It follows from the Difference Principle, and the fact that dispositions of practical thought are traits of character, that if the virtue theory is false, there must be something in the distinctive nature of those dispositions to explain its failure. This is possible only on a rationalist conception of ethics, according to which the standards of practical reason derive from the nature of agency or practical thought.

Understood in this abstract way, ethical rationalism takes various forms. It might be Kantian: deriving standards of practical reason from formal constraints implicit in practical thinking. It might be recognitional: deriving standards of practical reason from the assumption that we act ‘under the guise of the good’. It might be instrumentalist: deriving standards of practical reason from the role of desire in the motivation of action. Or it might be cognitivist: deriving standards of practical reason from the role of self-knowledge in acting for reasons. I argue against all such views.

The basis of the argument, and its claim to completeness, is a theory of intentional action defended in the first part of the book. This theory is minimalist: it offers few materials for the rationalist project. For instance, although it gives a role to desire and self-knowledge in intentional action, this role is insufficient to establish claims about what there is reason to do. Most importantly, the theory denies that we act under the guise of the good, or that we must see what we are doing as justified to some degree – assumptions that play a crucial role in Kantian and recognitional forms of rationalism. These doctrines mistake the sense in which one must take the reasons for which one acts as reasons for acting as one does: it is not that one must take them to count in favour of what one is doing, but as reasons that explain why one is doing it. This conception of taking-as-one’s-reason explains the connection, noted but left mysterious by Anscombe (1963), between acting intentionally and knowing what one is doing.

Reference

Setiya on Intention, Rationality and Reasons
Michael E. Bratman

‘The idea that there are standards of practical reason apart from or independent of good character,’ Kieran Setiya (2007a: 1) trenchantly argues, ‘is a
Setiya’s argument in this fine book is a striking blend of philosophy of action and normative philosophy. A central claim is that the intention is a special kind of belief. I want both to challenge that claim and to reflect on a subtle argument in its favour that is in the background.

1.

Practical thinking, as understood by Setiya, includes the thinking that is involved in ‘the motivation of action done for reasons . . . , the balancing of reasons . . . , and the forming and revising of intentions and desires’ (7–8). Dispositions of practical thinking are traits of character. So, we can evaluate a given disposition of practical thought by appealing to general standards of good character and asking whether that disposition of practical thought is good as a trait of character. The ‘Virtue Theory’ says that all standards of practical reason are, at bottom, the reflection of standards of good traits of character as those standards of good character are applied to, in particular, dispositions of practical thinking.

What Setiya calls ‘rationalism’ is a theoretical alternative to the Virtue Theory. (While this is a somewhat idiosyncratic use of this term, I will simply follow Setiya here.) The idea is to find certain features of practical thinking that are essential to intentional agency, and then to show that these essential modes of practical thinking, without further appeal to general standards of good character, support standards of practical reason that apply to all cases of intentional agency.

To assess such rationalism, we need a theory of intentional agency and of the practical thinking that is essential to it. According to Setiya, this theory will need to account for a tight connection between such agency and the agent’s belief about what she is doing, a connection that Anscombe (1963) famously highlighted. In particular, according to Setiya, it is in general true that ‘when someone is acting intentionally, there must be something he is doing intentionally, not merely trying to do, in the belief that he is doing it’. This is the principle ‘Belief’ (26). Setiya aims to explain why this, as he supposes, is true.

Setiya’s explanation goes by way of a kind of ‘minimalism’ (98) about intentional agency. Intentional action is causally sustained by a relevant intention. When one acts for a reason, one acts on the basis of an intention.

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1 My present essay is a contribution to a symposium on this book. Page references to that book appear in parentheses in the main text. My essay also touches on related ideas in Setiya 2007b and 2008, and in Setiya’s comments on my ‘Intention, Practical Rationality, and Self-Governance’ delivered at the 2008 Chapel Hill Colloquium. And I have benefited from Setiya’s responses, Michael Smith’s discussion of Setiya’s book and the general discussion when an earlier version of the present essay was presented as a part of a symposium on Setiya’s book at the December 2008 meetings of the American Philosophical Association.
This intention consists in the desire-like belief that one is hereby so acting because of one’s belief that \( p \). Here, \( p \) is the reason for which one acts, the ‘because’ is the ‘because’ of motivation and ‘hereby’ indicates that the desire-like belief is in part about itself and its own role in action (45). In the limit case in which one acts intentionally, but for no further reason, one’s intention is the desire-like belief that one is hereby so acting.

