

Objective Own-Standards Rational Belief

[Version presented at the 2016 Eastern APA (amended)]

J. A. Smart¹

1 Introduction

Dialetheists can coherently believe some propositions that those who endorse the law of non-contradiction cannot. In those cases, the beliefs of the former would be epistemically rational and those of the latter would be irrational. These rationality claims hold regardless of whether the agents' logical beliefs are epistemically justified. They are about a sense of rationality on which it is a matter of meeting one's own standards.²

This important epistemic status has largely been overlooked by epistemologists.³ Own-standards style accounts are generally seen as being problematically subjective. In what follows, I defend the own-standards approach from these objections, in part, by developing an account of objective agent standards inspired by David Lewis' best system account of natural laws.

As a point of entry, §2 raises problems for two contemporary accounts of rational belief aimed at capturing something like the own-standards idea. These sorts of problems have led John Broome to argue that the own-standards project is too subjective to provide a tenable account of rationality. §3 considers and rejects this argument. §4 develops and defends a best system account of agent standards on which the nature and satisfaction of those standards is an objective matter of fact. Finally, §5 argues that, given the truth-aim of belief, the best system account provides a substantive and principled error theory for the apparent normativity of rationality.

¹ University of Missouri. Email: jasmart@mizzou.edu.

² This is presumably true of practical rationality as well. But I focus here on the epistemic case. In what follows, "rationality" *sans modifier* should be read as "epistemic rationality."

³ Richard Foley is the most notable exception (Foley, 1987), (Foley, 1993).

2 Problems for Subjectivizing Reasons

Reasons and rationality seem in some sense to be objective and subjective sides of the same coin (at least for the own-standards sense of rationality). Reasons are those things (facts, perhaps) that objectively count in favor of taking an attitude toward some proposition – belief, for our purposes. If reasons give us an objective standard for what we ought to believe, then perhaps rationality means meeting one’s own standards in that it requires adherence to a subjectivized version of reasons.

One popular approach to fleshing out this idea is what Jonathan Way has called *subjective reasons accounts*.⁴ These contend, roughly, that

SR A belief is rational for an agent only if it is supported by those beliefs of the agent, the objects of which would count as epistemic reasons were they true.

Call these latter, *reason-beliefs*.⁵

SR boasts two significant advantages. First, it is not *radically* subjective—it is not merely up to the agent whether or not her belief is rational. Second (and more on the mind of its advocates), is that reason-beliefs seems to tie rationality to reasons in a way that can save the apparent normativity of rationality.⁶ However, SR has the disadvantage that it cannot adequately handle our opening observation concerning dialetheists and (let’s call them) classicists. Call this the *Priest problem*, after the (in)famous dialetheist Graham Priest.

Suppose that Priest is wrong; the law of non-contradiction is necessarily true, and dialetheism, therefore, necessarily false. This is not a problem in that it makes it irrational for Priest to believe otherwise. He

⁴ (Way, *Two Accounts of the Normativity of Rationality*, 2009). Versions of subjective reasons accounts are defended by Derek Parfit (2012), Mark Schroeder (2007), and Jonathan Way (2010).

⁵ This is a broader use of that term than that in. What I call *reason-beliefs* are what Broome calls *P-beliefs* (p. 101). What Broome calls *reason-beliefs* (Broome, 2013, p. 88) are what I below call *support-beliefs*.

⁶ See (Way, 2009) for a discussion. We will consider the issue of normativity in §6.

might well have reason-beliefs that render his dialethic position rational.⁷ However, it *is* a problem in that it seems entirely rational for Priest to reason, “The liar sentence is both true and false. Therefore the liar sentence is true.” This is just the sort of thing we are getting at when we say that certain things are rational for dialetheists like Priest that are not rational for classicists. But the situation is vexed for subjective reasons accounts, since application of SR requires determining what to say about subjunctive conditionals whose antecedents are necessarily false. So far as I can see, there are three main possibilities here, none of which look good for SR.

