

Why Cognitivists About Practical Reason can Only be Semi-Cognitivists⁺

Giacomo Mollo^{*}

gmollo@umich.edu

ABSTRACT

Debates about the nature and the role of rationality are part of the core of philosophy of economics. Holding rational beliefs and being instrumentally rational are some of the primary desiderata that economic theory demands when modelling the behavior of an agent. Philosophy itself, and especially philosophy of action, has also explored analogous issues and can certainly provide substantial insights about the nature of practical rationality. An agent is demanded to hold rational belief about the world: theoretical rationality requires the agent to hold beliefs that are consistent and coherent. On a practical level, the agent is capable of intending: this activity brings about the state of affairs that he desires. Rationality urges the agent to hold intentions consistently with the set of beliefs that he is accepting. Practical rationality in particular demands the agent to respect the consistency and coherence requirements for intentions.

In the following paper I am going to explore and criticize cognitivism about practical reason, one of the most disputed position in action theory. Cognitivists claim that we can make sense of the rational requirements for consistency and coherence of intentions by appealing exclusively to the requirements of consistency and coherence of beliefs. Practical rationality is in some sense reducible to theoretical rationality. I will explore this claim and assess whether this is an acceptable possibility. And of course, I will point out that there is space for some criticism.

PROLOGUE

Cognitivism about practical reason is the position according to which we can explain the requirements of consistency and coherence of intentions in terms of the requirements of consistency and coherence of beliefs. My main interest is to analyze the validity of the cognitivist's claim that demands of theoretical rationality (TR) can fully explain all demands of practical rationality (PR) and in particular to test whether the cognitivist account of belief-involvement of intention can be successful in explaining both consistency and coherence of intentions.

I will start by considering what are assumed to be the requirements of practical and theoretical rationality. I will use examples to illustrate how exactly these requirements work and I will make clear what they are supposed to accomplish. I will then consider the relationship between requirements of TR and requirements of PR. This will be followed by an explanation of how cognitivists about intentions have attempted to claim that rational requirements of practical reason are grounded in (or derive from) rational requirements for theoretical reason. I will consider the general case where cognitivists attempt to show that (1) *inconsistency of intention can be explained in terms of inconsistency of beliefs*, and (2) *incoherence of intentions*

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^{*} Department of Philosophy, University of Michigan



can be explained by incoherence of beliefs. I will consider cases (1) and (2) and assess their plausibility.

As for claim (1), I will take into account an objection inspired by Brunero's kidnapping scenario¹. I will make some interpretive clarification of the case – I will distinguish between intending not to A and not intending to A - and demonstrate that the cognitivist is able to provide a strong case in favour of his position no matter which interpretation we adopt.

Secondly, I will consider claim (2) and explain how Bratman² has objected to this position. He shows how there is a possibility to hold false beliefs about intentions: this will create a situation in which we have coherence of beliefs in TR and incoherence of intentions in PR. This occurrence challenges the cognitivist's idea that coherence of intentions is grounded in coherence of beliefs. I will object to Bratman by assessing whether holding a false belief about intention is a genuine possibility.

The rest of the paper will present an alternative attack against cognitivism. If we assume that (a) the standard formulation of coherence of intention is correct and (b) the Strong Belief Thesis holds, I show that we have good ground to dispute the claim that incoherence of intentions can be reduced to incoherence of beliefs.

My conclusion is that it is not possible to be a complete cognitivist: consistency of intentions is systematically explained from a cognitivist's perspective and the account is able to address a number of objections. If however we consider coherence of intentions, we can see how no claim about belief-involvement that a cognitivist supports can possibly reduce incoherence of intentions to incoherence of beliefs.

THEORETICAL RATIONALITY AND PRACTICAL RATIONALITY: EACH HAS ITS OWN DEMANDS

If an agent wants to be rational about his own beliefs, he needs to respect the two main requirements of theoretical rationality: consistency of beliefs (COB) and coherence of beliefs (COHB). If a set of belief honours both demands of theoretical rationality then the set is considered rational.

Belief Consistency requires that all beliefs are not mutually exclusive if considered together. One possible formulation is:

COB: Theoretical rationality demands that if one believes p, and believes p→-q, then one must not believe q.

We can illustrate this requirement by using an example.

Theoretical rationality requires that IF you hold beliefs:

Belief 1: [It's raining]

Belief 2: If [it's raining] then NOT [Streets are dry] (i.e. Streets are wet)

THEN

(if you want to respect the COB requirement) you MUST NOT hold the belief:

Belief 3: [Streets are dry]

¹ Brunero, J. Against Cognitivism about Practical Rationality. *Philosophical Studies*, August 2008.

² Bratman, M. Intentions, Beliefs, Practical, Theoretical. In J. Timmerman, J. Sorupski, S. Robertson, eds. *Spheres of Reason*, OUP.



I take this requirement as a wide scope requirement: if I hold beliefs 1, 2, 3 at the same time - and therefore my beliefs are not consistent- then in order to be consistent I must discard either belief 1, belief 2 or belief 3.³

Coherence of beliefs (COHB or Belief Closure) is the requirement that you need to believe the logical consequences of your beliefs. Bratman et al.⁴ refer to it as explanatory coherence: the idea is that each belief X needs to have an explanation (i.e. a series of other beliefs Y,Z,W) that are able to account for belief X. One possible formulation is:

COHB: Theoretical rationality requires that if one believes p , and believes that $p \rightarrow q$, then one must believe $\neg q$.

Again, we can use the same example:

Theoretical rationality requires that IF you hold beliefs:

Belief 1: [It's raining]

Belief 2: if [It's raining] then NOT[Streets are dry] (i.e. Streets are wet)

THEN

(if you want to respect the COHB requirement) you MUST hold the belief:

Belief 3: NOT[Streets are dry]

On the other hand, practical rationality defines the requirements for a rational system of intention and of intentions and beliefs. If an agent wants to be rational about his own beliefs and intentions, he needs to respect the two main requirements of practical rationality: consistency of intentions (COI) and coherence of intentions (COHI). If a set of intentions and beliefs honours the demands of practical rationality then the set is considered rational.

