

Rational *Akrasia*

John Brunero

University of Missouri – St. Louis, Department of Philosophy
599 Lucas Hall, 1 University Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63121 USA
bruneroj@umsl.edu

ABSTRACT: It is commonly thought that one is irrationally akratic when one believes one ought to *F* but does not intend to *F*. However, some philosophers, following Robert Audi, have argued that it is sometimes rational to have this combination of attitudes. I here consider the question of whether rational *akrasia* is possible. I argue that those arguments for the possibility of rational *akrasia* advanced by Audi and others do not succeed. Specifically, I argue that cases in which an akratic agent acts as he has most reason to act, and cases in which an akratic agent achieves a kind of global coherence he wouldn't have achieved had he instead formed intentions in line with his best judgment, do not establish the possibility of rational *akrasia*. However, I do think that rational *akrasia* is possible, and I present two arguments for this thesis. The first argument involves a case in which one is incapable of revising one's belief about what one ought to do, where one also acknowledges this belief to be insufficiently supported by the evidence. The second argument involves a case in which one rationally believes that one ought to have an akratic combination of attitudes.

KEYWORDS: *akrasia*, Audi, Broome, *enkrateia*, Enkratic Requirement, rationality, rational requirements

It's commonly thought that it's irrational not to form intentions in accord with one's best judgment. More precisely, it's commonly thought that if one believes one ought to *F*, but does not intend to *F*, then one violates some requirement of rationality.¹ For instance, I violate some requirement of rationality when I believe I ought to take the day off, but don't intend to take the day off. I violate a requirement of rationality because my attitudes – specifically, the combination of my believing I ought to take the day off and my not intending to do so – fail to cohere with one another. And this is so regardless of whether my belief is true. Even if it's not the case that I ought take the day off, and I really ought to go to the office instead, I still violate some rational requirement in having this combination of attitudes.

What requirement is it that one violates? John Broome suggests it's the following:

Enkrasia: Rationality requires of *N* that if

¹ Perhaps it's best to avoid speaking of one's "best judgment," and to instead speak of one's beliefs about what one ought to do, when formulating a requirement governing *akrasia* and *enkrateia*. On one reading of "best judgment," one's best judgment is "one's judgment of what is best." But such beliefs about what is best don't seem relevant to the Enkratic requirement, since one could believe some option *A* is the best option without being irrational in not intending to *A*. For instance, a satisficing consequentialist might believe he ought to either *A* or *B*, and that *A*-ing is the best option, but yet not be irrational in intending to *B* instead. Thanks to Nora Heinzelmann for this point. On another reading of "best judgment," one's best judgment is one's judgment made in the best (or at least very good) conditions – with proper reflection, freedom from bias or self-interest, etc. But that can't what's be relevant to the Enkratic requirement either since even our non-ideally-made judgments about what we ought to do are such that we could be irrationally akratic with respect to them. I suspect that, at least with regard to discussion of the Enkratic requirement, what people have in mind by one's "best judgment" is simply one's beliefs about what one ought to do.

- [1] *N* believes at *t* that she herself ought to *F*, and
- [2] *N* believes at *t* that, if she herself were then to intend to *F*, because of that, she would *F*, and
- [3] *N* believes at *t* that, if she herself were not then to intend to *F*, because of that, she would not *F*, then
- [4] then [*sic.*] *N* intends at *t* to *F*.²

The second and third clauses are meant to ensure that one believes that one's *F*-ing depends on one's intending to *F*. After all, there may be nothing irrational about believing one ought to *F* and not intending to *F* when one also believes that one will *F* regardless of what one intends, or when one believes one's intention to *F* would be ineffective in bringing it about that one *F*s.

Broome's requirement is a "wide-scope" requirement in that the logical scope of "requires" ranges over the entire conditional. Since it does so, this requirement doesn't require of the akratic agent that she make some specific change in her attitudes. Rather, what is required of her is that she *either* intend to *F*, *or* not believe that she herself ought to *F*, *or* revise one of her beliefs (in [2] or [3]) about the significance of her intention to *F*. Proceeding in any of these ways would allow her to escape from the state of having an incoherent combination of attitudes.

Although it is commonly thought that *akrasia* is always irrational, some philosophers have recently challenged this.³ These philosophers argue that there are, or at least could be, cases of "rational *akrasia*" – this is, cases in which one fails to have intentions that cohere with one's beliefs about what one ought to do, but in which one doesn't fail to do as rationality requires.⁴

In this paper, I'll consider whether there are any genuine cases of rational *akrasia*. Specifically, I'll consider whether any of the examples discussed in the literature show that *Enkrasia* is false – that one could believe one ought to *F*, not intend to *F*, have the relevant beliefs about the relationship between one's intending to *F* and one's *F*-ing, and yet not fail to do as rationality requires. I'll argue (§1) that none of the examples or arguments discussed in the literature show that rational *akrasia*, in this sense, is possible. However, I'll also introduce two new cases (§2, §3) that I think *are* genuine instances of rational *akrasia*, in this sense. In these two cases, it is not irrational for one to have the combination of attitudes that *Enkrasia*, or a related requirement, prohibits one from having.

§1.

I'll start by focusing on Robert Audi's (1990) argument for the possibility of rational *akrasia*, primarily because he was the first to present a sustained argument for this thesis, but also because other, more recent, attempts to argue for this thesis can be viewed as attempts to follow up on different strains of Audi's argument. Audi's argument focuses on the following

² Broome 2010, p. 290.

