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Is Rationality Normative for Reasoning?

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Abstract

The reasoning view of rational normativity claims that structural rationality is normative for reasoning. Specifically, it claims that structural rationality gives us reasons to structure deliberation in ways that respect the requirements of rationality. This paper critically assesses the reasoning view. It argues that while the reasoning view might succeed in responding to arguments against the normativity of rationality, it is in tension with the motivations for thinking that rationality is normative in the first place. Moreover, proponents of the view do not offer any independent reason for thinking that the view is true. As such, we have no reason to accept the reasoning view.

1 Introduction

There are all sorts of reasons to be rational. If I care about achieving my ends, then I would do well to be instrumentally rational. If I want to get along with others, then my actions had better be predictable and make sense to them. If I care about the truth, then I would do well to avoid inconsistent beliefs. And so on. But does rationality *itself* give me any reasons, apart from these other things I care about? This paper critically examines the view that *rationality is normative for reasoning*, a view I will call the *reasoning view* of rational normativity. More specifically, the idea is that rationality gives us reasons to structure our reasoning or deliberation in certain ways—namely, in ways that respect the requirements of rationality. While much ink has been spilled in recent times over the question of whether rationality is normative¹, relatively little critical attention has been paid to the reasoning view.

¹ See Lord (2021) for an overview.

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Insofar as its proponents claim that it provides a novel and attractive vindication of rational normativity, however, the reasoning view deserves to be taken seriously both by sympathisers and sceptics of rational normativity. The aim of this article is therefore to assess whether the reasoning view withstands critical scrutiny. It argues that it does not.

Its proponents argue that the reasoning view is attractive because of its ability to respond to certain prominent objections to the idea of rational normativity. However, to assess any philosophical view, we need to know more than how well it responds to objections. We also need to know whether we have any independent reasons for thinking that the view is true. I will argue that proponents of the reasoning view offer no such reasons. Firstly, I will argue that the reasoning view's strategy for answering the objections it is designed to answer undermines the initial motivations for thinking that rationality is normative. Secondly, I will argue that its proponents offer no alternative motivations for thinking that rationality is normative. As such, I will conclude that we have no reason to think that the reasoning view is true. The remainder of the paper will be divided into two main sections. In the first, I will motivate and explain the reasoning view (Sect. 2). In the second, I will argue that we should not accept the reasoning view (Sect. 3).

2 The Reasoning View

In this section, I explain how the reasoning view aims to explain the normativity of rationality. First, I examine the pre-theoretical motivations for thinking that rationality is normative (Sect. 2.1). Second, I examine three prominent objections to the thesis that rationality is normative (Sect. 2.2). Third, I explain how the reasoning view responds to these arguments and more generally aims to vindicate the normativity of rationality (Sect. 2.3).

2.1 The Normativity of Rationality

As a preliminary, we must first understand the relevant notion of 'rationality' in question. For rationality can refer to (at least) two things: *substantive* rationality, and *structural* rationality. Roughly, to be substantively rational is a matter of correctly responding to one's (normative) reasons, whereas to be structurally rational is a matter of one's attitudes being internally coherent. Thus, I am structurally rational if I intend what I take to be the necessary means to one of my ends, even if I have no reason to pursue that end. And I am substantively rational if I form a belief in accordance with my evidence, even if this belief is inconsistent with my other beliefs. Of these two notions, our concern here will be with structural rationality (hereafter simply 'rationality').

Why, then, think that rationality is normative? A tempting answer is that rationality consists of certain requirements, norms, or standards, expressed in deontic vocabulary, which can be followed or violated. However, this answer is too quick. For we need to distinguish *formal* or *generic* normativity from *robust* or *authoritative* normativity. The rules of chess, for instance, are formally normative insofar as they

issue requirements and permissions that can be expressed using deontic vocabulary. But the requirements of chess *themselves* do not seem to have any authority over me in the way that, say, moral requirements do. Rather, insofar as I have authoritative reasons to follow the rules of chess, these will derive from whatever reasons I have for playing chess (e.g. that I enjoy playing chess, or that I have agreed to play chess with my friend). So what we want to know is whether rationality is *authoritatively* normative (hereafter simply ‘normative’).²

A common motivation for thinking that rationality is normative is that certain parts of ordinary thought and talk about rationality seem to involve normative claims. For instance, it is often claimed that irrationality attributions involve normative criticism:

