

Which Reasons? Which Rationality?

Daniel Fogal and Alex Worsnip

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1. Introduction

The idea that rationality is about responding to reasons has a turbulent history. For a time in the late 20th century, it seemed to be so dominant that it was often taken for granted without argument.¹ It then came under sustained assault,² and – at least in the practical rationality literature³ – went into retreat. Yet more recently, the view has enjoyed a resurgence, with sophisticated versions of reasons-responsiveness theories of rationality abounding.⁴

One thing that makes it hard to assess the slogan that rationality is about responding to reasons is that there is an ever-increasing plethora of distinctions that are drawn not only with respect to reasons, but also with respect to rationality – yielding a corresponding plethora of interpretations of the slogan. Two such (purported) distinctions are especially important to us here: one with respect to reasons, and one with respect to rationality.⁵

The first is the distinction between **subjective** and **objective** reasons.⁶ Very roughly, subjective reasons are constrained by the epistemic situation or perspective of the agent for whom they are reasons, whereas objective reasons are not. (Later, we'll see that this binary distinction is too simplistic; we need at least a tripartite distinction along this dimension of difference.)

The second is the distinction between **structural** and **substantive** rationality.⁷ Very roughly, structural rationality is about whether sets of attitudes *fit together* or *cohere* with each other, whereas substantive rationality is about whether attitudes (paradigmatically, but perhaps not exclusively, taken individually) are actually *reasonable* or *justified*.

¹ See, among many others, Foot (1972) and Williams (1981).

² See, among many others, Scanlon (1998: ch. 1), Broome (2007, 2013), and Setiya (2004).

³ Though not in epistemology, where it typically taken as axiomatic that epistemic rationality consists in responding to evidence – which plausibly amounts to the view that epistemic rationality consists in responding to a particular kind of reason.

⁴ See, among others, Schroeder (2009), Gibbons (2010), Kiesewetter (2017), and Lord (2018).

⁵ Various other distinctions won't occupy us. For example, we won't say anything about the distinction between *ex ante* and *ex post* rationality. Additionally, like other participants in the contemporary debate, we intend our discussion to cover both the rationality of doxastic states such as belief and the rationality of practical states such as intention.

⁶ See, among others, Schroeder (2004, 2007, 2009), Setiya (2004), Way (2009, 2012), Markovits (2014), Whiting (2014), and Sylvan (2015).

⁷ See, among others, Scanlon (2007), Chang (2013), Neta (2015), and Worsnip (2018), and Fogal (forthcoming).

While the first of these distinctions – or at least something in the neighborhood of it – is widely accepted, the second is controversial. Call views that deny any deep distinction between structural and substantive rationality *unifying* views of rationality, and those that affirm such a distinction *dualist* views of rationality. The first of this paper’s two main aims is to defend dualism about rationality against one prominent line of resistance. This line of resistance holds that once we get clear about what kind of reasons rationality requires us to respond to, the structural/substantive distinction becomes otiose. We will argue that this is not so. The structural/substantive distinction cannot be eliminated so easily.

The second aim is to answer the following question: with the two distinctions drawn, what becomes of the slogan that rationality is about responding to reasons?

We will argue that structural rationality cannot be understood in terms of responsiveness to *any* kind of reasons. This reinforces the depth of the dualism that we defend: it isn’t that substantive rationality involves responsiveness to *one* kind of reasons, and structural rationality involves responsiveness to *another* – instead, structural rationality cannot be understood in terms of reasons at all.

What about substantive rationality? It seems hard to deny that substantive rationality has at least *something* to do with reasons: after all, in glossing the difference between structural and substantive rationality, we said that substantive rationality is about being *reasonable*. Like some others,⁸ we think that the most promising interpretation of the slogan that substantive rationality is about responding to reasons will involve an “evidence-relative” understanding of reasons. But we also pose a challenge for making this idea precise – a challenge that ultimately, surprisingly, calls into question the fundamentality of the notion of a reason even with respect to the analysis of substantive rationality.

2. Motivating the Distinctions by Examples

To get a better feel for the two distinctions above, it’s worth illustrating them with some examples.

To see the distinction between subjective and objective reasons, consider Bernard Williams’s (1981) classic case in which you mistakenly believe that the glass in front of you contains gin and tonic, when it actually contains petrol. Given what you (falsely) believe, there’s a sense in which you have a reason to drink what’s in the glass.⁹ This reason is provided by, or otherwise relative to, your perspective – it is a

⁸ E.g. Kieseewetter (2017), though Kieseewetter rejects dualism, and so holds that rationality *simpliciter* is about responding to evidence-relative reasons.

⁹ Notice that we haven’t said whether or not the belief is justified, or reasonable. As we’ll soon see (§4.1), this difference matters.

subjective reason. However, there's another sense in which you don't have any reason to drink; indeed, in which you have a strong reason *not* to drink. The glass, after all, doesn't actually contain gin and tonic, but rather petrol. The sense of 'reason' in which there's a strong reason for you not to drink is the *objective* sense. What reasons you have in the objective sense depends on facts about the world, not on how things appear to be from your perspective.

To motivate the distinction between substantive and structural rationality, consider someone – let's call him Tom – who believes that he is Superman, believes that Superman can fly, but isn't terribly confident in his own ability to fly.¹⁰ (Suppose he's tried and failed several times.) Intuitively, there are at least two things wrong with Tom, both of which are naturally characterized as rational failings. First, he believes something – namely, that he's Superman – that flies in the face of all his evidence (or so we may safely assume). Second, in believing that he's Superman and that Superman can fly while *not* believing that he himself can fly, Tom fails to believe an obvious consequence of other things he believes.

These two rational failings are interestingly different.¹¹ Tom's first failing, that of believing he is Superman, consists in a failure to respond correctly to his evidence. But Tom's second failing, that of failing to believe an obvious consequence of other things he believes, doesn't seem to consist in a failure to respond correctly to his evidence. Indeed, since Tom's evidence supports *not* believing that he can fly, it would be a failure to respond correctly to his evidence if he *did* believe that he can fly. Still, in failing to believe an obvious logical consequence of other things he believes, Tom seems to commit a rational mistake of some kind – one that is distinct from and additional to his initial mistake of believing that he is Superman.

The distinction between substantive and structural rationality is intended to mark the difference between these two kinds of rational failings. Tom's belief that he is Superman is an instance of *substantive* irrationality – it's a failure to respond to his (in this case, evidential) reasons. Tom's failure to believe an obvious logical consequence of his other beliefs is an instance of *structural* rationality – it's a failure to have mental states that cohere in the right way.

To sharpen the point further, it's worth comparing Tom to his brother Tim. Like Tom, Tim believes that he is Superman and that Superman can fly, but unlike Tom, Tim believes that he can fly. There's a clear sense in which Tim is even *less* rational than Tom, since he has *two* beliefs that go dramatically against his evidence (viz. that he is Superman, and that he can fly), where Tom has only one (viz. that he

¹⁰ This example is indebted to Jim Pryor.

¹¹ See Setiya (2007: 650).

is Superman). But there is also a clear sense in which Tim is *more* rational than Tom, since his beliefs cohere in a way that Tom's don't: he doesn't fail to believe any obvious consequences of his other beliefs. We can recognize both of these senses by saying that Tom is more substantively rational than Tim, but Tim is more structurally rational than Tom.

The distinction between structural and substantive rationality can be motivated using other forms of incoherence besides deductive inconsistency, including incoherence between non-doxastic states. Consider an analogous case involving means-end incoherence (following Setiya 2007, inspired by Rawls 1971). Talia intends to count the number of blades of grass in her garden, even though doing so brings her no great pleasure. But although she knows that in order to complete the count she must keep track of how many blades she has counted so far, she can't be bothered to keep track and so doesn't intend to.

Like Tom, Talia exhibits two distinct rational failings. First, Talia's intention to count the blades of grass in her garden is irrational. Counting the blades of grass is utterly pointless. As such, Talia lacks sufficient reason to count the number of blades of grass, and so is *substantively* irrational for so intending. But second, Talia also exhibits a rational failing in not intending the known means to her end (viz., keeping track of her progress). This isn't itself a failure of substantive rationality: since counting the blades of grass isn't a worthwhile project in the first place, Talia lacks sufficient reason to keep track of her count. Rather, it is a failure of structural rationality – a failure to have mental states that cohere with each other.

3. Direct Mapping?

At least if one focuses primarily on the case of Tom and Tim, it may seem that the structural/substantive distinction is doing similar work to that which the subjective/objective distinction was doing in the gin-and-tonic case. One might think, for example, that there's a "subjective" sense (relativized to his other beliefs) in which Tom should believe that he can fly, but an "objective" sense in which he shouldn't believe that he can fly. So one might wonder if the two distinctions do the same, or closely related, work.

The simplest way to understand this idea is as positing a direct mapping of the two distinctions onto one another, in a way that preserves slogan that rationality is about responding to reasons:

Direct Mapping. Substantive rationality is about responding to *objective* reasons, while structural rationality is about responding to *subjective* reasons.¹²

Direct Mapping fails for myriad reasons, but the most obvious is that there doesn't seem to be *any* sense (substantive or structural) in which (all) failures to respond to objective reasons are ipso facto irrational. To illustrate, let's consider a precisification of Williams's petrol case:

Cleverly Disguised Petrol. The stuff in the glass in front of you looks like gin and tonic, smells like gin and tonic, and has been served to you by a barman in response to your request for gin and tonic. On the basis of this evidence, you believe that it's gin and tonic. In fact, however, it's petrol.