Consistency of intentions explains how intentions and beliefs are compatible if taken together:

COI: Practical rationality requires that if one intends to x , and believes that if one will x then one will not y , then one must not intend to y .

We can use an example to clarify the notion:

Practical rationality requires that IF you hold:

1. Intention : [I intend to travel to Prague this afternoon]

2. Belief : [If I travel to Prague this afternoon, I will not travel to New York this afternoon]

³ Generally speaking, being a wide scope requirement simply means that there are three ways to remove yourself from an irrational state: as mentioned you can discard either 1, 2 or 3. The scope of the requirements is not attached to a specific attitude – this would be a narrow scope requirement- but ranges over a disjunction, in this case, of beliefs. For a more detailed treatment of the subject see Broome 1999, 2007 and Kolodny 2005.

⁴ Bratman, M. Intentions, Beliefs, Practical, Theoretical. In J. Timmerman, J. Sorupski, S. Robertson, eds. *Spheres of Reason*, OUP.



THEN

(if you want to respect the COI requirement) you MUST NOT hold the intention:

3.Intention: [I intend to travel to New York this afternoon]

I take this requirement also as a wide scope requirement: if I hold 1, 2, 3 at the same time (and therefore my intentions and beliefs are not consistent) then in order to be consistent I must discard either 1, 2 or 3.

Coherence of intentions (COHI or Means-End coherence) explains what intentions we should hold given our beliefs and our other intentions:

COHI: Practical rationality requires that if one intends to x, and believes that if one will x, then one must intend to y, then one must intend to y.

Again we can use an example to clarify the position:

Practical rationality requires that IF you hold:

1.Intention: [I intend to travel to Prague this afternoon]

2. Belief: [If I travel to Prague this afternoon, then I must intend to buy a ticket to Prague]

THEN

(if you want to respect the COHI requirement) you MUST hold the intention:

3.Intention: [I intend to buy a ticket to Prague]

Again I take COHI to be a wide scope requirement: If I hold 1 and 2 and fail to hold 3, then I am in a situation of incoherence of intentions. In order to hold coherent intentions I can either abandon 1, abandon 2 or form intention 3.

COGNITIVISM ABOUT PRACTICAL REASON

Is there a relationship between the requirements of theoretical rationality and the requirements of practical rationality? Cognitivists generally think that we can appeal to theoretical rationality to explain the requirements of practical rationality.

Their approach includes two different moments: in the first place they formulate a position that is able to relate beliefs and intentions. Secondly, they explain why given this position it is possible to claim that the rational requirements of practical rationality are grounded in rational requirements for theoretical rationality.

There are three different ways of considering the relation between beliefs and intentions. Each view has a different idea of what is defined as belief-involvement i.e. the explicit relation between intention and the belief that is involved when the intention is formed.

According to the Identity Thesis (or Pure Cognitivism) the intention “I intend to A” is a belief that “I WILL do A”. Intentions are some sort of beliefs: they coincide with a special kind of



belief. This is taken to be the strongest position of the three. This view can be found in the early works of Harman (1976) and in the work of Velleman⁵.

A different position is the Strong Belief Thesis: this claims that the intention “I intend to A” *involves* the belief that “I WILL do A”. The idea is that if I am in the state of intending to A, then I am also in the state of believing that I will A. Unlike the Identity Thesis, an intention is a separate entity from a belief. This position figures in the later work of Harman (1987).

Lastly, the Weak Belief thesis claims that the intention “I intend to A” *involves* the belief that “it is *possible* that I WILL do A”. Holding an intention requires holding the belief that it will be possible that I will perform the action that I am intending. This is clearly the weakest position.

In general we can say that the relation between intention and belief pointed out by one theory or the other will tell you how to derive a certain belief from the corresponding intention. For instance if you hold the intention “I intend to A” then, according to the Strong Belief Thesis, you do hold the belief that “I will A”.

As pointed out earlier, a definition of the belief-involvement is the first step toward explaining the requirements of practical rationality by appealing to the requirements of theoretical rationality. It is now time to see exactly how this movement is accomplished.

1. CONSISTENCY OF INTENTIONS IS EXPLAINED BY CONSISTENCY OF BELIEFS

Consider first of all the general case of inconsistency of intentions by using the example I presented earlier in the text. For the sake of clarity I will distinguish beliefs and intentions in two separate columns.

BELIEFS	INTENTIONS
(b) Belief: [If I travel to Prague this afternoon, I will not travel to New York this afternoon]	(a) Intention: [I intend to go to Prague this afternoon] (c) Intention: [I intend to travel to New York this afternoon]

This is clearly a case of inconsistency in practical reason: If I intend to go to Prague AND I hold the belief that if I travel to Prague this afternoon then I won't travel to New York, then I cannot rationally hold the intention to travel to NY this afternoon.

Let's now assume the Strong Belief Thesis⁶ and see how cognitivists relate the requirement of consistency of intention in practical reason with the requirement of consistency of beliefs in

⁵ Velleman, D. *Practical Reflection*, University of Chicago Press.

⁶ The entire paper will focus on the Strong Belief Thesis version of cognitivism. This is the position in between the radical and the weak positions and, as the reader will see later in the text, it seems the most promising when it comes to successfully address certain objections against cognitivism. I will briefly show how the Identity Thesis can be problematic but I will not take into consideration the Weak Belief Thesis.



theoretical reason. The belief-involvement principle in the case of the Strong Belief thesis is: *the intention “I intend to A” involves a belief that “I will do A”*. If we consider the example, then the intention [I intend to go to Prague this afternoon] (a) *includes* in some sense the belief [I will go to Prague this afternoon] (a*) by the Strong Belief Thesis. By the same token [I intend to travel to New York this afternoon] (c) *includes* the belief [I will travel to New York this afternoon] (c*). In a schematic form:

BELIEFS		INTENTIONS
(a*) Belief: [I will travel to Prague]	← <u>by Strong Belief Thesis</u>	(a) Intention: [I intend to travel to Prague this afternoon]
(b) Belief: [If I travel to Prague this afternoon, I will not travel to New York this afternoon]		
(c*) Belief: [I will travel to New York this Afternoon]	← <u>by Strong Belief Thesis</u>	(c) Intention: [I intend to travel to New York this afternoon]

It is at this point clear how the inconsistency of intention that occurred between (a), (b) and (c) can be explained by the inconsistency of beliefs (a*), (b) and (c*).

