

Goodness-Fixing Isn't Good Enough: A Reply to McHugh and Way*

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Abstract

According to McHugh and Way reasoning is a person-level attitude revision that is regulated by its constitutive aim of getting fitting attitudes. They claim that this account offers an explanation of what is wrong with reasoning in ways one believes to be bad and that this explanation is an alternative to an explanation that appeals to the so-called Taking Condition. I argue that their explanation is unsatisfying.

Keywords: reasoning, taking condition, inference, rationality

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1 Introduction

It is absurd to have thoughts that could naturally be expressed by saying something of the form:

(Bad) r , so, p ; but r does not support p . (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 191)¹

As Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way put it, ‘the second half seems to contradict the first’ (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 191). I will call an irrational mental state, act, or combination thereof absurd just in case consciously engaging in the act, state, or combination makes it necessary that one is conscious of a clash in one’s mind, i.e., it implies that constituents of one’s mental life are in rational tension with one another and that this is clear from the subject’s perspective.² If I consciously believe, e.g., that P and that $not-P$, these two mental states consciously clash with one another.³

This notion of absurdity is meant to capture an intuitive difference between two types of irrationality. Committing the Gambler’s Fallacy, denying non-obvious consequences of one’s beliefs, and having intransitive preferences involve inconsistent commitments. But these states or acts are not always absurd. One can easily go in, say, for the Gambler’s Fallacy while being conscious of one’s reasoning and beliefs and without being

¹Of course, such thoughts aren’t irrational if the thinker changes her mind in the middle or if she means something by ‘support’ that is not relevant to whether one is irrational in making an inference. Let’s put such cases to one side.

²Perhaps a partial grasp of the contents involved or inattention provide counter-examples to this way of capturing the intuitive notion of absurdity. I ignore such complications here. Notice that I do not say that being conscious of a clash is a higher-order or independent state of mind.

³Perhaps there are exceptions to this among paraconsistent logicians, philosophers with peculiar views about belief, etc. I am ignoring such issues here.

conscious of any rational tension. By contrast, one cannot consciously think instances of (Bad) without being conscious of a rational tension.

Good accounts of inference should either explain the absurdity of (Bad) or explain it away. Notice that it is easy to explain why thinking instances of (Bad) is irrational. After all, when you think an instance of (Bad) you are making at least one mistake: either your inference is bad, or your belief that the inference is bad is false. And you can know this *a priori*. But that doesn't distinguish (Bad) from the Gambler's Fallacy. The challenge is to explain why thinking instances of (Bad) is not merely irrational but absurd. Some philosophers think that in order to explain this, we must accept Boghossian's (2014) Taking Condition, i.e., the thesis that inference requires that the reasoner takes her premises to support her conclusion and draws her conclusion because of that fact. McHugh and Way present a novel account of reasoning, and they claim that 'we need not explain the incoherence of (Bad) by appeal to the Taking Condition' (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 191). Their 'account offers an alternative explanation' (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 191). I will argue that this alternative explanation is unsatisfying.

2 McHugh and Way's explanation

The general shape of McHugh and Way's account is that reasoning is a case of person-level, conscious and active rule-following in which the reasoner aims at getting fitting attitudes, e.g., at getting a true belief in the case of theoretical inference, or a permissible intention in the case of practical

inference. McHugh and Way flesh out this general view by giving an account of aim-directedness. Reasoning aims at fitting attitudes because reasoning is a 'functional kind in the strong sense that only activities regulated by its aim count as reasoning' (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 179). They explain what they mean by 'regulated' in dispositional terms.

Our suggestion is that agents can be sensitive to fittingness-preservation in reasoning without representing their reasoning as fittingness-preserving. They thereby count as aiming at fittingness. In particular, we suggest that the point of reasoning guides through the rules of reasoning that you follow. In following the rules that you follow, you manifest your imperfect sensitivity to what will serve the aim of getting fitting attitudes. (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 180)

On their view, reasoning is a manifestation of a disposition to revise attitudes, where this disposition is susceptible to being changed by higher-order dispositions in such a way that the lower-order disposition tends to preserve fittingness. The manifestations of the lower-level dispositions are acts of rule-following, and the higher-order dispositions change which rules the agent follows in such a way that the rules tend to preserve fittingness. We sometimes do this by directly (without representation) being sensitive to fittingness-preservation.

McHugh and Way think that their view explains the absurdity of (Bad) in the following way: In theoretical reasoning, we aim at getting true beliefs. If I believe that an inference is bad, I acknowledge that it will at best be a lucky coincidence if I reach my aim of getting a true belief by

making the inference. Knowingly taking inadequate means to one's aims is absurd. That is why thoughts like (Bad) are absurd.

