling someone it would be wonderful if he jumped over the moon makes sense; telling someone he has a reason to jump over the moon does not."[22] If consciously controlling our beliefs is akin to jumping over the moon—i.e., something which we are unable to do voluntarily—then perhaps there is little sense to be made of non-evidential reasons for belief. It is not clear what is meant by "voluntarily" or "at will" in arguments for doxastic involuntarism. But if "at will" simply means "immediately", then doxastic involuntarism seems to rule out state-given reasons for belief but also less controversial notions such as lengthy and careful deliberation.[23]

The position that one is only *capable* of believing in line with perceived evidence should not be conflated with the assertion that one *ought* to believe in line with perceived evidence. It is also important to distinguish what is psychologically impossible from what simply lacks epistemic justification. The doxastic involuntarist argument is not that, among the various types of reasons for belief, evidential reasons have some kind of normative *priority* over pragmatic reasons for belief but that evidential reasons for belief are merely explanatory. While I do not mean to take a strong stance on the ethics of belief, many philosophers accept some form of the "ought implies can" principle with respect to normative reasons for belief. And if we cannot exert *any* control over what we believe, there seems to be nothing *justifying* about evidential reasons for belief. The

[22] Shah (2006), p. 486
[23] For a lengthier exploration of this point, see Hieronymi (2006).

burden is upon the strong evidentialist to show how coming to believe, say, via a belief-causing pill (or brain injury) is less justified by our normative reasons for belief than believing *p* on the basis of relevant evidence. Doxastic involuntarism, by collapsing the normative into the explanatory, cannot do so. Thus, we need something weaker than doxastic involuntarism to explain why state-given reasons are not genuine normative reasons for belief.

However, if belief has any function apart from capturing truth—that is, if we can construe what beliefs are *for* as including more than simply aiming at truth—then it is not clear why evidential reasons are the only sort of normative reasons for belief. One needn't take the hardline position that only evidential reasons are, in a *causal* sense, relevant to belief-formation through deliberation. It may be conceptually possible that one can "reason" from the benefits of believing *p* to the conclusion that *p* is true. We can imagine science fiction scenarios where this is the case. The more important question is whether this reasoning process counts as *defective* reasoning. The normative criterion is needed to differentiate legitimate forms of reasoning from defective forms and justified beliefs from unjustified beliefs. For example, wishful thinking may lead someone to believe that there is still plenty of beer in the fridge after a long night of intemperate drinking with friends, despite having, as a background condition of his reasoning, the belief that he purchased only enough drinks to cover the evening; this belief would be unsupported, although the process which produced it might in some sense constitute reasoning.

Imagine a science fiction scenario in which agents can gain beliefs in ways which are wholly unencumbered by perceived evidence. Suppose that taking a certain pill will

allow you to believe that your success in life is valued by the universe itself.[24] Perhaps you are aware that having this belief will be better for you in the long run, allow you to accomplish more in your life, more cheerfully than before, and you can take this pill with almost no negative side-effects. Obviously, there is much to be said in favor of taking the pill. One might argue that these beneficial aspects stand in favor of having the belief itself. As noted earlier, some have argued that what stand in favor of taking the pill are actually reasons to *intend* to take the pill, not reasons to *believe* what the pill causes you to believe. Considerations which would count in favor of this belief include certain metaphysical arguments about the nature of reality, the possibility of a higher power, etc.

Presumably, though, many believers are capable of *higher-order* reasoning which takes benefits of belief into account. And whether or not they are capable of directly forming a first-order belief *B* on the basis of those concerns, one *can* form higher-order belief *A* about belief *B*, i.e., whether one ought, all-things-considered, to have *B*. In some circumstances, what is most important to us (or most in line with our ends) is not the truth of a belief but the fact that we stand to gain something significant as a result of believing it. This is most evident in contexts of religious doubts, as in the famous example of Pascal's wager. If you were convinced that adherence to a theistic worldview would improve your life (and prospects for the afterlife), one set of means by which you could gain this belief is to put yourself in a receptive mindset and become a regular churchgoer. Changing habits of thought may also be an effective means for altering what one takes to be morally objectionable beliefs. This sort of long-term habituation of belief is not only conceptually possible but familiar. Recognition that one harbors racist or sexist

[24] Belief-causing pills of this sort would also need to have the side-effect that the agent forgets having taken a belief-causing pill (and perhaps other prior beliefs).

tendencies may count as a moral reason to change one's habits of thought to eventually eliminate these thoughts and their effects on one's behavior. Similarly, the belief that one will survive a terrible illness may contribute to actually surviving the illness. And, if survival is one's end, it seems that one has a prudential reason for belief. Designating this reason as an object-given reason for intention seems to beg the question.

