

**PHD THESIS SUMMARY:**  
**Attitudes First: Rationality Attributions and the Normativity of Rationality**

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Rationality seems obviously normative—after all, it features heavily in our practices of evaluating agents, their thought processes, and actions. We criticise our interlocutors for being irrational and praise students for displaying rationality.

This practice motivates one of two main themes of this thesis: getting rationality attributions right. Because we use rationality in this important way, we better have a reliable procedure for deciding when a rationality attribution is warranted, and when not. Ultimately, this has the further advantage of shedding some light on the *property* of rationality, and what it takes for agents to be rational.

The other main theme of this thesis is the *normativity* of rationality. The two main themes obviously interact. The normativity of rationality can provide an explanation for our practice of using rationality attributions in criticism or praise—the reason why someone is criticisable if they are irrational is because rationality is normative. So being irrational would amount to not living up to the demands of a normative notion. But it is notoriously difficult to provide an argument for the normativity of rationality that is not subject to a number of immediate counterexamples. Developing such an argument is the aim connected to this second main theme of the thesis.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of standard ways of making rationality attributions, such as simply checking for compliance with rational requirements (for instance, intending the means to our ends). It also introduces some issues surrounding arguments for the normativity of rationality, like the bootstrapping problem: the problem of how coherence requirements may seem to create reasons out of thin air (see, for example, Kolodny 2005). Moving forward, chapters 2–5 are concerned with the first aim of this thesis: better rationality attributions.

Chapter 2 explores the extent to which rational requirements can be used as guides for rationality attribution—is it enough to simply check whether an agent satisfies rational requirements, and to call them rational on that basis? It includes an extensive survey of various choice points in debates about the correct formulation of rationality requirements, such as whether these requirements are synchronic or diachronic. The chapter concludes that such requirements alone cannot provide sufficient guidance for rationality attributions.

Chapter 3 then explores the different strategy of bypassing rational requirements and directly focussing on rationality attributions. It lays out three desiderata for an adequate account of such attributions: flexibility (with regard to the amount of attitudes we can evaluate), informativeness (allowing for comparisons of attributions), and delimitation (providing a procedure for deciding on the relevant set of attitudes).

Chapter 4 puts forward a novel account of rationality attributions. This account focusses on explicitly mentioning sets of an agent's attitudes, and also includes a measure of the attribution's robustness. For example, an agent would be rational with regard to subset  $a_2$  of their attitudes, which may include beliefs  $b_1$  and  $b_2$ , and an intention  $i_1$ . The robustness of this attribution is measured in terms of the distance between  $a_2$  and the largest subset at which the agent does not violate any rational requirements. Thanks to these features, the account meets the desiderata stated in the previous chapter, and also allows for progress on persisting disagreements in the debate, such as the question whether our rationality attributions should take into account all or only some of an agent's attitudes.

Concluding this first part of the thesis, chapter 5 further illustrates the account by contrasting it with an alternative understanding of rationality attributions that understands them contextually (that is, the idea that whether someone counts as rational varies with context).

Chapters 6–8 are dedicated to the second aim of this thesis, that is, to defend the normativity of rationality. In chapter 6, I consider the problems for a reasons-based understanding of the normativity of rationality which arise from so-called transmission principles: principles which maintain that reasons are transmitted from ends to means (see, for example, Way 2010). I question the plausibility of such transmission principles in general, and point out various additional strategies to defend rationality's normativity.

Chapter 7 (forming the basis of Bastian 2020) provides further support for one of these strategies: to understand rationality's normativity in terms of (potentially weak) reasons. It shows that existing criticisms of coherence-rationality often implicitly assume an evidentialist conception of epistemic rationality. Once we make this explicit and open up the possibility of endorsing a different, coherentist conception of epistemic rationality instead, these criticisms lose force—we can then allow that some pragmatic reasons are indeed reasons of the right kind for belief.

Finally, chapter 8 presents my positive argument. I propose to understand rationality's normativity in terms of *commitment*—if you are rationally required to  $x$ , you are committed to  $x$ . Commitment can avoid the counterexamples of alternative understandings in terms of *reasons* or *ought* by combining features of both notions: just like reasons, it can be outweighed by stronger competing considerations, and just like *ought* it still exerts strong normative force. This makes commitment a promising normative notion in its own right.

Next to this defence of the normativity of rationality, there is an underlying methodological current, or lesson, to this thesis. It highlights how greater complexity and specificity in our debates is helpful and might even be required. Specifically, my treatment of the matter shows that, often, taking a closer and more fine-grained look at rationality can help to solve persisting problems.

## REFERENCES

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