

RATIONALITY, RATIONALIZATION AND JUSTIFICATION

If a worth-while discussion of any topic, philosophical or non-philosophical, has to be rational, then the one about rationality should also obviously be. But then in discussing rationally what one considers to be the nature of rationality, the discussant would perhaps unavoidably be also *using*, in the discussion, his notion or understanding of rationality. Perhaps on this account, though not *only* on this account, some circularity is very likely to creep in his discussion. I shall not, therefore, be surprised if someone accuses the reasoning presented in this paper of being circular, though the reason of my saying all this is not to procure an anticipatory bail.

Perhaps some kind of circularity is bound to creep in the logical analysis of any basic concept. This is not a misfortune to be lamented over because reasoning in a circle is unilluminating only if the circle is really very small. Just as we do cover distance when we move in a big spatial circle and may not come back in our life-time to the point we started from, we can make philosophical progress if the conceptual circle we move in is not too small.

Though rationality is talked about mostly by philosophers, it does not seem to be a peculiarly philosophical concept in the sense that it is copiously used or referred to by common people in their normal transactions. Using my intuitions about, or understanding of, the meaning of rationality as ordinarily or commonsensically understood, I shall first try to characterize the condi-

tions which, when fulfilled by a person, would entitle him to be called a rational person. I would do this and not discuss the notion of rationality abstractly because this procedure seems to be a better way to handle even the abstract notion of rationality. But even if that is not true, I prefer it because it offers me the hope of serving the interests of this paper better than the latter.

To be rational, one must, it seems to me, have the concept of rationality. To have or possess a concept is to have the ability to conceptually behave in a certain manner in an appropriate situation. The latter does not necessarily mean the ability to analyse the concept, rather the exhibition of the ability to use the concept provides the data which a sound analysis has to take into account or against which it has to be checked. Philosophers analyse the concept of rationality but it is not that they alone possess it, nor that all those who possess it are philosophers.

To possess the concept of rationality is to be able to recognise (a) when something is a reason for something else and (b) what are one's conceptual or logical liabilities or responsibilities when he admits or acknowledges that something is a reason for something else.

(a) Everything is not a reason for everything else and everything may not have a reason. But there are things for which reasons exist. That I like strong coffee may be a reason for my going to a restaurant where it is available and not any reason for my going to the restaurant with a fur cap on my head, and there may be no reason for my wearing a fur cap while going to the restaurant for a strong cup of coffee. To have the concept of rationality is to have the ability to distinguish between reasons and non-reasons in one's own as well as in others' cases, and also to be able to distinguish between weak and strong, worse and better, reasons. There may be a situation in which he himself is

not able to provide a reason, but he must be able to identify whether or not the one offered by another person is, or whether it is better or worse reason than another offered by someone else or available to him from his own resources.

(b) To recognise or admit that R is a reason for A is not a blank admission in the sense that one cannot remain unaffected by the admission. Suppose R is a good reason for A and A is a proposition or a factual claim. Then by admitting that there is a good reason for A one incurs the liability or responsibility to accept or believe that A. Not to do so would make him irrational and would entitle us to call him irrational. In fact, if we do not call him irrational, then we would become irrational. It is irrational not to call a man irrational who does not accept as true the proposition that A while admitting that there is a good reason R certifying that A is true

Whether or not one accepts A to be true, when he accepts that there is a good reason for its being true, is independent of his interests as well as of the effects of accepting that A. A rational person would accept that A even if doing that adversely affects any of his interests or is likely to have some favourable or adverse effect for someone else. Similarly, a rational spectator would call him irrational (or rational, as the case may be) without caring for the effects of his doing so. If a person does not arouse a feeling of trust in me, I would not call him trustworthy, but if he admits as true what he has a reason to, I would call him rational without caring for the feeling his doing that, or my calling him rational, is or is not likely to arouse in me. In this sense rationality is a rational, cognitive, non-subjective, concept.

To say that a rational person accepts as true what he has a reason to does not mean or imply that he never does the contrary. It simply means, as already said, that he has the liability or responsibility to do that. Just as one may fail to

fulfil some of his responsibilities in other walks of life, he may fail to fulfil some of his responsibilities as a rational person. This is only to say that one may sometimes be irrational, and when he is, it is irrational to treat it as a miracle. But all this does not mean that one can nonchalantly *choose* to be rational by accepting that A or irrational by rejecting it. The admission that there is a good reason for A exercises a coercive influence in the sense that one feels committed to accept that A; it becomes one of his responsibilities to accept that A. If, on the other hand, he does not feel the coercive influence, he would be rationally obtuse and not just irrational. But if he feels it but due to some non-rational factor does not do what as a rational person he should have done, he is irrational.