³ Audi 1990, MacIntyre 1990, Arpaly 2003, Jones 2003, Tappolet 2003. Coates 2012 challenges the view that epistemic *akrasia* – believing contrary to one's best judgment – is always irrational.

⁴ Although those who defend the possibility of rational *akrasia* tend to speak of the rationality of *acting* contrary to one's best judgment, the arguments they give would also support the rationality of *intending to act* contrary to one's best judgment. And so these arguments would have a clear bearing on *Enkrasia*, which concerns one's intending to *F*, rather than one's *F*-ing. Robert Audi (1990, p. 272-273), for instance, acknowledges that what he claims regarding the rationality of weak-willed action also extends to the rationality of weak-willed intention.

example: John believes that he ought not allow his daughter to go out on Saturday night because he thinks that prohibiting her from going out would be proportionate retribution for her talking on the phone when she should have been studying. But when John, a committed retributivist, is about to tell his daughter about her punishment, he “looks into her eyes, realizes that she will be quite upset, decides to make do with a stern rebuke, and let her go.” (p. 276) John, we are assuming, doesn’t change his mind about what he ought to do; we could even suppose that, holding onto his belief, he criticizes himself after the fact for being weak-willed when it came time to administer the punishment. So, we have here a clear case of *akrasia*. But is John’s *akrasia* irrational?

Audi argues that our answer to this question will depend on how we fill out the details of John’s case. Suppose there are other elements of John’s psychology that would cohere well with his not punishing his daughter, such as a belief that doing so would be hurtful and a desire not to be hurtful, and a belief that doing so would likely provoke his daughter to rebel and a desire not to provoke rebellion. These desires and beliefs constitute “good reasons rooted deep in his character.” (p. 277) And John’s belief that he ought to punish his daughter doesn’t itself cohere with John’s character, interests, and ideals; it is, Audi assumes, an irrational belief for him to hold. Given these features of John’s psychology, John’s acting *against* his best judgment would better cohere with his overall psychology than would his acting in accordance with his best judgment. This example is presented in support of Audi’s main thesis: “that rationality must be holistically conceived and that when it is, some incontinent actions may be seen to be rational.” (p. 280)

Audi’s remark that John’s failure to follow through in punishing his daughter is grounded in “good reasons,” and his related remark that John’s behavior “accords with a civilized and generally admirable compassionate desire,” (p. 277) are not relevant to the question we are asking here. Rationality has to do with coherence among one’s attitudes. But whether there is good reason for someone to hold some particular attitude isn’t relevant to how well or badly one’s attitudes cohere. Consider again the example with which we started. I falsely believe that I ought to take the day off, and, akratically, intend to go to the office instead, where this is precisely what I ought to do. The fact that there are good reasons to intend to go to the office doesn’t render me any more coherent in holding the attitudes I hold, and so won’t help establish the possibility of rational *akrasia*.⁵

For similar reasons, we can also set aside those attempts to argue for the possibility of rational *akrasia* by showing how *akrasia* could lead one to act as one has an *internal* reason to act. (McIntyre 1990) Internal reasons, very roughly, are reasons that an agent has to perform some action where an agent could come to be motivated to perform that action by a process of practical reasoning starting from his “subjective motivational set” – that is, his

⁵ A parallel point holds for attempts to establish the possibility of rational *epistemic akrasia* by pointing to cases in which there are good reasons to have a belief even though one believes that one ought not hold this belief. See, for instance, Coates 2012. If we understand rationality as we’ve been understanding it in this paper, as a matter of coherence among one’s attitudes, then whether there’s good reason – that is, sufficient evidence – to have some belief isn’t relevant to the question of whether one is *rational* in holding it. One would still be incoherent insofar as one has the combination of believing one ought not believe that P and believing that P.

However, in the related case in which one *believes* that there’s sufficient evidence for the belief that P, then one does have some attitude which has a potential bearing on one’s rationality. But this attitude won’t help establish the possibility of rational *epistemic akrasia*. Rather, it seems to introduce a *second* violation of a rational requirement. In addition to the *epistemic akrasia* (believing one ought not believe that P and believing that P), one would also have inconsistent beliefs: one would believe both that one ought not to believe that P and that there’s sufficient evidence that P. If we suppose that one also believes that if there’s sufficient evidence that P, then it’s not the case that one ought not to believe that P, then one has inconsistent beliefs.

set of desires, values, commitments, etc. (Williams 1981). On Williams's conception of internal reasons, there could be an internal reason of which one is unaware, perhaps as a result of a false belief one holds. Suppose I falsely believe that going to the office will be unproductive when in fact it will be quite productive. In this case, there is an internal reason to go to the office of which I'm unaware. When, against my better judgment, I go to the office, I act as if I in fact have good (internal) reason to act. But that doesn't make my intending to go to the office cohere any better with my other attitudes. I'm still criticizable as irrational, even though I act as if I have an internal reason to act.

So, we'll set aside Audi's observations of how akratic intentions could lead one to act as one has reason to act.⁶ Indeed, it's clear that Audi doesn't intend to rest his argument on such observations. His argument, rather, rests upon a different observation: that an akratic action, although involving a local incoherence between the action and one's best judgment, may cohere with one's psychology *taken as a whole*. Consider the passage immediately preceding Audi's introduction of the example of John:

...even in acting reflectively we may not take adequate account of our overall perspective, our perspective as determined by certain of our basic beliefs and desires, especially those crucial in our world view. Could there be, then, an action against one's better judgment which, through its accord with (the relevant parts of) our overall perspective, *is* rational? If so, we should reject the common assumption that incontinent actions are all irrational. (p. 276)

Here, what matters is coherence: a case of *akrasia*, while involving local incoherence, could achieve global coherence – that is, accord with one's "overall perspective" – and is therefore rational.

