

RATIONALITY
THROUGH
REASONING

JOHN BROOME

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Rationality Through Reasoning

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Rationality Through Reasoning

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For Derek Parfit

Preface

Long ago, Derek Parfit generously asked me to respond to a paper of his in a symposium at the 1997 Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association. Writing my response was the beginning of my work on the subject of this book. Traditionally, the two papers in a symposium were published in the *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* under the same title. But sharp-eyed readers may have noticed that, whereas Parfit's paper was entitled 'Reasons and motivation', mine was entitled 'Reason and motivation'. By that time, I had already concluded that rational motivation was less about reasons than many philosophers assume, and more about figuring out by reason what you ought to do and then coming through reason to do it.

The last stage brings a difficulty. If you come through reason to do a particular act, reason supports your doing it. But how could it support your doing an act unless it is one you ought to do? And it might not be one you ought to do; even if you have figured out by reason that you ought to do this act, you may have made a mistake. A solution came to me as I walked along Dag Hammarskjölds väg in Uppsala, one snowy day early in 1998. I was in Uppsala on the first of several long visits to the Swedish Collegium of Advanced Study. SCAS has always been exceptionally generous to me and given me the very best opportunities for working. Each visit has advanced my work on the subject of this book. That first time I realized that, when you come through reason to act, reason need not support your acting simpliciter. Instead, reason – rationality – requires of you that, if you believe you ought to do something, you do it. The condition is within the scope of what reason requires. Reason supports your making the conditional true, not your acting. This insight that the requirement of rationality has a 'wide scope' was not original; I soon discovered that Jonathan Dancy had mentioned it twenty years earlier in his paper 'The logical conscience'. But it provided a foundation for this book. Later, a long correspondence with Niko Kolodny helped me to refine it.

Through the following years I slowly disentangled some of the relevant concepts. First, I disentangled rationality from normativity in general. Many

philosophers think of rationality as a sort of enforcer for normativity: it is your rationality that makes you do what you have a reason to do, or at least what you believe you have a reason to do. I now think that rationality is much less tightly connected with normativity than that. Second, I disentangled reasoning, which is something a person does, from rationality, which is a property of a person and her mental states. During these developments, I benefited from many discussions with those of my research students who were interested in aspects of the subject: first Andrew Riesner and later Julian Fink, Stephen Kearns, Yair Levy, James Morauta, Toby Ord, and Gerard Vong.

The last five years of my work on the book have mainly been occupied with trying to understand reasoning. My account of reasoning has gone through several revolutions, each correcting an initial mistake of mine. At first I was deceived by a similarity between the contents of instrumental practical reasoning and the contents of theoretical reasoning by *modus ponens*. I thought that the two were somehow fused together. I have now concluded that their similarity is only superficial. A second mistake was to assume that, when reasoning is correct, it is made correct by requirements of rationality. I now realize that reasoning is made correct by permissions, not requirements. Correct reasoning is not reasoning you are required to do by rationality, but reasoning you are permitted to do by rationality. This seems intuitively obvious, but I understood it properly only as a result of facing up to an objection to my previous account of reasoning that was shown me by Kieran Setiya. A third mistake was to assume that reasoning – at least when it is conscious and something we do – has to be conducted in language. This may be true, but a discussion with Paul Boghossian persuaded me it is best not to assume it. Boghossian also made me realize I should take more seriously the well-known difficulties of rule-following, which are associated with my view that reasoning is a rule-governed operation.

I gave three Blackwell-Brown Lectures in 2003. I was honoured to receive the invitation. This book exists because of it. The lectures drew together my work up to that point. It turned out to be an earlier point in the development of the book than either I or my publishers had anticipated. Still, from then on I possessed a draft book.

I have been honoured by subsequent invitations that have given me the opportunity to garner advice from philosophers in different parts of the world. I want to mention three in particular. First, I gave four Wedberg Lectures in Stockholm in 2004, where I benefited from the commentary of the four excellent discussants, Lars Bergström, Torbjörn Tännsjö, Folke Tersman and Åsa Wikforss. Second, there was a conference on my work in Canberra in 2007, with valuable papers from Geoffrey Brennan, Garrett Cullity, James Dreier, Andrew Reisner, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Nicholas Southwood and Daniel Star.

Third, I gave two Whitehead Lectures at Harvard in 2011, where again I received very useful comments.

Many institutions have supported me with their generosity during the long writing of this book. I have mentioned SCAS already. My visits there have alternated with visits to the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Any philosopher who has spent time at the RSSH knows what wonderful stimulation is to be found there. My home universities – first St Andrews and now Oxford – have been very kind with the leave they granted me from teaching. For a whole three years, my research on this book was funded by a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust. Not only did the Trust finance me for all that time, but it has shown remarkable forbearance during the subsequent years while the book remained unfinished. I do hope it will think the result is worth the wait.