Important features of this model of intentional agency and acting for a reason include: (i) The motivational ‘because’ is a causal ‘because’. (ii) A double reduction: acting for a reason is analysed in terms of the motivational role of an intention that refers to an explanatorily relevant belief whose content specifies the reason for which one acts (28); and intention itself is analysed as a special kind of belief. (iii) Intention involves reflexivity, since it is a desire-like belief about itself. In this sense, the theory is Harman-like (1999). (iv) The theory explains the Anscombe-inspired principle \textit{Belief}, since the intention that is always involved in intentional agency is a belief that one is so acting. This is a payoff of the double reduction.

The next point is that there is nothing in this theory that requires, in all cases of intentional agency, that the agent acts in the light of what he thinks justifies his action. What is required is only that the agent has a desire-like belief about what motivationally explains the action. ‘In acting for a reason, one takes something as one’s reason to act in an explanatory not a normative sense’ (93). It is a mistake to conflate ‘reflection as reflexivity – as in the knowledge of what one is doing and why – with reflection as evaluative thought’ (93).

So, Setiya’s theory of intentional agency is doubly reductive, merges themes from Harman and Anscombe, does this in a way that tries to do justice to Stocker’s (1979) observations about desiring the bad, and avoids the claim of many philosophers that in acting intentionally one must be acting under the guise of a justification.\(^2\)

Now, since intentional action need not be under the guise of a justification, we cannot appeal to this guise in order to ground standards of practical reason that apply quite generally to all cases of intentional agency. So, if we are going to find features of intentional agency as such that could ground generally applicable standards of practical reason, we will need to look directly at the minimal elements of motivation and intention. Here, I focus on intention.\(^3\)

\(^2\) An example of this last claim given by Setiya is Raz (1999: 8).

\(^3\) Concerning motivation, one ‘rationalist’ idea is that given

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(a)] the motivation of action is always grounded at bottom in desire,
  \item[(b)] there is something about practical thinking as such which makes appropriate a basic instrumental norm that favours the satisfaction of desire.
\end{itemize}
Intention, on the theory, is a special desire-like belief about one’s own action and its explanation. So, there is a limited sense ‘in which selfknowledge can be described as the constitutive aim of action: it is a goal towards which intentional action is always and essentially directed’ (108). Can this aim ground generally applicable standards of practical reason?

Setiya thinks not. The problem, he says, is that this cognitive aim of intention is too thin to ground substantive standards of practical reason. To realize this aim, all that one needs to do is to act as one intends, and so act as one believes one is acting. But, ‘the standards of practical reason must be ones that we can violate, even when we know what we are doing and why’ (111).

As Setiya sees it, there is here an important difference between his theory and the theory of Velleman (1989, 2000). On Setiya’s theory, the motivational power of intention is built right into the attitude itself: it is a desire-belief. [So, Setiya needs to reject Smith’s (1987) claim that a single attitude cannot have two different ‘directions of fit’.] Velleman’s idea, in contrast, roughly, is that to intend to X is to believe one will X by way of this very belief; and what makes it true that this intention-belief will motivate X is not an intrinsic feature of that belief, but rather the fact that there is, in the background, a general aim in favour of self-knowledge and self-understanding. According to Velleman, this background aim is essential to intentional agency as such. And this aim of intentional agency may not be fully realized just by doing as one intends and for the reason one intends, since that is compatible with achieving wider or narrower forms of self-knowledge and self-understanding. Even when I succeed in doing what I intend, and for the reason I intend, I might still find what I am doing puzzling in the light of my other, broader concerns. So, there is a room for the idea that this overall concern with self-knowledge and self-understanding is indeed a ‘rationalistic’ ground for the standards of practical reason.

