

RATIONALLY DETERMINABLE CONDITIONS

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1. Our Question

Consider the following two lists

Conspiring to assassinate the prime minister	Feeling tired
Concluding from recent employment data that wages will soon rise	Craving Doritos
Resenting the passerby who carelessly pushed you on the street	Having an itch on your elbow
Fearing a nuclear attack	Tripping over a crack in the sidewalk
Walking to the store to get some butter	Finding oneself in a new place

These lists include acts, events, and states of various kinds: I will use the general term “condition” to denote any act, event, or state. Using the term “condition”, I can now formulate an observation and a task for this paper:

The observation is this: All of the items on the left-hand list are conditions that have the following property: there can be *a reason in light of which* the agent is in that condition. But none of the items on the right-hand list have that property: there can be *a reason why* the agent suffers from tinnitus, or feels tired, but *no reason in light of which* she suffers from tinnitus, or feels tired, etc. I will henceforth use the phrase “rationally determinable conditions” to denote all of the conditions that go on the left-hand list, i.e., all those conditions which are such that there can be a reason in light of which the agent is in them.

But what accounts for this difference between rationally determinable conditions and other conditions? Why are some conditions such that there can be a reason in light of which the agent is in them, but other conditions are not? My task in this paper will be to answer that question.

To appreciate that the answer to this question is not obvious, I'll begin by briefly surveying some wrong answers:

Wrong answer 1: Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that we can enter into voluntarily.

This is wrong, because reactive attitudes such as fear and resentment are not voluntary. Neither are beliefs (at least many, if not all, of) which are also rationally determinable conditions.

Wrong answer 2: Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that we occupy intentionally.

This is also wrong, because reactive attitudes such as fear and resentment are not intentional. Neither are beliefs.

Wrong answer 3: Rationally determinable conditions are actions.

Again, this is wrong, because reactive attitudes are not actions, nor are beliefs.

Wrong answer 4: Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that we occupy as a consequence of our choices.

This is wrong because many other conditions are also consequences of our choices: e.g., I might suffer tinnitus because I chose to attend lots of loud concerts without protecting my hearing.

Wrong answer 5: Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that we are responsible for being in.

This is wrong because we can be responsible for being in many other conditions as well: if I suffer tinnitus because I neglected to protect my hearing when attending lots of loud concerts, I am responsible for suffering tinnitus.

Wrong answer 6: Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that we can know ourselves to occupy without observation.

This is wrong because we can also know ourselves to suffer from tinnitus, or to feel tired, without observation.

Wrong answer 7: Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that we can know ourselves to occupy in a way that enjoys immunity to error through misidentification.

This is wrong because we can know ourselves to suffer from tinnitus, or to feel tired, in a way that enjoys immunity to error through misidentification.

Wrong answer 8: Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that are purely psychological rather than somatic.

This is wrong because some rationally determinable conditions are intentional actions (e.g., walking to the store) that can be performed only given certain somatic conditions.

Wrong answer 9: Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that can serve as the reasons in light of which an agent does or thinks or feels something.

This is wrong because some other conditions can also serve as such reasons: for instance, the itch on my elbow can be the reason in light of which I decide to purchase some topical anaesthetic.

This long list of wrong answers may encourage especially pusillanimous philosophers to dismiss our ordinary distinction between conditions that agents can occupy in light of reasons, and conditions that they cannot occupy in light of reasons, as gerrymanded, and may encourage other such philosophers to revere it as fundamental and not explicable. But I think both of these reactions are too quick, and I will substantiate this suspicion by offering a principled account of the distinction in this paper.

Before offering my principled account, let me telegraph that account in the following slogan.

Rationally determinable conditions are conditions that involve the agent's *commitment* to something or other.

I believe that this slogan is, at least on one reading, correct—but it is not yet clear how to read it. The rest of this paper attempts to work out an interpretation of this slogan that helps us to understand the distinction between rationally determinable conditions and others. Once we understand that distinction, we will then be in a position to address the following question about reasoning: is the activity of reasoning itself a rationally determinable condition? Can you engage in reasoning in light of some reason?¹