Recall that we're understanding objective reasons as fully unconstrained by the agent's epistemic situation or perspective. Thus, in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol*, your objective reasons decisively support refraining from drinking the stuff in the glass. But there is *no* good sense of the word 'irrational' such that you're irrational if you drink the stuff in the glass.¹³ Even *substantive* rationality is constrained for the agent's epistemic situation or perspective so as not to require responsiveness to reasons entirely outside the agent's ken. Thus, Direct Mapping fails.

Although we take the point that rationality (in any non-stipulative sense) cannot consist in responding to objective reasons to be elementary, it has been surprisingly frequently ignored. Oddly, Williams himself, despite having introduced the original version of the petrol case, seems not to recognize it. Williams argues that the (only) correct construal of reasons is objective, in the sense defined here (1981: 102-3).¹⁴ But he also assumes that failures to respond to reasons are ipso facto irrational (*ibid.*: 110). Jointly, these claims commit him to the view that you are irrational to drink in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol*. But this is clearly the wrong result.¹⁵

¹² Kolodny (2005) gets close to this in his talk of "objective and subjective rationality". See also Foley (1993: 8-15) and Schroeder (2004).

¹³ Broome (2007: 352) offers a similar case that illustrates the same point.

¹⁴ Williams is a "subjectivist" about reasons in a *different* sense, namely that he thinks that what can be a reason for an agent is constrained by her *motivations* or *desires*. See fn. 33 below.

¹⁵ Williams may have overlooked this problem because his original version of the case is underspecified. Specifically, it doesn't make clear whether you have good evidence that the glass contains gin and tonic (as in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol*), or whether this is something that you believe against the evidence (as in a different variant of the case, *Obviously Petrol*, discussed below). In the latter case, it does seem like there's a good sense in which you are irrational to drink. So if we focus on the latter version of the case, or tacitly interpret it that way, the problem doesn't become clear. It's only *Cleverly Disguised Petrol* that brings it out.

4. Substantive/Structural Unification?

We have argued that the subjective/objective and structural/substantive distinctions do not directly map onto one another, since there is no good sense in which rationality requires responsiveness to (all) objective reasons. But given this, one might now wonder whether the substantive/structural distinction is really needed in the first place. There are two ways that this thought might go. We'll take them in turn.

4.1 Coherentist Unification

The first version of the strategy is inspired by John Broome (2007). Broome begins by noting, for the same reasons we did, that rationality doesn't require responsiveness to (what we're calling) objective reasons. The lesson, he thinks, is that if there is any true interpretation of the slogan that rationality requires correctly responding to reasons, it must be one on which "a rational person's response to reasons [is] filtered through her beliefs in some way" (Broome 2007: 353). Broome then argues that the best interpretation of this thought is that it's part of being rational that, for all Φ , you intend to Φ if you believe that your reasons require you to Φ (*ibid.*: 359-361). But this "enkratic" requirement is one of the standard, core requirements of *structural* rationality. It requires a kind of coherence, forbidding you from simultaneously believing that your reasons require you to F and yet not intending to F .

If this is right, then the distinction between substantive and structural rationality isn't needed. Structural rationality is supposed to be concerned with coherence, whereas substantive rationality is supposed to be concerned with reasonableness, or reasons-responsiveness. But if the best interpretation of the slogan that rationality requires reasons-responsiveness turns out to pick out a coherence requirement, then the distinction between the two kinds of rationality evaporates. We don't need to introduce any further notion of rationality that goes beyond coherence. Thus, Broome's view amounts to:

Coherentist Unification. Rationality *simpliciter* is about having attitudes that satisfy various requirements of coherence (including that of being responsive to one's beliefs about reasons). Given this, the distinction between structural and substantive irrationality is impossible or unnecessary to draw.¹⁶

The problem with Broome's view, however, is that it fails to capture cases that are naturally described as irrational. Consider a different precisification of Williams's petrol case:

¹⁶ Cf. also Dancy (2000: ch. 3).

Obviously Petrol. As well as actually being petrol, the stuff in the glass looks like petrol, smells like petrol, and is sitting around in a mechanic's garage. Nonetheless, in defiance of all this evidence (which you dismiss as irrelevant), you believe that it's gin and tonic. As such, you believe that you have decisive reason to drink the stuff in the glass.

Unlike in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol*, there's clearly at least a *sense* in which you are irrational to drink in *Obviously Petrol*. Though both cases are ones in which the stuff in the glass is in fact petrol, the relevant difference is that in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol* you lack evidence for this, whereas in *Obviously Petrol* you have lots of evidence for it. Broome's view is insensitive to this difference. In neither case does your drinking (or intending to drink) involve a failure to respond to your beliefs about what your reasons require of you: indeed, in both cases you do (and intend) exactly what you believe that your reasons support doing. Thus, Broome's view doesn't deliver a verdict of irrationality in either case.

The sense in which you are irrational to drink in *Obviously Petrol* is exactly what the notion of substantive rationality is designed to capture. It's a kind of irrationality that can be present even when the agent doesn't exhibit any incoherence, as in *Obviously Petrol*. So what goes wrong in the Broomean argument for the conclusion that the structural/substantive distinction is unnecessary? The problem is with Broome's assumption that, given that rationality doesn't require responsiveness to *objective* reasons, it must require only responsiveness to one's *beliefs* about reasons. This overlooks a number of more intermediate interpretations of the claim that rationality requires responsiveness to one's reasons.¹⁷ Most glaringly, it overlooks more than one interpretation of the claim that rationality requires responsiveness to one's *subjective* reasons.¹⁸ As we'll see in the next subsection, this can be interpreted so as to require more than merely responding to one's beliefs about reasons, or enkratic coherence.¹⁹

¹⁷ See also Kiesewetter (2017: 161); Lord (2018: 23-4).

¹⁸ This is especially odd given that Broome claims that the 'ought' that expresses the central normative concept is "prospective", not objective, where the former is relative to evidential probabilities (Broome 2013: 41). One would think that he would endorse something similar about reasons.

¹⁹ Broome does consider one other possibility: namely that rationality requires responding to what he calls "attitudinal" reasons (Broome 2007: 353-9). Attitudinal reasons are reasons that either consist in one's attitudes themselves, or facts about those attitudes. (Broome denies that there are any such reasons.) However, this possibility is different from the most promising interpretations of the claim that rationality requires responsiveness to subjective reasons. In *Obviously Petrol*, you don't have *attitudinal* reasons not to drink, since you don't believe that the glass contains petrol. So the view that rationality requires you to respond to your attitudinal reasons can't explain why it's irrational to drink in *Obviously Petrol*.

In a new paper (Broome forthcoming), Broome notes that others have wanted to distinguish structural and substantive rationality. However, he denies the ordinary English word 'rational' ever refers to (what others call) substantive rationality, and as such holds that we should use a different term for it that avoids the language of rationality entirely, reserving 'rationality' solely for structural rationality. He writes:

"So far as I can tell, this [substantive] use of 'rational' is not historically justified. 'Rational' has never had this normative meaning in common English. [...] [Take] a case where the agent ought to do or intend something, but believes she ought not to. Suppose there is nothing irrational about her false belief; it is supported by good – though misleading – evidence. Presented with a case like this, would ordinary English speakers use 'rational' in [the substantive] sense? In this sense it would be rational for the agent to do or intend what she rationally believes she ought not to do or intend. Would any ordinary English speaker say that? [...] I very much doubt that any ordinary English speaker would say it. [...] So far as I can tell, the [substantive] sense is an invention of philosophers. [...] The new sense of 'rational' simply leads to confusion. Most philosophers who write about rationality intend to write about it as it is commonly understood. That is my intention. Given all this, we should eschew the [substantive] sense of 'rational', and I do." (Broome forthcoming: 6)

The passage is odd in numerous respects. First, it assumes that those who distinguish substantive and structural rationality understand substantive rationality in terms of responding to one's *objective* reasons, since it assumes that in a case where you (objectively) ought to Φ , but rationally believe that you ought not to Φ , substantive rationality requires you to Φ . As we've already explained, this is not the most promising interpretation of the notion of substantive rationality; it is a straw man. More plausible views of substantive rationality can accommodate Broome's point that the agent in question is not naturally described as being rationally required to Φ . For on most plausible precisifications of the "subjective" notion of a reason, cases where you (objectively) ought to Φ but rationally believe that you ought not to Φ are not cases where you have decisive subjective reasons to Φ .