If I say to [someone], “You are irrational”, then, naturally enough, they take me to be making a criticism of them, they take me to be expressing a negative attitude towards their reasoning processes, as a normative claim that they ought to change their attitudes, and they immediately, you can rest assured, feel the pressure to respond to what they see as a challenge. [...] [T]he suggestion that the speaker is making a normative claim cannot be “cancelled”. (Hussain, 2007: 28f)

Calling a person irrational involves criticizing that person. The criticism is different in character from moral blame, but it is still criticism. Criticizing someone involves more than the judgement that the criticized person has violated some standard; it also involves the judgement that the standard is authoritative for her. [...] [A]scriptions of rationality and irrationality seem to presuppose that we have decisive reasons to be rational. And if we cannot make sense of this, it seems we must give up on an essential feature of the discourse about rationality ascriptions and admit that it rests on an illusion. (Kiesewetter, 2017: 25)

Thus, the idea is that irrationality attributions *essentially* involve or entail normative claims about what we ought or have reason to do.³

Although the most common motivation for thinking that rationality is normative is that irrationality attributions are normative, this might be motivated some other way. For even if we deny that irrationality attributions are essentially normative, some other part of rationality discourse might be essentially normative. Such a view is suggested by Alex Worsnip in relation to our talk of rational *requirements*:

[I]f structural rationality is not normatively significant, then we lose our right to talk of genuine *requirements* of structural rationality. For, one may reasonably ask, if facts about what is rational or irrational don’t in any way bear on what attitudes we ought to have or on what we ought to do, in what sense could we be genuinely required to have the attitudes that are rational, or to avoid hav-

²For an account of what authoritative normativity consists in, see Brown (2024).

³Similar arguments are made with respect to other putatively normative domains. For instance, Kauppinen (2023) argues that epistemic norms are normative because we are criticisable for violating them.

ing those that are irrational? More briefly: how could there be non-normative requirements? (Worsnip, 2021: 30)

More generally, then, the idea is that at least some parts of rationality discourse appear to be essentially normative.

While this appearance gives some *prima facie* motivation for the thesis that rationality is normative, it does not speak decisively in its favour. For one might instead provide some non-normative explanation of why rationality discourse appears to be normative. For example, since irrationality ascriptions are ‘transparent’, highlighting what appear to be clashes of substantive reasons *from the perspective of the irrational agent*, such ascriptions will typically put pressure on the agent to revise their attitudes (Kolodny, 2005). It might also be the case that irrationality ascriptions conversationally implicate normative claims, perhaps via generalized conversational implicature (Ridge, 2014). While I am sympathetic to a non-normative explanation of the normative appearance of rationality discourse, I will not rely on any such sympathies here. Rather, I will grant the proponent of rational normativity that insofar as rationality discourse appears to be normative, we will have reason to accept a theory that saves these appearances, at least other things being equal.

2.2 Three Problems for Rational Normativity

Objectors to the normativity of rationality, however, argue that other things are not in fact equal. For there are several pressing objections to the thesis that rationality is normative. In this sub-section, I will focus on three such objections from Niko Kolodny’s (2005) influential paper on the normativity of rationality. I take these as my focus not only for reasons of space, but because proponents of the reasoning view construct their view specifically in response to these objections. With the arguments explained, in the final sub-section I will then explain how the reasoning view responds to them.

The first objection is *the bootstrapping problem*. According to the bootstrapping problem, if we assume that rationality is normative, then this has the absurd consequence that we can generate reasons for more or less anything simply by forming the relevant attitudes. For example, it is plausible that rationality requires that I intend to do what I believe I have decisive reason to do (or something along these lines). But suppose I form the belief that I have decisive reason to eat your car; not only is your car bad for the environment, but my sustainable vegan diet has left me lacking in iron, and the clear solution, it seems to me, is to eat your car. Clearly this is something that I have little to no reason to do or intend to do. However, if rational requirements are reason giving, then it seems that I give myself a reason to eat your car simply by forming the belief that I have decisive reason to do so. But this is implausible—why would considerations about rational coherence speak in favour of doing *that*?

The standard response to *the bootstrapping problem* is to maintain that rational requirements are *wide-scope*. The idea is that rationality demands of me *not* that I intend to eat your car, but that I [intend to eat your car *or* abandon my belief that I have decisive reason to eat your car]. Roughly, then, on the wide-scope conception, rationality requires that I avoid certain *combinations* of attitudes, not that I adopt any

particular attitude. In response to this move, Kolodny offers a sophisticated argument to show that at least some rational requirements must be narrow-scope, and as such, the bootstrapping objection stands. Whether Kolodny's argument is successful is, of course, controversial. In any case, the reasoning view has the resources to respond to the bootstrapping problem even in its simplest form, so I will not discuss the objection any further here.