But, Setiya sees two inter-related problems for this theory. First, it leads to a version of what I myself once called the ‘problem of promiscuity’ (Bratman 1999). All beliefs about oneself – even, for example, that one is about to trip over the rug – would engage this general aim of self-knowledge and so, on the theory, generate motivation so to act. But, it is not plausible that we are quite generally motivated, even a little bit, to make true such pessimistic beliefs (109–10). (And, I would add, it is not plausible that the promotion of self-knowledge in such cases is a normative reason for action.) Second, it is a

In response, Setiya challenges premise (a). Setiya grants that the motivation of action will always involve some sort of desire, since intention itself is a desire-like belief. (In this respect, Setiya endorses an aspect of what Michael Smith calls the Humean Theory of Motivation.) But, according to Setiya, we can be led to an intention by way of a disposition of practical thought that is not itself triggered by a desire. (Setiya’s example is a disposition to intend to help you if I see you need help. See pp. 102–6.) So, according to Setiya, desire is not always a basic source of the motivation of action, contrary to (a).
consequence of Setiya’s minimalist theory of intentional agency that ‘so long as one has desire-like beliefs to play the role of intending and taking as one’s reason, one’s practical thought need not involve the tendency that Velleman describes’ (110). So, this tendency ‘does not belong to the essence of rational agency; and so it is not among the materials to which the rationalist can appeal’ (110).

The rationalist, then, cannot appeal to the idea that in intentionally acting, we always act under the guise of a justification. And the basic components of intentional agency – motivation (which I have not discussed here) and intention – do not by themselves provide grounds for generally applicable standards of practical reason. Setiya concludes: ‘We have no grip on what it is to think well about how to live and how to act, apart from our grip on what it is for a person to be good.’ (116)

The final step is to articulate a general connection between good practical thinking and normative reasons for action. Now, we learn from Williams (1995: 186–94) that we do not want to say that an agent’s reasons for action are fully determined by what would be favoured in his practical thinking if he were a person of full practical wisdom. Here, Setiya appeals to a version of Watson’s (1975: 210) example in which an angry squash player who has just lost has a reason to leave the court forthwith even though a person of full practical wisdom would favour, rather, shaking the hand of his victorious opponent. According to Setiya, what we should say is that ‘a reason is a premise for an episode of good practical thought whose other conditions are already in place’ (11), where the standard of good practical thought can take due account of the imperfections of the agent – in this case, the agent’s tendency to be moved by his anger. This leads us to

**Reasons**: the fact that \( p \) is a reason for \( A \) to \( \Phi \) just in case \( A \) has a collection of psychological states, \( C \), such that the disposition to be moved to \( \Phi \) by \( C \)-and-the-belief-that-\( p \) is a good disposition of practical thought, and \( C \) contains no false beliefs. (12)

But, Setiya has argued, the standards of ‘a good disposition of practical thought’ do not have a ‘rationalistic’ grounding in the nature of intentionally acting for a reason. So, we have ‘reasons without rationalism’.

2.

Much of Setiya’s argument draws on his cognitive theory of intention. And his initial philosophical motivation for this theory of intention comes largely from the conviction, first, that **Belief** states a fundamental condition of

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4 Setiya supposes that ‘for Velleman, the constitutive aim of action is a tendency that operates in the agent…’ (108).
intentional agency and, second, that some such belief theory of intention is needed to ensure this basic condition.

I myself am sceptical of this line of thought. I suspect that there are plausible counter examples to *Belief* – cases in which one intentionally X's but does not believe, while one is X-ing, that one is X-ing or even that one is Y-ing where one is X-ing by Y-ing and Y-ing is not simply trying to X. Perhaps my right arm has been paralyzed for awhile but there is some reason to believe that the paralysis has worn off and so I try to raise it. If I succeed, then I raise it intentionally, but all that I sensibly believed about what I was doing while I was acting was that I was trying to raise my arm (Setiya 2008). Second, I worry that even were *Belief* to be true about intentional action, there would still be cases of intending to A that do not involve a belief that A: an absent-minded cyclist might intend to stop at the book store on the way to home but, knowing that he is absent-minded, not be confident that he will (Bratman 1987: 37). Third, I worry that in seeing intention as a reflexive desire-belief, we have mistakenly precluded the possibility of an intention that one does not believe that one has (Bratman 2009).