THE KIDNAPPING CASE

Let me now take into consideration one specific objection to cognitivism. Brunero⁷ points out that the Strong Belief Thesis entails that believing that one will X is *necessary* for intending to X. He then claims that this is problematic: it is in fact possible to show that believing one will X is not sufficient for intending to X.⁸ This means that Brunero interprets the Strong Belief Thesis as saying that believing that one will X is *sufficient* for intending to X. This latter position is vulnerable to a number of different counterexamples. Brunero describes cases in which it is possible to believe that one will X without him intending to X. Suppose a gangster is now kidnapping me. As he ties me up I hear from his driver that we are going to the gangster’s hideout. In this case I do not intend to go to the gangster’s hideout but I believe that I will go to the gangster’s hideout⁹. We hold a belief that I will X without intending to X. This is contrary to the claim that believing that one will X is sufficient for intending to X. Brunero is right in claiming that believing one will X is *not sufficient* for intending to X. But is it really true in the

⁷ Brunero, J. Against Cognitivism about Practical Rationality. *Philosophical Studies*, August 2008.

⁸ Ibid. “According to the Strong Belief Thesis, believing that one will x is necessary for intending to x. But problems for the above attempt to use BC [belief consistency] to explain IC [intention consistency] arise from the fact that believing one will x is not sufficient for intending to x. I’ll argue here that (a) believing one will x is not sufficient for intending to x [...]”.

⁹ Ibid. “Surely I do not intend to go to the gangster’s hideout, even though I believe I will”.



first place that - as Brunero seems to interpret it - the Strong Belief Thesis entails that holding a belief *is sufficient* for intending?

I believe that the Strong Belief Thesis cannot be understood as Brunero interprets it: There is no element in its definition that would suggest how holding a belief would be *sufficient* to produce an intention. All it claims is that *the intention "I intend to A" involves the belief that "I will do A"*. From this formulation it is clear that there is in fact a necessity relation, namely that "Intending to A" necessarily requires a belief that "I will A". There is however no sufficiency relation that transpires from the original definition: nothing tells us that forming a belief is sufficient to produce a corresponding intention. In his objection, Brunero seems to interpret the definition of the Strong Belief Thesis as *the intention "I intend to A" ONLY involves a belief that "I will do A"*. If we consider his interpretation, then we can deduce a sufficiency relation between belief and intention: if an intention to X only involves a belief to X, then a belief to X can be said to be sufficient to produce the intention to X. This last formulation is equivalent to the Identity Thesis but it is inaccurate as an interpretation of the Strong Belief Thesis.

In conclusion, Brunero's kidnapping case – as it is presented- is certainly a good counterexample to the Identity Thesis but it is inadequate to challenge the Strong Belief Thesis.

I still believe that the kidnapping case is an interesting example and I want to propose an alternative way in which it can still challenge cognitivism. As we have seen, cognitivists claim that it is possible to explain inconsistency of intentions by appealing to inconsistency of beliefs. In the kidnapping case we have a situation in which I do NOT intend to go to the gangster's hideout but I do believe that I will go to the gangster's hideout.

If we assume the Strong Belief Thesis and attempt to see which belief is involved in (a) then we will have a situation as the following:

BELIEFS

INTENTIONS

(a*) Belief:

[I will NOT go to the gangster's hideout ← by Strong Belief Thesis

(a) Intention:

[I do not intend to go to the gangster's hideout]

(b) Belief:

[I will go to the gangster's hideout]

This is problematic in that we can observe consistency in practical reason that is NOT reflected in consistency in theoretical reason since (a*) and (b) are inconsistent. We have no reason to say that intentions are inconsistent, but if we apply the Strong Belief Thesis then we cannot doubt that we are holding inconsistent beliefs. This is clearly a problem for cognitivism.

"INTENDING NOT TO A"

It is possible to respond to this objection on different grounds. Let's now focus on how we can interpret intention (a) in the example. Prima facie, by "I do not intend to go to the gangster's



hideout” I might mean “I intend not to go to the gangster’s hideout” or “I intend to abstain from going to the gangster’s hideout”. I have formed my intention and my intention is to not go to the gangster’s hideout. Since we do have an intention, a cognitivist would legitimately apply the Strong Belief Thesis to understand what belief is involved by that intention. In a schematic form:

BELIEFS		INTENTIONS
<p>(a*) Belief: [I will NOT go to the gangster’s hideout</p> <p>(b) Belief: [I will go to the gangster’s hideout]</p>	<p>← by Strong Belief Thesis</p>	<p>(a) Intention: [I INTEND NOT to go to the gangster’s hideout]</p>

As pointed before, we see how this interpretation presents a problem for the cognitivist’s account: we are presented with inconsistent beliefs (a*) and (b) and with intention (a). We have thus a case in which inconsistency of beliefs is not reflected in inconsistent intentions.

At this point I believe the cognitivist can still provide a response to this counterexample. This would require to analyze the exact *kind* of belief that is involved by intention (a).

Velleman¹⁰ suggests an interesting distinction between how we understand intentions and how we understand predictions. Understanding someone’s intention to do A requires understanding the evidences that shows that he wants to do A. On the other hand, understanding a prediction that he will do A involves understanding the evidences that he will do A *independently* of the will of the agent to do A.

Let’s now see how this distinction can help cognitivists to respond to the kidnapping case. The question is whether belief (a*) is the correct formulation of the kind of belief involved in the intention [I INTEND NOT to go to the gangster’s hideout]. Following Velleman’s distinction we would need to be clear on the will of the agent when attempting to understand his intentions. Does (a*) really helps understanding the evidences that shows whether the agents wants (or doesn’t want) to go to the gangster’s hideout or not? I believe that we can produce an alternative formulation of the belief involved in (a):

¹⁰ Velleman, D. “ *Perhaps the difference is that an agent’s intending to do something is normally to be explained by his wanting to do it, whereas his predicting that he will do something is to be explained by his having evidences that he will*”. *Practical Reflection*, University of Chicago Press. Pages 94-95.