Authors like Shah and Kolodny rely on what Mark Schroeder calls "high-handed arguments" against the theory of state-given reasons. High-handed arguments "presume on the strength of the obviousness of the object-given/state-given theory to be able to discern that no [state-given reasons theory] could even possibly be right."[25] Reisner echoes these concerns, noting that he has yet to find a knockdown argument against the state-given reasons theory which doesn't beg the question against the existence of such reasons right from the start. Reisner argues that strong evidentialists view state-given reasons as the wrong kind of reasons without demonstrating on *a priori* grounds that something is clearly wrong with the prospect of state-given reasons for belief.

At any rate, I believe that much of the resistance to the state-given reasons theory can be explained by our uneasiness about epistemic irrationality. Believing on the basis of pragmatic rather than evidential concerns violates normative requirements of epistemic rationality. There are circumstances in which a misappraisal of the evidence is excusable, but when an agent gains a belief in a way which is *intentionally* contrary to the evidence, we intuit that something has gone wrong. We may even go so far as to deem that agent epistemically blameworthy. But whatever blame is incurred as a result of ignoring one's evidential reasons, it is open to the state-given reasons theorist to say that the agent *ought*, all-things-considered, to believe a contradiction if she can come by that belief by

[25] Mark Schroeder, "The Ubiquity of State-Given Reasons" (2012), p. 485

something as simple and painless as taking a pill. If one could bypass the psychological limits on belief acquisition by taking a belief-causing pill, it is not clear why that fact could not factor into one's deliberations about whether to believe *p*.[26]

To summarize this section, the two most persuasive strategies against state-given reasons for belief seem to be:

1) Demonstrating that purported state-given reasons for belief are actually object-given reasons for intentions, and

2) Showing that there is something about the concept of belief itself which is supported only by evidence (broadly construed).

Both of these strategies rely on a strong form of evidentialism. But the strongest version of this view, *doxastic involuntarism*, is purely explanatory and seems to eliminate normative reasons for belief altogether. Doxastic involuntarism can explain how attention to evidence produces belief, but it fails to explain how evidential reasons for belief are in any sense justifying. Weaker versions can capture the normative aspect of reasons for belief but face the charge of question-begging. Reisner rejects strong evidentialism on similar grounds.[27] Beliefs are subject to a kind of indirect control through intentions, and that suffices to cast doubt on doxastic involuntarism as well as strictly evidentialist accounts of normative reasons for belief. Hence, the strong evidentialist's misgivings about state-given reasons are inconclusive.

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[26] Perhaps all that truly follows from the state-given reasons theory is that pragmatic concerns can determine whether or not something is *worth* having true beliefs about. Suppose you suspect that the Earth's climate is changing, and it is important (valuable, etc.) for you to know whether or not the Earth's climate is changing. In some sense this can be considered a reason for belief which does not count in favor of the content of the belief. While I do not have space here to evaluate value-based normative theories, the recognition of non-evidential reasons for belief seems to be all that is required to get the state-given reasons theory off the ground and motivate the kind of account that Reisner defends.

[27] Reisner (2009a)

Like the first serious objection to Reisner's argument, the latter two are somewhat technical, but I believe the latter objections hit their mark. As discussed earlier, the standard examples of state-given reasons for belief are pragmatic reasons. Puzzlingly, after distinguishing state-given pragmatic reasons for belief from object-given evidential reasons for belief, Reisner posits the existence of state-given *evidential* reasons for belief. Regardless of what we feel about the existence of state-given reasons, evidential reasons appear to stand in favor of the *content* of a belief rather than the belief itself. That is, everyday evidential reasons are generally considered to be object-given reasons. If *IDN* is only true by virtue of the reasons provided by epistemic rationality, we can identify two major difficulties with Reisner's argument. First, there is the logical question of whether a state-given reason can be logically derived from an object-given reason. The second problem is normative rather than logical. The results of Reisner's account are mixed, as the existence of state-given evidential reasons to be rational may partially justify beliefs which are unsupported by the evidence available to a person.