However, it's not clear at all how the conclusion that "we should reject the common assumption that incontinent actions are all irrational" would follow. I agree that Audi's example shows that someone's acting akratically can be *more rational* than someone's acting in accordance with one's best judgment. But it doesn't follow from this that not all akratic actions are irrational. After all, the claim that one way of proceeding is more rational than another is a comparative assessment. But it could very well be that both ways of proceeding are irrational, with one of those being more rational than the other. (In the same way, one option could be better than another even though both are bad options.)

Is there any justification for claiming that John's *akrasia* is rational? Audi does concede that akratic action is irrational to some degree, but he maintains that "without being rational to the highest degree, an action may still be rational on balance." (p. 280; see also p. 275) Presumably, the idea is that there is more to be said in favor of the rationality of John's *akrasia* than against it. Although the local incoherence speaks against John's *akrasia*, the more significant achievements in global coherence speak in favor of it, and so, on balance, John's *akrasia* is rational.

⁶ A similar line of argument is presented in Tappolet 2003, who observes that one's emotions "can, it seems, make us more rational, in the sense of allowing us to track reasons which we have but which we've neglected in our deliberation" (p. 115) even when those emotions run contrary to one's beliefs about what one ought to do. Likewise, Jones 2003 starts from the observation that "emotions sometimes key us to the presence of real and important reason-giving considerations without necessarily presenting that information to us in a way susceptible of conscious articulation and, sometimes, even despite our consciously held and internally justified judgment that the situation contains no such reasons" (p. 181). These are important observations, but they do not establish the possibility of rational *akrasia* in the sense in which we're interested here.

But this line of reasoning seems to simply overlook that there was *another alternative* open to John – namely, his ceasing to believe he ought to punish and not intending to punish – and that this alternative has all of the advantages of the way he actually proceeded and none of the costs: it achieves global coherence without incurring any local incoherence. It seems inappropriate to assess the rationality of John’s *akrasia* without considering this alternative available to him.

Consider an analogy: suppose I’ve parked my car on the train tracks and there are two ways I could escape this dangerous situation: I could put the car in drive and go forward without incident or put it in reverse and go backwards, running over your dog. I need to remove my car from the tracks very soon to avoid the oncoming train. Now, it would be a very poor defense of my driving in reverse were I to say to you, “Well, there are some considerations speaking against going in reverse – the injury to your dog – but other, more significant, considerations counting in favor of it – namely, that it allowed me to avoid getting hit by the train – and so my actions were, on balance, reasonable.” That’s a poor defense because there is another, equally good, way to achieve those same benefits without incurring any costs: driving forward. Likewise, there are two ways that John could achieve the benefits of global coherence: by being akratic or by revising his belief. And, for similar reasons, it’s a poor defense of his *akrasia* to argue that although it involves some degree of irrationality, its gains with respect to global coherence render it, on balance, rational. Both defenses involve assessing an option without considering relevant, superior alternatives.

I’m not disputing the plausible claim that there are two ways John could proceed – his continuing to believe he ought to punish and not intending to punish, and his ceasing to believe he ought to punish and not intending to punish – that are each *more rational* than his following through and intending to punish. Rather, I’m simply denying this establishes the possibility of rational *akrasia*. And so I’m not expressing any disagreement with Nomy Arpaly’s claims in the second chapter of *Unprincipled Virtue*. Arpaly presents an example designed to show that one’s acting against (as opposed to in accord with) one’s best judgment could increase overall coherence in one’s set of beliefs and desires, and she concludes from this example that “there are some cases in which one is *more rational* in acting against one’s best judgment than one would be in acting according to it.” (p. 41, emphasis added). She is careful to avoid claiming that there are some cases in which *akrasia* is rational.

Let’s sum up the argument so far. I have been considering the question of whether rational *akrasia* is possible – that is, whether one could believe one ought to *F*, not intend to *F*, and have the relevant beliefs about the relationship between one’s intending to *F* and one’s *F*-ing, and yet be rational. I have argued that none of the arguments in the current literature establish that it is. Some of those arguments appeal to the ways in which akratic action may involve one’s acting for good reasons. But these considerations can be dismissed as irrelevant since we are understanding rationality as a matter of coherence among one’s attitudes. Other arguments appeal to the global coherence that could be gained by one’s acting against one’s best judgment. But such arguments can only establish the comparative conclusion that one’s intending akratically may be *more rational* than one’s intending in line with one’s best judgment, not the conclusion that rational *akrasia* is possible.

§2.

I’ll now argue that rational *akrasia* is possible. I’ll argue that there are some instances in which it would be rational for one to believe one ought to *F*, not intend to *F*, and have the relevant beliefs about the relationship between one’s intending to *F* and one’s *F*-ing.

Let's start by considering a variation on Audi's example. Jack, like John, believes that he ought to punish his daughter, and this belief doesn't cohere well with many other beliefs and desires he has. And, we'll assume, Jack believes that there isn't sufficient evidence for his belief that he ought to punish her.⁷ But Jack knows that he's unable to change this belief. He knows that even if he were to review all the convincing arguments against punishing her, and remind himself that there's not sufficient evidence for his belief, he would continue to believe that he ought to punish his daughter.⁸ Perhaps after extensive therapy, he'll cease to believe this. But he also knows that by then it would be too late, since the decision about whether to punish her needs to be made now.

