

VIOLATING REQUIREMENTS, EXITING FROM REQUIREMENTS, AND THE SCOPE OF RATIONALITY

BY ERROL LORD

It is generally agreed that many types of attitudinal incoherence are irrational, but there is controversy about why they are. Some think incoherence is irrational because it violates certain wide-scope conditional requirements, others ('narrow-scopers') that it violates narrow-scope conditional requirements. In his paper 'The Scope of Rational Requirements', John Brunero has offered a putative counter-example to narrow-scope views. But a narrow-scooper should reject a crucial assumption which Brunero makes, namely, the claim that we always violate conditional narrow-scope requirements when we do not comply with them. I show how Brunero's objection can be met by denying this claim, and I provide independent arguments in favour of denying it.

I. INTRODUCTION

A thought shared by nearly all parties to the debate about rationality is that certain kinds of attitudinal incoherence are irrational. A paradigm practical example is *akrasia*, believing you ought to ϕ but failing to intend to ϕ . A paradigm epistemic example is closure incoherence, believing p , believing [if p , q], caring whether q , but not believing q .

Nearly everyone agrees that having these combinations of attitudes is irrational. Nevertheless there is tremendous controversy over what *explains* why these combinations are irrational. This is because there is tremendous controversy about the structure of the requirements you violate when you are incoherent. There are two main camps. On the one side, there are *wide-scopers*, who think that *akrasia* is irrational because when you are akratic you violate the principle *ought wide* (OW):¹

OW. Necessarily, I am rationally required to [intend to ϕ if I believe that I myself ought to ϕ].²

Wide-scopers think that 'rationally required' takes wide scope over the whole conditional. This means, *inter alia*, that as long as one is not akratic, one has complied

¹ Obviously similar things can be said for closure incoherence. To save space I omit the details.

² The 'I myself' formulation is intended to rule out cases where I believe that A ought to ϕ but do not believe that I am A . Or to put it another way, it is supposed to ensure that agents can express their belief that A ought to ϕ in the first person. Thanks to an anonymous referee for help here.

with (OW). Thus there are two ways of complying with (OW): either you do not have the belief, or you have the belief and the corresponding intention. If Buster believes he ought to live with his mother, he can comply with (OW) either by giving up his belief or by forming the intention to live with his mother.

On the other side there are *narrow-scopers*, who think that akrasia is irrational because when you are akratic you violate the principle *ought narrow* (ON):

ON. Necessarily, if I believe that I myself ought to ϕ , then I am rationally required to intend to ϕ .

Narrow-scopers think that ‘rationally required’ takes narrow scope over just the consequent of the conditional. This means, *inter alia*, that one only complies with (ON) when one is coherent in a certain way. When Buster believes that he ought to live with his mother, he only complies with (ON) if he intends to live with his mother. In contrast with his relation to (OW), Buster does not comply with (ON) when he gives up his belief.

John Brunero, in a recent paper in this journal, argues against narrow-scoping.³ He argues by means of a counter-example. Brunero is right that narrow-scoping is doomed *if* we make a particular assumption about the logic of requirements, *viz* that all non-compliance states are violation states. His argument depends on making this assumption. I shall argue that the narrow-scooper ought to reject it. This is not just to avoid Brunero’s objection. There are independent reasons for rejecting the assumption.

The structure of the paper will be as follows. In §II I shall introduce Brunero’s argument. §III will explicate a parable that offers the narrow-scooper guidance. In §IV I shall bring the lesson of the parable to bear on the debate about the structure of rationality. The lesson is that the narrow-scooper has an interesting way out of Brunero’s objection, and an independent reason for taking it. Finally, in §V, I shall compare my narrow-scooper’s view with Brunero’s positive view.

II. THE OBJECTION

Brunero’s objection is centred on the case of Annie. First, some background is needed. Brunero focuses on two narrow-scope requirements advocated by Niko Kolodny.⁴ These are (I+NS) and (B–NS) below. The objection does not turn on these particular requirements. As I shall show later, a case with the relevant structure can be constructed for any pair of requirements such that one requirement requires an agent to exit from the other requirement.

