

*The Normativity of Rationality*, by Benjamin Kiesewetter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 314.

1.

Do we always have reason to do what's rational? If being rational is just a matter of responding correctly to reasons, as a traditional view has it, then, trivially, yes. However, many philosophers now reject the traditional view. There are at least two sources of pressure for doing so. One source is the apparent existence of forms of irrationality that are purely *structural*. For instance, when we are practically akratic (failing to intend to do what we believe we ought to do), means-end incoherent (failing to intend what we believe to be a necessary means to an intended end), doxastically akratic (failing to believe propositions for which we believe we have sufficient evidence), or modus ponens incoherent (failing to believe propositions which follow by modus ponens from propositions we already believe), we seem to be irrational just in virtue of the *combinations* of attitudes we hold, irrespective of whether any of the *individual* attitudes involved is one we ought to hold or have reasons for. (For convenience, I use 'attitudes' to include absences of attitudes; note also that, for at least some of the combinations mentioned, certain further conditions, discussed on pp. 191-2, 255 of the work under review, must be met before irrationality is guaranteed.) The phenomenon of structural irrationality has led some philosophers to suppose that rationality, or an important part of it, is essentially concerned with coherence rather than with responding to reasons (Broome 1999, 2013; Worsnip 2018). According to these philosophers, there are structural requirements of rationality which forbid incoherent combinations of attitudes, and which must be sharply distinguished from any requirements or reasons to hold or not hold individual attitudes.

A second source of pressure for rejection of the traditional, reason-based conception of rationality lies in recent theorising about reasons. It is now widely held that reasons are objective, typically mind-independent facts, and many philosophers make the further claim that reasons need not be epistemically accessible to the agent whose reasons they are (Broome 2007a; see also, e.g., Sobel 2001, Schroeder 2007). For instance, if some food contains salmonella but you have no evidence for this, then it seems that there is a reason for you not to eat it, though it might nonetheless be rational for you to eat it. Conversely, if you mistakenly believe that the food contains salmonella, it seems irrational for you to eat it, even though there

may be no reason not to. Thus, responding to your reasons and doing what's rational are not the same thing, or so it seems.

In his tremendous book *The Normativity of Rationality*, Benjamin Kiesewetter defends a novel version of the traditional view that rationality is a matter of responding correctly to reasons. Rationality is not even in part, he claims, concerned with coherence as such. Its requirements are not structural requirements, but requirements of reasons bearing on individual attitudes. While incoherent combinations of attitudes do (typically) entail irrationality, this is because they entail that the agent has failed to respond correctly to reasons bearing on an individual attitude or action, not because the incoherent combination is itself forbidden by rationality. The reasons in question are those that are epistemically accessible to the agent—but these, Kiesewetter further argues, are all the reasons there are. Kiesewetter's account thus vindicates the normativity of rationality: we always have reason, and indeed decisive overall reason, to do what's rational.

Kiesewetter's case for the reasons-based conception of rationality is thorough, powerful, sensible and clear. Along the way there are penetrating discussions of very many issues in the theory of rationality and reasons. Even when the issues will be familiar to readers of the recent literature, Kiesewetter's treatment invariably illuminates them in fresh ways.

In what follows I will briefly summarise the book, before asking whether Kiesewetter's approach can vindicate certain widely held claims about rationality.

2.

Kiesewetter begins his case (Ch. 2) by directly arguing for the normativity of rationality. Failure to be rational, he claims, is always criticisable, and the kind of criticism in question ('personal criticism') is one whose correctness entails that the agent had decisive reason not to do what she did. This argument does not presuppose any particular view of what rationality consists in, but its conclusion puts serious pressure on the coherence-based conception, as Kiesewetter goes on to show. That's because the putative structural requirements of rationality—requirements to avoid incoherent combinations of attitudes—seem not to be normative. For one thing, such requirements, if normative, would threaten to allow 'detachment' of implausible normative consequences (Ch. 4). This is a widely recognised problem for so-called 'narrow-scope' structural requirements, such as a requirement to intend to  $\phi$  which applies to you if you believe you ought to  $\phi$  (however senseless or wicked  $\phi$ -ing would in fact be). Kiesewetter argues that a version of it also applies to 'wide-scope' requirements, such as a requirement to (intend to  $\phi$  if you believe you ought to  $\phi$ ). A further reason to doubt that there are normative structural requirements of rationality, familiar from

Kolodny (2005), is simply that there seems to be no good answer to the question why we should always comply with them. This concern is not met, Kieseewetter convincingly argues, by claiming that agents violating these supposed requirements will be failing to conform to reasons they *take* themselves to have, or *would* have if their beliefs were true (Ch. 5).

