

Instrumental Rationality, Symmetry and Scope

ABSTRACT: Instrumental rationality prohibits one from being in the following state: intending to pass a test, not intending to study, and believing one must intend to study if one is to pass. One could escape from this incoherent state in three ways: by intending to study, by not intending to pass, or by giving up one's instrumental belief. However, not all of these ways of proceeding seem equally rational: giving up one's instrumental belief seems less rational than giving up an end, which itself seems less rational than intending the means. I consider whether, as some philosophers allege, these "asymmetries" pose a problem for the wide-scope formulation of instrumental rationality. I argue that they do not. I also present an argument in favor of the wide-scope formulation. The arguments employed here in defense of the wide-scope formulation of instrumental rationality can also be employed in defense of the wide-scope formulations of other rational requirements.

KEYWORDS: Instrumental rationality; Rational requirements, Symmetry; Wide-scope, Narrow-scope

The rational requirement of instrumental rationality (sometimes also called "means-ends coherence") requires, roughly speaking, that we intend the means we believe necessary for achieving our ends. For instance, instrumental rationality prohibits the following combination of attitudes: intending to pass a test, not intending to study, and believing intending to study is necessary for passing. Someone who finds herself in the state of having such a prohibited combination of attitudes could escape from this state in one of three ways: by coming to intend to study, by ceasing to intend to pass, or by ceasing to believe intending to study is necessary for passing.

However, intuitively, not all of these ways of proceeding are equally rational: coming to intend to study seems *more rational* than ceasing to intend to pass, and these two ways of proceeding each seem more rational than ceasing to believe intending to study is necessary for passing, which seems to be a downright irrational way of proceeding. There appears to be, as it's often put, an *asymmetry* in the rationality of the different ways one can escape from a state of means-ends incoherence.

In this paper, I'll consider what implications this and other similar asymmetries have for the formulation of rational requirements. Some philosophers allege that such

asymmetries present an obstacle to the wide-scope interpretations of rational requirements – that is, interpretations in which "requires" is taken to have wide logical scope over a conditional.¹ In §1, I consider two such challenges to the wide-scope interpretation of instrumental rationality, both of which focus on the rationality of giving up an instrumental belief. I defend the wide-scope interpretation against these two challenges. Specifically, I argue that if we understand the rational requirement of instrumental rationality as being in some ways analogous to a Rossian *prima facie* duty, we can deflect the force of these two challenges. I also offer one additional argument in support of the wide-scope interpretation. Then, in §2, I show how the arguments of §1 generalize, in that they can be employed in defense of the wide-scope interpretations of other rational requirements. In §3, I return to instrumental rationality and consider some objections concerning the asymmetry between escaping a state of instrumental incoherence by giving up an end and escaping it by intending the means, and I discuss how these objections can be met.² I conclude that none of these objections pose any difficulty for the wide-scope interpretation of instrumental rationality, nor for the wide-scope interpretations of similar rational requirements.³

I.

Let's begin by setting out three possible interpretations of instrumental rationality, depending on how widely the logical scope of "requires" ranges over the relevant attitudes:

(*IR-Wide*) Rationality requires that [if you intend to e , and you believe that intending to m is necessary for e -ing, then you intend to m].⁴

(*IR-Medium*) If you believe that intending to *m* is necessary for *e*-ing, then rationality requires [if you intend to *e*, then you intend to *m*].⁵

(*IR-Narrow*) If you intend to *e*, and believe that intending to *m* is necessary for *e*-ing, then rationality requires that you intend to *m*.⁶

Each of these interpretations has a different implication for what an agent in a state of means-ends incoherence is required to do. Suppose you intend to pass a test, don't intend to study, and believe your intending to study is necessary for passing. According to *IR-Wide*, rationality requires you to *either* intend to study *or* not intend to pass *or* not believe that intending to study is necessary for passing. *IR-Wide* posits the existence of a symmetry in the following sense: any of these three ways of proceeding would constitute a way of complying with the requirement. In contrast, according to *IR-Medium*, rationality requires you to either intend to study or not intend to pass; there are only two ways of proceeding that would constitute a way of complying with the requirement. And, according to *IR-Narrow*, rationality requires you to intend to study; there is only one way of proceeding that would constitute a way of complying with the requirement.

The symmetry posited by *IR-Wide* has been a source of objections to that formulation. How, critics object, can abandoning one's instrumental belief – that is, here, one's belief that intending to study is necessary for passing – constitute a way of being instrumentally rational? The standard reply to this objection is to note that *other* requirements of rationality, specifically requirements of theoretical rationality, would prohibit such revisions in belief.⁷ However, not everyone is convinced by this reply. Mark Schroeder has argued that it's nonetheless implausible for an account of rationality to be committed to the idea that, *so far as instrumental rationality goes*, abandoning one's instrumental belief is rationally permissible. According to Schroeder, "[s]urely a good

account of subjective instrumental rationality should not tell us that so far as instrumental rationality goes, this kind of behavior is okay."⁸ In light of this objection, Schroeder concludes that wide-scope formulations, while able to identify incoherent attitudes at a given time, fail when it comes to specifying how one is to *proceed* to revise those attitudes.⁹ The wide-scope formulation of instrumental rationality tells us, implausibly, that it's permissible to proceed by revising one's instrumental belief.