BELIEFS

INTENTIONS

(a**) Belief:
[I will NOT go to the
gangster's hideout BY MY
OWN WILL]

← by Strong Belief Thesis

(a) Intention:
[I do NOT intend
to go to the gangster's hideout]

(b) Belief:
[I will go to the gangster's
hideout]

We have here applied the Strong Belief Thesis and formulated the correct kind of belief that is involved in intention (a). Belief (a**) expresses the wants of the agent holding intention (a): if the agent could choose, then he will not go to the gangster's hideout i.e. he will not go to the gangster's hideout by his own will. From a cognitivist perspective, this is the exact belief that is involved by intention (a): it helps us understanding the evidences that shows whether or not the agent is willing to go to the gangster's hideout. Belief (b) on the contrary is not derived from the agent's decisions or wants but it is a prediction given a certain state of the world (namely the fact that the agent is tied up sitting in the gangster's car). It involves understanding the evidences that he will go to the gangster's hideout *independently* of his will to go to the gangster's hideout.

It is now finally clear how (a**) and (b) are consistent. By distinguishing between kinds of beliefs the cognitivist has one way to successfully respond to the kidnapping case and invalidate its role as a counterexample.

“NOT INTENDING TO A”

There is however a second possible interpretation of “I do not intend to go to the gangster's hideout” (a) in the kidnapping example. This might in fact mean that the agent *failed* to form the intention to A. In other words the agent is incapable to produce the intention “I intend to A”. He does NOT embark in the process of intention formation at all and there is no intention whatsoever that appears in his practical reasoning.

In the light of the latter formulation of (a), we can consider its implications for cognitivism. By “I do not intend to go to the gangster's hideout” we mean is that I do not form the intention to go to the gangster's hideout. There is no intention whatsoever in the picture:

 BELIEFS

 INTENTIONS

(b) Belief: [I will go to the
gangster's hideout]

(a) Intention: [...]



It is evident that the kidnapping case does not pose any problems for cognitivism: we lack an intention that could be reduced to a belief through a belief-involvement principle. Under this interpretation the issue about consistency does not arise in the first place. The cognitivist is therefore immune to the counterexample.

We have considered the cognitivist’s claim that consistency of intentions can be explained by consistency of beliefs. We have tested the claim by providing a counterexample to it. We have also seen how the cognitivist has different ways to respond to the challenges and firmly defend his main claim. It seem therefore plausible to conclude that there are solid cases that the cognitivist can employ to show that we can explain the consistency of intentions in terms of consistency of belief. I am not here claiming that this is the right way of explaining consistency of intentions in practical reason. What I am trying to convey is that the cognitivist seems to have the tools to defend his explanation of consistency of intentions in practical reason.

2. COHERENCE OF INTENTIONS IS EXPLAINED BY COHERENCE OF BELIEFS

Cognitivists claim that incoherence in practical reason can be reduced to incoherence in theoretical reason: if we perceive an incoherence of intentions then there must be a parallel incoherence in the system of beliefs that the agent is holding. This latter will be able to explain the former.

Let’s consider the general case of incoherence of intentions as Bratman¹¹ presents it. We have seen that practical rationality demands that if “I intend to E” and I hold the belief that “If one will E, then one will intend to M” (M is the means I must take to accomplish end E), then I am required to form the intention “ I intend to M”. If you do not intend to M then your intentions are incoherent. Take the initial example of incoherence of intentions and rephrase it to fit Bratman’s formulation. If I hold the intention [I intend to go to Prague this afternoon] (a); hold the belief that [buying a ticket is necessary to go to Prague] (b) and [intending to buy a ticket is necessary to buy a ticket](c) and still hold [I do not intend to buy a ticket] (d), then my intention-belief system is incoherent. Let me represent the situation by highlighting its two main elements, beliefs and intentions. I will use again the left column for beliefs and the right column for intentions:

BELIEFS	INTENTIONS
(b) Belief: [Buying a ticket is necessary to travel to Prague]	(a) Intention: [I intend to travel to Prague this afternoon]
(c) Belief: [Intending to buy a ticket is necessary to buy a ticket] ¹²	(d) Intention: [I do not intend to buy a ticket]

¹¹ Bratman,M. Intention, Belief, Practical, Theoretical. In J. Timmerman, J. Sorupski, and S. Robertson, eds. *Spheres of Reason*, OUP.

¹² I am including belief (c) to be faithful to the characterization that Bratman provides. It can be pointed out that this belief is by no means required to make the system of beliefs/intentions coherent as it does not appear in the original formulation of COHI presented earlier in the text.



Given the formulation of coherence of intentions illustrated above, it is now relatively straightforward to see how this is a case of incoherent intentions. I do not intend to buy a ticket when the demands of practical rationality require me to do so.

Let's now assume the Strong Belief Thesis and see how cognitivists relate the requirement of coherence of intention in practical reason with the requirement of coherence of beliefs in theoretical reason. The position claims that: the intention "I intend to A" involves the belief that "I will do A". If we consider the example mentioned above, then we can see how by the Strong Belief Thesis the intention [I intend to travel to Prague this afternoon] (a) involves the belief [I will travel to Prague this afternoon] (a*). By the same token [I do not intend to buy the ticket] (d) involves the belief [I will not buy the ticket] (d*). In a schematic form:

BELIEFS		INTENTIONS
(a*) Belief: [I will travel to Prague]	← <u>by Strong Belief Thesis</u>	(a) Intention: [I intend to travel to Prague this afternoon]
(b) Belief: [Buying a ticket is necessary to travel to Prague]		
(c) Belief: [Intending to buy a ticket is necessary to buy a ticket]		
(d*) Belief: [I will NOT buy a ticket]	← <u>by Strong Belief Thesis</u>	(d) Intention: [I do not intend to buy a ticket]

From a cognitivist's standpoint, we can therefore observe how the incoherence of intentions that do not respect the demands of practical rationality – set (a); (b); (c); (d) – can be seen as incoherence of beliefs that do not respect the demands of theoretical rationality – set (a*); (b); (c); (d*).

