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The Ladder of Rationality

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John Broome's *Rationality Through Reasoning* presents a novel, highly accessible, and groundbreaking theory of rationality, reasons, and reasoning. Free of (unexplained) jargon, its arguments are minimalistic in the best sense. Moreover, the book bears witness to Broome's intellectual integrity. There is no attempt here to paper over the cracks: Broome provides charitable interpretations of his opponents' theses, openly identifies weaknesses in his own arguments, and happily points the reader to where more work is needed. The result is a book that not only inspires but also steers those aiming to participate in the debate toward areas that are intellectually worthy of further time and thought. This book is, in essence, a model for how to make progress in analytic philosophy.

Rationality Through Reasoning represents the culmination of the development of almost 20 years' worth of Broome's systematic thinking on rationality and reasoning. The book centres on the question: how can reasoning make us more rational? That is, how can we bring ourselves to satisfy requirements of rationality by employing our ability to form a new attitude on the basis of our existing attitudes?

In crafting his answer to this question, Broome takes a detailed excursion through central topics of normativity, rationality, and reasoning. Chapters 2 to 4 analyse the nature of ought and normative reasons. Chapters 4 and 5 reject the view that rationality consists in responding to normative reasons. Chapters 7 to 10 discuss rationality and its requirements, and chapter 11 explores whether rationality is normative. Chapters 12 to 16 develop Broome's account of reasoning and how reasoning can make us rational.

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Given the variety of topics Broome discusses, it is impossible to do full justice to his arguments in the space available here. I will therefore confine myself to three (perhaps idiosyncratically chosen) highlights.

I begin with how Broome consolidates the relationship between rational requirements and normative reasons. Many philosophers hold the view, often perceived as a truism, that if there is anything that gives us reasons, it is the prescriptions of rationality. Moreover, it is certainly rational to believe, intend, or do whatever your reasons require you to believe, intend, or do. In short, rationality requires you to respond correctly to normative reasons. Or, slightly more formally, rationality requires you to *X* if and only if your reasons require you to *X*.

Suppose you accept this view. We then face the question of the explanatory determination of this biconditional. Does the fact that your reasons require you to *X* explain why rationality requires you to *X*? Or does the fact that rationality requires you to *X* explain why your reasons require you to *X*? Broome aims to show that these questions are actually misguided. The biconditional expressed above fails to capture *any* relationship that holds between what reasons require and what rationality requires.

According to Broome, the fact that your reasons require you to *X* does not imply that rationality requires you to *X*. Your reasons might require you to stop reading this review immediately and seek shelter in your basement. But you may not be aware of this. In this scenario, it is not the case that rationality requires you to seek shelter in your basement, even though your reasons require you to (cf. 74-5). Second, the fact that rationality requires you to *X* does not imply that reasons require you to *X*. The balance of your reasons may sometimes require you to be incoherent. In quirky circumstances, believing a contradiction, or being in an otherwise attitudinally incoherent state, might have very beneficial effects (192). Moreover, despite his sophisticated efforts, Broome is unable to establish an argument to the effect that, necessarily, you have a normative reason to satisfy the requirements of rationality (cf. ch. 11). In sum, although 'reasons' and 'rationality' are etymologically connected (194), their philosophical and conceptual connection remains tenuous at best.

I find Broome's arguments illuminating and convincing. They have a consequence, however, which I think Broome has not fully taken on board. Suppose all of normativity is determined by normative reasons. That is, you are entirely as you ought to be if and only if you believe, prefer, expect, intend and do what your reasons require you to do. Once we have accepted this picture, why should we actually care about rationality and its requirements? Of course, rational requirements may stand in an interesting relation to normative reasons. They may map our reasons, or perhaps represent evidence for a particular class of reasons (for example, if rationality requires you to *X*, then this is strong evidence that you have good reason to *X*). But, as pointed out above, Broome has no argument for either of these views. It simply remains unclear what function rational requirements play in the world of normativity.