Theoretical reasoning is guided by the aim of acquiring fitting beliefs. If p does not support q , then reasoning from p to q is not a good way to pursue this aim. So, reasoning from p to q while judging that p does not support q amounts to taking what you acknowledge to be an unreliable means to your end. That looks plainly irrational. [...T]his seems enough [...] to explain why assertions of (Bad) seem incoherent. (McHugh and Way, 2017, p.191)

At the level of the general view, this explanation says that it is absurd to aim at something by consciously and actively following a rule at the person-level while believing that this isn't non-accidentally conducive to one's aim. Making inferences one believes to be bad is absurd because it fits that description.

3 Critique of McHugh and Way's explanation

At the general level, the explanation sounds plausible. We must ask, however: What is doing the explanatory work? After all, the explanation isn't an alternative to explanations that presuppose the Taking Condition if aiming at something by consciously and actively following a rule at the person-level requires that one represents one's act of rule-following as conducive to one's aim. To see this, suppose that in making an inference, the subject must represent her act of following a particular rule of reasoning as conducive to her aim of acquiring fitting attitudes. If following

that rule is conducive to this aim, then the premises of applications of the rule support the conclusions of those applications.⁴ If representation is closed under implication, it follows that in making an inference, one must represent one's premises as supporting one's conclusion. But that is precisely what McHugh and Way want to deny. They could reply that representation is not closed under implication. If that is their response, we can all agree on a slightly broadened version of the Taking Condition, namely: Inference requires that the reasoner takes something to be the case that immediately implies that her premises support her conclusion and draws her conclusion because of that fact. I will assume that McHugh and Way want to deny (both conjuncts of) this version of the Taking Condition. So I assume that, on their view, aiming at something by consciously and actively following a rule at the person-level doesn't require that one represents one's act of rule-following as conducive to one's aim.

It seems plausible that aiming at something at the person-level by consciously and actively following a rule requires that one represents one's rule-following as conducive to one's aim. When I aim at filing my taxes correctly by consciously and actively following certain rules, e.g., I represent what I am doing as conducive to filing my taxes correctly. McHugh and Way must argue that their explanation doesn't depend on any such requirement. They try to do this by presenting an account of aim-directedness. This strategy works only if aim-directedness does all

⁴This is a version of the contrapositive of the conditional that is the second sentence of the passage just quoted. Hence, I take it to be uncontroversial in this context.

the heavy lifting in their explanation.⁵ So let's assume, for a moment, that McHugh and Way's explanation must appeal only to aim-directedness, and let's ignore, for now, issues regarding person-level, conscious, and active rule-following.

3.1 The basic problem

The key claim in McHugh and Way's explanation is that it is absurd to take what one acknowledges to be unreliable means to one's aim. 'One's aim' must be understood in light of their account of aim-directedness. (Aim) is my best effort to capture this account, in isolation from person-level, conscious, and active rule-following.

⁵This comes out in their objection to Broome's view. They say that following the rule to move, e.g., from believing it is raining to believing that one is hearing trumpets 'seems compatible with knowing that the weather has nothing to do with whether you hear trumpets.' And they add: 'It's hard to see how attitude-formation of this sort could be sufficient for reasoning' (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 174). In other words, it is hard to see how attitude-formation that doesn't yield the absurdities (or: incompatibilities) characteristic of (Bad), when conjoined with the belief that the input-contents have nothing to do with the output-contents, could be reasoning. Moreover, they think that what is missing in Broome's account is the aim-directedness of reasoning. That can be correct only if the account of aim-directedness of reasoning does all the heavy lifting in an explanation of the absurdity of (Bad)—or, as they may put it, in an explanation of the incompatibility that Broome cannot explain. One may think that the connection I am drawing here doesn't hold because McHugh and Way's complaint about Broome is that his view cannot explain an impossibility, whereas I am complaining that McHugh and Way's account cannot explain an absurdity. In an earlier paper, I explicitly left it open whether what needs to be explained is an absurdity (what I then called a 'severe irrationality') or an impossibility (Hlobil, 2014). As far as I can see, the arguments in this paper go through if we think of the relevant kind of absurdity as impossible. If we think, on the other hand, that thinking instances of (Bad) is not impossible but merely absurd, then McHugh and Way's complaint against Broome should be that Broome's view cannot explain this absurdity. For, in that case, it is merely absurd but not impossible to reason from the belief that it is raining to the belief that one is hearing trumpets while knowing that the weather has nothing to do with whether one hears trumpets.