Second, Broome actually refutes his own view without noticing it. Consider the sentence, "Suppose there is nothing irrational about her false belief; it is supported by good – though misleading – evidence." Here Broome assumes that the rationality of a belief is a matter of its being supported by good evidence. But assuming that a belief's being supported by evidence is just a matter of its being supported by (a particular kind of) *reasons*, this just is to employ a substantive notion of rationality with respect to belief. (We defend this contention further in §4.1.1 below.) Thus, in a passage devoted to arguing that it is unnatural to use 'rational' in a way that picks out substantive rationality, Broome himself uses 'rational' in exactly such a way. Moreover, his doing so is extremely natural and reflects a more widespread

tendency to use ‘rational’ in its substantive sense when evaluating beliefs. When we say that the climate change denier, or the flat-earther, or the person who believes in fairies at the bottom of her garden, is irrational, we are not (necessarily) saying that her beliefs are internally incoherent, but instead that they aren’t supported by her evidence, such that she lacks adequate reasons for them.

Finally, the fact that Broome feels the need to stipulate that the agent’s belief that she ought not to Φ is supported by her evidence (on his way to suggesting that it wouldn’t be natural to describe her as being rationally required to Φ) suggests that he recognizes that, if this belief were *not* supported by her evidence, it would not be so unnatural to describe her as rationally required to Φ . But this fact cannot be captured by Broome’s own theory. To capture it, we need to make room for a distinctive notion of substantive rationality.

4.1.1 Objection: can coherentism accommodate evidential requirements?

In the preceding, we’ve been assuming that failures to respond to one’s evidence are not *ipso facto* instances of incoherence. This was crucial both to our contention that the coherentist unification cannot capture the sense in which you’re irrational to drink in *Obviously Petrol*, and to our contention that Broome is betraying his own theory when he admits that failures to believe what one’s evidence supports are irrational. But this might be challenged, on the following grounds.²⁰ In order for some piece of evidence to be of relevance to what it’s rational for you to believe, you have to stand in the right kind of epistemic relation to that evidence (as it’s sometimes said, you need to *possess* the evidence). But plausibly, standing in that relation to the evidence involves being in some mental state – or at least, whether you stand in this relation to the evidence supervenes on your mental states.²¹ But then, it looks like the irrationality of believing against the evidence you possess involves a bad relation between your mental states. For example, in *Obviously Petrol*, you believe that the stuff in the glass is gin and tonic (and intend to drink it) despite having certain mental *experiences* as of the stuff in the glass smelling like petrol. Perhaps, then, there is a sense in which your mental states “clash” in such a case. And what is incoherence if not such a clash between your mental states?

We certainly concede that the relevant notion of evidence on which rationality requires responsiveness to the evidence is one on which the agent has to stand in the right kind of epistemic relation to the evidence. And, at least for the sake of argument,

²⁰ Cf., e.g., Wedgwood (2017: 4, 11-12).

²¹ E.g., on Williamson’s (2000) view, you possess some proposition *p* as evidence iff you know *p*. According to Williamson, knowing *p* is a mental state; and even if he’s wrong, knowing *p* plausibly requires being in the mental state of believing *p*.

we're willing to concede that whether this is so supervenes on the agent's mental states. However, what we deny is that just any kind of broadly "bad relation" between one's mental states counts as *incoherence* in the sense we use to characterize what is distinctive of structural, as opposed to substantive, rationality. We'll argue this in two steps. First, we'll stay within Broome's own framework, and argue that *he* cannot view failures to respond to one's evidence as incoherent. Then, we'll argue that those who depart from Broome's framework shouldn't think of them as incoherent either.

Within Broome's framework, the crucial point to remember is that Broome denies that rationality requires responsiveness to reasons. But evidence for *p* just is a certain kind of reason to believe *p*: indeed, an evidential consideration is the *paradigm instance* (and, according to some, the only instance) of a reason for belief. Thus, it is contradictory to claim that rationality doesn't require responsiveness to reasons, but does require responsiveness to evidence. This remains so notwithstanding the fact that rationality only requires responsiveness to the evidence one possesses, where this (we are supposing) supervenes on one's mental states. For exactly the same could be said of the slogan that rationality requires responsiveness to reasons (including practical reasons): it requires only responsiveness to the reasons one possesses, where this could equally be taken to supervene on one's mental states.²²

Nor is the requirement to believe what one's evidence supports of a piece with the sorts of coherence requirements that Broome endorses in his positive theory. These requirements are *wide-scope*, in the sense that when one has the combination of mental states that the requirement forbids, one can come to satisfy the requirement by revising *any* one of the offending attitudes. And they are *schematic*, in the sense that they all pick out *general* patterns of (attitudinal) mental states that are rationally incoherent, where this involves abstracting away, at least to some extent, from the content of the particular attitudes involved. For example, it's supposed to be incoherent to believe *p* and not-*p*, whatever '*p*' is; it's supposed to be incoherent to intend to Φ , believe that Ψ -ing is necessary for Φ -ing, but not intend to Ψ , whatever ' Φ ' and ' Ψ ' are; etc.

By contrast, the requirement to believe what one's evidence supports is not wide-scope. For example, when one has experiences as of the glass containing petrol (and no reason to distrust these experiences), one is simply required one to believe that the glass contains petrol; the requirement to believe what one's evidence supports in such a case can't be satisfied by revising one's experiences (if such a thing

²² Indeed, as we'll see later, this is exactly what sophisticated reasons-responsiveness theories do say.

is even possible). And, while the evidential requirement(s) can be stated in a way that is schematic (e.g.: “if your evidence decisively supports p , you’re required to believe p ”), in order to say which combinations of *mental states* this requirement forbids, we’d need to say which mental states make it the case that your evidence decisively support p . But *this* (often) can’t be captured schematically: when some experience (for example) makes it the case that your evidence supports p , this is often ineliminably due to the particular content of the experience and the particular content of p (and, perhaps, contextual features of one’s situation) in a way that cannot be abstracted into any general pattern.

Thus, Broome cannot view failures to respond to the evidence as (ipso facto) incoherent – which, given *Coherentist Unification*, means he can’t view them as irrational either. But what about some proponent of *Coherentist Unification* who doesn’t share all of Broome’s commitments? Such a person might, in particular, depart from Broome’s claim that rationality doesn’t require responsiveness to reasons, instead viewing *all* failures to respond correctly to (possessed) reasons as a kind of incoherence.²³

We think this use of ‘incoherent’ is a stretch of the ordinary meaning of the term. This can be brought out sharply by cases where it’s unobvious exactly what one’s evidence supports. For example, suppose you possess some body of relevant evidence about who will be the US president in 2021. Presumably there are at least some credences that are inadequately supported by that evidence. Suppose, just to fix ideas, that given all the evidence you have, a credence of 0.6 that Sanders will be president is inadequately supported. Does it follow that you would be *incoherent* if you had credence 0.6 that Sanders will be president? We find it a real stretch to say so. If you arrive at credence 0.6 because you simply misassess the probative force of your evidence that Sanders will be President, judging it to be stronger than it really is, then it seems to us that you are not incoherent in any good sense – though you are, we would contend, less than perfectly *substantively* rational.

Perhaps more importantly, even if there were *some* sense in which having this credence would make one “incoherent,” throwing such cases together with the paradigm instances of structural irrationality seems to collapse distinct phenomena, obscuring important differences between them. Consider the difference between (a) someone who simply misassesses the force of her evidence that Sanders will be president, judging that it supports credence 0.6 and forming credence 0.6 as a result, and (b) someone who herself judges that the evidence doesn’t support credence 0.6 that Sanders will be president, but goes on to form this credence anyway. It seems

²³ This is Wedgwood’s (2017: 11-12) view.

like there is an important difference between these two characters, and it is useful to be able to express that difference by saying that the former is at least structurally rational, while the latter is not. To say that the two errors here are of a piece with one another seems like willful insensitivity to a distinction that, whatever language we use to capture it, is clearly there. (We will return to this issue in §4.2.2.)

More generally, one shouldn't count as incoherent (in the sense that we intend to pick out structural rationality) when the suboptimality of one's mental states is only due to a failure to correctly grasp a *substantive relation of support* between some fact (or proposition, or experience) and some response. This holds even when this substantive relation of support is fairly obvious to reasonable people. Thus, the "clash" between (say) the experience as of the glass containing petrol and believing that the glass contains gin and tonic does not amount to incoherence – at least not in any sense of 'incoherence' that avoids collapsing distinct normative phenomena. And so, the attempt to capture its irrationality by means of *Coherentist Unification* fails.

4.2 Subjective Reasons Unification

As we saw in §4.1, coherentist unifiers such as Broome seem to overlook the possibility of understanding substantive rationality in terms of subjective reasons. But it might be wondered whether this proposal can form the basis of a very different kind of unificatory view.²⁴ The idea would be that the paradigm kinds of incoherence associated with "structural irrationality" in fact all constitute, or involve, failures to respond to one's subjective reasons. Thus, a notion of rationality as responsiveness to *subjective* reasons can unify substantive and structural rationality:

Subjective Reasons Unification. Rationality *simpliciter* is about responding to subjective reasons. Given this account, the distinction between substantive and structural rationality is impossible or unnecessary to draw.

