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The Handbook of Rationality

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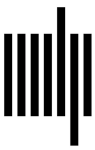

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2.1 Reasons and Rationality

John Broome

Summary

I explore the relationship between rationality and reasons, particularly the reductive idea that rationality can be defined in terms of reasons. I start with an analysis of the meaning of "rationality" in order to clarify the issue. Then I assess the view that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. To this I oppose a "quick objection," describe the defenses the view has against this objection, and argue that these defenses are unappealing. Next, I assess various related views, including the view that rationality consists in responding correctly to beliefs about reasons and argue against each of them. Eventually, I identify the kernel of truth that lies within them, which is that rationality requires you to intend to *F* if you believe you ought to *F*. I call this principle "enkrasia." It is only one requirement of rationality among many, so it licenses no reduction of rationality.

1. Normativity and Reasons

Knauff and Spohn explain in their Introduction that a recurring theme in this handbook is the relation between positive and normative approaches to the study of rationality. This chapter investigates some fundamental aspects of the normative approach.

The word "normative" has various meanings, and at least two are current in philosophy. One meaning is "involving correctness." Rules and requirements are by definition normative in this sense. Any rule or requirement sets up a standard of correctness, so that complying with it is correct according to the rule or requirement. Rationality requires things of us, or—to put it differently—it prescribes things to us. For instance, it prescribes that we intend means to ends that we intend and that we do not have contradictory beliefs. So rationality is inevitably normative in this sense of "normative." Much of the study of rationality is concerned with its normativity in this sense, investigating just what rationality requires of us.

Many things besides rationality are normative in this sense. Fashion is an example. Fashion these days prescribes that men do not wear bellbottom trousers. But this does not automatically imply that a man ought not to wear bellbottom trousers or has any reason not to. It is a real question whether we have any reason to dress as fashion requires. This a question about the normativity of fashion in a different sense. In this sense, "normative" means "involving ought or reasons."

We may ask the same question about rationality: when rationality requires something of us—such as to intend means to ends we intend—does that imply we ought to do it or have any reason to do it? Although rationality is inevitably normative in the first sense, there are real questions about its normativity in the second sense. These and related questions are the topic of this chapter. In this chapter, "normative" has the second sense.

Reasons are a paradigmatic feature of normativity in this sense. They became an important object of study for philosophers only in the middle of the 20th century. A significant achievement of the philosophy of normativity since that time has been to make a sharp distinction between motivating reasons and normative reasons (e.g., Smith, 1994). (To be precise, the distinction is between the property of being a motivating reason and the property of being a normative reason. Many particular things have both properties.) Motivating reasons explain, or help to explain, why a person does something. Normative reasons explain, or help to explain, why a person ought to do something (Broome, 2013, chapter 4). It is normative reasons that figure in this chapter, since the chapter is about the relation between rationality and normativity.

In the past few decades, reasons have come to dominate the philosophy of normativity. As a result of what is often called "the reasons-first movement,"[1] many philosophers now think that rationality can be given a reductive definition in terms of reasons. If that were true, it would mean that the study of rationality is nothing more than the study of reasons. One aim of this chapter is to explore this reductive idea.

2. The Meaning of "Rationality"

It is natural to associate reasons with rationality. The words "reason" and "rationality" have a common origin in the Latin word "ratio." But this simple etymological association covers up a tangle of meanings that connect the two words. I need to start with some disentanglement.

The word "reason" entered English from French along with the Norman invasion of England in 1066. Its first recorded occurrence in English is in a book called the *Ancrene Riwle*, whose earliest manuscript dates from about 1225 (Day, 1952). "Reason" appears there in various different senses, all of which survive today. Sometimes it means simply "explanation," as it still does in such sentences as "The reason for the long delay was incompetence." Often it refers to a motivating reason, which is a special sort of explanation of why a person does something.