(Aim) S aims at A in ϕ -ing if S 's ϕ -ing is a manifestation of a disposition, D_1 , that is susceptible to change in accordance with a higher-order disposition, D_2 , and manifestations of D_2 tend to change D_1 such that manifestations of D_1 tend to realize A .

McHugh and Way say that they don't fully spell out their dispositional account of the aim-directedness of reasoning (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 182). I will assume, however, that their presentation includes enough details to support their alternative explanation. If (Aim) suffices to explain the absurdity of (Bad), the following principle must be true.

(Abs) It is absurd to manifest a disposition, D_1 , that is susceptible to change in accordance with a higher-order disposition, D_2 , that tends to change D_1 such that manifestations of D_1 tend to realize A while also believing that this manifestation of D_1 realizes A at best by coincidence.

Unfortunately, (Abs) is false. Sense impressions are a counterexample. I am disposed, *ceteris paribus*, to have veridical sense impressions, and the way I form sense impressions is disposed to change in accordance with my direct sensitivity (without representation) to the veridicality of the resulting sense impressions. That is what happens when I am wearing inverting glasses for several days and, as a result, my visual sense impressions first represent my environment incorrectly as upside down but then adjust to represent my environment veridically. Moreover, *sense impression* is arguably a goodness-fixing kind: *qua* the things they are, sense impressions ought to represent the environment veridically. Nevertheless,

I can have the typical sense impression of the Müller-Lyer illusion and also believe, without irrationality or absurdity, that my sense impression is not veridical. So, merely being disposed to fulfill a constitutive function and being disposed to adjust one's disposition to fit this aim does not suffice to explain the absurdity of (Bad).

This shows that if what McHugh and Way mean by 'having an aim' is merely aiming at something in the way captured by (Aim), then they cannot presuppose that it is 'plainly irrational' to take 'what you acknowledge to be unreliable means to your' aim (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 191). Perhaps they can presuppose this if we can control the manifestation of D_1 by practical reasoning. McHugh and Way acknowledge, however, that for their account to be tenable, 'it must be possible to be guided by an aim without reasoning' (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 180). To illustrate their explanation, they need a case in which you do something in pursuit of an aim, you don't represent your action as conducive to your aim, your action is not the result of reasoning, but it is nevertheless absurd to believe that your action is an unreliable means to your aim because of the aim-directedness of your action. I believe that there aren't any uncontroversial cases of that kind.

McHugh and Way give the following example of aim-directedness without reasoning: 'Whenever you execute an intention, you are guided by an aim, but this need not involve reasoning' (McHugh and Way, 2017, p. 180). It is true that when I, e.g., raise my arm, the contractions of my muscles are guided by my aim of raising my arm, I don't have to reason about how to contract my muscles, and I do not represent the contraction

of my muscles as conducive to my arm-raising. However, it is not absurd to contract my muscles in a certain way with the aim of raising my arm while also believing that contracting my muscles in that way is not a reliable way to raise my arm. I may have false but rational beliefs about what goes on in my arm when I raise it.

3.2 The basic problem doesn't go away

At this point, an opponent may point out that McHugh and Way's notion of aiming (or particular way of aiming) at fitting attitudes in reasoning is substantially richer than the notion of aiming captured by (Aim). They hold that reasoning is person-level, conscious, active, and a case of rule-following (McHugh and Way, 2017, pp. 168ff.). Perhaps we can fix the explanation by requiring that the manifestation of D_1 must be a person-level, conscious, and active case of rule-following.

We should ask, however: If (Aim) by itself can't explain the absurdity, why does it help to add that the manifestation of D_1 is person-level, conscious, active and a case of rule-following? One hypothesis is that these additions fix the explanation because they covertly introduce the requirement that the agent represents her act as conducive to her aim. To rule out this hypothesis, McHugh and Way should explain how aiming at something, as captured by their account, interacts with additional features, like being person-level or active, to yield the desired explanation. As far as I can see, they don't do that. Moreover, as I shall argue in the rest of

this response, it is difficult to see how they could do that in a plausible and non-question-begging way.

Let us look at the possible additions one by one. McHugh and Way say that 'what makes reasoning active is that it is aim-directed' (McHugh and Way, 2017, p.191). So once we take aim-directedness into account, we shouldn't get any additional explanatory power from the assumption that reasoning is active.

Does it help to say that the manifestation of D_1 must be conscious? It does if it implies that the agent represents the manifestation as aim-conducive. But McHugh and Way cannot say that. And merely knowing about the manifestation doesn't help. I can know, e.g., that I am manifesting such-and-such a disposition in forming the Müller-Lyer sense impressions, without this yielding any absurdity. So adding to the explanation that the manifestation of D_1 must be conscious doesn't fix the problem.