Bratman challenges this account by presenting a case in which we observe coherence of beliefs and, at the same time, incoherence of intentions.

BRATMAN AGAINST COGNITIVISM

In "*Intention, Belief, Practical, Theoretical*"¹³ Bratman argues that it is not possible to reduce a case of incoherence in practical rationality to a case of incoherence in theoretical rationality. Cognitivism seems to allow the possibility of holding a false belief about one's own intention:

¹³ Bratman, M. *Intentions, Beliefs, Practical, Theoretical*. In J. Timmerman, J. Sorupski, S. Robertson, eds. *Spheres of Reason*, OUP.



this will generate a situation in which even though someone’s beliefs are coherent, her intentions will be incoherent. This is how Bratman argues to support this claim:

Suppose I intend E and know that E requires both M and that I intend to M. If I still do not intend M my intentions suffer from means-end incoherence. But suppose that I in fact do not intend M, I nevertheless falsely believe that I intend M. So my beliefs are that E, that E requires both M and that I intend M, and that M. There is no incoherence (though there is falsity) in this structure of beliefs. So means-end coherence is not belief coherence.¹⁴

If cognitivism allows the possibility of holding a false belief regarding one’s intentions (i.e. I falsely believe I intend M when in fact I don’t) then we have a situation where we have *coherence in our system of beliefs and at the same time we hold incoherent intentions* (‘I intend to E’ and ‘I do not intend M’). Since coherence of intentions derives (according to cognitivism) from coherence of beliefs then coherence in one’s beliefs system should be *reflected* in one’s system of intentions. According to Bratman, the possibility of holding a false belief precludes this parallelism. In a schematic form:

BELIEFS		INTENTIONS
(a*) Belief: [I will travel to Prague (E)]	← <u>by Strong Belief Thesis</u>	(a) Intention: [I intend to travel to Prague this afternoon]
(b) Belief: [Buying a ticket (M) is necessary to travel to Prague]		
(c) Belief: [Intending to buy a ticket is necessary to buy a ticket]		
		d) Intention: [I do not intend to buy a ticket]
(e) [FALSE] Belief: [I intend to buy the ticket]		
(f) Belief: [I will buy the ticket]		

As we can observe, by introducing false belief (e) we are faced with a perfectly coherent system of beliefs and at the same time with a system of incoherent intentions. This would count as a counterexample to the explanation that cognitivists provide to reduce incoherence of intentions to incoherence of beliefs.

¹⁴ Ibid.



AGAINST BRATMAN

First of all it is necessary to establish what is the interpretation of Bratman’s claim “in fact I do not intend M” or, in my example, “ I do not intend to buy the ticket” (d). Two are the possibilities if we follow the distinction that I presented earlier between holding the intention “I intend not to A” and failing to form the intention “I intend to A”.

On one hand Bratman might mean ‘I intend NOT-M’ or ‘I intend to NOT buy a ticket’. If this is the case, then his position cannot possibly hold. Since the agent is holding an intention to not perform an action, the cognitivist might claim that (given that intention involves belief) the agent needs to have a belief of the kind “I will not buy the ticket”. This will produce incoherence also in theoretical reasoning and it would dismiss Bratman’s counterexample. The interpretation however misses the very idea of what we have described as incoherence.

On a second interpretation the sentence “ I do not intend to buy the ticket” (d) might be paraphrased as “I did not form the intention to buy the ticket”. This is certainly more plausible and is able to sustain Bratman’s line of reasoning. The relevance given to the fact that incoherence of intentions entails my failing to form the right intention will be later helpful to support the critique that I will move against cognitivism. As for now let’s consider how we can criticise Bratman from a different perspective even if we allow this second interpretation. Following the second interpretation, the final picture would be:

BELIEFS		INTENTIONS
(a*) Belief: [I will travel to Prague (E)]	← <u>by Strong Belief Thesis</u>	(a) Intention: [I intend to travel to Prague this afternoon]
(b) Belief: [Buying a ticket (M) is necessary to travel to Prague]		
(c) Belief: [Intending to buy a ticket is necessary to buy a ticket]		
		(d) Intention: [...] {should be: I intend to buy a ticket}
(e) [FALSE] Belief: [I intend to buy the ticket]		
(f) Belief: [I will buy the ticket]		

Your intentions are incoherent in that you FAIL to form the intention that you must form according to the demand of practical rationality. At the same time your beliefs are coherent in that you DO FORM the belief that you must form according to the demand of theoretical



rationality. If we accept this interpretation, then we can appreciate how Bratman's case is a counterexample to cognitivism.

There are two main lines of reasoning that can be used to attack Bratman's counterexample.

On one hand, a cognitivist might show that a closer analysis of the example presented will reveal coherence in practical reason together with coherence in theoretical reason. Earlier in this paper we considered different versions of cognitivism: Identity Thesis, Strong Belief Thesis and Weak Belief Thesis. If Bratman's picture is a counterexample to cognitivism then it needs to challenge all three versions of cognitivism. It is clear that the counterexample challenges the Strong Belief Thesis and the Weak Belief Thesis. But what about the Identity Thesis? As we have seen, according to the Identity Thesis (or Pure Cognitivism) the intention "I intend to A" *is* a belief that "I WILL do A". Intentions are some sort of beliefs: they coincide with a special kind of belief. The belief "I will buy the ticket" (f) *is* the same as the intention "I intend to buy the ticket". We are thus holding the intention "I intend to buy the ticket" in practical reason as the coherence requirement would command us to do. This is precisely the case because my intention "I intend to buy the ticket" is the same as my belief "I will buy the ticket". If this is true, then we are presented with coherence of beliefs and *at the same time* coherence of intentions. This is contrary to what Bratman is claiming. There is therefore at least one version of cognitivism that is not effectively challenged by Bratman's counterexample.