The second objection is '*the Why be rational?*' problem. According to the 'Why be rational?' problem, we have reason to doubt that rationality is normative because there are no good answers to the question 'Why be rational?' For notice that the normativity of rationality is not supported by the kinds of observations with which this paper began, such as that being instrumentally rational will help me get the things I want, and that avoiding inconsistent beliefs will help me avoid false beliefs. At the most, these examples show that we have reasons to follow particular requirements of rationality *from time to time*. But this is insufficiently general to vindicate the normativity of rationality. For instance, while being rational might sometimes lead me to true beliefs, other times it will not, such as when I reason from false premises. And if my ends are harmful to me, then perhaps it would be a good thing to be instrumentally irrational. Of course, there are many more candidate answers to the 'Why be rational?' question than I have considered here. But the general idea is that it seems doubtful that there is any sufficiently general reason to be rational that can explain why rationality *as such* gives us reasons.

The third objection is the *deliberative problem*. According to the deliberative problem, we have reason to doubt that rationality is normative because rational requirements do not figure in our reasoning in the way that other normative considerations do. For instance, suppose I come to believe that all the evidence suggests that the economy will shrink in the next quarter. On the basis of this evidence, I come to believe that the economy will indeed shrink in the next quarter. What I do not seem to do in such a case is to acquire this belief *also* for the reason that it is consistent with my other mental states, particularly my beliefs about what the evidence suggests. Firstly, this latter reason would seem to be superfluous, as it seems that once I have established what the evidence suggests, there is no further question of what speaks in favour of the belief.⁴ Secondly, believing something simply because it coheres with one's other beliefs seems to be the *wrong kind* of reason for believing, as it concerns facts about my psychology rather than any reason for thinking that the belief is true. Thirdly, it is unclear whether I even *can* form beliefs on this basis.

Thus, whatever the intuitive plausibility of the view that rationality is normative, it faces serious objections. With these objections explained, I will now turn to how the reasoning view aims to answer these objections and thereby vindicate the normativity of rationality.

⁴ At least assuming that there are no practical reasons for having or lacking the belief. But the possibility of there being such reasons does not speak in favour of there being rationality-based reasons.

2.3 The Vindication of Rational Normativity

Reasoning, or deliberation, is the activity of rationally arriving at new attitudes on the basis of one's existing attitudes. Such activity is rational insofar as it is governed by certain norms, principles, or requirements. According to the reasoning view of rational normativity, these requirements are normative *for* our reasoning, in the sense that they give us reasons to structure our deliberation in ways that respect those requirements. As we will see, there are different ways of unpacking this idea which give rise to different versions of the reasoning view. Here, I focus on what I take to be the two most prominent versions of the view, one from an influential but unpublished paper by Nadeem Hussain (2007), and another from Alex Worsnip's (2021) recent book-length discussion of the nature of rationality.

We have said that reasoning is an activity governed by certain norms or principles. But which norms or principles *should* we follow when reasoning? The answer, according to the reasoning view, is that we should follow the requirements of rationality. As Hussain writes, "[t]he requirements of rationality pick out the norms with which an agent ought to reason." (2007: 7) For Hussain, this is the case because rational requirements *just are* requirements of reasoning, and that "[r]ational requirements apply only to reasoning. [...] Where we are not, or cannot be, reasoning, there the requirements do not apply." (2007: 7–8) If we put this view about the content of rational requirements together with the reasoning view of rationality, this suggests a straightforward picture of rational normativity. Specifically, if rational requirements are normative requirements, and if rational requirements specify proper rules of reasoning, then rationality just is that part of normativity that governs our reasoning and deliberation.

However, the reasoning view is not committed to this picture of rational requirements. Indeed, the reasoning view is compatible with *any* view of rational requirements. On this way of interpreting the reasoning view, the idea is that rational requirements, *whatever they are*, give us reasons to deliberate in certain ways—namely, in ways that respect those requirements. For instance, Worsnip (2021) argues independently of the reasoning view that rational requirements prohibit certain combinations of mental states. Thus, on Worsnip's view, rational requirements do not apply to reasoning as such, only to combinations of mental states. However, we can still combine this view about what rational requirements are with the reasoning view of the normativity of rationality. The resulting view is one according to which "the fact that some possible combination of attitudes is incoherent is a reason to treat it as off-limits in one's deliberation."⁵ (Worsnip, 2021: 256) Here, to treat some com-

