

## **DOES RATIONALITY GIVE US REASONS?<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

Most of us take it for granted that we ought to be rational—to have the bundle of dispositions and abilities that constitute the faculty of rationality. Most of us also take it for granted that we ought to satisfy various individual requirements of rationality: we ought not to believe it is Monday and also believe it is not Monday; we ought to intend to catch the 12.50, if we intend to get to a meeting and believe catching the 12.50 is the only way to get there; and so on.

There is a genuine question whether these things are so: ought we to be rational, and ought we to satisfy the individual requirements of rationality? In this paper, I shall suggest that the answer to the first question is plausibly “Yes”, but I shall concentrate particularly on the second question. I shall explain that I have found no satisfactory grounds for answering “Yes” to it. For the moment, I doubt that, necessarily, we ought to satisfy each of the individual requirements of rationality. Indeed, I doubt that, necessarily, we have any reason to satisfy each of these requirements.

### **2. Requirements of rationality**

You have arranged to go to a conference in Montreal on 16–18 October, some months ahead. You firmly intend to go to the whole conference. You write the appointment in your diary, and put it out of your mind for a while. A few weeks later a colleague invites you to a meeting in London on 17 October. You agree to go, and intend to do so. For a while, till you discover your mistake, you intend to be in Montreal on 17 October and you also intend to be in London on that day. But, since you know a little geography, you believe you cannot be in both places on the same day.

This is the sort of thing that happens to all of us occasionally. It is common, but nevertheless a lapse in our rationality. It is not entirely rational to have two intentions that you believe are incompatible. Rationality requires of you that you do not intend to do one thing and also intend to do another, when you believe you cannot do both.

This is typical of rationality. It requires certain things of you. It requires you not to have contradictory beliefs or intentions, not to intend something you believe you cannot do, to believe what obviously follows from something you believe, and so on. Since the logical structure of the requirements of rationality is important, I shall set out a few examples with a little formality. A fully formal statement of a requirement would take the form:

For all  $a$ , if  $a$  is a person, rationality requires of  $a$  that  $a$   $F$ s,  
where some verb phrase replaces ' $F$ '. To be less formal, I shall instead write:

Rationality requires of you that you  $F$ ,  
intending exactly the same meaning. This less formal statement contains the implicit quantifier 'whatever person you are'.

Here are some examples:

*First requirement.* Rationality requires of you that you do not both believe  $p$  and believe not- $p$ .

*Second requirement.* Rationality requires of you that, if you believe  $p$  and you believe (if  $p$  then  $q$ ), and if it matters to you whether  $q$ , then you believe  $q$ .

*Third requirement.* Rationality requires of you that, if you intend to  $G$ , and if you believe your  $F$ ing is a necessary means to your  $G$ ing, and if you believe you will not  $F$  unless you intend to  $F$ , then you intend to  $F$ .

*Fourth requirement.* Rationality requires of you that, if you believe you ought to  $F$ , and if you believe you will not  $F$  unless you intend to  $F$ , then you intend to  $F$ .

These are schemata; we get individual requirements by making appropriate substitutions for the schematic letters.

These examples are meant to illustrate the general nature of requirements of rationality (or 'rational requirements', as I shall sometimes say). For that purpose, it does not matter whether my formulations are accurate; if these examples are wrong, others would do instead. None of these ones is uncontroversial. For instance, a paraconsistent logician would deny the first; she would think rationality permits you to have some contradictory beliefs. But I hope these examples will seem plausible to most people's intuition. I cannot offer a general criterion for identifying requirements of rationality; intuition is all I can appeal to.

I need to make some explanatory remarks about some of the examples. First, the clause 'and if it matters to you whether  $q$ ' in the second requirement is there in order to accommodate the plausible view that rationality does not require you to clutter your mind with pointless beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Second, 'it matters to you whether  $q$ ' describes a state of your mind. We sometimes use this expression to mean that the truth of  $q$  would be objectively good or bad for you, quite apart from what you yourself think about  $q$ . But that is not my meaning.

Third, the clause 'if you believe you will not  $F$  unless you intend to  $F$ ', which is included in the third and fourth requirements, may be unexpected. But you can quickly see it is needed by thinking about a case where you believe you will  $F$  anyway, whether or not you intend to.