I have to express ironical thanks to another institution: the UK Research Excellence Framework. The REF is stupid in some ways. It demands that philosophy should have a demonstrable impact on society within fifteen years, whereas the actual impact of philosophy on society is wide and deep but takes decades or centuries to develop. However, the REF did have the merit of setting me a deadline. For its sake, this book had to go to press by the end of 2012. It went, with all the imperfections it still contains. I could have worked much longer on trying to eliminate each one. I am pleased I did not, and now I can even blame them on the REF.

Over the years I have been helped by a great number of philosophers who gave me their time. I am not adequately acknowledging my debts simply by including them in the great long list below. Many have sent me extensive comments and continued to do so for years. But when so many have helped me to a greater or lesser extent, what else can I do? I am worried, too, that I have probably forgotten to list some people whose contribution has been important. If you are one of those, please forgive my lapse of memory.

I have already mentioned Derek Parfit, who started me on this track, influenced the turnings I took, and also near the end sent me long comments about the whole book. Parfit's own work was the stimulus for mine. Several chapters of my book implicitly or explicitly engage with it. I often obstinately disagree with Parfit, but I hope he will recognize that I am much more on his side than against it. Really, he has always been my mentor.

I have also already mentioned my students at Oxford. I have learnt a great deal from them, and some have taken the trouble to comment extensively on my writing. More senior friends and colleagues, with whom I have had many conversations about topics in this book, include Gustaf Arrhenius, Michael Bratman, Geoffrey Brennan, Krister Bykvist, Roger Crisp, Jonathan Dancy, Brad Hooker, Douglas MacLean, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Nicholas Southwood, John Skorupski and Ralph Wedgwood.

I know of several philosophers besides Parfit and my students who have read drafts of the whole book and sent me comments. They include Josée Brunet, Roger Crisp, Garrett Cullity, Mark Schroeder and Ralph Wedgwood. Each has contributed greatly. I must mention Brunet in particular. She spent a year in Oxford, during which she worked carefully through my draft and regularly gave me thoughtful advice. She was a great help.

Now the great long list. Besides those I have mentioned already, each of the following philosophers has helped me, mostly through written comments. Some have helped me a great deal: Norbert Anwander, Nomy Arpaly, Robert Audi, Dennis Badenhop, Thomas Baldwin, Sophie Botros, Selim Berker, John Bishop, Sarah Broadie, Anne Burkard, Erik Carlson, Ruth Chang, Matthew Chrisman, Ursula Coope, Louis deRosset, Malte Engel, Pascal Engel, David Estlund, Daan Evers, Nancy Cartwright, Garrett Cullity, Bill Child, Janice Dowell, Gerald Dworkin, Edward Elliot, Kit Fine, Antonio Gaitán-Torres, Jan Gertken, Margaret Gilbert, Katrin Glüer-Pagin, Kalle Grill, Dorothy Grover, Olav Gjelsvik, Caspar Hare, Anandi Hattiangadi, Tim Henning, Pamela Hieronymi, John Horty, Kent Hurtig, Nadeem Hussain, John Hyman, Benedikt Kahmen, Benjamin Kiesewetter, Christine Korsgaard, Richard Kraut, Arto Laitinen, Daniel Laurier, Leon Leontyev, Micah Lewin, Sten Lindström, Christian List, Errol Lord, John Maier, Julia Markowits, Cynthia MacDonald, Graham MacDonald, David McCarthy, Adam Morton, Kevin Mulligan, Jennifer Nagel, Carsten Nielsen, Sven Nyholm, Jonas Olson, Peter Pagin, Herlinde Pauer-Studer, Adam Perry, Philip Pettit, Christian Piller, Eugen Pissarskoi, Andreas Pittrich, Dag Prawitz, Robert Pulvertaft, Joseph Raz, Henry Richardson, Michael Ridge, Simon Robertson, Jacob Ross, Abe Roth, Kieran Setiya, Nicholas Shackel, Thomas Schmidt, Oliver Schott, François and Laura Schroeter, Nick Shea, Peter Simons, Holly Smith, Michael Smith, Nicholas Smith, Daniel Star, Daniel Stoljar, Bart Streumer, Jussi Suikkanen, Pär Sundström, Sigrun Svarvasdottir, Lucas Swaine, Sergio Tennenbaum, Judith Thomson, Teru Thomas, Valerie Tiberius, John Turri, Gijs van Donselaar, Bruno Verbeek, Jay Wallace, Clas Weber, David Wiggins, Dominic Wilkinson, Stephen Winter and Michael Zimmerman.

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I am especially grateful to my wife Ann for her forbearance. She has now patiently sat out the writing of seven books.

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Introduction

1.1 Motivation

When you believe you ought to do something, your belief often causes you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. How does that happen? I call this ‘the motivation question’. I shall try to answer it in this book.

It is also true that, when you believe you ought to do something, your belief often causes you actually to do it. We could also ask how that happens. This question raises the mind–body problem. When you believe you ought to do some bodily act, and this belief causes you to do the act, a state of your mind causes a physical movement. One part of the mind–body problem is to understand how a state of mind can have a physical effect like that. I wish to set this problem aside, and I do that by focusing on your intention rather than your action. The motivation question is about your mind only. When your belief causes you to intend to act, your intention will in turn generally cause you to act, but that is not my concern.

