

Fundamentality and Rationally Open-Ended Endeavours:

Reply to Amijee

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1 Introduction

Amijee (2022) argues that as long as we have not yet discovered that any fact is ungrounded, we ought to be committed to a version of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), according to which every fact is grounded. Below I present Amijee's argument (section 2), rebut it (section 3), and diagnose where it fails (section 4).

2 Amijee's argument

Amijee attempts to establish her conclusion by showing that commitment to the PSR is rationally indispensable to a species of inquiry in which we ought to engage, namely "structural inquiry", which she (2022: 2) defines as "[seeking] to explain *what makes it the case* that any given fact obtains." Her argument proceeds in two parts: First she (2022: 1) argues that a "practical indispensability argument applied to [structural inquiry] supports a commitment to the PSR", and then she argues that we (epistemically) ought to engage in that kind of inquiry.

The conclusion of the first part is this:

(Commitment to PSR) An innocent agent that engages in structural inquiry (i.e. one who has yet to discover that any fact is brute) ought to be committed to the PSR (i.e. something that the inquirer already believes rationally requires that they accept the PSR).

Amijee's (2022: section 3) argument for this relies on the following principle:

(Intention-Belief Thesis) If a subject rationally intends to ϕ , she believes that she is able to ϕ .

Using this premise, Amijee wants to establish that if one structurally inquires into a fact, then one must believe that one is able to explain that fact. Here is her (2022: 5) argument:

(P1) “someone engages in structural inquiry just in case they seek to explain a given fact.”¹

(P2) “one cannot seek to explain a given fact without intending to explain it.”

Amijee restricts her intention to rational cases and derives:

(P3) “when one seeks to explain a [given] fact, one rationally intends to explain it.”

Using **Intention-Belief Thesis**, Amijee concludes:

(C1) “if one structurally inquires into a fact, then one must believe that one is able to explain that fact.”

From this, Amijee wants to derive

(C2) If one structurally inquires into a fact, then one must believe that there is an explanation for that fact.

3 Amijee’s argument fails

Reflection on metaphysical practice and analogous cases reveals that Amijee’s argument fails:

First, while metaphysicians often seek to explain or provide grounds for facts, we simply are not in general thereby committed to the existence of there being such explanations or grounds. We may try to find grounds or explanations, but are often perfectly aware of the possibility that what we covet may not exist. Hence we do not believe antecedently that those grounds or explanations exist, and even less that we are able to find them. This is not irrational and hence C1 and C2 are false.

Second, analogous cases abound in which agents rationally seek something or seek to ϕ without believing the thing to exist or without believing that they are able to ϕ . Here are some examples:

1. Antoinette has crash-landed in the desert. Being out of water and options, she ventures into the dunes, unsure if there is help to be found.
2. Priddel et al. (2003) were seeking to find tree lobsters on Ball’s Pyramid, but when they arrived they were not certain yet that in fact any still survived there.
3. I’ve been hunting for the perfect dessert for ages, but I’m not sure that such a thing even exists.

¹ Let us ignore that this differs from her earlier characterization.

4. Some mathematicians will happily look for a proof for Riemann's hypothesis for the rest of their days, but as far as they are concerned, it may well turn out that there is no such proof.
5. A trauma surgeon states truthfully: I will try my utmost to save them, but their injuries might prove to be too grave.
6. Rodney Mullen attempts to land a kickflip (i.e. successfully perform a certain skateboard trick) for the first time in history. He is almost certain that it is beyond his abilities for the moment, but nevertheless tries again and again to learn how to, and eventually he succeeds.

None of these characters is irrational just because it is not the case that they believe that there is help in the desert/tree lobsters on Ball's Pyramid/the perfect dessert/a proof for Riemann's hypothesis/saving the victim or landing a kickflip is actually within their abilities. Note moreover that (1) given their evidence, it would be a mistake for many of our characters to believe otherwise, and (2) in the last case, someone seeks to ϕ exactly in order to acquire the ability in question. Metaphysicians in pursuit of grounds should often be understood analogously to how we understand these characters (which is of course compatible with some other metaphysicians being committed to the PSR or the existence of the grounds they attempt to identify).

4 Diagnosis

While these and the abundance of similar cases suffice to rebut Amijee's argument, it may be instructive to consider where the latter goes wrong. One candidate culprit is **Intention-Belief Thesis**, which is quite strong and might best be dropped for weaker principles such as

(Intention-Belief Thesis*) If a subject rationally intends to ϕ , her beliefs are compatible with her being able to ϕ .

Or (for some c):

(Intention-Belief Thesis)** If a subject rationally intends to ϕ , she has a credence of at least c that she is able to ϕ .

Prima facie, these principles are both plausible and avoid ascribing irrationality to the subjects of our test cases.²

² Of course, much more can be said about these principles. For example, what **Intention-Belief Thesis**** amounts to depends on the relation between credence and belief, and in order for **Intention-Belief Thesis*** to give the right result in the mathematicians' case, a notion of compatibility seems required that is not merely modal: If the proof they seek to find is impossible, a merely modal notion might deliver that any beliefs whatsoever are incompatible with their being able to find a proof.

Additionally, Amijee (2022: 5–7) considers two options to avoid her argument that retain **Intention-Belief Thesis**:

(Conditional Intention) What the structural inquirer really intends is to explain the fact if it has an explanation.