Assessing this proposal requires us to get clearer about what is meant by the term 'subjective reason', which – we'll now suggest – admits of multiple interpretations.²⁵ Consider again *Obviously Petrol*. In this case, the objective reasons support refraining from drinking, since the liquid in the glass is petrol. What about the subjective reasons? That depends on what is meant by 'subjective reason'. On an *evidence-relative*

²⁴ Proponents of the view that rationality consists in responding to subjective reasons include – though the details vary – Schroeder (2009), Parfit (2011), Way (2012), Gibbons (2010, 2013), Whiting (2014), and Sylvan (2015, forthcoming). Though not all of these authors explicitly present this as a way of unifying substantive and structural rationality, they all offer the view as an account of rationality *simpliciter*, and not of substantive rationality in particular, where that's being distinguished from structural rationality.

²⁵ Cf. also Feldman (1988).

interpretation of this notion,²⁶ your reasons support refraining from drinking, since you have very strong evidence that the stuff is petrol.²⁷ On a *belief-relative* interpretation, your reasons support drinking, since you believe that the stuff in the glass is gin and tonic.^{28,29} So really there are (at least) *three* distinct notions of a reason along the dimension that the objective/subjective distinction is supposed to track, which we can summarize as follows:

	What do the reasons support in...	
	... <i>Cleverly Disguised Petrol</i> ?	... <i>Obviously Petrol</i> ?
Fact-relative ("objective")	Refraining	Refraining
Evidence-relative	Drinking	Refraining
Belief-relative	Drinking	Drinking

The literature has been muddled by the fact that some philosophers use ‘subjective reason’ to mean ‘evidence-relative reason’,³⁰ while others use it to mean ‘belief-relative reason’,³¹ and others either aren’t clear which of the two readings they intend³² or deliberately amalgamate the two.³³ We don’t think these philosophers are best understood as giving competing analyses of a single, unified, pretheoretical

²⁶ The notion of evidence as it appears in ‘evidence-relative’ here is one that picks up on the evidence that the agent herself possesses (cf. §4.1.1 above), not on of all the evidence that is “out there”.

²⁷ This isn’t true, by contrast, in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol*.

²⁸ Some may deny that there is a genuine belief-relative sense of ‘reason’ (Dancy 2000: ch. 3; Wedgwood 2017: 58). We don’t need to adjudicate this debate here. We’ll argue that neither the evidence-relative or belief-relative interpretation succeeds in unifying substantive and structural rationality. If the belief-relative interpretation isn’t a genuine reading of the word ‘reason’ in English, so much the worse for using it for this unificatory project.

²⁹ Are belief-relative reasons the same things that Broome allowed that rationality requires you to respond to? No. As we saw, Broome thinks that rationality requires that if you believe your reasons require to *F*, you intend to *F*. But plausibly, you can have a belief-relative reason to *F* without believing that your reasons require you to *F*, as in many cases where you believe something that, if true, would be a reason to *F*, without believing *that* it is a reason to *F*.

³⁰ E.g. Gibbons (2013: ch. 2); Markovits (2014: 7).

³¹ E.g. Schroeder (2004, 2007, 2009); Setiya (2004: 271).

³² E.g. Way (2012).

³³ We’ll consider this view below in §4.2.2.

target, the notion of a subjective reason. Instead, we take them to be picking out distinct notions that are worth distinguishing from each other just as much as they are worth distinguishing from fact-relative (or “objective”) reasons. Consequently, we propose jettisoning objective/subjective terminology³⁴ in favor of a tripartite distinction between fact-relative, evidence-relative, and belief-relative reasons.³⁵

With the difference between evidence-relative and belief-relative reasons now clarified, we can see how *neither* is well-placed to provide an account of rationality that unifies the substantive and the structural. On one hand, an account in terms of *belief*-relative reasons is, like Broome’s view, clearly inadequate to capture substantive rationality.³⁶ We can see this, again, by considering *Obviously Petrol*. In *Obviously Petrol* your belief-relative reasons support drinking. But again, there’s clearly at least a sense in which you are nonetheless irrational to drink in *Obviously Petrol*, and this sense is precisely what the notion of substantive rationality is supposed to capture.

On the other hand, an *evidence*-relative notion of a reason fails to capture structural rationality. As the case of Tom illustrated, someone who fails to respond to their evidence-relative reasons – for example, by having a crazy belief – displays a further kind of irrationality if they are also incoherent – for example, by failing to believe an obvious consequence of the crazy belief. The notion of structural (ir)rationality is designed to capture this, but an account in terms of evidence-relative reasons can’t, since the latter only detects irrationality in virtue of the original, evidentially-unsupported belief.³⁷ Similarly, as the case of Tim illustrated, someone can fail to respond to their evidence-relative reasons (e.g. by having beliefs that are completely out of whack with the evidence), while being completely internally coherent. We think there’s a sense in which such a person is rational, and that’s what

³⁴ Another advantage of this switch in terminology is that it avoids the confusion engendered by the fact that the language of ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ reasons is sometimes (e.g. by Parfit 2011) used to mark an entirely different distinction, namely that between desire-given and desire-independent reasons.

³⁵ In drawing the tripartite distinction, we don’t mean to endorse the claim that the count noun ‘reason(s)’ in its broadly normative sense is semantically ambiguous. The distinction is compatible with – and, indeed, we are sympathetic to – a semantic theory on which the term is context-sensitive, with a contextually-determined parameter for background information. (Cf., *inter alia*, Henning 2014; Finlay 2014: ch. 4; Wedgwood 2017: chs. 4-5.) On this view, ‘fact-relative’, ‘evidence-relative’ and ‘belief-relative’ just draw attention to the nature of the information relative to which a given ‘reason(s)’-claim is to be evaluated. Additionally, we leave open the possibility that there are further notions of a reason beyond the three we distinguish. These three, however, are the ones most relevant for our purposes.

³⁶ In fact, in §5 below, we’ll argue that the belief-relative notion of a reason is *also* inadequate to capture structural rationality. But that’s a somewhat subtler matter.

³⁷ Here we are assuming, plausibly we think, that (irrationally) believing something is not sufficient for its being part of one’s evidence. Hence, Tom’s belief that he is Superman does not provide him with evidence that he can fly.

the notion of structural rationality is designed to capture – but an account in terms of evidence-relative reasons can't.

Or so it seems, *prima facie*. We'll now consider two strategies that push back.

4.2.1 *The Guarantee Hypothesis*

The first strategy comes from Benjamin Kiesewetter (2017) and Errol Lord (2018). Kiesewetter and Lord moot the following hypothesis:³⁸

The Guarantee Hypothesis. The incoherent patterns of attitudes associated with structural irrationality always guarantee that one has failed to respond to one's evidence-relative reasons.³⁹

So, for example, when one believes p and believes $\text{not-}p$, at least *one* of these beliefs must be insufficiently supported by one's evidence.

We think that the Guarantee Hypothesis is false, but will have to leave arguing that for another occasion. Fortunately, we don't have to establish that the hypothesis is false in order to argue that it doesn't vindicate *Subjective Reasons Unification*.

There are, we suggest, two ways to understand the purported upshot of the Guarantee Hypothesis. One reading is *eliminativist* about structural (ir)rationality, while the other is *reductivist*. The eliminativist thought is this. Given that incoherent patterns of attitudes guarantee a failure to respond to one's evidence-relative reasons, they guarantee that the agent is (substantively) irrational. So, the thought goes, we don't need a distinctive notion of structural irrationality to capture the sense in which incoherent agents are irrational. We can eliminate it, saying that rationality *simpliciter* is about responsiveness to evidence-relative reasons.

On the eliminativist reading, the view is clearly a kind of unificationism, since it removes the need for distinguishing substantive and structural rationality. However, it remains subject to the original objections levelled against *Subjective Reasons Unificationism* above – even granting, for the sake of argument, the Guarantee Hypothesis. The problem is that it isn't *just* the intuition that agents with incoherent patterns of attitudes are irrational that needs to be accounted for. We should *also* want to account for the thought that agents who already fail to respond to their (evidence-relative) reasons, but who are *also* incoherent, are irrational in some *additional, further*

³⁸ Before Kiesewetter and Lord, a similar hypothesis was suggested by Kolodny (2007), though Kolodny doesn't frame the view in terms of *evidence*-relative reasons specifically.

