Reasons and Rationality

Jonathan Way

University of Southampton

Philosophers have long been interested in the relationship between reasons and the requirements of morality. Do we all have reason to do what morality requires? For instance, do I have reason to keep my promises, help the poor, and refrain from harming others, even if doing these things would serve neither my desires nor interests? Quite apart from their independent interest, these questions have deep implications for meta-ethics. For it is widely held that there is a constitutive connection between reasons and moral requirements. To be morally required to keep a promise, on this view, just is for there to be a certain kind of reason – distinguished, perhaps, by its form, content, or grounds – to keep the promise. Thus if I lack a reason to keep the promise, I cannot be morally required to do so.

The parallel questions about the relationship between reasons and certain rational requirements have, until fairly recently, been rather less debated. The rational requirements I have in mind are requirements of coherence – for example, the requirements to be consistent in your beliefs and intentions and to intend what you take to be the necessary means to your ends. Of these requirements too we can ask whether we all have reason to comply. And once again, since it is natural to take there to be a constitutive connection between reasons and rational requirements, this question has deep implications. If there is no reason to be consistent in your beliefs, for example, then we might doubt that there is a rational requirement to be consistent in your beliefs.

This chapter explores the recent debate about these latter set of questions. I begin by explaining why we might take there to be rational requirements of coherence. I then note

some reasons to doubt that we always have reasons to comply with such requirements and suggest that, given the plausibility of a constitutive connection between reasons and rational requirements, these concerns also count against the idea that there are requirements of coherence. The second half of the chapter considers how we should proceed if these doubts are cogent.

1. Rational Requirements of Coherence

We can motivate the idea that there are requirements of coherence by thinking about some simple cases. Suppose that Jack believes that today is Thursday and believes that if today is Thursday, his essay is due today. Suppose also that Jack considers whether his essay is due today but neither draws the conclusion that his essay is due today nor gives up either of his initial beliefs. (Perhaps wishful thinking prevents him drawing the conclusion). Or suppose that Jill intends to finish her essay today and believes that in order to finish her essay she must stop watching daytime TV. But suppose Jill neither forms the intention to stop watching daytime TV nor gives up her initial intention or belief. (Perhaps Jill is weak-willed). Something seems wrong with both Jack and Jill; it is natural to characterise both as irrational.

These examples suggest, to a first approximation, that it is irrational to fail to believe what follows from your beliefs by modus ponens (to be *closure incoherent*) and to fail to intend what you take to be the necessary means to an end that you intend (to be *means-end incoherent*). In a weak sense, we can immediately conclude that closure and means-end coherence are 'rationally required'. In this weak sense, to say that you are rationally required to do A is to say that doing A is a necessary condition of being fully rational. However, the examples also suggest a stronger sense in which rationality requires coherence. What, we might ask, explains why closure incoherence and means-end incoherence are irrational? A

natural answer is that there are *rules* or *principles* which require you to be closure and means-end coherent. What is wrong with Jack and Jill is that they violate these principles.[1]

The examples of Jack and Jill are representative of a range of cases in which people are irrational because their attitudes do not fit together in a coherent way. Other examples include cases in which someone has clearly inconsistent beliefs or intentions, or in which someone intends to do something they think they should not do. In a parallel way, reflection on these cases suggests that there are rational requirements – in the stronger sense – to avoid these combinations of attitudes. (Here and throughout I often use 'attitude' in an artificially broad sense to include *absences* of beliefs and intentions).

Rational requirements of this sort govern *combinations* of attitudes (Broome 1999, 2013). It is not, for example, that rationality requires Jack to believe that his essay is due. For all we know, that might not be true. Jack's belief that his essay is due on Thursday might be a result of sheer pessimism – perhaps his evidence shows that his essay is due next Monday. In that case, rationality plausibly requires Jack to give up this belief, rather than concluding that his essay is due today. The same point applies to Jill. It might be that rationality requires Jill to give up the intention of finishing her essay today – perhaps she should know that this is not feasible – rather than forming the intention to stop watching daytime TV. We can make room for these possibilities by stating the rational requirements in question as follows:

(Closure) Rationality requires you not to [believe *p*, believe if *p* then *q*, and not believe *q*].

(Means-End) Rationality requires you not to [intend to E, believe M-ing is the only way to E, and not intend to M].

[1] The weak sense is what Broome (2013: ch. 7) calls the 'property' sense of 'requires', the strong sense is what he calls the 'source' sense.

These requirements simply prohibit the combinations of attitudes which Jack and Jill display (*closure incoherence* and *means-end incoherence*). The precise formulation of these requirements is a matter of dispute. It might reasonably be doubted that all cases of closure incoherence or means-end incoherence as I have defined them are irrational. For instance, there might seem to be nothing wrong with cases of closure incoherence in which the entailed proposition *q* is entirely trivial, or with cases of means-end incoherence in which M-ing is something you will do whether or not you intend to do so. However, it would be a distraction to try to qualify Closure and Means-End to avoid such worries and so, for the most part, I shall stick to the simple formulations here. Parallel remarks apply to other requirements I shall discuss.[2]

Following the influential work of John Broome, requirements which prohibit combinations of attitudes are often called 'wide-scope' requirements. (The idea is that 'rationality requires you not to' takes wide-scope over the conjunction within the brackets). Following this tradition, I shall call those who accept that there are wide-scope requirements of this kind proponents of the *wide-scope view*. Proponents of this view hold that for each kind of incoherent combination of attitudes, there is a corresponding rational requirement – a rule or principle banning that combination. If you have an incoherent combination of attitudes you are irrational *because* you violate a rational requirement. Further examples of such rational requirements might be:

(Belief Consistency)	Rationality requires you not to [believe *p* and believe not-*p*].
(Intention Consistency)	Rationality requires you not to [intend to A, believe you cannot both A and B, and intend to B].

[2] For formulations of Closure and Means-End which aim for greater precision, see Broome 2013: ch.9. More fundamental doubts about the rational requirement of Enkrasia, which extend to at least some other requirements of coherence, might be drawn from discussions of 'rational akrasia' in Arpaly 2000. I will not consider these doubts here. For discussion see Brunero 2013 and Kolodny 2005: 526-7, 534-9.