I+NS. If one believes that there is conclusive reason to ϕ , then rationality requires one to intend to ϕ

³ J. Brunero, ‘The Scope of Rational Requirements’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 60 (2010), pp. 28–49. Brunero uses the same type of argument many times in his ‘Instrumental Rationality, Symmetry, and Scope’, *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming). By my count, four of his arguments there fail if one adopts the logic I advocate in this paper.

⁴ See N. Kolodny, ‘Why Be Rational?’, *Mind*, 114 (2005), pp. 509–63.

B–NS. If one believes that there is not sufficient evidence that p , then rationality requires one not to believe that p .

You think these requirements are plausible if you are a narrow-scooper. It does seem irrational to violate (I+NS) and (B–NS). Narrow-scoopers explain why having those combinations is irrational by insisting that (I+NS) and (B–NS) are requirements of rationality.

Suppose Annie believes that there is conclusive reason to attend a lecture tonight, and she also believes that she lacks sufficient evidence to believe that there is conclusive reason to attend the lecture. Then she is required by (I+NS) to intend to attend the lecture, and she is required by (B–NS) to drop her belief that there is conclusive reason to attend the lecture.

Of course, it is possible for Annie to comply with both requirements in this situation. In order to comply with both she would have to form the intention to go to the lecture, and also drop her belief that there is conclusive reason to attend. Indeed, there might not be anything irrational about doing that. However, it is hard to see why we should think that she is *required* to do that. Suppose she does not: instead, she drops her belief that there is conclusive reason to attend, but does not form the intention to go. There seems to be nothing necessarily irrational about doing that either. However, it seems that if she does do that she would be violating (I+NS). This is because if she were to do that, she would not be doing something which (I+NS) at one point required her to do. Thus if (I+NS) is a requirement of rationality, then Annie *is* necessarily irrational when she drops the belief but does not form the intention. Brunero concludes from this that (I+NS) is false.

III. THE PARABLE

Once upon a time, there were no legal regulations about whether one could lawfully ride one's bicycle on the sidewalks of downtown Lincoln, Nebraska. However, there came a time when the powers that be in Lincoln thought it was unsafe and annoying to have cyclists crowding the sidewalks in the only part of town that garnered a lot of foot traffic. So they decided to make it illegal to ride one's bike on the sidewalks in downtown Lincoln.

(Sidewalk) and (Street) thus became codified into the City of Lincoln's code:

Sidewalk. If you are on the sidewalk in downtown Lincoln, you are legally required not to ride a bicycle

Street. If you are riding a bicycle in downtown Lincoln, you are legally required to be in the street.

A certain moral philosopher employed by the local university became aware of the new law, and as he was on his way home from a downtown restaurant he realized an odd feature of (Sidewalk) and (Street). It happened when one of his graduate students, Tim, mounted his bicycle on the sidewalk and started riding (the moral philosopher did not ride bicycles himself because he was too clumsy). It occurred to

the moral philosopher that Tim was legally required by (Sidewalk) to not ride his bicycle, and was legally required by (Street) to be in the street.

The odd thing was not that Tim could not comply with both requirements. In order to do that he would have to stop riding his bicycle and start walking in the street. The moral philosopher happened to know that it was legally permissible (albeit a bit silly) to walk one's bike in the street. The odd thing about it was that it seemed that Tim was legally *required* to walk his bicycle in the street. If this were right, then it would be illegal for Tim to walk his bike on the sidewalk. After all, if he were to do that, then he would not be doing something that (Street) at one time required him to do. But it seems crazy for the law to forbid Tim from walking his bicycle on the sidewalk when he is in this situation.

This result seemed to the moral philosopher like a perverse joke on bike-riders. He thought he should do something to remedy the situation. So he went to an open meeting of the city council. He argued that the council members should change the law so that 'legally required' took wide scope over the whole conditionals in (Sidewalk) and (Street). This was the only way he could see to relieve future Tims from being legally required to be silly and inefficient. He did not get very far.