This example differs from Audi's example of John. In Audi's example, we resisted the conclusion that John's *akrasia* was rational since there was a better option available to John – namely, his revising his belief – that yielded all the gains in global coherence without any local incoherence. But Jack knows this isn't an option for him. (Jack's situation would be analogous to the case in which one has driven on the tracks but, after a mechanical failure prevents one from putting the car into drive, one realizes that backing up is the only way to avoid the train.) If, in light of this knowledge, Jack decides not to punish his daughter, Jack would have the combination of attitudes prohibited by *Enkrasia*, but yet Jack's having this combination wouldn't be irrational.

Note that I'm not claiming that Jack is fully rational. After all, a fully rational person would not hold beliefs he believes to be insufficiently supported by the evidence. Such a combination of attitudes seems to be a violation of an epistemic analogue of *Enkrasia* – a prohibition on believing P when one believes there's insufficient evidence that P. But it doesn't follow from Jack's not being fully rational that Jack's *akrasia* is irrational.⁹ For one thing, we can locate the specific source of Jack's irrationality and it's not his *akrasia*, but his *theoretical* irrationality. For another, Jack's not intending to punish his daughter seems to be a rational way of *responding* to this irrational, recalcitrant belief.

Even though a fully rational version of Jack wouldn't violate *Enkrasia*, it seems wrong to accuse *Jack* of irrationality in violating *Enkrasia*. We are familiar with other examples like this in the philosophical literature, where what one's fully rational self would do differs from what it would be rational for one's actual self to do, given the ways in which one's actual self falls short of full rationality. Consider an example discussed in another context by Michael Smith (1995) who himself borrows the example from Gary Watson (1975).¹⁰ A squash player who is aware of his violent uncontrollable anger suffers a crushing defeat to his opponent. Rather than approach him for the customary post-game handshake, he decides to forgo the handshake and leave the courts immediately, for fear that his anger might get the best of him and he'd do something he'd regret. Although a fully rational version of the squash player would have no problem being a good sport and shaking his opponent's hand, this is not the rational course of action for the squash player himself.

⁷ It's not clear whether Audi's John has this belief. Audi claims that the belief is irrational, but doesn't specify whether John believes that his belief that he ought to punish isn't supported by sufficient evidence.

⁸ For discussion of a similar case involving an unalterable belief, in the context of a debate about whether rational requirements are normative, see Setiya 2007, p. 656.

⁹ It might be inappropriate to call Jack's case one of *akrasia*, since it's not clear that Jack is displaying any *weakness* in his will. But that doesn't matter for my purposes here. All that I wish to argue for is that it's a case in which one believes one ought to *F*, does not intend to *F*, and one has the relevant beliefs about the relationship between intending to *F* and *F*-ing, but yet it seems wrong to say one violates a requirement of rationality in having this combination of attitudes.

¹⁰ See also Railton 1986.

Rather, given his irrational anger, which he can do nothing about, the rational course of action is to leave the courts immediately.

It's important for an account of rationality to consider such cases. After all, we employ rational requirements when we advise and criticize others. And, an account of rationality that didn't consider the ways in which we fail to be fully rational would end up giving bad advice, and inappropriate criticism. For instance, an account which criticizes our angry squash player for simply walking away issues inappropriate criticism, and an account which advises him to walk up to his opponent issues pernicious advice.

The example of Jack is similar. Although a fully rational version of Jack wouldn't be akratic (since he would have given up his normative belief), Jack's violation of *Enkrasia* is a rational response to an irrational belief that he knows he can't change. An account of rationality that criticized his *akrasia*, not simply his theoretical irrationality, would be issuing inappropriate criticism. And an account that advised him to follow through on his belief that he ought to punish – a belief he recognizes to be irrational, but can't change – would be issuing bad advice.

The example of Jack, I've argued, establishes the possibility of rational *akrasia*. But one might wonder whether there are any actual cases like this. Although I'm arguing only for the thesis that rational *akrasia* is possible, I do think there are some actual cases that are at least plausible candidates for being cases of rational *akrasia* along these lines. People with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) often have unwanted thoughts and behaviors that they can't control, including, sometimes, certain normative beliefs. For instance, one might believe that one really ought to check once more whether the stove is turned off. But, people who have OCD have, at some point, recognized these obsessions or compulsions as "excessive or unreasonable." (American Psychiatric Association 2000, Ch. 7, §300.3, B) A person with OCD who recognizes that he can't help having such unreasonable normative beliefs may be able to exercise a greater degree of control over his actions, and actively resist acting upon what he believes he ought to do. And such resistance may lead him to have the combination of attitudes prohibited by *Enkrasia*; it may, for instance, lead someone to believe he ought to check the stove one more time and not intend to check the stove one more time. Such cases, since they involve rational responses to one's irrationality, are, I think, cases of rational *akrasia*, in the sense that one has a combination of attitudes prohibited by *Enkrasia*, yet is not irrational in having that combination. However, since there are questions about how exactly to understand the psychology of those who suffer from anxiety disorders such as OCD, and since a full treatment of the relevant issues in philosophical psychology would take us well beyond the scope of this paper, I'll limit myself to claiming that such cases are at least plausible candidates for being actual cases of rational *akrasia*.