Just once in the *Ancrene Riwle*, "reason" refers to a normative reason. This is in the sentence (translated into modern English):

> The third reason for fleeing the world is the gaining of heaven. (p. 73, folio 43)

Just previously in the text, the author says he will describe "eight reasons why one ought to flee the world," which is to say, eight explanations of why one ought to flee the world. Then he starts to enumerate them, and when he comes to the third, he describes it as a reason for fleeing the world. So "a reason for fleeing the world" refers to an explanation of why one ought to flee the world. This is a normative reason.[2]

In all those senses, "reason" is a count noun. It also appears once in the *Ancrene Riwle* as a non–count noun naming a property that people possess. We still call this property the "faculty of reason." Since it is a mental faculty, let us call this "reason in the mental sense." The original text needs some exegesis:

> Wummon is the reisun—thet is, wittes skile—hwen hit unstrengeth. (p. 121, folio 73)

The author has just recounted a parable from the Bible. He is saying that the woman in the parable represents the faculty of reason (spelled "reisun"). Because the word "reason" had only recently acquired the mental sense, he glosses it using an older English term for the faculty of reason: he says (in modern spelling), "that is, wit's skill." Since this earliest mention of the faculty of reason is obscure, here is a clearer one from Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 2, Scene 2):

> The will of man is by his reason sway'd.

The adjective "rational" is first recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) in 1398. From its beginning, it was cognate to "reason" in the mental sense and in that sense only. It had the meaning "having the faculty of reason." It had this meaning and no other for about two hundred years. The *OED* shows that for all that period, it was applied as a predicate only to people, creatures, souls, minds, and suchlike: all things that could possess the faculty of reason. This meaning of "rational" persists today.

The noun "rationality" appeared in 1627 as the name of the property that is ascribed by this adjective. Since this property is just reason in the mental sense, "rationality" and "reason" in this sense were originally synonyms.

However, the meaning of "rationality" has by now broadened. "Reason" in the mental sense refers only to a faculty. "Rationality" today refers to the same faculty and also to a state of mind—roughly, a state of mind that could have arisen from the exercise of the faculty of reason, which is to say, a coherent state of mind. The term "structural rationality" is often used today for the rationality of states.[3] These days, we would not count a person as fully rational if she had the faculty of rationality but not structural rationality. For instance, a person is not fully rational if she does not intend means to her ends, even if she has the ability to ensure that she does intend means to her ends. Ability is not enough; we expect it to be exercised.

Nevertheless, even in this broadened sense, rationality retains one central feature: it is a property of a person and specifically a property of her mind. Moreover, it depends on the other properties of the person's mind: as Wedgwood (2002) puts it, rationality supervenes on—depends only on—the mind. If a person might be in either of two possible situations, but her mental properties apart from rationality would be the same in either, she would be equally as rational in one as in the other. So, even though the meaning of "rationality" has broadened beyond the mental sense of "reason," it still refers to a mental property.

However, from 1598 onward, the *OED* records "rational" used as a predicate of things that do not have minds. These days, we apply "rational" to acts, beliefs, city plans, and many other things without minds. These uses of "rational" for nonmental things are derived from the original, mental sense applied to people. A city plan is rational if it could have been designed by rational people. A person's act is rational if, were she to do it, she would be no less rational than if she were not to do it. And so on. Nevertheless, in its core meaning, "rationality" still refers to a property of people, and it is a mental property. It supervenes on the mind.

Some philosophers assign a different meaning to "rational." For example, Kolodny and Brunero (2013/2018) say,

> "What would it be rational for an agent to do or intend?" could mean:
>
> 1. By doing or intending what would the agent make her responses (i.e., her attitudes and actions) cohere with one another? . . .
> 2. What does the agent have reason, or ought she, to do or intend?

The first of these meanings is roughly structural rationality. The second is sometimes called "substantive rationality,"[4] but it is not a normal meaning of "rational" at all. To see this, think of a case where you ought to turn left, but you firmly believe on the basis of strong but misleading evidence that you ought to turn right. In the substantive sense, it would be rational for you to turn left. But no nonphilosopher would say it is rational. No one would call it rational to do the opposite of what you firmly believe you ought to do.[5]

The substantive meaning of "rational" could be etymologically justified. "Rational" is a cognate word to "reason," and it could in principle be cognate to "reason" in the normative sense. Actually, however, "rational" has never had this normative meaning in common English. It has always been cognate to "reason" in the mental sense only. I use it only with this common meaning.