2. Commitments Involve Dispositions

What is it for an agent to be committed to something or other? It is *at least* to have certain dispositions. If you are committed to something or other then you are disposed to act and think and feel in certain ways, depending upon what it is to which you are committed, and what it is to which you are committed depends in turn upon which rationally determinable condition you are in: believing, intending, concluding, resenting, judging, fearing, etc. For instance, if you *believe that Trump will get re-elected*, then you are, at least for the most part, disposed to act and think and feel in certain ways. You might, for instance, be disposed to employ the proposition that Trump will get re-elected as a premise in your reasoning, and to accept the conclusions that you draw from that premise. Also, you might be despondent in response to your prediction about Trump, and thereby become disposed towards pessimism. You might be disposed to assert, when queried about whether Trump will get re-elected, that he will, and so on. What gathers all these dispositions together, as dispositions of the kind that are involved in your belief, and so involved in your commitment to the truth of the

proposition, that Trump will get re-elected? For now, I will do no more than wave my hands in response to this question. I will say that all of these dispositions are dispositions to act and think and feel *as if* you believe that Trump will be re-elected. Eventually, I will say more about why this handwavy shorthand is not just convenient, but necessary, as an answer to our question about what the various dispositions involved in the particular belief I've mentioned all have in common.

Now, to take another case: **If you *decide to spend this evening by going to the movies*, and so are committed to spending your evening in that way, then you will be, at least for the most part, disposed to act and think and feel in certain ways.** You might, for instance, be disposed to employ the proposition that you will go to the movies as a premise in your reasoning. You might be excited about watching this evening's film, and be disposed towards anticipatory mental imagery of your watching it. You might be disposed to assert, when queried about your plans for this evening, that you are going to the movies, and so on. **What gathers all these dispositions together, as dispositions of the kind that are involved in your deciding to go to the movies tonight?** Again, I will do no more at this point than wave my hands in response to this question, and say that all of these dispositions are dispositions to act and think and feel as if you decided to go to the movies. And again, I will eventually (but not yet) explain why such handwaving is necessary in response to this question.

I've said that being committed to something *involves* being disposed to act and think and feel as if you are so committed. But such "involvement" is not identity; we cannot identify commitment with any particular totality of dispositions. We can argue against this identification of commitment with some totality of dispositions by means of a dilemma. Suppose the envisaged identification were, at least on some reading, correct. In that case, either your commitment would be identical to your being *completely* disposed to proceed as if you are so committed, or else it would be identical to your being *for the most part* disposed to proceed as if you are so committed. But, as I will now argue, neither of these last two disjuncts can be correct.

The argument against the first disjunct—that your being committed to something is identical to being completely disposed to proceed as if you are so committed—is implicit in Kripke's (1982) reflections on the possibility of giving a dispositionalist account of rule-following. As Kripke points out, to follow a rule is not to follow it infallibly, nor even to be disposed to follow it infallibly: we can follow a rule even if we occasionally fail to conform our behavior to the rule, and even if we are *disposed* to fail to conform our behavior to the rule in particular cases. For example, someone whom we would normally regard as using the symbol "+" to denote the addition function might nonetheless be disposed to make certain specific sorts of errors in their use of that symbol—at least when it comes to large numbers that they don't often consider, or when it comes to numbers whose numeric

commitment is not identical with totality of dispositions

expressions look very similar to the user, and so on. To follow a rule requires one to be disposed to act in accordance with that rule for the most part—but it cannot require one to act perfectly in accordance with that rule, or even to be disposed to act perfectly in accordance with that rule.

Applying this same point to the case of intention: intending to F cannot be a matter of being disposed in all respects to act, think, and feel as if F is what you take to be the thing to do, since intending to F is consistent with being disposed to do some specific things that conflict with that intention under certain circumstances. And the same argument works for the case of belief, or judgment, or any other condition our being in which consists in our being committed to something. This refutes the identification of commitment with being disposed to proceed *in all respects* as if that is one's commitment. If undertaking a commitment is identical with any totality of dispositions, it can only be a totality that includes dispositions to proceed *for the most part* as if one is so committed.

But that identification cannot be correct either. To see why, consider the “toxin puzzle” posed in Kavka (1983): You will enjoy a considerable benefit if you now form the intention to drink a toxin tomorrow, but once you reap this benefit, you will no longer have any reason to drink the toxin tomorrow, and so will not be able rationally to act on your intention. Knowing all this in advance, you cannot now simply form the intention to drink the toxin on the basis of the considerable gain you will enjoy from forming that intention. This is because forming an intention to drink the toxin involves expecting to drink the toxin—and you already know that, no matter what you might be thinking now, when it comes time to act on your intention to drink the toxin, you will have no reason to drink it and some good reason not to drink it. So you cannot now intend to drink the toxin, knowing already that, when the time comes, you will know that you are rationally unable to act on this intention. Nevertheless, it is still possible for you to be disposed to proceed, at least for the most part, in thought and feeling and deed *as if* you intend to drink the toxin: a sufficiently good method actor might generate such a disposition in herself—at least for a limited time and in a particular setting—even in the absence of the intention that would normally give rise to the disposition. Thus, while intending to F requires one to be disposed to act, think, and feel in most respects as if you are committed to F'ing, the latter is not sufficient for the former, and so the former cannot be identical to the latter.