This also leaves us wondering about the value of those activities that make us rational. Suppose correct reasoning aims in some way at satisfying rational requirements. But suppose we have no argument for the view that this aim is normative or valuable. It would indeed be surprising if the normative force of the aim of what we often conceive as the essential human ability (i.e. reasoning correctly) were not easily detectible. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the connection between rationality and (correct) reasoning and to develop a view of correct reasoning as part of responding correctly to reasons. In this sense, Broome's study of rationality may eventually function like a ladder: once you have reached the next level, you might dispose of the ladder without losing anything.

I now turn to more theoretical issues. Broome introduces an illuminating distinction, which is relevant not only for rationality but also for normativity in a wider sense. 'Rationality' (as well as 'morality', and perhaps 'prudence') can refer to (i) a property, (ii) a capacity, or (iii) a source (or system) of requirements (chap. 7). Also, there is a sense in which a property, a capacity, or a system of requirements can *require* something of you (109-10). However, the sense of 'requires' usually varies between types of rationality. For example, when we say 'The capacity of rationality requires *X*' or 'The property of rationality requires *X*', we use 'requires' roughly to express that *X* is required for the possession of a higher or full capacity or property of rationality (114). By contrast, when we say 'The system or source of rationality requires *X*', we express

something prescriptive (or 'deontic', if you like), i.e. rationality *prescribes X* (as in 'You ought to *X*' or 'The law requires *X*') (116).

This discovery is important. It offers an elegant understanding of the attractiveness of 'Standard Deontic Logic' (SDL) (set up for rational and other requirements) without dodging its paradoxical implications. SDL appears attractive because '[p]roperty requirements are friendly to deontic logic' (114). They allow us to set up the standard semantics of SDL, in which 'You *X*' is rationally required of you if and only if 'You *X*' is true whenever you are more or fully rational. Property requirements, for example, satisfy axiom *K* (115): whenever the property of rationality requires of you that you *X* and the property of rationality requires of you that [if you *X*, you *Y*], then the property requires you to *Y*. Yet this does not hold for the prescriptive sense of source requirements (see example on page 120).

There is a straightforward example that shows why. Whenever you are more or fully rational, you are spatially extended. So, the property of rationality requires you to be spatially extended. This is uncontroversial. Understood as a prescription, however, it is not the case that rationality requires you to be spatially extended. Take an abstract entity. We would not rationally *prescribe* that a number, set, or proposition be spatially extended, for example. Things without spatial extension do not fall within the domain of things that are under rational prescriptions.

The fact that the property and the prescriptions of rationality differ in their friendliness to SDL is an important insight. Nevertheless, I take issue with Broome's claim that three relationships hold between the property and the source sense of rationality.

First, Broome thinks that the source sense is prior to the property sense. We cannot employ the property of rationality in determining what rationality requires. I do not think that Broome's arguments strictly imply this. True, we cannot fully analyse 'the source of rationality requires you to *X*' in terms of 'the property of rationality requires you to *X*'. But, as I argued in my 'A Constitutive Account of "Rationality Requires"' (Fink 2014), this does not mean that the property of rationality (which I think is simply the property of coherence) cannot be *part* of such an analysis.

Second, Broome argues that even if the property sense of rationality were prior to the source sense, the property would not help us to define precisely what rationality requires of us. In particular, it could not tell us whether a conditional requirement has a wide or a narrow logical scope (137). Broome emphasizes this point by developing it as a formal theorem and proof (148). Nonetheless, I disagree. The logical form (wide or narrow scope) can make a difference to the circumstances in which you are fully rational. This is the case when replacing a wide- with a narrow-scope requirement brings into existence another (violated) requirement. An example can be found in Fink ms). Consequently, there seem to be situations in which the property of rationality may help us to determine the logical form of rational requirements.

