

Rationality

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Rationality as a Property and Rationality as a Source of Requirements

The word ‘rationality’ often refers to a property – the property of being rational. This property may be possessed by people, and also by beliefs, acts, conversations, traffic schemes and other things. I shall concentrate on the rationality of people. The rationality of other things is derivative from the rationality of people.

One task for an account of rationality is to describe the contours of the property of rationality, when it is ascribed to people. That is to say, the account should tell us when we are rational and when we are not. An account of rationality also needs to describe what rationality requires of us. At first this may seem to be nothing different, because ‘rationality requires’ seems to be definable in terms of the property of rationality. But that turns out not to be so.

We do often speak of what a property requires of us. For instance, we say “Beauty requires hard work.” This sentence specifies a necessary condition for possessing the property of beauty, or perhaps for possessing this property to a higher degree. It means that hard work is necessary for being beautiful, or more beautiful. The notion of a necessary condition is not entirely determinate, so there is room for different interpretations of the sentence “Beauty requires hard work.” It may mean that, necessarily, if you do not work hard you are not beautiful. Or it may mean that, if you were not to work hard, you would not be beautiful. Or that, necessarily, if you do not work hard you will not be more beautiful. And so on.

We could understand ‘rationality requires’ on the same model. We could take “Rationality requires you to *F*” to mean that your *F-ing* is a necessary condition for you to be rational, or to be more rational. For instance, because being alive is a necessary condition for being rational, we could intelligibly say that rationality requires you to be alive. But that would not be giving ‘rationality requires’ its most natural meaning; we most naturally make a distinction between what is necessary for being rational and what rationality itself requires of us. We would naturally say that, although being alive is necessary for being rational, rationality does not itself require you to be alive. What rationality itself requires is such things as intending means to ends that you intend, not

having contradictory beliefs, and so on. So ‘rationality requires’ has another, more natural meaning.

We would more naturally understand ‘rationality requires’ on the model of ‘convention requires’ or ‘the law requires.’ This brings us to recognize that ‘rationality’ is not only the name of a property; it is also the name of an abstract entity in a category that I believe has no generic name. Others in the category are convention, the law, morality and prudence. Members of this class issue requirements; they are sources of requirements. The law requires you not to defraud people; convention requires you to use your right hand for shaking hands; morality requires you to keep your promises; rationality requires you to intend means to ends that you intend; and so on.

I call this second sense of ‘rationality’ the ‘source sense,’ and the first the ‘property sense.’ When we speak of requirements of rationality, we generally use ‘rationality’ in the source sense. In this sense, ‘rationality’ is synonymous with one of the senses of ‘reason.’ ‘Rationality requires’ generally means the same as ‘reason requires.’

Rationality in the source sense requires you to intend means to an end you intend, not to have contradictory beliefs, to intend to do what you believe you ought to do, and so on. Many of rationality’s requirements are hard to formulate precisely, and several are controversial; I shall give more careful attention to a few requirements later. The list of requirements may be very long. Nevertheless, it does not include every necessary condition for being rational. Being alive is not a requirement of rationality in the source sense, for instance.

Requirements of rationality in the source sense cannot be defined in terms of the property of rationality. However the property of rationality can be defined in terms of requirements of rationality in the source sense. I shall next explain how.

The first step is to define a person to be fully rational if and only if she satisfies all the requirements of rationality she is under.

Next we need to define the ordering relation ‘more rational than.’ Compare two states a person might be in, *A* and *B*, where she is under the same requirements of rationality in both. Suppose that in *A* she satisfies all the requirements she satisfies in *B*, and some others as well. Then she is more rational in *A* than in *B*. This gives a sufficient condition for being more rational, but not a necessary one. The person may also be more rational in *A* than in *B* if the requirements she satisfies in *A* are together more important than those she satisfies in *B*. To apply this criterion, we must have some scale for the importance of requirements; I assume we do intuitively. No doubt the scale is very indeterminate, which means the ordering of states by ‘more rational than’ will be very partial.