A second way to attack Bratman is to show that we are actually presented with incoherence of beliefs in theoretical reason as well as incoherence of intentions in practical reason. Bratman claims that what makes beliefs coherent – even when intentions are incoherent – is the possibility of holding a false belief about one's intention. In the following part I will attack this claim and show that there is no genuine possibility for the agent to hold false beliefs about future intentions. If my argument is correct then Bratman's counterexample to cognitivism will lose its appeal.

Let's begin by breaking the idea of 'falsely believing that I intend to buy the ticket' into its main components. I am now going to make some basic assumptions that will help supporting the rest of the argument. First of all it is crucial to distinguishing believing and intending and determine which is the functional role of each element in our mental economy. Believing is a cognitive state: I am in a mental state in which I have reasons to believe something about the world. I have evidences that I take as supportive for my belief and I accept this belief as true. The role of a cognitive state is to accept or reject information about the world on the basis of evidences. Intending, on the other hand, is a motivational state: it affects my immediate behavior and, generally speaking, it initiates the action that is the content of my intention. I take intention to be the first step toward a conscious action. Its role is to move my behavior toward a specific direction. This is an extremely broad distinction but it is helpful to understand exactly the kind of belief that we hold when we hold a belief about our own intention. From this characterization it follows that I cannot be in a motivational state that applies to the future exclusively: since intention is immediately motivational, then my intentions can only concern my present behavior.¹⁵ I can also be in a cognitive state that tells

¹⁵ I can intend to perform an action in the future but this intention is not disconnected from my present actions. I can intend to boil an egg in the future but this intention has an immediate motivational impact on the means that I intend to use now to reach my goal. I take the intention to perform a future action to be necessarily connected with the present motivational state of the agent. This is compatible with Bratman's ideal of future-directed intentions but it is not the focus of the discussion. See Bratman 1987.



me something about my future motivational state. This is precisely the case in which I believe that I intend to buy the ticket. I am now in a cognitive state: I believe something about the world; in this special case I believe something about my future self. I am in a cognitive state whose content is a future motivational state. I am holding the belief that I intend to buy the ticket: this is a particular kind of belief, namely a belief *about* my own future intentions.

Let's now examine how a cognitive state – belief – about a motivational state can be made true or false. In other words what I am asking is how exactly can I truly or falsely believe that I intend to buy the ticket. Bratman argues that the main problem with cognitivism is that it allows cases in which we can hold false beliefs about intentions i.e. cases where an agent falsely believe he intends to X when he in fact he does not intend to X. Unfortunately he does not fully explain how cognitivism can allow such a possibility and in particular how exactly belief about intentions can be made true or false. We can however infer the underlying picture that Bratman seems to imply when he claims that we can hold false beliefs about intentions. Consider the example in which I hold the belief that I intend to drink the coffee that is in front of me in one minute. As the time comes I fail to intend to drink the coffee. I might claim that I am falsely believing that I intend to drink the coffee in one minute: I am lacking that very motivational state when the time comes. The presence of the intention to drink the coffee when the proper time comes is what makes the belief about my intention true or false. If, in fact, I formed the intention to drink the coffee, then I would have truthfully held the belief that I intended to drink the coffee in one minute. The belief about my intention is made true or false by the presence of that very intention. The belief “I believe I intend to drink the coffee in one minute” is made true or false by the presence or the absence of the intention “I intend to drink the coffee” when the proper time comes. Hence the possibility of holding a false belief about one's intention i.e. that “*I in fact do not intend M*” when at the same time “*I nevertheless falsely believe that I intend M*”.¹⁶

I believe that this is a faulty characterization and that there is no genuine possibility to hold a false belief about one's intention if we consider this picture. To show this I will consider two main cases, the synchronic case and the diachronic case. Let's start with the synchronic case: the belief about intention to do X and the intention to do X itself occur at the same time. Think of an example in which I initiate an action by my intending and at the same time I am fully aware of it. We can say that the agent is in the cognitive state “I believe at t_1 that I intend to buy the ticket at t_1 ”. Let's say that t_1 is exactly now: I am in the motivational state “I intend to buy the ticket at t_1 ”. At the same time, by observing myself as being moved by that intention, I have good evidence for the presence of my intention and therefore good grounds to support the belief – i.e. be in the cognitive state - “I believe at t_1 that I intend to buy the ticket at t_1 ”. If at t_1 I held the belief “I believe at t_1 that I intend to buy the ticket at t_1 ” *without* at the same time the presence of the intention “I intend to buy the ticket at t_1 ”, then I would have a situation in which I falsely believed about my intention. Is this last case a genuine possibility? I am inclined to say no: if I do not hold the intention to do X at t_1 , then I do not have any reason to form a belief that I hold the intention to do X at t_1 . This would misrepresent what is going on in my practical reason. In general, to rationally hold a belief about an intention, one requires the presence of the intention that the belief is specifying. In order to see whether that intention is present the agent needs evidences. I believe that many elements can count as evidences that you are/are not holding an intention: these include being spontaneously aware

¹⁶ Bratman, M. Intentions, Beliefs, Practical, Theoretical. In J. Timmerman, J. Sorupski, S. Robertson, eds. *Spheres of Reason*, OUP.



of your own intention, consciously observing your own system of intentions by careful introspection, or seeing yourself initiating an action right now. If by introspection I cannot find any intention to lift the cup in front of me now – or I do not see myself initiating now the action of lifting the cup in front of me - it would be irrational to hold the belief “I believe now that I intend to lift the cup in front of me now”. In the synchronic case we are in a situation in which the presence of the intention “I intend to do X now” supports the belief “I believe now that I intend to do X now”. The absence of such intention does not allow the belief about that intention to emerge in the first place. In this case rationality demands that beliefs about intention are either supported by actual intention or are not formed at all. Therefore in the synchronic case there is no possibility to hold a false belief about intention in the sense that Bratman emphasizes.