Some proponents of structural requirements of rationality accept that they are not normative. But, Kieseewetter argues, it is obscure what it means to posit rational requirements we need have no reason to comply with. And the positing of such requirements, whether narrow- or wide-scope, leads to further difficulties independently of whether they are supposed to be normative (Ch. 6).

The second half of the book presents and defends Kieseewetter's positive account of rationality and reasons. On this account, rationality consists in responding correctly to *available* reasons, where an agent's available reasons are given by her evidence (Ch. 7). Available reasons are, furthermore, the only reasons there are, in the sense that only epistemically accessible facts are relevant to what you ought, in the deliberative sense, to do (Ch. 8). This 'perspectivist' claim about reasons and Kieseewetter's account of rationality are mutually independent, but together they make for a satisfyingly unified picture. Kieseewetter develops a sophisticated 'news-sensitive' version of perspectivism in order to accommodate the fact that deliberation can often progress through the acquisition of *new* evidence, such as in advice.

If rationality consists in responding to available reasons (hereafter: 'reasons'), and we need have no reason to avoid incoherence, then why are incoherent agents irrational? Kieseewetter's answer is that such agents are guaranteed to violate a requirement of reasons bearing on an individual attitude or action. For instance, a practically akratic agent is guaranteed to either hold a belief she is required not to hold (if her evidence fails to support  $\phi$ -ing) or to fail to hold an intention she is required to hold (if her evidence supports  $\phi$ -ing) (Ch. 9). The most difficult case here is means-end incoherence, because it is clear that your reasons might individually permit each of the attitudes that together make for a means-end incoherent combination (since both end and means might be permitted but not required). Kieseewetter's solution is based on the claim that a means-end incoherent agent with sufficient evidence for her means-end belief typically has decisive reason to *decide between* taking the means and foregoing the end (Ch. 10). This reason is one of economy: by intending the end but not the means the agent risks engaging in 'pointless activity' (p. 283), such as taking other, ineffective means towards the end, and deliberating unnecessarily.

3.

It is an attractive and carefully worked out picture. But can it capture everything we might want to say about rationality? Many philosophers accept *internalism* about rationality: the claim that facts about whether an agent is rational supervene on her non-factive mental states. At first glance this looks incompatible with Kieseewetter's account: he holds that rationality is a matter of responding correctly to reasons, that reasons are given by evidence, and that an agent's evidence does not supervene on her non-factive mental states (since evidence is factive, and knowing that p is sufficient for having p as part of your evidence). However, he argues that the incompatibility is merely apparent. That's because it can be claimed that, even though an agent's evidence does not supervene on her non-factive mental states, the facts about which attitudes are *required* by her evidence do so supervene. For the case of belief, this 'backup view' is stated as follows:

If A's total phenomenal state supports p, and p would—if true—be an available reason for (or against) believing q, then A's appearances provide an equally strong available reason for (or against) believing q (p. 173).

A's total phenomenal state is that part of A's evidence comprising, roughly, the totality of A's appearances: perceptual, introspective, intellectual, and so on. Any proposition that is part of A's evidence, Kieseewetter claims, is supported by A's appearances (*ibid.*). Thus, if p is part of your evidence and supports q, then your internal twin who is deceived about whether p nonetheless has 'backup' evidence, given by how things appear to her, that supports both p and q.

The term 'equally strong' in the statement of the backup view is crucial. It needs to be true not only that your deceived twin has reasons for the same beliefs you have reasons for, but that these reasons are of the same strength as your reasons. Otherwise, it might be that you have decisive reason for a certain belief, and yet your twin does not—and so, given Kieseewetter's account, rationality might require something different of you than of your twin, contrary to internalism.

This makes the backup view highly contestable. Suppose the strength of support your evidence gives for believing a proposition is proportional to the probability of that proposition conditional on your evidence (cp. pp. 112, 256-7). Now consider a total phenomenal state or body of evidence E, that supports p. And suppose p, if true, would be a reason for believing q. The probability of q on E might nonetheless be lower than the probability of q on the union of E and p. For example, the probability that there's something on the table conditional on a body

of evidence including the fact that there's a glass on the table is 1, but the probability that there's something on the table conditional on a body of evidence including only the fact that it looks as if there's a glass on the table is presumably somewhat lower than that. So, on such a view of evidential support, it should be possible for internal twins to differ with respect to whether their evidence gives decisive reason for believing a certain proposition. Similar points apply regarding reasons for intention, we might add: the fact that Jack is in need plausibly provides a stronger reason to intend to help him than does the fact that it looks as if Jack is in need.