A similar criticism is advanced by Matthew Bedke, who notes that, other things equal, it's more rational to escape a state of instrumental incoherence by giving up one's end than by giving up one's instrumental belief:

There are limits, however, on the rational resolution of conflicting attitudes that are not reflected in wide scope requirements. If I want a beer and believe there are beers in the fridge, and believe I can get one by intending to walk to the fridge, and so on, other things equal, it is more rational to give up the end of getting a beer rather than give up the belief that there are beers in the fridge. In other words, rationality has a built in directionality that wide scope requirements do not capture.¹⁰

It's not entirely clear what Bedke intends to rule out by introducing the "other things equal" clause, but here's one very plausible conjecture: when my belief that there's beer in the fridge is itself irrational (perhaps because I know there's no evidence supporting this belief, and it's mere wishful thinking on my part to believe there's beer there), then other things wouldn't be equal. In that case, it *wouldn't* be more rational to give up the end of getting a beer rather than give up the belief that there's beer in the fridge; it would be more rational to give up the belief instead.

Though Schroeder and Bedke are objecting along the same lines, there is a subtle

difference between the two objections. The problem with *IR-Wide*, for Bedke, is that it doesn't capture the "directionality" of instrumental rationality, according to which, *other things equal*, it's more rational to give up an end rather than revise an instrumental belief. But Schroeder's objection doesn't employ a *ceteris paribus* clause. Schroeder thinks that the problem with *IR-Wide* is that it implausibly entails that *so far as instrumental rationality goes*, it's rationally permissible to revise an instrumental belief. And since the implausibility is present so far as instrumental rationality goes, there's no need to hold other things equal: regardless of how other things are – specifically, regardless of what other attitudes an agent might have or what other rational requirements might be in play – *IR-Wide* issues an implausible result: it tells us that, so far as instrumental rationality goes, it's rationally permissible to revise an instrumental belief. But on Bedke's objection, in contrast, it seems to matter what one's other attitudes are, and hence it's necessary to employ the *ceteris paribus* clause.

Since there seems to be this difference between the two objections, I'll deal with them separately, starting with Bedke's observation of the "directionality" of instrumental rationality: that other things equal, it's more rational to give up an end rather than revise an instrumental belief. My strategy for defending *IR-Wide* against this charge is to concede that the observation of "directionality" is correct, but to show how the observation can be explained in a way that is consistent with *IR-Wide*.

Bedke's inclusion of an "other things equal" clause should give us a clue about how to understand the judgment that one way of proceeding is *more rational* than another. The inclusion of such a clause indicates that when other things are *unequal* – perhaps when one believes there's no evidence for one's instrumental belief – such judgments could change: giving up the end could become *less rational* than giving up the instrumental

belief. And that indicates that such judgments about whether one way of proceeding is more rational than another are *dependent* on the attitudes an agent has *besides those* directly relevant to the requirement of instrumental rationality – namely, besides one's intending an end, not intending the means, and having an appropriate instrumental belief. (Here, such a judgment is dependent on whether the agent also believes there's no evidence for his instrumental belief.)

I think it's important to draw a distinction between "local" and "overall" (or "all-attitudes-considered") judgments of rationality.¹¹ Whereas "local" judgments of rationality specify what's rational in light of a certain subset of an agent's attitudes – perhaps what's rational in light of the fact that one intends some end, has a certain instrumental belief, but doesn't intend the means – "overall" (or "all-attitudes-considered") judgments of rationality specify what's rational in light of the totality of an agent's attitudes. Note that if we draw such a distinction, we can see that there's no inconsistency in claiming both that (1) two ways of proceeding are on a par as far as instrumental rationality goes, but (2) considering the other attitudes of an agent, one way of proceeding is more rational than another. The first is a "local" judgment and the second an "overall" judgment.

We can understand these "local" judgments of rationality as being analogous to Rossian *prima facie* duties.¹² Consider an example in which two of Ross's *prima facie* duties (specifically, the duty of beneficence and the duty of fidelity) are relevant to the particular case: both Andy and Bradley are equally in need of the Professor's advice today, but she doesn't have enough time to talk to both of them. But since she's promised Andy that she'd speak to him, all-things-considered, she ought to talk to Andy instead of Bradley today. Now, we might say that so far as the *prima facie* duty of beneficence goes, she's *just*

as obligated to speak to Andy as she is to speak to Bradley – both are equally in need of her advice. But to say that speaking with Andy and speaking with Bradley are on a par as far as beneficence goes *doesn't* commit us to thinking that they are on a par overall; indeed, once we factor in her promise to Andy, it's clear that they are no longer on a par overall. Analogously, to say that giving up an end, intending the means, and giving up an instrumental belief are all on a par as far as instrumental rationality goes *doesn't* commit us to thinking that they are all on a par overall. Once we expand our focus beyond those attitudes relevant to instrumental rationality, one way of proceeding may be more rational than another. (For instance, if one believes that one has conclusive reason to intend the end, and believes that one has conclusive reason to hold the instrumental belief – and, in case it matters, one also believes that these two beliefs are themselves beliefs that one has conclusive reason to hold, and so on – and there are no other relevant attitudes bearing on this case, then intending the means is *more rational* than giving up the end or giving up the belief.) There is no inconsistency between saying that the two ways of proceeding are on a par as far as instrumental rationality goes, but, overall, one way of proceeding is more rational than another.