This is the simplest case and Bratman might reply that it does not reflect the scenario that he was presenting. What he is concerned with, as we have seen, are cases of beliefs about future intentions. In those cases, he wants to claim that we can hold false beliefs about future intentions. Let’s call this category diachronic cases i.e. situation in which the beliefs about intention and the intention itself occur in separate times. Take for example the belief: “I believe now that I intend to buy the ticket at t_2 ” – where t_2 is in the future. I am in a cognitive state now that expresses something about my motivational state at t_2 . In order for Bratman’s counterexample to work we need the possibility to falsely believe now that I intend to buy the ticket at t_2 . In Bratman’s picture, the absence or presence of the intention at t_2 is what makes the belief true or false. But is this a real possibility?

There are only two moments at which the belief “I believe now that I intend to buy the ticket at t_2 ” could be made true or false: these are when the ‘now’ is in the past – call it t_1 – and when then ‘now’ coincides with t_2 . The first question is: Can I hold a false belief at t_1 ? I would say that given the very nature of the belief at t_1 , that belief cannot be true or false at t_1 . The truth making condition of the belief at t_1 has not yet happened: the occurrence or not occurrence of the intention at t_2 will determine whether the belief is true or false. At t_1 we are clearly not in a position to assign a truth value to that belief. If this argument is correct then at t_1 we cannot possibly claim that we are holding a false (or true) belief about our future intention. The belief is neither true nor false in that the truth making condition has not happened yet. If we consider the behavior of the agent at t_1 we see that he acts at t_1 as if he will actually have the intention at t_2 . This would not make the belief itself true or false: all we can say is that there is no way to distinguish the behavior of an agent at t_1 that will actually form the intention at t_2 from the behavior of a second agent at t_1 that will fail to form the intention at t_2 . Both agents are holding at t_1 a belief that is neither true nor false.

Let’s say that t_2 comes – i.e. ‘now’ is t_2 – and that I do NOT form the intention to buy the ticket. Can I hold a false belief at t_2 ? Can I falsely believe now –i.e. at t_2 – that I intend to buy the ticket at t_2 ? If Bratman is right, since I did not form an intention then my belief is false. But is this a real possibility? As the reader can notice, this is the same as a synchronic case i.e. a case in which belief about intention and intention itself happen at the same time. The absence of the intention to buy the ticket will give no evidences to rationally hold a belief about that intention. In other words if I do not intend to buy the ticket at t_2 then there is no possibility that I can rationally hold the belief “I believe at t_2 that I intend to buy the ticket at t_2 ”.

Imagine a case in which you are in love with a perfect stranger that you happen to see everyday at the coffee shop where you go each morning. I might consciously form the intention to talk to the stranger the next day. I am aware of my mental process and I might come to think that I believe now that I intend to talk to her tomorrow. The following day I



enter the coffee shop, see the person and my emotional reaction prevents me to accomplish what I did intend to do the previous day: my voice disappears and I cannot think of anything to say. Does that mean that yesterday – or today – I falsely believed that I intended to talk to her when I actually did not intend to do so? Would today's failing to accomplish what I intended to do make yesterday's belief false? I do not think so: yesterday my belief could not be either true or false: the truth making condition – whether I will or won't talk to her tomorrow – did not happen yet. Today as I walk in the cafeteria and miserably fail to talk to that person, I do not have any evidence to accept the belief "I believe now that I intend to talk to her now" anymore.

This is much in line with Setya's claim that "the mind is not transparent to itself"¹⁷: we might be just wrong about assessing our future psychological states. What I am claiming is that we either are not in the position to say whether the assessment is correct – we are holding now a belief about a future intention- or whenever we attain such position then it would be irrational to hold that belief without proper evidences.

In conclusion there is no space to hold a false belief about intention: it is in fact the case that either your belief about intention cannot assume any truth value or that you do not have any ground to form a certain belief about intention. Contrary to what Bratman claims, I do not believe that holding a false belief about intention is a genuine possibility. If the argument is correct, then the counterexample that Bratman present against the cognitivist loses its appeal. If this is the case then the cognitivist is safe: it is in fact the case that we have incoherence in practical reason – we fail to form the intention to buy the ticket – and incoherence in theoretical reason – we fail to form the belief that we will buy the ticket.

Suppose now for the sake of the argument that the previous reasoning is completely mistaken: let's grant that holding a false beliefs about intention is a genuine possibility. If this is the case, I believe that Bratman will still have to solve one important problem.

First of all, the cognitivist might claim that the mere introduction of belief (e) does not make the system of beliefs coherent or incoherent. Belief (e) is so to speak neutral: the belief "I believe that I intend to do X" is not the kind of belief that we need to form to produce a coherent set of beliefs in theoretical reason. The bare introduction of (e) in the set of beliefs does not make beliefs coherent. Bratman seems to be aware of this: what makes the system of beliefs coherent is the presence of belief (f) " I will buy the ticket". But how is belief (f) produced?

One can argue that beliefs "I will travel to Prague this afternoon" (a*) and "Buying the ticket is necessary to travel to Prague" (b) are sufficient to produce the belief "I will buy the ticket" (f) and make the set of beliefs coherent. Bratman however claims that it is (e) - the possibility to form false beliefs about one's intention - the key element that makes the system of beliefs coherent. The challenge for Bratman is to explain what is the exact role of (e) to make the set of beliefs coherent: from the previous considerations it seems that we can easily hold a coherent set of beliefs even without the presence of (e). There must be therefore some theoretical movement that will make the possibility of holding a false belief about intention a crucial element for making beliefs coherent. Unless this issue is addressed, I do not think that the counterexample that Bratman presents is successful in challenging cognitivism.

¹⁷ Setiya, K. Cognitivism About Instrumental Reason. *Ethics* 117, 2007.



AN ALTERNATIVE ATTACK AGAINST COGNITIVISM

The idea presented in the first critique to Bratman is what led me to believe that there might be an alternative way to object to cognitivism. It seems to me that the problematic move is done when connecting theoretical reason with practical reason. I do not see particular problem in reducing (a) to (a*) but there is certainly an ambiguity in interpreting (d) “ I do not intend to buy the ticket”. The interpretations we can possibly provide to (d) might prevent the possibility of its translation in the sphere of beliefs.