One might challenge the thought that there is a significant difference between the cases of Jack and John, provided that we understand John's case in a certain way. Jack believes he has insufficient evidence for his normative belief (that is, his belief that he ought to punish his daughter), but he knows that he's unable to change it. But John might be such that, although he knows it's possible for him to revise his normative belief, such a revision would be *rationaly inaccessible* to him, in the sense that he doesn't see a rational basis on which to revise this normative belief. Even though his normative belief fails to cohere with many of his other beliefs and desires, he may not be in a position to appreciate this incoherence and revise his normative belief in light of these other beliefs and desires. We might suppose that John believes (falsely) that his belief that he ought to punish his daughter coheres well

with the rest of his beliefs and desires, thereby making the revision of his belief that he ought to punish his daughter rationally inaccessible.¹¹

This does bring the example of John closer to that of Jack in some important ways, since in saying that the revision of one's normative belief is rationally inaccessible, we come closer to saying that it's impossible. However, much more would have to be said about the notion of rational inaccessibility than can be explored here. But, putting this aside, I do think we would do better to work with the example of Jack instead. For one thing, if we specify that John believes that his belief that he ought to punish his daughter coheres well with the rest of his beliefs and desires, it's less clear that there would be significant gains in global coherence in his being akratic. In being akratic, he would be acting contrary to a normative belief that, *by John's own lights*, coheres well with the rest of his beliefs and desires. So, it's less clear that he acts in accord with his "overall perspective" in being akratic. For another thing, it's open for one to insist that there's still a better option open to John: revising *both* his belief that he ought to punish her *and* his belief that this belief coheres well with his other beliefs and desires. (John is still *capable* of coming to see how his belief that he ought to punish her doesn't in fact cohere with his other beliefs and desires, and revising his beliefs in light of this discovery, thereby removing any incoherence.)

But, most importantly, in specifying the example of John along these lines, we haven't yet said anything to establish that the local incoherence (his believing he ought to punish but not intending to punish) isn't irrational. But the example of Jack *does* include a feature which licenses us to claim that this local incoherence isn't irrational: the local incoherence is the result of Jack's *rationally responding to* a normative belief he knows he cannot change, and hence isn't irrational.

In summary, Jack has the combination of attitudes prohibited by *Enkrasia* (believing one ought to *F*, not intending to *F*, and having the relevant beliefs about the relationship between one's intending to *F* and one's *F*-ing), but yet his having this combination of attitudes is not irrational.

§3.

I'll now turn to another way in which *akrasia* can be rational. Suppose that one believes that one ought to have a combination of attitudes prohibited by *Enkrasia* – that is, one believes that one ought to believe one ought to *F* and not intend to *F* (while having the relevant beliefs about the relationship between one's intending to *F* and one's *F*-ing). Admittedly, this is a peculiar case: it's a case where violating *Enkrasia* would be a way of coming into conformity with one's belief about which attitudes one ought to have. In this section, I'll argue that in such cases, it may be rational to go against one's better judgment.

Let's consider the applicable requirements in this case by considering an example. Suppose Jill has the following combination of attitudes: she believes she ought to register for the conference, she doesn't intend to do so, but she believes that she ought to have the following combination of attitudes: believing she ought to register and not intending to do so. Rationality has to do with conflicts among our attitudes, and it seems that there are two relevant conflicts, or potential conflicts, that rational requirements might here govern:

- (i.) the conflict between her believing she ought to register and her not intending to register, and

¹¹ Thanks to Robert Audi for remarks which suggested to me this way of understanding the example.

(ii.) the conflict between her believing she ought to have the combination *believing she ought to register and not intending to register* and her not having the combination *believing she ought to register and not intending to register*.

If Jill resolves her *akrasia* with respect to her belief that she ought to register, she'll then be flouting her best judgment: she won't have the combination of attitudes she believes that she ought to have.

Which requirements govern these conflicts? The following two wide-scope requirements seem applicable:

(R1) Rationality requires that [if Jill believes she ought to register, then she intends to register].

(R2) Rationality requires that [if Jill believes she ought to have the combination *believing she ought to register and not intending to register*, then she have the combination *believing she ought to register and not intending to register*].

The second of these requirements might seem a bit unusual since it concerns an agent's belief about a *combination* of attitudes, as opposed to some specific attitude. But we want to be able to criticize *akrasia* with respect to beliefs about combinations of attitudes as well. For instance, I believe I ought not both intend to drink tonight and intend to drive tonight, though I don't think there's anything wrong with having one of these intentions without the other. Were I to go on to have this combination of attitudes, without revising my belief, I would be irrationally akratic. Or I might have the belief that I ought to have the combination of intending to fill out the application and intending to pay the application fee, while believing there's no point in doing one without the other. We want to be able to criticize one's *akrasia* with respect to this belief as irrational as well.¹²

The second of these requirements might seem unusual for another reason: the agent doesn't believe that her having this combination of attitudes is under her control in the same way in which her actions are under her control.¹³ Recall that Broome's *Enkrasia* applies only when the agent has beliefs – specifically, the beliefs [2] and [3] – about how her *F*-ing depends upon her intending to *F*. But it's not plausible to assume that Jill, or any rational person, would have similar beliefs regarding this combination of attitudes; she wouldn't believe that her having this combination of attitudes depends on her intending to have them. She knows she can't have this combination of attitudes “at will.”