(Enkrasia) Rationality requires you not to [believe that you ought to A and not intend to A].

The wide-scope view offers a simple, plausible, and elegant explanation of what is wrong with incoherence. Because of this, it has found many supporters since it has become clearly formulated.[3] Nonetheless, it also faces deep challenges, which we shall now consider.

2. Reasons to be Rational?

Each wide-scope requirement directs you to do something: avoid inconsistency, akrasia, means-end incoherence, and so on. They thus raise a simple question: *why* do these things? What reason is there to do so? As Niko Koldony puts it in the title of his (2005), 'why be rational?' I begin this section by reviewing some of the reasons Broome and Kolodny have offered for thinking that this question cannot be answered – that there is not necessarily reason to comply with wide-scope requirements. I then explain what I take the significance of this result to be.

Broome (2013) and Kolodny (2005) consider two main candidate answers to the question 'why be rational?'[4] According to the first, there is instrumental reason to comply with wide-scope requirements: doing so is a means to other things you should do. According to the second, you should comply with wide-scope requirements because doing so is constitutive of being an agent with beliefs and intentions.

On their most straightforward reading, each of these answers fails. It need not be true, in any particular case, that complying with wide-scope requirements is a means to doing

[3] Versions of the wide-scope view are defended in Broome 1999, 2013, Brunero 2010, Darwall 1983, Greenspan 1970, Hill 1973, Reisner 2009, Ross 2012, Shpall 2013, Wallace 2001, Way 2010, 2012, Wedgwood 2011, Worsnip 2015, forthcoming.
[4] Cf. Kolodny 2007, 2008a, 2008b, Southwood 2008, and Way 2010, 2012.

anything else you should do. A desperate student might comply with Means-End by intending to cheat on a test; he need not thereby do anything else he should do. Nor is it the case that if you violate a wide-scope requirement, you are no longer an agent – akrasia, inconsistency and the rest are possible, after all.

These objections invite the reply that it is only the *disposition* to comply with wide-scope requirements that is instrumentally valuable, or necessary for agency. Perhaps a disposition to satisfy wide-scope requirements will lead you, over the long run, to achieve more of what you should achieve than you otherwise would. Or perhaps a creature that lacked this disposition would not be a creature with beliefs or intentions. But this reply faces its own problems. First, as Kolodny (2008a) argues, it is in fact not so clear that the disposition to comply with wide-scope requirements is either instrumentally valuable or necessary for having beliefs and intentions. If the disposition to comply with a wide-scope requirement is just the disposition to move from a state of incoherence to *some* state of coherence, then there are other dispositions which are at least as likely to lead you to do what you should do, and which would allow you to have beliefs and intentions. For instance, the disposition to move from believing *p* and believing not-*p* to suspending judgment on both is at least as likely to lead you to achieve something you should than the disposition to drop the belief that *p*, drop the belief that not-*p*, or drop both (Kolodny 2008a: 447). Second, and in any case, this reply does not answer the question at hand. We wanted to know why, as the wide-scope requirements claim, you are required to be coherent. It is no answer to this question to say that you are required to be *disposed* to be coherent.

There are also more principled grounds for doubt that there are reasons to comply with at least some wide-scope requirements. Means-End, Intention Consistency, and Enkrasia are requirements with peculiar objects, in that they prohibit combinations of beliefs and intentions. It is hard to see what could count as a reason against a combination of this sort.

Ordinary reasons bearing on belief, and perhaps combinations of beliefs, are given by evidence bearing on the proposition(s) believed. Ordinary reasons bearing on intentions and combinations of intentions are given by reasons bearing on the actions intended. Neither of these familiar models can be applied to combinations of belief and intention. So it can be hard to see what a reason to comply with these requirements might look like.

This point might be queried. Suppose that there is a large incentive for complying with a rational requirement – perhaps, to adapt a famous example from Kavka (1983), an eccentric billionaire will reward you for being means-end coherent. This, we might think, is a clear case in which there is reason for a combination of intentions and belief. However, the case is misleading. The kind of reasons we find in examples of this sort seem not to support the charge of irrationality which wide-scope requirements are supposed to underpin. We can see this by considering the converse case in which an eccentric billionaire will reward you for being means-end *in*coherent. While a reward of this sort would make means-end incoherence *fortunate* it would not seem to make it rational – the more natural description of the case is that the billionaire is rewarding irrationality. Incentives of this kind thus seem like the 'wrong kind' of reason to be rational.[5] The task for the wide-scope view is thus to find the 'right kind' of reasons to comply with wide-scope requirements. Since the paradigm examples of the 'right kind' of reasons – evidence and reasons for action – do not seem to bear on the combinations Means-End, Intention Consistency, and Enkrasia prohibit, this task seems challenging.

Some may find these worries misguided. Why should we expect reasons to comply with wide-scope requirements to derive from other reasons we have or to fit other familiar models of reasons bearing on belief and intention? Perhaps reasons to comply with these rational requirements are simply primitive, admitting of no further explanation in normative

[5] Cf. Broome 2013: 94; Parfit 2011: 125-6, Way 2010: 219, 2012: 497-8.

terms. This suggestion is not without precedent. Philosophers in the Hobbesian and Kantian traditions have often taken the central task of practical philosophy to be to show how requirements of morality can be derived from requirements of coherence. Requirements of coherence, in these traditions, are often taken as primitive. Nonetheless, there are grounds for suspicion. First, the suggestion still fails to answer the question of *what* the reasons to comply with wide-scope requirements are. What, for instance, is the reason to be means-end coherent? Second, it is common to associate the idea of an primitive reason with the idea of a *final* reason – of what is worthwhile *for its own sake*. Utilitarians, for example, might take there to be primitive reasons to pursue pleasure, insofar as pleasure is worth pursuing for its own sake. Looked at in this light, the claim that there are primitive reasons to be coherent seems very implausible. As Kolodny (2007: 241) remarks, it seems 'outlandish that the kind of psychic tidiness that [a rational requirement] enjoins should be set alongside such final ends as pleasure, friendship and knowledge'.