First, we might say that “were it true” makes no sense when applied to a necessary falsehood. In that case, Priest could never be rational in believing on the basis of his logical commitments, and that doesn’t seem right. Perhaps, instead, such subjunctives are trivially true. This saves the rationality of Priest’s belief that the liar sentence is true, but at a significant cost – necessary falsehoods now count as epistemic reasons for all possible beliefs.⁸

Finally, we might read the subjunctive as concerning *epistemic* possibility. But in this case the Priest problem becomes a variation on what I call the *wrong kind of standards problem*. Consider that Priest believes dialetheism to be true, and this belief is as much a candidate for a reason-belief as any other. Problems arise because the support relation invoked by SR entails classical logical rules. There will then be cases in which Priest’s dialetheism belief would dialetheically support the target-belief under evaluation, but does not classically support that belief. SR will judge the target-belief as irrational, but that is belied by the coherence Priest displays in forming the belief.

⁷ If it seems odd that one might have (appropriate) classical support for a non-classical position in logic, consider a simpler case of a young logician who meets Priest. The novice’s beliefs that Priest is an expert, that he therefore ought to defer to Priest, and that Priest endorses dialetheism will all count as reason-beliefs, and their support of the novice’s belief that dialetheism is correct will render that belief rational for him.

⁸ Interestingly, since it is almost certain that all humans harbor contradictory beliefs of some sort, this is a problem for any such account which employs a strict reading of classical logic.

Ultimately it seems that any interpretation of SR is open to some variation of the Priest problem—a problem raised by conflict between the standards of the agent and some particular objective standard of evaluation. Perhaps the solution, then, is ditch this latter. This is done by what we may call *subjective support accounts*⁹, which take another approach to subjectivizing reasons. These hold, roughly, that

SS A belief is rational for an agent when the agent believes that that there is sufficient reason for that belief.

Call these latter *support-beliefs*.

John Broome focuses on subjective support accounts in the section, “Meeting your own standards,” of his *Rationality Through Reasoning* (Broome, 2013). Perhaps his primary criticism of the view is that SS is subject to the *wrong kind of reasons* problem. In brief, the issue is that on subjective support accounts there is nothing to prevent an agent from forming a support-belief on the basis of pragmatic reasons (indeed, there is nothing to prevent an agent from forming a support-belief on no basis whatsoever). We might try to alter SS to require an epistemic-support-belief, but then SS would run into the wrong kind of standards problem—an agent might believe that pragmatic reasons count as epistemic reasons, and might even do so on the basis of an appropriate epistemic-support-belief.

3 Broome’s Objection to Own-Standards Accounts

Broome diagnoses the problems with subjective support accounts as resulting from their general own-standards approach. It is, he says, a “nice liberal thought,” but it cannot be developed into a full account of rationality. The reason is that doing so would mean abandoning any

⁹ Variants are endorsed by T. M. Scanlon (Scanlon, 2004), Jonathan Dancy (Dancy, 2004), and Niko Kolodny (Kolodny, 2005). Kolodny’s view, however, is not well represented by the principle SS below, since he holds that the requirements of rationality concern processes and SS is given in terms of states.

objective standards.¹⁰ But that contradicts our firm intuitions that there many cases of definite irrationality. Rationality must, he argues, concern some objective requirements.

This rejection of the own-standards project is too quick. Broome fails to see that standards can be objective even when relativized to agents. To illustrate, consider a writing group whose members make commitments for their next meeting. One commits to 10 pages, another to a short story, and yet another to 20 stanzas of poetry. It is an objective matter of fact whether or not these commitments are fulfilled even though there is no single standard applicable to each member. An own-standards account of rationality can peg the relevant standards of rational evaluation to agents in the same way. For one agent they are paraconsistent, for another they are classical. Moreover, and importantly for our purposes, such agent-relativity is perfectly consistent with restrictions on the content of standards. If a member of the group commits to sculpting a statuette, then she has not given a writing commitment even though there is a clear standard as to whether or not she has fulfilled the commitment she did make. Coherence is clearly fundamental to the notion of rationality with which we are concerned, and similarly restricts the sorts of standards that are relevant.

A belief, then, is rational in the sense of meeting one's own standards, when it is coherent with other beliefs of the agent according to the agent's standards of coherence. This is a sketch, and not a theory of rational belief. But it does show that we can capture the insight with which we started in a principled way. The beliefs which are rational for Priest and irrational for classicists are beliefs that are dialetheically consistent with other of Priest's beliefs, but are classically inconsistent with other of the classicists' beliefs.

Well and good for the likes of Priest, but what about agents who do not hold explicit coherence standards? If all (or nearly all) agents have at least *some* rational beliefs, and if the rationality of those beliefs depends on whether or not they meet the agents' own standards of coherence, then an own-standards theory of rationality must provide some account of agent

¹⁰ Or in Broome's terms, "strict liability."

standards that does not depend on the agent explicitly endorsing those standards.