3. Rationality as Responding Correctly to Reasons

Although "rationality" does not have a normative *meaning*, it is a popular view among philosophers and others that, as a *substantive* matter, rationality is nevertheless intimately connected with normativity. A strong version of this view is the claim that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons.[6] This is a reductive claim: it claims that rationality is reducible to reasons in this way.

It is subject to something I call the "quick objection."[7] The property of rationality supervenes on the mind, whereas the property of responding correctly to reasons does not. These therefore cannot be the same property. This section examines the quick objection and defenses against it.

Take a particular person called "you." You are rational to some degree, and this degree supervenes on your mind. I insisted in section 2 that this is part of the meaning of "rational."

What about responding correctly to reasons? First, what is this property, more exactly? You have many reasons. Each is a reason for some particular thing: a reason for you to do something, or to believe something, or not to intend some particular end without also intending a means to it, or for something else. I use a schematic letter to represent this generality: a reason of yours is a reason for you to *F*. Responding correctly to reasons cannot be simply *F*ing whenever you have a reason to *F*. Often you have a reason to *F* and also a reason not to *F*. You cannot both *F* and not *F*, so if responding correctly to reasons required you to *F* whenever you have a reason to *F*, you often could not respond correctly to reasons. That cannot be so.

Instead, we must recognize that your reasons in some way combine together. They may weigh against each other, some may override others, some may cancel others, and so on. Your reasons together require various things of you. They require you to *F*, to *G*, and so on. Another way of putting this is that you ought to *F*, to *G*, and so on.

In this section, I assume that, to respond correctly to reasons, you must comply with reasons, by which I mean you must *F* whenever your reasons together require you to *F*.[8] An alternative interpretation is that you must intend to *F* whenever your reasons together require you to *F*. I consider that interpretation in section 5. Your reasons together could not both require you to *F* and require you not to *F*, so the previous problem does not arise for either interpretation.

Responding correctly to reasons may imply not just complying with reasons but also doing so because your reasons require you to. In this section, I assume that complying with reasons is at least a part of responding correctly to reasons. Consequently, the property of responding correctly to reasons cannot supervene on your mind unless the property of complying with reasons does. I shall argue that complying with reasons supervenes on your mind only if some unappealing philosophical theories are true.

For you to comply with reasons is for the following universal conditional proposition to be true: that, for any *F*, you *F* if reasons require you to *F*. This conditional supervenes on your mind if both sides of it do—that is, if, for any *F*, first, whether or not reasons require you to *F* supervenes on your mind and, second, if reasons require you to *F*, whether or not you *F* supervenes on your mind. As I shall put it: first, what your reasons require supervenes on your mind and, second, your performance supervenes on your mind. It is conceivable that the property of complying with reasons could supervene on your mind even if one of these conditions was not satisfied, but I cannot see how this could actually happen. So the quick objection divides into two objections. The first is that what your reasons require

does not supervene on your mind. The second is that your performance does not supervene on your mind. Either is enough to refute the claim that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. I shall develop these two objections in turn.

3.1 First Objection

Does what your reasons require of you—in other words, what you ought—supervene on your mind? The claim that it does is a sort of subjectivism about ought. Various subjectivist theories support it. For example, one is the theory that you ought to *F* if and only if *F*ing has the greatest expected value for you out of all the alternatives, where expected values are given by your own credences and your own judgments of value.

Many philosophers find subjectivism about ought an unappealing theory. It conflicts with common sense, if nothing else. Common sense tells us that external facts can influence what you ought to believe or do. For example, the fact that lowering clouds are gathering is a reason to expect rain, and the fact that your child is badly hurt is a reason to take her to the hospital.

Kiesewetter (2017, chapter 7) offers a means of easing this discomfort with subjectivism. He agrees with common sense that reasons are often features of the external world and argues that this can be made consistent with subjectivism about ought.

