In Defense of The Wide-Scope Instrumental Principle

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Suppose that people always have reason to take the means to the ends that they intend.¹ Then it would appear that people’s intentions to pursue ends automatically give them reasons to take the means. This idea might seem appealing: intuitively, people who fail to take (at least what they know to be) the necessary means to their ends are in violation of the reasons for action that they have, and that is why we describe them as practically irrational.² But the idea is also deeply problematic, because it makes reasons for action too easy to come by. No reason to drink the petrol in that glass? Just adopt the bizarre intention of filling your stomach with any old liquid, and suddenly you’ll have reason to do so! I’ll call this The Bootstrapping Problem.³

In “The Myth of Instrumental Rationality”, Joseph Raz sees The Bootstrapping Problem, and concludes that the instrumental principle must be false: people’s ends and intentions do not give them reasons to take the means to fulfilling them.⁴ Raz’s alternative is, roughly speaking, the principle that people have reason to take the means to those ends that they have undefeated reason to have.

The immediate difficulty with this alternative sort of suggestion is that it leaves unexplained the phenomenon of “cleverness” and its opposite: people who take the means to ends they have no reason to pursue (or good reason not to) seem to be rational in a certain way, while people who fail to take the means to their ends seem to display a distinctive form of

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² I’ll use the phrase “the means” as shorthand for “the known, necessary means” to the end, since it isn’t irrational not to take a means one couldn’t have known was the means, nor to not take a sufficient means when some better means was taken. This qualification yields a weak but plausible version of the instrumental principle. Instrumental rationality would presumably include further principles as well.
irrationality even in the absence of any good reason to have the ends they do. We find ourselves pulled in two apparently incompatible directions. If we say that people have reason to take the means to the ends they actually have, the Bootstrapping Problem threatens. If we say instead that people have reason to take the means to ends they should have, there seems to be no room left for explaining what is rational about good means-end reasoning to bad ends: the rationality of cleverness.5

In this paper I argue that there is a sense in which it is true that people always have reason to take the means to their ends. Understood according to the wide-scope reasons approach (as suggested by John Broome and Jay Wallace)6 the instrumental principle does not entail that we always have narrow-scope reasons to take the means to our actual ends, so it doesn’t raise The Bootstrapping Problem. The bulk of this short paper refutes an argument Raz makes to show that The Bootstrapping Problem arises even on the wide-scope reasons approach. Showing that his objection fails is significant. The wide-scope reasons approach allows us to (i) maintain the intuition that a practically irrational agent has reason to do otherwise, (ii) readily explain why instrumentally irrational agents are irrational in the same way, whether or not they have reason to have the ends that they have, and (iii) cut off a popular objection to the idea that rationality is purely instrumental, according to which instrumental reasons arise only when normative force is “transmitted” from ends there is non-instrumental reason to have to their means.

Wallace says that wide-scope reasons are those that constrain our attitudes by “governing combinations of attitudes”.7 We represent this logically by containing a logical connective within

5 Raz develops his own rather sophisticated answer to this problem that unfortunately I cannot delve into here.
the scope of the reason operator. Thus, a *wide-scope conditional reason* says that we have reason to make it the case that (if the antecedent is true then the consequent is true). Wide-scope conditional reasons do not allow for *detachment* by modus ponens, which is to say that if one has a wide-scope conditional reason of the form: reason (to A if P), it does not follow generally from this and the truth of P, by modus ponens, that one has reason (to A). The right response might instead be to make it the case that not P. If the instrumental principle is wide-scope, we cannot simply detach a narrow-scope reason to take the means from the fact that we intend a certain end.

Raz objects that the following syllogism is valid, and that it shows that if the wide-scope instrumental principle is true, it still entails narrow-scope reasons to take the means to the ends one has.\(^8\)

(1B) One has reason (to do M if one intends to do E and M is the means to E)

(2B) One intends to do E and M is the means to E.

Conclusion:

(3) One has reason to do M.

At first glance, it might seem that the argument above works by detachment. But detachment is not permissible here. Here’s Raz’s explanation of how the argument works: \(^9\)

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\(^8\) Raz, “The Myth of Instrumental Rationality,” 12.