First, let us consider the logical question. Reisner contends that if there is an evidential reason not to believe a contradiction, then there is an evidential reason to satisfy a rational requirement. The important question here is whether we can logically derive a state-given evidential reason to have coherent beliefs—ER ~[B(*p*) & B(~*p*)]—from the more straightforward object-given evidential reason not to believe contradictions—ER ~[B(*p* & ~*p*)]. Not only are complex beliefs such as [B(*p* & ~*p*)] phenomenologically different from jointly inconsistent beliefs such as [B(*p*) & B(~*p*)], but their logical structures differ. Reisner presents a proof which is meant to draw the link between non-contradiction and *No Contradictory Beliefs*:

1. ER ~B(*p* & ~*p*) (assumption)
2. ~ER ~(B*a* & B*b*) → ~ER ~[B(*a* & *b*)] (assumption)
3. ER ~[B(*a* & *b*)] → ER ~ (B*a* & B*b*) (2, contraposition)
4. ER ~ (B*p* & B~*p*) (2, 3 *modus ponens*)[28]

Our attention should be focused on the second premise, which states that if we do not have an epistemic reason to be coherent, we would not have an epistemic reason not to believe contradictions. Reisner admits that the second premise relies on "the view that we can agglomerate under evidential requirement" and acknowledges that skepticism on this point will make the argument implausible.[29] Such skepticism may be motivated by attempts to avoid epistemic paradoxes resulting from agglomeration of belief, such as the "lottery paradox".[30] The lottery paradox is as follows: each ticket in a 1000-ticket lottery has a .999 chance of being the losing ticket, so you have reason to believe that any individual ticket you buy will not be the winning ticket. If beliefs agglomerate, then you can reasonably believe that each of the 1000 tickets will not win the lottery. But one of the tickets will surely win. As a result, agglomeration of belief allows one to reasonably believe a contradiction on the basis of probabilistic evidence. And as non-contradiction is a basic principle of logic, we may be inclined to reject agglomeration of belief. Doing so will allow us to simply reject premise #2. And if we reject this premise, this leaves open the possibility of having an object-given evidential reason not to believe a contradiction *without* having a state-given evidential reason to have consistent beliefs.

Assume for the moment that we can derive *No Contradictory Beliefs* from non-contradiction. It then follows that we have a very strong evidential reason to satisfy *No Contradictory Beliefs*, a wide-scope rational requirement. There are multiple ways to

[28] Reisner (2011), p. 48
[29] Reisner (2011), p. 49
[30] See "Epistemic Paradoxes", http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemic-paradoxes/

satisfy wide-scope requirements, only one of which will be supported by one's object-given reasons. Supposing that the available evidence supports *p*, one has an object-given evidential reason to drop the belief that ~*p* in case of contradictory beliefs. But if there is a state-given evidential reason to be coherent—and this reason is an evidential reason—then dropping either one of conflicting beliefs is supported in some sense by the available evidence. This is due to the fact that individual wide-scope requirements say nothing about the best way to satisfy them from among the options available to us. *Additional* evidential requirements may dictate the correct method, but we are concerned here with *local* rationality and the normativity of *individual* rational requirements (*IDN*). Local rationality permits dropping the belief that *p*, dropping the belief that ~*p*, or dropping both. Reisner's account of state-given evidential reasons introduces the potential for conflict among evidential reason-types. In other words, in cases of contradictory beliefs, one can always believe in accordance with one's state-given evidential reason by dropping a belief which is supported by one's object-given evidential reasons.