Perhaps what is doing the explanatory work is that the manifestation of D_1 must be person-level. If being person-level merely implies that the manifestation of D_1 is truly ascribable to the whole person, then forming sense impressions should count as person-level and, hence, as a counterexample. So perhaps what is meant by saying that the manifestation of D_1 is person-level, is that the manifestation must be responsive to reasons. After all, reasoning dispositions are responsive to our beliefs about what is good reasoning in a way in which dispositions to form sense impressions are not responsive to beliefs about what are good ways to form sense impressions. One hypothesis that immediately suggest itself is that our dispositions

to reason in certain ways are responsive to our beliefs because the manifestation of such a disposition requires that we represent our reasoning as fittingness-preserving (or whatever else makes reasoning good). But McHugh and Way cannot say that. So they owe us an alternative account.

To see that giving such an account is difficult, notice that there seem to be two ways in which dispositions can be responsive to our beliefs about the goodness of such dispositions. In a weak sense, e.g., our dispositions to form intuitions about mathematical questions is responsive to our beliefs about which dispositions are good. We start out, e.g., with dispositions to form intuitions about which of two countably infinite sets is larger. We quickly learn that such intuitions are unreliable. But ridding ourselves of the dispositions to form such intuitions takes time. Some of us eventually succeed in ridding themselves of such dispositions. Reason-responsiveness in this weak sense cannot explain the absurdity of (Bad). After all, it is not absurd to manifest the disposition to intuit that there are more natural numbers than even numbers while also believing that this way of forming intuitions is unreliable.

Some of our dispositions are responsive to reasons in a stronger sense. If I consciously manifest a belief-forming disposition, e.g., and I believe that this is a bad disposition, then I thereby lose the belief I thus formed or I am conscious of a clash among my mental states. Unfortunately, saying that our reasoning dispositions are reason-responsive in this way is simply to acknowledge that (Bad) is absurd. It doesn't explain why that is the case.

McHugh and Way might object that what explains the absurdity of (Bad) is that inference is a kind of rule-following (and a person-level, conscious, and active kind of rule-following). I agree that it is absurd to consciously follow a rule one believes to be bad (in the sense that one should not follow it) or to follow it in a way one believes to be incorrect (although one thinks one should follow the rule). However, McHugh and Way cannot simply presuppose that. After all, conscious, active, person-level rule-following may require that the subject represents herself as correctly following a rule that is conducive to her aim. That is where we started. We need to be sure that no such requirement operates in McHugh and Way's account. Otherwise, it is not clear that they are offering an alternative to explanations that appeal to the Taking Condition.

Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (Hlobil, 2014), the fact that (Bad) is absurd and the fact that it is absurd to follow a rule one believes to be bad (or to follow a rule in a way one believes to be incorrect) are philosophically puzzling in the same way and, hence, cry out for a unified explanation. Thus, an explanation of the absurdity of (Bad) in terms of rule-following is unsatisfying if the absurdity of following a rule one believes to be bad is left unexplained. Now, McHugh and Way acknowledge that they need a purely dispositional account of rule-following in order to flesh out their account. I doubt that a purely dispositional account of rule-following can explain why it is absurd to follow a rule one believes to be bad. If McHugh and Way's explanation presupposes that a purely dispositional account of rule-following can yield such an explanation, this must be

spelled out and defended. Until they do that, they haven't provided a satisfying alternative explanation of the absurdity of (Bad).

4 Conclusion

To sum up, I cannot see how the purely dispositional account of aim-directedness, as codified in (Aim), can explain the absurdity of (Bad). Nor can I see how adding bells and whistles about reasoning being person-level, conscious, active and a case of rule-following adds any explanatory power, unless it presupposes that a parallel question about rule-following has already been answered or it covertly introduces a version of the Taking Condition. Perhaps McHugh and Way's account of the aim-directedness of reasoning can be supplemented so as to explain the absurdity without running the risk of covertly relying on a version of the Taking Condition. But until they do so, their claim that they have an alternative explanation is premature.

McHugh and Way might object that what needs to be explained is just why making inferences one believes to be bad is irrational in the sense of involving inconsistent commitments (McHugh and Way, 2016). The additional fact that this irrationality is absurd, they might say, need not be explained by an account of reasoning. If that is their view, they should hold that no explanation in terms of aim-directedness is needed. In that case, their response to the objection that their account doesn't underwrite the Taking Condition shouldn't be that they can offer an alternative explanation of what is wrong with (Bad). Rather, they should

argue that people like Boghossian (2018) and I are wrong in thinking that an explanation is needed in the first place. Whether that is so is an interesting question, but it is not the question that McHugh and Way are addressing. It will have to wait for another occasion.

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