⁵For Worsnip, facts about what is irrational are grounded in facts about what is incoherent, where these two properties are co-extensive but distinct. Because of this, Worsnip (2021: 247–8) points out that it might be that, strictly speaking, it is facts about coherence that give us reasons, not facts about rationality. However, it is less clear to me that we really have two distinct properties here. After all, there are different senses of being incoherent, so we will want to know which kind of incoherence is involved in irrationality. For it is not as if irrational combinations of attitudes are *logically* incoherent—there is nothing incoherent in the idea, say, of a person believing a contradiction. The most obvious answer to this question is that we are talking about *rational* coherence, in which case it is less clear that coherence and rationality are distinct in the way that Worsnip suggests. In any case, these details are not important for our discussion, so I will continue to frame the question in terms of whether rationality gives us reasons.

bination of attitudes as off-limits is to be disposed to not consider it as a deliberative option and to actively consider ways of avoiding the combination.

Importantly, then, the reasoning view is a view about the *normativity* of rational requirements, not about what rational requirements are. And it certainly has some intuitive plausibility. After all, rationality is in some way concerned with the internal relations of one's attitudes, and reasoning just is changing or maintaining one's attitudes on the basis of one's existing attitudes. So there is plausibly a tight connection between rationality on the one hand and reasoning on the other. But however that may be, the primary motivation that proponents of the reasoning view like Hussain and Worsnip give for the view is its ability to respond to the objections to rational normativity raised by Kolodny and others.

Let's start with the bootstrapping problem. The bootstrapping problem presupposes that if rationality gives us reasons, these are reasons for particular attitudes. However, the reasoning view denies this. According to the reasoning view, rationality does not give us reasons for attitudes, but reasons to structure deliberation in certain ways. But these are two very different kinds of response. Indeed, according to the reasoning view, rationality does not even give us reasons to change or maintain combinations of attitudes. It only gives us reasons concerning how we should deliberate. But if the reasoning view denies that rationality gives us reasons for attitudes, the bootstrapping problem simply does not get going.

The deliberative problem can be solved in the same way. For again, the deliberative problem implicitly assumes that if rationality gives us reasons, these reasons must show up in our reasoning. But the reasoning view denies that reasons of rationality are like this. According to the reasoning view, reasons of rationality are not the kind of thing we take into consideration when weighing up whether to adopt some attitude or set of attitudes. Rather than featuring *in* such deliberation, their role is to structure the way in which we deliberate about whether to adopt some attitude or set of attitudes (Hussain, 2007: 52; Worsnip, 2021: 259). So again, because the reasoning view denies that reasons of rationality are reasons for attitudes, the deliberative problem simply does not get going.

Finally, the reasoning view solves the 'Why be rational?' problem by rejecting the assumption that a vindication of rational normativity needs to answer the question 'Why be rational?' Both Hussain and Worsnip draw a comparison to H. A. Prichard's (1912) argument that it is a mistake to demand a general answer to the question 'Why be moral?' Rather, Prichard argues, moral reasons are not grounded in anything more fundamental. Indeed, to demand some general reason to be moral seems to ask for the wrong kind of reason for why one should act as morality requires. As we might put it, morality is non-derivatively normative. In the same way, Hussain and Worsnip suggest that rationality might also be non-derivatively normative (Hussain, 2007: 48–49; Worsnip, 2021: 238–40; see also Southwood, 2008: 17–18). But if rationality is non-derivatively normative, then we do not need to answer the question 'Why be rational?' to vindicate the normativity of rationality. Indeed, as Worsnip (2021: 236–7) points out, the claim that rationality gives us reasons is independent from the claim that there is some general reason to be rational. Given that the reasoning view only says that rationality gives us reasons to structure deliberation in certain ways, it need not imply that there is a general reason to do so.

It appears, then, that the reasoning view has the resources to deal with a number of pressing objections to the thesis that rationality is normative. Indeed, if the reasoning view is correct, then this seems like a particularly strong response to the three objections. For it would show that such objections presuppose an incorrect account of what rational normativity is. The proper response to the objections on this view is thus to show that the correct view of rational normativity simply avoids the objections in the first place. In what follows, I will grant that the reasoning view provides an adequate response to these objections on its own terms. Nonetheless, I will argue that the reasoning view fails to vindicate the normativity of rationality.