Now, we are in a position to explain Bedke's observation of "directionality" in a way that's consistent with the truth of *IR-Wide*. Bedke is observing that most often, an agent's other attitudes will be aligned in such a way that, *all-attitudes-considered*, giving up the instrumental belief will be the less rational alternative, though occasionally (when other things *aren't* equal) one's attitudes will not line up this way, and giving up the instrumental belief won't be the less rational alternative *all-attitudes-considered*. But, such an observation poses no threat to *IR-Wide*, which is properly understood as a *local* requirement. It's perfectly consistent to claim both that (1) *as far as IR-Wide goes*, giving up

an end is just as rational as giving up the belief, and (2) most often, *all-attitudes-considered*, it will be more rational to give up the end than give up the belief.

We can thus explain the observation of directionality and do so in a way that doesn't threaten our interpretation of instrumental rationality as *IR-Wide*, understood as a local requirement. On our explanation, when we observe that, other things equal, it's less rational to give up an instrumental belief than to give up an end or intend the means, we are observing that most often one's *other attitudes* will line up so that, all attitudes considered, giving up the instrumental belief is the least rational way of escaping from a state of instrumental irrationality. Of course, it's possible that other things *aren't* equal -- namely, that one's other attitudes will line up so that giving up the belief is indeed the most rational way of escape (as in the unusual case above where one wishfully believes that there's beer in the fridge despite knowing there's no evidence for this). But, usually, our other attitudes will line up so that abandoning the instrumental belief is the least rational option. And that's *why* we think that, other things equal, it's less rational to give up on an instrumental belief than to give up on an end or intend the means. Since, on this explanation, directionality is explained by our judgments of what's rational *all attitudes considered*, it poses no threat to our understanding of *IR-Wide* as a *local* rational requirement.

It should be emphasized that the details of this explanation will have to be filled out. In particular, we would need some further explanation of what makes one way of proceeding more rational than another, all attitudes considered. Here's a start: one way of proceeding is more rational (all attitudes considered) than another if the first involves the violation of no rational requirements while the second involves the violation of some rational requirements. But this won't go far enough. What about examples like the one

above, in which one believes one has conclusive reason to intend the end, and believes that one has conclusive reason to hold the instrumental belief, and one intends the end, holds the instrumental belief, but doesn't intend the means? Now, intending the means would violate no requirement of rationality, so it's here the most rational option, all attitudes considered. But, intuitively, abandoning one's end would be *more rational* in this case than abandoning one's instrumental belief, even though *both* ways of proceeding would violate a rational requirement. What explains the difference here?

Here I think it would help to appeal to an idea from Joseph Raz (who himself attributes the thought to Michael Bratman): that violations of rational requirements are indications that an agent is not functioning properly – specifically, that there is some malfunctioning of the agent's rational capacities.¹³ On Raz's view, individual violations of requirements of rationality are *evidence* of the improper functioning of one's capacities as a agent or as a believer. We don't have space to consider Raz's view here, but it does suggest a helpful thought: that some violations of rational requirements will indicate *more severe* defects in the functioning of one's rational capacities than other violations. In this particular case, I am inclined to think that the theoretical irrationality involved in giving up on an instrumental belief one takes to be conclusively supported by the available evidence indicates a *more severe* malfunctioning of one's rational capacities than does the practical irrationality involved in not intending an end in line with one's better judgment. And that's why I think it's *more* irrational to give up the belief than to give up the end in this case.

But, for the purposes of this paper, I won't defend this particular explanation of why it's more irrational in this case to give up the instrumental belief than to give up the end. Perhaps there is another, better explanation available. But it does seem as though

any explanation of the observation of directionality (the observation that, *other things equal*, it's more rational to give up the end than to give up an instrumental belief) will have to account for the *ceteris paribus* clause – specifically, it would have to account for how it could come out that other things are *not* equal and it's more rational to give up the belief instead. And it seems that we could account for this only by considering how an agent's *other attitudes* could line up so as to make it the case that it's more rational to give up the belief instead. But this shows us that these judgments of which way of proceeding is more rational are sensitive to the other attitudes an agent has besides those relevant to the local instrumental conflict, and hence would pose no threat to *IR-Wide*, understood as a *local* requirement of rationality. So, we have a reason to think that *any* explanation of the observation of directionality would be compatible with *IR-Wide*, understood as a local requirement of rationality.

Let's now turn our attention to Schroeder's objection to *IR-Wide*. Schroeder thinks that it's implausible for an interpretation of the requirement of instrumental rationality to allow that giving up an instrumental belief is rationally permissible, regardless of whether doing so is condemned by other requirements of theoretical rationality, and regardless of whether doing so is overall irrational. We won't be able to employ the same strategy of reply we employed in response to Bedke since Schroeder is explicitly challenging the *local* requirement: on his view, it's implausible to claim that *so far as instrumental rationality goes*, it's rationally permissible to give up an instrumental belief.