IV. THE LESSONS

I shall focus for a moment on Tim and the moral philosopher. Since both of them are on the sidewalk, (Sidewalk) applies to both of them. But there is a crucial difference between Tim and the moral philosopher when it comes to (Street): at the moment t when Tim starts riding his bicycle, (Street) *applies* to Tim but does *not* apply to the moral philosopher. Moreover, as soon as Tim makes it the case that (Street) applies to him, he comes to violate (Sidewalk).

Suppose Tim notices he is violating the law as he rides down the sidewalk, and he decides that he would prefer to take part in the conversation on the sidewalk rather than get home faster by riding in the street. So he dismounts and walks his bike on the sidewalk. He thus fails to do something that (Street) required of him at t , *viz* to be in the street. But here is the key point: when he gets off his bike, he makes it the case that (Street) *no longer applies to him*. To give it a name, he *exits* from (Street).

Annie's case has the same structure. Both (I+NS) and (B-NS) apply to Annie when she believes that there is conclusive reason to attend the lecture and believes that she lacks sufficient reason to believe that there is conclusive reason to attend the lecture. Brunero's point (and it is a good one) is that it does not seem irrational for Annie to merely exit from (I+NS) by complying with (B-NS), *i.e.*, to comply with (B-NS) by dropping her belief and *not* forming the intention to go. Brunero assumes, and his argument crucially rests on this assumption, that when Annie does this she *violates* (I+NS). After all, she would only be irrational if she violates a requirement of rationality. By parity of reasoning, he is committed to saying that when Tim dismounts and walks his bike on the sidewalk he is *violating* (Street) by merely exiting.

I have isolated a crucial assumption of Brunero's argument, namely, that by exiting from a narrow-scope conditional requirement one is violating that requirement.

My suggestion to the narrow-scooper is to reject this assumption, and say that one does not violate a conditional requirement when one exits. One only violates the requirement when the antecedent is true but the consequent is false. Thus Annie only violates (I+NS) when she believes that there is conclusive reason to attend the lecture but does not intend to attend the lecture. Similarly, Tim only violates (Street) when he is riding his bicycle somewhere other than in the street.

This is not the only thing narrow-scoopers should say. They should hold two auxiliary commitments. First, they should hold that (I+NS) *permits* exiting. That is, (I+NS) does not forbid exiting. Narrow-scoopers should hold that one does something forbidden only when one violates a requirement. When this is combined with the innocuous claim that everything that is not forbidden is permitted, it follows that all the non-violation states are permitted. Narrow-scoopers must think this in order to get out of Brunero's objection. For they need to be able to say that Annie is rationally permitted to merely exit from (I+NS). This does not mean that narrow-scoopers should think that (I+NS) *entails* that one is all-things-considered permitted to exit. It just means that narrow-scoopers should think that (I+NS) does not settle whether exiting is forbidden. An upshot of this is that whether exiting is forbidden by rationality will be determined by *other requirements*. As I shall show in the next section, this is a virtue of my narrow-scope view.

Secondly, narrow-scoopers should not say that Annie *complies* with (I+NS) when she exits. If they were to say this, then it would be hard to tell the difference between (I+NS) and a wide-scope version of the same requirement (I+WS). This is because (I+NS) and (I+WS) would not differ in terms of violation or compliance. Thus narrow-scoopers should insist that exiting is distinct from both violation and compliance. Thus not only can one violate and comply with conditional requirements, one can exit from them as well.⁵

This is not implausible, as is shown by

Promise. For any ϕ that is antecedently reasonable, if *A* promises *B* that *A* will ϕ and *B* has not released *A* from the promise, then *A* is required to ϕ .⁶

Suppose you agree with the claim that exiting is not violating. The question is whether exiting is always complying. Suppose on Tuesday I promise to meet you for lunch on Wednesday. Later in the day I find out that my mother is in hospital and I need to go to see her. This will force me to miss lunch tomorrow. So I call you up and ask you if it is OK for me not to come. You say that it is perfectly fine, and thus release me from the promise. Since I have been released, (Promise) no longer applies to me. Moreover, I made it the case that it no longer applies to me: I caused you to release me. I thus exited from (Promise). Intuitively, though, I have not *complied* with

⁵ One can exit from wide-scope requirements as well. One exits from a requirement iff one makes it the case that the requirement does not apply to oneself. Thus one could exit from a wide-scope version of (I+) or (B-) by making it the case that one cannot have beliefs and intentions, for example, by killing oneself. Do wide-scoopers really want to say that one violates a very large number of requirements when one kills oneself? That would certainly be a new way to argue that suicide is necessarily irrational!