3 Against the Reasoning View

In this section, I argue against the reasoning view of rational normativity. In a nutshell, the problem is that by formulating the view as a response to a set of objections against the existence of rational normativity, it fails to offer any reason for thinking that rationality is normative in the first place. I will first argue that the view fails to do justice to the pre-theoretical considerations that motivate the thesis that rationality is normative (Sect. 3.1). I will then argue that its proponents offer no independent reason to accept the view (Sect. 3.2). If my arguments are correct, they do not show that the reasoning view is false. But they do show that we have no reason to accept the reasoning view.

3.1 Motivations Reconsidered

Recall that the normativity of rationality is typically motivated by the thought that certain aspects of rationality discourse appear to be essentially normative. We saw two versions of this claim. The first version is that irrationality attributions essentially involve normative criticism. The second version is that talk of rational requirements must be construed as normative. Taking each of these claims in turn, how does each square with the reasoning view?

Let's begin by considering Hussain's view. Recall that, for Hussain, rational requirements *just are* requirements of reasoning. Thus, if irrationality attributions essentially involve normative criticism, then such attributions involve criticism of one's reasoning. However, as Southwood (2008: 21) has pointed out, irrationality attributions seem appropriate in many cases that do not involve reasoning. For instance, suppose I believe both p and not- p , or suppose I believe bringing about q is necessary to achieve my ends without intending to bring about q or change my ends. Both cases seem to be paradigm instances of irrationality. However, suppose that I have not arrived at these attitudes via reasoning but in some other way. If irrationality attributions apply only to reasoning, then in neither case am I irrational. But on the face of it, simply having these attitudes is enough to make me irrational. Moreover, suppose I did arrive at these attitudes by reasoning. In this case, I would be criticisable as irrational in so reasoning. However, because Hussain (2007: 7–8) claims that rational requirements apply not only *to* reasoning, but also only *when* we are reasoning, this implies that even if I *was* irrational to reason to both p and not- p , I am no

longer irrational in believing p and not- p if I am no longer deliberating about whether p . However, it is implausible that I cease to be irrational simply by no longer thinking about the issue in question. Indeed, it would seem that the surest way to avoid irrationality on this picture would be to give up reasoning altogether.

It might be thought that this is a problem not for the reasoning view as such, but for Hussain's view of rational requirements. For instance, if we accept Worsnip's view that rational requirements are requirements to avoid incoherent combinations of attitudes, we avoid the problematic result that we can only be irrational when reasoning. For Worsnip, we are irrational in virtue of possessing incoherent attitudes, no matter how we arrived at those attitudes. Nonetheless, we see that a similar objection applies to Worsnip's view. Although Worsnip's view does not imply that we are irrational only when reasoning, it does imply that we are normatively criticisable for being irrational only when reasoning. But insofar as we do criticise people for being irrational, it is not plausible that our criticism is so limited. For you might criticise me for having incoherent attitudes regardless of how I acquired those attitudes and regardless of whether I am currently engaged in any reasoning. But if rational requirements only give me reasons to structure my deliberation in certain ways, then there is no normative failing on my part simply by having incoherent attitudes.

Indeed, we see that this objection applies to *any* version of the reasoning view. This is because it is an essential feature of the view not only to claim that rationality is normative for reasoning, but to also deny that it is normative for attitudes (or combinations thereof). For it is precisely by denying that rationality is normative for attitudes that the reasoning view avoids the bootstrapping and deliberative problems. As soon as we allow that rationality is also normative for attitudes, the problems resurface. Rather, the reasoning view is committed to a wholesale rejection of rational normativity for attitudes. Crucially, however, insofar as ordinary rationality discourse involves robust normative criticism and advice, it is implausible to think that this applies only to reasoning and never to attitudes. Thus, the rational normativity of reasoning and attitudes stands or falls together.⁶

Some might think that ordinary practice does maintain a distinction between robustly criticisable irrationality that results from bad reasoning and non-criticisable irrationality that results from elsewhere. This might be, for instance, because reasoning is perhaps the only way of exercising control over our attitudes. Although I am doubtful that ordinary practice does maintain such a distinction, we see that granting it does not help the reasoning view in the required way. For instance, suppose I believe both p and not- p as a result of irrational reasoning. Suppose also that I am normatively criticisable for having these beliefs in virtue of being criticisable for reasoning irrationally, such that the same criticism would not apply if I acquired these beliefs in some other way. Whatever the merits of this view, it is not compatible with the reasoning view. For it denies the key claim that rationality is normative only for reasoning. As soon as it allows for rationality-based reasons for attitudes in any form,

⁶ It is for this reason also that the proponent of the reasoning view cannot maintain that rationality's normativity applies derivatively to attitudes. This is because derivative normativity is still normativity. Thus, the existence of derivative reasons for attitudes is sufficient to raise the bootstrapping and deliberative problems.

