

2

PRACTICAL REASON

Rationality or normativity but not both

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1 Introduction

The term ‘practical reason’ has two quite different meanings. They arise from the ambiguity of the noun ‘reason.’ In one of its meanings, practical reason can be identified with rationality and in the other with normativity. But the two meanings are often fused in philosophy, and indeed the distinction between rationality and normativity is often obscured. There are philosophical theories that identify the two. This chapter aims to hold apart the two meanings of ‘practical reason.’

It starts by analyzing the rational meaning and the normative meaning in sections 2 and 3, respectively. Section 4 gives a simple reason for thinking that rationality and normativity must be distinct: one is a mental property, and the other is not. Your degree of rationality depends only the properties of your mind, whereas often you ought normatively to act on the world outside your mind. Section 5 examines and rejects two possible responses. One denies that rationality is a mental property; the other asserts that normativity is a mental property. Section 6 describes a different argument in a Kantian spirit. A special, reified concept of Rationality might possibly be united with normativity, but it is far from our ordinary concept of rationality. Section 7 summarizes the chapter’s argument and draws the conclusion that the two meanings of ‘practical reason’ cannot be successfully unified.

This book therefore covers two distinct topics.

2 Rationality

In one of its senses, ‘reason’ is the name of a property that is possessed to a greater or lesser degree by people. This property can be ascribed to someone by means of the adjective ‘rational,’ which corresponds to the noun ‘reason’ in this sense. To say a person is rational is just to say that she has reason in this sense.

The noun ‘rationality’ is a name for this property, formed from ‘rational’ by attaching the noun-forming suffix ‘-ity.’ In the course of history, the noun ‘reason’ gave rise to the adjective ‘rational,’ which in turn gave rise to the new noun ‘rationality.’ The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2006) records ‘reason’ in this sense from 1225, ‘rational’ from 1398 and ‘rationality’ (in the

non-mathematical sense) from 1628. 'Rationality' is therefore strictly speaking a redundant word, since we already have 'reason' as a name for the property that is ascribed by 'rational.' But 'rationality' is useful all the same because it is less ambiguous than 'reason.' It is synonymous with 'reason' in just one of its senses – the one I am describing in this section. I shall often use 'rationality' in place of 'reason' in this sense. I shall also use the expression 'reason in the rational sense.' This terminology helps to limit the confusion that can be caused by the ambiguity of 'reason.'

When 'reason' has the rational sense, 'practical reason' means the same as 'practical rationality.' It refers to the part of rationality that is concerned with action. What does that include? What is the subject matter of the philosophy of practical reason in this sense?

First, the subject matter is mental. A conceptual feature of rationality is that a person's rationality is an intrinsic property of her mind, and it supervenes on other intrinsic properties of her mind. If your mind has exactly the same intrinsic properties (apart from rationality) in one possible state as it has in another, then you are exactly as rational in the one as you are in the other. Rationality supervenes on the mind, as I shall put it, taking this expression from Ralph Wedgwood (2002). And I shall use 'mental property' to refer to an intrinsic property of the mind.

For example, when a person intends to drink a glass of liquid, she is equally rational in the case when the liquid is petrol as she is in the case when it is gin, so long as the difference is not registered in any mental property of hers.¹ For another example, if you fail to take a means to an end that you intend, this is not necessarily a failure of rationality if it is caused by some non-mental obstruction. It could be that, if you had had all the mental properties you do have, but the obstruction had been removed, you would have taken the means to your end. There would then have been no failure in your rationality, so supervenience implies there is no failure in the actual case either.

We sometimes ascribe the property of rationality to other things besides a person. For example, a belief may be said to be rational. So may an act, a government's policy, or even a city plan. The primary bearers of rationality are nevertheless people. Ascriptions of rationality to other things are derivative in one way or another. For example, to say a person's action was rational may mean that, had she not done it, she would have been no more rational than she is, having done it. Or it may mean that her action constitutes evidence of her rationality. To say a city plan is rational may mean that it could have been designed by a rational person. These derivative sorts of rationality are not necessarily mental properties. But the rationality of a person is a mental property of hers.

What about mental externalism? I believe the Taj Mahal is made of marble. Suppose that, elsewhere in the universe, there is a Twin Earth that has all the same intrinsic physical properties as Earth. On Twin Earth lives a person called 'John Broome.' His intrinsic physical properties, including the intrinsic properties of his brain, are the same as mine. He has a belief that he would express with the words 'The Taj Mahal is made of marble.' But he has no beliefs about the Taj Mahal, because the Taj Mahal is on Earth and he has no beliefs about Earth. His belief is about the Twin Taj Mahal. My belief is about the Taj Mahal, so his belief is not the same as mine, since it has a different content and beliefs are individuated by their contents. At least, that is the view of mental externalists. I take each of a person's beliefs to be a mental property of hers. So Twin John's mind does not have all the same mental properties as mine has. If externalism is true, our mental properties do not supervene on our intrinsic physical properties, therefore.