(Of course, it might be objected that method actors have higher-order dispositions to suspend their lower-order dispositions in particular situation, viz., when they come out of character. But of course, no matter what intention you have, and what first-order dispositions it might involve, you will also typically have higher-order dispositions to suspend those lower-order dispositions under some circumstances.)

Intentions require dispositions, but no totality of dispositions is both necessary and sufficient for intending, and so intending is not identical to any totality of dispositions. The same argument works, *mutatis mutandis*, to show that beliefs are not identical to the dispositions they require, and that reactive attitudes like resentment or appreciation are not identical to the dispositions they require, and so on. In summary, although commitment requires that one be disposed, for the most part, to act, think, and feel as if one has that commitment, the latter is not sufficient for the former, and so they cannot be identical.

3. Commitments Involve having Dispositions *because of* those Commitments

I've said that being committed to something involves being disposed to act, think, and feel, at least for the most part, as if you are so committed. But we can see how these dispositions must be related to the commitments that involve them if we think a bit more about the contents of the commitments themselves.

Suppose you are committed to the truth of the proposition that Trump will get re-elected. Then you will be, at least for the most part, disposed to act and think and feel as if you take it that Trump will get re-elected. But, in the sort of case we're now discussing, your disposition to act, think, and feel in these ways—the dispositions that are involved in your being so committed—are dispositions that you have *not* in virtue of pretending that you believe that Trump will get re-elected. Of course, it's possible for you to *pretend* to believe that Trump will get re-elected, and to have these dispositions be involved in your pretense—but that's not the case we're considering now. We're considering the case where the dispositions that you have are dispositions involved in your actually believing that Trump will get re-elected. When these dispositions are involved in your belief, then you will be disposed to act, think, and feel as if **you take it that Trump will get re-elected** *in virtue of* your commitment to the truth of the proposition that Trump will get re-elected. **Dispositions that are involved in your belief are just the dispositions involved in your commitment to the truth of the proposition believed.**

Suppose you are committed to spending this evening in a particular way. Then you will be disposed, at least for the most part, to act and think and feel as if that is what you take to be the way to spend this evening. But again, you will not be disposed to act, think, and feel in these ways in virtue of pretending that you are planning to spend the evening in that way (though again, it's possible for you to engage in such pretense). Rather, you will be disposed to act, think, and feel in these ways in virtue of your commitment to that being the way to spend this evening. Again, if you are committed to feeling a certain way about how your friend has treated you, then you will be disposed, at least for the most part, to act and think and feel as if that

commitment as
grounding its
dispositions

is how to feel about how they've treated you. But once again, you will be disposed to act, think, and feel in these ways in virtue of your commitment to that being how to feel about how they've treated you. And so on. **To the extent that you are committed to something, your dispositions to act, think, and feel as if you are so committed are dispositions you have on account of your commitment.** More generally, to be committed to something in a particular way is to be having various dispositions *in virtue of your having that very commitment*. The explanatory connection is packed into the very content of the commitments that explain your dispositions. To live up to your commitments is to **be disposed to comply with those commitments for a specific kind of reason—viz., to be disposed to comply with those commitments in virtue of your having those very commitments.** A condition is one that involves commitments, therefore, only in so far as it involves dispositions to act and think and feel in those ways because one has those very commitments.

In light of this point, it should now be clear why I had to be handwavy in section 3, in spelling out the dispositions involved in commitment. Of course, commitments might cause you to have any number of dispositions. **But the dispositions that are involved in commitments are not merely whatever dispositions are so caused: they are precisely those dispositions that you have to act, think, or feel certain ways for a certain reason, viz., because you are so committed.** The only way to group together the wide variety of dispositions involved in a particular commitment is to group them together as those dispositions that you have because you are so committed. Since this is the only way to group together these various dispositions, my efforts to describe these various dispositions in section 2 were necessarily handwavy: I didn't at that point have the resources necessary to explain how to group them together.