the reasoning view robs itself of the resources by which it aims to vindicate rational normativity.⁷

None of this is to deny that there might be a normative difference between having incoherent attitudes in virtue of reasoning incorrectly and acquiring those attitudes in other ways. For instance, if someone has picked up the beliefs p and not- p by reasoning correctly, or perhaps simply automatically, but has never explicitly considered these beliefs, we might withhold criticism. This might make it tempting to believe that facts about the agent's reasoning are what make the difference between criticisable and non-criticisable irrationality.⁸ But again, the reasoning view is committed to denying that holding incoherent attitudes is normatively criticisable *however we arrive at those attitudes*. However, it is implausible that we robustly criticise people's reasoning for being irrational but *never* criticise their attitudes for being irrational. So the reasoning view fails to do justice to the primary motivation for thinking that rationality is normative, namely that irrationality attributions involve robustly normative criticism.

Finally, suppose that irrationality attributions are not essentially normative, but that some other part of rationality discourse is essentially normative. For instance, recall Worsnip's suggestion that we cannot make sense of our talk of *requirements* if we do not take such talk to be normative. Although Worsnip does not fully endorse the suggestion, it is still worth considering whether it might help the reasoning view. We see quickly, however, that this suggestion fails for reasons similar to those already discussed. If rational requirements are normative only for reasoning, and there are no non-normative requirements, then rational requirements apply only to the agent's reasoning processes and not their attitudes. So the proposal entails the same implausible restriction of the scope of rational normativity.

Moreover, the proposal is arguably incompatible with Worsnip's account of what rational requirements are. Recall that for Worsnip, rational requirements prohibit certain combinations of mental states. Although these requirements are supposed to be normative *for* reasoning, the requirements themselves are not *about* reasoning—they are about which combinations of attitudes are prohibited. However, if all requirement talk is normative, then to say that rationality requires avoiding certain combinations of attitudes is a normative claim. So if we take the proposal about the essential normativity of requirements seriously, we end up with a view in which rationality gives us reasons for attitudes. But it is precisely by denying this idea that the reasoning

⁷ Worsnip (2021: 267) writes that he does not want to “overegg” the difference between his view and the view that rationality gives us reasons for disjunctions of attitudes, because “[u]ltimately, on my view, you should avoid [incoherent] combinations of attitudes [...] by structuring your deliberation in accordance with coherence-based reasons.” However, for the reasons just outlined in the main text, it seems to me that Worsnip is not licenced to make this claim. For as soon as we introduce rationality-based reasons for attitudes, the view faces the deliberative problem. So it seems to me that Worsnip *should* want to overegg the difference between the two views, as the alternative to his view fails to vindicate rational normativity in the way he proposes.

⁸ A different explanation might be that ignorance or lack of control *excuses* us from criticism, which is still to say that there was a normative failing in being irrational. It should be clear that this explanation is also not available to the reasoning view.

view is meant to vindicate the normativity of rationality. So the appeal to the essential normativity of requirements does not seem to help the reasoning view either.⁹

3.2 Fittingness

Our argument so far against the reasoning view has been that it undermines the very considerations that motivate the thesis that rationality is normative. However, this need not be the end of the road for the reasoning view. For one might still accept the view if it can be defended on its own terms. Specifically, one might defend the reasoning view as being a plausible normative view in its own right without relying on the kind of pre-theoretical motivations for rational normativity discussed above. If this is possible, then one could accept the preceding arguments without abandoning the reasoning view.

Some remarks by Worsnip relating to the fittingness of rationality might be understood in this spirit. Worsnip (2021: 265) claims that we should structure deliberation in ways that respect rational requirements because it is *fitting* to do so. If this claim withstands scrutiny, then proponents of the reasoning view can vindicate the normativity of rationality from a first-order normative perspective. Because Worsnip argues that the fittingness claim is a fundamental normative truth that cannot be explained in terms of anything else, it is somewhat difficult to say anything conclusively for or against it. However, it seems to me that, notwithstanding its intuitive plausibility, the claim is undermotivated. For the remainder of this section, I will try to offer some grounds for doubting that we have any reason to accept the fittingness claim. If we lack any reason to accept the fittingness claim, then we cannot appeal to this claim to defend the reasoning view. I offer three arguments.