We may define a person as rational (rather than fully rational) if and only if her state is sufficiently high in this partial ordering, and irrational if and only if her state is sufficiently low in it. ‘Sufficiently’ will have to be left vague, and no doubt dependent on the context.

In this way, we can define all the features of the property of rationality. The definitions capture one feature that the property obviously possesses: that rationality is a matter of degree.

A complication is that, once we have the property of rationality, we can identify necessary conditions for you to possess this property, and we *could* say that rationality requires those conditions of you. If we did, we would be talking of the requirements of

rationality in the property sense. This is a different from the source sense, and requirements in one sense are not necessarily requirements in the other, even though the property of rationality is defined on the basis of requirements in the source sense.

Requirements in the property sense are not necessarily requirements in the source sense; I have already given the example of being alive. Moreover, requirements in the source sense are also not necessarily requirements in the property sense. For the sake of an example, let us assume that rationality in the source sense requires a person to intend to do whatever she believes she ought to do; I shall later say this is indeed so. Suppose Huck Finn believes he ought to hand over Jim, an escaped slave, to the authorities. (I take this example from Arpaly 2003.) Then, if he does not intend to hand Jim over, he is violating a requirement of rationality. But suppose that Huck would nevertheless be more rational overall if he were not to intend to hand Jim over. Perhaps having that intention would entail conflicts among Huck's deeply held moral beliefs. Then, in one sense of 'necessary condition,' a necessary condition for Huck to be more rational is that he does not intend to hand Jim over. So we might say that rationality in the property sense requires Huck not to intend to hand Jim over. There might nevertheless be no such requirement in the source sense. Moreover, we should not forget that, if Huck believes he ought to hand Jim over but does not intend to, he is violating a requirement of rationality in the source sense.

Since requirements of rationality in the source sense cannot be defined in terms of the property of rationality, but the property of rationality can be defined in terms of requirements of rationality in the source sense, these requirements are the key to describing rationality. I shall concentrate on them.

The rationality of things other than people is derivative from the rationality of people. Start with mental attitudes such as beliefs and intentions. We say a mental attitude of a person is irrational if the person would be more rational without it, and it is rational if it is not irrational. Next acts. An act has a mental component: you cannot do a particular act unless you have a particular mental attitude. We say an act is irrational if its corresponding attitude is irrational, and it is otherwise rational. The rationality or irrationality of other things such as conversations and traffic schemes derives from the rationality or irrationality of people in more remote ways that depend on the particular case.

Rationality and Normativity

What is the relation between rationality and normativity? Since rationality in the source sense issues requirements – we might say 'rules' – it is automatically normative in one sense. 'Normative' in one sense just means 'to do with rules.'

But for any source of requirements, there is a question of whether you have any reason to satisfy its requirements. Have you any reason to satisfy the requirements of convention, for instance? This is the question of whether convention is normative in a different sense. In this sense 'normative' means 'to do with reasons.' This is the sense that is commonest in moral philosophy, and it is the one I shall adopt. There is a real question of whether rationality is normative in this sense. To put it another way: have you any reason to satisfy the requirements of rationality?

I think this is a substantive question, which I shall not try to answer here. Instead, I shall respond to the common view that it is not a substantive question at all. Many philosophers think it is a conceptual truth that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. If that were so, it would follow that if rationality requires something of you, you have a reason to achieve that thing. So these philosophers think it is a conceptual truth that you have a reason to satisfy the requirements of rationality. There is no substantive question whether rationality is normative.

An objection to this view is that often you have false beliefs about reasons. You may believe your reasons require you to do something, whereas actually they require you not to do it. Then you are irrational if you intend not to do it, even though intending not to do it is the correct response to your reasons. So rationality cannot consist in responding correctly to reasons. I think this is a sound objection, and it remains a substantive question whether you have any reason to satisfy the requirements of rationality.