Suppose then that some or other of these considerations convince us that there is not necessarily reason to comply with wide-scope rational requirements. How should we react? What would be the significance of this claim?

Broadly speaking, there are two possibilities. First, we could maintain that there are wide-scope rational requirements while allowing that there are not always reasons to comply with them. Wide-scope requirements would in this respect be analogous to requirements of etiquette and the law. In the UK, etiquette requires you to shake hands when introduced and the law requires you to drive on the left. It does not follow from these claims that there is reason to do these things. Often there will be, other times there will not. Similarly then, we could claim that although rationality does require us to be coherent, this does not imply that there is always reason for us to be coherent. Second, we could deny that there are wide-scope requirements. To see why we might take this line, compare Mackie's view of moral

requirements. On a natural interpretation, Mackie (1977) holds it to be a conceptual truth that if there are moral requirements, then there is reason to comply with them. Since Mackie takes it that we do not always have reason to comply with putative moral requirements, he concludes that there are no moral requirements. We might similarly take it to be a conceptual or otherwise necessary truth that if there are rational requirements, there are reasons to comply with them. If we then come to think that there is not always reason to comply with wide-scope rational requirements, we should conclude that there are no such requirements.[6]

In my view, there are strong pressures towards the second line. To start with, the conclusion that there is no reason to comply with wide-scope requirements undermines the basic motivation for accepting such requirements. Wide-scope requirements were introduced in order to explain what is wrong with incoherence. Since there is nothing wrong with doing what there is no reason not to do, requirements which do not entail reasons cannot serve this purpose. Furthermore, it is hard to see what it would be for there to be rational requirements which are not understood, at least in part, in terms of reasons. Here the analogy with the requirements of the law and etiquette is less helpful. Requirements of this sort are naturally understood in terms of contingent social practices. However, rational requirements, if true at all, seem to be necessary – after all, in motivating the idea that there are rational requirements we did not need to make any assumptions about the actual world; all possible agents who have inconsistent beliefs or intentions, or who are means-end incoherent, seem thereby to be irrational. But if rational requirements are necessary, they cannot be understood in terms of contingent social practices. In this respect, rational requirements seem more like the basic requirements of morality or prudence, which are also widely held to be necessary. However, since the requirements of morality and prudence are also very often understood in terms of

[6] Broome (2013) and Worsnip (forthcoming) react in the first of these ways, Kolodny (2007, 2008a, 2008b) in the second. (Though note though that Broome does not deny that there is always reason to comply with rational requirements – he takes it to be an open question whether this is so).

reasons (cf. Darwall 1983, Smith 1994), requirements of this sort also seem not to offer a helpful model for understanding how there could be rational requirements without reasons.[7]

There are thus significant grounds for doubt that there are always reasons to comply with wide-scope requirements, and good reason to think that if there are no such reasons, then there are no such requirements. This case is not, of course, conclusive – there is much more that could be said on all of these matters. Nonetheless, the case is strong enough to make it worth considering how we might proceed if we do conclude that there are no wide-scope requirements. This shall be my topic for the rest of the chapter.

3. Disjunctivism

If there are no wide-scope rational requirements, then we need a different way to explain what is wrong with incoherence. The most prominent and well-developed account in the literature is what I shall call the *disjunctivist* account. This view was first suggested by Joseph Raz (2005) and has been developed in detail by Niko Kolodny (2007), among others. It is this account I shall focus on here.[8]

Disjunctivism starts by rejecting the wide-scoper's idea that there is anything as such wrong with the incoherent combinations of attitudes. The problem with the incoherent agent, the disjunctivist insists, is not the way in which he combines his attitudes. Rather, what is

[7] In reply to this, it might be observed that not all accounts on which rational requirements are understood in terms of reasons imply that there is always reason to comply with rational requirements (Way 2009). For instance, according to Derek Parfit (2011: 33-5), what you are rationally required to do is, roughly, what you would have conclusive reason to do if your beliefs were true. This view does not require that there is always reason to do what rationality requires and yet it gives us a way of understanding rational requirements in terms of reasons. However, this view does not avoid the doubts raised in this section. Parfit's view allows rational requirements to come apart from reasons in cases in which you have false beliefs or are ignorant. But the doubts about wide-scope rational requirements do not turn on such cases. For more on this, see Kolodny 2007: 248, Schroeder 2009: 231-2, Setiya 2007: 657-63, and Way 2010: 220-2.

[8] Disjunctivism is also defended about some or all kinds of incoherence by Kiesewetter forthcoming, Lord 2014, Skorupski 2010, and Wedgwood 2003. There are other alternatives to the wide-scope view which I cannot discuss here. See, for example, Finlay 2009, the suggestion in Raz 2005 that rationality is an evaluative, rather than a normative, matter, and the 'intermediate-scope' view of Way 2010, 2012.

wrong is one (or more) of the particular attitudes which the incoherent agent has. The disjunctivist idea is that incoherence ensures that you go wrong in some specific way – e.g. that you have some belief or intention that you should not have – but is not *itself* a problem.

To illustrate this idea, consider belief inconsistency. For the wide-scoper, what is wrong with believing *p* and believing not-*p* is that you violate a requirement against combining your beliefs in that way. For the disjunctivist, the problem is more specific. If you believe *p* and believe not-*p*, then *either* you should not believe *p or* you should not believe not-*p*. (Hence the term 'disjunctivist'). If you have inconsistent beliefs, you are thus guaranteed to believe something which you should not.

There are various ways in which this claim about inconsistency in belief might be supported. Consider the following candidate principles governing belief:

If not-*p*, you should not believe *p*.

If you lack sufficient evidence for *p*, you should not believe *p*.

The first of these clearly entails that if you have inconsistent beliefs, you believe something which you shouldn't. And on the plausible assumption that you cannot have sufficient evidence for *p* and also sufficient evidence for not-*p*, so does the second (cf. Kolodny 2007: 233). So if either of these principles hold, inconsistency in belief guarantees that you have a belief that you should not have.