There are probably many ways to do this. But of course, we should restrict ourselves to accounts that are not *ad hoc*, and this will narrow options considerably. In fact, I am only aware of two. My preference is for the Lewis-style best system account which I develop in §5. The other is Richard Foley's account which appeals to reflective dispositions (Foley, 1987). Unfortunately, while I think that there are good reasons to prefer my account over Foley's, comparison would require more involvement with Foley's theory than we have space for here.

4 A Best System Account of Agent Standards

4.1 *The account*

Natural laws have traditionally been taken to be universal principles that in some sense "govern" local matters of fact. Newton's laws somehow "tell" a billiard ball what velocity and momentum to have when struck. David Lewis rejected this picture, holding that, "all there is to the world is a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact, just one little thing and then another," (Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, 1986, p. ix). Yet Lewis did not reject laws of nature altogether. Instead he proposed a *best system account* of natural laws.¹¹

The name of the account refers to the winner of a competition among systems of truths that capture all and only the local matters of fact that compose our world. A system wins if its members best trade off between strength—capturing lots of information—and simplicity—which, to a very rough first approximation, may be thought of as sentence length in a natural language. Natural laws are the generalizations in that best system.

My best system account of agent standards concerns what we might call the agent's "epistemic world" instead of a whole possible

¹¹ See in particular (Lewis, 1983) and (Lewis, 1994).

world—the local matters of fact are the agent’s epistemic attitudes.¹² However, the nature of the systems and their competition must be altered from Lewis’ account. Lewisian natural laws are exceptionless, but epistemic standards are routinely violated. So, instead of systems of accurate description that compete in strength and simplicity, we must consider all systems of description, and let their competition be a matter of trading off between accuracy, strength, and simplicity.¹³

Note that the relevant standards for rational evaluations will not be all of the generalizations in the best system of an agent’s epistemic world. As mentioned above, what will be important for own-standards rationality are standards of coherence. Compare that the generalizations relevant to a natural law of gravity will only be those of attraction of bodies.

4.2 *Allaying worries for the account*

One concern for this best system account is that it falls prey to the wrong kind of reasons problem that made trouble for SS above. There is nothing in the account to prevent an agent from having standards that allow for pragmatic concerns as the basis for beliefs. This is, however, a feature and not a bug. If an agent routinely endorses pragmatic concerns as reason for belief, then when she neglects such reasons she does so irrationally. It may well be the case that she ought not to have such a standard, but given that she does there is still the matter of whether or not she meets that standard. But note that this defense does not give us reason to revert to a subjective support account, instead it relocates the problem with such theories. A best system account, but not a subjective support account, makes sense of accusations of irrationality when an agent believes that she has conclusive reason for her target-belief, despite the fact that she would not accept the

¹² Acts of reasoning *per se* will not be included here just as a cue ball’s motion *per se* is not included in the set of facts that must be captured by Lewis’ Humean systems. Instead, what we talk about as the motion of the cue ball is captured by the facts *such and such properties are expressed here at t_1* , and *such and such properties are expressed there at t_2* . In the same way, acts of reasoning will be captured by facts about which attitudes the agent holds at various times.

¹³ Actually, we could construe the Lewisian account in this way too, only giving accuracy lexical priority over strength and simplicity.

same sort of reasoning in other cases. A scientist well-skilled in cranial stimulation could not make a belief rational for herself by shocking herself into having a support belief against her better judgment.

One might also object that the governance notion of laws is a better analogy for agents who, like Priest, *do* explicitly endorse standards. But even the most brilliant logicians will not always believe in accordance with the rules they endorse. Yet those rules, if well-followed, will show up as generalizations in the best system of truths about their epistemological worlds. Too, we might tweak the account further by adding particular weight to certain sorts of facts. The dropping or adding of beliefs while the agent considers an explicit standard or very carefully deliberates might count for more, and doing the same while tired, hurried, or intoxicated might count for less. But I will leave consideration of such details for another time.