⁶ See M. Schroeder, 'The Scope of Instrumental Reason', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18 (2004), pp. 337–64, who uses a similar example to make the same point.

(Promise). I got out of (Promise). This is why it makes sense to say that you have released me from the obligation. This intuition supports the thought that exiting is distinct from compliance.

To recapitulate, if narrow-scopers reject Brunero's assumption that exiting from a requirement is violating a requirement, then they can escape the force of his objection. This is because rejecting the assumption allows them to say that (I+NS) permits exiting. Thus Annie is not necessarily doing something rationally forbidden by giving up her belief. Moreover, this move has independent merits: it gives a natural account of what is going on in cases like Tim's. It also provides a natural interpretation of requirements like (Promise).

V. THE TWO VIEWS

Brunero offers a diagnosis of what is wrong with narrow-scoping. This diagnosis leads him to a positive view. I think it will be illustrative to compare Brunero's positive view with my narrow-scooper's view. First, an explication of the diagnosis and positive view.

Brunero uses an analogy to help to explain his diagnosis. He likens the narrow-scooper's mistake to a mistake which holists about reasons often charge non-holists with making.⁷ Holists about reasons maintain that 'what is a reason in one case may be no reason in another, or even a reason on the other side' (Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, p. 73). Non-holists, as you might expect, hold that any feature that is a reason in one case is a reason in all cases.

Holists generally argue for their position by means of examples. A well worn one is this epistemic example offered by Dancy (p. 74). Suppose the wall in front of me appears red. Usually the fact that it appears red is a reason to believe that it is red. But I have just taken a pill that makes blue things appear red to me. In this case, it seems that the fact that it appears red is actually a reason to believe it is blue. Examples like this are supposed to lend weight to the thought that any reason-giving feature can fluctuate between contexts in the same way as the fact that the wall appears red to me can fluctuate between contexts. The main point is that holists maintain that it is a mistake to think that a certain feature always plays the same reason-giving role in all contexts.

Brunero thinks that the narrow-scooper makes a similar mistake. This is because the narrow-scooper thinks that having certain attitudes always makes it the case that one is rationally required to do certain things. For example, those who think (I+NS) is true think that a requirement to intend to ϕ is generated every time one believes

⁷ Brunero actually puts the diagnosis slightly differently. He says that moral particularists who are holists make this move against moral generalists. It is true that some particularists have done this, but now everyone in the debate recognizes that holism does not necessarily cause problems for generalism. See esp. S. McKeever and M. Ridge, *Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal* (Oxford UP, 2006); P. Väyrynen, 'Moral Generalism: Enjoy in Moderation', *Ethics*, 116 (2006), pp. 707–41; J. Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (Oxford UP, 2004). It does not really matter for the analogy if the targets of the complaint are particularists or simply non-holists. I put it my way just for the sake of accuracy.

that one has conclusive reason to ϕ . Brunero thinks his case shows that this is false. He holds that in Annie's case a requirement to intend to attend the lecture is not generated by Annie's belief that there is conclusive reason to attend it.

This leads to Brunero's positive view. He holds that the wide-scope versions of (I+) and (B-) are true. This is what explains why one is necessarily irrational when one is incoherent. However, having the antecedent attitudes does not always generate a further narrow-scope requirement to make the consequent true. Sometimes it does; sometimes it does not. Annie's case is a case where having the belief that there is conclusive reason to attend the lecture is, according to Brunero, not a case where a requirement to intend to attend the lecture is generated. This is because of her belief that there is not sufficient reason to believe that there is conclusive reason to attend. Thus, for Brunero, the agent's other attitudes determine whether having certain attitudes gives rise to a narrow-scope requirement.

My narrow-scopers, on the other hand, think that having the antecedent attitudes does always ground a requirement to make the consequent true. However, they *also* think that this is compatible with the permissibility of exiting. Whether exiting is rationally permissible all-things-considered is determined by other requirements, and hence by the agent's other attitudes. Thus both Brunero and my narrow-scopers agree that whether it is permissible for Annie to merely exit is determined by all of her attitudes.