³⁹ Strictly speaking, Lord's view is that rationality requires responsiveness to an epistemically filtered *subset* of one's *objective* reasons. But this is close enough to the evidence-relative view not to matter here.

way. And similarly, we should want to account for the thought that agents who maintain coherence while failing to respond to their (evidence-relative) reasons are in *one* sense rational. Even if the Guarantee Hypothesis is true, it can't account for these latter claims. And so, we think, its truth would not support *eliminating* the notion of structural irrationality.⁴⁰

This leads us to the second way of understanding the purported upshot of the Guarantee Hypothesis. On this reading, the view is *reductivist*, not eliminativist, about structural (ir)rationality. Specifically, the idea is that structural (ir)rationality can be analyzed in terms of substantive (ir)rationality in (something like) the following way: what it is for attitudes to be structurally irrational is for them to *guarantee* substantive irrationality. Unlike the eliminativist view, the reductivist view is consistent with thinking that being structurally irrational is a special kind of defect, distinct from that of merely being substantively irrational.⁴¹ Indeed, the reductivist might be able to account for this distinctiveness. On the present view, an agent's being substantively irrational is just a matter of failing to respond correctly to her (evidence-relative) reasons. An agent who is *structurally* irrational, however, does not merely fail in this way. Something stronger is true: her attitudes are such that it's *guaranteed* that she has failed to respond correctly to her (evidence-relative) reasons. Moreover, this guarantee is in a good sense a priori: on this view, once we know what the agent's attitudes are, we can immediately tell she has *in some way* failed to respond to her (evidence-relative) reasons, without needing to know anything about her circumstances or evidence.⁴² Perhaps being in a situation where there's this sort of a

⁴⁰ In response to this sort of worry, Lord (2018: 62-3) moots an alternative, intermediate view. Translated into our vocabulary, his point is that if the Guarantee Hypothesis is true, and we accept an "inheritance" principle of deontic logic that says that if you are required to Φ and Φ -ing entails Ψ -ing, then you are required to Ψ , then the requirement to respond to your evidence-relative reasons entails the various coherence requirements. Lord suggests this could then explain the intuition that those whose attitudes are both unsupported by their reasons and incoherent are irrational twice over. The inheritance principle is dubious. But even if it's acceptable, it is particularly poorly placed to explain "counting" intuitions about the *number* of ways that a person is irrational. If inheritance holds, any requirement entails an *infinite* number of other requirements. For example, the requirement on Tom not to believe that he is Superman will also entail a requirement not to (believe he's Superman and believe that grass is green). But Tom's violation of *this* requirement *doesn't* seem to be an extra respect in which he is irrational.

⁴¹ Kiesewetter (2017) sometimes talks as if he intends his view to be understood this second way. For example, he writes that he aims to "explain the phenomenon of structural rationality in terms of [substantive] requirements" (*ibid.*: 23). On the other hand, elsewhere he talks of structural rationality as a "myth" (*ibid.*: 127) or says he is explaining "the *appearance* of structural irrationality" (*ibid.*: 158; our italics).

⁴² Cf. Whiting (2014: 16). Of course, as Lasonen-Aarnio (forthcoming) points out, the fact *that* she has the attitudes in question is not *a priori*. Lasonen-Aarnio argues that this creates trouble

priori *guarantee* that you're substantively irrational makes it the case that you are guilty of a deeper kind of irrationality than you are when you merely, as a matter of fact, *are* substantively irrational. That deeper kind of irrationality can be labelled 'structural irrationality'.

This implementation of the view is more promising than the first (though since we reject the Guarantee Hypothesis, we still ultimately reject it). But it simply isn't a form of unificationism, since it positively *affirms* the distinctness of substantive and structural rationality. Thus, neither the more ambitious nor the less ambitious reading of the view saves the unificatory view. The more ambitious (eliminativist) version of the view is subject to the same objections we originally levelled at the unificatory view, while the less ambitious (reductivist) version isn't a version of the unificatory view.

4.2.2 *The hybrid view*

The second strategy attempts to vindicate *Subjective Reasons Unification* by appealing to a notion of a subjective reason that *amalgamates* what we've been calling the 'evidence-relative' and 'belief-relative' interpretations. Call this the *hybrid view* of subjective reasons. Advocates of the hybrid view typically take subjective reasons to include not just the contents of beliefs, but also those of perceptual experiences and other evidentially-relevant non-doxastic states, such as intellectual seemings or the deliverances of memory.⁴³ Schroeder (2011), for instance, takes subjective reasons to be the contents of one's "presentational attitudes", understood as attitudes that "present their content to their subject as being true" (204). This includes belief and perceptual experience, but not (for example) desire, wonder, supposition, or assumption (204-205; cf. also Sylvan 2015).

At first blush, the hybrid notion of a subjective reason looks to be well-suited to the task of unifying substantive and structural rationality, since it incorporates traditional elements of both. Appealing to the contents of *belief* helps account for intuitions about coherence, and appealing to the contents of *experiences* helps account for intuitions about justification or reasonableness.

One immediate problem facing the hybrid view is that it isn't clear how it can explain our seemingly bifurcated judgments of (ir)rationality in *Obviously Petrol*. In *Obviously Petrol*, you're convinced the stuff in the glass is gin and tonic despite evidence to the contrary. As noted above, although there's a clear sense in which it would be irrational for you to drink, there's *also* a clear sense in which, given what

for the idea that a guarantee of substantive rationality (always) grounds a distinctive sense in which the agent is criticizable.

⁴³ See, e.g., Schroeder (2011), Whiting (2014), and Sylvan (2015).

you believe, it would be *rational* for you to drink.⁴⁴ Indeed, given your belief that it's gin and tonic together with your strong desire for gin and tonic, it would seem to be irrational *not* to drink. The sense in which it would be irrational to drink corresponds to substantive rationality, while the sense in which it would be irrational not to drink corresponds to structural rationality.

How might the hybrid view explain these verdicts? It's unclear. After all, according to the hybrid view, subjective reasons are provided *both* by one's experiences *and* by one's beliefs. In *Obviously Petrol*, then, you would have at least one reason to drink provided by your beliefs, as well as at least one reason not to drink provided by your experiences. Whether it would be rational or not for you to drink therefore isn't clear. Presumably it will depend on the relative strength or weight of the reasons involved, but it is hard to see how the relative weights of the two countervailing reasons would be determined in this sort of case.

The problem here isn't *just* that the hybrid view doesn't immediately yield a verdict. It's also that this picture – where your beliefs and experiences provide you with countervailing reasons that are of similar enough kinds to be commensurable and compete – seems phenomenologically off. It doesn't seem that, in this case, the reason to drink and the reason not to drink are countervailing considerations that can be felt from the same perspective to jointly determine an all-things-considered verdict. Rather, it seems that from one point of view, you have a strong reason to drink, and that from a different point of view, you have a strong reason not to drink. This phenomenology differs from most ordinary cases of competing *pro tanto* reasons.

Other cases can bring out the problem even more sharply. Consider George, who believes (it goes without saying, unjustifiably) that Obama is a Muslim and that all Muslims are terrorists. Notwithstanding these beliefs, we can agree that George has strong reasons, provided by his evidence, against believing that Obama is a terrorist. But it just seems wrong to say that George's unjustified beliefs provide him with competing reasons of the same broad kind in favor of believing that Obama is a terrorist. It's not just that the evidential reasons in favor of the former outweigh or even defeat the latter.⁴⁵ Rather, it's that any sense in which his unjustified beliefs provide him with "reasons" to believe that Obama is not a terrorist can only be a sense of 'reason' *so* subjective that it's detached from the substantive reasonableness or justification of his beliefs entirely. Along the dimension of evaluation that's

⁴⁴ In putting things this way, we don't intend to be taking a stance on the debate between "narrow-scope" and "wide-scope" views. A fundamentally wide-scope view is compatible with superficially narrow-scope talk (see Worsnip 2015).

⁴⁵ Compare Schroeder (2011), who holds that unjustified beliefs provide reasons, but ones that are guaranteed to be defeated.

concerned with the substantive justification or reasonableness of his belief that Obama is a terrorist, his beliefs that Obama is a Muslim and that all Muslims are terrorists don't help *at all*. To amalgamate his evidential reasons to believe that Obama is not a terrorist with his (supposed) belief-given "reasons" to believe that Obama is a terrorist is to fail to keep distinct normative phenomena apart.

Or consider Helga, who believes as a result of wishful thinking that her child is the brightest student in the school. We find it incredibly implausible to think that merely *believing* that her child is the brightest student in the school gives her any substantive reason or justification to be proud. Such beliefs are clearly relevant to structural rationality, but not to substantive rationality. Having substantive reasons, like having children, is harder than that.

There are also reasons to worry about the hybrid view's adequacy in capturing structural rationality. The hybrid view attempts to unify beliefs and perceptual experiences by grouping them under a broader category of *presentational states*: states that have a content that they present as true. But this misses out a number of other states that can be relevant to structural rationality.

First, any version of the hybrid view that's built around the notion of a presentational state will have trouble accommodating *non-presentational* doxastic states, such as agnosticism or the suspension of judgment. For example, suppose you believe that p entails q and suspend judgment with respect to q . Given these states, it would seem to be structurally irrational to believe p . This can't be captured by saying that there's a (hybrid) subjective reason not to believe p , however, since suspension of judgment is not a presentational state – it doesn't present its content to its subject as being true.

Second, it can't fully account for the relevance of *graded* presentational states such as degrees of confidence. I might be fairly confident that p and that p entails q , but not be confident enough to actually believe either and so not have them as (hybrid) subjective reasons to believe or disbelieve anything else. Yet clearly something would be wrong if I wasn't at all confident that q – and it would be even worse if I were to positively believe that not- q . Again, a hybridized subjective reasons view seems incapable of accommodating this, since you either have a subjective reason or you don't – and whether you do or you don't depends on whether the content "presents" itself as true, where this is also taken to be an on-off matter. Wherever the threshold for how much confidence is required is drawn, it seems that states of confidence below the cut-off can still make a difference to structural rationality. Moreover, it seems that *how much* of a difference they make, both below

and above the threshold, will in part be a function of how high one's confidence is. It's far from clear how the hybrid view can account for any of this.

