

Michael E. Bratman, Planning, Time and Self-governance: Essays in Practical Rationality

Grčki, David

Source / Izvornik: **Croatian Journal of Philosophy, 2020, 20, 262 - 267**

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:637635>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#) / [Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-03-22**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[Repository of the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences - FHSSRI Repository](#)



Michael E. Bratman, Planning, Time and Self-governance: Essays in Practical Rationality, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 272 pp.

In his new book *Planning, Time and Self-governance: Essays in Practical Rationality* Michael E. Bratman tries to answer the following questions: *Why be a planning agent and what is the value of a planning theory of intention?* In order to answer these questions, he develops a diachronic account of rationality with the notion of self-governance. In order to fully understand what this means we need to look briefly at Bratman's earlier work. Over the course of the last three decades, Bratman has developed his theory of action and practical reasoning—a planning theory of intention. The planning theory of intention states the following. Human beings are planning agents. We have the ability to formulate and execute plans. Plans are types of intentions that are focused on future action i.e. future oriented intentions. Our capacity to form and execute plans stems from two general needs that we have as human beings: the need for deliberation or practical reasoning and the need for coordination. Our ability to deliberate would be of minimal use to us if we were doing it only moments before the time of action. In order to use our deliberate capacities to its fullest we deliberate in advance i.e. we plan. The second need that we, as human beings have is a need for coordination. We can distinguish between two types of coordination: personal coordination that we have with ourselves at different times (intrapersonal coordination) and coordination that we have with others (interpersonal coordination). Because we are limited creatures, both in cognitive and material resources, we need, in order to achieve complex and temporally distant goals both types of coordination—intrapersonal and interpersonal. Plans are an essential part of human agency and practical reasoning. Our ability to make plans is something that separates us from animals (although not the only thing; others being our language capacity, reflection, higher-order cognition). Plans, as forms of intention, have distinctive normative properties like commitment and nonreconsideration. When we formulate plans we usually, if no new evidence, information or reasons arise, stick to them and do not reconsider them. This is because it would be almost impossible for us to manage our own lives if we would deliberate about every moment of every day on every decision we make. For example, if I want to go to the theatre I will do it in the following manner. I deliberate whether I want to go, decide on it, form an intention and then execute the action of going to the theatre. When all this is done, I will not, usually, reconsider every step of the way between my house and the theatre whether I should go or not. I consider that matter settled (although subject to change if I receive new evidence, information or reasons). From this Bratman builds the normative side of his planning theory of intention. The normative side consists of rational pressures that are put on the agent who identifies herself as a planning agent. Those pressures are intention consistency and intention stability. They state that an agent, if she is a planning agent, has to have intentions that are not contradictory. She cannot, simultaneously, have intentions that are not co-possible. For instance, an agent cannot intend and not intend to go to the theatre tonight. Also, her intentions have to have some level of stabil-

ity i.e. she cannot suddenly drop her future-directed intention without any reason whatsoever. Lastly, this pressure gives rise to the norms of practical rationality. The most important norm for Bratman's theory of intention is means-end coherence. The norm, roughly states that an agent, if she intends some end E and is aware of the necessary means to E which is M she is rationally required to intent to M. This simply means that we need to intend the necessary means (if we know them) for our desired ends (goals). This is, very briefly, Bratman's theory of intention which he has developed in the last three decades and which had profound influence in the fields of philosophy of instrumental rationality and philosophy of action.

Now we can return to the book at hand—*Planning, Time and Self-governance: Essays in Practical Rationality*. In this book, Bratman tries to answer the questions *why to be a planning agent and what is the value of a planning theory of intention?* With his planning theory of intention Bratman has presented an in-depth and influential way of thinking about practical reasoning, instrumental rationality and everyday decision making. Bratman's model explains and offers normative structures for everything from simple everyday decisions like what to eat for lunch tomorrow, to choosing between different option regarding your carrier or planning your retirement years. But, according to some philosophers he has not answered the real question regarding rationality and action, that is why should we care about being a planning agent and what value does a planning theory of intention brings to our lives. The short answer, located in the title of the book, is *self-governance*. We all want, at least a certain amount of, coherence and stability in our own lives. Means-end coherence and stability of intention can certainly provide instrumental reasons for stability and coherence in our lives but it seems (according to Bratman's critics and Bratman's argumentation in this book) that we value governing our own lives noninstrumentally—and that value is self-governance. For the long answer to the questions *why to be a planning agent and what is the value of a planning theory of intention* we need to examine the book more closely.

Firstly, we shall take a look at the structure of the book i.e. how chapters align with one another, secondly we shall examine the content of all the chapters and lastly see how it all ties up together.