The backup view also seems an awkward fit with Kieseewetter's other commitments. For it seems to make his externalism about reasons idle, in a certain way. Though there are reasons that don't supervene on the agent's non-factive mental states, e.g. known contingent external facts, these reasons make no difference to which attitudes rationality or reasons require of that agent. You and your internal twin cannot differ in respect of whether your attitudes are rational or comply with your reasons. We might wonder whether facts that can make no difference to what your reasons require of you can count as genuine reasons (Kieseewetter makes a related point in a different context on p. 199). We might thus wonder how this view differs substantively from the view that all reasons are given by or supervene on internal facts. Yet Kieseewetter is clearly opposed to such an internalist view about reasons (pp. 6-8, 168-9). Rightly so, we might think, since external facts often seem to play the paradigmatic roles of reasons—being appropriate for use in deliberation, bearing on what we ought to do, and so on. To be fair, Kieseewetter is cautious about endorsing the backup view outright (pp. 174, 180). As he notes, there is an alternative way he could respond to the problem: he could reject internalism about rationality (p. 170). He is reluctant to do this, saying there are 'strong arguments' (ibid.) for internalism. However, he specifically mentions only one such argument, due to Huemer (2006). It depends on the assumption that 'it is irrational to believe  $p$  and believe  $\neg q$  if at the same time  $p$  and  $q$  appear to you exactly alike in every epistemically relevant respect' (pp. 170-1). I think this assumption will seem more compelling to those already committed either to internalism about rationality, or to structural requirements of rationality, than to those who are dubious or sceptical about both.

A simpler argument might appeal to intuitions to the effect that your deceived (e.g. envatted) internal twin is no less rational than you are in, say, believing that there's something on the table; she is a victim of illusion, not a perpetrator of irrationality. But it's not obvious that such intuitions establish internalism. At any rate, it seems to me that, given that Kieseewetter regards rational requirements as nothing other than requirements of reasons, and rejects any purely

internal *coherence* requirements of rationality, it may be more natural for him to reject internalism about rationality than to endorse the backup view.

4.

The second issue I want to raise concerns the plausible idea, which Kieseewetter accepts (pp. 235, 242), that being incoherent makes you irrational. (By ‘incoherent’ here and hereafter I refer to irrational incoherence of one of the paradigmatic sorts mentioned at the beginning of this review, unless otherwise indicated). As he points out (pp. 3, 166), not all failures to respond to reasons are naturally described as irrational. Sometimes, for instance, it’s very hard to tell what beliefs a body of evidence supports, and an agent may fail to form a belief for which her evidence in fact provides decisive reason, despite careful attention to the matter. Such an agent may be less than fully rational, without meriting criticism as irrational. At any rate, she arguably needn’t be making the same *sort* of mistake as the incoherent agent.

This is a *prima facie* problem for any attempt to explain the irrationality of incoherence in terms of failure to respond to reasons. Part of Kieseewetter’s proposed solution is to claim that what’s characteristic of incoherence, and what makes it constitute irrationality, is that the attitudes involved *guarantee* a failure to respond to reasons—a claim he spends much of his final two chapters substantiating. Having attitudes that guarantee a violation of decisive reasons, he claims, ‘can give rise to a form of criticism that does not depend on a substantive normative assessment of the reasons that the agent has for or against a particular attitude’, namely criticism ‘as irrational’ (p. 236).

One question is how this proposal fits with the backup view, and with the more general claim that facts about which attitudes your reasons require of you supervene on your non-factive mental states. This claim entails that *any* violation of decisive reasons for or against an attitude supervenes on your mental states. Perhaps not all the mental states involved need be attitudes. But, if combining attitudes so as to guarantee a violation of reasons is irrational, it’s not obvious why combining attitudes so as to guarantee a violation of reasons given your other mental states shouldn’t also be irrational.

This worry could be avoided by jettisoning the backup view, as I already recommended. However, there would still be a further concern: it does not seem true that having attitudes that guarantee a violation of reasons is necessarily irrational in the way that incoherence typically is. After all, just as evidence can support a proposition in a highly unobvious way, so your attitudes can guarantee a violation of reasons in a highly unobvious way. Suppose you hold beliefs such that, if there is sufficient evidence for them, this entails that you ought to  $\phi$ , but this entailment is very obscure and you don’t intend to  $\phi$ . It’s not clear that this would make

you irrational in the manner of the incoherent agent—or any more so than the agent who fails to believe a proposition that is decisively but obscurely supported by her evidence.