In answer to this objection, some philosophers make a distinction between subjective rationality and objective rationality. When you have the false beliefs I described, they say that subjective rationality requires you to intend to do what you believe your reasons require you to do, but objective rationality requires you to intend to do what your actual reasons require you to do. Objective rationality consists in responding correctly to actual reasons.

This is a bad answer. It flies in the face of something that is indeed a conceptual truth: that the property of rationality, when ascribed to a person, is a mental property. If, in one possible situation, your mind has just the same properties (apart from rationality) as it has in another, then your degree of rationality is exactly the same in one as it is in the other. Consequently, requirements of rationality are requirements on your mind only. The idea of objective rationality violates this principle, unless all your actual reasons are themselves properties of your mind. I assume they are not.

Suppose the hotel is on fire and the only way to escape is to jump from the window. Your actual reasons require you to jump. But suppose you have no idea the hotel is on fire, and you believe your reasons require you not to jump. It is implausible to say that you are in some way rational if you intend to jump. This is because rationality is a mental property. Since objective rationality is not a mental property, it is not rationality at all.

I conclude it is not the case that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. I believe the idea that it does arises largely from a confusion over the meaning of ‘reason.’ Some philosophers seem unhesitatingly to associate rationality with reasons, but actually the connection between rationality and reasons is not very close. It is true that ‘rational’ in the source sense is synonymous with the mass noun ‘reason’ in one of its senses. But the count noun ‘reason,’ whose plural is ‘reasons,’ has a quite different meaning. It is a normative word, whereas the meaning of the mass noun is not normative.

To illustrate the point, think of David Hume’s remark that “Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger” (Hume 1978, Book 2, Part 2, § 2). Hume means that this preference is not contrary to rationality: that he might have this preference without violating a requirement of rationality. He does not mean that the preference is not contrary to his reasons. I

assume Hume recognized he had a strong reason not to have this preference, since it is contrary to morality and to prudence. His claim is that it is not contrary to rationality.

Requirements of Rationality

How may we identify what the requirements of rationality are? Are there any guiding principles to follow? I have already mentioned one: that the property of rationality, when ascribed to a person, is a mental property. A second is that rationality is associated with good order in the mind; to be rational is to have a mind that is internally coherent. Correspondingly, requirements of rationality require coherence within the mind.

These two principles give us some limited guidance in identifying requirements of rationality. I know no other broad principles. Some philosophers think that particular requirements follow from the nature of certain mental states. For instance, it is said to be a constitutive feature of the state of belief that it aims at the truth, and certain requirements of rationality on beliefs are supposed to follow from this feature. But I have not seen this idea worked out convincingly in detail. So beyond those two general principles, I am guided largely by an intuitive idea of what rationality requires.

Mental coherence includes simple consistency, so some requirements of rationality require consistency. For instance, rationality requires you not to believe a proposition and also believe its negation, and not to intend to do something and also intend not to do it.

But rationality probably does not require you to have no inconsistent beliefs at all. Unless you are very complacent, you no doubt believe that not all your beliefs are true. That is to say, you believe that not all the propositions you believe are true. On the other hand, of each proposition you believe, you believe it is true. So your beliefs are inconsistent. Does rationality require you not to be in this state? Probably not; that would be implausibly demanding.

The requirements of rationality go beyond narrow consistency to wider sorts of coherence. One example is the instrumental requirement of practical rationality: the requirement to intend a means to an end that you intend. Practical requirements turn out to be surprisingly complicated to formulate precisely. This is my formulation:

Instrumental requirement. Rationality requires of N that, if

- [1] N intends at t that e , and
- [2] N believes at t that, if m were not so, because of that e would not be so, and
- [3] N believes at t that, if she herself were not then to intend m , because of that m would not be so, then
- [4] N intends at t that m .