The book is comprised of a set of essays that can stand independently of each other. Each essay has a clear and precise line of argumentation that can stand on its own and serves as a point in the overall argumentation of the entire book. All of the essays, excluding the first essay (introduction) and the last essay, were published as independent papers elsewhere. These essays serve as chapters in this book and their order is chronological (with some exceptions). Bratman's argumentation in this book can be analyzed as having two parts with two small excursions.

In the first part, Chapters 1–4 (roughly), Bratman establishes the problem at hand. The first problem is, as I have mentioned at the beginning, why should someone be a planning agent or what is the value of a planning theory of intention. The second problem is a problem of instrumental rationality in general i.e. whether there is such a thing or can it be reduced to theoretical rationality. Bratman acknowledges that these are genuine problems for his planning theory of intention and that something needs to

be done. In these chapters he is also laying grounds for the latter argumentation involving self-governance.

In the second part, Chapters 5–11 (roughly), Bratman proposes a brand new way of looking at his planning theory of intention and that is *Self-governance-Planning Agency*. The idea is to put some value into the planning theory of intention and that value is self-governance. We, presumably, find some value in governing our own lives in contrast to aimlessly going from one personal project to another not finishing any of them. Bratman is arguing, roughly, that in order to achieve what we value, and that is self-governance, we need to commit ourselves to the normative aspects of his planning theory of intention; means-end coherence and intention stability. Now I will briefly discuss the content of each of the chapters in the book.

Bratman's "Introduction" serves two main purposes. The first one is to offer a summary of all the other chapters in the book and the second is to present the *challenge*. The challenge is presented by Joseph Raz and Niko Kolodney and states that the idea that planning norms are norms of rationality is a myth. The rest of the book is Bratman's response to that challenge.

In the second chapter "Intention, Belief, Practical, Theoretical" and the third chapter "Intention, Belief, and Instrumental Rationality" Bratman expands and explains the challenge presented to him. Bratman is claiming that all of his critics, or at least most of them, have one thing in common. They are reducing the requirements of practical rationality, like demands for consistency and coherence, to the requirements of theoretical rationality. He calls these authors *cognitivists*. Cognitivists are authors who claim that "practical rationality of one's system of intentions is, at bottom, theoretical rationality of one's associated beliefs" (19). There are at least three authors who can be classified as cognitivists: Gilbert Harman, J. David Velleman and R. Jay Wallace. In these chapters Bratman engages with the criticism of Gilbert Harman and J. David Velleman more thoroughly. Harman's basic idea, as Bratman calls it, is that when an agent intends some end E she is necessarily believing E. Bratman responds by arguing that sometimes we intend some end E and do not believe it—as in the case of forgetfulness. Velleman's critique of Bratman's work can be roughly summarized by the following question: "Why... should an agent be rationally obliged to arrange means of carrying out an intention, if he is agnostic about whether he will in fact carry it out?" (Velleman 2007: 205). This is an attack on Bratman's core normative requirement of practical rationality—means-end coherence. Bratman's response is that we are rationally obliged to the norm of means-end coherence because this norm stems from practical values like cross-temporal integrity, cross-temporal self-governance and sociality.

Chapter 4 "Intention, Practical rationality and Self-governance" is the core chapter of Bratman's book. In it he defends his planning theory of intention as an account of rationality and sets foundations for a diachronic account of rationality by introducing the notion of self-governance. Firstly, Bratman restates his norms of practical rationality, *means-end coherence*, and *intention consistency*, respectively. Then, he argues that we have a distinctive noninstrumental practical reason to oblige to these norms. That reason is cross-temporal self-governance. The concept of self-governance

is something that Bratman derives from the works of Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt's idea is that we need an account of what it is for an agent to identify with a certain thought or an attitude. In other words, what is it for a thought or an attitude to speak to an agent; which thought has agential authority for an agent. Frankfurt, and subsequently Bratman, states that the relevant question for our practical thought and action is for an agent to ask herself *Where do I stand?* with respect to my intentions, attitudes and desired ends. She does this via deliberation and reflection. When she has found "the place to stand" on some practical issue she can govern in a particular domain, "for self-governance where you stand guides your relevant thought and action" (97). Because, we as human beings, are planning agents, we have the reason to oblige to practical norms of rationality and that reason is self-governance.

In Chapter 5 "Agency, Time and Sociality" Bratman is introducing and reintroducing two ideas that will be relevant for his diachronic account of rationality. Those ideas are *shared intentional activity* or the ability to have *we-intentions* and self-governance at the time (synchronic) and self-governance over time (diachronic). He does not explore these ideas in substantial details in this chapter.