His argument is this. A feature of the external world is a reason for you only if it available to you, by which he means it is part of your body of evidence. Indeed, he assumes that what you ought is determined by your total body of evidence together with features of your mind such as your likes and dislikes. He now applies a strong dose of externalism about the mind, taking his lead from Williamson (2000). According to Williamson, your evidence is what you know, and your knowledge is a mental state of yours. Given this, your body of evidence is a feature of your mind. So what you ought is entirely determined by features of your mind, even though reasons are features of the external world.

I doubt this will ease many philosophers' discomfort.[9] It conflicts equally with common sense. In effect, it expands the notion of the mind to include whatever facts in the world constitute reasons. Subjectivism about ought remains an unappealing theory.

3.2 Second Objection

Your reasons often require you to act in the external world. For example, your reasons may require you to insure your house. Even reasons that are features of your own mind may require this. For example, perhaps you want to avoid risk of financial ruin and believe that insuring your house is necessary for that purpose, and perhaps this desire and belief constitute a reason for you to insure your house.

So let us assume your reasons require you to insure your house. Suppose you take the usual steps to do so: you complete an application form, glance through the contract, pay the premium, and so on. Compare two cases. In the first, by these steps, you successfully insure your house. In the other, a clause in the contract, which you do not read, says your house is insured only if it is roofed with metal, tiles, or slate. Your house is roofed with cedar shingles, so you do not successfully insure it. But suppose you never claim on insurance, and your failure never comes to light. Then your mind has all the same properties in both cases. Nevertheless, in one you do as your reasons require and in the other you do not. So your performance does not supervene on your mind.

This second objection could be overcome if we could accept a sort of subjectivism about performance. We could say that reasons cannot require you to do something unless the criterion for whether or not you do it is internal to your mind. We could deny in the example that your reasons require you to insure your house. We could say instead that they require you to act in a way that appears to you to be insuring your house or, alternatively, that they require you to intend to insure your house.

This sort of subjectivism has been defended,[10] but it, too, is unappealing. The relevant reason in this case is a reason of self-interest: it is in your interest to insure your house. It is not in your interest to do something that appears to you to be insuring your house or to intend to insure your house, except insofar as either leads you to actually insuring it.

3.3 Conclusion

The claim that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons can be defended against the quick objection only by showing that complying with reasons supervenes on your mind. There are two objections to this claim, which can be overcome only on the basis of unappealing philosophical theories. The quick objection is vindicated to this extent.

In any case, blocking the quick objection is far from sufficient to establish that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. There are other, independent objections. One is that it is often moral reasons that require you to do some act. Suppose you respond correctly to these reasons by doing this act because your moral reasons require you to. If responding correctly to

reasons constituted rationality, this would exhibit your rationality. But actually, it exhibits your morality rather than your rationality (see chapter 12.1 by Fehige & Wessels, this handbook).

The same would be true even if your responding to reasons supervened on your mind. Suppose that your moral reasons require you not to have racist beliefs or not to have evil intentions, for example. Again, responding correctly to these reasons exhibits your morality and not your rationality.

The claim that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons remains dubious.

4. Rationality as Entailed by Responding Correctly to Reasons

A weaker claim is that rationality is *entailed* by responding correctly to reasons.[11] This, too, may be intended as a reductive claim that rationality is nothing more than a part of responding correctly to reasons.

4.1 Structural Reasons

On one version of this view, everyone has reasons—call them "structural reasons"—to have her mind in good coherent order. You have a reason not to have contradictory beliefs, a reason to intend means to ends that you intend, and so on. The view is that rationality consists in responding correctly to your structural reasons. Responding correctly to structural reasons would supervene on your mind, so this view is immune to the quick objection.