Fourth, in the third and fourth requirements, the pronouns 'you' and 'your' occur in various embedded sentences that describe the contents of your beliefs. In all these places, they are reflexive pronouns. That is to say, they indicate that you yourself would express the contents of these beliefs using the first-personal pronouns 'I' and 'my'. The requirements would not otherwise be correct. Suppose you believe that the owner of the dead donkey ought to bury it, but do not realize that the owner is you. You would not say 'I ought to bury the donkey'. Consequently, you might not intend to bury the donkey, and yet not be irrational on that account. So the fourth requirement is only correct if your ought-belief is first-personal.<sup>3</sup> The same goes for the other beliefs mentioned in the third and fourth requirements.

Next I want to make some general remarks about requirements of rationality, which my examples illustrate. First, what rationality requires of you is primarily states of your mind, not bodily actions. Rationality is a mental faculty, so that rationality can require of you only what can be infallibly achieved by your mind. It cannot require a bodily act such as raising your arm.<sup>4</sup> If rationality required you to raise your arm, then failing to raise your arm would have to be a failure of your rationality. But it might not be: you might fail to raise your arm because some external force prevents you from doing so. This could happen however rational you are.

Second, in each of my examples, rationality requires a particular relationship to hold among your propositional attitudes; it does not require you to have any particular single propositional attitude. This is typical of rational requirements. Typically, 'rationality requires' governs a logically compound statement that describes relations among your attitudes. It has a *wide scope*, as I shall sometimes put it.

There are some rare exceptions. For example, rationality requires you not to believe the contradictory proposition that it is Monday and it is not Monday. But it is very plausible that rational requirements generally have a wide scope. I think everyone will agree that whether or not it is rational for a person to have a particular attitude almost always depends not just on what attitude it is, but also on other features of the person. It may be irrational for me to believe something that you believe quite rationally, because this belief does not cohere properly with my other beliefs, whereas it coheres with yours. So when we say an attitude of a person is rational or

irrational, we inevitably mean it is rational or irrational in relation to others of her attitudes. It can also happen that an attitude of yours is rational in relation to some of your attitudes and irrational in relation to others of your attitudes.

'In relation to' is an inexact notion. My formulae for rational requirements make the relative nature of the requirements explicit, and they say precisely what sort of relation among your attitudes is required.

### 3. The normative question

I do not use 'requires' as a normative term. For instance, I might say that freemasonry requires you to roll up one trouser-leg, without suggesting you ought to do that. However, it seems plausible that the requirements of rationality are indeed normative. This paper investigates whether that is so.

What would it mean, exactly? It might mean that, necessarily, if rationality requires you to *F* then you ought to *F*, and moreover you ought to *F* because rationality requires you to *F*. There is a way to put this more briefly. When you ought to *F* because *X*, we say that *X* is a reason for you to *F*.<sup>5</sup> When, necessarily, you ought to *F* if *X*, we say that *X* is sufficient for it to be the case that you ought to *F*. When the two things are true together, we may say that *X* is a sufficient reason for you to *F*. In this case, necessarily, if rationality requires you to *F*, that is a sufficient reason for you to *F*.

That is a strong version of the idea that the requirements of rationality are normative. Some philosophers would prefer a weaker version, because they think that in some circumstances you ought to be irrational. They think, for example, that if you could prevent a nuclear war by believing a contradiction, then you ought to believe a contradiction. But they nevertheless think that, although you ought to do it, believing a contradiction would still be irrational.

Here is a way to fill out their view. There are various sources of requirements that are normative: morality, prudence, and so on. Rationality is one of them. Morality requires some things of you, prudence requires some things of you, rationality requires some things of you, and so on, and these requirements are normative. Sometimes there will be conflicts between normative requirements that arise from different sources. For example, sometimes morality requires you to *F* when prudence requires you not to *F*. When there are conflicts, somehow they are resolved, and from the resolution will emerge what you ought to do.

Conflicts between the requirements of rationality and requirements from other sources are rare. That is because requirements of rationality particularly govern relations among a person's mental states, whereas morality, prudence, and the rest are rarely concerned with those relations. Rationality has its domain of application, where it is pretty much on

its own. Examples of conflict between rationality and other sources of requirements are far-fetched. To create an example just now, I supposed that believing a contradiction might avert a nuclear war, and that is far-fetched.

So, according to this weaker view, when rationality requires you to *F* it is normally the case that you ought to *F*. But it is not always the case, so the fact that rationality requires you to *F* is not a sufficient reason for you to *F*. Nevertheless, it is a reason of sorts. On this view, whether or not you ought to *F* is sometimes determined by the resolution of a conflict between different requirements. When requirements can conflict, we say that each constitutes a *pro tanto* reason; there may be a conflict between *pro tanto* reasons for you to *F* and *pro tanto* reasons for you not to *F*. The view is that requirements of rationality must be *pro tanto* reasons: necessarily, when rationality requires you to *F*, that is a *pro tanto* reason for you to *F*.

