

Diachronic Requirements on Practical Commitments

Miranda del Corral

John Broome's *Rationality through Reasoning* (2013) tackles one of the central problems in the philosophy of action: How do agents achieve a rational balance amongst their attitudes? The book's main project is to defend the idea that, through reasoning, we actively bring ourselves to satisfy the requirements of rationality. While I find Broome's account of synchronic requirements compelling, I think his approach to diachronic requirements contains some questionable assumptions. Chapter 10 of his book presents two different sorts of diachronic requirements: basing prohibitions and requirements of persistence. Here, I shall discuss the requirement to have persistent intentions:

Persistence of Intention, special form. If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires of N that, if N intends at t_1 to F, and no cancelling event occurs between t_1 and t_2 , then either N intends at t_2 to F, or considers at t_2 whether to F [p.178].

In what follows, I will examine three aspects of Persistence of Intention that I find problematic. First, I will argue that diachronic practical rationality is not a matter of not forgetting one's intentions. Second, I shall raise some worries about the appropriateness of including 'cancelling events' in the requirement. In Section 3, I will argue that rational requirements cannot be satisfied through consideration. I will conclude this paper by suggesting that rationality requires us to have *effective*, and not merely *persistent*, intentions.

I. FORGETTING

Persistence of Intention, according to Broome, "is just the requirement not to forget an intention" [p.181]. I think this claim is misleading.

Forgetfulness¹ does not entail a violation of Persistence of Intention, since you cannot be rationally required not to forget an intention.

Consider the following scenario. One day, on your way to work, you slip and hit your head on the ground. As a result, you suffer from memory loss. Fortunately for you, it only affects the memories that you had acquired that day. For instance, earlier that day you were thinking about what to do after work, and decided to watch the *Breaking Bad* series finale, airing that night. That intention is now gone from your mind: you have completely forgotten it.² Would that count as a cancelling event? According to Broome, it would not. Had you fallen and died, then your death would have allowed you to drop your intention without violating Persistence of Intention. Yet, you survived, and you are now violating a rational requirement. Suppose now that, the day after, everybody in your workplace is talking about the *Breaking Bad*'s final episode, and that reminds you that you intended to watch it, but failed because you forgot. You may feel upset because of the spoilers, or you may believe that you should have done something to remember your intention, because watching that episode was important for you; but you have not violated a requirement of persistence concerning your intention, for forgetting was not an action of yours, but something that happened to you, regardless of how you came to forget.

Forgetting is a passive mental event. Even if you believe you ought not to forget, Enkrasia does not apply to you, insofar as you do not believe that 'not forgetting' is controlled by your intentions.³ At best, you might be required to take the appropriate steps in order to minimise the risk of forgetting, such as setting up an alarm, writing a sticky note, or asking a friend to remind you whatever you believe you ought to remember. But being required to minimise the odds of forgetting is different from being required not to forget. Although this is a minor objection, I think we can learn something about what attitudes can and cannot be required by rationality.

II. CANCELLING EVENTS

According to Broome, cancelling events permit the agent to drop her intention without engaging in consideration. Broome identifies four types of cancelling events: dying, coming to believe you already F-ed, coming to believe that F-ing is impossible, and considering whether to

F. Cancelling events are thus exempting conditions: you are no longer required to comply with the requirement. However, each of the four types of cancelling events make the agent exempt for completely different reasons, making it difficult to include all of them in the same conceptual category. Furthermore, if consideration counts as a cancelling event, Persistence of Intention contains an implausible loop. Let us recall Broome's formulation of Persistence of Intention:

Persistence of Intention. If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires of N that, if N intends at t_1 to F, and no cancelling event occurs between t_1 and t_2 , then either N intends at t_2 to F, or considers at t_2 whether to F [p. 178, my emphasis].

Following Broome, when we consider, we actively cancel the requirement, because considering is a cancelling event. Hence, Persistence of Intention could be reformulated as follows:

Persistence of Intention [Loop]. If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires of N that, if N intends at t_1 that p, and no cancelling event occurs between t_1 and t_2 , then either N intends at t_2 to F, or creates a cancelling event at t_2 .

If you consider at t_2 , then a cancelling event has occurred at some point between t_1 and t_2 . So any consideration is indeed an instance of a cancelling event between t_1 and t_2 . Therefore, it can be eliminated from the consequent:

Persistence of Intention [Bootstrapping?]. If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires of N that, if N intends at t_1 to F, and no cancelling event occurs between t_1 and t_2 , then N intends at t_2 to F.