For an analogy, think of the magnetic field of a particular magnet. The field belongs to the magnet, but it does not supervene on the magnet's intrinsic physical properties, since other ferrous objects in the neighborhood influence the field. The field's direction and strength at a particular point do not supervene on intrinsic physical properties of the magnet. However, they are

intrinsic properties of the magnet's field; indeed, the field simply consists of the set of directions and strengths at all points. The analogy is this: a person corresponds to a magnet; the person's mind corresponds to the magnet's field; a belief corresponds to the direction and strength of the field at a point. A person's belief supervenes on the intrinsic properties of her mind, but it does not supervene on her intrinsic physical properties

If externalism is correct, the principle that rationality supervenes on the mind does not imply that Twin John and I are exactly as rational as each other, since our minds are different. Nevertheless, we surely are exactly as rational as each other, so presumably there is some stronger principle that does have this implication. Presumably it would be a principle that rationality supervenes on internal properties of the mind, defined in some way or other. But I do not know any such principle, and I do not affirm that one exists. At any rate, externalism is no threat to the principle I do affirm, that a person's rationality supervenes on her mental properties apart from rationality itself. It simply suggests there may also be a stronger principle.

Some acts are mental, such as acts of doing mental arithmetic, but many are not. If rationality is a mental property, how can it be concerned with non-mental acts? How can it be practical? The answer is that some mental properties are intimately related to action. Intentions are the prime example. A necessary condition for doing an act is that you have a particular intention. Also, an intention generally causes an act, and it is the object or purpose of an intention to do so. Practical rationality is primarily the part of rationality that is concerned with intentions.

The property of rationality – of reason in the rational sense – is often described more specifically as an ability or a capacity or a faculty. But that description is too narrow. Suppose you intend some end but do not intend an act that you believe to be a necessary means to this end. This is a lapse in your rationality, whatever abilities you may have. If you have the ability to acquire the intention of doing this act, well and good, but your rationality is still lacking unless you exercise this ability. Moreover, your rationality might improve even without your exercising an ability. You might come to intend an act that you believe is a necessary means to an end you intend not by doing anything at all but as a result of some subpersonal process within you. You are then more rational than you were before, even though you have not exercised your rational ability. One part of rationality is concerned with a person's mental states and the relations between them rather than with her abilities.

Nevertheless, an important part of being rational is having a rational ability, and another part is the process of exercising it. A rational ability is commonly exercised through the activity of reasoning, so reasoning falls under rationality. The philosophy of practical reason includes practical reasoning within its subject matter; several chapters in this book are concerned with it. Furthermore, the correctness of reasoning is also a part of rationality. Any creature that reasons is rational to an extent, but a creature that reasons correctly is more rational than one that reasons incorrectly.

We sometimes reify the property of rationality, treating it as a thing rather than a property. We do the same for morality. Morality is the property a person possesses when she is moral, but sometimes we treat it as something that stands outside a person and has or at least pretends to some sort of authority over her. Similarly we sometimes treat rationality – reason in the rational sense – as something that stands outside a person and has some sort of authority over her. The philosophy of rationality encompasses reified rationality.

Reification is most apparent in the expression 'rationality requires.' 'Rationality requires you to intend means to your end' may mean simply that intending means to your end is a necessary condition for your having the property of rationality. With this meaning, rationality

is not reified. The sentence follows the model of ‘Survival requires you to drink water,’ which means that your drinking water is a necessary condition for your having the property of survival. However, ‘Rationality requires you to intend means to your end’ may alternatively be understood on the model of ‘The law requires you to pay taxes.’ This latter sentence means that the law prescribes that you pay taxes. Similarly, ‘Rationality requires you to intend means to your end,’ when rationality is reified, means that rationality prescribes that you intend means to your end.

I claim that the expression ‘rationality requires’ is most naturally understood in the reified sense.² I think we would not naturally say that rationality requires you to be alive. But being alive is a necessary condition for possessing the property of rationality, so unreified rationality does indeed require you to be alive. On the other hand, rationality does not prescribe that you are alive, so reified rationality does not require you to be alive. We naturally take ‘rationality requires’ this second way. What rationality requires in this more natural sense is a subset of the necessary conditions for being rational.