So the view that rational requirements are normative is the view that, necessarily, rational requirements constitute either sufficient or *pro tanto* reasons. There is a genuine question of whether this is so. Are the requirements of rationality normative, and if so, why? Let us call this ‘the normative question’.

#### **4. Why not ask the normative question?**

Moral philosophers worry a lot about why we ought, or generally ought, to do as morality requires, but the corresponding question about rationality is not much discussed. Why not? It is sometimes explicitly argued that there is no genuine normative question; I shall come to James Dreier’s argument for this claim in section 7. Before that, I shall mention various other possible explanations. One is that many of us habitually describe the requirements of rationality in terms that beg the question. For example, in my paper ‘Reasons’, I said ‘You ought (to believe the world was made in less than a week, if you believe the world was made in six days)’ meaning to express a requirement of rationality. I should have said ‘Rationality requires you (to believe...),’ leaving open the question of whether you ought to satisfy this requirement. I have learnt better now.<sup>6</sup>

A second possible explanation is that many philosophers examine rationality in a context that prevents the requirements of rationality from being normative in my sense. These philosophers examine primarily the rationality of acts. They assume rationality requires some particular acts of you, and when they consider requirements of rationality, they think first of its requirements on your acts.

Simultaneously, they recognize there are some acts you ought to do. Which these are is determined in some way that is independent of which acts

are rationally required. Then which acts are rationally required is determined in some way that involves your beliefs. For example, one theory is that rationality requires you to *A* if and only if you believe you ought to *A*. Another is that rationality requires you to *A* if and only if rationality requires you to believe you ought to *A*.<sup>7</sup> In these biconditionals, the determination goes from right to left. Some philosophers treat the rationality of things other than acts in the same framework. For example, Derek Parfit offers a similar account of which desires rationality requires you to have.<sup>8</sup>

This framework implies that the acts rationality requires you to do are not the ones you ought to do, unless some particular condition on your beliefs is satisfied. The condition is that you believe you ought to do what actually you ought to do, or that rationality requires you to believe you ought to do what actually you ought to do, or something similar. Correspondingly, the desires that rationality requires you to have are not the ones you ought to have, unless some condition on your beliefs is satisfied. In general, when rationality requires you to *F*, it may not be the case that you ought to *F*. So if rationality requires you to *F*, that is certainly not a sufficient reason for you to *F*.

Nor is it a pro tanto reason for you to *F*. A pro tanto reason for you to *F* plays some role in helping to determine whether or not you ought to *F*. But in this framework, whether or not you ought to *F* is determined independently of whether or not rationality requires you to *F*. In this framework, therefore, rational requirements are not normative in my sense.

However, within the framework, some philosophers take rational requirements to be normative in a different sense. They divide normativity into two sorts: the objective and the subjective sort. Sometimes you objectively ought to *A* and you subjectively ought to *B*, where *B*ing is different from *A*ing. The fact that you objectively ought to *A* is determined independently of what rationality requires. But the fact that you subjectively ought to *B* might be determined by the fact that rationality requires you to *B*. If so, the requirement of rationality would be normative in a subjective sense.

‘Ought’ is our most basic normative term. I understand it well. But ‘subjectively ought’ and ‘objectively ought’ are philosophers’ terms, and their meaning needs to be specified. What is the meaning of ‘You subjectively ought to *F*’? It is evidently supposed to assign some normative property to your *F*ing; the word ‘ought’ indicates that much. ‘You subjectively ought to *F*’ is supposed to say something a bit like ‘you ought to *F*’. But what like it, exactly?

It might just mean the same as ‘rationality requires you to *F*’. But we are interested in whether rational requirements are normative, and if so why, and this interpretation leaves us with those questions still to answer. Alternatively ‘You subjectively ought to *F*’, might mean ‘From your subjective point of view you ought to judge you ought to *F*’. This attributes a complex normative property to your *F*ing, but it is not the sort of normative

property we are after. It attributes the property of *you ought* only to a judgement of yours, and it attributes no property remotely parallel to *you ought* to your *Fing*.

