

Are There Reasons to Be Rational?

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The thesis.

Among people writing about rationality, few people are more rational than Wlodek Rabinowicz. But are there reasons for being rational? This paper explores whether there are, and attempts to defend a limited thesis to the effect that there are reasons to be rational. The thesis that is defended is limited this way: As long as you see reasons as "primitive", and you see normative facts as something that cannot be derived from "rational" facts, then you ought to recognize that among the reasons there are, there are also reasons to be rational.

The dialectical situation.

1. The view that there is no reason to be rational is increasingly popular.¹ The view is, perhaps surprisingly, presented as a consequence of seeing reasons as "primitive". This latter view, that reasons are "primitive", we motivate like this: Some concepts are so central that we cannot account for them properly by using other concepts. Such concepts are "primitive"

¹ Niko Kolodny (Mind 2005) has argued forcefully in support of this no reason for being rational thesis. John Broome used to disagree with it, but is in fact close to endorsing the thesis, as he finds that there are no good arguments against it. Broome still officially holds the view that we ought (in a normative sense) to be rational.

concepts. Many philosophers find that we ought to see the concept "being a reason for" as such a "primitive" concept. This view rejects seeing the concept of reason as derived in some way or other from the concept of rationality. Taking this line, one then has to address the relationship between the concept of reason for and the concept of rationality. It is when you ask whether there is reason to be rational, you seem to be landed with the view that there aren't any, or so it is argued. The framework in which this argument is conducted can be seen as characterized by J. Raz: "**The normativity of all that is normative consists in the way it is, or provides, or is otherwise related to reasons.**"² If there is no reason to be rational, it is not true that we ought (in a (possibly weak) normative sense) to be rational.

There is a different position on reasons that seems to lead what is basically the same conclusion.³ If one instead holds that "ought" is the central normative concept, then one can define the concept of reason as what explains the truth of an ought-statement. The concept of "ought" is then the concept from which we (by using the concept of "explaining") define the concept of "reason". There is something possibly odd here. The oddity is this. The explanans, the item that does the explaining, is then conceptually secondary to the explanandum and defined by it. There will, in that case, be further delicate questions about the theoretically possible situation with an ought-statement one takes to be a true normative statement, but for which there is no reason that can provide an explanation. Should one conclude that there is no true ought statement in this case where there is no explanation? Does the lack of an explanans mean that we are mistaken about the explanandum; mistaken in thinking

² J. Raz. **Engaging Reason**, OUP, Oxford, 1999.p. 67.

³ This seems to be John Broome's present position.

here is ought-statement that is normative? There is, in this case, at least nothing automatic about the inference from the lack of an explanation to us being mistaken about the actual existence of explanandum as long as this explanandum is conceptually prior to the explanans. We cannot as a rule let a concept (the concept of a reason) which in this particular case is to be seen as secondary to the central normative concept, a concept which itself is to be illuminated for its content by the concept of normative ought statements, determine the extension of the conceptually prior concept (the central normative concept of "ought"). We simply cannot assume that all ought-statements need explanations of this specific sort. Indeed, it would be very natural that some of them do not. At least, it seems to me, we cannot assume that they do and at the same time reject the thesis that the normativity of all that is normative consists in the way it is, or provides, or is otherwise related to reasons. In fact, this latter thesis seems needed to make direct inferences about the lack of normativity from an observed a lack of explanation by a reason. I shall not discuss further this position on the relationship between "ought" and the concept of a reason.

This paper argues, as announced, that there is reason to be rational. I shall argue that there is always some reason to be rational even if one's conception of rationality is such that not everything counts in favour of being rational. This, I claim, holds as long as one's view of rationality is well motivated. I shall also aim to throw light on what goes wrong when one is led to the view that there is no reason to be rational.

In the course of doing this, I shall maintain that the conception of reasons against which this problem about whether there are reasons for being rational is set, goes naturally with two fairly stable conceptions of

rationality. There is reason to be rational on both of these (relative to the conception of reason) well motivated and stable conceptions of rationality. I cannot really rule out other conception of rationality, but there grounds for thinking that they might be in tension with the view of reasons that is the point of departure of this paper is accepted.

The set-up: Normative requirements and requirements of rationality.