If A is an action and R a good reason for doing it or deciding to do it, then again to accept that R is a good reason and not to do A would be irrational. Here also one incurs a liability or responsibility to do A by admitting there is a good reason for doing it. But the passage from one's admitting or acknowledging that there is a good reason for (deciding to do A or) doing A to doing A is not without any gap. The time for doing A may not have arrived, or some internal or external factor may stand in the way of his doing it, etc. But the rational person must feel inclined or prepared to do A; otherwise either his acknowledgment that there is a good reason for doing A, or his rationality, is not genuine. A rational person may, therefore, have a good reason to do A and still may not do it without becoming irrational, but he must be prepared or inclined to do it. However, if there is no hindrance, internal or external, to his doing it, then he cannot remain rational if he does not do A at an appropriate time and place while still admitting that there is a good reason for doing it.

To acknowledge that one has a reason for accepting that A is a proposition, is to have, thus, a pro-attitude towards accepting

its truth. It is this attitude which can properly be called a propositional attitude. Similarly, if A is an action, to admit there is a reason for doing it is to have a pro-attitude towards doing it. As any attitude is a disposition, it need not be actualised, i. e., find expression in actual action of the relevant kind if all or some of the necessary conditions of its actualisation have not been satisfied. But it seems to me that one who admits the existence of a reason for doing A and also denies having any pro-attitude or inclination towards doing it cannot be said to have the concept of rationality in a full-blooded sense; that is, we cannot call him a rational person. He, in fact, does not know what does it mean to admit or acknowledge the existence of a reason for doing something.

A reason for an action may be conceived as independently intelligible as well as intelligible only in relation to the agent of action. In the former sense it is simply a reason for the action. For example, one may say that M's obedience to the leader of his party is the reason for his having been chosen by the leader as the party's candidate for the election, or that leader's belief that M is obedient to him is the reason of his having been chosen. Since an action is always an agent's action, meaning by the agent an individual or a group of individuals, the concept of the agent's reason seems to be primary concept and that of the independently intelligible reason a derivative from it. A reason for an action, in its natural sense, is the reason of the agent of that action for doing it, and when we find that a certain reason is generally or normally the reason of several agents, or one which we also consider to be the reason, we speak of it as an independently intelligible one.

Sometimes one feels like saying that something is a reason for doing A though it is not the reason of a particular agent for his doing A. For example, he may say, one's dedication to social

service is the only reason for being chosen as his party's candidate, but the leader of no party considers it to be so. But here also the concept of reason is not agent-neutral. One who makes the above assertion is in fact saying that had he been the leader of a party, one's dedication to social service would have been his reason, or that if a leader functions the way he ought to, his reason for choosing candidate would be the latter's dedication to social service. A reference to the agent, thus seems to be essentially involved in the concept of a reason for an action.

The concept of an agent's reason tautologically involves the agent's acceptance, admission, or acknowledgment that it is a reason. It may be a belief, an intention, or acknowledgment of something as a duty or an obligation. We can say that L's reason for choosing M as his party's candidate is his *belief* that N is dedicated to him when he intends to select one who is so dedicated, or his *intention* to make him so dedicated believing that his making him the party's candidate will do that, or his *acknowledgment of his being obligated* to choose him because of a past promise. But in either case the reason becomes the agent's reason because of its relationship with him, because it is *his belief*, *his intention*, or *his acknowledgment of obligation*.

But to see the rationality of his behaviour does not mean that we accept his reason as the right reason. Reasons are as much amenable to assessment or evaluation as are actions. A leader who selects his party's candidate because of his dedication to himself has as much a reason for his selection as his opponent who selects his party's because of his dedication to social service. After knowing their reasons we know the rationality of their selections and both the selections become equally intelligible, and in a sense rational to us, but without entailing that the two reasons have equal weight.

We grade reasons on so many grounds, moral, political, strategic, etc. For example, one may say that dedication to social service is a better reason than dedication to the leader of the party for selecting a party's candidate. The grading of reasons has its effect also on the grading of actions. For example, an action done for a better reason is graded as better than another done for a worse one. The choice of a candidate on account of his dedication to social service may therefore be said to be a better choice than the one made on account of his dedication to the leader. But any action for which the agent has a reason to do is a rational action.

