'In Two (or more) Minds' about Rationality?  
Dual Process Theory’s Contribution to the Rationality Debate

This paper shows how the advent of dual process theories provides us with a framework which can be used to resolve the 'rationality debate' – whereby research into human reasoning has moved us to ask not only ‘how rational are we?’, but also ‘what counts as rational?’.

To illustrate how dual process theory equips us to answer this problem, I first outline how Evans & Over’s (1996) account both preserves a distinction between descriptive and normative theories of human reasoning, and provides a principled basis upon which to ground their account of what counts as normative. However, their ‘starting point for… human rationality… [is] to ask how decisions taken and actions performed serve the goals of the individual’ (Evans & Over 1996:1); yet it can be notoriously difficult to determine ‘the goals of the individual’ – rendering their account vulnerable to the accusation of ‘redefining rationality at will’, and thus imperilling its normative force.

I suggest that this challenge can be met by recognising that the fundamental locus of rationality is the human agent (rather than discrete reasoning mechanisms, for example); and that the requirement to understand someone as an intentional agent introduces conceptual constraints on ‘what counts as rational’, and thereby guards against the charge of interpretationism. Crucially, this requires us to invert Evans & Over’s account – the foundational notion of rationality is that ‘sanctioned by a normative theory’ (their ‘rationality2’). This is a prerequisite for agency; only then does ‘rationality1’ (which ‘serves the goals of the individual’) come into play.

Dr Clare Saunders  
Subject Centre for Philosophical & Religious Studies  
University of Leeds  
clare@prs.heacademy.ac.uk