However, I think Schroeder's objection becomes less convincing once we reflect on how instrumental rationality permits much that is otherwise irrational. After all, even if one intends some end against one's better judgment, one could come to be instrumentally rational by coming to intend the means believed necessary to that end,

thereby forming *another* intention against one's better judgment. Suppose I intend, against my better judgment, to get a beer now, and I believe that to get a beer now, I must intend to walk to the corner pub. And suppose that intending to walk to the corner pub is also against my better judgment. In coming to intend to walk to the corner pub, I am coming to comply with the requirement of instrumental rationality (on *any* interpretation: *IR-Wide*, *IR-Medium*, or *IR-Narrow*) yet I am forming yet another intention that is against my better judgment. We don't think it problematic that, so far as instrumental rationality goes, it's rationally permissible to form this intention.

Since we think that it's perfectly fine for instrumental rationality, on *any* interpretation, to permit the formation of an intention that is otherwise irrational, we shouldn't be so bothered by the fact that instrumental rationality, understood as *IR-Wide*, would permit the revision of a belief that is otherwise irrational. In other words, since we don't *in general* expect that instrumental rationality will forbid everything that's rationally forbidden, we shouldn't object to *IR-Wide in particular* on the grounds that it permits something that is rationally forbidden.

Additionally, the analogy between local rational requirements and Rossian *prima facie* duties might again prove instructive.¹⁴ We don't expect the *prima facie* duty of beneficence to condemn every kind of wrongdoing. For instance, if the Professor in our example breaks her promise to Andy, her wrongdoing wouldn't be condemned by the *prima facie* duty of beneficence. Similarly, we shouldn't expect the requirement of instrumental rationality to condemn every kind of irrationality; we should allow that other requirements of rationality can come into play.

So, neither Bedke nor Schroeder have provided a conclusive asymmetry objection to interpreting instrumental rationality as *IR-Wide*. I'll now present an argument for

preferring this interpretation to its competitors, specifically to *IR-Medium*. Those who are worried about the symmetry posited by *IR-Wide* may prefer *IR-Medium* on the grounds that on that interpretation, abandoning one's instrumental belief wouldn't constitute a way of complying with the rational requirement. *IR-Medium* would thus avoid the above asymmetry objections. But I'll argue that *IR-Medium* has its own costs (not shared by *IR-Wide*) that speak against it.

According to *IR-Medium*, if one has an instrumentally incoherent combination of attitudes (say, intending to pass the test, believing that to pass one must intend to study, but not intending to study) one is rationally required to *either* abandon one's end *or* come to intend the means. If one proceeds by doing *neither* of these, then one has proceeded in an *irrational* way – one has violated the requirement of instrumental rationality. But now suppose that I come to acquire good evidence that my intending to study isn't necessary to pass the test. Suppose a reliable source tells me that the Professor never fails anyone because doing so would irritate the new Dean, and so no matter how badly I perform on the test, so long as I show up for it, I'll just barely pass. So I discover I don't need to study, and hence don't need to intend to study, to pass. Now suppose I give up my belief that studying is necessary to pass, and I keep on intending to pass and not intending to study. Intuitively, I've proceeded in a perfectly rational way.

But, according to *IR-Medium*, I haven't proceeded in a perfectly rational way. Since I believed that intending to study was necessary for passing, I, to be rational, should have proceeded either by no longer intending to pass or by coming to intend to study. And since I have done neither of these things (as I've abandoned the belief instead) I have proceeded in a way which *violates IR-Medium*, and so I haven't proceeded in a perfectly rational way. (It is indeed true that by abandoning the belief, the requirement to either

drop the end or intend the means, which was once in place, is no longer in place. But *prior to* dropping the belief, that requirement was in place. It required me to either drop the end or intend the means. And I did neither. So, I violated the requirement. And, so, I haven't proceeded in a perfectly rational way.)¹⁵

But this unintuitive consequence is not shared by *IR-Wide*. When I proceeded by dropping my belief that studying (and hence intending to study) is necessary for passing, making no other changes in my attitudes, I did not proceed in a way that violated *IR-Wide*. According to *IR-Wide*, I was rationally required to *either* drop this belief *or* drop the end *or* intend the means, and so I complied with, and did not violate, *IR-Wide* by dropping the belief. And hence it doesn't follow that I haven't proceeded in a perfectly rational way. In sum, since *IR-Medium*, but not *IR-Wide*, generates an unintuitive consequence in this case, we should prefer *IR-Wide* as our formulation of instrumental rationality.

II.

The strategy employed above to defend *IR-Wide* against the asymmetry objections can also be employed to defend the wide-scope interpretations of other rational requirements against similar asymmetry objections. Consider, for example, two possible interpretations of the requirement that John Broome has called "Krasia"¹⁶:

(*K-Wide*) Rationality requires that [if you believe that you ought to x , then you intend to x .]

(*K-Narrow*) If you believe that you ought to x , then rationality requires that you intend to x .