The motivation question has an easy answer: most people are disposed to intend to do what they believe they ought to do, perhaps not every time, but often. They have the ‘enkratic disposition’, as I shall call it. This is a genuine answer to the question, and correct as far as it goes. It has a real content. It tells us that the explanation of why you often intend to do what you believe you ought to do lies within you: you are constituted that way. We can no doubt add that you have this disposition as a result of natural selection.

However, this easy answer is very thin. It leaves a lot to be explained. How does the enkratic disposition work, exactly? In what way does it bring about its effect?

One possible answer is that some causal process within people, whose details have no philosophical interest, tends to make them intend to do what they believe they ought to do. But this answer is unsatisfying. Some people have the enkratic disposition more strongly than others, and some may not

have it at all; some are strongly disposed to intend to do what they believe they ought to do, and others are not. We can classify people accordingly. Let us call the ones who have the disposition strongly 'sheep', and the others 'goats'. Unless we are Calvinists, we shall not be satisfied with merely classifying people. We should expect it to be at least partly up to people themselves whether they are goats or sheep. We should expect that people by their own efforts can actually bring themselves to intend to do what they believe they ought to do. And we should be able to explain how they can do so. It is not enough to say it just happens because of some causal process within them.

Rationality and reasoning

We can call in rationality to help answer the motivation question. We can say that rationality requires people to intend to do what they believe they ought to do, and that it requires them to be disposed to do so – to have the enkratic disposition. No doubt this is true, and it follows that the goats are not fully rational. This is a criticism to throw at the goats, but it is still 'merely classificatory', to use Thomas Nagel's term.¹ It gives us an explanation of why rational people are disposed to intend to do what they believe they ought to do, which is that they would not be classified as rational if they did not. But it gives us no explanation of how, in rational people, this disposition works.

In *Ethics and the A Priori*, Michael Smith undertakes 'to explain how it can be that our beliefs about what we are rationally justified in doing play a proper causal role in the genesis of our actions'.² (Smith is interested in desires rather than intentions.) His explanation is that

In rational creatures . . . we would . . . expect there to be a causal connection between believing that it is desirable to act in a certain way and desiring to act in that way. . . . For the psychological states of rational deliberators and thinkers connect with each other in just the way that they rationally should.³

But this does not explain how our beliefs play a proper causal role in the genesis of our actions. It explains only why rational creatures are causally disposed to act in ways they believe are desirable. The explanation is that otherwise they would not count as rational.

Elsewhere, Smith mentions 'the capacity we have, as rational creatures, to have a coherent psychology'.⁴ This is getting somewhere. Exercising a capacity is something we do; it does not just happen. So Smith is suggesting that we

may ourselves bring it about that we desire to do what we believe we ought to do. But we still need to be told how we do that.

Calling in rationality is definitely a step towards the explanation we are looking for. It points us towards reasoning. We know that people have a particular means of coming to satisfy some of the requirements of rationality, and that is reasoning. Reasoning is something we do. It is a mental activity of ours that can bring us to satisfy some of the requirements of rationality.

For example, suppose you believe it is raining and that if it is raining the snow will melt. Plausibly, rationality requires you to believe what follows by *modus ponens* from beliefs of yours – in this case that the snow will melt – at least if you care about what follows. Suppose you do care whether the snow will melt; perhaps you are planning to ski today. But suppose you do not yet believe the snow will melt. (You have just woken up. You have noticed the rain, and you know that rain causes snow to melt, but you have not yet thought about the snow.) So at present you do not satisfy this requirement of rationality. But you can bring yourself to satisfy it by undertaking a process of reasoning. This process will set out from your initial beliefs and it will conclude with your believing the snow will melt. In doing this reasoning you are mentally active, and you bring yourself to satisfy a requirement of rationality.

Now suppose you believe you ought to oil that squeaky hinge. I have already assumed that rationality requires you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. You can bring yourself to satisfy this requirement, too, by a process of reasoning. The process will start from your initial belief that you ought to oil that squeaky hinge and conclude with your intending to do so. So reasoning can bring you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do.

Your ability to reason constitutes part of your *enkratic* disposition. No doubt you often intend to do what you believe you ought to do automatically, without reasoning. But this does not always happen automatically, and when automatic processes fail, sometimes you achieve the result through the activity of reasoning. I call this type of reasoning ‘*enkratic reasoning*’.

We have arrived at a more interesting answer to the motivation question. You have an *enkratic* disposition, and this disposition sometimes works through the philosophically interesting process. This process is *enkratic reasoning*, which is something you do. You have the ability to bring yourself, through reasoning, to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. I hope to justify this answer.

In one way, it is a very attractive answer to the motivation question, because it tells us that we can motivate ourselves by our own activity. But many moral philosophers will find it unattractive in a different way.⁵ In moral contexts, these philosophers think a truly virtuous person does what she believes she