The disjunctivist holds that something similar holds for each incoherent combination of attitudes. Each incoherent combination guarantees that you have some attitude you should not have or lack some attitude you should have.[9] If this is right, then we seem to be able to

[9] We might distinguish between *full* and *partial* disjunctivism. The full disjunctivist holds that each incoherent combination guarantees that you have some attitude you should not have or lack some attitude that you should have. The partial disjunctivist agrees with the full disjunctivist that there are no requirements against the combinations of attitudes which constitute incoherence but holds that there are nonetheless requirements against

explain what is wrong with incoherence without postulating rational requirements against incoherence. The problem with incoherence is just an ordinary failure to respond to reasons for or against a belief or intention – a kind of failure you might make even if you were coherent.

In this way, disjunctivism is more parsimonious than the wide-scope view – it aims to explain what is wrong with incoherence by appealing to reasons for belief and intention which are acknowledged on all sides. Disjunctivism thus has some claim to be the default view. Nonetheless, the task facing the disjunctivist is formidable. To begin with, the disjunctivist needs to show that plausible claims about reasons to believe and intend imply that there is something wrong with each kind of incoherence. But the task does not end there. We do not merely have a sense that *something* is wrong with incoherence. We also have a sense of *what* is wrong with incoherence. So disjunctivists need to show that their account captures our sense of what is wrong with incoherence.

In the remainder of this chapter, I consider the disjunctivist's progress on these tasks. I focus the discussion around three problems, the first of which faces the disjunctivist's first task and the second and third of which face the disjunctivist's second task. I argue that disjunctivists have thus far failed to solve these problems. Before turning to this though, there are two clarifications to make.

First, it might be thought that, far from being an alternative to the wide-scope view, disjunctivism is in fact a potential way to *vindicate* the wide-scope view. Suppose that you are incoherent in believing p and not believing q. According to the disjunctivist, what is wrong is either that you believe p when you should not or that you fail to believe q when you

---

some combinations of attitudes, and that such requirements help to explain what is wrong with incoherence. For example, the partial disjunctivist might hold that there are reasons against combinations of intentions and that what is wrong with intention inconsistency is that *either* you should not [intend to A and intend to B] *or* you should not believe that you cannot both A and B. Partial disjunctivism is endorsed by Kolodny 2008b and, on natural interpretations, by Ross 2012 and Wedgwood 2011. For reasons of space, and because it allows us to see the issues more clearly, my focus here is on full disjunctivism.

should. However, it might seem to follow from the claim that you should not believe *p* that you should not [believe *p* and not believe *q*]. And it might seem to follow from the claim that you should believe *q* that you should [believe *q* or not believe *p*] –equivalently, that you should not [believe *p* and not believe *q*]. Disjunctivism may thus seem to entail that there are wide-scope requirements.

The inferences relied on here can be represented as follows:

Should ~ (α) → Should ~ (α and β)

Should (α) → Should (α or β)

These inferences are valid in standard deontic logic. But standard deontic logic is controversial, and the particular inferences appealed to here have attracted some of the controversy. For instance, some people think that it does not follow from the fact that you should not accept an invitation to review a book (since you will never get around to writing it) that you should not both accept the invitation and write the review (Jackson and Pargetter 1986, Kolodny this volume). And some people think that it does not follow from the fact that you should post the letter that you should post the letter or burn it (Ross 1941, Cariani 2013). Thus it is at best very far from clear that disjunctivism entails wide-scope requirements.

Furthermore, even if disjunctivism entails wide-scope rational requirements, it does not entail the wide-scope *view*. Wide-scopers hold that wide-scope rational requirements explain what is wrong with incoherence. This could not be said of requirements which hold only as trivial entailments of the disjunctivist's requirements. Requirements derived by the inference rules above have no force beyond those from which they are derived. If you neither post the letter nor burn it, it is not as if you go wrong in two ways, or that you would have

done better had you burned the letter (cf. Kolodny 2007: n.18, Schroeder 2015). So requirements derived in this way could not explain what is wrong with incoherence.

Second, it is fairly common in the literature we are concerned with (and elsewhere) to distinguish between *objective* and *subjective* 'should's. On a simple way of drawing this distinction, what you objectively should do is determined by the facts of your situation, whereas what you subjectively should do is determined by your perspective on your situation.[10] Thus in Bernard Williams' (1981) famous example in which you have petrol in your glass but believe it to be gin, you objectively should not take a sip but subjectively should. If we accept this distinction, then the disjunctivist will need to choose between saying that incoherence ensures that you do something you objectively or subjectively should not do. However, to the extent that I can, I will ignore this distinction here. I will tend to write, as I have done so far, as if there were just a single relevant sense of 'should' – the sense in play when we ask the deliberative question of what to do or believe. The extent to which it may be helpful for the disjunctivist to distinguish senses of 'should' is a question for further work.

4. Problems for Disjunctivism

I now turn to consider three problems for disjunctivism.

4.1. The Problem of Permissiveness

The first task for the disjunctivist is to show that each form of incoherence ensures that you go wrong in some more specific way – that you have some attitude you should not or lack some attitude you should have. The first problem for the disjunctivist it that this appears not

[10] See, e.g. Parfit 2011, Schroeder 2009, Sepielli this volume, Setiya 2007, Sylvan 2015, Way 2010, 2012, Wedgwood 2003, Whiting 2014. Some of these authors draw this distinction in terms of what there is reason to do and what rationality requires you to do.

to be so. In *permissive cases*, there seems to be nothing wrong with any of the attitudes involved in an incoherent combination.

The problem is perhaps clearest for the cases of intention consistency. Thus to take a standard example, consider Buridan's ass, choosing between two equally attractive bales of hay. The ass has sufficient reason to take the right bale of hay, sufficient reason to take the left bale of hay, and knows that he cannot take both. It would clearly be irrational for the ass to both intend to take the right bale and intend to take the left bale. But neither the intention to take the right bale, the intention to take the left bale, or the belief that he cannot take both seem problematic in themselves. The problem seems precisely to be with the combination of these attitudes.