Now if someone were to advance objections to *K-Wide* along the lines of Bedke's objection

(by noting that *other things equal*, it's more rational to come to form the intention to x rather than give up one's belief that one ought to x) we could employ the same strategy of defense: we could argue that this observation is perfectly consistent with the truth of *K-Wide*. *K-Wide* simply claims that so far as Krasia goes, coming to form the intention and giving up the normative belief (that is, the belief that one ought to x) are on a par. But if we consider agents' attitudes overall, it will more often be the case that it's more rational for an agent to come to form the intention to x rather than give up the normative belief. And this is what we note when we observe the "directionality" – namely, that, other things equal, it's more rational to come to intend to x than to give up the normative belief. (Of course an agent's attitudes may line up another way so as to make it that giving up the normative belief is the more rational alternative; to accommodate this possibility, we need the "other things equal" clause.) But there's no inconsistency in claiming both that (1) as far as *K-Wide* goes, coming to intend to x is just as rational as giving up the normative belief, and (2) most often, all-attitudes-considered, it will be more rational to come to intend to x than to give up the normative belief.

If someone were to advance an objection to *K-Wide* along the lines of Schroeder's objection (by noting that our interpretation of the requirement shouldn't entail that, *in so far as Krasia goes*, it's perfectly okay for one to abandon one's normative belief) we could employ the same strategy of defense we employed earlier. We could try to deflate our expectations of what our interpretation of Krasia should accomplish: we shouldn't expect our interpretation to forbid everything that's rationally forbidden. And we could deflate such expectations by showing how we don't *in general* expect Krasia (whether wide-scoped or narrow-scoped) to forbid everything that's rationally forbidden. For instance, Krasia (whether wide-scoped or narrow-scoped) would permit one to form an intention that is

inconsistent with other intentions one has. The formation of such an intention, without the revision of any others, is irrational, and would be forbidden by a consistency requirement governing one's intentions. But Krasia (whether wide-scoped or narrow-scoped) would not forbid proceeding in this way.

Since we think that it's perfectly fine for Krasia, on *any* interpretation, to permit one to proceed in a way that is rationally forbidden, we shouldn't be so bothered by the fact that Krasia, when understood as *K-Wide*, would permit the irrational revision of one's normative beliefs. In other words, since we don't in general expect that the requirement of Krasia will forbid everything that's rationally forbidden, we shouldn't object to *K-Wide* in particular on the grounds that it permits something that is rationally forbidden.

So, it seems that our strategy for deflecting the asymmetry objections to the wide-scope interpretation of instrumental rationality can also be extended to deflect similar asymmetry objections to the wide-scope interpretation of Krasia. Although I won't rehearse the arguments here, I believe the strategy can also be extended to deflect similar asymmetry objections to the wide-scope interpretations of other rational requirements, including the consistency requirement governing intentions, and the consistency and closure requirements governing beliefs, as well as the "structural" rational requirements, such as the requirement to have the attitudes one believes one has conclusive reason to have, and not have the attitudes one believes one has insufficient reason to have.¹⁷

We should also note how the positive argument I advanced in §1 for preferring *IR-Wide* to *IR-Medium* also allows for an analogous argument to be advanced for preferring *K-Wide* to *K-Narrow*. Suppose I believe that there is insufficient reason for believing that I ought to get a beer, and yet, irrationally, I believe that I ought to get a beer. But, irrationally, I don't intend to get a beer. There are two relevant conflicts here:

one governed by Krasia (the conflict between my believing I ought to get a beer and my not intending to get a beer) and one governed by a requirement of theoretical rationality (the conflict between my believing I have insufficient evidence for my belief that I ought to get a beer and my believing it anyway). The requirement of theoretical rationality relevant to this latter conflict would be one that Niko Kolodny has formulated as

(B-): Rationality requires one not to believe that p , if one believes that there is not sufficient evidence that p .¹⁸

Whether *B-* is given a wide-scope interpretation or a narrow-scope interpretation does not matter for the argument I'm advancing here (though, of course, I believe that an argument analogous to the one I'm advancing here speaks in favor of giving it a wide-scope interpretation).

Intuitively, there is at least one way of proceeding here that would be perfectly rational: giving up the belief for which, as I see it, there is insufficient evidence (namely, the belief that I ought to get a beer). Suppose I proceed by dropping my belief that I ought to get a beer, making no other changes in my beliefs or intentions. I have proceeded in a perfectly rational way. Yet, if we interpret Krasia as *K-Narrow*, then it would come out that I haven't proceeded in a perfectly rational way. Since I believed that I ought to get a beer, according to *K-Narrow*, rationality required me to proceed by intending to get a beer. But since I did not proceed this way (I abandoned my normative belief instead) I have proceeded in a way which *violates K-Narrow*, and so I haven't proceeded in a perfectly rational way.

But this unintuitive consequence is not shared by *K-Wide*. When I proceed by dropping my belief that I ought to get a beer, making no other changes in my beliefs and intentions, I do not proceed in a way that violates *K-Wide*. According to *K-Wide*,

rationality requires me to *either* abandon my belief that I ought to get a beer *or* intend to get a beer, and so I comply with, and do not violate, *K-Wide*, when I give up my normative belief. And hence it does not follow that I haven't proceeded in a perfectly rational way. In sum, since *K-Narrow*, but not *K-Wide*, generates an unintuitive consequence in this case, we should prefer *K-Wide* as our interpretation of Krasia.¹⁹

III.