All of these aspects of rationality, when applied to the practical sphere, provide the subject matter of the philosophy of practical reason. What exactly does rationality require of our intentions? What is practical reasoning, exactly, and what distinguishes correct from incorrect practical reasoning? These are questions for the philosophy of practical reason. An important question is whether there is a distinctly practical branch of rationality at all. For example, it has been argued that rational requirements on intentions are only derivative from rational requirements on beliefs (e. g. Ross 2009, Setiya 2007, Wallace 2001). David Hume (1988: 458) famously denied that there is any such thing as practical reasoning: ‘Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood,’ he said.

3 Normativity

A different sense of ‘reason’ gives us the second meaning of ‘practical reason.’ ‘Reason’ in this different sense is a mass noun. It is derived from the count noun ‘a reason,’ whose plural is ‘reasons.’ The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2006) gives an example of the count noun from 1225, but no clear examples of the mass noun earlier than Shakespeare.

The count noun itself has various senses, which philosophers have identified as a motivating sense, an explanatory sense, a normative sense and so on. I use it in the normative sense only. In this chapter, ‘a reason’ always refers to a normative reason.

Count nouns are often associated with corresponding mass nouns. For example, ‘a light’ is associated with ‘light’ and ‘a pleasure’ with ‘pleasure.’ Often the things referred to by the count noun explain or give rise to whatever is referred to by the mass noun (Fogal 2016). We often use simply ‘give’ for this relation. A light gives light and a pleasure gives pleasure. Similarly, the count noun ‘a reason’ is associated with the mass noun ‘reason.’ A reason gives reason. For example, the fact that a restaurant is noisy, which is a reason to avoid it, gives reason to avoid this restaurant.

Grammatically, a mass noun refers to stuff of some sort. Whereas ‘light’ refers to a sort of physical stuff and ‘pleasure’ refers to a sort of mental stuff, it is obscure what the mass noun ‘reason’ refers to. Grammatically, it should refer to normative stuff of some sort. However, it seems metaphysically improbable that such normative stuff really exists.

The metaphysics of reason makes little difference to this chapter, but it deserves a mention. I think the mass noun does not refer to anything. I think that saying ‘There is reason to avoid that restaurant’ is merely the way we have in English of ascribing a particular normative property to

the act of avoiding that restaurant. English provides no adjective for the property that something has when there is reason for it. You might think 'reasonable' is such an adjective, but it is not. Even when something has the property of being something there is reason for, it may not be reasonable. There may be reason to avoid a restaurant, but stronger reason not to avoid it. If so, avoiding the restaurant would not be reasonable. In the absence of an adjective, we can ascribe the property only by using the expression 'there is reason.' This expression apparently refers to stuff but does not really do so; it ascribes a property.

In this chapter, it does not matter whether the mass noun 'reason' refers to something. What matters is that there is a sense of 'reason' in which it is a mass noun and has a normative meaning. To contrast it with the rational sense of 'reason,' I call this the 'normative sense.' Reason in this sense is closely associated with reasons. Reason is given by reasons, as light is given by lights. Whenever there is reason, something gives rise to it, and that something is a reason. Whenever there is a reason, it gives rise to reason. The sentences 'There is a reason for A to F ' and 'There is reason for A to F ' are therefore true or false together. Consequently, many philosophers slip between the mass noun 'reason' and the count noun 'a reason,' apparently without noticing (e.g. Nagel 1970; Skorupski 2010; Smith 2004).

Those two sentences actually have significantly different meanings. 'There is a reason for A to F ' is a quantified statement, which asserts the existence of something in the world that is a reason for A to F . 'There is reason for A to F ' means only that A 's F ing has the particular normative property of being something there is reason for; it does not assert the existence of anything. At least, that is my view. Still, so long as metaphysics is not in question, slipping between reason and reasons can be harmless. A philosopher who writes of practical reason in the normative sense might equally well write of practical reasons.

Indeed, when 'reason' has the normative sense, 'practical reason' may be used to refer to all of practical normativity. The philosophy of practical reason in this sense is concerned with everything that reasons require of us in practical matters. It is concerned with what our reasons require us to do or to intend.

Reasons come from various sources: morality, prudence and the law are among them. Rationality may also be among them: it may be that if rationality requires something of you, this fact constitutes a reason for you to achieve what it requires.³ So morality, prudence, the law and perhaps rationality all contribute to normativity; they help to determine what our reasons require of us.

What your reasons require of you is, put differently, what you ought. Here, I use 'ought' in the 'all-things-considered' or 'final' sense, as I shall throughout this chapter. Philosophers sometimes use 'ought' for what morality in particular requires of you; I do not use it that way.