Broome rejects this formulation for the following reason: if the fact that you had an intention to F at t_1 is unalterable, and no cancelling event occurs between t_1 and t_2 , then N has a reason to intend at t_2 to F, because of Necessary Detachment and Normativity of Rationality. However, the possibility of creating normative reasons at will amounts to implausible bootstrapping.⁴

Hence, either considering is a way of satisfying Persistence of Intention, but it is not a cancelling event, or considering is a cancelling event, but these events do not belong in the antecedent of the require-

ment. I will first explore whether the second alternative is feasible, and then argue for a third way: cancelling events should not be part of the requirement, *and* considering is not a cancelling event.

Let us start with death. Given the principle of supervenience, cancelling events have to be mental. It is not obvious that death counts as a mental event, and even if it did, it should not be included in the antecedent of the conditional requirement. Otherwise, death would have to be included as a cancelling event in every other requirement (both synchronic and diachronic), because life is a condition for having rational capacities. Suppose that you are akratic. After you realise your irrationality, you reason in order to bring yourself to intend to do what you believe you ought to do, but you die in the meanwhile. You would certainly no longer be required to form that intention, nor to change your normative belief. Rational requirements do not apply to you anymore, for you do not have a rational capacity.⁵

Second, there is a better explanation on why your belief that you already F-ed, or that F-ing is impossible, allow you to drop your intention to F, without appealing to cancelling events. Suppose that you intend now to F later. Then, you come to believe that F-ing is impossible. As Broome points out, your rational disposition “causes you to satisfy many rational requirements” [p. 206]. This disposition may work automatically, or you may reason in order to satisfy a particular rational requirement. If you believe that F-ing is impossible, either some passive processes, or your active theoretical reasoning may cause you to believe that you will not F, which will cause you to drop your intention to F. This way, you are allowed to drop your intention without considering whether to F.⁶ Furthermore, these two beliefs (that F-ing is impossible and that you already F-ed) play a similar role with regard to other rational requirements, such as Enkrasia and the Instrumental Requirement. While lacking these two beliefs is a condition for you to intend to do something, it seems unnecessary to include this condition in the antecedent of the requirement.

If we exclude cancelling events from the antecedent of Persistence of Intention, the following formulation obtains:

*Persistence of Intention***. If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires of N that, if N intends at t_1 to F, then either N intends at t_2 to F, or considers at t_2 whether to F.

Lastly, the reason why the act of considering should count as a canceling event is not straightforward. After all, you are required either to consider or to maintain your intention, which means that either of them is a way to *comply with* it, not a way to *cancel* it. I shall now assess the role of consideration, and argue that the act of (re)considering is not an appropriate form of compliance with the requirement. I will thus reject Persistence of Intention**.

III. CONSIDERING

Judging and deciding are appropriate ways to comply with rational requirements because, through these acts, we exercise control over our beliefs and intentions. For instance, in order to comply with Enkrasia you have either to *decide* to F, or to *judge* that you ought not to F. Merely by considering whether to F, or whether you ought to F, you do not satisfy Enkrasia. (Re)considering whether to F (or whether p is true) consists in (re)evaluating the reasons for and against F-ing (or for and against the truth of p). Unlike judging and deciding, considering is an activity that can be performed at will, just like imagining or presupposing.⁷ Considering may be a previous step in the process of deliberation, but it is not an act through which Persistence of Intention is satisfied.

Broome claims that, by considering whether to F you are in fact dropping your intention to F, before reaching a decision: “[O]nce you have begun to consider whether to F, you may permanently (and not merely while you are considering) drop your intention” [p. 179]. Suppose, for instance, that yesterday you decided to tidy your desk today. This morning you check your email and discover that you have to reply to several of your students and write a recommendation letter by today. You reconsider then whether to tidy your desk. Suppose that the process of evaluating the pros and cons of tidying your desk today takes ten minutes. What happens to your intention to tidy your desk while you were reconsidering whether to do it? While Broome defends the idea that your intention is dropped, I think it is only temporally suspended.

An intention to F is a practical commitment to F. It cannot be rationally dropped without answering the question of whether to F, which amounts to deciding, not to considering. Suppose that you were

interrupted before having made up your mind whether to tidy your desk, and you stop reconsidering without having decided. Then, given that you have not decided otherwise, you have not dropped your intention; your practical commitment has not been revoked.

If rationality allowed you to drop your intentions just by considering them, either for the first or for the n -th time, then your intentions would not be persistent at all — and the same goes for beliefs. Just considering whether p does not cause you to drop your belief that p , nor rationality allows you to drop your belief that p .⁸ In order to consider whether p , you need to presuppose the plausibility of not p , not to drop your belief that p . If your considering process does not reach a conclusion (i.e. you either judge that p /not- p , or you decide to withhold belief), it is not rational for you to drop your belief.