In Chapter 6 "Time, Rationality and Self-governance" Bratman expands on his notions of synchronic and diachronic self-governance. Synchronic self-governance is simply an agent's practical standpoint at the time i.e. "synchronic structures of attitudes that is sufficiently unified so as to constitute where the agent stands at that time" (144). Synchronic self-governance is a necessary but not sufficient condition for diachronic self-governance. In order to achieve diachronic self-governance several conditions need to be met. Those conditions are the diachronic notion of personal identity i.e. an agent needs to be the same person over certain period of time, psychological continuity of the agent's mental states over time, semantic interconnectedness of the agent's intentions and default stability of intention. Bratman argues that the agent's intentions need to be meaningfully connected in the context of her practical standpoint. He is doing that because he wants to avoid examples like the agent having a coherent and consistent set of weird and physically impossible fantasies. The agent's intentions need to be stable (in absence of supposed conclusive reasons for change) in order to persist over time. When these conditions are met we have a diachronic notion of self-governance. We can use this notion as a normative (noninstrumental) reason to conform to practical norms of rationality like means-end coherence and stability of intention.

As I mentioned before, there are two excursions in the second part of the book; Chapter 7 "Temptation and the Agent's Standpoint" and Chapter 8 "The Interplay of Intention and Reason". In Chapter 7, Bratman revisits one of the key issues of his planning theory of intention—the problem of temptation, which is, in short, a diachronic form of the "weakness of will" problem. In Chapter 8, Bratman engages in a discussion with David Gauthier's theory of deliberation and practical reasoning. Both of these chapters are excursions at least in two senses. Firstly, they tackle specific issues; the problem of temptation and David Gauthier's theory of deliberation and practical reasoning. Secondly, these chapters make the chronology of the

book out of sync. That being said, the problems in these chapters are solved by the account of diachronic rationality using the notion of self-governance, so in some way they do fit with the rest of the second part of the book.

Chapter 9, “Consistency and Coherence in Plan” is written somewhat in a form of a dialogue between Bratman and a fictional planning agent named Kate. In this “conversation” Kate is asking two questions: is there any reason for her to be a planning agent and can she sometimes be a planning agent and sometimes not be a planning agent depending on her current preferences and whether it is advantageous for her at that particular time? Bratman’s answer to the first question is that we should be planning agents because we should value governing our own lives. In other words, the reason to be planning agent is self-governance. The answer to the second question is that an agent, in this case Kate, cannot actually choose to be *planning agent*. Not all agents are planning agents but those who are cannot simply cease to be planning agents at will because planning agency is embedded in their psychic economy.

In Chapter 10 “Rational Planning Agency” Bratman develops his full-fledged diachronic account of rationality. Building on his notion of diachronic self-governance Bratman argues for diachronic plan rationality which consists of several normative constraints. *Practical rationality/Self-governance-Planning Agency* states, roughly, that it is pro tanto, defeasibly irrational to fail to have a coherent practical plan-infused standpoint or to choose contrary to that standpoint. *Diachronic Plan Rationality* states, roughly, that when the conditions for synchronic and diachronic self-governance are met it is defeasibly, pro tanto irrational to make choices that bock your continued diachronic self-governance. *Rational end of diachronic self-governance* states, roughly, that it is pro tanto, defeasibly irrational for a planning agent, capable of self-governance to fail to have an end of diachronic self-governance. These normative constraints (not exhaustively) constitute Bratman’s diachronic account of rationality.

In the last chapter of the book, Chapter 11 “A Planning Agent’s Self-governance Over Time” Bratman explores the merger of his two ideas: the diachronic account of self-governance and intentional shared agency. The result is acting “together” with oneself at different times: a shared agency model of diachronic self-governance. In other words, the idea is that an agent “cooperates” with himself from different times in a way that different agents cooperate with each another. The idea is not new *per se* because it goes back to the days of decision theorists and game theorists like McClellan, who argued that an agent is bargaining with himself from different times, but Bratman is revising the idea in a new light using the notion of diachronic self-governance.

Overall the book is very well structured and the argumentation is clear and precise. The chapters follow from one another nicely (with the possible exceptions of Chapters 7 and 8 which I have discussed). The book has two “flaws”. The first is that the book is not kind to the readers that are not familiar with contemporary issues in philosophy of action and instrumental rationality. The second is that some chapter focus on specific issues, like temptation, and do little to contribute to the general argumentation presented in the book. The project in the book is quite ambitious. Bratman is

presenting a new and fresh way of looking at practical rationality, normative reasons and philosophy of action. Whether his account of *Diachronic Plan Rationality* works or not is for the reader to decide.*

DAVID GRČKI
University of Rijeka, Rijeka, Croatia

* The writing of this paper was supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under grant number IP-06-2016-2408.