The general case for incoherence presented earlier in the text, shows how intention (d) [I do not intend to buy the ticket] – and interpreted as “I intend NOT to buy the ticket” - is reduced by the Strong Belief Thesis to the belief (d*) [I will not buy the ticket]. This is the case that the cognitivist endorses. In the earlier example, incoherence of intentions in practical reason is reduced to the incoherence of belief (a*); (b); (c) and (d*). We have a situation in which incoherence of intentions in practical reason is explained by incoherence of belief in theoretical reason.

I want to claim that this is not the correct interpretation. Incoherence of intentions occurs because I *fail* to form the intention “I intend to buy the ticket”. Being incoherent is certainly not the same as intending –or to *form* an intention to do- the opposite of what I was demanded to intend by the coherence requirements of practical reason. Incoherence, on the contrary, pertains the fact that we *fail to form* an intention for the means that our beliefs would require us to intend in order to accomplish the end. A situation of incoherence of intentions is a situation in which I hold (a); (b); (c) and fail to produce the correct intention “I intend to buy the ticket”.¹⁸ So if we want to see which intentions I am holding when I am incoherent we will find that there is *no intention whatsoever* regarding the action “buying the tickets”. In a schematic form:

BELIEFS	← <u>by Strong Belief Thesis</u>	INTENTIONS
(a*) Belief: “I will go to Prague”		(a) Intention: [I intend to go to Prague this afternoon]
(b) Belief: [Buying a ticket is necessary to go to Prague]		
(c) Belief: [Intending to buy a ticket is necessary to buy a ticket]		

¹⁸ At this point some critics would challenge the idea that incoherence of intentions *only* amounts to fail to form the right intention which is demanded by the coherence requirement of rationality. They can argue that one can in fact be incoherent also by forming an intention with the wrong content . This is not an issue: even if we form an intention with the wrong content, at the same time we are still failing to form the right intention. This latter is the key to incoherence. When we consider incoherence, it seems to me that there is no difference between the situation in which (a) I fail to form the required intention and (b) I fail to form the required intention *and* I form an intention with the wrong content. In both circumstance we are incoherent because we fail to form the correct intention.



(d*) ?

(d) Intention: [...]
(I do not form the intention to
buy the ticket)

In (d) we observe an absence of intention. The agent, even though holding beliefs/intentions (a), (b) and (c), failed to form the correct intention in conformity with the requirement of coherence of intention.

Since there is no intention upon which we can apply the Strong Belief Thesis then there can't be a parallel belief that will be able to produce incoherence of beliefs. Cognitivists in fact lack a principle that connects non-formed-intentions with beliefs: there is no relation that is made evident regarding the belief involvement of intentions that are failed to be produced. If this is correct then it is not the case, given the classical formulation of belief involvement in any cognitivist account, that incoherence of intentions in practical reason can be possibly explained with incoherence of beliefs in theoretical reason.

The cognitivist might respond that in this case you still have incoherence of beliefs: the demand of theoretical rationality requires you to derive the belief that you will buy the ticket (d*) if you hold beliefs (a), (b) and (c). There is no belief (d*) and therefore we have incoherence in theoretical reasoning. At the same time no intention (d) has been formed even though its production was required by the coherence requirement of practical reason. You can see how the absence of my intention to buy the ticket occurs together with the absence of my belief that I will buy the ticket. The cognitivist might go further and claim that whenever we fail to form the belief required by the demand of theoretical rationality, then we also fail to form the intention required by the demand of practical rationality. He might insist on the fact that there is a situation of theoretical incoherence every time we encounter practical incoherence. We can therefore observe incoherence of beliefs and incoherence of intentions.

The problem with this response is that it does not support the original cognitivist claim that we can understand incoherence in practical reason by reducing it to incoherence in theoretical reason. Even if we concede that the cognitivist is able to demonstrate the constant coexistence of theoretical incoherence with practical incoherence, then it does not follow that one is explicable by the other. He did not show how what went wrong in cases of practical incoherence is reducible to what went wrong in cases of theoretical incoherence. The cognitivist still needs to explain how exactly the failure in practical reason is connected with the failure in theoretical reason or how exactly incoherence in practical reason just is incoherence in theoretical reason.

As I understand the cognitivist picture, the only available instrument to connect intention and belief is a belief-involvement principle: depending on the version of cognitivism – Identity Thesis, Strong Belief Thesis or Weak Belief Thesis – this principle will provide a bridge between practical reason and theoretical reason. Intentions will be therefore related to their corresponding belief. When we consider cases of practical inconsistency, the cognitivist has the proper instruments to explain how exactly inconsistency in practical reason can be explained by inconsistency in theoretical reason. If however we consider cases of practical incoherence, the cognitivist does not have those theoretical tools that can provide a satisfactory account in favour of the claim that we can explain incoherence in practical reason by incoherence in theoretical reason. As I pointed out earlier in the text, a belief-involvement principle cannot possibly be applied when an intention is absent.



There is in fact a full theoretical gap: we would require the cognitivists to provide a ‘non-belief involvement principle’ that would explain how the absence of an intention somehow *involves* the absence of a corresponding belief. In its current formulation, the cognitivist account cannot explain how the failure to form an intention is connected with the failure to form a belief. It seems therefore that cognitivism cannot possibly provide an account for incoherence of intention in terms of incoherence of beliefs.

CONCLUSION

Can you now possibly be fully cognitivist regarding all the requirements of practical rationality? Given the idea of belief-involvement, can you explain the rational requirements of consistency and coherence in practical reason by appealing to the rational requirements of theoretical reason?

My answer is no. The cognitivist’s picture *can* provide a sound and structured explanation on how to derive inconsistency of intentions from inconsistency of beliefs. However, as it is formulated, it *cannot* explain how to reduce incoherence of intentions to incoherence of beliefs. Given the present debate, a reasonable position to hold is to be a semi-cognitivist: this view endorses cognitivism regarding the consistency requirement but cannot accept cognitivism when it comes to explain the coherence requirement. We have seen how the two rational requirements presuppose different structural elements, a fact that is particularly evident when we consider failure of respecting those demands. If we assume the belief-involvement principle alone, then we can see how it can be applied on the consistency requirement and it cannot possibly be applied to the coherence requirement.

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