

## SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF RATIONALITY

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While discussing the concept of rationality, in tribal thought or any other thought for that matter, a distinction should be made between what a man is and what he does. When we judge a man from the point view of what he is, we say that he is essentially a rational being. And when we say that he is essentially a rational being, we use the concept of rationality in the sense of 'capacity' to think rationally. And to think rationally means to have capacity to distinguish between what is reasonable and what is not reasonable concerning the matter of certain kinds of things. The rational thinking capacity is considered to be the distinguishing mark of human beings in virtue of which they are said to have language, philosophy, science, technology, music, art, value and culture, etc. But to say that human beings do have capacity to think rationally is not to say that whenever they think, they always think reasonably. It only means that they do have natural potential power to behave in rational way which other beings essentially lack. And the natural potential power to behave in rational way does differ in degree from individual to individual. The power of rational thinking no doubt is a natural quality of all human beings. But in spite of this its development always requires a conscious effort and proper training. The individual's educational, social, economic and cultural backgrounds do play a great role in its development. Not only this, to have a natural potential capacity to think rationally is one thing and to exercise that capacity is another thing. If a person does not exercise his or her natural rational thinking capacity when there is a need to exercise it, we do not generally characterize him or her as a rational being even if he or she is assumed to

have a natural potential capacity to think rationally. We characterize him or her as a non-intelligent person. In fact, whenever we judge any person as to whether he or she does have any capacity to do certain things rationally or not, we always do it on the ground of his or her mental and physical activities. Nevertheless, whatever the case there might be, the fact still remains that no human being, we believe, lacks the natural potential capacity to think rationally. And to say this is not tantamount to saying that whenever any human being thinks, he or she always thinks rationally because what he or she thinks may or may not be rational at all. This is perfectly quite possible not only logically but also factually. And when we say it, we do not definitely use the concept of rationality in the sense of natural 'capacity' to think rationally. We use the concept of rationality in the sense of 'reasonability' and the question of reasonability does primarily arise only in the context of what human beings think, believe and do in their life and not in the context of what they are essentially assumed to be in themselves.

When we judge human thoughts, beliefs and actions of certain kinds either as rational or as irrational, we always do it in the sense of reasonability and not in the sense of his or her natural capacity to think rationally. From this point of view, we can say very well that to be rational is to be reasonable and to be reasonable is to be logical and to be logical is to conform to the canons of logic because the canons of logic are the canons of rationality. There is no doubt about it that one may have difference of opinion as regard to what really constitutes the canons of logic and rationality. But even then the fact remains that whenever anyone judges certain kinds of things either as rational or as irrational, he or she always judges it by using certain canon of logic which he or she assumes as a canon of rationality. Thoughts, beliefs and actions to which the canons of logic cannot be applied are said to be beyond the scope of rationality. They are best described as non-rational. Thoughts, beliefs and actions to which the canons of logic can be applied are said fall within the scope of rationality. Since such thoughts, beliefs and actions fall within the scope of rationality, we can legitimately characterize them either as rational or as irrational. Those thoughts, beliefs and actions which conform to the canons of logic we call them as rational. But those thoughts, beliefs and actions which do not conform to the canons of logic we do not call them as rational. We

characterize them as irrational. It is from this point of view that logical positivists claimed that metaphysical, religious and ethical systems of thought, belief and action are beyond the scope of rationality. Since they are considered to be beyond the scope of rationality, they can neither be characterized as rational nor as irrational according to their view. They can best be characterized as non-rational.

Deviation from rationality is irrational which can occur in different ways. For example, if we fail to recognize an inconsistency existing in our systems of thought, belief and action, no matter what they are, we cannot be said to be rational at all. We can be characterized as irrational. Not only this, even if we accept for the sake of argument that there exists an inconsistency in our systems of thought, belief and action but do not reject or exclude it from them, still we cannot be said to be rational at all. We can be characterized only as irrational. The reason is that because the concept of rationality does not admit in it the presence of inconsistency and contradiction. So the ideal man of rationality could be said is one who not only knows the distinction between what is reasonable and what is not reasonable concerning the matter of certain kinds of things but also believes and acts consistently without any deviation from rationality throughout in one's case as well as in other's cases. He exhibits his rationality through his coherent thinking and action. Such type of man we call as a man of rational character. In fact, whenever we judge any person either as rational or as irrational, we always do it on the basis of what he or she thinks, believes and does, and not on the basis of what he or she is assumed to be essentially is.