2. In order to get a good hold on this issue, let us begin by noting that it also can be seen as the issue of whether the requirements of rationality are genuine normative requirements. We need to be very clear in our conception of what it takes to be a normative requirements as opposed to a non-normative ought-statement and also about what it takes to be a requirement of rationality.

A true ought statement about what we should do, is a normative statement. Typically normative requirements are requirements that are capable of being weighed against each other. We can often tell whether a requirement is genuinely normative, but we cannot provide a neutral, non-normative way of identifying them. Maybe we have to rest content with this identification of the normative. But remember that we must have a generous or liberal conception of the normative in place in order to get the problem of this paper going. A terminology, employed by John Broome, is that if you ought to F because X, then there is a reason for you to F. The existence of a reason is entailed by the truth of the sentence containing the "because". This reason might be a sufficient reason; in that case the existence of this reason by necessity makes it the case that you should F. A weaker type of reason (pro tanto reason) provides a consideration of favour of F-ing. The thesis to be defended here is the

weak thesis that when rationality requires you to F, then there is some reason for you F. This formulation is neutral on what sort of reason we are dealing with (sufficient or pro tanto). This is a weak claim.

In order to make any progress with out main question, we also need to determine what the real requirements of rationality are. This can be done in quite different ways. The perhaps simplest way is by providing a list of reasonable candidates. If we simply list what strikes us as reasonable, we aim to stay close to an ordinary or everyday conception of rationality. But this conception of rationality might, philosophically speaking, be mixture of various concerns. If our question is going to be the question of whether there is, by necessity, some reason to do what rationality requires, and the conception of reason we employ in asking the question is a philosophically informed conception, then there might be mismatches between this conception of reason and the "list" conception of rationality. We should at least aim for a list about which there is little or no dispute.

Let us take a brief look at candidates for the list. One of the requirements on such a list might be that rationality requires of us that we do not believe contradictions. This seems an obvious candidate. Another requirement could state that we should, when it matters to us, believe the logical consequences of what we believe, another could require of us to intend to F when we believe we ought to do F. This candidate seems more easily disputable than the first. I shall explain why later in this paper when I discuss problems concern the notion of "mattering". Let me for the moment stress that these suggested requirements are candidates only. Both requirements are suggested by John Broome. (Gil Harman first suggested the last of them). There will be many candidates for such a list, and it really is not all that clear how we should proceed when deciding

about whether something should belong on the list. The list eventually takes on the shape of a view about rationality. However, there is no such thing as a philosophically neutral common sense view of rationality, and no way such a list will be undisputed. When addressing the main issue in this paper, we need a clear view on rationality. How do we make progress?

3. We could see rationality as deriving from what is thought of as core requirements. That would provide criteria for being on the list. One candidate for such core requirements is that we should have the attitudes we believe we have conclusive reason to have. This seems to be Niko Kolodny's view. This would make rationality very subjective indeed. One would need to explicate the philosophical point of deriving rationality from exactly these very core subjective requirements. More importantly, if the requirements of rationality all derive from beliefs we have about what reasons we have, then it seems quite obvious that there is a possibility that there will not necessarily be a reason to do what rationality requires of us. Remember that reasons are taken to exist independently of what reasons we think exist. Our beliefs about what reasons there are might be mistaken. If that were the case, then there would not be a reason even if we believed so. Rationality would in that case deliver seeming reasons, and that only. That is what rationality can deliver, according to Kolodny.

The presumably undisputed list of requirements that does not start from core requirements will come out differently. Typically such lists make up more of a mixed bag, as does our beginning of a list above. Some of the candidates for being on the list state relationships between what we believe (or indirectly believe) about reasons (or about what we ought to

do) and what attitudes we should have. Such requirements might inherit some of the problems mentioned above, stemming from the obvious fact that our beliefs about reasons might be false. A way out of this might then be to insist that all requirements of rationality have wide scope. There are some problems in maintaining this general view about rationality requirements but I shall not here go into these.

The simplest of the requirements on the supposedly undisputed list requires of us that we do not believe contradictions. Such a requirement requires things of us way beyond our beliefs. We would be in breach of this requirement if we actually believed a contradiction, even if we did not believe that we believed a contradiction. This type of requirement, that we do not believe contradictions, is therefore substantive in a quite significant way. Requirements that build from our beliefs about what we have reason to believe, could not demand the same of us.

