

Process-Oriented Rationality

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The project of my dissertation is to develop and defend a process-oriented approach to rationality. On the prevailing picture of rationality in the literature, the norms that govern rational behavior are *state-oriented* - they are rules that tell us what attitudes or combinations of attitudes, like beliefs or intentions - that is, what mental states - are rationally required or allowed (for instance, they tell us that believing contradictions is rationally prohibited). This picture is my primary target - I argue that we should reject it in favor of a view that understands rationality as *process-oriented* - that is, that takes rational requirements as rules governing the way mental processes unfold over time, rather than policing combinations of attitudes.

This dissertation has five chapters. Each, except the last, is designed to stand more or less on its own. As a whole, it is organized as a progressive march away from a purely state-oriented model of rationality to a purely process-oriented one, in a way intended to allow the reader to get off the boat at any point, rejecting the arguments in later chapters without giving up the lessons from earlier chapters. There will be a number of recurrent themes, but one in particular is worth flagging here. Again and again, we will see that a state-oriented picture of rationality struggles to provide rational norms that are properly sensitive to the ways human agents are *cognitively limited* - by constraints to our memory, our ability to handle large amounts of information, and our finite processing speed. For this reason, this dissertation might well be subtitled “Rationality for Dummies.”

In the first chapter, I consider the recent case given by Brian Hedden for the claim that all rational norms are synchronic (and therefore not process-oriented), on the grounds that diachronic norms are inconsistent with internalism about rationality and that they cannot account for the irrelevance of facts

about identity to what it is rational for us to believe. I show that Hedden's arguments have force only against the background of the state-oriented picture, where all rational norms are norms on attitudes like belief. A view on which the objects of rational concern are processes is immune to his critique. In addition, I provide a positive case that provided that it is rational to take any time at all to form beliefs after acquiring evidence, at least *some* norms must be diachronic. If this is as far as the reader gets before getting off the boat, they will have learned at least that there are diachronic norms, that there are advantages to understanding them as process-oriented norms, and therefore that the near-complete neglect of such norms in the literature leaves a gap in our understanding of rationality.

Having made room for some process norms, in the next two chapters I consider two active debates in the rationality of belief - the debate over *conservatism*, the view that the fact that one already believes something can make it rational to keep believing it, and *permissivism*, the view that agents with the same evidence can rationally disagree. I argue that these positions are attractive, but that the views representing them in the literature are vulnerable to powerful objections. If, however, we reject widely assumed state-oriented versions of requirements capturing our responsiveness to our reasons, in favor of process-oriented versions of these requirements, the door opens to distinctive dynamic versions of conservatism and permissivism which are immune to the problems for traditional views and have independent plausibility. In developing the dynamic solution, I begin to give a positive sketch of what plausible dynamic norms might be and how they interact. If the reader gets at least this far before balking, they will have learned not only that there are at least some process-oriented norms, but that accepting certain norms of this kind as *replacements* for commonly endorsed state-oriented norms provides us a novel and attractive resolution of important contemporary disputes.

In Chapter Four, I argue directly against the state-oriented picture more broadly. In particular, I argue, state-oriented principles are unable to give a good account of the phenomenon of *rational delay* - how it can be rational for finite, cognitively limited agents like us to take time to update our attitudes. I

begin by showing how *synchronic* state-oriented norms relating our attitudes are inconsistent with rational delay. Then, I show how revised norms that are *diachronic* but still state-oriented must, in order to avoid the objection, be formulated in a way that suggests they are best understood as the mere shadows of a system of norms on processes. I then show how considering a process-oriented approach to rational delay gives us a way to capture the spirit of motivations on both sides of the dispute over wide and narrow scope. If the reader is still with me, they will have accepted that state-oriented norms do not capture the conditions of rational failure.

In the final chapter, I consider a retreat position for the defender of state-oriented principles, one on which those principles are understood not directly as what I have called rational norms, but rather are taken to have a more fundamental, and explanatory relation to rational norms on processes, for instance, by serving as a system of ideals to be approximated. I argue that many of the most common state-oriented principles cannot plausibly be understood to have this role, and that this kind of approach has difficulty distinguishing this role from one that might be played by fully objective conditions like truth. A reader still nodding after this chapter will have been convinced that there is no easy way to reinterpret what a system of state-oriented principles is supposed to describe which preserves much of what their defenders have said about them and still maintains a central role in explaining rationality.

By the end, many unanswered questions will remain. The positive sketch I will have provided of a system of process norms will be only the barest outline of a complete picture, which will have to be informed by what the cognitive sciences may have to say about the the design of human cognitive processes. I will not have defended the norms I propose against other candidates in the process-oriented family. I will have said next to nothing about the connection between rationality, understood in the process-oriented way, and other core normative concepts like “knowledge”, “ought”, “reasons”, or “good”.

But anyone who is moved to try and fill these gaps has already steered the philosophical conversation about rationality far from where it is today, and if I do not succeed in convincing the reader

that the purely process-oriented view is correct, there is value in exploring the work that process norms can do and whether the attention of epistemologists and theorists of practical reason might be pulled a little further in their direction.