(Intention to Try) When the structural inquirer seeks to explain a fact, she does so by intending to try to explain the fact.

Now, if we are to keep **Intention-Belief Thesis**, then the analogue of some such option *must* work at least sometimes, since we have to accommodate the datum that the subjects of the above example cases are not irrational. Therefore, let us see where Amijee’s objections go wrong and if she says anything that could be defended specifically for the case of structural inquiry, but not for the example cases.

To **Conditional Intention**, Amijee (2022: 6) objects that we can only act on a conditional intention if we first settle the antecedent. But first, this would rule out using the idea of **Conditional Intention** to retain **Intention-Belief Thesis** in light of the example cases. Second, it can be doubted: If we have an intention to ϕ conditional on P and an intention to ψ conditional on non- P , and both ϕ -ing and ψ -ing would be furthered by ξ -ing, it may be possible to ξ on the basis of the two conditional intentions.

Looking specifically at intending to explain, Amijee moreover argues:

[If] I intend to explain a fact if it has an explanation, I must first find out if it has an explanation.

But, plausibly, to find out if the fact has an explanation, I generally must first intend to explain it.

But this seems incorrect: First, I can acquire knowledge that P has an explanation on the basis of unanticipated testimony. Second, suppose I witness how a window breaks after Moriarty throws a rock at it. It seems plausible that (in normal situations) from that information, together with whatever further “explanation detecting” cognitive capabilities there are, I can arrive at an explanation of why the window is broken without the need to intend to explain why the window is broken. If anything, I need to intend to apply the explanation detecting faculties to the information given.

Now, perhaps Amijee could claim that this intention involves an intention to explain, but if so, this latter intention being rational would not seem to require believing that there is an explanation: Presumably, we rationally apply the explanation detecting capabilities to a situation where there is no explanation, with the result that we do not detect an explanation (or perhaps detect an absence thereof) – just like we can, for example, rationally apply our conceptual capabilities to situations in order to figure out whether they contain giraffes, without believing beforehand that there are any giraffes present. I thus conclude that Amijee’s argument against **Conditional Intention** is unconvincing.

Amijee (2022: 6) argues against **Intention to Try** as follows:

[Suppose] that we grant the claim that the intention to try to explain a fact is coherent. This intention is a genuine alternative to construing structural inquiry as simply involving the intention to explain, only if we also grant the further claim that trying to explain does not require an intention to explain (and instead involves merely an intention to try to explain). But this further claim is highly controversial. McCann [1991: 29], for example, brings out what is problematic about it.

That assumption [namely that it is possible for a person to intend to try to *A* without intending to *A*] is difficult to defend, for the fact is that ‘trying’ is not a name for a kind of action ... a bare intention to try [to *A*] is not an intention I can act upon ... This is because there is no particular type of change we can bring about in the world that counts as a ‘try’. Rather, ‘trying’ is a term that signifies the general business of acting in pursuit of some objective, a term that tends especially to be used when the objective is difficult to achieve. Thus my intention to try [to *A*] must be carried out by doing something else, aimed at achieving the objective of [*A*-ing.]

Again, if McCann’s argument goes through and **Intention to Try** must be rejected on this basis, the underlying idea could neither be used to square **Intention-Belief Thesis** with the rationality of the subjects of our test cases, which I have established as a datum and in analogy to which we should treat the metaphysician’s case. Moreover, McCann’s argument can be questioned by maintaining that an intention to try to ϕ must be carried out by doing something else, aimed at achieving the objective of ϕ -ing, while maintaining that there is no particular type of change that counts as a ‘try’, and where doing this something else does not involve an intention to ϕ .

For example, our trauma surgeon intends to try to save the victim. They carry out this intention by doing things that are aimed at achieving the objective of saving the victim, i.e. their survival. But to do so, rather than requiring an intention to save the victim, it seems sufficient for our surgeon to have an intention to do things that are aimed at achieving the objective of saving the victim, or an intention to do things that will increase the probability of the victim’s survival, e.g. staunch the bleeding and stitch the ruptured artery.

5 Conclusion

I conclude that Amijee’s argument fails to establish that innocent structural inquirers are committed to the PSR and the existence of the grounds that they inquire about. For all that I have said, the second part of

Amijee’s argument aimed to establish that we (epistemically) ought to engage in structural inquiry (i.e. seek to metaphysically explain facts) still succeeds, but if so, this epistemic duty does not involve a commitment to the PSR.

Finally, could Amijee perhaps argue that we epistemically ought to engage in *structural inquiry**, which is just like structural inquiry, but further requires agents that engage in it to assume that every fact is grounded? Given that it is possible to rationally engage in structural inquiry without engaging in structural inquiry*, it is hard to see how such an argument could go: For example, on one plausible view, the source of the alleged epistemic commitment to either would be the same, namely the epistemic value of the result of the inquiry (i.e. metaphysical explanation or understanding), and hence be unfit to establish a duty of structural inquiry* over structural inquiry. Perhaps Amijee could try to argue that structural inquirers* are better at obtaining those epistemic goods than structural inquirers (as one could perhaps attempt to argue that trauma surgeons, crypto-zoologists, and the like are more successful if confident in their abilities), but again it is hard to see how to fashion this idea into a convincing argument.

Bibliography

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