Whether rationality always permits you to consider is a different problem. Broome claims that considering may be irrational, since “you may violate some other requirement. For instance, circumstances may make it irrational for you to reconsider your intention — perhaps you should be acting, and not thinking, say” [p. 182]. Suppose that you have decided to go on a diet. It would be unreasonable for you to reconsider whether to go on a diet in front of a piece of cake, if you believe that you may suffer from temporary judgement-shift. Perhaps it is not *reasonable* for you to reopen the question unless you face conclusive evidence that you ought to revise your intention. Or maybe the fact that you have frequently made decisions that you have later regretted is a *pro tanto* reason for you not to redeliberate about whether to lose weight in front of a piece of cake.⁹ However, reconsidering whether to go on a diet cannot be prohibited by a wide-scope rational requirement, for the possibility of reconsidering one’s attitudes is precisely the way to avoid bootstrapping.

IV. THE RIGHT TO CHANGE ONE’S MIND

Any suitable theory of rationality must acknowledge the right to change one’s mind without violating a requirement to have persistent intentions. My suggestion is the following: while considering alone does not lead to compliance, either deciding not to F or trying to F ¹⁰ are permissible ways to comply with a diachronic rational requirement on intentions. In fact, rationality does not only require your intentions

to be *persistent* (i.e. not to be dropped for no particular reason), but also to be *effective*. The following requirement covers both features:

Resolve. Rationality requires that [if you intend to F at t , then you try to F at t]¹¹.

A possible worry about this requirement is that it may entail bootstrapping. To recall, the argument would go as follows. Following Necessary Detachment, an ‘unalterable’ fact is necessary, and thus cannot be changed. Suppose that we are at t now. The fact that you had formed your intention to F earlier than t is ‘unalterable’: you cannot change the fact that you decided to F in the past. Therefore, the antecedent of the requirement is necessary, and the consequent can be detached: rationality requires you to try to F. Following Normativity of Rationality, you now have a reason to try to F at t . That is impermissible bootstrapping.

Nevertheless, I think this argument relies on a particular assumption concerning the unalterability of past events that I do not find convincing. Mental attitudes, unlike promises,¹² are not unalterable. I can drop a previous intention simply by deciding to do so. In fact, these two processes are two aspects of the same event: changing one’s mind. When you decide to F, you intend to F. When you decide not to F you either drop your previous intention to F, or you form a negative intention to F.¹³ Therefore, the *Resolve* requirement does not entail bootstrapping, insofar as your intention to F is not unalterable (no matter when you formed it).

In fact, *Resolve* could be reformulated so to include a reference to the time in which you form the intention to F:

*Resolve***. If t_1 is earlier than t_2 , rationality requires that if you decide at t_1 to F at t_2 , then you try to F at t_2 , or you decide between t_1 and t_2 not to F at t_2 .

After t_1 , you cannot do anything about having decided at t_1 to F at t_2 . However, by making that decision, you formed an intention to F at t_2 . You can change that intention whenever you want. Although I take *Resolve*** to be correct, it is also unnecessarily complicated.

The *Resolve* requirement includes a reference to the time in which the content of the intention is to be executed: you intend to F at t , where t may refer to a specific moment (you intend to meet your

friend at 2 pm), an interval (you intend to watch a film this evening), or a deadline (you intend to write a paper before the end of this month). Even if t is only vaguely specified, practical commitments need to be temporally located. The role of such commitments is to enable intra and inter-personal coordination [Bratman (1987)]; and actions are organised in a time scale. Intentions, unlike wishes or hopes, consist of a practical commitment to doing something at some point in the future. A rational requirement to have effective intentions has to include a time reference, so when the agent misses the deadline, she has violated that requirement. Since it is a diachronic requirement, it is not possible for the agent to repair past irrationalities: if, at t_{+1} , she has neither F-ed nor decided not to F, she will have unalterably violated Resolve, concerning that particular intention to F at t .

CONCLUSION

Broome convincingly argues throughout his book that even if some automatic process may cause us to act, we can also actively motivate ourselves to act — this is the central thesis of the book, with which I agree. In the same sense, I would add, sometimes we have to actively cause ourselves to execute our intentions: this capacity is usually known as ‘strength of the will’ (or, to put it less dramatically, just ‘the will’). In fact, diachronic rationality does not only require our intentions to be persistent, but also to be effective — this is, it requires us not to be weak-willed. When we make a decision, we adopt a practical commitment, which is a commitment to *act*. Insofar as rationality supervenes on the mind, we can only be required to try, or to change our minds; that is what Resolve requires. This requirement avoids what I have argued to be the problematic aspects of Persistence of Intention, while being compatible with the general framework for understanding the normative requirements of rationality developed by Broome.

*Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Universidad de Buenos Aires
Instituto de Filosofía “Alejandro Korn”
Puán, 480, 4 piso, oficina 430,
Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina
E-mail: miranda.delcorral@filo.uba.ar*

NOTES

¹ According to Broome, “intending something at one time, and not intending it at a later time, when no cancelling event occurs in the meanwhile, just is forgetting” [p. 181]; thus, every violation of Persistence of Intention would be an instance of forgetfulness by definition. However, Broome also acknowledges that forgetfulness is related to memory loss, for he briefly addresses in pp.177 and 181 the idea that forgetting entails a failure in the faculty of memory. I will use the verb ‘to forget’ in its common (although vague) meaning, which involves temporal or permanent unawareness of one or more previous attitudes.

² A different problem would be whether our intentions persist when we are not aware of them — that is, while they are forgotten. Broome does not directly address this question in his book, although he claims that even when you forget an intention, “the dispositions that constitute your intention are still in place” [p. 165].

³ See pp. 25 and 171. Maybe you do believe you can intend not to forget something; in that case, Enkrasia would apply to you (regardless of whether your belief is false).

⁴ Broome argues against this formulation on p. 179.

⁵ “Because of rationality’s limited domain, all my formulae that say ‘Rationality requires of N that ...’ are implicitly prefixed by the condition ‘If N is within the jurisdiction of rationality’” [p. 135].

⁶ See p. 283.

⁷ See Hieronymi (2008).

⁸ It does not allow you to form a belief that p (or an intention to F), either. You have to *judge* that p is the case, or to decide to F; that is, you have to conclude the process of weighing reasons and settle the question on whether p (or whether to F), thus adopting a commitment. Or you may also decide to withhold belief or intention [Schroeder (2012)].

⁹ In this line of thought, Bratman’s “no-regret condition” [Bratman (1998)] and Holton’s “rules of thumb” [Holton (2009), pp.160ff.] aim to establish one or more criteria to determine whether it is rational to reconsider an intention. Whereas I think these rules can successfully guide the agent’s behaviour and minimise the chances of future regret, I would not agree that violating one of these rules constitutes the violation of a rational requirement. At best, *prudence*, not rationality, might require you not to reconsider your intentions if you do not believe you ought to do it.

¹⁰ Given the principle of supervenience, an agent cannot be required to *act* on her intentions, but she can be required to *try* to do so. ‘Trying’ is just another term for ‘present-directed intention’. In Broome’s formulation of Persistence of Intention, “to intend at t_2 to F” may also include tryings.

¹¹ I firstly introduced this formulation of the requirement in del Corral (2013).

¹² A promise entails, precisely, a renouncing one's right to reconsider.

¹³ Broome argues that explicit reasoning cannot conclude in the absence of an attitude [p. 278 ff.], although you can drop an intention through theoretical reasoning. Although I am not committed to this claim, I am happy to concede that, if your reasoning is practical, you form an intention (positive or negative), and if it is theoretical, you simply drop your previous intention.

REFERENCES

- BRATMAN, M. (1987), *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*; Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- (1998), "Toxin, Temptation, and the Stability of Intention"; in *Rational Commitment and Social Justice. Essays for Gregory Kavka*, edited by J. L. Coleman and C.W. Morris, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- BROOME, J. (2013), *Rationality through Reasoning*; Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- DEL CORRAL, M. (2013), "Against Normative Judgement Internalism"; *Organon F* 20 (4), pp. 567-87.
- HIERONYMI, P. (2008), "Responsibility for Believing"; *Synthese* 161 (3), pp. 357-73.
- HOLTON, R. (2009), *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*; New York, Oxford University Press.
- SCHROEDER, M. (2012); "The Ubiquity of State-Given Reasons"; *Ethics* 122 (3) pp. 457-88.

RESUMEN

El proyecto central de John Broome en *Rationality Through Reasoning* (2013) es defender la tesis de que es el proceso activo de razonamiento el que nos lleva a cumplir con los requisitos sincrónicos y diacrónicos de la racionalidad. En este artículo, examino tres aspectos del requisito de tener intenciones persistentes que me parecen problemáticos: la relación entre la racionalidad práctica y el olvido, el papel de los "eventos de cancelación", y la tesis de que la consideración lleva a la satisfacción del requisito. Para abordar estas dificultades, sugiero que la lo que la racionalidad requiere no es que tengamos intenciones *persistentes*, sino *efectivas*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *requisitos de la racionalidad, racionalidad diacrónica, racionalidad práctica, intenciones, John Broome.*

ABSTRACT

John Broome's main project in *Rationality through Reasoning* (2013) is to defend the idea that, through reasoning, we actively bring ourselves to satisfy the synchronic and diachronic requirements of rationality. In this paper, I will examine three

aspects of Persistence of Intention that I find problematic: the relation between practical rationality and forgetting, the role played by “cancelling events”, and the claim that consideration leads to satisfaction of the requirement. To tackle these difficulties, I will suggest that rationality requires us to have *effective*, and not merely *persistent*, intentions.

KEYWORDS: *Rational Requirements, Diachronic Rationality, Practical Rationality, Intentions, John Broome.*