Kiesewetter could qualify his claim and say that when it is *obvious* that your attitudes guarantee a violation of reasons, this constitutes irrationality of the relevant sort. However, as he points out (p. 237) and as his careful discussion demonstrates, even if incoherent combinations guarantee such a violation, that they do so is not obvious (see also Way forthcoming).

Finally, it seems to me that Kiesewetter's strategy to explain the irrationality of incoherence risks being in tension with elements of his case against rational requirements of coherence. He suggests that we can appropriately criticise someone as irrational on the basis of a combination of attitudes they hold, without identifying any individual attitude as faulty. Mustn't the combination itself therefore be the *object* of the criticism—what we are criticizing the agent *for*? And if appropriate criticism is tied to violation of decisive reasons, as Kiesewetter claims, mustn't these reasons bear on the object of the criticism? In fact Kiesewetter stops short of the claim that the object of criticism must be identical to what the implied decisive reasons bear on (p. 30), but he nonetheless seems to regard this claim as plausible, as it surely is.

In response, Kiesewetter may deny that, strictly speaking, agents can be appropriately criticised as irrational for incoherent combinations as such. After all, on his account, the only rational requirements necessarily violated by incoherent agents are requirements to respond to reasons bearing on individual attitudes or actions. Nonetheless, it's still true that incoherent agents 'are irrational at least partly *because* they are incoherent' (p. 238). Incoherence makes the entailed violation of a rational requirement constitute irrationality, without itself constituting the violation of some further, structural requirement of rationality.

Is this a stable position? In assessing it we must bear in mind the distinction between two senses of 'requirement': the 'property sense' and the 'code sense' (p. 19; the distinction is due to Broome 2007b). A requirement of rationality in the property sense is just a necessary condition for being rational. In this sense, there are structural requirements of rationality: being incoherent in certain ways entails not being rational. But this is a very weak claim: being alive is a requirement of rationality in this sense. By contrast, a requirement of rationality in the code sense, the sense in which I have been using the term thus far, is a rule or prescription issued by rationality, that we can satisfy or violate. This is the sense in which philosophers disagree over whether there are structural requirements of rationality.

On Kiesewetter's account, avoiding incoherence is not merely necessary for being rational. Incoherence *makes* an agent *irrational*. Coherence thus satisfies a central condition on rational requirements in the code sense: failure to be coherent *explains why* agents in certain states are irrational (pp. 19, 42). While this doesn't yet entail that there are rational requirements of

coherence in the code sense, it does suggest that coherence has more significance for rationality than merely being a necessary condition for it. As we might put it: if rationality doesn't call on us to avoid incoherent combinations of attitudes, why should holding these combinations make the difference between being irrational and not?

If there is indeed a tension here, then perhaps the solution is to back off from the idea that incoherence makes us irrational. Incoherence does, perhaps, entail a failure to respond to reasons, and thus a failure to be fully rational. It may also often, or characteristically, be accompanied by a failure to respond to a second-order reason to reassess one's attitudes, as well as a failure to manifest a valuable disposition (pp. 245-6, 292-3). It may thus be correlated with certain failures and shortcomings, including rational ones, and these may often be flagrant enough to merit the epithet 'irrational'. But perhaps the generalisation that incoherent agents are irrational (partly) because they are incoherent must be given up.

This may seem a radical move. But Kieseewetter is already committed to the prima facie surprising claim that there is no rational requirement to avoid, for instance, akrasia, or even (though he doesn't talk about it) having contradictory beliefs. Moreover, he is willing to allow that, strictly, incoherence does not always entail irrationality: in certain cases means-end incoherence (pp. 285-7) and perhaps even doxastic akrasia (p. 254) can be rational. Thus, it seems in the spirit of his approach to simply deny that incoherence has any straightforward significance for an agent's rationality.

5.

I've suggested that Kieseewetter's approach may ultimately put pressure on him to reject internalism about rationality, and that it may demand an even more radical expunction of the notion of coherence from the theory of rationality than he sometimes seems to embrace. If so, some may find these implications unpalatable. Others may welcome them. What's clear is that anyone working on rationality and reasons will have to take into account Kieseewetter's formidable arguments; and anyone interested in the topic will enjoy and learn a great deal from this book.\*

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