The agent's reason explains his action or makes it intelligible in the sense that after knowing the reason we know *why* he did it. But does it mean that anything whatsoever the agent *can* offer and we *can* accept as his reason? Suppose the leader of the party, when asked why did he select M as the party's candidate, mentions as his reason the fact he was born on a Monday. We know now *his* reason but still we may say that in a sense our puzzlement about his choice remains unmitigated. But in fact the puzzlement has now shifted to his acceptance of M's being born on a Monday as a reason for selecting him. But suppose he says that the voters have a strong liking for people born on a Monday and among the applicants for the party's ticket he was the only one born on a Monday. With this explanation, our puzzlement vanishes or at least becomes very much lessened. We now see the (believed) causal link between his being born on a Monday and his chances of being elected. His being born on a Monday is now accepted as a reason by us because of its causal link with the expected result of his selection: he is selected because he is expected to win the election and he is expected to win because he was

born on a Monday. Therefore, an agent's reason is a relevant reason if it is causally related, directly or indirectly, with what the action is intended or expected to achieve, though it is not the cause of the action.

The above is a good example of means-end or prudential rationality. Quite a few philosophers maintain that to be rational is to select what one considers to be the best means to what he desires or intends to have or achieve. B's gifting a rare book, which he very much needs for his own research, to C can be called a rational action, or B a rational agent, if we find that he *wants* to resuscitate his fading friendship with C and believes that his gifting the book would (or is very much likely to) produce the desired result. It is rational to select or use what one considers to be the best means to his end and irrational not to do that. But to be entitled to be called a rational agent, one must be able to see that the reason for doing something, which is a means to some end of his, is the fact that it is a means to the latter. That is, he must have the concept of rationality, the ability to understand what it is to be a reason and to feel the force of importance of the relationship that exists between a reason and that for which it is a reason. It is obvious that reference to both, a desire and a relevant belief, is necessary to explicate the notion of means-end rationality.

It is not necessary that whatever a rational person does is rational. For example, he may pick up a book from his shelf and start reading it for no specific reason. There may not be any reason for his picking up a book as against, say, picking up his violin and any for picking up the book he actually picked up rather than any other one within his reach. He might have picked up the book because he had nothing else to do, but that he had nothing else to do cannot be said to be the reason for his picking up the book, because it is not a reason for doing any-

thing. But suppose after turning idly a few pages he comes across a page which gives some statistics he very much needed and therefore starts perusing the book very seriously. His perusal then becomes a rational action though his picking up the book is not.

To say, therefore, that to be rational is to possess the concept of rationality is not to say that whatever the rational man does is rational. It only means that whenever one does something rational, or whenever we consider someone a rational agent, the rationality of the action or of the agent can be explicated in terms of the agent's having the concept of rationality.

The concept of means-end, or desire-belief, rationality, cannot be applicable to moral rationality, i.e., to cases where the reason for doing something is a moral reason, whereas the model presented here seems to be applicable to means-end as well as moral rationality. Moral rationality can be reduced to means-end rationality only if moral reasons are considered to be hypothetical reasons, i.e., reasons involving desires and beliefs, as Mrs. Philippa Foot does in several of her writings viz maintaining that moral judgments are hypothetical imperatives. I shall not try in this paper to criticize Mrs. Foot or participate in the controversy which her writings have given rise to, as I propose to take up this subject elsewhere. But I do hope to show how the model of rationality presented here can take care of moral rationality without reducing it to prudential rationality, while explaining the latter as well.

Every reason for an action need not be causally related to the intended or expected result of the action and every action need not be done intending or expecting it to have something as its outcome. This seems to be obviously true of a moral reason. A moral reason is generated by one's acknowledgement

of an obligation, or we can even say that one's acknowledgment itself of the obligation to do x is a reason, or rather a conclusive reason, for doing it. Suppose L , the leader of a political party, admits or acknowledges his obligation to select a candidate only if he is whole-heartedly dedicated to the cause of non-violence. Then, if he finds that M is so dedicated and does not have any countervailing vice, he has a moral reason to select M . Whether or not he wants to select M on some other ground as well, or wants his selection to produce a certain result, would in this case be immaterial, as far as the rationality of his selecting M is concerned. His act of selecting M is a rational act since he has a reason, or what he considers to be a reason, for doing it.

I can say, in reply to the question why did he select M , that he did that because of M 's dedication to the cause of non-violence, or because he was obligated to do that (on account of M 's dedication...). The latter expresses the former in a more explicit form. M 's dedication becomes a moral reason for L to select M because L has accepted the moral principle that one ought to select a candidate only if he is dedicated to the cause of non-violence, and it is therefore that his acknowledgement that he ought to select M is *his*, the agent's, reason for his action. M 's dedication will not be L 's moral reason for selecting M unless and until L feels or acknowledges that he is obligated to select one who is so dedicated.