To make a closer parallel with 'rationality,' I shall treat 'normativity' as the name of a property than can be possessed by a person. 'Normative' is its corresponding adjective. Normativity is the property you have when you do what you ought to do, believe what you ought to believe, hope for what you ought to hope for and so on. The property of normativity is the property of F ing when you ought to F . This property comes in degrees: the more you perform as you ought, the more normative you are.

This use of 'normativity' and 'normative' is an innovation. But it should not be offensive, because 'normativity' as moral philosophers use the word is an artificial term anyway. It should therefore not be offensive to treat it artificially as a property of people.

I shall further cement the parallel between rationality and normativity by using the term 'normative requirement' for an ought. When you ought to do something, I shall sometimes say that normativity requires you to do it.

4 Rationality is not the same as normativity

I have identified two different meanings of ‘practical reason’: practical rationality on the one hand and practical normativity on the other. They arise from quite different senses of ‘reason.’ Indeed, ‘reason’ in these two senses belongs to two different grammatical categories: in one sense, it is the name of a property and in the other a mass noun.⁴ The two meanings of ‘practical reason’ should not be confused.

When they write about practical reason, some philosophers deliberately adopt the normative meaning. But the chapters in this book show that philosophers more commonly adopt the rational meaning and set out to write about practical rationality including practical reasoning. In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Jay Wallace (2020) defines practical reason as ‘the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do.’ This definition is too narrow, since rationality is more than a capacity, but at any rate, it picks out the rational meaning of ‘practical reason’ rather than the normative one. However, although their aim is to write about rationality, many philosophers end up discussing reasons, which are a feature of normativity rather than rationality. They may have a justification for associating normativity with rationality in this way; the rest of this chapter discusses some potential justifications. But it should not happen through accidental equivocation between the rational meaning of ‘practical reason’ and the normative one. The normative meaning is slightly obscure, since it comes from the mass noun ‘reason,’ whose reference is obscure, but it is a bona fide meaning that makes it correct to discuss reasons under the heading ‘practical reason.’ The mistake is to confuse the two meanings.

Still, there are articulated philosophical views that identify rationality with normativity (e.g. Lord 2017).⁵ Although there are two different meanings of ‘practical reason,’ involving two different grammatical categories, some philosophers think the difference does not represent any real distinction. They think the two grammatical routes I mapped out through different senses of ‘reason’ arrive eventually at the same destination.

Many philosophers suppose that your rationality is a matter of achieving what reasons require of you. More precisely, they think that rationality consists in *F*ing when your reasons require you to *F*. But this is *F*ing when you ought to *F*, which is just what normativity is. Their supposition is that the property of rationality is the same as the property of normativity as I defined it. They treat rationality and normativity as identical. Let us call their view ‘the identity theory.’

We might be less interested in whether the properties of rationality and normativity are the same than in whether what rationality requires of you is the same as what normativity requires of you. Let us give the name ‘the requirement-identity theory’ to the theory that rationality requires a person to do something if and only if normativity requires her to do it, which is to say if and only if she ought to do it. The requirement-identity theory implies the identity theory. To see why, suppose the requirement-identity theory is true, and suppose you are rational. Because you are rational, you satisfy all the rational requirements you are under. The requirement-identity theory tells us that your rational requirements are the same as your normative requirements, so you also satisfy all the normative requirements you are under. You are therefore normative. So, necessarily, if you are rational, you are normative. By a parallel argument, necessarily, if you are normative, you are rational. Properties that necessarily have the same extensions are identical properties, or so I shall assume. So the requirement-identity theory implies the identity theory. I intend to refute both theories. For this reason, I shall concentrate on the identity theory, since a refutation of this theory is also a refutation of the other.

There are definitely strong connections between rationality and normativity. I said in section 3 that rationality may well be a source of normativity; if rationality requires something of you, that may well be a reason for you to achieve what it requires. Furthermore, rationality requires you to intend to do whatever you believe you ought to do. I call this requirement ‘enkrasia’ (Broome 2013: section 9.5) It requires you to respond to your normative beliefs in a particular way. This is only one of many practical requirements of rationality; for instance, another is the requirement to intend whatever you believe is a means implied by an end you intend. Still, it does constitute an important connection between rationality and normativity.

But rationality is not identical to normativity. There is a *prima facie* objection to the identity theory; I call it ‘the quick objection’ (Broome 2013: section 5.2). It is simply that rationality supervenes on the mind and normativity does not. If your mental properties (apart from rationality) are the same in one possible state as they are in another, you are equally rational in the two states, but you may not be equally normative. Here are two examples.