Fourth, I worry that in seeing intention as a desire-belief, we have located the element of the agent’s being settled on an option in the wrong place: we have located it in the belief, whereas being relevantly settled on an option seems to me to be, rather, a kind of practical commitment to that option. Perhaps, I know myself well enough to be confident that I will, at the end, give into a certain temptation; and there is motivation in favour of this. So perhaps, I have a desire-belief in favour of so acting. But still, I might remain undecided about this, and not yet intend to do this. I am as yet not practically settled on this – I do not, for example, see myself as yet under rational pressure to settle on means (Bratman 1987: 19–20).

In response to this last concern, one might say that it is the conative aspect of the intention-belief that accounts for the agent’s being settled on the option. But, this would be to give up on one source of support for identifying intending A with a kind of belief that A, namely, this identification is what captures the sense in which in intending A one is settled on A. And, in any case, such an appeal to a distinctively practical way of being settled on an option may be precluded for Setiya by an argument of his to which I turn in §3.

Fifth and finally, we can ask how on Setiya’s theory we are to explain the rational failure, if any, that is involved in failing to intend means known to be necessary to what one intends. For reasons that will emerge in §3, Setiya rejects the idea that this is a distinctively practical rational failure. This leaves him with the view that, to the extent that there is a rational failure, it is a failure to conform to norms of theoretical rationality that apply to the

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5 Setiya’s response to this kind of example is in Setiya 2008. Sarah Paul (forthcoming) argues that this response is problematic. I find Paul’s critique forceful, but I cannot address these issues here.
beliefs involved in intending. This is ‘cognitivism’ about instrumental rationality. However, as I have argued elsewhere, such cognitivism about instrumental rationality is challenged by the possibility of believing one intends the necessary means even if one does not in fact intend those means (Bratman 1981: 255–6; forthcoming a).6

For these reasons, I am sceptical about Setiya’s cognitivist theory of intending and about the argument for it that is grounded in Belief. Rather than develop these concerns further, however, I want to explore the further argument to which I have just now twice alluded, an argument that lends support to a cognitive theory of intention not by appeal to Belief, but by rather appeal to Reasons.7

3.

Begin by asking how things would look if we agreed that intention is essential to intentional agency, but saw – as do I and a number of philosophers – intention not as a kind of belief but, rather, as a distinctive practical attitude (to borrow a term from Sarah Paul8), one that, unlike ordinary desire, involves something like a practical commitment to acting as one intends. Suppose you, in this sense, intend E. You are settled on – practically committed to – achieving E. What does this involve? Well, you will normally be set not also to intend other ends that you believe are inconsistent with E; and you will normally be set to settle on what you take to be necessary means to E. Further, all this will normally be true, in part, because you at least implicitly accept associated norms of consistency and means-end coherence. These norms would say something roughly like: it is a pro tanto requirement that your intentions, taken together, be consistent and consistent with your beliefs; and it is a pro tanto requirement that if your intentions include intending E then they include intending what you know to be necessary means to E. And these norms will be fitting in the sense that, normally, conformity to them is needed for your intentions to function properly in your psychic economy.

So, intending involves a disposition to conform to such norms, in part by way of guidance by implicit acceptance of these norms; and violation of these norms will normally undermine the characteristic roles of intending. Taken together these ideas seem to support the idea that such norms of consistency and coherence are norms of practical rationality for an agent who has

6 For this use of the term ‘cognitivism’ see Bratman 1999.
7 My thought that some such argument is at work is supported both by Setiya’s ‘Cognitivism About Instrumental Reason’ (Setiya 2007) and by his comments on my ‘Intention, Practical Rationality, and Self-Governance’ delivered at the 2008 Chapel Hill Colloquium.
8 Sarah Paul, ‘How We Know What We’re Doing’ (unpublished).
intentions. And since this support is grounded in the nature of intending, this is a ‘rationalistic’ ground for such practical norms.