So I've said that having a commitment involves being disposed to act, think, and feel *as if you're so committed*, and to be so disposed *because you are so committed*. This is to say that the commitments both determine the identity of the dispositions, and they also explain your having those same dispositions.

4. Commitments Involve having Dispositions *in light of* those Commitments

But not just any old explanatory connection running from those commitments to those dispositions will satisfy the explanatory condition specified in the contents of those commitments. To see this point, let's suppose that Nyambi believes a very complex psychological theory about belief-formation—call this complex psychological theory P. Also, suppose that P entails T, and T is true:

(T) People who accept P are disposed to act, think, and feel as if they take this sentence to be true.

Finally, suppose that the entailment relation between P and T is complicated, and not at all easy to see: Nyambi himself doesn't see that P entails T. So, although Nyambi is committed to the truth of T by virtue of accepting P (which entails T) this is not a commitment that Nyambi recognizes himself to have. Furthermore, since T is true, Nyambi is disposed to act, think, and feel *as if* he takes T to be true—but not for any reason that he can discern. (Indeed, he might be mystified by these dispositions of his, if and when he notices them at all, and he might wonder whether T is something he actually believes, despite having, so far as he can tell, no reason to do so.) Finally, notice that his dispositions to act, think, and feel as if he takes T to be true are predicted and explained by his acceptance of a theory that commits him to the truth of T. But even if Nyambi counts as believing T (and, given his own perplexity at why he has these dispositions, it's not clear that he does), he certainly doesn't believe T in the way that his acceptance of P commits him to doing so. His acceptance of P commits him to believing T in light of that very commitment to the truth of P—but it is clear that, even if Nyambi counts as believing T, he doesn't count as doing so in light of his commitment to the truth of P. In this respect, Nyambi fails to satisfy the commitments that he has in virtue of his acceptance of P. To satisfy those commitments, he would need not merely to believe T—he would also need for his belief that T to be explained in a different way by his acceptance of P.

What is this different kind of explanation that is packed into the content of Nyambi's commitment to the truth of P? To answer this question, let's return once again to the dispositions that I've said are involved in having a commitment: to be committed to the truth of the proposition that Trump will get re-elected requires one to be disposed—at least for the most part—to act, think, and feel as if one takes that proposition to be true. To be so disposed involves such things as: being disposed to accept those conclusions that one draws from the premise that Trump will get re-elected, being disposed to speak as if Trump will get re-elected, and so on. And I've also said that, one must be disposed to do these things in virtue of one's taking it to be true that Trump will get re-elected—in other words, one must be disposed to accept those conclusions that one draws from the premise that Trump will get re-elected *in virtue of one's accepting that premise as true*, and one must be disposed to speak as if Trump will get re-elected *in virtue of one's accepting that he will get re-elected*, and so on. So **the dispositions that are involved in undertaking a commitment are not merely dispositions to act, think, or feel various ways—they are dispositions to act, think, or feel various ways for a particular kind of reason (viz., that one is committed to doing so).** But, as pointed out in the preceding section, that is just to say that the contents of one's commitments determine the identity conditions of the dispositions that one is committed to exercising on the basis of those

commitments: the contents of the commitments determine the form of those dispositions that those very same commitments explain. In other words, the two connections established in the preceding section between commitments and dispositions—the identity-fixing connection and the explanatory connection—are not metaphysically independent connections. The distinctive way in which commitments explain dispositions is a kind of explanation in which the explanans determines the identity-conditions of the explanandum.

formal causation

The commitments are, to put it in Aristotle's terms, "formal causes" of those dispositions. The explanatory relation between commitments that one undertakes, on the one hand, and the dispositions involved in those commitments, on the other, is an explanatory relation in which the commitments are formal causes of the dispositions: they cause those dispositions, but in such a way as to metaphysically determine the identity (or what Aristotle would have called the "form") of those dispositions. Those commitments are like blueprints that both cause our house-building efforts and also fix it that many of the bodily movements we make while engaged in those efforts are exercises of a disposition to follow those very blueprints.

To sum up: I've said that, for an agent to be committed to something, she must be disposed, at least for the most part, to act, think, and feel as if she is so committed. I've also said that, for an agent to be committed to something, she must have those dispositions because of her commitment to having them. Now we can specify this last condition more fully: those very dispositions of hers must be dispositions that are both causally and constitutively explained by her commitment to those dispositions.