One is the drinks example again. You intend to drink a glass of liquid. In one case the liquid is petrol and in the other gin, but assume the difference does not register in any mental property of yours. To complete the story, suppose the glass is unexpectedly taken away from you before you carry out your intention to drink, so you never find out what is in it. The difference between the two cases makes no difference to your mind at any time. You are equally rational in either case because rationality supervenes on the mind. However, if the circumstances are normal, in the first case you ought not to intend to drink the liquid because drinking it is harmful, whereas in the second case this is not so. Since you intend to drink the liquid, in the first case, you are not as you ought to be in this respect, whereas in the second case, that is not so. You may be normative in the second case but not in the first.

Here is the second example. You ought to insure your house against fire. Moreover, you believe this is so, and you set about insuring your house. You complete an application form and pay a premium to an insurance company in the usual way, without having studied all the fine print carefully. Now take two different cases. In the first, everything proceeds as expected, and your house is insured. In the second case, the small print contains a clause that says your house is insured only if its roof is constructed of slate, tiles or metal. Actually your house’s roof is constructed of cedar shingles, so the house is not insured. Suppose this fact never comes to your attention because there is no fire. Then your mental properties are exactly the same in both cases; in particular, in both cases you believe you insure your house. You are therefore equally rational in both cases. Yet in one case you insure your house as you ought, and in the other you do not. You may be normative in one, but you are not normative in the other.

5 Responses

The quick objection to the identity theory can be opposed in only two ways. One is by asserting that normativity supervenes on the mind. The other is by denying that rationality supervenes on the mind. Neither of these responses is sufficient to prove the identity theory, but refuting both is sufficient to refute the identity theory. In this section, I aim to refute both.

Does what you ought supervene on the mind?

The first response to the quick objection is to assert that your normative situation cannot be different in two cases if your mental properties are the same. The argument for this claim breaks into two parts. The first is to argue that what you ought – what normativity requires of you – supervenes on your mind.

One way of making this argument is to claim that all reasons are states of mind. For example, they might be pairs consisting of a desire and a belief. In the drinking example, we may assume that you desire not to drink petrol. If you believe the liquid is petrol, you then have a reason not to intend to drink it, and we may assume you ought not to intend to drink it. This is so whether or not the liquid is actually petrol. Conversely, if you believe the liquid is gin, you have no reason not to intend to drink it. Again, this is so whether or not the liquid is actually petrol.

Just because reasons are states of mind, it does not directly follow that what you ought supervenes on your mind. What you ought does not depend only on what your reasons are; it also depends on how your reasons combine and weigh against each other. But, once we assume reasons are states of mind, we may naturally add the further assumption that what you ought also supervenes on the mind.

We emerge with a fully subjectivist view about what normativity requires. Many philosophers are unwilling to accept this much subjectivism, and there is also a less subjectivist argument for the view that what you ought supervenes on your mind. This argument can be developed from Benjamin Kiesewetter's (2018) account of reasons. Kiesewetter accepts that reasons are often objective and outside the mind; for example, they may be facts about the world. But he thinks that a necessary condition for something to be a reason for you is that it impinges on your mind in some way.⁶ More precisely, it is part of your evidence, which Kiesewetter takes to entail that either you believe it, or it is evidenced by some more inchoate state of your mind such as a phenomenal experience. He assumes that what you ought is determined by your reasons, which are necessarily part of your evidence.

This is not enough to ensure that what you ought supervenes on your mind. In the drinks example, suppose the liquid is petrol and this fact is part of your evidence. You believe the liquid is petrol, and perhaps you experience associated phenomena such as a particular smell. Then according to Kiesewetter, you have a reason not to intend to drink the liquid. The reason is that the liquid is petrol. Let us assume that consequently you ought not to intend to drink the liquid. Now compare a different case in which the liquid is gin, but your mental properties are exactly as before. You believe the liquid is petrol, and you have the same associated mental phenomena. The phenomena are illusory in this case, of course. In this case, you have no reason not to intend to drink the liquid, since it is not petrol. It is not the case that you ought not to intend to drink it. If the liquid is petrol, you have a reason, and if it is gin, you do not, yet your mind has exactly the same properties in either case. So we do not yet have an argument that what you ought supervenes on your mind.