Third, and finally, it can't (straightforwardly) account for the relevance of *non-doxastic* states such as intentions, preferences, and desires. For example, given that you intend some end *E* and believe that some means *M* is necessary for *E*, you'll be structurally irrational if you fail to intend *M*. But your intention is not a state that presents its content as true, and so it cannot supply a (hybrid) subjective reason to intend *M*. There are other examples that do not involve *any* beliefs: given a preference for *A* over *B* and a preference for *B* over *C*, it's structurally irrational to prefer *C* over *A*, but again, since preferences don't present their contents as true, they cannot supply (hybrid) subjective reasons. One could pursue a complex account according to which these states all guarantee the presence of normative or evaluative beliefs about how one ought to act or what would be best,⁴⁶ but this seems *ad hoc*. Similarly, one could claim that what really furnishes the reason is one's belief *that* one has the relevant intention or preference, or one's experience as of having it. But this is odd, and many will insist that the first-order states themselves are capable of making a difference to what is structurally rational. Intentions, preferences, and the like needn't be filtered through one's presentational states to play such a role.

Thus, even the hybrid theory of subjective reasons fails to make the unification of substantive and structural rationality plausible.

5. Direct Mapping, Redux?

We have argued that the prospects for unifying substantive and structural rationality by appeal to subjective reasons are dim. We've also, along the way, argued against a hybrid view of subjective reasons that groups evidence-relative and belief-relative reasons together, holding instead that we should reject the objective/subjective dichotomy in favor of a tripartite distinction between fact-relative, evidence-relative, and belief-relative reasons. However, with this done, a different kind of direct mapping of this distinction onto the substantive/structural distinction might seem very plausible:

Direct Mapping, Redux. Substantive rationality is about responding to *evidence-relative* reasons, while structural rationality is about responding to *belief-relative* reasons.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Cf. Schroeder (2009).

⁴⁷ This seems to be close to Sylvan's (forthcoming) view.

However, this proposal fails as well. In particular, it's a mistake to try to understand structural rationality in terms of belief-relative reasons. There are at least three reasons why.

The first is that all the states relevant to structural rationality that the hybrid view of reasons left out are also (*a fortiori*) left out by a belief-relative view. Thus, it faces the same difficulties that the hybrid view faces in accounting for the structural relevance of non-presentational doxastic states, graded doxastic states, and non-doxastic states.

The second problem is this. At least on one prominent account of belief-relative reasons,⁴⁸ it suffices for R 's being a belief-relative reason for A to Φ that (i) A believes R , and (ii) if R were true, R would be a fact-relative reason to Φ . But given this analysis (and others like it), one can fail to respond to one's belief-relative reasons without any structural irrationality. This is so in many cases where, though (i) and (ii) both hold, A believes that R does *not* provide any reason to Φ . Consider:

CEO. A CEO is trying to decide whether to open a new factory. She believes (truly, let's suppose) that opening this factory will gravely damage the environment. This is (in fact) a decisive reason not to open the factory. But the CEO doesn't care that the factory will damage the environment, and denies that this fact is any reason at all not to open it. She goes ahead and opens the factory.

In this case, the CEO believes a proposition – that opening the factory will gravely damage the environment – that, if true, is a decisive reason not to open the factory. She thus has a decisive belief-relative reason not to open the factory, at least by standard accounts of belief-relative reasons. Yet it seems clear that – given that the CEO doesn't care about the environment and explicitly denies that environmental considerations constitute reasons – the CEO isn't *structurally* irrational for opening the factory, or intending to do so.

The third problem is that an account of structural rationality as responsiveness to belief-relative reasons arguably presupposes a “narrow-scope” account of structural rationality. On this view, a belief gives you a reason to have or not to have some other attitude. But at least many theorists of structural rationality think that requirements of structural rationality are “wide-scope”: they simply ban *combinations* of attitudes, staying neutral on *which* should be revised, and without either attitude having any special authority over the other. This isn't fully dispositive, since not everyone accepts the wide-scope view, but those attracted to the wide-scope

⁴⁸ See e.g. Schroeder (2009), Parfit (2011).

view have an additional reason to be suspicious of an account of structural rationality as responsiveness to belief-relative reasons.

6. Substantive Rationality as Responsiveness to Evidence-Relative Reasons

Given the distinction between fact-relative, evidence-relative reasons, and that between substantive and structural rationality, there are *six* possible interpretations of the slogan ‘rationality is about responsiveness to reasons’:

	Substantive rationality	Structural rationality
Fact-relative reasons	False (§3)	False (§3)
Evidence-relative reasons	?	False (§4.2)
Belief-relative reasons	False (§4.2)	False (§5)

Our arguments to this point have ruled out all but one of these interpretations. (For each false interpretation, the brackets indicate in which section to find our argument.) That leaves us with only one candidate possibility: that substantive rationality is about responsiveness to evidence-relative reasons.

This claim seems initially very plausible. It seems like substantive rationality must be about responding to reasons of *some* kind. And judgments about substantive rationality seem to line up well with judgments about evidence-relative reasons. For example, as we saw earlier, the agent is substantively rational in drinking in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol* – where her evidence-relative reasons support drinking – but not in *Obviously Petrol* – where they don’t.

However, there are challenges in fleshing out the notion of an evidence-relative reason in such a way as to yield a fully satisfying account of substantive rationality. We’ll focus on one such challenge by considering and criticizing a recent proposal by Lord (2018).

6.1 Lord's view

On Lord's view, (substantive⁴⁹) rationality is about responding to the reasons you "possess". This can be seen as a kind of evidence-relative view. Suppose some proposition (or fact) R is a reason for you to Φ . According to Lord, one condition on your "possessing" R as a reason to Φ is that you are in a position to know R . Thus, there is a kind of epistemic or evidential constraint on the reasons that you possess.⁵⁰ So, for example, the proposition (or fact) that the glass contains petrol, in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol*, is not among your *possessed* reasons, since given your evidence, you are not in a position to know it. But in *Obviously Petrol*, the same proposition (or fact) is among your possessed reasons, since, given your evidence, you *are* in a position to know it. This helps to explain why it is irrational for you to drink in *Obviously Petrol*, but not in *Cleverly Disguised Petrol*.

However, Lord thinks that this first, epistemic condition on possessing a reason is not enough to yield a fully satisfying account of substantive rationality. To show this, he appeals to the following case, adapted from Broome (2007):

Lois's Fish. Lois just ordered fish from her favorite seafood restaurant. Right before she digs in, the waiter comes out to inform her that the fish contains salmonella. Lois has the unfortunate belief that salmonella is one of the many bacteria found in food that is harmless to humans. And, indeed, this belief is rational. A renowned food scientist told her so. So she goes ahead and forms an intention to eat the fish and eats the fish. (Lord 2018: 98)

In this case, Lord assumes, the fact that the fish contains salmonella is a decisive reason not to eat it. Moreover, Lois is in a position to know that the fish contains salmonella.⁵¹ So, if meeting the first condition suffices for possessing a reason, it seems, Lois possesses a decisive reason not to eat the fish. But, Lord judges, it isn't irrational for Lois to eat the fish. Thus, so far, the account of possessed reasons doesn't form the basis for a satisfying account of substantive rationality.

Lord's solution to this problem is to introduce a second, "practical" condition on possessing a reason, namely that A must be "in a position to manifest knowledge

⁴⁹ Actually, Lord thinks that rationality *simpliciter* is about responding to reasons. This is because he thinks that structural rationality can be eliminated via the Guarantee Hypothesis. We considered and rejected this strategy in §4.2.1 above. But we can still consider Lord's view as an account of *substantive* rationality.

⁵⁰ If some proposition p is amongst your evidence only if you're in a position to know it, then it follows given Lord's view that only propositions that are among your evidence can be among your reasons. Equally, if what you're in a position to know chiefly *depends* upon your evidence, then there's also a clear sense in which the view is evidence-relative.

⁵¹ This distinguishes the case from one like *Cleverly Disguised Petrol*, where the agent is *not* in a position to know the relevant reason, namely that the glass contains petrol.

about how to use R as a reason to Φ " (*ibid.*: 121). Lord clarifies how he is understanding the relevant know-how thus: "if you know how to use R as a reason to Φ , you are disposed to Φ when R is a reason to Φ " (*ibid.*).

We will argue that the introduction of this second condition makes Lord's theory of substantive rationality far too underdemanding. To see why, note that Lord accepts the following three claims:

- (1) Substantive rationality requires A to Φ only if (i) there is a decisive reason (or body of reasons) R for A to Φ , and (ii) A possesses R . (*general account of substantive rationality*)
- (2) A possesses a reason R to Φ only if A is in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use R as a reason to Φ . (*practical condition on possessing a reason*)
- (3) A is in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use R as a reason to Φ only if A is disposed to Φ when R is a reason to Φ .⁵² (*clarification of the practical condition*)

It follows from (1), (2), and (3) that

- (4) Substantive rationality requires A to Φ only if (i) there's some decisive reason (or body of reasons) R for A to Φ , and (ii) A is disposed to Φ when R is a reason to Φ .