It seems to me that the list conception must be supplemented with a formulation of a conception of the point of rationality. Such a point would serve as a criterion for being on the list, and might be used directly in order to decide on whether there are reasons for being rational.

Two conceptions of rationality.

4. Rationality is normative if it follows by necessity that if rationality requires you to F, there is some reason to F. This is the thesis I shall try to establish. I shall now distinguish two conceptions of the point of rationality, a broad (or maximalist), or a narrow (and minimalist). Both are, I would claim, natural candidates for a conception of rationality relative to an objectivist (or "primitivist") conception of reason. I shall

proceed to argue that there is reason to be rational both on a maximalist and a minimalist conception of rationality.

On a maximalist conception of rationality, rationality consists in responding correctly to all the reasons there are. Since this is the point of rationality, it clearly follows that there is reason to F if that, (F-ing), is what rationality requires of us. This conception of rationality requires much of us. But it is in no way automatic, on this conception of rationality and reasons, that we are irrational if we fail to be rational. Irrationality might be much more limited; it might consist in specific sub-types of failures in relation to what we believe rationality requires of us. Not rational does not necessarily mean irrational.

Someone might argue against this maximal conception of rationality the following way: On some occasion there might be reasons for you to F, but through no fault of your own you do not believe there any such reasons. You will then not respond properly to the reasons by F-ing. This failure, it might be claimed, cannot be a failure of your rationality as long as there was no fault of your own.

This argument seems very close to being directly question begging. It assumes the thesis that you cannot respond properly or rationally to reasons unless you believe those reasons exist. That thesis, however, cannot be assumed against a conception of rationality as the proper response to the reasons there are. There are several elements to this. Part of the proper response to the reasons there are will be the cognitive response of coming to hold the beliefs you ought to hold about what reasons there are. It seems clear that this element in this conception of reasons does not go well together with the assumption that you can only

respond properly or rationally to reasons you believe exist. A conception of rationality that sees rationality as consisting in proper responses to independently existing reasons cannot at the same time limit rationality to responses to those among the reasons you are aware of. That limitation is simply not available to this particular conception of rationality in this setting.⁴

5. The conception of rationality as proper response to all the reasons there are, is therefore a conception of rationality that cannot in any way accept a limitation like the one above, the limitation to the reasons you believe there are. But in order to reject this limitation to what we believe to be reasons, it is not required that we adopt a maximalist conception of rationality. We should reject this limitation under all circumstances as long as we hold that reasons exists independently of what we believe about reasons. A minimalist conception of rationality sees the requirements of rationality as amounting to little more than the requirements of reasoning, requiring that you obey the laws of logic and so on and so forth. However, this view, this minimalist conception of rationality, cannot be seen as amounting to requiring of us that we respond only to what we believe the laws of logic are. The content of the requirement must go beyond that.

6. Let us then focus on the minimalist conception of rationality. I see this as a conception of rationality that connects requirements of rationality and requirements of reasoning and reduce the former to the latter. The

⁴ It seems to me that the limitation in question is more plausible if one were to concentrate on choosing between alternative physical actions. But that way of limiting rationality seems ad hoc.

latter can, if you like, be seen as process-requirements, requirements upon us for reasoning correctly. Let us ignore the discussions about the kind (state-requirements versus process-requirements) of requirements we are dealing with here. In order for such requirements of reasoning to have any bite, we must formulate reasoning requirements as containing some objective requirements as to what correct reasoning is. A commitment to avoid contradictions must be just that, not a commitment to avoid what we take (or believe) to be contradictions. If we let subjectivity loose here at this point, it would make all reasoning-requirements relative to what the subject believes is good reasoning. That would be going too far towards subjectivism. We need to characterize simple rules for how to operate on contents, and build from there. One simple such rule is to avoid believing contradictions. Presumably we need to bring in more complex rules, at least amounting to the rules of first-order predicate logic, and probably we should go much beyond this as well.

What then do the work in specifying rules of reasoning would be facts about correct logic or reasoning. Focussing on the former, we might say that what reasoning requires of us is that we be responsive to logical reasons. Such reasons are provided by the logical facts. The possibility of missing the responsiveness to the logical reasons is what Lewis Carroll made us aware of.

Logical reasons and normativity.