There is no one common canon of rationality by which we can legitimately assess all kinds of human thinking, formal and informal, concerning the matter of certain things. The reason is that the canons of logic differ from context to context and the canons of logic are the canons of rationality. For example, the canons of rationality which we use in the context of formal modes of reasoning we do not use them in the context of informal modes of reasoning. Since the canons of rationality of the formal modes of reasoning are conceptually different from the canons of rationality of the informal modes of reasoning, that is why we cannot say that the concept of rationality preserves the same criteriological meaning in both

the contexts of its applications. Not only in the context of formal logic but also in the context of informal logic the concept of rationality does not preserve the same criteriological meaning because the sense in which we use the concept of rationality in the context of natural sciences, we do not use it in the same sense in the context of social sciences like history, sociology and political sciences etc. Take, for example, the formal canon of consistency. The formal canon of consistency no doubt is considered as one of the canons of rationality. But the sense in which we use it in the context of formal sciences like mathematics and logic, we do not use it in the same sense in the context of natural and social sciences. In the context of formal sciences when we use it, we use it in a rigorous sense. But in the context of informal sciences when we use it, we do not use it in the same degree of rigorousness. We use it relatively in loose sense. Those thinkers who have tried to use the axiomatic deductive model of rationality, which is considered to be the paradigm of rationality, to evaluate human thoughts and beliefs of the empirical sciences, to my mind, have gone wrong because empirical phenomena which these sciences study are of such kind that they cannot be presented rigorously in terms of axiomatic deductive model of rationality on par with formal sciences. They can best be presented in the inductive model of rationality. The reason for it is that human thinking concerning the matter of empirical reality is of such kind that it is always open to susceptibility and revision. We cannot claim that we have arrived at the final truth concerning the matter of empirical realities by assuming certain finite number of axioms or postulates as we do claim in the case of formal sciences. If we apply the axiomatic deductive model of rationality in the field of empirical sciences, we will have to first assume that the truth of explanatory premises, that is, laws and theories are the truths of reality which we cannot assume. Karl Popper was right when he said that the system of scientific knowledge concerning the matter of reality is always open ended. It is not a closed system.

Even within the contexts of formal and informal sciences, we find that the concept of rationality does not preserve the same meaning in criteriological sense of the term. Its meaning changes from one context to another. For example, the sense in which we use the concept of rationality in the context of natural sciences like physics and chemistry, we do not use

it in the same sense in the context of social sciences. In the context of natural sciences we connect our conception of rationality with the notions of objectivity, universality, uniformity, relevance, observational and experimental testability, evidences, truth, laws and theories. While in the case of social sciences we do not necessarily connect our conception of rationality with all these notions. Take, for example, the method of experimental testability. The method of experimental testability no doubt is considered as a rational method in physical sciences. But this is not considered as a rational method in the context of social sciences. In the context of social sciences we do not link our conception of rationality with the method of experimental testability. The reason for it is that human act-phenomena, we believe, are of such kind that they are beyond the scope of experimental testability. Take, for example, the discipline of history. To study human history of the past, we cannot re-enact past events in our 'historical laboratories' even if we wish as we do in the case of natural events. We cannot make the same kind of direct observation that the scientists make. Because of this reason many people have doubted whether we can really know anything definite about the past. Not only this, we cannot understand human historical events of the past in terms of the event-cause model alone the way we understand natural events because human events are of such kind that they always involve in them the role of a conscious agency, that is, human will and human will is not governed by any laws of causality. It is because of this reason in evaluating of human act-phenomena either as rational or as irrational we will have to use the agent-cause model of rationality which is conceptually different from that of the event-cause model of rationality. Likewise, in the context of formal sciences too the concept of rationality does not preserve the same criteriological meaning. Its meaning changes from system to system. What we consider as rational in one formal system of thought, we do not consider the same thing rational in another formal system of thought. Take, for example, the context of formal logic. There are different systems of formal logic. What we consider to be rational in two valued logic, we do not consider same thing to be rational in three valued logic because in both cases the assumptions from which we derive our conception of rationality differ. In the context of two valued logic the concept of rationality logically

rests on this assumption that a proposition has two and only two truth values, that is, it is either true or false but not both. While in the context of three valued logic this assumption is discarded. We rather assume that a proposition has three values. It is either true or false or possible. And this distinction is very important to assess the relative rationality and irrationality of both the systems. We cannot judge them by using a common canon of logic because they are on different grounds of rationality. If we do it, we are bound to deviate from rationality and to deviate from rationality is irrational.