Perhaps 'You subjectively ought to *F*' can be defined in some way that attributes an appropriate sort of normative property to your *Fing*. If so, we shall have a genuine normative question to ask within this framework: if rationality requires of you that you *F*, is it the case that you subjectively ought to *F*, and if so why? So perhaps we can formulate a normative question within the framework, by dividing normativity. We still have to answer this question, of course.

But I see no need to divide normativity. It is one response to the difficulty that arises within the framework I described: that within the framework, when rationality requires you to *F*, that is not a reason for you to *F*. This implies that rational requirements are not normative in my sense, whereas it seems intuitively plausible that they are normative in some sense.

I think this difficulty arises from misformulating the requirements of rationality. Rationality requires particular relations to hold among a person's propositional attitudes. For example, roughly, it requires of you that, if you believe you ought to *F*, you intend to *F*. This is my fourth requirement, and it has a broad scope. If the requirements of rationality are formulated like this, we can find room for the normativity of rational requirements without any need to divide normativity. Rationality requires of you that, if you believe you ought to *F*, you intend to *F*. We might allow it to follow that you ought, if you believe you ought to *F*, to intend to *F*. In this sentence, 'if you believe you ought to *F*' lies within the scope of 'ought'. If your belief is false, it is not the case that you ought to *F*, and perhaps it is not the case that you ought to intend to *F*. There is no inconsistency in that.

I think there is only one sort of normativity. But 'you ought' may govern various different things; it may have broad scope or narrow scope. A difference in scope should not be mistaken for a difference in the sort of normativity.

## **5. Rationality and reasons**

That was the second possible explanation of why the normative question is seldom asked: the framework of much of the discussion of rationality obscures the question. A third possible explanation is that many philosophers think there is an obvious conceptual connection between rationality and reasons, which would make rationality obviously normative in some way or other. I shall next explore various connections that are thought to hold. I do not think any of them makes it obvious that rational requirements are normative. But we can hope that one might provide a unobvious

explanation of their normativity. So here my discussion turns towards asking the normative question itself.

First two spurious, merely apparent, connections. One is that ‘rationality’ and ‘reason’ have the same Latin root. But etymology cannot answer the normative question. The second is that the mass-noun ‘reason’ in one of its senses designates a faculty that people have, and rationality is a component of that faculty. To say people have reason is partly to say they are rational. This is a connection between rationality and reason, but it is not one between rationality and reasons. Reasons are designated by the count-noun whose singular is ‘a reason’ and plural ‘reasons’. The count-noun and the mass-noun designate quite different things.

Nevertheless, this ambiguity can be mistaken for a real connection between rationality and normativity. Take David Hume’s pronouncement that

‘Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.’<sup>9</sup>

In the *Treatise*, Hume rarely uses the count-noun ‘reason’ in a normative sense, and never in this section entitled ‘Of the influencing motives of the will’. Here, ‘reason’ refers to the faculty of reason, and the section aims to demonstrate that this faculty cannot motivate an action or oppose a passion. He means that, if he preferred the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger, his faculty of reason could not oppose this preference. Since rationality is a component of the faculty of reason, his statement implies it would not be irrational for him to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger.

Hume’s meaning is unambiguous, but the potential ambiguity of ‘reason’ leads some authors to read Hume as also saying something normative: that it is not contrary to *the reasons* to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger. In other words, that it is not the case that he ought not to have this preference. I am sure Hume did not mean that, and I am sure he did not believe it. Preferring the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger would be very immoral, and Hume was no less moral than the rest of us. According to Hume, morality does not arise from reason. He says this preference is not contrary to reason, but I am sure he thought it contrary to morality.

## 6. Responding correctly to reasons

My next putative connection between rationality and reasons seems more genuinely relevant. It is often said that rationality is the faculty of responding correctly to reasons. If this were so, then rationality would be normative in a sense. Rational requirements would not be normative in my sense, because that would mean these requirements would constitute



sufficient or *pro tanto* reasons. Instead, we would have the opposite connection between rationality and reasons. Rationality would be the faculty of responding to independently existing reasons; it would not itself provide reasons. I need to investigate this putative connection between rationality and normativity, since it might show I have got the connection between rationality and normativity the wrong way round.

There is a quick objection to the idea that rationality is the faculty of responding correctly to reasons. On some occasion, you might not know what reasons there are, through no fault of your own. You will then not respond correctly to the reasons, but your failure will not imply any failure of your rationality. So rationality cannot be the faculty of responding correctly to reasons.