The same case counts against the disjunctivist account of means-end incoherence. It would clearly be irrational for the ass to intend to take the right bale, believe that moving right is necessary for taking the right bale of hay, but not intend to move right. But neither this intention nor the belief seems problematic in themselves. Nor does it seem that the ass should intend to move right – after all, he could equally well move left and take the left bale. The problem seems to be with the combination of these attitudes.

Cases of this sort are ubiquitous in the practical realm.[11] It is not unusual for us to face cases in which, like Buridan's ass, we have *equally weighty* reasons in favour of multiple options. As Michael Bratman (1987: 11) reminds us, we faces cases of this sort every time we pick from a shelf of cereal packets in the store. Nor are these the only kinds of permissive cases. There are also cases of *incommensurability*, in which the reasons in favour of two or more of our options do not outweigh each other, but are not equally weighty. For many people, the reasons involved in a choice between law school and graduate school in philosophy, or between taking a holiday by the mountains or by the sea, may be

[11] As Joseph Raz (1999: 100) famously put it, 'most of the time people have a variety of options such that it would accord with reason for them to choose any one of them and it would not be against reason to avoid any of them'.

incommensurable in this sense.[12] There are also cases in which one of our options is *supererogatory* – morally admirable but not required. For example, it might be supererogatory in this sense to sacrifice next summer's holiday in order to make a large donation to charity. In all of these cases, it seems possible to be means-end incoherent or have inconsistent intentions without having any attitude you should not have or failing to have some attitude that you should. Cases of practical mere permissibility thus pose a very serious problem for the disjunctivist account of means-end coherence and intention consistency.[13]

The problem for the disjunctivist account of epistemic incoherence – of belief inconsistency and closure incoherence – is less severe. As we have seen, plausible epistemic norms seem to rule out the possibility that you could be permitted to believe *p* and also permitted to believe not-*p*.[14] Thus one kind of epistemic permissiveness seems to be ruled out. If there are cases of epistemic permissiveness, they are cases in which you are permitted to believe *p* but also permitted to suspend judgment on whether *p*. However, cases of this sort would still pose a problem for the disjunctivist.

Consider how the disjunctivist might explain what is wrong with closure incoherence. The closure incoherent agent believes *p*, believes if *p* then *q* but does not believe *q*. Suppose that the first two beliefs are doxastically justified – that is to say, there is sufficient reason for the agent to believe *p* and if *p* then *q* and the agent believes these claims for these reasons. What the disjunctivist needs to show is that the agent should believe *q*. He might begin by appealing to an analogue of a familiar closure principle for justification:

---

[12] It is controversial whether such cases are well characterised as cases of incommensurability, as opposed to, e.g. incomparability, or parity, or rough equality. (See, e.g. the introduction to Chang 1997, and the essays therein). For our purposes this dispute does not matter; my use of the term 'incommensurability' is entirely stipulative.

[13] For attempts to solve this problem, see Kolodny 2007: 252; 2008a: 453 and Schroeder 2009: 237-8. Disjunctivist might also try to solve the problem by drawing on the arguments that intentions affect our reasons in Brunero 2007 and Kolodny 2011. I argue that these strategies fail in Way 2013. Kolodny also discusses the problem, with respect to intention consistency, in his (2009). There his solution is to move to what in n. 9 I call 'partial disjunctivism'.

[14] Although as Ross (2012) observes, things get less clear once we move beyond pairwise consistency.

> If there is sufficient reason to believe *p* and sufficient reason to believe if *p* then *q*, then there is sufficient reason to believe *q*.

This principle implies that the closure incoherent agent has sufficient reason to believe *q*, and thus that it is permissible for that agent to believe *q*. However, to get the result that the agent *should* believe *q*, the disjunctivist needs to rule out the possibility that the agent is also permitted to suspend judgment on whether *q*. The disjunctivist needs to rule out the possibility of epistemic permissiveness.

It may seem obvious that there are cases of epistemic permissiveness. After all, every proposition that you know has an infinite number of consequences. It is surely not the case that you are required to believe each of these consequences. But since you have at least as much evidence for each such consequence as for something that you know, it seems that you must also be permitted to believe such consequences.

However, examples of this sort do not settle the relevant issue. We can grant that you are permitted but not required to believe *trivial* propositions for which you have sufficient evidence. For instance, you are permitted but not required to believe that either 2+2=4 or the moon is made of cheese. You are not required to believe this because it adds nothing to your stock of beliefs which you might usefully rely on in deliberation about what to do or think. However, for much the same reason, it seems doubtful that there is anything irrational about cases of closure incoherence which involve a failure to believe trivial propositions of this sort. Cases of this sort thus do not provide examples in which closure incoherence seems irrational despite there being nothing wrong with any of the attitudes involved taken individually.[15]

[15] For a classic statement of this point, see Harman 1986. For a formulation of the Closure requirement which takes the point into account, see Broome 2013: 157.

So there is a problem for the disjunctivist only if there are cases of epistemic permissiveness involving *non-trivial* propositions. Nonetheless, it might well be thought that there are cases of this sort. Often when we rely on memory, or testimony, or perception, or on inference from a complex body of evidence, there will be some salient doubt about whether the evidence shows that *p*. While the issue is disputed, it seems plausible that in at least some such cases, it would be permissible either to go ahead and believe or to suspend judgment. Consider, for example, the low stakes 'bank case' familiar from discussions of epistemological contextualism:

> You would like to deposit a check but there is a long line at the bank. If the bank is open on Saturday, it will be much easier to deposit it then. If the bank is not open on Saturday, you will only be mildly inconvenienced. You recall that the bank was open on Saturday a couple of weeks ago but also know that banks sometimes change their hours (cf. De Rose 1992).

Should you conclude that the bank will be open tomorrow and so leave it until then to deposit the check? We might think that you could go either way – that it would be permissible for you to conclude that it will be open but also permissible to suspend judgment. Since it is not a trivial matter whether the bank will be open tomorrow, this is a fair candidate for a case of merely permissible but non-trivial belief.[16] So there may yet be a problem of permissiveness for the disjunctivist account of closure incoherence.