This may strike you as mysterious: how can a commitment cause someone to have, or to exercise, a disposition? And, if causes and effects are distinct existences, then how, more mysteriously still, can a commitment *constitute* the exercise of that same disposition? The analogy I've made above to a blueprint suggests that both questions should be answered by appeal to the notion of representation: an agent undertakes a commitment by virtue of representing something or other as fitting, or correct. But this very same representation can both cause the agent to do some further thing, and also play a role in metaphysically determining the form of that effect. A familiar example of such formal causation is the enactment of legislation. For a particular law to be enacted, that law must be represented by some lawmaking body that is to enact it. The representation of that law by the lawmaking body—a representation that takes the form of a bill to be enacted—is part of what causes the body to enact the law: the body enacts it at least partly because of the content of the bill. But the bill simultaneously helps to constitute the body's behavioral dispositions (whether that behavior to which the body is disposed involves the utterance of "aye" or the raising of hands or the pressing of buttons at particular times) as *an enactment of that very law*: what sort of legislative act it is that the lawmaking body performs is metaphysically determined (in part) by the content of the bill that is enacted.

So a particular representation—the bill—both *causes* the legislative body to enact it into law, and also *constitutes* their action as an action of enacting that law (as opposed, say, to a mere making of noises). In enacting the law, the lawmaking body exercises a disposition it has—a disposition to enact legislation—and this disposition is both caused by the bill itself, and also partly constituted by that very same bill as a disposition to enact that particular bill into law. What did the lawmaking body do on that particular occasion? It voted *that particular bill* into law, and did so (at least partly) because of the content of the bill.²

A series of events or states in the agent can amount to the agent's being committed to something only by virtue of the agent's representing those very same events or states *as* appropriately responsive to, or expressive of, that commitment. And in so constituting her own events or states as the events or states that they are, the agent makes herself answerable to assessment in terms of rationality, because she thereby makes herself capable (at least in principle) of understanding and answering to such assessments. This is why agents who are incapable of reflection on their own events and states might be assessable as functioning properly or improperly, but they cannot be assessable as proceeding rationally or irrationally.³

On the picture I've offered, rationally determinable conditions are those conditions that are constituted by the agent's de se representation of those very conditions as fitting. What does this tell us about reasoning? Is reasoning itself a rationally determinable condition—something that one can do for a reason? Yes, but *only* when our reasoning is constituted by our own de se representation of it as fitting is it rationally determinable. Is the “reasoning” allegedly undertaken by Chrysippus's dog so constituted? Is the “reasoning” allegedly undertaken by our visual cortex in calculating edges so constituted? Is the “reasoning” allegedly involved in the generation of priming effects on perceptual states so constituted? If the empirical study of these phenomena leads us to answer these questions in the negative, we will then be committed to claiming that such “reasoning” is not rationally determinable. The reasoning that we can perform for reasons consists in our de se representations of that very reasoning as fitting.⁴

Notes

1. I say that we will be in a position to “address” this question, but I don't say that we will be able to *answer* it. Malmgren (forthcoming) argues—correctly, in my view—that any account of the form I develop is too thin to guide us in answering substantive, empirical questions about the extension of the category of rationally determinable conditions. Therefore, she concludes, an account like mine must be supplemented with an empirically richer account (which she develops). I concur. In this paper, I'm not trying to answer any substantive, empirical questions about which particular conditions are rationally determinable. I begin by assuming that

- some conditions are rationally determinable and others are not, but these assumptions are intended only to fix the reference of the phrase “rationally determinable condition”, and so defeating those specific assumptions needn’t undermine my project here, which is to understand well enough what is involved in some condition’s being rationally determinable that we could then predict what reasoning would have to be like in order to be rationally determinable.
2. Cf. Korsgaard (1996) on autonomy. If we think of autonomy as a capacity the exercises of which are rationally determinable conditions, then the present account of rationally determinable conditions can serve to answer the challenge that Hieronymi (2014) poses to Korsgaard’s account, viz., to explain how *de se* representations could help to account for autonomy.
 3. Burge (2000) argues for the stronger claim (concerning which I remain neutral) that the capacity for *de se* thought *just is* the capacity to distinguish those conditions that are immediately revisable in light of reasons from those that are not.
 4. Thanks to Paul Boghossian, Phil Bold, David Hills, Zoe Jenkin, Adam Leite, Anna-Sara Malmgren, Eric Marcus, Miriam McCormick, Lisa Miracchi, Antonia Peacocke, John Phillips, Peter Railton, Joshua Schechter, Susanna Siegel, Keshav Singh, David Sosa, and Michael Williams for helpful discussion of earlier versions of this material.

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