This quick objection will break down in either of two cases. It will break down if you can respond correctly to reasons without knowing what reasons there are, and it will break down if you cannot fail to know what reasons there are. So far as I can tell, neither of these cases is possible unless the reasons are mental states of yours such as your beliefs, but if the reasons are mental states either might be possible. Perhaps you can respond correctly to your mental states even if you do not know what your mental states are. Suppose you believe a missile is coming, and this belief is a reason for you to duck. Suppose you respond by ducking. You might not know that you believe a missile is coming; yet you respond. Alternatively, perhaps you cannot fail to know what your mental states are. Then, if your mental states constitute the reasons, you cannot fail to know what reasons there are.

So if all reasons are mental states of yours, the quick objection might break down. Let us suppose you believe  $p$  and you believe (if  $p$  then  $q$ ). Let us also suppose for the sake of argument that these beliefs of yours constitute a reason for you to believe  $q$ . Perhaps these beliefs could cause you to believe  $q$  without your knowing you have them. Or perhaps you cannot fail to know of these beliefs of yours. Either way, it is plausible that you are irrational if you do not believe  $q$ . This would be because there is a reason for you to believe  $q$ , which either you cannot fail to know about or which you can correctly respond to without knowing about, and you do not respond to it correctly. You fail to respond correctly to reasons, and this is plausibly a failure of rationality. So this example supports the idea that rationality is responding correctly to reasons.

The example depends on the supposition that your belief in  $p$  and your belief in (if  $p$  then  $q$ ) constitute a reason for you to believe  $q$ . I think this is not so, and I have argued against it.<sup>10</sup> If I needed to reject decisively the idea that rationality is the faculty of responding correctly to reasons, I would repeat my argument here. But that would be tedious, and for my present purpose unnecessary. I can take a shortcut. I shall not argue against the view that your beliefs constitute a reason; instead I shall argue that this view begs the question of whether rational requirements are normative.

Suppose you believe  $p$ , and you believe (if  $p$  then  $q$ ), but you do not believe  $q$ . We may take it for granted that you are irrational (provided it matters to you whether  $q$ —I shall keep this condition implicit). That is not in question. I accept it myself because it is implied by my second requirement of rationality. Rationality requires a certain relation to hold among your mental states, which does not hold. This is plainly a failure of your rationality specifically. I myself deny that your believing  $p$  and believing (if  $p$  then  $q$ ) constitute a reason for you to believe  $q$ . But just for the sake of argument, let us suppose they do constitute a reason. Plainly, if they are a reason at all, it is a reason of rationality. They constitute a reason for you to believe  $q$  because it would be irrational for you not to believe  $q$ , given that you believe  $p$  and believe (if  $p$  then  $q$ ). It is the requirement of rationality that explains the existence of the reason, not the existence of the reason that explains the requirement of rationality. So the reason exists (as we are supposing it does) only because the requirement of rationality is normative. We still need to explain why this is so; that question is begged.

Let me generalize. The idea that rationality is the faculty of responding correctly to reasons is subject to a quick refutation unless all reasons are taken to be mental states. If they are mental states, their property of being reasons must derive from the requirements of rationality, which require various sorts of coherence among mental states. But then they can be reasons only because the requirements of rationality are normative. So we have made no progress towards explaining the normativity of the requirements of rationality.

## 7. More on responding correctly to reasons

The idea that rationality is the faculty of responding correctly to reasons leads to a different explanation of why the normative question has not been much discussed. Because of this idea, some philosophers reject the question. Their view has been nicely formulated by James Dreier, who says ‘there is no sense at all to be made of the question of whether we have any reason to follow the rules of rationality’.<sup>11</sup> It turns out he means we ought to follow them.

Dreier’s argument is long and careful.<sup>12</sup> My sketch will not do it justice, but I hope it will be enough to let me make the point I need to make. Take a person who does not follow the rules of rationality, and suppose she asks why she should follow them. The only answer anyone could give her would have to be a reason for her to follow those rules. But this person is irrational, which Dreier takes to mean she does not respond correctly to reasons. Giving her a reason would therefore be ineffective because she would not respond correctly to it. It could not bring her to be rational. Dreier also assumes the view known as ‘internalism’: that any reason there is

for a person to do something must be able to motivate the person to do that thing. Since our person could not be motivated by a reason to follow the rules of rationality, internalism implies nothing could even be a reason for her to do so. So no answer could be given to her question of why she should follow the rules of rationality.