[16] Following White 2005 there is a growing literature on the question of epistemic permissiveness. (Kolodny (2007: 248) follows White in rejecting the possibility of epistemic permissiveness). Because of its significance for questions about the epistemic significance of disagreement, much of this literature focuses on the possibility of inter-personal permissiveness – i.e. the possibility that different people could be permitted to take different attitudes towards the same proposition given the same evidence. What is relevant here is the possibility of intra-personal permissiveness – the possibility that the same person could be permitted to take different attitudes towards the same proposition given the same evidence. For endorsement of this possibility, see McHugh forthcoming, Nickel 2010. For doubts, see Sylvan forthcoming.

4.2. The Further Problem Problem

The next two problems arise even if the disjunctivist can show that there are no permissive cases and thus that something is wrong with all cases of incoherence. The first problem is that, in at least some cases, it seems that *more* is wrong with incoherence than the disjunctivist allows. Consider the following example:

> Boris thinks that anyone who has been tempted to cheat on their partner will burn in hell for all eternity. Boris also knows that he has been tempted to cheat on his partner. But Boris does not think that he will burn in hell for all eternity – wishful thinking prevents him from drawing this conclusion.

This should be an easy case for the disjunctivist. After all, Boris clearly has a belief that he should not have – no-one should think that anyone who has been tempted to cheat on their partner will burn in hell for all eternity. But on the face of it, that is not *all* that is wrong with Boris. In failing to draw the obvious consequence of his beliefs, Boris seems to go wrong in a further way, over and above his mistaken belief. One way to see this is to compare Boris with Berys, who has the same belief about hell as Boris, also knows that she has been tempted to cheat on her partner, but *does* accept that she faces eternal damnation. While both Boris and Berys are irrational – and Berys might even be *more* irrational, overall – there seems to be a clear respect in which Boris is irrational and Berys is not.[17]

[17] Drawing on Arpaly 2000, one might suggest that Berys is more irrational than Boris if Boris' failure to conclude that he will burn in hell reflects an awareness, at some level, of the lack of evidence for this belief. However, even if one accepts this, it still seems to be the case that there is a respect in which Boris is irrational and Berys is not. And in case this is denied, we can simply stipulate that Boris' failure to draw the conclusion is not to be explained in this way.

We can raise similar problems for the disjunctivist's account of the other forms of incoherence. For instance, suppose that a mafioso intends to have one of his friends killed, thinks that in order to have this friend killed he will have to kill him himself but has not yet been able to summon the intention to kill his friend himself. This should be another easy case for the Disjunctivist – after all, he clearly has an intention he should not have. But again it does not seem that this is all that is wrong with this mafioso. It seems like he goes wrong in a *further* way by failing to intend the means to his end. It does not seem like what is wrong with the mafioso in this case is the same as what is wrong with him in the case in which he does intend to kill his friend himself. I call this the *further problem problem* (cf. Kolodny 2007: 237).

4.3. The Problem of Rationality

The forms of incoherence we are concerned with invite the charge of irrationality. This is a distinctive kind of criticism. As Derek Parfit (2011:33) puts it,

> We use the word "irrational" to express the kind of criticism that we also express with words like 'senseless', 'stupid', 'idiotic', and 'crazy'. To express weaker criticism of this kind we can use the phrase "less than fully rational".

We can distinguish this kind of criticism from the kind we might express by saying 'he made a mistake', 'he did the wrong thing', or 'he lacked sufficient reason for what he did'. Someone might do the wrong thing without being irrational, stupid, or foolish – for example, if they are ignorant of relevant facts – and someone might be irrational, stupid, or foolish without doing the wrong thing – as, perhaps, when recklessness pays off. Criticism of

someone as irrational seems to target the person in a way that saying that someone did the wrong thing need not. It suggests that the mistake in the action or attitude is one that it was legitimate to expect the person to avoid (cf. Setiya 2004).

Since cases of incoherence are naturally thought of as cases of irrationality, it is not enough for the disjunctivist to show that incoherence guarantees a mistake; it needs to be shown that incoherence guarantees irrationality. The problem is that the disjunctivist's strategy is precisely to show that incoherence guarantees that you do something you should not. Since failures of this sort do not guarantee irrationality, there is thus reason to be concerned that the disjunctivist's strategy is not up to the task at hand.[18]

We can illustrate the problem by considering another disjunctivist account of what is wrong with closure incoherence. Suppose that the disjunctivist claims that what is wrong with closure incoherence is that it involves violation of *truth norms* – e.g. that you should not believe falsehoods and that you should believe (non-trivial) truths.[19] These norms clearly imply that the closure incoherent agent either believes something he should not or fails to believe something he should. But these norms do not by themselves explain why closure incoherence is irrational. For it is *easy* to violate truth norms without irrationality – we often rationally believe falsehoods and rationally fail to believe truths.

Although the matter is less clear-cut, I believe that a similar problem faces the disjunctivist who argue that what is wrong with the closure incoherent agent is that he believes something he lacks sufficient evidence for, or fails to believe something for which he has sufficient evidence (Kolodny 2007: 248-50; Lord 2014: 165-6). While it is often irrational to believe against the evidence, it is not always so. Bodies of evidence can be

[18] Note that the problem of rationality is distinct from the further problem problem. The problem of rationality is a problem about the kind of criticism which incoherence warrants. The further problem problem is about the location of the problem with incoherence. Either problem could be solved without solving the other. For instance, even if the mafioso of the previous section is irrational for intending to have his friend killed, it seems as if he goes wrong in a further way by not intending to kill him himself.

[19] For discussion of such norms see, e.g. Littlejohn 2010, Shah 2003, Wedgwood 2002, Whiting 2010.

complex and difficult to interpret, and so it can be hard to determine whether a body of evidence is sufficient to establish some claim. In cases of this sort, careful and conscientious consideration of the evidence might still lead you astray. We might well doubt that in such cases failures to conform your beliefs to the evidence must be irrational. And even if we insist that all such failures are to some degree irrational, there is still a problem for the disjunctivist here. Incoherence seems like a blatant and ordinarily quite severe form of irrationality. But not all failures to respond properly to your evidence are blatant or severe cases of irrationality. The difficulty of determining what your evidence supports can at least substantially *mitigate* the irrationality of failing to respond properly to evidence. Thus even if disjunctivists who appeal to evidential norms can explain why closure incoherence is irrational, they have a problem explaining why it is irrational to the extent that it is.