7. We see that what we achieve by the restriction of the requirements of rationality to requirements upon reasoning is a much slimmer approach to rationality. We still cannot achieve a reduction of rationality to what we believe to be rational. That would not necessarily be rationality. We can,

in the light of this point, rephrase the question of whether there would always, by necessity, be a reason to satisfy a requirement upon reasoning. The answer is yes; there would at least be a logical reason.

Then the issue then becomes whether logical reasons are normative reasons. They are if they interact with other normative reasons in making true a normative all things considered judgement about what we ought to do. And there is some reason to think they do exactly this.

In order to bring this out, let us look at this assumed central requirement of rationality (introduced in a related formulation by Gil Harman and defended in this formulation by John Broome), and let us consider what sort of requirement this is:

Rationality requires of N that if N believes that p, and N believes that if p then q, and it matters to N whether q, then N believes that q.

This requirement introduces the notion of "mattering" in the formulation of the requirement. The issue I will discuss is, of course, how to understand this "mattering". Is it a normative type of mattering? The requirement says that rationality requires of you that you form the beliefs that are the consequences of the beliefs you hold already, but only when it **matters to you** that you do form these beliefs. Think of the "mattering" as being non-normative. Imagine that you are just very keen on believing the consequences of what you believe. Therefore it matters to you – it is a taste you have; you like this so much. Another possibility is that you have a different taste; believing the consequences of your beliefs do not matter to you in the least, you could not care less about believing consequences.

Thinking about this, we see that something is not right. The mattering cannot just be a matter of taste. In that case, there would be instances of liking or not liking believing consequences that are not really compatible with rationality when taken into the extreme. This consideration might, in that case, be taken to show that the suggested requirement of rationality is not a proper rationality-requirement at all.

In order to make progress here, let us inquire further about this requirement, defended by Broome, from the standpoint of the two conceptions of rationality I have indicated above. The minimal conception took rationality to be concerned with logical reasons. But there are no logical reasons not to believe the logical consequences of what you believe already. On this minimal conception of rationality, the suggested requirement cannot be a requirement of rationality. And, we have established, it is not a matter of taste. The mattering must be normative.

Let us instead approach to issue from the viewpoint of the maximal conception of rationality. This conception of rationality might be inclined to say that we should some times hold back on working out all the logical consequences of what we believe and instead spend our time doing more important things. This seems to imply that this is what there is most reason to do in those cases, and that this, in turn, is what is rational. It is therefore required of us that we are responsive to logical reasons, but we should always weigh this responsiveness towards logical reasons against responsiveness to all the reasons of quite different sorts, and in such weighing, the non-logical reasons can often win out in case of conflict. This weighing shows, also on this view, that the "mattering" in Broome's formulation hides what is in fact straight normative weighing. There is no

question about whether or not we ought to be moved by logical reason at all, but there are questions about the extent to which they ought to matter in concrete cases of weighing. Questions about how we should weigh various reasons against each other constitute the life of normative reasons. If this is right, then the logical reasons are normative reasons, and Broome's requirement is understood and appreciated on that background. (Of course, we must hasten to add, there are complex questions about how we weigh various types of reason against each other. This is true: It is extremely difficult to see how we should weigh prudential reasons against moral reasons. Those two types of reasons are undisputedly normative. The situation with logical or epistemic reasons weighed against moral reasons seems to me to exhibit a parallel of sorts.)

8. The important point for me is that the same point about weighing can be maintained both on the minimalist and on the maximalist conception of rationality. True, the weighing itself would be conceived of as different on the different conceptions. On the minimalist conception it would be a weighing where the logical reasons, or the "rational ought", would be weighed against other oughts, something which should result in an all things considered ought about what you ought to do.

The upshot is this on this minimalist conception of rationality: The requirements upon reasoning should never be restricted by whether reasoning "matters" to you. The "mattering" is always external to the requirements of reasoning. The only thing that matters for satisfying the requirements of reasoning is the reasoning's correctness. Other things matter, but they are not requirements upon reasoning or rationality. They matter normatively. Accepting the requirement Broome has suggested is therefore not compatible with seeing the requirements of rationality as the

requirements of reasoning. It therefore suggests that accepting a formulation like Broome's for a rational requirement requires a more substantive notion of rationality than a minimalist conception.