The obvious conclusion to draw would be that it is not the case that this person should follow these rules. But that is not what Dreier concludes. He says: 'If you can't draw the practical inferences . . . then nothing counts as a reason for you. That is why [rules of rationality have] a kind of ground-level normative status.'<sup>13</sup> He will not countenance the idea that these rules might have no normative status, so instead he supposes they have a normative status that cannot be explained by reasons. That is surely wishful thinking.

I do not think Dreier's argument successfully supports his claim that no sense can be made of the question of whether we have any reason to follow the rules of rationality. The question makes good sense; it is just that Dreier does not like the answer "No", which his argument should have led him to. (I myself do not accept this argument for the answer "No", because I do not accept the premises of Dreier's argument. I accept neither internalism nor the idea that rationality is the faculty of responding correctly to reasons.) Thinking like Dreier's no doubt explains why some philosophers ignore the normative question, but it does not show it is a malformed question, nor does it contribute to answering it.

Some philosophers modify the idea that rationality is the faculty of responding correctly to reasons, and say instead that it is the faculty of responding correctly to what you *believe* to be reasons. What would this amount to, more exactly? Suppose you believe the balance of reasons favours your *Fing*; what would count as responding correctly? One answer would be *Fing* itself. But if *Fing* is a bodily act, rationality cannot demand as much as that, as I explained in section 2.

A better answer would be intending to *F*. Then responding correctly to what you believe to be reasons would be intending to *F* when you believe the balance of reasons favours your *Fing*. The idea is that rationality is the faculty of doing so. I think this is close to the truth. If you believe the balance of reasons favours your *Fing*, presumably you believe you ought to *F*. And I think rationality does indeed require you to intend to *F* when you believe you ought to *F*, provided you also believe you will not *F* unless you intend to *F*. This is the fourth requirement of rationality on my own list.

However, this is not what rationality *is*. It is just one of the requirements of rationality. There are other requirements that do not involve beliefs about reasons at all. The idea that rationality is responding correctly to what you believe to be reasons is very far from a complete account of rationality.

In any case, even for this fourth requirement, there remains the substantive question of whether it is indeed normative. Is it the case that you

ought to intend to do what you believe you ought to do (when you believe you will not do it unless you intend to)? We still need to know whether this is so, and if it is so why. To say that rationality is the faculty of responding correctly to what you believe to be reasons is a way of recognizing the requirement. It does not help to establish whether the requirement is normative.

### 8. An instrumental source for the normativity of rationality?

I have come to the end of my list of connections that appear to hold between reasons and rationality. I embarked on it in the hope that one of them might help to answer the normative question. But I have drawn a blank.

I would still like to answer the normative question, though that is evidently becoming hard. I have one more line to pursue. But because the question is hard, I shall pursue this line in a generous spirit. I shall make assumptions that I cannot properly justify, and rely on arguments that are frankly rough. The real conclusion of this paper will be sceptical: I know of no good grounds for thinking that the requirements of rationality are normative. Given that, I want to see how far a generous spirit can take us in finding grounds.

The line I want to pursue starts by recognizing that, if the requirements of rationality are indeed normative, that seems likely to be for instrumental reasons. It seems likely to be because of what we can achieve by satisfying the requirements. I shall ignore the possibility of total scepticism about normativity. I assume there some things you ought to do, to hope for, to believe, and so on, and some things you ought not to do, hope for, believe and so on. In general, there are some *G*s such that you ought to *G*. Satisfying the requirements of rationality seems plausibly a good way of coming to *G* in many instances when you ought to *G*. Perhaps this explains why you ought to satisfy these requirements. That is the idea I shall now explore.

If the idea of an instrumental explanation is to work at all, it must be possible for normativity to be transmitted from an end to a means. In my generous spirit, I shall take for granted that it can be. More precisely, I shall take it for granted that, if you ought to *F*, and *G*ing is part of the best means for you to *F*, then you ought to *G*. This seems a plausible principle, though I cannot defend it here.

How can it be applied to rationality? Suppose rationality requires some particular thing of you; it requires you to *F*. If this implies that you ought to *F*, it cannot always be for directly instrumental reasons. Often, satisfying a particular requirement of rationality will not contribute to your achieving anything you ought to achieve. Indeed, it will sometimes prevent you from

achieving something you ought to achieve. For example, suppose you believe you ought not to do something, but your belief is false and actually you ought to do this thing. If you satisfy the fourth requirement of rationality on this occasion, you will intend not to do it. Consequently, you will probably not do it. But you ought to do it. So in this case, satisfying a requirement of rationality will prevent you from doing something you ought to do.