3.2.1 The Analogy with Morality Reconsidered

First, I think the fittingness proposal should make us reconsider the analogy between rationality and morality. Recall that in response to the ‘Why be rational?’ question, Worsnip claimed that this question is on a par with the ‘Why be moral?’ question. If we agree with Pritchard that it is a mistake to try to ground morality’s authority in something external to it, then the proponent of the reasoning view can also say that it is a mistake to try to ground rationality’s authority in something external to *it*. Thus, we have a sort of companions in innocence argument that purports to show that it is legitimate to refuse to provide any deeper explanation of rationality’s authority.

However, in many important respects, the analogy does not hold for the fittingness proposal. For Pritchard, the only legitimate answer to the question, ‘Why be moral?’ is a moral one. But for Worsnip, the answer to the question, ‘Why be rational?’ is

⁹Worsnip (2021: 243–4) points out that it might be possible to “excise all talk of what rationality *requires*” from a description of the content of rationality as he understands it. If so, then Worsnip’s view of the content of rationality would be compatible with the claim that requirements talk is essentially normative. However, if we accept this view, we can no longer appeal to rational requirements talk as a pre-theoretical motivation for thinking that rationality is normative. So this response does not save the reasoning view from the objection that it undermines our pre-theoretical motivation for accepting that rationality is normative.

not a rational one. Rather, the normativity of rationality is explained in terms of something *external* to it—that it is *fitting* to reason rationally. Indeed, this is what we should expect, since we already know that rational requirements are not normatively contentful—if they were, then Worsnip’s view of rational requirements would directly give us reasons for attitudes, which the reasoning view denies. Thus, while none of this supports the claim that the fittingness proposal is *false*, it does suggest that the ‘Why be moral?’ and ‘Why be rational?’ questions are not appropriately analogous for considerations about the former to support considerations about the latter.

3.2.2 The Constitutive Rationality of Attitudes

Second, Worsnip (2021: 266) recognizes that insisting that rationality is normative because it is fitting to structure deliberation rationally might seem “disappointing, or to consist in a kind of foot-stomping”. To quell this worry, at least to some degree, he offers the following positive suggestion to lend plausibility to the fittingness view:

Incoherent combinations of attitudes are ones that, by their very nature, are difficult to sustain under conditions of full transparency—since it’s constitutive of the attitudes in question that anyone who genuinely counts as having them necessarily has some disposition to give the combination up when these conditions of full transparency are met. Reflection on this may drive home just how little sense these combinations of attitudes make, and thus the fittingness of ruling them out in deliberation. (2021: 265-6)

However, there are two reasons to doubt whether these considerations do in fact support the fittingness claim. Firstly, if we do take these considerations to support the fittingness view, we lack any explanation of why incoherence does not also merit avoiding attitudes. Secondly, the considerations suggest an alternative explanation of our reasons to avoid incoherence that does not presuppose the normativity of rationality.

Worsnip (2021: ch.5) argues that it is constitutive of our attitudes that we have at least some disposition to avoid incoherence when we become aware of it. Not only is it difficult to sustain such incoherence, it is also difficult to make sense of these attitudes. Given that reasoning is the activity of changing one’s attitudes, it seems fitting that one reasons in such a way as to respect rational requirements. Below I will challenge this line of thought, but granting it for now, the question is why is it not *also* fitting to *have* coherent attitudes and *avoid* having incoherent attitudes? After all, it is difficult to sustain such incoherence, and difficult to make sense of incoherent attitudes. If these considerations support the claim that it is fitting to reason according to rationality, then it seems ad hoc to deny that the very same considerations also support the claim that it is fitting to have coherent attitudes and lack incoherent attitudes. But if *that* is fitting, then we have reasons to have and avoid certain combinations of attitudes, which is what the reasoning view denies.¹⁰

¹⁰ It might be thought that it is not ad hoc to deny the fittingness claim to our attitudes because “it’s not clear that conjunctions and disjunctions of attitudes have fittingness conditions at all.” (Worsnip, 2021:

Next, consider that it does seem plausible that we have reason to structure deliberation in ways that avoid incoherence. However, there are many putative explanations of why this is so that do not rely on the fittingness claim. For instance, it is plausible that we have reason to structure deliberation in ways that avoid incoherence so that our reasoning is understandable and predictable to others and so that we can jointly reason together with others in an effective way (compare Mildenerger, 2019). Moreover, perhaps there is value in simply being a unified agent (compare Korsgaard, 1996). However, none of these explanations support the fittingness claim or the reasoning view more broadly. Of course, the existence of these reasons is compatible with Worsnip's suggestion that it is fitting to structure deliberation in ways that avoid incoherence. And as long as the fittingness claim is true, this is sufficient to vindicate the reasoning view. The point of introducing these other reasons, however, is to undermine the motivation for accepting the fittingness claim in the first place. If there are other explanations available for why we have reason to deliberate rationally, then it is not clear why we also need to postulate fit-related reasons, as it is not obvious what work such reasons are doing.