But let us add some assumptions. Let us assume, first, that what you ought is determined by your evidence as a whole. This means it can be affected by evidence that you have a reason as well as evidence that itself constitutes a reason. Second, let us assume that something is part of your evidence only if you know it. This is Timothy Williamson's (2000: chapter 9) view; Kiesewetter mentions it but does not commit himself to it. Third, let us assume that knowledge is a mental state. This too is Williamson's view (2000: chapter 1). Then, if your mind has all the same properties in one case as in another, the third assumption ensures that what you know in one case is the same as what you know in the other. The second assumption then ensures that your evidence is the same in either case. Finally, the first assumption ensures that what you ought is the same in either case. What you ought supervenes on your mind, therefore. In effect, the assumption that knowledge is a mental state bridges the gap between your mind and the outside world.

These are strong assumptions, and many philosophers would be unwilling to accept them. But for the sake of argument, let us assume that what you ought supervenes on the mind. It does not follow that normativity supervenes on the mind, as I shall shortly explain.

However, you might think that the requirement-identity theory – the theory that what you ought is the same as what rationality requires of you – does follow. What rationality requires of you supervenes on the mind, so if what you ought also supervenes on the mind, does it not follow that what you ought and what rationality requires of you are the same? It does not. In the insurance example, it may be that you ought to insure your house, whereas rationality requires you to intend to insure your house. This is consistent with assuming that what you ought and what rationality requires of you both supervene on your mind. Suppose, for instance, that you want to preserve your wealth and you believe that insuring your house is a necessary means to that end, and that this is why you ought to insure your house.

Does normativity supervene on the mind? No

We are assuming for the sake of argument that what you ought supervenes on the mind. Normativity is the property of *F*ing whenever you ought to *F*. To establish that normativity supervenes on the mind, we also have to show that, in cases where you ought to *F*, your actually *F*ing supervenes on your mind. This is the second part of the argument that normativity supervenes on the mind.

The insurance example reveals the problem with it. In that example, I assumed you ought to insure your house. But whether or not you insure your house does not supervene on your mind. It depends on the small print in the insurance contract, which you have not studied. So your normativity does not supervene on your mind. In one case, you do as you ought, and in the other, you do not, even though your mind is the same in both cases.

To argue that normativity supervenes on the mind, we need to argue that any act you ought to do must be one whose performance supervenes on the mind. Some acts satisfy this constraint. Mental acts such as doing mental arithmetic satisfy it. So does any act of bringing it about that your mind has a particular property. This need not be a mental act, because you might bring about the property by non-mental means. For instance, by opening a window, you might bring it about that you believe the window is open.

To make the argument in the insurance example would involve denying that you ought to insure your house. Instead, what you ought would have to be something that supervenes on your mind. For instance, it might be that you ought to bring yourself to believe you have insured your house. You can achieve this by the non-mental means of filling in the right form, paying the premium and so on. Alternatively, it might be that you ought to intend to insure your house or to have some other mental property.

Acting on the world outside your mind does not supervene on your mind. For example, raising your arm does not supervene on your mind. You might fail to raise your arm even while your mind has exactly the properties it would have if you raised it. Your nerves might fail to activate your muscles, and you might be looking the other way.

The argument has to be that no act on the world outside your mind can be something you ought to do. That is utterly implausible. The fact is that you ought to insure your house and not merely intend to insure it or believe you have insured it. You ought to make sure your car's brakes are in good condition, you ought to be kind to strangers, look both ways before you cross the road and so on. It is quite implausible that all these ordinary normative claims are false.⁷

I conclude that normativity does not supervene on the mind.

Does rationality supervene on the mind? – Yes

Errol Lord (2017) favors the identity theory. He adopts the first response to the quick objection; he denies that rationality supervenes on the mind. He thinks (Lord 2017) that rationality

consists in responding correctly to the reasons you possess, he thinks that you possess a reason just when you are in a position to know it (Lord 2010), and being in a position to know a reason, as he understands it, does not supervene on the mind.

Lord uses the drinks example to illustrate possessing a reason as he understands it. You intend to drink a glass of liquid, which is either petrol or gin. Lord adds the assumption that, lying on the counter right in front of you, is an authoritative card that specifies which the liquid is. If it is petrol, the fact that it is petrol is a reason not to intend to drink it. The fact that the reason is described on a card right in front of you – and Lord adds some further supporting details – implies that this reason is possessed by you.

However, Lord supposes you do not read the card so that the reason does not impinge on your mind, even though it is possessed by you. Your mind has exactly the same properties whether the liquid is petrol or gin, even though in the former case, you possess a reason not to intend to drink the liquid, whereas in the latter case, you do not.

Lord supposes that, if the liquid is petrol, the reason you possess not to intend to drink it outweighs any opposing reasons you might possess, so responding correctly to the reasons you possess entails not intending to drink it. If you intend to drink it, you are therefore irrational according to his theory of rationality. Why should we accept that? Lord evidently thinks he has supplied enough details to convince us that your failure to read the card is a failure of rationality.