So, we cannot conclude on direct instrumental grounds that, necessarily, if rationality requires you to *F*, you ought to *F*. No doubt you often ought to *F* when rationality requires you to, but these grounds do not show this to be necessarily so. Nor do these direct instrumental grounds suggest there is necessarily any pro tanto reason for you to *F*. We cannot conclude rationality is normative by this route.

Bayesians often deploy so-called ‘pragmatic arguments’ in arguing that you ought to satisfy some of the Bayesian requirements of rationality.<sup>14</sup> These arguments take it for granted that there is some aim you ought to pursue. Then they show that, if you constantly have to deal with exploiters such as Dutch bookies and money pumpers, part of the best way for you to pursue this aim is to satisfy the Bayesian requirements. However, we do not constantly have to deal with exploiters, and sometimes you may better pursue the aim by failing to satisfy a Bayesian requirement than by satisfying it. Therefore, a pragmatic argument of this sort cannot show directly that, necessarily, if it is a Bayesian requirement that you *F*, you ought to *F*. Pragmatic arguments may be more convincing if they are aimed at showing you ought to have a disposition to satisfy Bayesian requirements, rather than that you ought to satisfy these requirements in particular instances. I now turn to a generalization of this idea.

## **9. The faculty of rationality**

It seems plausible that you ought to have the faculty of rationality, for instrumental reasons. By ‘the faculty of rationality’ I mean a bundle of dispositions and abilities that causes you to satisfy many of the requirements of rationality; this is only a rough description because of the vague term ‘many’. This rational faculty seems plausibly part of the best means we have of achieving something we ought to achieve. In my generous spirit, I offer only a rough argument to support this claim, just as my description of the rational faculty was only rough. This rough argument might perhaps be polished up into an actual demonstration, but I have not done that.

Here it is. I have already assumed there are some *G*s such that you ought to *G*. Let ‘to *H*’ be ‘to *G* in many instances when you ought to *G*’. I think it fair to assume, by some informal rule of agglomeration, that you ought to *H*. Having the rational faculty is plausibly part of the best means

you have to *H*. ‘Best’ means better than the alternatives, and I am sure there would be a lot of difficulty in specifying alternatives properly, but I shall permit myself to ignore that difficulty. If the rational faculty is part of the best means you have to *H*, then by the transmission of normativity from ends to means, you ought to have the rational faculty.

Informally, instead of ‘to *H*’, I shall say ‘to achieve much of what you ought to achieve’. The argument I gave assumes that having the rational faculty is part of the best means you have of achieving much of what you ought to achieve. I take that to be a contingent fact. I assume there could be a quirky world where having the rational faculty is not part of the best means you have of achieving much of what you ought to achieve. Rational people in that world satisfy the same requirements of rationality as rational people do in our world. They intend to do the things they believe they ought to do; they do not have contradictory beliefs; they believe what follows by modus ponens from the contents of their beliefs; and so on. But because of the way causal processes work in their world, these rational people tend not to have the beliefs they ought to have or do the things they ought to do, and so on. They do not achieve much of what they ought to achieve.

In this quirky world there are also irrational people. They just do what they feel like doing, believe whatever comes into their heads, and so on. The causal processes in this world ensure that these irrational people achieve much of what they ought to achieve.

In that world it is plausibly not the case that people ought to be rational, since rationality does not help them achieve much of what they ought to achieve. On the contrary, it is plausible that they ought to be irrational—do what they feel like doing, believe whatever comes into their heads, and so on. In saying this, I am employing our concept of rationality. People in the quirky world itself might have a different concept of rationality from ours, but that does not affect what I am saying.

This argument suggests that, if the rational faculty were not instrumentally successful, it would not be the case that we ought to have it. So it supports the view that, when we ought to have the rational faculty, that is because it is instrumentally successful.

Let us suppose, then, that you ought to have the rational faculty for instrumental reasons. Can this provide an explanation of why the requirements of rationality are normative? This would be an indirect instrumental explanation, rather than the direct one that I rejected.

Unfortunately, the answer is no. We are assuming you ought to have the rational faculty. If you do, it will cause you to satisfy many particular requirements of rationality in particular instances. It does not follow that you ought to satisfy those requirements in those instances. Nor does it follow that you have a pro tanto reason to satisfy those requirements in those instances. No principle of inference allows us to draw either

conclusion. If you ought to have some general faculty, it does not follow that you ought to be in any particular state that the faculty causes you to be in, nor that you have a pro tanto reason to be in that state. 'You ought to *F*; if you *F*, your *F*ing will cause you to *G*; so you ought to *G*' is not a valid pattern of inference. Nor is 'You ought to *F*; if you *F*, your *F*ing will cause you to *G*; so you have a pro tanto reason to *G*'.