Perhaps it will be claimed that none of these other reasons are sufficiently general enough to explain the normativity of rationality. However, the normativity of rationality is precisely what is at issue, so it is question-begging to invoke this as a consideration in its defence. It might be claimed that without the fittingness claim, we cannot account for the intuition that we have reason to deliberate in ways that avoid incoherence even in the absence of all other reasons. However, such intuitions are highly contestable and not likely to be accepted by the opponent of rational normativity. Moreover, if the only work the fittingness claim is doing is to account for these cases, then this hardly seems like a strong enough reason to accept it.¹¹

3.2.3 Constitutive Standards of Reasoning

Third, a final argument that might be offered in favour of the fittingness view runs as follows. According to one prominent understanding of fittingness, the fittingness of an activity like deliberation is determined by the standards internal to that activity (Worsnip, 2021: 261). Given that the attitudes involved in deliberation are constitutively rational, it plausible that the standards internal to the activity of deliberation involve structuring deliberation to avoid incoherence. In this way, we have independent reason to accept the fittingness proposal. There are two things to say in response.

268) Firstly, Worsnip argues that it is not clear that a disjunction of attitudes can constitute a response. However, I do not see any reason why a disjunction of attitudes cannot constitute a response in the relevant sense. It is just that there are multiple ways of realizing the response. Secondly, Worsnip argues that in cases where the disjunction of attitudes lacks a common content "there's no shared object here that could be said to merit that disjunctive response" (2021: 268). Again, however, I do not see why the lack of common content implies that there could be no shared object that merits the response. For instance, we might think that the agent's deliberative predicament merits avoiding some combination of attitudes. Or we might think that the fact that the agent would be irrational or incoherent by adopting some set of attitudes merits avoiding those attitudes. So more would need to be said here to substantiate Worsnip's arguments. In any case, the objection that immediately follows in the main text is independent of the preceding argument.

¹¹ See also Johnson King (2024), who argues that the idea that structural rationality is normative stands in tension with the idea that structural rationality is constitutive of our attitudes.

The first is just to repeat the above argument that it would be ad hoc to deny that there are fit-related reasons to have coherent attitudes. For instance, it is plausible that the standards internal to belief involve some kind of truth norm, which would make it unfitting to have inconsistent beliefs, as these cannot both be true.

The second response is that it is independently implausible to understand fittingness in terms of internal standards. Although many recent theorists have understood fittingness in these terms, as Christopher Howard and Stephanie Leary (2022: 228) point out, this is a relatively recent development and has not been the dominant understanding of fittingness throughout its history. More substantively, they also point out that constitutive standards come too cheap to capture the robustly normative notion of fittingness, and that fittingness and constitutive standards often come apart. For instance: “If you strap on your skates and perform a triple axel in the middle of your department meeting, then you might perform the jump correctly, but the jump (at least in normal circumstances) wouldn’t be merited.” (Howard & Leary 2022: 228) Thus, despite widespread acceptance of the claim that fittingness facts are facts about constitutive standards of correctness, this claim should be rejected. So even if the constitutive standards of reasoning make reference to rational requirements, this does not support the fittingness claim.

4 Conclusion

Taking a step back, it is legitimate to ask whether the reasoning view really chimes with our pre-theoretical view about the normativity of rationality. For it seems arbitrary to limit the normative scope of rationality to reasoning. If rationality is normative, then surely rationality gives us reason to avoid and weed out inconsistencies just as much when reasoning as when not. If we had good theoretical or normative grounds for maintaining a normative distinction between irrationality in reasoning and irrationality outside of reasoning, then perhaps it would not matter whether common sense made such a distinction. But proponents of the reasoning view offer no reason for accepting this distinction either. The only reason offered is that the view can solve our three objections. But being able to solve these objections gives us no reason to think that the view is in fact true. Moreover, if proponents of the reasoning view are correct that the view is uniquely well-placed to answer these objections, then the prospects look dim for vindicating rational normativity. Instead, it would suggest a non-normative explanation of the normative appearances. Of course, perhaps the objections can be dealt with separately. But if they can, then we remove the main motivation for accepting the reasoning view. All in all, then, we have no reason to accept the reasoning view.¹²

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