However, I don't think that such beliefs are necessary components of rational requirements in general. Consider, for instance, that it's irrational for one to believe one has conclusive evidence that *P*, but yet not believe *P*. Here, one's attitudes fail to cohere. One would be in violation of the rational requirement that Niko Kolodny has formulated as:

¹² In these examples, one believes that one ought to have, or not have, a combination of attitudes only because one believes that one ought to perform, or not perform, the relevant combination of actions. For instance, one believes that one ought not have the combination of intending to drink and intending to drive only because one believes one ought not drink and drive. But, as we'll see below, it's possible for one to believe one ought to have a certain combination of attitudes for state-given reasons as well.

¹³ I was helped here, and in the next paragraph, by objections from Jonathan Way.

(B+) Rationality requires one to believe that P, if one believes there is conclusive evidence that P. (Kolodny 2005, p. 521)¹⁴

But, for this requirement to apply, it's not necessary that one think one's believing that P depends upon one's intentions. And that's a good thing, since it's doubtful that we hold our beliefs "at will" – that is, it's doubtful that our having them depends on our intending to have them in the same way that our *F*-ing (usually) depends on our intending to *F*. So, I'm not worried by the fact that R2 doesn't require the agent to believe she can have the combination of attitudes "at will."

The requirement R2, however, is not an application of Kolodny's B+, since R2 concerns Jill's believing that she *ought* to have a certain combination of attitudes. It doesn't concern her believing that she has *conclusive evidence* for anything. It's possible that she believes she ought to have this combination of attitudes just because of the pragmatic benefits that come from having them, not for any evidential reasons. However, it's worth noting that Kolodny takes B+ to be a more specific application of the "core requirements" of rationality, which he formulates as follows:

(C+) Rationality requires one to have *A*, if one believes that one has conclusive reason to have *A*; and

(C-) Rationality requires one not to have *A* if one believes that one lacks sufficient reason to have *A*. (Kolodny 2005, p. 524)¹⁵

And these more general requirements aren't restricted to beliefs about conclusive evidence for beliefs. Also, such requirements are in place regardless of *why* it is that one comes to believe one has conclusive reason to have *A* – whether one has this belief for the "right kind" or the "wrong kind" of reasons. For instance, if Pascal believes that he has conclusive reason to believe in God only because of the pragmatic benefits of believing in God, but doesn't believe in God, his attitudes fail to cohere: he fails to believe in line with his beliefs about what he has conclusive reason to believe. In the same way, even if Jill believes she ought to have this combination of attitudes for the "wrong kind" of reasons, R2 would still apply to her.¹⁶ So long as she believes that she ought to have this combination of attitudes, she would be irrationally incoherent in not also having this combination of attitudes. (Also, keep in mind that R2 is a wide-scope requirement. Jill could comply with R2 by giving up

¹⁴ Kolodny argues for a narrow-scope interpretation of this requirement and the related "core" requirements below. Others, including myself, have argued, against Kolodny, that they should be understood as wide-scoped. See Brunero 2010 and Broome 2007. I'll here assume the wide-scope interpretation is correct.

¹⁵ I'll avoid dealing with the complicated question of the relationship between the requirements of rationality and the principles of correct reasoning. This would take us too far afield. Andrew Reisner has pointed out to me that *Enkrasia* concerns one's belief that one ought to ϕ , as opposed to the belief that one ought to *intend* to ϕ , which might make for some important differences between *Enkrasia* and Kolodny's "core requirements" – which concern beliefs about the attitudes, not actions, that we ought to have – especially when it comes to the correct reasoning associated with these requirements. Despite these differences, there is a common feature in that both Kolodny's "core requirements" and *Enkrasia* require a coherence between one's normative beliefs (one's belief that one ought to have *A*; one's belief that one ought to *F*, respectively) and the attitudes relevant to the contents of those beliefs (*A*; an intention to *F*, respectively).

¹⁶ I'm here taking beliefs about which attitudes one "has conclusive reason" to have and beliefs about which attitudes one "ought" to have, to be equivalent. If you think there are significant differences, you could make the appropriate substitutions in the requirements.

her belief that she ought to have the combination of attitudes. She might come to see that she doesn't have good grounds for her belief that she ought to have this combination of attitudes, and then abandon that belief.)

Kolodny's "core requirements" concern single attitudes ("to have A", "not to have A"). However, for the reasons given above, I think we should understand these requirements so that they apply not only to one's beliefs about which specific attitudes one ought to have, but also to one's beliefs about which combinations of attitudes one ought to have. There doesn't seem to be a good reason for insisting that one can be irrationally akratic with respect to the former beliefs but not with respect to the latter. So, I think there is a *prima facie* case for thinking that R2 is a genuine requirement of rationality.

My argument here for the possibility of rational *akrasia* starts from the premise that the belief that one ought to have the combination *believing one ought to F and not intending to F* need not be an irrational belief. In other words, there are some contexts in which one's having this belief would be rationally permissible. Consider an example. Suppose you find yourself to be akratic: you believe you ought to register for the conference but don't intend to do so. Now suppose some eccentric billionaire arrives and offers you a significant reward if you continue to have this precise combination of attitudes, or promises a significant punishment if you resolve your *akrasia*. It seems you now have good reason to think you ought to have the akratic combination. (In case it matters, suppose also that you think it's possible for you to hold onto this combination.) In this case, it doesn't seem irrational for you to believe that you ought to have this combination. Perhaps this belief is false, but it's not irrational for you to hold it.¹⁷