Let us accept that that is so. Then you would be equally irrational if the liquid were gin and you intended to drink it. In that case, too, you fail to read the card in front of you. If your failure is irrational in one case, it is irrational in the other. It cannot be otherwise, since your mind is no different in the two cases.

What if the details are such that, in the petrol case, you know something you do not know in the gin case? For example, suppose you know the card contains information that is vital for your health. In the gin case, you do not know this because it is not true. Some philosophers take knowledge to be a mental state (e.g. Williamson 2000: chapter 1). If they are right, you have different mental properties in the two cases, so the principle that rationality supervenes on the mind does not apply. If they are wrong, we may continue to assume your mind does have the same properties in the two cases, so the principle does apply. We may assume, in particular, that in the gin case, you believe that the card contains information that is vital for your health, just as you do in the petrol case. Given that your failure to read the card is irrational in the petrol case, it is irrational in the gin case too.

Lord's example only makes it clearer that rationality supervenes on the mind. I am speaking of rationality as we ordinarily understand it. There can be other, artificial notions of rationality – 'objective rationality' for instance – that do not supervene on the mind. Kantians often identify normativity with rationality. In section 6, I shall argue that they can do so only by adopting a special, reified notion, which might be called 'Rationality' or 'Reason' with a capital letter. This reified notion need not supervene on the mind. But rationality as we ordinarily understand it does.

I conclude from this section that the quick objection is sound and the identity theory is false.

6 A Kantian response

There remains one way of denying that rationality supervenes on the mind that I have not yet explored. I shall approach it indirectly, by a detour through a puzzle about morality.

A Kantian view is that morality supervenes on the mind. The view is that to be moral, you require only a good mind – specifically, a good will. If, by bad luck, your good will does not achieve good consequences for the world, you are no less moral for that.

Even if morality supervenes on the mind, it does not follow that normativity does so. Morality is only a part of normativity. My examples were about prudence rather than morality, and there is no suggestion that prudence supervenes on the mind. So the conclusions I drew from the examples are not affected. The point I want to make is different. Applied to morality, the Kantian view is plausible, and it raises a puzzle.

It is plausible that your possession of the property of morality does indeed supervene on your mind. If you intend to act well but bad luck intervenes and prevents you from achieving a good result, it is plausible that this does not count against your morality. You cannot be blamed, so you cannot be any less moral. In general, you cannot be more moral in one state than another if your mind is no different. Yet on the other hand, it is implausible that everything morality requires of you – in other words, everything you morally ought – supervenes on your mind. For example, morality requires you not to cause unnecessary suffering, and whether or not you cause unnecessary suffering does not supervene on your mind. Morality is surely aimed at the world, not at improving your own mind. So morality supervenes on the mind, but what morality requires does not. How can these claims be reconciled? That is the puzzle.

A solution is to recognize that the reification of morality has gone a long way. ‘Morality’ is the name of a property that people possess. Plausibly, this property supervenes on the mind. If we construe ‘morality requires’ on the model of ‘survival requires,’ what is morally required of you is whatever is a necessary condition for possessing the property of morality and nothing more. If morality supervenes on the mind, what is morally required in this sense also supervenes on the mind.

But we also reify morality and treat it as an external entity that has some authority over us. Let the capitalized word ‘Morality’ be the name of the reified entity. Then ‘Morality requires’ should be construed on the model of ‘the law requires’ rather than on the model of ‘survival requires.’ It means much the same as ‘Morality prescribes.’ Reified Morality does not require of you everything that is a necessary condition for possessing the property of morality. For example, a necessary condition for being moral is to be alive, but Morality does not require you to be alive. Morality does not prescribe being alive.

We would not naturally say that morality requires you to be alive. This shows that in the expression ‘morality requires,’ ‘morality’ most naturally refers to reified Morality rather than unreified morality.

One consequence of reification is the one I have just described, that Morality does not require everything that is a necessary condition for being moral. But our reification of Morality goes further than that. Reified Morality also requires some things of you that are not necessary conditions for being moral. It requires some acts and omissions in the external world. For instance, Morality requires you to make sure your car’s brakes are in good condition, and it requires you to refrain from murder. This is part of our commonsense understanding of Morality, and Kantians would not deny it. Being kind to strangers and refraining from murder do not supervene on your mind. Since we are making the Kantian assumption that the property of morality supervenes on the mind, it follows that they are not part of the property of morality. So on the Kantian view, reified Morality in some ways goes beyond morality as a personal property. This solves the puzzle: morality supervenes on the mind, but what Morality requires does not.