If intending were – as Setiya maintains – a kind of belief, we might be led to norms of consistency and coherence on intention that are tied to the nature of belief. But, these would be norms of *theoretical* rationality. In contrast, the distinctive practical attitude view of intending seems to lead us to norms of *practical* rationality, norms that are grounded in the nature of intending. And from this, it may seem to follow that we can derive norms of good practical thinking from the nature of intending. These would be norms that enjoin adjusting our intentions in a way that tracks the avoidance of violation of these norms of consistency and coherence.\(^9\)

Suppose then that there is a norm of good practical thinking and an associated standard of a good disposition of practical thought that enjoins responsiveness to and conformity with the norm of means-end coherence. Suppose further that M is a necessary means to E, though you do not yet intend E. And consider

\[(D) \text{ The disposition to be moved in favour of (either intending M or not intending E) by the knowledge that M is a necessary means to E.}^{10}\]

The cited standard of a good disposition of practical thought endorses (D). But then, given *Reasons*, it follows that the fact that M is a necessary means to E is quite generally a normative reason in favour of

(either intending M or not intending E).

And given this reason it may seem to follow that if you do in fact intend E then the fact that M is a necessary means to E is a normative reason in favour of, in particular, intending M. And this may seem to follow *even if end E is akratic, crazy, immoral or imprudent*. But, it seems clear that Setiya would reject this conclusion (Setiya 2007b: 652–4).

We can express this argument as follows:

1. There is a rationalistic practical norm of means end-coherence (supported by a distinctive practical attitude view of intending)

So,

2. (D) is a good disposition of practical thought.
4. M is a necessary means to E. (assumption).

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\(^9\) Or at least, norms that enjoin this when this is in a relevant sense possible – a condition whose satisfaction I will take for granted in my discussion. (Thanks to Simon Rippon for a query that pointed to a need for some such condition.)

\(^{10}\) This formulation of (D) draws on Setiya’s comments at the 2008 Chapel Hill Colloquium.
So,

5. There is a reason for (either intending M or not intending E) (from 2, 3, 4).


So,

7. There is a reason to intend M. (from 5. and 6.)

So,

8. Intending E always provides a reason to intend necessary means to E.

In contrast, it is, I take it, Setiya’s view that we are not led to this (unacceptable) conclusion by his cognitive theory of intention, even if we grant that this theory allows that theoretical norms of belief consistency and coherence are tied to the nature of intending. Since these are theoretical norms that constrain belief, we need not think that they specify good dispositions of practical thought: we need not think that theoretical norms concerning belief consistency and coherence are ipso facto norms for good practical thinking. But, what is needed to engage Reasons in the way just mooted is a view of good dispositions of, in particular, practical thought. What is needed is, in particular, claim 2.

I can now state the promised argument in support of Setiya’s belief theory of intention, an argument that goes by way of Reasons rather than by way of Belief. The distinctive practical attitude theory of intention, conjoined with Reasons, leads – in the indicated way – to the normatively implausible conclusion that intentions quite generally provide reasons for necessary means. The cognitive theory of intention, even when conjoined with Reasons, does not lead to that conclusion. So, we have grounds to prefer the cognitive theory of intention.

Suppose then that we accept Reasons,¹¹ that we agree that intending the end does not always provide a reason for necessary means, that we hold a distinctive practical attitude view of intending, and that we grant that this view supports a rationalistic ground for practical norms of intention consistency and coherence. The worry is that these views are not mutually consistent. And Setiya’s view is that we should give up the distinctive practical attitude view of intending, thereby avoiding premise 1.

What to say?

Well, one initial line of reply – drawing on work of Broome (2005: 5) – is that the inference from 5 and 6 to 7 is not valid. As Broome puts it, we should not endorse such a ‘factual detachment of a reason’.

¹¹ I myself am not hereby endorsing Reasons. My strategy here is only to accept it for the sake of this discussion of Setiya’s work and then to explore its implications.
The problem is that this rejection of detachment with respect to reasons may not be sufficiently robust. As Setiya and others have emphasized, a hard case is one in which the intention in favour of the end is psychologically compulsive and unmodifiable. Setiya’s example is a compulsive intention to smoke.12 Suppose then that we change 6 to

6.* Intend E and this intention is psychologically unmodifiable.