In §I, I considered two asymmetry objections to *IR-Wide*. Roughly speaking, both Bedke and Schroeder found fault with the fact that according to *IR-Wide*, abandoning an instrumental belief is just as rational as abandoning an end. But one might also object to *IR-Wide* on the grounds that according to it, abandoning an end is just as rational as coming to intend the means. (This is a *second* allegedly objectionable symmetry posited by *IR-Wide* – one which would also be posited by *IR-Medium*, but not *IR-Narrow*.)

One might argue that, other things equal, it's more rational to escape a state of means-ends incoherence by intending the means rather than giving up one's end. (The "other things equal" clause is necessary to take care of those cases where one discovers it will be too costly, difficult, or otherwise unreasonable, to carry out the end.) And, one might conclude, this shows that *IR-Wide*, which holds that abandoning an end and coming to intend the means are on a par, is false.

The fact – if it is a fact – that, other things equal, it's more rational to intend the means can be explained in part by the fact that we tend not to form ends blindly or capriciously. Before setting an end, we give some thought to what's involved in carrying it out. (If we were to tend to form ends blindly or capriciously, or, at a greater extreme, if our ends were randomly selected for us out of the set of all possible ends, then we might

see things run in the other direction: it would be the case that, other things equal, it's more rational to abandon an end.) But the important point to note is that this argument has the same structure as the argument from Bedke we considered in §1, and so that same strategy of reply will work here: we should insist that so far as instrumental rationality goes, giving up an end and intending the means are equally rational, but once we expand our view to consider other attitudes, it will indeed usually be the case that it's more rational to intend the means. But there is no inconsistency in claiming both that (1) as far as *IR-Wide* goes, coming to intend the means is just as rational as giving up the end, and (2) most often, all-attitudes-considered, it will be more rational to come to intend the means than to give up the end.

But perhaps there is another, related way one might object to *IR-Wide* that cannot be met so easily. When we think of people who are most often giving up on their ends, we are inclined to accuse them of some sort of irrationality. Moreover, we are inclined to accuse them of being *instrumentally* irrational. Let's consider an example of such a character: Candice decides to go to the post office this afternoon to send out some mailings, but on the way there, she gives up on this end and decides to go buy groceries instead. But on the way to the market, she yet again trades in this end for another: going to hang out with her friend David. But on the way to David's house, she once more changes her mind and intends to spend a relaxing afternoon at home, but by the time she gets home the afternoon is gone and she's accomplished nothing.²⁰ We're inclined to accuse Candice of some kind of irrationality. And, since Candice failed to follow through on any of her ends, we're inclined to accuse her of being *instrumentally* irrational. (Assume that a more complete specification of the example won't undermine the intuition that she's irrational in some way; this isn't a case where, for example, on the way to run each

errand, Candice receives a phone call from a reliable source who informs her that running that errand is futile, or anything fancy like that.) Yet the problem is that *IR-Wide* would not license such an accusation of irrationality since as far as *IR-Wide* goes, she's behaved in a perfectly rational way. Each time she gave up on her ends, she *complied with IR-Wide*.

This objection is challenging. In some ways, it is *more* challenging than the asymmetry objections we considered in §1 (which challenge the symmetry posited by *IR-Wide* between giving up an instrumental belief and giving up an end) since some of the strategies we used in §1 don't work here. For instance, in §1, we noted that *other* requirements of rationality – specifically, requirements of theoretical rationality – can be brought in to condemn a person's giving up his instrumental belief. But a similar strategy won't work here; the (alleged) problem with Candice is that she's *instrumentally* irrational and so her behavior should be condemned by a requirement of *instrumental* rationality, not some *other* requirement of rationality. (In other words, while it seems wrong to say that giving up on an instrumental belief is a kind of instrumental irrationality – it seems better to say instead that it's a kind of theoretical irrationality – it *doesn't* seem wrong to say that Candice is guilty of some kind of instrumental irrationality.) And if Candice's behavior should be condemned as instrumentally irrational, but *IR-Wide* doesn't condemn her at all, then we should reject *IR-Wide*.

How should we reply to the objection? I think we should claim that the example, as it stands, is under-described, and we need more information about Candice's psychology. For instance, we would want to know whether Candice has any other (persisting) intentions that are in some way undermined by her fluctuating intentions throughout the afternoon. I'll argue here that it's plausible to think that Candice has a

more general intention about her own attitudes – what Michael Bratman has called a "self-governing policy" – and that her fluctuating intentions throughout the afternoon make her instrumentally irrational with respect to this more general intention.