One's acknowledgement that he is obligated to do x is a reason for his doing it because, after knowing that he is so obligated, we cannot ask him to supply a further reason, nor can he ask for one after admitting that he ought to do it. And, his acknowledgment of obligation, though a reason, or rather a conclusive reason, is not causally related to the action or any intended or expected outcome of it.

Davidson says that the explanation of an action in terms of the agent's reason for doing it is a rationalization.¹ He does not, I think, use 'rationalization' in the psychoanalytic sense. Rather he seems to mean that to offer a rationalization of an action is to exhibit the rationality of the action. In this sense, which seems to me a fair interpretation of Davidson's intention, knowing the agent's reason does make his action appear rational, though we still retain our option to assess the acceptability of his reason in terms of our norms about what could be or should be the reason for an action of the kind his action is. But to offer a rationalization, for Davidson, is not to offer a real justification. It is only in an anemic sense that the rationalization of an action justifies it, since it only shows that "from the agent's point of view there was, when he acted, something to be said for the action."²

Referring to a non-moral example, he says that the agent's reason justifies his action if it is true (of course, if it is something which could be true or false). My belief that it will soothe your nerves explains and thus rationalizes why I pour you a shot, but it will justify my pouring you a shot only if it is true.³

To justify my act of pouring you a shot the belief that doing so will soothe your nerves must be *my* belief and it must be a true belief. Unless it is my belief it cannot be my reason and unless it is true it cannot justify the action for which it is claimed to be a reason. This seems to be Davidson's thinking. But if it is true that pouring one a shot soothes his nerves, it cannot justify my pouring you a shot if I do not believe that it does. And, if I believe that it does, it will justify to me my pouring you the shot. Similarly, to another person, an evaluator of my action, my reason, i. e., my belief, will justify my action if he also holds the belief as I do. To hold the belief for me, as well

justified from the spectator's point of view, or *vice versa*. Of course, it does, but that does not mean that the same action is justified and unjustified. Nor does it mean that the agent's and the spectator's points of view have to be at variance with each other. A spectator may accept the agent's reason and the agent also may, after having reflected over the spectator's criticism of his rationalization or justification, agree with the spectator that what he considered to be a good reason for his action was not a good reason, or that he made a mistake in identifying his reason.

Referring to my earlier example, the spectator S may agree with L that L's belief that M is dedicated to the cause of non-violence justifies his selecting M, or as a result of S's criticism L may agree with him that he should not have considered it to be a good reason for selecting a candidate, or even that it was not his real reason. He may do the latter if, for example, as a result of S's probings, he does some serious self-analysis and then finds that he really selected M because of her charming looks and manners and not because of her dedication to non-violence.

To understand properly the agent's reason and its rationality or justifying power in relation to the particular action, whose reason it is claimed to be by the agent, is not exactly like understanding the relationship between a proposition and its logical implication. If I know what the proposition means and certain linguistic or logical rules, I would know whether or not it implies what it is claimed to imply. But to understand properly the reason-giving role of an alleged reason for an action I have to be well acquainted with the non-linguistic, pragmatic context in which the action is done, the agent's or his society's relevant world-view or ideology, etc. For example, the social-political climate prevailing in a country and the prospects, ideology or

world-view of a political party, or of every political party, may be such that one's dedication to the leader of his party is a better reason than his dedication to non-violence. A critic of the agent's reason may not accept his world-view and, therefore, may not accept his reason as a good reason, but then his quarrel with the agent is really about the latter's world-view and consequentially about his reason.

It is not too much to assume that a rational critic, who properly understands a rational agent's world-view or the particular sector of it which is relevant to the action concerned, would agree with him about the justifying power his reason has from his point of view. In case he shares the latter's world view, he would also consider it justifying from his own point of view. The universality built into the concept of rationality, and, therefore, into that of rationalization or justification, can thus be interpreted as follows : If one rational person sees the world as another one does, he would agree with the latter's judgment about the rationality and consequently justifiability of an action of his explained in terms of his (the agent's) reason. It does not mean that two rational persons can never disagree about the rationality of an action, and it would be irrational or foolish to prescribe that what everyone considers to be rational alone should be called rational.

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NOTES

1. Davidson, Donald, 'Action, Reasons and Causes', in White, Alan R. ed. *The Philosophy of Action* (Oxford, 1968), p. 79
2. Ibid., p. 85
3. Ibid. p. 84