Happily, the best system account of agent standards is not subject to many of the prominent concerns about the Lewisian theory from which it takes its cue. For instance, whereas many of us believe that a matterless universe would not thereby be a lawless one, Lewis' account would deem it so. But an agent without any epistemic attitudes would be no epistemic agent at all, and it is entirely appropriate that the best system account of standards would not ascribe to it any epistemic standards. Another example is that our pretheoretic conception of laws of nature is that they are unchanging. But Lewis' account allows for worlds whose laws are gruesome—the generalizations of the best system might describe very different relationships before and after some time *t*. This is just the sort of thing that we want to be able to capture for agents however, who might, for instance, endorse classical standards for a time and then convert to dialetheic standards.

Two further concerns warrant more detailed discussion. §5 considers whether the best system approach can account for the apparent normativity of rationality.

5 Apparent Normativity and the Truth-Aim of Belief

The present account is subject to a worry analogous to a very basic concern about Lewis' theory. There is the nagging feeling that what Lewis identifies are not actually *laws*. The very idea of a natural law seems to be of something that enforces adherence, and that is not what the best system account provides. Enforcement, *per se*, is not a concern for standards, as these may be met or unmet. However, the best systems account of standards might be seen as unable to capture the normativity of epistemic standards.

In addressing this concern we should remember that our present goal is to show that it is possible to have an account of rationality as meeting one's own standards that is not radically subjective. Our goal is not to give an account of all epistemic standards. Therefore, it is not a worry that the best systems account fails to capture epistemic normativity in general. Nevertheless, rationality, even less-than-fully-objective rationality, seems to also be in some sense normative. Given the purely descriptive nature of the best system account, it would appear not to be up to that task

But that is only when we consider the account in isolation. Things are different when we also consider the notion of the truth-aim of belief. This latter tells us that when we believe, we attempt to accurately represent the world. But note that we are all committed to the "consistency" of the world. Were we not, the very idea of planning or acting intentionally in general would cease to make any sense. It is only natural, then, that we would view it as a fundamental requirement on our representations of the world that they demonstrate the pattern that we are committed to being a property of that world.

If the truth-aim of belief is strongly normative then we might take rationality to derive its normativity therefrom. But since I do not think that the truth-aim is normative, I instead take the above as a substantial and principled error theory. On this view we can see rationality as having a sort of "in-game" normativity—the sort that prevents a chess player from moving a knight in a straight line—rather than the sort of strong normativity thought to be exemplified by concepts such as justification.

The important difference between rationality and chess, is that we are all playing at rationality, and we cannot stop so long as we are epistemic agents. This is why rationality *feels* so normative. And it is why it is an important epistemic status despite being no guarantor of truth. Its relevance is that *irrationality* is a guarantor of falsehood. Or, more accurately, when we recognize irrationality in our beliefs we are committed to thinking that some belief of ours is false – that it fails to fulfill its truth-aim – and that we have *gang* epistemically *agley*.

In response to the Cartesian question, “What am I to believe?,” own-standards irrationality tells us, “Not *that!*”

6 Conclusion

We have seen that it is possible to give an account of own-standards rationality that is not radically subjective. The best system account provides a principled way of determining standards of rationality, even for agents without explicit coherence commitments. Moreover, when considered in light of the truth-aim of belief it provides a substantive error theory for the apparent normativity of rationality.

References

- Broome, J. (2013). *Rationality Through Reasoning*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dancy, J. (2004). *Ethics without Principles*. Oxford University Press.
- Foley, R. (1987). *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Foley, R. (1993). *Working Without a Net: A Study of Egocentric Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.
- Kolodny, N. (2005). Why Be Rational? *Mind*, 114, 509-63.
- Lewis, D. K. (1983). New work for a theory of universals. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*(61), 343-77.

(DRAFT: Comments welcome; do not cite without permission)

- Lewis, D. K. (1986). *Philosophical Papers* (Vol. II). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, D. K. (1994). Humean Supervenience Debugged. *Mind*(103), 473-90.
- Parfit, D. (2012). *On What Matters* (Vol. I). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, T. M. (2004). Structural Irrationality. In G. Brennan, R. Goodin, F. Jackson, & M. Smith (Eds.), *Common Minds: Themes from the Philosophy of Philip Pettit* (pp. 231-46). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schroeder, M. (2007). *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford University Press.
- Way, J. (2009). Two Accounts of the Normativity of Rationality. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy | Discussion Note*, 4(2), 1-8.
- Way, J. (2010). Defending the wide-scope approach to instrumental reason. *Philosophical Studies*(147), 213-33.