In *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason*, Bratman observed that not all intentions are plans to perform some specific action in a single future situation; rather, he notes, "intentions can also be general and concern potentially recurring circumstances in the agent's life." He calls such intentions "policies" and gives a number of examples:

Buckle up seat belts when driving a car. No more than one drink when you have to drive home. Never agree to chair more than one committee at a time. Refuse second desserts. Don't let lists get longer than seven items. Check brakes every 6000 miles. Check house insurance yearly. Change furnace filters every two months. Read some German prose every night before going to bed. Don't make important decisions at the end of a long and stressful day.²¹

Bratman notes that these policies are, like more specific intentions, subject to rational requirements of consistency and coherence.²² For instance, the policy of reading German prose every night before going to bed would make it irrational to also intend to go jogging every night before going to bed, while believing that I can't do both, and would make it irrational not to intend to go to the bookstore, while believing doing so is a necessary means to reading German prose before going to bed. In his more recent work on self-governance, Bratman calls particular attention to self-governing policies – that is, policies we have about our own attitudes. Again, here are some examples:

One might have, say, a policy of developing and supporting a strong concern with honesty in writing, of trying to be more willing to be playful or less inclined to be impatient with others, of trying not to be so attracted to chocolates or to other

temptations, or of never acting on or treating as providing a legitimate consideration in one's deliberation a desire for revenge or a desire to demean. We may call such higher-order policies *self-governing* policies.²³

And these policies will likewise be subject to rational requirements of consistency and coherence.

I think that it's plausible to assume that Candice would have a self-governing policy against her having fluctuating intentions. If that's so, we have an explanation of why Candice would be subject to criticism for being instrumentally irrational: even though she complies with *IR-Wide* in every specific instance in which she gives up on her end, her doing so instantiates a pattern that makes her instrumentally irrational with respect to her self-governing policy. In short, she's instrumentally irrational with respect to this *more general* intention.²⁴

What role does this self-governing policy play within Candice's deliberations? In the ordinary case in which an agent doesn't dither as Candice does, there's no need for this self-governing policy to enter into deliberations. But it will play a role in Candice's case when she comes to realize that her intentions are fluctuating, perhaps leading her to say to herself, "I need to stick to something." This self-governing policy, like all of the other policies mentioned by Bratman above, is most plausibly understood as a *defeasible* policy. Candice isn't saying to herself, "I need to stick to something, come what may." Rather, she acknowledges that there may be good reason to revise her intentions yet again. But this self-governing policy functions by pressuring Candice to resist further fluctuation in her intentions.

Bratman also notes that there is a special rationale for having policies: "It may sometimes be easier to appreciate expectable consequences (both good and bad) of

general ways of acting in recurrent circumstances than to appreciate the expectable consequences of a single case. If this is so, then deliberation about general policies, rather than about more specific cases, may at times be a better 'guide to life'.²⁵ This rationale may perhaps apply to the self-governing policy under consideration here. In her more specific deliberations about what to do at the moment (whether to go to the grocery store, whether to go see David, etc.), Candice may fail to appreciate how *a pattern* of giving up on her ends would have bad consequences (in that one gets nothing done at the end of the day). And having a policy against fluctuation in intentions would provide a remedy for such short-sightedness.

Given that we've identified an important role for such self-governing policies in an agent's deliberation, I don't think it's implausible to assume that agents typically have such general, higher-order intentions not to have fluctuating intentions. Additionally, it's not implausible to assume that agents have certain beliefs associated with such policies; for instance, Candice, we can assume, believes that she'll comply with her self-governing policy only if she sticks to an intention for an appropriate length of time. Given that it's plausible to assume that Candice has both this self-governing policy and the relevant belief about what her intentions must be like to comply with it, we can accuse her of being instrumentally irrational with respect to this self-governing policy when her intentions fluctuate as they do. Although it initially appeared as though *IR-Wide* was defective in being unable to license a criticism of Candice as instrumentally irrational, we've shown that, on some plausible assumptions, there is a way for *IR-Wide* to license such a criticism.

In any case, I think that a version of the positive argument I gave in §1 and §2 will provide us with conclusive reason to prefer *IR-Wide* to *IR-Narrow*. Suppose David is

means-ends incoherent: he intends to go to the grocery store, believes that to do so, he must intend to drive into town, but has no intention of driving into town. Now suppose he comes to find out that his wife has already bought the groceries for the week. Intuitively, were he to proceed by giving up his intention to go to the grocery store, making no other changes in his beliefs or intentions, he would proceed in a perfectly rational way. But according to *IR-Narrow*, David wouldn't be proceeding in a perfectly rational way: he is rationally required to intend the means, and if he fails to do this, he *violates IR-Narrow*. But since *IR-Wide* doesn't commit us to this unintuitive result, we should prefer *IR-Wide*.

IV.

In conclusion, the wide-scope formulation of instrumental rationality, *IR-Wide*, is not vulnerable to the various asymmetry objections that have been leveled against it. I've shown how the defender of *IR-Wide* can respond to both Bedke's and Schroeder's worries regarding the rationality of giving up an instrumental belief by showing how *IR-Wide* is a "local" requirement of rationality in some ways analogous to a Rossian *prima facie* duty. And I've also suggested a strategy to defend *IR-Wide* against the charge that it cannot account for our intuition that the person who is always giving up on her ends, like Candice, is guilty of instrumental irrationality.