But, whenever 4(i) satisfied, R is a reason to Φ . So whenever 4(i) and 4(ii) are *both* satisfied, A is disposed to Φ . Thus, (4) entails:

- (5) Substantive rationality requires A to Φ only if A is disposed to Φ .⁵³

But (5) is not tolerable; it makes the account of substantive rationality far too underdemanding. Paradigm cases of substantive irrationality involve agents who are not even *disposed* to do what substantive rationality requires them to do.⁵⁴

Consider first paradigm examples of (substantive) epistemic irrationality, such as a flat-earthier. The flat-earthier, let's suppose, is aware of various

⁵² There is a scope ambiguity in this premise. " A is disposed to Φ when R is a decisive reason (or body of reasons) to Φ " might be read either narrow-scope – such that the disposition is to [Φ], and A has this disposition when R is a decisive reason to Φ – or wide-scope – such that the disposition is to [Φ when R is a decisive reason to Φ], and A has this disposition whether R is a decisive reason to Φ or not. Whichever way it is read, though, the problematic consequence remains; see the next footnote below.

⁵³ If premise (3) above is read wide-scope (see the last footnote), then perhaps strictly speaking (5) should be replaced by: (substantive) rationality requires you to Φ (in circumstance C) only if you are disposed to [Φ in circumstance C]. But this result is just as objectionable.

⁵⁴ Sylvan's (2015) account of rationality as responsiveness to "apparent" reasons faces an analogous problem.

considerations – such as the fact that all scientists hold that the earth is a sphere – that are, in fact (though not in the flat earther’s opinion), decisive evidential reasons to believe that the earth is a sphere. In defiance of this evidence, the flat-earther believes that the earth is flat (and not a sphere). On Lord’s account, the flat-earther is (substantively) irrational only if he is *disposed* to believe that the earth is a sphere (in the presence of the relevant evidence), but nevertheless ends up believing that the earth is flat (in the presence of the very same evidence). But this seems wrong. It’s completely natural, in the (substantive) sense of ‘irrational’ that is dominant in mainstream epistemology,⁵⁵ to call the flat-earther irrational even if he’s a steadfast flat-earther with no disposition whatsoever to believe that the earth is a sphere. Indeed, this insensitivity of the flat-earther’s dispositions to the evidence is plausibly part of what actually *grounds* the verdict of severe substantive irrationality.

Now consider cases of substantive practical irrationality, such as the agent who drinks from the glass in *Obviously Petrol*. It isn’t part of the setup of this case that the agent is *disposed* to refrain from drinking, but goes on to drink anyway. Rather, we can understand the agent as having no disposition to refrain from drinking whatsoever, despite all the signs that the glass contains petrol. Once again, this lack of disposition to refrain from drinking doesn’t mitigate the agent’s substantive irrationality for drinking; if anything, it intensifies it.

The problem can be brought out further by considering a case that forms a minimal pair with the *Lois’s Fish* case that Lord uses to motivate the second condition:

Lois’s Fish-Modified. Lois orders fish from her favorite seafood restaurant. Right before she digs in, the waiter comes out to inform her that the fish contains salmonella. Lois has the unfortunate belief that all bacteria, including salmonella, are harmless for humans, because they are “natural”. She has this belief despite her previous experiences getting sick from eating spoiled food, and her awareness of the testimony of all scientists to the contrary. Her intention to eat the fish remains, and she eats the fish.

Though we agree with Lord that Lois is rational to eat the fish in the original case, it is incredibly natural to say that she’s (substantively) irrational to eat the fish in this modified case. But Lord’s theory seems to give the same verdict about both. In both cases, it’s natural to suppose, Lois is *not* disposed to treat the fact that the fish contains salmonella as a reason to refrain from eating the fish. Thus, on Lord’s view, she doesn’t possess this reason. Thus, on Lord’s view, Lois isn’t irrational in either case.

⁵⁵ Note that Lord (2018: 4-5) claims to be siding with the epistemologist’s ordinary conception of rationality, as compared with the (coherentist, Broomean) conception that was (at least for a time) dominant in the practical rationality literature.

Intuitively, the difference between the original and modified versions of the case is the background belief that Lois's action rests upon (namely, that salmonella is harmless to humans) is rational in the original version of the case, but irrational in the modified version. However, this doesn't make a difference to the verdict that Lord's theory yields about the rationality of Lois's action. It might be suggested that this is OK as long as we can say that Lois is irrational in *some* way in the modified case: if not in her action, then in her background belief.⁵⁶ But Lord's view can't even say that Lois's background belief is irrational. For just as in the case of the flat-earthier, Lord's view will say that Lois is irrational to believe that salmonella is harmless to humans only if she is *disposed* to treat the experiences of sickness and scientists' testimony as reasons not to believe that salmonella is harmless for humans – which, we can stipulate, she isn't. Thus, although Lord stipulates that Lois has good reasons for her background belief in the original case, it's not clear why this should make a difference to Lois's rationality *on Lord's theory*.

That said, a similar problem for Lord's view arises even in cases that (unlike *Obviously Petrol* and *Lois's Fish-Modified*) don't involve any intuitively irrational background beliefs. For instance, return to the example of Talia, whose primary aim is to count blades of grass, even though this doesn't bring her much, if any, pleasure.⁵⁷ It's natural to describe even an ideally coherent version of Talia as seriously irrational, simply in virtue of her commitment to such a worthless end.⁵⁸ In this case, her intention to count blades of grass need not rest on any intuitively irrational belief. Once again, Lord's theory would only be able to count Talia as irrational if she has some *disposition* not to count grass that is sensitive to her reasons not to count grass (but continues to count grass anyway). But again, it seems that we're willing to convict Talia of substantive irrationality whether or not this is so.

Lord (p.c.) has suggested, in reply, that the cases have to look very odd for the subject to genuinely have no disposition of the relevant kind, and that his account can still say that the subjects are irrational in all ordinary, non-far-fetched versions of the cases. We have three counter-replies. To make them concrete, we'll focus on the flat-earthier, though the same points apply to the other cases.

First, it doesn't seem that far-fetched to imagine the flat-earthier having no disposition of the relevant kind. We can imagine the flat-earthier as a conspiracy theorist who takes the testimony of scientists to be evidence *against* the content of what they say. Since this person is disposed to become *less* confident that the earth is

⁵⁶ Compare Lord (2014: 161-2).

⁵⁷ Rawls (1971: 432).

⁵⁸ Cf. Setiya (2007: 649).

a sphere in response to scientific testimony to that effect, it's plausible that he has no disposition to believe that the earth is a sphere in response to this testimony. This doesn't seem far-fetched or even that unusual. People can be (grossly) mistaken about what their evidence supports. There isn't always a part of them that recognizes what it really supports, with some corresponding disposition to respond appropriately, buried deep down. Evidential support relations just aren't that transparent.

Second, even if the case is unusual, it is possible, and Lord's view still seems to yield the wrong verdict about it, in a way that reveals a more general structural flaw with the view. Intuitively, the less that one is disposed to respond appropriately to one's evidence, the *more* (substantively) irrational one is, with the limiting case being that where one has no disposition whatsoever to respond appropriately to one's evidence, which is the *height* of (substantive) irrationality. But Lord's view predicts that having no disposition whatsoever to respond appropriately to one's evidence should let one off the hook. That is the wrong result.

Third, suppose Lord can construe the case so that in any realistic version of it, the agent has *some* disposition to believe that the earth is a sphere in response to scientific testimony to that effect. In order for this to help Lord, even this very weak disposition (that is defeated by a stronger disposition to respond in the opposite way to *the very same stimulus*) needs to suffice for meeting the practical condition. In other words, he must understand his practical condition as requiring only *some* disposition, no matter how weak or defeated. But then Lord owes us an explanation of why, if we should expect there to be a very weak disposition of this kind in the flat-earther case, we shouldn't also expect there to be a similarly weak disposition to appropriately respond to one's reasons in cases like (the original version of) *Lois's Fish*, in which he wants to say that the practical condition in *unmet* is order to let the agent off the hook. We see no principled grounds for holding this. Thus, the view faces a dilemma: either understand dispositions, and the strength of them that's required, such as to count *both* the flat-earther *and* Lois as satisfying the practical condition (in which case the practical condition doesn't do the work it was supposed to do), *or* understand them in such a way as count neither of them as satisfying the practical condition (in which case our objection from the flat-earther case and others like it stands).

The upshot is that Lord's account fails to capture the irrationality in the very sorts of cases that motivate the introduction of a category of *substantive* rationality – that goes beyond mere coherence – in the first place. Lord doesn't himself employ distinct notions of substantive and structural rationality. But he does seem to think that the idea that rationality consists *only* in coherence will be too underdemanding a theory of rationality. However, as we've seen, given the strong constraints Lord puts

on what it takes to “possess” a reason, his own theory also ends up being similarly underdemanding. On Lord’s view, in effect, the only way you can be (substantively) irrational in not Φ -ing is if you are *disposed* to Φ , but this disposition is somehow blocked. It’s an oddly restrictive view of substantive rationality that confines it to failures to manifest dispositions that you already have.

