

## **Demons in depression: rumination and agency**

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The literature of clinical psychology stresses that *rumination*, which involves repetitive thinking, is a central factor in major depressive disorder (MDD) (Watkins and Roberts, 2020; Wells, 2011). Recently, philosophers have begun discussing various issues concerning the agency of such rumination (e.g., Fanti Rovetta, 2025; Degerman and Sul, 2025; Farokhi, 2025). One central question seems to be: Are subjects active or passive in relation to their rumination in depression, that is, is rumination in depression something that subjects do or something that merely happens to them? Depressed subjects often describe their own rumination as involuntary and beyond control (Watts et al., 2017; Ciobotaru et al., 2024; Mancini et al., 2024), yet it remains an open question whether this description makes sense in the light of further philosophical examination. Answering this question is also of clinical importance. Current psychotherapeutic interventions train agential capacities such as attention control, introspective awareness, intentions, and values with the aim of strengthening a subject's ability to competently regulate their own rumination (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson, 2011; Wells, 2011). A successful philosophical account on the agency of rumination would likely inform such therapeutic protocols.

In a recent publication, Glasser and Irving (*forthcoming*) have defended a novel account on the agency of rumination – we can call it the ‘affect in action account’ (inspired by the title of their paper). This account makes two interrelated claims, namely: The rumination of depression involves the presence of so-called *occurrent agency* but the failure of so-called *aggregative agency*. Occurrent agency concerns an agent's capacity to guide mental and bodily processes as they unfold over time, while aggregative agency concerns an agent's capacity to organize and distribute actions over time. According to Glasser and Irving, this account explains why rumination in depression might feel passive (by the failure of aggregative agency) while it is, in fact, active (by the presence of occurrent agency).

However, we shall argue that the affect in action account is problematic in various respects. Furthermore, we shall utilize the major points of our critique to develop the foundation

for an alternative account. Concerning our critique, the affect in action account presents three motivating considerations for why the rumination of depression involves occurrent agency.

First, it claims that (1) subjects have personal-level attentional guidance of their rumination. To motivate (1), the account develops and draws on a thought example, Peter and his boss, as core evidence. However, as we shall argue, this example does not describe the rumination in depression adequately. The clinical literature stresses that the rumination in depression has the features of so-called *brooding*, involving negative valence, abstract construal, and cause-effect focus among other things. Instead, the example with Peter and his boss seems to describe another type of rumination, called *pondering*, which is not the type characterizing depression (Watkins and Roberts, 2020).

Second, the account claims that (2) subjects endorse their rumination through relevant goals. To motivate (2), the account refers to studies and models in psychology suggesting that rumination occurs as a response to goal-discrepancies, in particular higher-level goals (Martin and Tesser, 1989). However, even though the rumination of depression might be *triggered* or *initiated* by detected goal-discrepancies, the unfolding episodes of rumination are themselves *not structured* by these relevant goals. Rumination in depression does not exhibit the flexibility that commonly characterize goal-driven activity (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson, 2011)

Third, the account claims that (3) subjects can resist their rumination. To motivate (3), the affect in action account states that since subjects can resist other paradigmatically strong desires, such as those involved in addiction and Tourette's syndrome, and since such desires are stronger than an agent's desire to ruminate, then we have strong reasons to believe that depressed subjects can resist their rumination. However, as we argue, this transitive argument fails because there is an important difference in the relevant control structures.

Utilizing the major points and insights of our critique of (1)-(3), we then lay the foundation for an alternative account of the agency of rumination in depression. We call this the 'managerial control account' (inspired by the terminology of Hieronymy's, 2006, discussion of doxastic control). This account stresses that episodes of rumination in depression are not themselves guided or controlled 'from within', but subjects can guide and control their *responses* to the occurrences of these episodes, hereby indirectly influencing the causal impact of the rumination and future occurrences. We draw on the work of third-wave cognitive-behavioural therapy, which strongly seems to stress that subjects cannot directly control their ruminative thoughts, though they can engage in certain synchronic and diachronic control

structures to influence the cognitive and emotional effects of these thoughts (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson, 2011; Wells, 2011). To develop this account further, we introduce two other considerations from the empirical and clinical literature. First, we stress that rumination in depression is the result of an extended habituation process. However, the rumination of depression is a particularly strong habit in the sense that it is unusually difficult to change (Watkins and Roberts, 2020). Second, we stress that rumination in depression does exhibit the features of a kind of self-narrative (Fanti Rovetta, 2025), though compared to self-narratives commonly, rumination is more rigid in its content.

We close our presentation by some concluding remarks on the observation that depressed subjects often describe their depressive thoughts and feelings as demonic (e.g., Solomon, 2014). Drawing on inspiration from Søren Kierkegaard's notion of 'the demonic' as enclosing and monological patterns of thinking and feeling, as in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844 [1980]), we stress that the 'managerial control account' offers an interesting perspective to make sense of how 'demons in depression' develop and unfold in the form of rumination.

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