There might be other examples. Consider John Perry's research into "structured procrastination," for which he won an Ig Nobel Prize. Perry notes that when we procrastinate, we usually don't do so by doing nothing whatsoever, but instead by doing other tasks. (Perry 1996) The goal of structured procrastination is to structure that procrastination so that one gets important things done when one is procrastinating. One needs to first convince oneself, through some self-deception, that some task is really important when it's actually not, and then, in procrastinating with regard to that task, get a lot of other more important things done. For instance, in procrastinating in registering for the conference, one might get out letters of recommendation, catch up on email correspondence, and write a paper for another conference. If I'm understanding Perry's idea correctly, the structured procrastinator might believe, at least in his more reflective moments, that the combination *believing he ought to register and not intending to do so* is a combination he ought to have; he recognizes that it "channels" his procrastination toward better results, so that the procrastinated task that doesn't get done isn't as important as the tasks accomplished while procrastinating. For someone who guides his life and work by the ideals of structured procrastination, like Prof. Perry, it might not be irrational to believe that the combination *believing he ought to complete some task and not intending to complete that task* is a combination he ought to hold. Again, it might be a false belief, but it doesn't seem to be an irrational one.

¹⁷ In this example, the reason one takes there to be for holding the combination of attitudes is a *state-given* reason. There is a question about whether state-given reasons are genuine reasons or not. But I need not consider that here. All that I'm aiming to establish here is that it is sometimes rationally permissible for one to believe that one ought to have an akratic combination of attitudes. Even if state-given reasons are not genuine reasons, someone who thinks that they are could rationally believe that he ought to have an akratic combination of attitudes. Perhaps he has a false theory of reasons, but it doesn't follow from this that his belief that he ought to have an akratic combination is irrational.

So, it's not always rationally impermissible for one to believe that one ought to have the combination *believing one ought to F and not intending to F*. In other words, the narrow-scope claim, "Rationality requires one not believe that one ought to have the combination *believing one ought to F and not intending to F*," is not true.

But here's the problem: it seems that R1 and R2 together entail this narrow-scope claim. So, if the narrow-scope claim is false, then either R1 or R2 must be false. Consider Jill. Note that the only way that Jill can comply with both R1 and R2 is by giving up her belief that she ought to have the akratic combination of attitudes. However she resolves her *akrasia* with respect to her belief that she ought to register – whether by intending to register or by not believing she ought to – she violates R2. But if she doesn't resolve her *akrasia*, she violates R1. So, the only way of proceeding that *doesn't* involve failing to do what rationality requires is giving up her belief that she ought to have the akratic combination of attitudes (as well as resolving, in some way, her *akrasia* with respect to her belief that she ought to register). And so rationality requires that she give up her belief.

An analogy with legal requirements might help here. Suppose you are again driving your car, and you are stopped at a red light, with pedestrians walking behind your car. You are legally required not to drive in reverse, since doing so would harm the pedestrians. You are legally required not to drive forward, since the light is red. The only way you can comply with these two requirements is by staying put, and so you are legally required to stay put. Jill's situation is much the same: the only way she can comply with two rational requirements, R1 and R2, is by giving up her belief that she ought to have the akratic combination of attitudes. And so that's what she is rationally required to do.

Since "is required that *p*" logically behaves like "is obligatory that *p*" we could also utilize Standard Deontic Logic (SDL) to show how these two wide-scope claims entail the problematic narrow-scope one. (See McNamara 2010, §2.1) The axioms of SDL are somewhat controversial. If you don't find SDL acceptable, then I would urge you to put weight instead on the argument in the previous paragraphs. But if you do find SDL acceptable, then you should also accept that R1 and R2 together entail the implausible narrow-scope claim that Jill is rationally required to give up her belief that she ought to have the akratic combination.

I'll use "R" for "rationality requires", "BO" for "you believe you ought to", "I" for "you intend to", and "φ" for an action. The only axiom of Standard Deontic Logic that we'll need here is a distribution axiom for rational requirements:

$$(R-K): R(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (Rp \rightarrow Rq).$$

I'll start with R1 and R2, and show how they together entail the implausible narrow-scope claim: $R \sim BO(BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi)$.

- | | | |
|-----|---|---------------------------------|
| R1) | $R(BO\phi \rightarrow I\phi)$ | |
| R2) | $R[BO(BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi) \rightarrow (BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi)]$ | |
| 3) | $R[\sim(BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi) \rightarrow \sim BO(BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi)]$ | Contraposition, from 2 |
| 4) | $R[\sim(BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi) \rightarrow R \sim BO(BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi)]$ | R-K, from 3 |
| 5) | $R(\sim BO\phi \vee I\phi)$ | Cond.-Disj. Equivalence, from 1 |
| 6) | $R[\sim(BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi)]$ | DeMorgan's, from 5 |
| 7) | $R \sim BO(BO\phi \ \& \ \sim I\phi)$ | Modus Ponens, from 4,6 |

And (7) is just the implausible narrow-scope claim.¹⁸

Since it may be the case that (7) is false – it may be, as argued above, that Jill is rationally *permitted* to hold this belief – we need to concede that, in such cases, either R1 or R2 is false. I won't take a position on *which* of these two requirements we should reject; rather, I only wish to argue that we must reject *one* of them, so as to avoid the problematic conclusion, (7). If we must reject one of these requirements, then it follows that there is at least one case in which rationality permits one to go against one's best judgment.