\(^9\) It should be noted, in fairness, that Raz’s argument here is at least partially founded upon a claim that Wallace makes (mistakenly, I think) in defense of a wide-scope instrumental principle. Wallace claims that “you can comply with [the instrumental principle] either by giving up the intention to [pursue the end], or by forming the intention to [take the means]” (Wallace. “Normativity, Commitment, and Instrumental Reason,” 17). While I defend the wide-scope instrumental principle against Raz’s argument here, I draw no conclusions about its success as a *reductio* of Wallace’s position in that paper.
(1B) does state that one has a reason … it is a reason to avoid being in a situation in which one would be in breach of that reason. And one would be in breach of it if one both intends E and fails to do M. There are two ways to avoid being in that situation. One is to abandon the intention to do E. The other is to do M. So one has both a reason to do M and a reason to abandon one’s intention to do E (though no reason to do both, because once one does one of them the reason to do the other lapses). That means that, so long as M is the means to E and one intends to do E, one has reason to do M. By doing M, when it is the means to E, one acts in a way that puts one on the right side of reason. By doing M, one conforms to the reason stated in (1B). It follows that one has reason to do M.\(^\text{10}\)

According to this explanation, the wide-scope instrumental principle (1B) gives us (equal) reason to pursue each (but not both) of two ways of satisfying it – taking the means or abandoning the end. Since one has no reason to both abandon the end and take the means to fulfill it, we may be tempted to agree with Raz that “once one does one of them the reason to do the other lapses.” But that would be a mistake. (1B) states a non-detachable, wide-scope reason, and because of this our actual ends and intentions make no difference to the claims it makes on us. There is nothing in the above argument to establish that once we have abandoned our intention to perform the end, we lose our reason to take the means to it, or that we only gain the reason to take the means once we have adopted the end.

To see this point, suppose that I have non-instrumental decisive reason to pay attention to looking after my teeth. But when I discover that looking after my teeth requires a frightening visit to the dentist, I decide that I am not going to take the means to that end. If I abandon any intention to look after my teeth, then according to Raz’s argument, I will have correctly observed the reason in (1B), and it will therefore no longer give me a reason to go to the dentist. But this is

\(^{10}\) Raz, “The Myth of Instrumental Rationality,” 12.
false, because I still *ex hypothesi* have non-instrumental reason to intend to look after my teeth. (1B) gives me the following instrumental reason: I have reason to make it the case that (if I intend to look after my teeth, then I go to the dentist). The only way of acting that would satisfy both of these reasons would be to go to the dentist, therefore it is obvious enough that in combination, these claims entail that I have a reason to do so. (1B) combined with my non-instrumental reason therefore entails the existence of a reason to go to the dentist, even though I actually lack the intention of looking after my teeth. My actual intentions and ends themselves make no difference to the narrow-scope reasons that the wide-scope reason entails.\(^{11}\)

Raz’s argument against the wide-scope approach is unraveling already. Any narrow-scope reasons derived from the wide-scope instrumental principle do not depend on our actual ends, therefore our actual ends do not give us reasons, and the Bootstrapping Problem does not arise. But perhaps my argument so far has only made things worse. If the premise that the end is actually intended plays no role in Raz’s argument, does the wide-scope instrumental principle generate narrow-scope reasons to take the means to all possible ends? The suggestion that we have such reasons is counterintuitive, at best, so I’ll call this *The Possible Ends Problem*.

To show that appearances here are misleading, I’ll need to show that the argument still goes wrong. I’ll begin by reformulating Raz’s syllogism to clarify it logically. The main change will be to take into account the point that the having of the intention to E played no role in the premises. Here’s how the reformulated syllogism looks:

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\(^{11}\) Of course, my having of ends and intentions may have *effects* that alter the terrain of my reasons in particular cases. For example, my abandoning my intention to look after my teeth may cause them to fall out, and I may thereby lose any further reason to look after them!
(1C) If (M is the means to E), then one has reason (to M if one intends E)

(2C) M is the means to E

From (1C) and (2C):

(2.1C) One has reason (do M if one intends E)

From (2.1C):

(2.2C) One has reason ((not to intend E) or (to M))

From (2.2C)

(3) One has reason to M

(4) One has reason not to intend E.

The first step is straightforward *modus ponens*, so to block the conclusions, I will argue that it is one of the steps from (2.1C) to (2.2C) and then to (3) and (4) that is invalid. Recall that Raz reasoned that a principle like (2.1C) states a constraint, that there are two ways of satisfying it, and that therefore we have reason to do each, but not both, of those things. Raz’s argument here relies on two principles:

For the step from (2.1C) to (2.2C):

(CD) If one has a reason of the form reason (If A then B), then one has a reason of the form reason (not A or B)

For the step from (2.2C) to (3) and (4)

(DE) If one has a reason of the form reason (not A or B), then one has both a reason (not A) and a reason (B).
A brief *reductio* will show that at least one of these principles must be rejected. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that we all have a reason to speak the national language, wherever we are.

Suppose, moreover, that this reason is wide-scope, so that it suggests that I may have a reason to speak French when I visit France, and, because Japanese is hard to learn, a reason not to be in Japan at all. This yields:

(1L) If (L is the national language in C), then one has reason (to speak L if in C).