It will now be plausible that the inference from 5 and 6* to 7 is valid;13 and, indeed, Setiya has urged that it is. Granted, even if this inference were valid we would still not reach conclusion 8. We would only arrive at

8.* Intending E, when it is not psychologically modifiable, always provides a reason to intend necessary means to E.

But, 8* still sees various imprudent, immoral or crazy intentions, and intentions in conflict with one’s best judgement, as providing reasons for means; and, again, it seems clear that Setiya would reject that.

How can a defender of the distinctive practical attitude view of intending block this argument to 8*? Must this defender insist that the inference from 5 and 6* to 7 is not valid? I think not.

Return to the move from norms of practical rationality on intention – norms of consistency and coherence – to norms of good practical thinking. Return, in particular, to the move from 1 to 2. This is a crucial move, since it is norms of good practical thinking, and thereby of good dispositions of practical thought, that are needed to engage Reasons; and it is by way of engaging Reasons that we arrive at the claim about reasons in 5., the claim that is the basis for the supposed detachment in the argument to 7. And I think we should be suspicious of this move from 1 to 2.

After all, this move assumes a kind of simple isomorphism between norms of practical rationality on intention, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, norms of good practical thinking and of good dispositions of practical thought. But, it seems to me that we should think of the demand for consistency and coherence of intention as only one element in an account of what good practical thinking is, in the sense of good practical thinking that can do the needed work in a principle like Reasons. In particular, such good practical thinking also involves sensitivity to one’s limitations and imperfections. If an agent has a compulsive but recognizably unwise intention to, say, smoke, then good practical thinking might well lead him, not to intend means to smoking, but rather to lock the cigarette cabinet.14

12 See Setiya 2007b: 660–1. It is, I think, this argument that lies behind Setiya’s rejection of a distinctively practical norm of means-end coherence.
13 Since I am supposing that 5. requires that the agent can achieve what it says there is a reason to achieve, we need to suppose here, given 6*, that the agent can intend the means.
(See n. 11 above.)
14 In this last point, I have been aided by discussion with Gideon Yaffe and Larry Temkin.
The idea, then, is to reject the assumption that if there is a norm of practical rationality that enjoins intention consistency and coherence, then thinking that is responsive *simply and solely* to such consistency and coherence is *ipso facto* good practical thinking in the sense needed for *Reasons*. And we can reject this assumption while retaining the idea that responsiveness to, *inter alia*, consistency and coherence is an important aspect of good practical thinking.

So, my proposal is to reject the move from 1. to 2. And once we reject this move we block the argument from the distinctive practical attitude view of intending, together with *Reasons*, to the interim conclusion about reasons – that is, 5. So the issue of detachment of a reason give an unchangeable intention in favour of the end – the issue of the validity of the inference from 5 and 6* to 7 – so far remains moot.\(^\text{15}\)

If we proceed in this way, we can say that there are some standards of practical reason that are supported by the nature of intention – though we reject an overly simple picture of the relation between these standards and standards of good practical thinking in the sense needed in *Reasons*. The standards of good practical thinking must in some way involve these norms of consistency and coherence of intention, and these norms have a ‘rationalist’ basis. So, on the assumption that we are to accept *Reasons*, rationalist considerations help in part to determine what is a practical reason. So, at most what we would have is a theory of reasons that is *not entirely* a matter of rationalism – a theory that builds on a distinctive practical attitude model of intending, rather than seeing intending as a kind of belief.

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References


15 I do think this issue will re-emerge in a somewhat different context (as I discuss in Bratman forthcoming b) though not in a way that challenges the point I want to make here in response to Setiya.


Reasons With Rationalism After All

MICHAEL SMITH

1. Overview

Kieran Setiya begins Reasons Without Rationalism (2007) by outlining and arguing for a schema in terms of which he thinks we best understand the nature of normative reasons for action. This is:

Reasons: The fact that p is a reason for A to φ just in case A has a collection of psychological states, C, such that the disposition to be moved to φ by C-and-the-belief-that-p is a good disposition of practical thought, and C contains no false beliefs. (12)

As Setiya points out, Reasons contrasts with both the ‘advice’ model of normative reasons (this is the view that A has a normative reason to φ only if A’s perfect counterpart desires that A φs), which is the view that I myself prefer.