Though much of the paper has focused on instrumental rationality in particular, the arguments generalize: the strategies employed here in defense of *IR-Wide* against the various asymmetry objections can also be employed in defense of the wide-scope interpretations of other rational requirements against similar asymmetry objections. And arguments analogous to the positive argument I gave in §1 for preferring *IR-Wide* to its

competitors can be used in support of the wide-scope interpretations of other rational requirements as well.²⁶

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Schroeder 2004, Schroeder 2009, Kolodny 2005, and Bedke 2009.

This paper will respond to the particular versions of this objection given by Schroeder and Bedke. Kolodny's version of the asymmetry objection introduces additional complexities, which I consider and respond to in Brunero 2010.

² §1 is largely concerned with the asymmetry between escaping a state of means-ends incoherence by giving up the instrumental belief and escaping it by giving up the end, while §3 is largely concerned with the asymmetry between escaping it by giving up an end and escaping it by intending the means. As I explain in §3, there are reasons for treating these two asymmetries separately.

³ This paper will not take a stand on the question of whether rational requirements are normative (either strongly normative in that we ought to comply with them, or weakly normative in that we have a reason to comply with them). Much discussion of the wide-scope interpretation of rational requirements has involved criticism of the *combination* of the wide-scope interpretation with the view that rational requirements are normative. See, for instance, Raz 2005 and Setiya 2007. Defenders of the wide-scope interpretation can avoid such criticism simply by holding that rational requirements are not normative. But the "asymmetry" objections considered here cannot be so easily disposed of, since they challenge the wide-scope interpretation itself, not its combination with the view that rational requirements are normative.

⁴ The wide-scope interpretation has been defended recently in Broome 2000, 2002, 2007, Dancy 2000 and Wallace 2001, though earlier defenses can be found in Hill 1973, Greenspan 1975, and Darwall 1983.

⁵ See Way 2009 for an interesting account of instrumental rationality supporting this formulation.

⁶ Other formulations are, of course, possible: one could formulate alternative versions of *IR-Medium* or *IR-Narrow* by, very roughly, switching the attitude(s) mentioned in the antecedent with those that are within the logical scope of "requires." But I take it that these three formulations have a *prima facie* plausibility that those other formulations would lack.

⁷ See, for instance, Setiya 2007, p. 667.

⁸ Schroeder 2004, p. 346. See also Schroeder 2009, p. 227. Schroeder draws a distinction between subjective instrumental rationality, which is what we are concerned with here, and objective instrumental rationality, which is concerned not with what an agent *believes* are the necessary means to his ends, but what are *in fact* the necessary means to an agent's ends. See Schroeder 2004, p. 338.

⁹ A similar conclusion about some wide-scope formulations is reached, by a different argument, in Kolodny 2005, pp. 514-542, and Kolodny 2007. (See especially Kolodny's distinction between state and process requirements in Kolodny 2005, p. 517.)

¹⁰ Bedke 2009, p. 687.

¹¹ Others have drawn a distinction along these lines. See, for instance, Kolodny 2005, pp. 515-516.

¹² Ross 1930, pp. 18-41.

¹³ See Raz 2005, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴ I am claiming that local requirements are analogous to *prima facie* duties in some respects. There may be other ways in which they are not analogous.

¹⁵ It won't help to deflect this objection by noting, as we did above, that instrumental rationality is a local requirement in some ways analogous to a Rossian *prima facie* duty. Intuitively, the person who proceeds by dropping his instrumental belief in this case has violated *no* requirement of rationality, not even a local one.

¹⁶ Broome 2007b, pp. 161. Broome's official statement of the requirement, which admits of both a wide-scope and narrow-scope interpretation, reads as follows: "*Krasia*: Rationality requires of *N* that, if *N* believes that she herself ought to *F*, and if *N* believes that she herself will *F* if and only if she herself intends to *F*, then *N* intends to *F*." My shortening this requirement for ease of expression has no bearing on the argument presented here.

¹⁷ For discussion of these last two requirements – which Niko Kolodny has called the "core requirements" of rationality, labeled (C+) and (C-) – see Kolodny 2005, p. 524.

¹⁸ Kolodny 2005, p. 521.

¹⁹ This argument for *K-Wide* is presented in greater detail in Brunero 2010.

²⁰ A similar example, used for a different purpose, can be found in Korsgaard 2009, p. 169.

²¹ Bratman 1999, pp. 87-88.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²³ Bratman 2007, p. 33.

²⁴ It may be that the objector explicitly spells out the example so that Candice has no such self-governing policy as part of her psychology. If that's the case, then I'm no longer inclined to think that she's instrumentally irrational, though she may be criticizable on other grounds.

²⁵ Bratman 1999, p. 88. Bratman also notes that these more general intentions would be supported by the same rationales he gives earlier in *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason* for the having of more specific intentions (rationales concerning our need for coordination and our limited resources as deliberators), the consideration of which would take us too far afield here.

²⁶ Thanks to Joseph Raz for helpful discussion of an earlier version of this paper, and to an anonymous *Philosophical Studies* referee for providing challenging and useful comments, which helped improve the paper a great deal. A shorter version of this paper will be presented at the 2010 Eastern APA meeting in Boston.