Morality is not particularly a subject for this chapter. Its relevance is that it could provide a model for the reification of rationality. We do indeed reify rationality, as I said in section 2. Let capitalized ‘Rationality’ be the name of the reified entity. Another name for it is ‘Reason.’ If Rationality is reified to the same degree as Morality, the requirements of Rationality need

not supervene on the mind any more than the requirements of Morality do, even though the property of rationality does supervene on the mind.

This makes it possible for Rationality to require acts or omissions in the external world. To take one example, Rationality might require you to act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.⁸ I earlier argued that rationality cannot be identical to normativity because rationality supervenes on the mind, whereas normativity does not. But the argument does not apply to reified Rationality if it does not supervene on the mind. It could even turn out that Rationality and normativity are identical. It could turn out that what you ought to do is nothing other than what Rationality requires of you.

There would be a lot more work to do before this Kantian claim could be established. First, it needs to be explained why Rationality does not supervene on the mind. It is plausible that Morality does not supervene on the mind, because Morality is concerned with the world, not with your mind. The same cannot be said of Rationality, however reified; it is much more plausibly concerned with your mind. It is strange to claim that Rationality may require something that is not a necessary condition for being rational. Second, it needs to be explained why Rationality encompasses the whole of normativity. Even if it is granted that Rationality does not supervene on the mind, that is far short of the conclusion that it constitutes all of normativity.

Those are two big jobs to do. But if they could be done, it would mean there is a concept of Rationality in which it is identical to normativity. There would be a sense of Practical Reason that unites Rationality and normativity.

But this concept of Rationality would be very distant from rationality, the property that is possessed by people. Take a new example. Suppose Rationality requires you to act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law. I take this to mean that Rationality requires of you that you do not perform any act unless it conforms to some maxim that you can will to become a universal law. What this requirement requires of you does not supervene on your mind. For example, suppose you give money to an honest-looking person who is soliciting contributions on the street. You believe this act conforms to the maxim 'Give money to charity,' which you can will to become a universal law. Now distinguish two cases. In the first, the person is indeed collecting for charity, so your act conforms to your maxim and does not violate the requirement of Rationality. In the second case, the person is collecting for a terrorist organization, and giving money to a terrorist organization does not conform to any maxim that you can will to become a universal law. In this second case, you do violate the requirement of Rationality. Yet your mind might have all the same properties in both cases. You might never find out that in the second case you contribute to a terrorist organization; you might go to your grave believing you gave to charity. You are plainly equally rational in the two cases because your rationality supervenes on your mind. The cases differ in what reified Rationality requires of you, but your unreified rationality is the same in both.

So the Kantian project of reification does nothing to bring unreified rationality closer to normativity. It remains a mistake to identify these very different properties.

7 Summary

At the beginning of this chapter, I explained on purely semantic and grammatical grounds that 'practical reason' has two distinct meanings. It can denote the property of rationality, which people possess to varying degrees. It can alternatively denote normativity, which I also treat as

a property that people possess to varying degrees – the property they possess when they do as they ought. There remained the possibility that these two properties are actually identical, but I argued they cannot be identical because rationality supervenes on the mind, whereas normativity does not.

I then warded off various responses to this argument. In a way, the most successful is a Kantian response, which does at least open up the formal possibility of a reified concept of Rationality that does not supervene on the mind. But even if the Kantian response succeeded, it would leave untouched the distinction between the property of rationality and the property of normativity. ‘Practical reason’ has two very different meanings, and philosophers would do well to keep them separate. This book covers two distinct topics.

Notes

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- 1 This famous example comes from Bernard Williams (1981).
- 2 My evidence is contained in (Broome 2013: 119–126). Here I give just one example.
- 3 It is a difficult question whether or not this is so. See, for example, Broome (2013: chapter 11), Southwood (2010), Lord (2010).
- 4 My thanks to Rob Bassett for pointing this out to me.
- 5 Lord’s (2018) book *The Importance of Being Rational* has been published since this paper was written. Lord’s views have developed, and my remarks here may no longer be entirely apposite.
- 6 More accurately, Kiesewetter takes this to be true of reasons to do something in the present but not necessarily of reasons to do something in the future.
- 7 Kurt Sylvan has pointed out to me that this is precisely what H. A. Prichard (2002: 95–97) thinks. Even with Jonathan Dancy’s help, I have not been able to extract a credible argument from Prichard’s text.
- 8 This is H. J. Paton’s translation of Kant’s categorical imperative in (Kant 1947: 88).

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Practical reason

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