Rationalism in Ethics

Noell Birondo

The word 'rationalism', as it appears in philosophical discussions of ethics and morality, signifies at least one of a cluster of theses, each of which connects some aspect of ethical experience to *reason* or *rationality*. The most provocative rationalist thesis arises in contemporary discussions in metaethics (*see* METAETHICS); and it is this thesis that remains the most likely referent, in contemporary discussions, of the phrase 'moral rationalism'. The thesis is more accurately referred to, however, as metaethical rationalism, since it concerns the provenance and nature of moral obligations, rather than their substance. A strong version of metaethical rationalism maintains that if someone is morally obligated to perform a certain action, then performing that action is what she has the strongest reasons, all things considered, to do. A weaker version of metaethical rationalism claims that if someone is morally obligated to perform a certain action, then performing that action is something that she has *a* reason to do, even though the reason might not be decisive: another reason, for instance of prudence, might trump the reason she has to act morally (*see* PRIMA FACIE / PRO TANTO "OUGHT"). It is rationalism in this metaethical guise that will be the ultimate focus of this entry.

Before getting to that, however, something needs to be said about the historical roots of rationalism in ethics. That will allow us to disentangle three separate rationalist theses: an epistemological, a motivational, and a metaethical version of rationalism. It should perhaps be noted here that although rationalists in the modern period tended to defend all three versions of rationalism simultaneously (Gill 2007: 26), and although they can be mutually reinforcing in certain ways, the logical relationship between the three theses is not a settled matter.

The Roots of Rationalism

Although rationalist themes make strong appearances in the most influential ancient Greek philosophers – in Aristotle, for instance, and quite starkly in Plato's theorizing