But it misunderstands responding correctly to reasons. To respond correctly to reasons, you must *F* when your reasons together require you to *F*, not when you have a single reason to *F*. Even if you have a structural reason not to have contradictory beliefs, you might have another reason to have contradictory beliefs. For example, an evil demon might announce it will destroy the world unless you have some contradictory beliefs. In a case like this, your reasons together may require you to have contradictory beliefs, so that responding correctly to reasons would imply having contradictory beliefs. Nevertheless, if you do have contradictory beliefs, you will not be fully rational. This shows that rationality is not a part of responding correctly to reasons, even if structural reasons indeed exist.

This argument illustrates a fundamental difficulty that stands in the way of reducing rationality to reasons. Rationality imposes *strict* requirements on us, and if we violate them, we are necessarily not fully rational. But what reasons require of us is generally defeasible; it can be overridden by further reasons. So reasons are not well suited to account for rationality.

4.2 Myth Theory

Another version of the view that rationality is entailed by responding correctly to reasons is known as "myth theory."[12] It is the view that rationality in the mental sense is a myth, or at least that structural rationality is a myth. Structural rationality is the property a person has when she has consistent beliefs and intentions, intends means to ends she intends, and so on. Myth theorists do not deny that this property exists. But they think it is an uninteresting property, because if a person responds correctly to reasons, she will possess it automatically as a consequence. They think that, if your mind is properly aligned with the world—so you believe what your reasons require you to believe, you intend whatever your reasons require you to intend, and so on—a necessary consequence is that your mind will be properly aligned internally. You will have consistent beliefs and intentions, intend means to ends you intend, and so on; you will be structurally rational.

Kolodny (2007) expresses his version of myth theory by denying that "there are rational requirements of formal coherence as such." Rationality definitely has requirements in one sense. Any necessary condition for something to possess a property may be called a requirement of the property. For example, a necessary condition for being bald is not having much hair, so we may say that baldness requires you not to have much hair. In this sense, rationality definitely requires you not to have contradictory beliefs. But Kolodny is using "requires" in a different sense. This is the sense that appears in my expression "your reasons require you to *F*." To say rationality requires you to *F* is to say that rationality prescribes *F*ing to you. Kolodny denies that rationality issues prescriptions.

I have two replies to myth theory. One is to deny it. I deny that if your mind is properly aligned with the world, it will necessarily be properly aligned internally. An example is where your reasons permit you to do something and also permit you not to do it. Cases like this are common: your reasons for going to Paris may neither outweigh nor be outweighed by your reasons for not going to Paris. Then, even if your mind is properly aligned with the world, you may intend to go to Paris, and also you may intend not to go to Paris. Furthermore, the world may give you no reason for not having both intentions; having both might even be helpful because it leads you to prepare for both eventualities. So, even if your mind is properly aligned with the world, you may

have both intentions. But then your mind is not properly aligned internally: you are not fully rational if you have contradictory intentions. You respond correctly to reasons, but you are not fully rational. In reaction to examples like this, Kolodny (2007) urges us to abandon the idea that you are necessarily not fully rational if you have contradictory intentions. That seems to me a desperate expedient.

The second reply is to point out that often you cannot respond correctly to reasons except by engaging your rationality. For instance, if you are to intend means to an end you intend, you may need to work out by theoretical reasoning what is a means to your end, and you may then need to do some instrumental reasoning in order to come to intend the means. Reasoning is a rule-governed process that takes you from some existing premise-attitudes of yours, such as existing beliefs and intentions, to a new conclusion-attitude. Correct reasoning is reasoning that follows correct rules. What rules are correct is determined by principles of rationality that connect the conclusion-attitude to the premise-attitudes.[13] These principles are independent of what your reasons require of you. They have to be independent, because reasoning proceeds in exactly the same way whether or not your reasons require you to have the premise-attitudes or the conclusion-attitude. You can reason equally well from false beliefs and bad intentions as from true beliefs and good intentions.

So even if it were true that responding correctly to reasons entails rationality, it would not follow that rationality can be reduced to responding correctly to reasons. Responding correctly to reasons itself depends on rationality.