There is thus nothing to prevent my narrow-scopers' view and Brunero's view from agreeing about when exiting is all-things-considered permitted. Whether the two views agree about this will be determined by whether my narrow-scopers agree with Brunero on what effects one's other attitudes have on the permissibility of exiting.⁸ This leaves the question of how to decide between the two views.

Despite potential agreement about what is rationally permitted and forbidden, there are important differences between the two. Although it is impossible to decide which view is correct here, or even to give the matter a preliminary investigation, I think it will be helpful for future research to catalogue two of the differences.

First, there are large differences in application.⁹ This is because Brunero's wide-scope requirements apply to many more people than the narrow-scope requirements. In fact, Brunero's wide-scope requirements require *everyone* to do a lot. Everyone is required to make all possible instantiations of the wide-scope requirements true. Thus I am always rationally required to [intend to hop up and down on my left foot, if I believe that there is conclusive reason to hop up and down on my left foot]. Moreover, I am *complying* with that requirement right now, since I do not believe I have decisive reason to hop up and down on my left foot. The narrow-scope requirements are not like this. For them to apply to you, you actually have to have specific attitudes. I would have to believe that I have conclusive reason to hop up and down on my left foot in order to be required by (I+NS) to do anything. Narrow-

⁸ That is how my narrow-scoper describes the situation. Brunero would describe it differently. For him the issue is how one's other attitudes affect whether having certain attitudes grounds narrow-scope requirements.

⁹ Perhaps the best discussion of this issue is to be found in Schroeder, 'The Scope of Instrumental Reason'.

scopers do not think I am complying with the true reading of (I+) by not believing something silly, just as narrow-scopers about (Street) do not think the moral philosopher is complying with (Street) by not owning a bicycle. Narrow-scopers hold, not without plausibility, that the requirements simply do not apply to me and the moral philosopher respectively.

The difference in application points to the main difference between the two views. My narrow-scopers' view, unlike Brunero's, posits that there is a difference between exiting and complying. Narrow-scopers hold that Annie is *exiting from* the true (I+) requirement when she gives up her belief, whereas Brunero holds that she is *complying with* the true (I+) requirement when she gives up her belief. It is not clear what the cash value is of drawing a general distinction between exiting and compliance. What is clear is that at least in some cases it is intuitive that there is a difference between complying and exiting. The case of promising is one; so is Tim's case (at least, I think so). If there is a difference in those cases, then it is hard to claim that there is no difference in the rationality cases. This puts pressure on wide-scopers. It seems that they have to make some *prima facie* implausible claims about some cases in order to maintain the proper parity across cases. Whether this can be borne out is a task for another day.

VI. CONCLUSION

The main aim of this paper is to show how narrow-scopers about rationality can resist John Brunero's objection, which seeks to provide a counter-example to the narrow-scope view. In Brunero's case, Annie is required by (I+NS) to intend to attend a lecture and is required by (B-NS) to drop her belief that there is conclusive reason to attend the lecture. (B-NS) thus requires Annie to exit from (I+NS). Brunero claims that narrow-scopers are committed to saying that Annie has violated a requirement of rationality if she drops her belief and does not form an intention to attend the lecture. His argument depends on the claim that one is necessarily violating a requirement when one exits from a requirement.

My suggestion to narrow-scopers is to reject this claim. One does not necessarily violate a requirement when one exits from a requirement. When narrow-scopers combine the rejection of Brunero's assumption with the auxiliary assumption that the only states forbidden by a requirement are the states one brings about when one violates the requirement, they can escape from Brunero's objection. Annie is not violating (I+NS) when she exits by giving up her belief. Moreover, since exiting is not forbidden by (I+NS), Annie is not doing something rationally forbidden when she gives up her belief but does not form the intention.¹⁰

Princeton University

¹⁰ Special thanks to John Brunero, Richard Chappell, Gideon Rosen, Mark Schroeder, Whitney Schwab, Michael Smith, Jonathan Way, Jack Woods and an anonymous referee.