Apart from this, both conceptions of rationality, the maximalist and the minimalist, would hold that there is indeed by necessity some sort of reason that counts in favour of what rationality requires. The point is obvious on the maximalist conception, but also quite obvious on the minimalist conception. In the latter case this reason can in concrete cases be weighed against other reasons, resulting in an all things considered ought. Since the conception of rationality is quite limited, one would have to think of this as weighing some normative concerns against other concerns. Both conceptions of rationality therefore support our main view of the relationship between the rational and the normative: There are reasons for being rational. This is brought out when we formulate conceptions of rationality, and use them both to assess whether specific requirements are rationality-requirements, and to assess whether there are reasons to be rational.

But does not rationality only concern relations between mental states?

9. Many people hold that the maximally substantive conception of rationality cannot be right because rationality concerns relations between our mental states, not relations between our mental states and externally existing reasons. Let us pause here and consider the content of this claim in some detail. Does it add anything to our considerations above about the conceptions of rationality above? The view of the mental at work this question needs to be looked at, not least because the rational and the

mental are intimately bound up with each other. The question could, in our context, become the question of what view of the mental goes naturally with the view on reasons we are presupposing.

Let me start in another end. If one were to hold that rationality concerns relations between mental states, and that only, one should also take great care in specifying precisely one's conception of mental states. One should for instance consider how the explanatory relations between different types of mental states ought to go in the preferred theoretical account of mental states. If the mental state of knowledge is the most central of the cognitive mental states, it is indeed natural that rationality should be seen as organizing the sphere of the mental from what we know.⁵ One's conception of knowledge would in that case naturally be externalist; at least one would not reduce knowledge to justified true belief. Among the things we know, much would also be of a normative nature: knowledge of reasons. On this background it might be right to hold that rationality in a way concern relations between mental states like belief and desire and externally existing reasons on the one side and actions on the other. The relation to externally existing reason would flow from the factive and externalist nature of knowledge and the use of knowledge in the account of belief and desire. The view that rational requirements always have wide scope, is a view that is naturally motivated by the point that it is never the case that we ought to have false beliefs.⁶ How do we defend the latter point? If one sees rationality as organizing our mental states, then the view that it is never the case that you ought to have false beliefs is a view that is natural when you let knowledge be the central mental state, and the starting point for the rational organization of the mental.

⁵ This view could be seen as a variety of a Tim Williamson-type view of the mental.

⁶ The view mentioned seem to be John Broome's view.

10. Let me take stock again. I have indicated a maximal and a minimal conception of rationality. The maximal sees the point of rationality as responding correctly to all the reasons there are. The minimal conception of rationality sees the requirements rationality as amounting to just the requirements upon reasoning proper. Both these conceptions of rationality see rationality as normative.

Both these conceptions of rationality also see the point of rationality as responding correctly to reasons. The difference between these conceptions is that the minimal conception restricts rationality to the reasons bound up with the reasoning requirements. This maximalist conception recognizes no such limitation.

It might be said that we should restrict rationality to relations between our mental states. But it does in no way follow from that point alone that we should restrict rationality to what we believe these relations are or should be. The latter is not necessarily recognizable as rationality at all. We need in any case to have a sound conception of mental states in order to know our way around at this point. It is unlikely that those who believe in external, primitively given reasons, should not let these reasons play a decisive role in their philosophical account of the nature of mental states. They would possibly achieve that by organizing the mental around knowledge and in particular knowledge of reasons. On such a conception, rationality might have its point in responding correctly to reasons in thought and action, either to the whole set of reasons, or to some subset; i.e. the subset of reasons that correlate the instructions about how to organize the mental field if it is to be recognizable as the mental. Rationality would be the servant of knowledge. In that case, the

introduction of considerations about the relationship between rationality and the mental does not really bring anything distinctly new to the debate about whether there are reasons for being rational.

Conclusion

11. Of course it is possible that there might be ways I have not considered of motivating a view of rationality which is such that it implies that there need not be reasons for being rational. Let me just note that it seems at present somewhat unlikely that such a view of rationality would go naturally with an objectivist "primitivist" conception of reasons. The general conclusion is therefore that the conception of reasons as "primitive" and objective, and not as derived from rationality, should not be combined with a view of rationality that does not connect the rational and reasons in such a way that, by necessity, if rationality requires us to do F, there is a reason for doing F. If one ends up with a different result, one's view of rationality is possibly faulty, or at least in tension with the conception of the relationship between reasons and rationality one ought to hold. If one takes reasons as primitives, one should think that there is always some reason that counts in favour of being rational.

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