4.4. A Disjunctivist Reply to the Further Problem Problem and the Problem of Rationality

The problem of rationality and the further problem problem both reveal that the disjunctivist needs to do more to distinguish the incoherent agent from the agent who merely has an attitude he should not have. Kolodny (2007: 242) suggests a further difference. He claims that incoherent agents are in a position to know that they have some attitude they should not have or fail to have some attitude that they should. For instance, if you have inconsistent beliefs, then you are in a position to know that you should drop at least one of those beliefs. This distinguishes the incoherent agent from the coherent agent who has an attitude he should not have. Coherent but mistaken agents are not always in a position to know that they are mistaken.

Kolodny argues, in effect, that disjunctivists can exploit this difference to solve the further problem problem. For the following claims seem plausible:

(Should Know) If you are in a position to know that one of a small set of attitudes violates some requirement, then you should know that one of this set of attitudes violates some requirement.

(Reconsideration) If you know that one of a small set of attitudes violates some requirement, then you should reconsider those attitudes, and revise them accordingly.

If (Should Know) and (Reconsideration) hold, then the disjunctivist can argue that there is a further problem with the incoherent agent, over and above the specific attitude(s) he should not have. For example, if the inconsistent believer does not know that either he should drop his belief in *p* or should drop his belief in not-*p*, then, by (Should Know), he fails to know something that he should. If he does know this but does not reconsider his beliefs, then, by (Reconsideration) he goes wrong in not reconsidering.[20] We might also take these suggestions to explain why incoherence seems irrational. If you are incoherent, you not only do something that you should not, you should know that you do something you should not. This might be taken to be grounds for attributing irrationality.

This is an interesting and insufficiently discussed part of Kolodny's view. I think that there are several questions one might raise about Kolodny's reasoning. Here I want to focus

[20] What if the incoherent agent knows that he has some attitude he should not have, does reconsider, but cannot tell which of his attitudes he should not have? Kolodny (2007: 243) suggests that in this case, the agent should drop each of the attitudes involved in the incoherence. He acknowledges (n.30) that this suggestion requires further defence.

on the first step – the claim that if you are incoherent, you are in a position to know that one of the attitudes involved in your incoherence is an attitude you should not have.

This claim might initially strike us as plausible. After all, it is very intuitive that something is wrong with incoherence. This might be taken to reflect the fact that everyone knows that incoherence guarantees that you do something you should not. However, this would be a mistake. The intuition that something is wrong with incoherence is neutral between the wide-scope view and the disjunctivist. The claim the disjunctivist needs is the more specific claim that every incoherent agent is in a position to know that their incoherence involves an attitude they should not have or the lack of an attitude they should have.

This should make clear that Kolodny's suggestion places a high demand on the disjunctivist. The disjunctivist's initial task was to establish that each incoherent pattern ensures that you go wrong in some specific way. But if the above line of reply is to succeed, the disjunctivist will have to establish something far stronger – that every incoherent agent is in a position to *know* that they have gone wrong in some specific way. Indeed, to solve the problem of rationality, the disjunctivist will have to show something stronger still – that anyone who does not know this is irrational.

It seems to me to be highly implausible that every incoherent agent is in a position to know that they have gone wrong in some specific way. Consider again the problem of permissiveness. Above I suggested that it is very plausible that there are cases in which means-end incoherent and intention inconsistent agents do not go wrong in any specific way. I could be wrong about this – perhaps there is some argument yet to be made to show that I am. But it seems incredible to think that it is so clear that means-end incoherence and intention inconsistency guarantee some local failing that every means-end incoherent or intention inconsistent agent should know that they have gone wrong in some specific way. For example, it seems incredible that Buridan's ass should know that either he should intend

to take the left bale or he should intend to take the right bale. To a lesser extent, the same seems true of closure incoherence. As we have seen, the disjunctivist account of closure incoherence rests on the denial that there can be cases of epistemic permissiveness. But this denial is a highly contested philosophical claim; insofar as there are prima facie plausible examples of cases of epistemic permissiveness, it is hard to see how it could be the case that all closure incoherent agents should know that they thereby believe something they should not, or fail to believe something they should. If this is right, then Kolodny's reply to the further problem problem, and, by extension, the problem of rationality, fails at the first step.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the disjunctivist faces three serious problems. It is doubtful that the disjunctivist can show that the forms of incoherence we have considered guarantee local failings. And even if this can be shown it is a further task, and one that disjunctivists have only just begun to address, to show that this is what explains what is wrong with incoherence. As things stand then, disjunctivists are a long way from showing that we can do without wide-scope rational requirements.

At the same time, it is clear that the wide-scope view also faces severe problems. It has proved very hard to show that there is always reason to comply with wide-scope rational requirements. And it is hard to make sense of wide-scope rational requirements unless there are such reasons. What is more the problem of rationality is arguably a problem for the wide-scope view too. Since not all failures to conform to requirements are irrational, wide-scopers need to make a case that the failures to conform to requirements which constitute incoherence

do count as irrational. Wide-scopers are yet to really address this issue.[21] There is thus much to be done before the debate over reasons and rationality is settled.[22]

References

Arpaly, N. (2000), 'On Acting Rationally Against One's Best Judgment', *Ethics* 110/3: 488-513.

Bratman, M. (1987), *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason* (Harvard University Press).

Broome, J. (1999), 'Normative Requirements', *Ratio* 12/4: 398-419.

(2013) *Rationality Through Reasoning* (Wiley Blackwell).

Brunero, J. (2010). 'The Scope of Rational Requirements'. *Philosophical Quarterly* 60/238: 28-49.

(2007). Are Intentions Reasons? *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88: 424-44.

(2013). 'Rational Akrasia'. *Organon F* 20: 546-66.