So when I say it that the concept of rationality differs from context to context, I say it in criteriological sense of the term. I do not say it in its generic sense of the term. In generic sense the concept of rationality no doubt does preserve a constant meaning throughout of all its applications. Because there are certain generic characteristics which are found invariably associated with all its uses. Take, for example, the characteristics of universality and consistency. The characteristics of universality and consistency are considered to be essential characteristics of rationality. This fact is quite evident from the very use of the concept of reason itself with which the concept of rationality is conceptually connected. Because what constitutes as a reason in one case, also at the same time constitutes a reason in other cases which are exactly alike in the relevant respects no matter whether these cases are the cases of facts or beliefs or actions. We cannot say in the same breath that something constitutes as reason in one case but not in other cases when the cases are exactly alike in the relevant respect without violating the canon of consistency and the canon of consistency is a canon of rationality. What is true of the concept of consistency is also true of the concept of universality in this regard. Because the concept of reason is of such kind that the notion of universality is logically built into it. Since the notion of universality is logically built into the concept of reason and the concept of rationality is conceptually connected with the concept of reason, therefore the notion of universality is also logically built into the concept of rationality. That is why I say that rationality of the concept of reason consists in its universal consistent applications. But to say this, however, does not tantamount to saying that the domain of the applicability of the concept of reason cannot differ. It does differ

depending upon the nature of its context of application. For example, the domain of applicability of the concept of reason has a wider universality in the context of formal and natural sciences than that of the context of human act-phenomena. The reason is that in the domain of human act-phenomena the applicability of the concept of reason is arrested by the conditions of human abilities and circumstances, etc. which is not true in the case of formal and natural sciences. Because in the case of formal and natural sciences we do not consider these conditions as rationally relevant conditions when we talk about the relative rationality and irrationality of their systems. In the context of formal and natural sciences when we universalize reason, we universalize it by ignoring these irrelevant conditions which we do not do in the case of an act-reason when we universalize it. In other words, we do not universalize act-reasons the way we universalize mathematical reasons by ignoring human abilities and their circumstances. When we do it, we deviate from rationality and to deviate from rationality is irrational.

Not only this, we also deviate from rationality when we assess different systems of thought, belief and action which do not belong to the same logical type either as rational or as irrational by using the canon of rationality of the one system against another. But when I say it, I do not mean to say that the concept of rationality is bereft of universality. It only means that the validity of universality of the concept of rationality is logically restricted to the domain of those things which belong to the same logical type. When we violate this restriction by universalizing our concept of reason beyond its legitimate scope of applications, it becomes irrational because we deviate from rationality and to deviate from rationality is irrational. There is no doubt about it that the applicability of the concept of rationality always presupposes the acceptance of certain common conceptual framework of thinking regardless of its specific application. But to say this is not tantamount to saying that a common conceptual framework of thinking cannot vary from context to context. It can vary from context to context and it does vary as a matter of fact. We do use different conceptual frameworks of thinking not only to study the different kinds of phenomena but also the same kind of phenomena of reality. And when we do it, we do not deviate any way from rationality. Because we



can very well use the different conceptual frameworks of thinking to assess the merits and demerits of the same kind of phenomena of reality without violating any canon of rationality. The reason is that there is nothing in the concept of rationality as such which logically rules out this possibility. In fact there can be nothing more rational than the method of critical analysis and assessment. And a critical analysis and assessment of the same phenomena can be made from different angles by using the different conceptual frameworks of thinking. And when we do it, we do not deviate any way from rationality. We deviate from rationality only when we do not apply our assumed canon of rationality consistently and universally to all cases of those things which belong to the same logical type. The reason is that because the canon of rationality involves in its meaning the notion of universal applicability throughout within its own domain of applications. Take, for example, the case of value judgments. If we logically assume in our conceptual framework of thinking that value judgments fall outside the domain of scientific inquiries, we cannot surely use the value criteria of rationality to assess the relative merits and demerits of the different scientific methods, laws and theories which we use in the pursuit of our scientific inquiries. The reason is simple because value judgments fall outside the domain of the assumption of our scientific inquiries. Since value judgments fall outside the domain of the assumption of our scientific inquiries, we cannot go against it what we already assume as the basis of our rationality. If we do it, we are bound to deviate from rationality and to deviate from rationality is irrational. So unless we reject our assumption of rationality which we assume, we cannot deviate from it. And when we do it rationally, we always do it by assuming some other assumption or assumptions. So to accept or reject any system of thought, belief and action of any kind means to have certain other conceptual framework of thinking.

If there is any grain of truth in what I have just said, then from this it is quite clear that to assess the merit and demerit of the different scientific methods, laws and theories, we will have to use some canons of rationality other than the canons of value judgments such as the canons of empirical testability, truth, certainty, objectivity and explanatory and predicting power, etc. The whole issue of rationality, therefore, logically depends upon that what we logically assume as the ground of our rationality. And to say this,



however, does not mean that rationality is purely subjective and anything can be assumed as the ground of rationality. Take, for example, the case of the principle of our moral action. We cannot assume any impossible proposition as a rational principle of our moral action. The reason is simple because we cannot act on an impossible proposition and what cannot be acted upon cannot be assumed as a rational principle of moral action. Only a set of consistent and coherent propositions can be assumed as the ground of rationality and none else. So if what we assume does not satisfy the logical requirements of rationality which it demands, we cannot derive any rationality from it. If we do it, we are bound to deviate from rationality and to deviate from rationality is irrational. No discussion in fact is rationally possible unless we assume certain coherent and consistent common standard of rationality. To say this is not to say that we cannot judge rationally the same thing from different angles. To my mind, it is perfectly possible without deviating from rationality because there is nothing in the concept of rationality as such which logically rules out this possibility. Since the notion of universality is conceptually in built in our conception of rationality, the concept of rationality presumes that the presence or the absence of certain subjective elements makes no difference to the mode of the universality of rationality. From this point of view, we can say that the notion of universality preserves the objectivity of rationality in the sense of personal neutrality and impartiality.