6.2 *The general challenge*

We’ve just argued that Lord’s version of the evidence-relative view provides an inadequate account of substantive rationality. Although Lord’s view is just one possible version of this view, its failure sets a more general task for other accounts. Lord is right that we don’t want our account of substantive rationality to convict the *original* version of Lois of irrationality. But, we have urged, we *do* want our account of substantive rationality to convict the *modified* version of Lois – and other characters like the flat-earther, the agent in *Obviously Petrol*, and so on – of irrationality. The task for evidence-relative theories is to find a view that satisfies both of these desiderata. It bears stressing that it appears that the original Lois *does* meet Lord’s first, epistemic condition on what it takes to possess a reason: she is in a position to know the fact (or proposition) that is a reason for her to refrain from eating (namely, that the fish contains salmonella), and that fact is plausibly part of her evidence. So the solution, it seems, can’t just be to reject Lord’s second condition and hang on to the first. There was something real that motivated the introduction of the second condition.

6.3 *The beginning of a solution?*

How is this problem to be handled? Here’s (the beginning of) a proposal. In the discussion so far, we’ve acceded to the common (usually tacit) assumption that normative support for an agent’s responses is (typically) fundamentally provided by atomic facts, taken on their own. For example, we’ve followed Lord in assuming that in Lois’s case, the normative support for a certain response (*viz.* not eating the fish) is provided by the atomic fact that the fish contains salmonella. On this picture, this atomic fact enjoys a privileged status as the reason (where ‘reason’ here is a count-noun) to refrain from eating the fish.⁵⁹ Other facts, like the fact that salmonella is harmful to humans, are not themselves part of the reason, but merely help *explain why* the fact that the fish contains salmonella is a reason for Lois to refrain from eating it. Call this the *atomic view*. So if we assume the atomic view, it seems that Lois meets

⁵⁹ That’s not to say that this picture denies that there could be *other* reasons not to eat the fish (e.g. that the fish is over-salted). But it does hold that the fact that the fish contains salmonella enjoys priority relative to the considerations that this picture takes to be in the background of explaining why *it* is a reason (e.g. the fact that salmonella is harmful to humans).

the relevant epistemic condition for possessing the reason: she's in a position to know (indeed, does know) that the fish contains salmonella.

But the atomic view isn't the only option. According to what we'll call the *cluster view*, normative support is (typically) fundamentally provided by *clusters* of facts, and the atomic facts we typically cite as normative reasons serve as *representatives* of such clusters.⁶⁰ The claim here is not just the banal one that there's often more than one reason to do something (as when the fact that the fish contains salmonella is one reason to refrain from eating, and the fact that the fish is over-salted is another). Rather, it's that even a *single* strain of normative support is typically provided by a cluster of facts, where at least many of the facts among this cluster are roughly on a par, explanatorily speaking. Thus, for example, the fact that fish contains salmonella itself only provides support for refraining from eating it *in conjunction with* the fact that salmonella is harmful to humans (and perhaps further facts too). To put things another way, the two facts jointly explain why Lois has reason (where 'reason' here is a mass noun, as distinct from the count noun 'reason(s)') to refrain from eating. Moreover, neither of these facts enjoys privileged status over the other in explaining why Lois has reason to refrain from eating.⁶¹ This means that it's a mistake to expect an answer as to which of these two facts is fundamentally "the reason" (where 'reason' is a count-noun) for Lois to refrain from eating.

The cluster view can nevertheless acknowledge that we often do felicitously *cite* atomic facts as (count-noun) 'reasons', without mentioning the other facts that constitute the remainder of the relevant cluster. However, it maintains that which fact from the cluster is most naturally cited as 'the reason' does not reflect any deep metaphysical or explanatory primacy, but rather just which fact most needs raising to conversational salience – a factor that varies across conversational contexts without any change in the underlying normative facts. For instance, if we (the conversational participants) both already know that salmonella is harmful to humans, but you're not yet aware that the fish contains salmonella, it's more helpful for me to cite the fact that the fish contains salmonella if you ask me to give you "the reason" for Lois not to eat the fish. But equally, if things are reversed, and you know that the fish contains salmonella but not that salmonella is harmful to humans, it's more helpful for me to cite the fact that salmonella is harmful as the reason for her not to refrain from eating.

⁶⁰ Cf. Fogal (2016).

⁶¹ It isn't, say, that the fact F1 that the fish contains salmonella explains why she has reason to refrain, and the fact F2 that salmonella is harmful to human explains *why F1 explains why* she has reason to refrain. Rather, F1 and F2 simply combine to explain why she has reason to refrain, on a par with each other.

Given the cluster view, Lois's position in the original version of the case – which, recall, is that of knowing that the fish contains salmonella, but not being in a position to know that salmonella is harmful to humans – isn't importantly different from that of someone (call him Lewis) who is in the converse position of knowing that salmonella is harmful to humans, but not being in a position to know that the fish contains salmonella. Each of them isn't in a position to know (at least) *one* of the cluster of facts that, jointly, provide normative support for refraining from eating. The atomic view takes it that Lois is in a position to know “the reason” to refrain from eating, but Lewis isn't. This is why Lord thinks Lewis's case is dealt with easily by the epistemic condition, but Lois's isn't, and so requires a separate “practical condition”.⁶² But given the cluster view, this is a mistake. Whatever epistemic condition deals with Lewis's case should be equally capable of handling Lois's: no practical condition is needed. This is appealing. Intuitively, pointing to Lois's lack of know-how about how to use a fact as a reason is an unduly roundabout diagnosis of her problem. Fundamentally, her problem is epistemic, not practical: it's that she doesn't know (and isn't in a position to know) that salmonella is harmful to humans.

6.4 *The new challenge(s)*

It might now seem that, at least if the cluster view is correct, we have solved our problem: we only need an epistemic condition after all. But in fact, as we'll now show, this falls short of a precisification of the claim that substantive rationality consists in responding to evidence-relative reasons.

To begin with, we haven't said how to reformulate the epistemic condition to apply to the cluster view rather than the atomic view. On the atomic view, there's a list of atomic facts that each constitute reasons, and you meet the epistemic condition for the relevant reason just if you're in a position to know the atomic fact that constitutes it. But what about the cluster view?

We might try saying that in order to be (substantively) rationally required to respond to some cluster of facts that provides support for Φ -ing, you have to be in a position to know *each* fact in the cluster. But there is cause to be dissatisfied with this simple proposal, for at least two reasons.

First, if the cluster of facts gets really large, it will be unrealistic to expect you to be in a position to know *everything* that jointly contributes to providing support for Φ -ing in order to be rationally required to Φ . In such cases, you will be rationally required to Φ even though you don't meet the epistemic condition as stated, and so the stated epistemic condition seems too strong.

⁶² Cf. Lord (2018: 23-27).

Second, consider cases where one is (rationally) misled about the *normative* question of whether some fact or cluster of facts supports Φ -ing, where this normative ignorance doesn't rest on more fundamental descriptive ignorance. Arguably, when one is aware of some cluster of facts that as a matter of fact decisively support Φ -ing, but rationally believes that those facts do not decisively support Φ -ing, one need not be irrational in failing to Φ . But the fact that the cluster decisively supports Φ -ing seems to be one fact that can't itself be part of the cluster. Thus, you're still in a position to know each fact in the cluster. In such case, you're not rationally required to Φ even though you do meet the epistemic condition as stated, and so the stated epistemic condition seems too weak.

Perhaps there is a way of fine-tuning the epistemic condition for the cluster view to meet these worries. But it may also be that we need to abandon the approach of assessing whether you satisfy some condition with respect to each of a series of propositions, one by one, and replace it with a more holistic evaluation of your epistemic position. If this is so, then the notion of an evidence-relative reason, as it appears in the slogan that rationality is about responding to evidence-relative reasons, is going to be hard to make precise.

Moreover, there's a sense in which, if the cluster view is correct, the slogan's reference to '*reasons*' encodes a mistake. On the cluster view, normative support for actions and attitudes is fundamentally provided by clusters of facts – ones that we rarely cite *in toto* as (count-noun) '*reasons*' – rather than the atomic facts that we do commonly cite as '*reasons*'. Thus, given the cluster view, substantive rationality is fundamentally about performing the actions, and having the attitudes, that are normatively supported by such clusters of facts – the actions and attitudes for which one has most (mass-noun) *reason*, where this too is given a suitably evidence-relative construal.⁶³ This may seem like a rather small change from the claim that substantive rationality is about responding to evidence-relative *reasons*. But to the extent that the latter slogan tacitly encodes the atomic view, it is liable to lead one into a mistaken view of the nature of normative support.

Let us take stock. Naively, one might have thought that the notion of an 'evidence-relative reason' can be captured in terms of a simple epistemic condition. But Lord points out that this is not so, for a simple epistemic condition gets the wrong result in (the original version of) *Lois's Fish*. Lord's own solution is to introduce a 'practical condition' on possessed (or evidence-relative) reasons, but we argued that

⁶³ As we've effectively already been pointing out, formulating the right evidence-relative construal of (mass-noun) *reason* may be a task even trickier than formulating the right evidence-relative construal of (count-noun) *reasons*.

this makes the resulting account of substantive rationality far too underdemanding. Our own preferred solution to the problem appeals to a cluster view about normative support, but with this in place, it turns out that (count-noun) *reasons* may not be as fundamental to the analysis of substantive rationality as they first seem to be. If this is right, then even the *most* promising interpretation of the slogan of that rationality consists in responding to reasons – namely that *substantive* rationality consists in responding to *evidence-relative* reasons – is at best misleading, and at worst mistaken.⁶⁴

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