5. Rationality as Responding Correctly to Beliefs about Reasons

A different reductive claim is that rationality consists in responding correctly to beliefs about reasons. This is subject to various interpretations. According to one proposed by Parfit (2011, chapter 5), responding correctly to beliefs about reasons implies *F*ing whenever you are required to *F* by the reasons you believe there to be. But this is ruled out by the first objection in section 3, because what is required by the reasons you believe there to be does not supervene on your mind. The way these reasons combine together to determine what is required may depend on something external to you.

On a second interpretation, supported by Kolodny (2008b), responding correctly to beliefs about reasons implies *F*ing whenever you believe your reasons require you to *F*. Because your belief is a mental state, it supervenes on your mind, so this interpretation is immune to the first objection. We can make it immune to the second objection by confining the response to mental states: we may say that rationality consists in having mental states that are correct responses to beliefs about reasons.

A third interpretation takes responding correctly to beliefs about reasons to imply intending to *F*—rather than actually *F*ing—when you believe your reasons require you to *F*. Once again, this is immune to the first objection, because your belief is a mental state. It is also immune to the second objection, because intending to *F* is a mental state and so supervenes on your mind.

Neither the second nor the third interpretation is vulnerable to the quick objection. Nevertheless, both are mistaken. The problem with them is that they do not cover all of rationality. There are many necessary conditions for rationality that are not implied by this claim. For example, you are necessarily not fully rational if you have contradictory beliefs or intentions, even if you yourself believe there is nothing wrong with having contradictory beliefs or intentions. These conditions of rationality impose "strict liability," as I put it (Broome, 2013, p. 75).

Still, the third interpretation of the claim does contain a truth. Rationality does not *consist in* responding correctly to beliefs about reasons, but it does *require* responding correctly to beliefs about reasons. That is:

Rationality requires of you that you intend to *F* if you believe your reasons require you to *F*.

This is one among many requirements of rationality. I call it *enkrasia*. It is only a rough formulation of *enkrasia*; an accurate formulation is more complicated and appears in Broome (2013, pp. 170–171). The state of believing your reasons require you to *F* while not intending to *F* is known as *akrasia*. *Akrasia* has traditionally been taken to be irrational (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7; Davidson, 1969), and *enkrasia* asserts that it is irrational.

6. Conclusion

Enkrasia is an important connection between reasons and rationality. It is a kernel of truth that is hidden inside the grander reductive views I have argued against: the view that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons and the view that it consists in responding correctly to beliefs about reasons. Those reductive views are false.

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Notes

1. Leading works in this movement are Nagel (1970), Parfit (2011), and Scanlon (1998).

2. See the definitions in Broome (2013, sections 4.2 and 4.3).

3. For example, by Scanlon (2007) and Wallace (2003/2018). In chapter 10.5 by Nida-Rümelin, Gutwald, and Zuber (this handbook), the term is used differently.

4. I believe this term originates with Max Weber; see Kalberg (1980).

5. I assume you have no attitude that favors turning left. Arpaly (2003) argues that sometimes it is genuinely rational to do something you believe you ought not to do. Her prime example is Huck Finn, who believes he ought not to conceal the escaped slave Jim but does so. She claims his decision is rational because it coheres well with other attitudes of Huck's apart from his belief. My case is not like that.

6. The most thoroughgoing defence of this view is Kiesewetter's (2017, chapter 7). Other examples are in Gibbard (1990, p. 161) and Lord (2017). Lord's view is that rationality consists in doing what you ought to do, but it will quickly appear that this amounts to the same thing.

7. See Broome (2013, chapter 5), where parts of the following argument are developed in more detail. There is also a fuller development in Broome (2021).

8. This is Kiesewetter's (2017) and Lord's (2017) interpretation.

9. There is a full discussion of the argument in Broome (2021).

10. Kurt Sylvan pointed out to me that it is defended by Prichard (2002, pp. 95–97). Even with Jonathan Dancy's help, I have not been able to extract a credible argument from Prichard's text.

11. The following arguments are set out more fully in Broome (2013, section 5.4).

12. The leading proponents are Kolodny (2008a) and Raz (2005).

13. Specifically by what I call "basing permissions of rationality" (see Broome, 2013, sections 13.7 and 14.2).

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