Going Contextual About Local and Global Rational Requirements

Abstract (985 words)

The distinction between local and global requirements is one of the many choice points concerning the correct formulation of rational requirements.

Kolodny (2005) takes it as a given that "our ordinary requirements about rationality" are local: "They are focused on specific conflicts among one's attitudes." He infers that rational requirements should do so too. "In each instance in which one is under a rational requirement, what it ought to require of one is to avoid or resolve some specific conflict among one's attitudes—as opposed to, say, satisfy some global constraint on all of one's attitudes." (pp. 515-516)

To distinguish between local and global rational requirements has proven useful in the debate about the scope of such requirements. For example, Brunero (2012) invokes this distinction to reply to the symmetry objection against the wide scope version of a means-end coherence requirement of rationality. He takes local judgments of rationality to "specify what's rational in light of a certain subset of an agent's attitudes", as opposed to global judgments of rationality which "specify what's rational in light of the totality of an agent's attitudes." (p. 129) With this distinction in place, he argues that the perceived asymmetry of different ways of complying with wide scope requirements is not a problem for wide scope views. That is because the asymmetry only arises if we consider the global level. Only then is there a difference in rationality between e.g. intending a means, no longer intending an end or dropping the belief about the means-end relation. For example, if in addition to intending an end and having a belief about what means would bring it about , the agent also believes that she has conclusive evidence for this belief, then intending the means is indeed a more rational way of complying with a rational requirement. However, if we adopt the local perspective and only focus on a subset of the agent's attitudes (i.e. the means-end belief and the intention to the end), there is no asymmetry between the options. They are in fact equally rational. Brunero claims that because of the local/global distinction, "there is no inconsistency in claiming both that (1) two ways of proceeding are on a par as far as instrumental rationality goes, but (2) considering the other attitudes of an agent, one way of proceeding is more rational than another." (p. 129)

If we find Kolodny's and Brunero's claims convincing, the local/global distinction seems both intuitive and useful. However, this paper raises two problems that this distinction faces and in the next step proposes a way of avoiding them whilst maintaining the spirit and usefulness of the distinction.

One, we face a demarcation problem. How small or large is the subset of the agent's attitudes supposed to be in order to qualify as *local*? Brunero's suggestion of limiting this subset to the attitudes that are "relevant to instrumental rationality" (p. 130) is not specific enough. Why for example should a belief about inconclusive evidence concerning a means-end belief not be relevant for instrumental rationality?

The proponent of the local/global distinction faces a difficult choice. If we restrict the subset too much, we face two further issues. For one, on a very strict understanding of local requirements, rationality risks to become an almost void notion that is too restricted in scope to make any substantial claims about an agent's system of propositional attitudes. Moreover, postulating a small subset of attitudes and corresponding local requirements that govern it might establish an artificial separation of related attitudes, e.g. of a belief about sufficient evidence that *x* is a means to *y* and the corresponding means-end belief. However, if the *local* subset of attitudes is too large, admittedly it might avoid the above issues but the local/global distinction might lose its interest if the subset includes almost all of the agent's attitudes.

Two, establishing a distinction between local and global requirements of rationality gives rise to contradicting judgments of (irr-)rationality. A local requirement might license what would be considered irrational according to a global requirement (e.g. dropping a means-end belief despite having conclusive evidence for it). Schroeder (2004, 2009) argues that, as a matter of principle, rational requirements should not issue contradicting judgments. Moreover, if we want our rational requirements to function as advice, this is a highly undesirable result. How can one be guided by the principles of rationality if these principles do not issue one consistent piece of advice?

This paper proposes to replace the local/global distinction with a contextual understanding of rationality ascriptions, modelled after contextualism about knowledge ascriptions. The version of epistemic contextualism that I am interested in holds that knowledge ascriptions of the form "S knows that p" express different propositions, depending on the context of the assessor (e.g. Cohen 1999, Feldman 2004). Because different propositions have different truth-conditions, it follows that the corresponding knowledge ascriptions are true in different contexts.

This paper explores whether rationality ascriptions like "S is rational in phi-ing" can be treated similarly as expressing different propositions, relative to the context of the attributor. If she has a local understanding of rationality in mind, her rationality ascription expresses a different proposition than the one expressed by another attributor who has a global understanding of rationality in mind. This contextual approach moves the local/global distinction from the requirements of rationality and into the context of the assessor. It is no longer the case that rationality itself or its requirements issue contradicting judgments. Instead, these different judgments can now be explained by appealing to the context of the assessor.

In this way, we can maintain the intuitive appeal of the distinction without having to make the difficult choice of appropriately restricting a local subset of attitudes and without having to allow for contradicting judgments within the notion and requirements of rationality itself.

References

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