Cariani, F. (2013). '"Ought" and Resolution Semantics', *Noûs* 47/3: 534-58.

Chang, R. (ed), (1997). *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason.* (Harvard University Press).

Darwall, S. (1983), *Impartial Reason* (Cornell University Press).

De Rose, K. (1992), 'Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52 (4): 913-29.

Finlay, S. (2009), 'Against All Reason? Scepticism about the Instrumental Norm', in C. Pigden (ed.), *Hume on Motivation and Virtue* (Palgrave McMillan), 155-178.

Greenspan, P. (1970). 'Conditional Oughts and Hypothetical Imperatives', *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (10): 259-76.

Harman, G. (1986), *Change in View* (MIT Press).

Hill, T. (1973), 'The Hypothetical Imperative', *Philosophical Review* 82/4: 429-50.

Jackson, F and Pargetter, R. (1986), 'Oughts, Options and Actualism', *Philosophical Review*, 95/2: 233 – 255.

Kavka, G. (1983), 'The Toxin Puzzle', *Analysis* 43/1: 33-36.

Kiesewetter, B. (Forthcoming), *The Normativity of Rationality* (Oxford University Press).

Kolodny, N. (2005), 'Why Be Rational?', *Mind* 114/455: 509-63.

(2007), 'How Does Coherence Matter?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 107/1: 229–263.

(2008a), 'Why be Disposed to be Coherent?', *Ethics* 118/3: 437-63.

(2008b), 'The Myth of Practical Consistency', *European Journal of Philosophy* 16 (3): 366-402.

(2011). 'Aims as Reasons', in S. Freeman, R. Kumar, and R.J. Wallace (eds.) *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon* (Oxford University Press), 43–78.

[21] Broome 2013: 91 claims that rational requirements impose 'strict liability', by which he means that it is always irrational to violate a rational requirement. However, he does not explain why this should be true.

[22] Thanks to Sophie Edwards, Guy Fletcher, Errol Lord, Conor McHugh, Niko Kolodny, Daniel Star, Daniel Whiting, and an audience at the University of Kent for comments on this paper or related material. Work on this paper was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/K008188/1].

(This Volume), 'Instrumental Reasons', in D. Star (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*.
Littlejohn, C. (2010), 'Moore's Paradox and Epistemic Norms', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88/1: 79-100.
Lord, E. (2014). 'The Coherent and the Rational', *Analytic Philosophy*, 54/4: 151-75.
Mackie, J.L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin).
McHugh, C. (Forthcoming), 'The Illusion of Exclusivity', *European Journal of Philosophy*.
Nickel, P. (2010), 'Voluntary Belief on a Reasonable Basis', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 81/2: 312-34.
Parfit, D. (2011), *On What Matters* (Oxford University Press).
Raz, J. (1999), *Engaging Reason* (Oxford University Press).
(2005). 'The Myth of Instrumental Rationality', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1/1. www.jesp.org.
Reisner, A. (2009), 'Unifying the Requirements of Rationality', *Philosophical Explorations* 12: 243-60.
Ross, A. (1941), 'Imperatives and Logic', *Theoria* 7: 53–71.
Ross, J. (2012), 'Normativity, Rationality, and Commitment', in R. Shafer-Landau (ed), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 7* (Oxford University Press), 138-81.
Schroeder, M. (2009), 'Means-End Coherence, Stringency, and Subjective Reasons', *Philosophical Studies* 143/2: 223-248.
(2015), 'Hypothetical Imperatives: Scope and Jurisdiction', in R.Johnson and M. Timmons (eds), *Reason, Value, and Respect*, Oxford University Press, 89-100.Sepielli, A. (This Volume), 'Objective and Subjective Reasons', in D. Star (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*.
Setiya, K. (2004), 'Against Internalism', *Nous* 38 (2): 266-98.
(2007), 'Cognitivism About Instrumental Reason', *Ethics* 117/4: 649-73.
Shah, N. (2003), 'How Truth Governs Belief', *The Philosophical Review*, 112/4: 447–82 (2003)
Shpall, S. (2013), 'Wide and Narrow Scope', *Philosophical Studies* 163/3: 717-36.
Skorupski, J. (2010), *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford University Press).
Smith, M. (1994), *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell Publishing).
Sylvan, K. (2015), 'What Apparent Reasons Appear To Be', *Philosophical Studies* 172/3: 587-606.
(Forthcoming), 'The Illusion of Discretion', *Synthese*.
Southwood, N. (2008), 'Vindicating the Normativity of Rationality', *Ethics* 119 (1): 1-30.
Wallace, R. J. (2001), 'Normativity, Commitment and Instrumental Reason', *Philosophers' Imprint* 1.
Way, J. (2009), 'Two Accounts of the Normativity of Rationality', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*. www.jesp.org
(2010), 'Defending the Wide-Scope Approach to Instrumental Reason', *Philosophical Studies* 147/2: 213-33.
(2012), 'Explaining the Instrumental Principle', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. 90/3: 487-506.
(2013), 'Intentions, Akrasia, and Mere Permissibility', *Organon F* 20/4: 588-611.
Wedgwood, R. (2002), 'The Aim of Belief', *Philosophical Perspectives* 16: 267-297.
(2003), 'Choosing Rationally and Choosing Correctly', in S.Stroud and C.Tappolet (eds.), *Weakness of Will and Varieties of Practical Irrationality* (Oxford University Press), 201-29.
(2011), 'Instrumental Rationality', in R. Shafer-Landau (ed), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 6* (Oxford University Press), 280-309.

White, R. (2005), 'Epistemic Permissiveness', *Philosophical Perspectives* 19/1: 445-59.
Whiting, D. (2010), 'Should I Believe the Truth?' *dialectica* 64/2: 213-224.
(2014), 'Keep Things In Perspective', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 8: 1-22.
Williams, B. (1981), 'Internal and External Reasons', in his *Moral Luck,*(Cambridge University Press), 100-110.
Worsnip, A. (2015). 'Narrow-Scoping for Wide-Scopers', *Synthese* 192/8: 2617-646.
(Forthcoming). 'The Conflict of Evidence and Coherence', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.