

Degrees of Agential Substantive (Ir)Rationality

Crystal Seet, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Consider the following case:

Talia intends to count the number of blades of grass in her garden, even though doing so brings her no great pleasure. Since counting the blades of grass in her garden brings Talia no great pleasure, serves no other worthwhile purpose, and comes with a significant opportunity cost, Talia lacks sufficient reason to count the number of blades of grass in her garden. Intending to do so is thus substantively irrational. ...Though Talia knows that, in order to complete the count, she must keep track of how many blades she has counted so far, she can't be bothered to keep track and so doesn't intend to. [This] seems to involve Talia in a second kind of irrationality. [The] problem isn't that she has strong reason to keep track of the number of blades of grass she's counted, but fails to intend to do so. ...Rather, the mistake is the distinctive, structural one of failing to intend the means to her ends.¹

This passage illustrates the distinction between substantive and structural rationality. Roughly, substantive rationality is about how well one responds to one's reasons, while structural rationality is about how coherent one is with regards to one's attitudes. Contrast Talia with her sister, Tania:

Tania also intends to count the number of blades of grass in her garden, [but] she intends to keep track of her progress. Tania is more structurally rational than Talia since she exhibits means-end coherence. But she is, if anything, less substantively rational than Talia, since she has two intentions that she lacks adequate reason for whereas Talia only has one.²

This interpretation of the case—that Tania is more substantively irrational than Talia—exemplifies the:

Counting Intuition: If an agent S holds a propositional attitude p that goes against S 's reasons, and S infers from p to a further attitude q that also goes against S 's reasons, then, all else equal, holding q makes S more substantively irrational.

Tania, by some practical inference, comes to have an additional intention unsupported by her reasons compared to Talia, so, according to the Counting Intuition, she is more substantively irrational than Talia.

1. Alex Worsnip (2021), *Fitting Things Together: Coherence and the Demands of Structural Rationality* (Oxford University Press), 6.

2. Worsnip, 6.

I argue that the Counting Intuition is false. Insofar as our objects of evaluation are agents—call this *agential* rationality—I propose that degrees of agential substantive rationality should be determined not by one’s attitudes that do not conform to one’s reasons, but by the quality of one’s substantive reasoning that generated those attitudes. On this view, agents are never more substantively irrational simply in virtue of holding an additional attitude that fails to conform to their reasons.

Why might some find the Counting Intuition plausible in the first place? I start by examining how the Counting Intuition might be theoretically supported. I consider what I’ll call a *Balancing View* of agential substantive rationality. Philosophers frequently talk about rationality in terms of one’s *balance of reasons*.³ Agents have (normative) reasons for or against ϕ -ing, each with their assigned weights, and we can weigh one’s reasons for ϕ -ing on the one hand, and one’s reasons against ϕ -ing on the other. To evaluate an agent’s substantive rationality, we look at how closely an agent’s decisions match their balance of reasons.

The Balancing View: *S*’s degree of substantive irrationality is determined by the total weight of reasons against each of *S*’s attitudes.

The Balancing View looks at the weight of reasons against each attitude, attitude by attitude. Let’s start with Talia’s and Tania’s initial intention to count blades of grass. Talia and Tania have identical reasons against counting blades of grass, so they have the same total weight of reasons against their intention to count blades of grass. Talia and Tania are even so far. The same reasons against counting blades of grass also oppose keeping track of their progress. Tania intends to keep track of her progress, while Talia lacks such an intention. Tania has non-zero weight of reasons against her subsequent intention to keep track of her progress while Talia does not. Finally, let’s combine these weights across attitudes for each agent. The combination of the total weight of reasons against each of Tania’s attitudes outweighs the combination of the total weight of reasons against each of Talia’s, so Tania is more substantively irrational than Talia on the Balancing View.

Here’s a counterexample to the Balancing View. Amy and Bob are two executives in a meeting about their company’s marketing decisions. They’ve been presented with market research that indicates that advertising campaign *A* would be more efficient than campaign *B*. They agree on campaign *A* without much discussion. While Amy made her decision based on the evidence presented by their market research team, Bob made the same decision simply because the colour scheme of the advertisements for campaign *A* contains his favourite colours.

On the Balancing View, Amy and Bob are equally substantively irrational since they have the same reasons available to them and they arrive at the same decision.⁴ However, Bob is intuitively more substantively irrational than Amy; Bob’s process of reasoning seems to have gone awry whereas Amy’s

3. See Bratman (1987, 2009), Broome (1999, 2013), Kieseewetter (2017), Lord (2018), Scanlon (1998, 2014), Schroeder (2021).

4. To resolve any lingering worries about this case, we can further stipulate that Bob and Amy have the same taste in colours, and that Bob did not pay attention to whether those colours that happen to be his favourite have been shown to be effective in advertisements.

has not. This suggests that an important feature of agential substantive rationality is the quality of one's reasoning. The Balancing View overlooks this feature by construing agential substantive rationality solely in terms of agents' attitudes and balance reasons. We've identified a desideratum for theories of agential substantive rationality: a plausible theory of agential substantive rationality ought to produce the verdict that agents like Amy and Bob—who have identical reasons available to them, form identical attitudes, but differ in the quality of their processes of reasoning—differ in their degrees of substantive rationality.

I propose a Reasoning View of agential substantive rationality that meets this desideratum. To sketch the Reasoning View, I'll start by assuming: if the distinction between substantive and structural rationality is *prima facie* plausible, then a distinction between substantive and structural reasoning is also *prima facie* plausible. Call these substantive and structural reasoning. Since substantive rationality is about responding to one's reasons, an agent's substantive reasoning is just their process of responding to their reasons: whether the reasons one takes oneself to have to ϕ really bear on ϕ -ing, favour ϕ -ing, and are as weighty as one takes those reasons to be. Structural reasoning, on the other hand, is concerned with the application, in some very loose sense, of structural requirements: e.g., when one deliberates about the means to one's end when one has an end, when one realises that one has contradictory beliefs or cyclical preferences when they are brought to the forefront of one's mind, etc. If agential rationality is about reasoning, and a distinction between substantive and structural reasoning is plausible, then it's worth exploring how we might understand agential substantive rationality in terms of substantive reasoning.

The Reasoning View: One's degree of substantive irrationality is determined by the quality of one's reasoning.

On the Reasoning View, Amy and Bob have different degrees of agential substantive irrationality because they differ in their substantive reasoning: Amy took the evidence presented by the market research team to be a decisive reason to choose campaign A , while Bob commits an error in substantive reasoning by taking his taste in colours as a decisive reason to choose campaign A .

Let's return to the case of Talia and Tania. A corollary of the Reasoning View is that if two agents engage in identical substantive reasoning, then they are equally substantively irrational. Here's an intuitive interpretation of their cases: Talia and Tania engage in identical substantive reasoning to arrive at their initial intentions to count blades of grass, and then diverge in their structural reasoning to wind up in different places about their (lack of) intention to keep track of their progress. If this is right, then Talia and Tania are equally substantively irrational on the Reasoning View. Hence, the Reasoning View opposes the Balancing View and the Counting Intuition; it's possible for two agents to be equally substantively irrational even if one has an additional attitude that goes against their reasons, and agents are never more substantively irrational simply in virtue of holding an additional attitude that fails to conform to their reasons.

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