It becomes impossible only when we logically assume that the rational subject cannot transcend his or her conceptual framework of thinking which we cannot rationally assume. Because the rational subject does have the natural potential capacity to assess critically not only the relative merits and demerits of his or her own conceptual framework of thinking but also of the others. History is full of such instances. We also call us as rational beings because of this capacity. So in order to maintain meaningfulness of the use of the concept of rationality we will have to assume that the rational subject does have reflective capacity to critically view himself and his activities of thinking, believing and doing from the point view of others. And to assume this is not to assume something which is logically impossible. If we do not assume that the rational subject does have reflective capacity to examine different conceptual frameworks of thinking of different people including his or her own, he or she cannot be said to be a rational being at

all which we say because the latter logically assumes the former. If whatever I have said is true, then from this it is quite clear that the concept of rationality is conceptually linked with the concept of human free thinking. In other words, the rational thinking capacity of a person is not governed by any laws of causality. It is governed by the rational subject itself.

Furthermore, the concept of rationality is not a rigid concept. It is a dynamic concept because the paradigm of rationality shifts from time to time according to growth of our understanding and knowledge. This is quite evident from the facts of the history of knowledge itself. Many things which we did accept as rational beliefs in the past we now no longer accept them as rational beliefs. We have discarded them because of the growth in our knowledge. Take, for example, the belief of the sun's going round the Earth. This belief was considered as rational belief during the time of Galilee. But after the discovery of Copernicus we now no longer consider it a rational belief. We have discarded it. We now believe that it is the Earth which goes round the Sun. What is true of the belief of the Sun's going round the Earth is also true of many other beliefs which we have discarded from our stock of knowledge. If this be so, then the concept of rationality cannot be said to be a static concept because it does admit change or modification. In fact there is also no contradiction in accepting something to be rational and subsequently raising doubt about it. And once we raise a doubt about it, we withdraw its rationality claim. And when we withdraw its rationality claim, we always do it by invoking some other paradigm of rationality and this process never comes to ends. We cannot rationally claim that we have arrived at final truth where we can stop and say that no further shifting of the paradigm of rationality is logically possible. By the 'paradigm' of rationality here I mean what the members of a rational community share and practice. The paradigm of rationality is a mental construction of the rational human mind but it is not arbitrary. In this sense the concept of rationality is conventional because it is determined by the conscious will of the rational subjects. Since it is determined by the conscious will of the rational subjects, it also opens to further modification and changability depending upon the growth in our understanding and knowledge.

It is perfectly quite possible that a rational subject may think that

what he or she knows, believes and does is rational, and yet it may not be rational at all in 'reasonable' sense of the term. Because the concept of rationality in the sense of reasonability is not logically grounded in the mere act of human thinking, believing and doing. It is rather logically grounded in the rational act of thinking, believing and doing and the concept of rational thinking, believing and doing is quite different from that of the mere thinking, believing and doing. If it were not the case, there would be no possibility of making the distinction between rational and irrational which we make in our life, everything would have been rational by virtue of the mere definition of rationality itself in 'capacity' sense of the term. But this is not so. Because the capacity of rational thinking is the characteristic feature of the rational subject, that is, human being while reasonability is the characteristic feature of human thought, belief and action and not the characteristic feature of the rational subject even if there is a conceptual connection between the two.

Moreover talking about rationality within a particular system of thought is one thing and talking about rationality of the system itself is another thing and both the things should not be muddled because there is a conceptual distinction between the two. If we do it, we are bound to deviate from rationality and to deviate from rationality is irrational. Why I say we deviate from rationality when we muddle them is that because in both the cases we do not use the concept of rationality in the same sense of the term. We apply different criteria of rationality. When we talk about rationality within a particular system of thought, we do it by assuming the rationality of the fundamental postulates of that system which we do not do when we talk about that system itself. In the latter case when we talk about rationality, we do not talk by assuming the rationality of the fundamental postulates of that system. We rather examine them by assuming some other fundamental postulates of rationality and to do so is not irrational because we do not deviate any way from rationality. This is analytically true in the light of the very use of the concept of rationality itself. Therefore when we talk about rationality in a particular tribal thought, regardless of what it is, we will have to keep this distinction in our mind to avoid deviation from rationality.

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