By adding to (1L) an innocent minor premise and using Raz’s principles, we can now complete a structurally identical syllogism as follows:

(1L) If (L is the national language in C), then one has reason (to speak L if in C)
(2L) French is the national language in France
(2.1L) One has reason (to speak French if in France)
(2.2L) One has reason (not to be in France or to speak French)
(3L) One has reason to speak French
(4L) One has reason to not be in France

But this is a highly implausible result - as a matter of fact I am in the USA, and have no particular reason to go to France! My embracing the principle that one has a reason to speak the local language (1L) surely does not, on its own, commit me to the view that, here and now, I have a reason to speak French (nor, indeed, to not be in France). We must therefore reject at least one of Raz’s principles (CD) or (DE).
The most natural understanding of wide-scope disjunctive reason claims actually vindicates (DE).\textsuperscript{12} Suppose it is stated that I have reason (to A or to B). This should be understood as distinct from the claim that I have (reason (to A) or reason (to B)), and so as true if and only if my doing each of A or doing B (but not both) would count as satisfying that reason. Think of the disjunctive instructions on a ready meal: “Microwave for 4 minutes, or oven bake for 30 minutes”. The instructions are best read as suggesting that I have reason (to microwave or to bake), not just (reason (to microwave) or reason (to bake)). I do not take a 50/50 gamble as to whether I act in accordance with the instructions when I choose to microwave the meal! This is to say, when I have reason (to microwave or to bake), I have (reason (to microwave) and reason (to bake), but not both). Therefore a wide-scope disjunctive reason claim does indeed imply narrow-scope reasons to perform the disjuncts, and (DE) is vindicated.\textsuperscript{13}

The above points bring into view clear grounds for rejecting (CD). Combining (1L) with the minor proposition (2L), we straightforwardly derived: (2.1L) One has reason (to speak French if in France). Intuitively, everything we have assumed so far is consistent with the assumption that, here and now in the USA, I have no reason whatsoever to speak French. But we have seen that (2.2L): One has reason (not to be in France or to speak French), entails that one has a reason to speak French, and therefore contradicts the last assumption. Therefore, (2.2L)
cannot be entailed by (2.1L), and we must reject (CD). A reason to make it the case that (if A, then B) is not equivalent to a reason to make it the case that (not A or B).

Does a wide-scope conditional reason such as (2.1L) entail a (weaker) disjunction of narrow-scope reasons, such as: (one has reason (to speak French) or one has reason (not to be in France))? It might be convenient if this were so, as it would help to explain why people have mistakenly accepted (CD). But, alas, it does not seem plausible. I could surely be committed to the claim (2.1L) that one has reason to speak the local language without being committed to thinking, here and now, that I have any narrow-scope reasons at all bearing on whether I should speak French or whether I should not be in France. I am only committed to the wide-scope reason claim: I have reason to make it the case that (if I am in France, I speak French). We can safely contrapose that conditional: I have reason to make it the case that (if it’s not the case that I speak French then I am not in France), and we can transform it into a conjunction: I have reason to make it the case that not both (it’s not the case that I speak French and I am in France). But we cannot introduce a disjunction, whether of wide or of narrow scope.

By explaining why (CD) must be rejected, I have shown that the argument for deriving simple narrow-scope reasons to take the means to any end from the wide-scope instrumental principle fails (absent an additional normative premise, such as that there is decisive reason to intend the end). This point therefore answers both The Possible Ends Problem and The Bootstrapping Problem.

The wide-scope reasons approach offers a simple and unitary explanation of why instrumental irrationality is something that can be criticized whether or not the agent has reason to have, or not have, the end he does. Someone who intends an end but does not take the means does not act in accordance with the wide-scope conditional reason that he has. He fails to make it
the case that (If he intends the end, he takes the means). “Instrumental reasons” are best conceived of as these wide-scope reasons, rather than as the narrow-scope reasons to take the means that the wide-scope reasons entail when combined with decisive reasons to intend particular ends. That way, we can say that all instrumentally irrational agents act against their instrumental reasons.

Since we did not need to derive any narrow-scope reasons either from the agent’s actual ends or from the ends he ought to have in order to know that he has violated his reasons, this account of instrumental rationality does not require “transmission” of normative force from ends to means. It is conceivable, on this account, that agents in fact have wide-scope instrumental reasons and no other reasons. It is conceivable, therefore, that rationality is purely instrumental.

An important question remains: why think that we actually have the wide-scope reasons expressed by the instrumental principle? I have not attempted to answer this question. But I have cleared away a problem that made answering it seem impossible from the get-go: I have shown why the instrumental principle, read as a schema for wide-scope instrumental reasons, is a credible account of at least some of the reasons that we take ourselves to have.