Condition [1] says that you (more formally ' N ') intend an end e . Condition [2] says that you believe m is a means to e , and moreover that it is a means 'implied' by e , as I put it. It is commonly recognized that rationality requires you to intend what you believe is a necessary means to an end that you intend. But we rarely encounter means that we believe are strictly necessary, so that requirement is rarely applicable. My

requirement is often applicable because condition [2] is frequently satisfied. Condition [3] says that you believe the means is 'up to you,' to put it informally. Rationality does not require you to intend a means to your end if you believe the means will happen anyway, without your intending it.

The formula as a whole says that rationality requires you that, if you satisfy these conditions, to satisfy condition [4], which is to intend the means m .

An equally important requirement of practical rationality is one that requires you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. I formulate it (slightly simplifying) as:

Enkrasia. Rationality requires of N that, if

- [1] N believes at t that she herself ought to F , and
- [2] N believes at t that, if she herself were then to intend to F , because of that, she would F , and
- [3] N believes at t that, if she herself were not then to intend to F , because of that, she would not F , then,
- [4] then N intends at t to F .

Clauses [2] and [3] say that it is up to you whether or not you F .

This is a central requirement of practical rationality. It is important because it links the theoretical with the practical. We often spend time on theoretical deliberation, forming beliefs about what we ought to do; enkrasia makes the results of our deliberation practical, because it requires our intentions, which are practical attitudes, to follow the beliefs we form. Implicitly, enkrasia has appeared twice in my argument previously: once in talking about Huck Finn, and once in discussing 'objective rationality.' (There I used 'your reasons require you to' rather than 'you ought to,' but the meaning is the same.)

Though enkrasia is crucially important, it is also controversial whether it is genuinely a requirement of rationality. Enkrasia is the requirement not to be akratic. It has traditionally been regarded as a requirement of rationality, because akrasia has traditionally been regarded as irrational. Moreover, it requires a sort of coherence between your normative beliefs and your intentions, and coherence is a mark of rationality. However, enkrasia seems intuitively not to be of a piece with the requirement not to have contradictory beliefs, or even with the instrumental requirement of practical rationality. Perhaps this is because it may sometimes require a difficult act of will. I shall not pursue this controversy here.

Reasoning

What role does the activity of reasoning play in our rationality? We satisfy many requirements of rationality naturally, without our doing anything about it. Unconscious process within us bring us to satisfy them. For instance, suppose you believe it is raining, but then you look up from your work and see the rain has stopped. Now you believe it is not raining. As you acquire this new belief, unconscious process within you cause you to stop believing it is raining. Those processes ensure you satisfy the requirement not to have contradictory beliefs, in this instance.

For another example, suppose you look up from your work and notice the time. You come to believe you ought to go home soon. At the same time, unconscious process bring you to intend to go home soon. They bring you to satisfy enkrasia in this instance.

But sometimes automatic processes let you down, and you find yourself violating a particular requirement of rationality. In this case, there is something you can do for yourself that can bring your to satisfy the requirement, and that is reasoning.

For instance, suppose you intend to visit Venice, and you believe you will not visit Venice unless you buy a ticket to get there, but you do not intend to buy a ticket. You violate the instrumental requirement. You may say to yourself:

I shall visit Venice.

Buying a ticket is a means implied by my visiting Venice.

Buying a ticket is up to me.

So I shall buy a ticket.

(No doubt you would use less stilted language.) The second and third of these sentences express beliefs of yours. The first and fourth express intentions. You have the belief and the intention to visit Venice when you start your reasoning, and you acquire the intention to buy a ticket in the course of the reasoning. So this reasoning brings you to satisfy the instrumental requirement of rationality.

So reasoning can contribute to your rationality by giving you a means of bringing yourself to satisfy particular requirements of rationality.

See also: PRACTICAL REASONING (31); DELIBERATION AND DECISION (32); AKRASIA AND IRRATIONALITY (35); RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTONOMY (39); ACTION IN HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE (50); THE PREDICTION OF ACTION (51); HUME (63).

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