This should not be controversial, but an example may help. Suppose you ought to be disposed to flee when threatened with an irresistible attack. Perhaps this is because part of your best means of minimizing your chances of injury as you go through life is to have this disposition. If you have it, then when you are threatened with an irresistible attack from a grizzly bear, you will flee. However, we may consistently suppose it is not the case that you ought to flee in those circumstances. We may even suppose you ought to lie down and play dead. Moreover, we may consistently suppose there is no pro tanto reason for you to flee—no reason to count against the terrible danger of doing so.

True, if you have the disposition, you flee, and the bear's threat is the reason why you do so. But that is only to say the attack explains why you flee. 'The reason why' here has a non-normative meaning equivalent to 'the explanation of why'. There should be no temptation to think there is a pro tanto reason for you to flee.

However, in the case of the faculty of rationality, there is a corresponding temptation. This faculty differs from the disposition to flee in one respect. I assume the disposition to flee causes you to flee automatically and unthinkingly when you are threatened. Therefore, although the bear's threat is the reason why you flee, we would not say it is the reason for which you flee. We say a person does something for a reason only when the explanation of why she does it passes through her rational faculty in some way. But when your rational faculty causes you to satisfy a particular requirement of rationality, then the explanation of why you do so passes through your rational faculty. So in that case, we will say you satisfy a requirement for a reason. There is a reason for which you satisfy it.

This makes it tempting to think there must be a pro tanto reason for you to satisfy it. But this temptation must be resisted. There are many clear cases where you do something for a reason, but there is no pro tanto reason for you to do it.<sup>15</sup> Suppose you are thirsty, and you believe the liquid in front of you is water, and you start drinking it. You may start drinking it for a reason; the explanation of why you do so passes your rational faculty. However, if the liquid is in fact petrol, there may be no pro tanto reason for you to start drinking it. So, just because there is a reason for which you satisfy a requirement of rationality, it does not follow that there is a pro tanto reason for you satisfy it.

## 10. Conclusion

After all this, I have been unable to show that the requirements of rationality are normative: that, when rationality requires you to *F*, that is either a sufficient or a pro tanto reason for you to *F*. For all I know, this may not be true. Often when rationality requires you to *F*, you ought to *F* for instrumental reasons, but I have to assume this is not necessarily the case, and nor is it necessarily the case that there is a pro tanto reason for you to *F*.<sup>16</sup>

Is this not very peculiar? When we accuse someone of irrationality, we are surely criticizing her. But that is consistent with what I have said. I said that, plausibly, you ought to have the rational faculty. If you do not satisfy some particular requirement of rationality, that is evidence that you do not have this faculty, at least to the highest degree. So it is evidence that you are failing to achieve something you ought to achieve. It is therefore genuine grounds for criticism. However, if you fail to satisfy a particular requirement of rationality, where you have gone wrong is not necessarily in failing to satisfy the requirement. You may have gone wrong in a different way, which your failure is evidence of.

## Notes

1. This paper owes a lot to comments I have received from Niko Kolodny and James Morauta, and to (Kolodny, 2005).
2. See (Harman, 1986, p. 12).
3. Christian Piller pointed this out to me. See (Piller, 2000, p. 202).
4. I take this point from (Reisner, 2004).
5. In (Broome, 2004) I defined it as a 'perfect reason'.
6. I learnt better from Andrew Reisner, who makes this point in (Reisner, 2004).
7. (Wedgwood, 2003).
8. (Parfit, 2001).
9. (Hume, 1978, book 2, part 3, section 3).
10. In (Broome, 1999) and (Broome, 2004).
11. (Dreier, 2001, p. 29).
12. The main argument is in (Dreier, 2001, pp. 38–42).
13. (Dreier, 2001, p. 42).
14. For a recent discussion of pragmatic arguments, see (Rabinowicz, forthcoming).
15. Jonathan Dancy denies this in (Dancy, 2000). He thinks that if you do something for a reason, there has to be a reason for you to do it. Unfortunately, I cannot pursue his argument here.
16. (Dancy, forthcoming) and (Kolodny, 2005) draw similar conclusions.

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