There may be an even easier route to establishing the possibility of rational *akrasia*.¹⁹ The above arguments aim to show that from R1 and R2 we can derive the implausible claim that rationality *requires* Jill not to believe that she ought to have the akratic combination of attitudes. But an equally implausible claim is that Jill lacks the *property* of (full) *rationality* insofar as she has the belief that she ought to have the akratic combination of attitudes.²⁰ And it's very easy to show that if R1 and R2 are both true, then Jill lacks the property of rationality insofar as she has the belief that she ought to have the akratic combination of attitudes. Here's the argument. Suppose she doesn't give up her belief that she ought to have the akratic combination of attitudes. There are two possibilities: she either has the akratic combination of attitudes or she doesn't. If she does have it, she violates R1, and hence lacks the property of rationality. If she doesn't have it, she violates R2, and hence lacks the property of rationality. So, insofar as she has the belief that she ought to have the akratic combination of attitudes, she lacks the property of rationality.²¹ And that's implausible. It's implausible to claim that she must give up this belief to be rational, as I've argued above. To avoid this implausible result, we must reject either R1 or R2. In other words, we must concede that, in some cases, rationality permits one to go against one's best judgment.

§4.

In summary, I've objected to previous attempts to argue for the possibility of rational *akrasia*. In showing how an akratic intention could lead one to act as one has reason to act, or how it could allow one to achieve global coherence while incurring the expense of local incoherence, one does not succeed in showing that having attitudes contrary to one's best judgment is rationally permissible. However, I've presented two arguments for the possibility of rational *akrasia*. First, I've argued one's *akrasia* could be rational when it is a rational response to some recalcitrant normative belief one believes one ought not have. Second, I've argued one's *akrasia* could be rational when one believes, not irrationally, that one ought to have the akratic combination *believing one ought to F and not intending to F*. In these two cases, it's rationally permissible to form attitudes contrary to one's best judgment. Admittedly, these are unusual cases. But one should expect such cases to be unusual given

¹⁸ Michael Titelbaum has independently presented a similar line of reasoning in "How to Derive a Narrow-Scope Requirement from Wide-Scope Requirements" (ms). Titelbaum's formal proof doesn't rely on SDL, and so may be preferable if you're not a fan of SDL.

¹⁹ I was here helped by some remarks from John Broome.

²⁰ For the distinction between the "property" sense and the "code" sense of "rationality," see Broome 2007, §2. I'll here follow Broome in thinking that you must satisfy all the requirements of the code of rationality in order to have the property of rationality (where this is short for "full rationality").

²¹ And by giving up this belief, while also avoiding the akratic combination of attitudes, she would violate no requirements of rationality, and then have the property of rationality, at least insofar as the attitudes mentioned in this example go.)

the ubiquity of the assumption that *akrasia* is necessarily irrational. However, as I've argued, that assumption is nonetheless mistaken: it is possible for *akrasia* to be rational.²²

²² Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the St. Louis Ethics Workshop, and at a 2012 Pacific APA Symposium with Nomy Arpaly, Sam Shpall, and Andrew Reisner, who provided very helpful comments on the paper. The paper was also presented at the Workshop on the Enkratic Requirement of Rationality held at the University of Vienna, where I learned much from the participants, especially Robert Audi and John Broome. Thanks also to Nora Heinzlemann, Yair Levy, Mike Titelbaum, Jonathan Way, and an anonymous referee for very helpful written comments on the paper.

References

- American Psychiatric Association, (2000): *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed., Text Revision* (Washington, D.C.).
- Arpaly, N. (2003): *Unprincipled Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Audi, R. (1990): Weakness of Will and Rational Action. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 68(3), 270-281.
- Broome, J. (2007): Wide or Narrow Scope? *Mind* 116, 359-370.
- Broome, J. (2010): Rationality. In: T. O'Connor - C. Sandis (eds.): *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*. Blackwell, 285-292.
- Brunero, J. (2010): The Scope of Rational Requirements. *Philosophical Quarterly* 60, 28-49.
- Coates, A. (2012): Rational Epistemic Akrasia. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 48(2), 113-124.
- Jones, K. (2003): Emotion, Weakness of Will, and the Normative Conception of Agency. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 52, 181-200.
- Kolodny, N. (2005): Why be Rational? *Mind* 114, 509-563.
- Kolodny, N. (2007): State or Process Requirements? *Mind* 116, 371-385.
- McNamara, P. (2010): Deontic Logic. In: Edward N. Zalta (ed.): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition)*, URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/logic-deontic/>.
- MacIntyre, A. (1990): Is Akratic Action Always Irrational? In: O. Flanagan and A. Rorty (eds.): *Identity, Character, Morality*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 379-400.
- Perry, J. (1996): How to Procrastinate and Get Stuff Done. In: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, [Washington, D.C.] 23 February 1996, 15 January 2012
<<http://chronicle.com/section/About-the-Chronicle/83>>
- Railton, P. (1986): Moral Realism. *Philosophical Review* 95(2), 163-207.
- Setiya, K. (2007): Cognitivism about Instrumental Reason. *Ethics* 117(4), 649-673.
- Smith, M. (1995): Internal Reasons. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55(1), 109-131.
- Tappolet, C. (2003): Emotions and the Intelligibility of Akratic Action. In S. Stroud and C. Tappolet (eds.): *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 97-120.

Titelbaum, M. (ms.): How to Derive a Narrow-Scope Requirement from Wide-Scope Requirements.

Watson, G. (1975): Free Agency. *Journal of Philosophy* 72(8), 205-220.

Williams, B. (1981): Internal and External Reasons. In *Moral Luck*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 101-113.