One might reply that I have merely described a conflict of reasons rather than anything objectionable about Reisner's argument. Conflicts among reasons are fairly common; for example, in the moral case above, your friend has a moral reason to take one course of action and a conflicting moral reason to take a different course of action. Indeed, we are often conflicted about what to do or believe on the basis of conflicting reasons. A plausible alternative interpretation of Reisner's argument might be that we do in fact have both state-given and object-given evidential reasons for belief. The former should be taken into account when determining what we ought to believe, but so should the latter. Neither completely determines what we ought to believe, so a conflict of

reasons does not necessarily sink a normative theory—even when those reasons are in conflict over the best way to satisfy a single rational requirement.

The problem with this particular conflict of reasons becomes apparent once we remember that normative reasons for belief *justify* beliefs. If we understand evidence as providing normative reasons for belief, both object-given and state-given evidential reasons are capable of justifying our beliefs. For various reasons, we often mistake the evidential force of some considerations and come to have beliefs which are unjustified by our object-given evidential reasons. But the only ways to have completely unjustified beliefs, as a consequence of the state-given reasons theory, are to believe contradictions or have contradictory beliefs. Given that state-given evidential reasons are "very strong" reasons on Reisner's account, it follows that *every* belief is supported by the evidence, as long as you do not also believe its opposite. Not only is this counterintuitive, but it runs against a common thread in epistemology, which is that evidence supports some beliefs and not others.

An example might help to clarify these points. Consider Bert, a patient in a psychiatric hospital. Bert is a limiting case of epistemic irrationality: Whenever the evidence appears to conclusively support *p*, Bert thinks that someone has tricked him into misinterpreting the evidence. And whenever someone has tricked him into misinterpreting the evidence, Bert reasons, the opposite of the evidence-supported belief is true. So, whenever the evidence appears to support *p*, Bert believes ~*p*. Now, suppose Bert is adept at recognizing what the evidence in fact supports, but as a result of his flawed reasoning, he tends to believe ~*p* when the evidence in fact supports *p*. More often than not, Bert believes contrary to his object-given evidential reasons but in a way that

constitutes a strange web of coherent yet unsupported beliefs. According to the state-given reasons theory, Bert nevertheless tends to believe in accordance with his state-given evidential reason to have consistent beliefs, despite being disposed to believe contrary to his object-given evidential reasons. The commonsense view of epistemic justification is that Bert is unjustified in the majority of his beliefs. The state-given reasons theory appears to say the opposite. We are left with the unsatisfactory result that no matter which belief an agent drops in cases of contradictory beliefs, the agent is complying with a normative requirement. That is, there is always partial support for one's belief. This presents, on one hand, a problem of excessive justification of beliefs, and, on the other hand, an inscrutable conflict among evidential reason-types.

V. Conclusion

Reisner (2011) attempts to ground the normativity of belief-consistency requirements in the reasons provided by epistemic rationality. To show that some rational requirements are derivatively normative in this way, we must be able to specify the exact relationship between believing contradictions and having contradictory beliefs. For the former belief pattern, we have reason to drop this complex belief, because it is necessarily false. But a set of contradictory beliefs does not lend itself to this solution. A contradictory pattern of beliefs such as [B(p) & B($\sim p$)] can be remedied in a number of ways. But an agent doesn't necessarily have an object-given evidential reason to drop either one of these beliefs, as an agent's evidential reasons seem to change along with the features of her environment.

Furthermore, making the reasons of rationality parasitic upon evidential reasons produces a strange result for a normative theory: any belief apart from contradictions and flatly contradictory beliefs is always justified to some degree by a state-given reason to be coherent. A belief could be produced by severe bias, wishful thinking, and poor reasoning—and also be *false*—yet be partially justified simply because an agent does not simultaneously believe its negation. The example of Bert and his strange belief system clearly illustrates this point. In short, Reisner's account partially defuses the "why be rational?" challenge, but it does so by allowing for excessive justification of beliefs.

This exploration of the state-given reasons approach has hopefully shown that, whatever gains are made by presupposing the existence of state-given reasons for belief, we have reason to doubt that *IDN* is true. Consequently, we may want to reject the most stringent of our original constraints, the Local Constraint. Doing so would open up a range of alternative explorations of the normativity of rationality. Nevertheless, as it stands, Reisner's theory forces us to accept a counterintuitive conflict among evidential reason-types as well as the partial justification of nearly every belief.

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