Third, Broome seems to be committed to the view that source requirements entail property requirements. That is, whenever the source of rationality requires you to *X*, the property also requires you to *X* (119). Here again, I disagree. To be fully rational at time *t*, you need to satisfy all rational requirements that apply to you at *t*. Which requirements apply to you depends on your rational capacity, i.e. on your logical and conceptual abilities (Fink 2014). I assume, for instance, that a newborn has no such abilities. Newborns are not subject to any requirements of rationality. As a child grows up, she is likely to develop such abilities. This renders her gradually subject to the requirements of rationality.

Plainly, you can acquire logical and conceptual abilities. But you can lose them too. If so, you may not be subject to a requirement at t_1, even though you were subject to it at *t* (Fink 2014, pp. 914-21). The consequence of this picture is plain: it is not the case that the only way you can become more or fully rational is by satisfying the requirements to which you are subject. Alternatively, you can also become fully rational by being subject to fewer requirements of rationality. So, in general, the fact that, at *t*, rationality requires you to *X* does not mean that you *X* whenever you are fully rational.

I turn, finally, to the highlight of the book: Broome's account of reasoning. A theory of reasoning faces two major definitional challenges: first, how to distinguish reasoning from other causal belief- and intention-forming processes; second, how to define reasoning without making it necessarily correct. Broome's account meets both

challenges.

Paul Grice, for example, defined reasoning preliminarily as '… the entertainment (and often acceptance) in thought or in speech of a set of initial ideas (propositions), together with a sequence of ideas each of which is derivable by an acceptable principle of inference from its predecessors in the set' (Grice 2001, p.5). However, Grice quickly added a correction: 'Not all actual reasoning is good reasoning; some is bad, and some is downright appalling. But our preliminary account seems to leave no space for reasoning to go wrong except through the falsity of one or more of its premises, or (perhaps) through the perverseness of the world in refusing to conform to the conclusion of an impeccable non-demonstrative inference' (2001 p.6). In sum, we need to ensure that there can be both correct and incorrect genuine reasoning.

Broome meets this challenge by defining reasoning as conscious rule-following activity. It is 'conscious' not in the sense that you entertain the rule that you follow in your reasoning, but in the sense that you entertain ('say to yourself') the contents of premise-attitudes that lead you to a conclusion-attitude. That is, '[a]ctive reasoning is a particular sort of process by which conscious premise-attitudes cause you to acquire a conclusion-attitude. The process is that you operate on the contents of your premise-attitudes *following a rule*, to construct the conclusion, which is the content of a new attitude of yours that you acquire in the process' (234; my emphasis). 'Operating on the contents' means that you engage in computational or algorithmic activity. For example, suppose you believe that (i) you have EUR 1234 in your bank account. You also believe that (ii) you just used your debit card to purchase a camera for EUR 123. Suppose you aim to know how much money is left in your account. You entertain and operate on the two propositions – (i) and (ii) – using the arithmetic rules of subtraction. This leads you to pick out the proposition 'You have EUR 1111 in your bank account', towards which you form a belief. You have thus formed this belief via reasoning.

Broome's account ensures that not all belief and intention formation is reasoning. We form many beliefs and intentions without following a rule in operating on our attitudes' contents. Also, not all reasoning is correct. '[R]easoning is correct if and only if it correctly follows a correct rule' (242). So, by following an incorrect rule (affirming the consequent, for example) (pp. 247-8), you are indeed reasoning; you're just not reasoning correctly.

What makes a rule correct? This is a point where I feel that Broome needs to supplement his account. I think he is aware of this, as he points out on page 258. According to Broome, a correct rule is one that corresponds to a 'basing permission of rationality', as he puts it. Basing permissions of rationality define the rules governing the formation of attitudes on the basis of other attitudes. For example, rationality permits you to base a belief that *q* on a belief that *p* and a belief that (if *p* then *q*) (191). Or it permits you to base an intention to *X* on a belief that you ought to *X* (290). By contrast, rationality prohibits basing not-believing that you ought to X on not-intending to X (141, 187).

Broome employs basing permissions and prohibitions to ensure that not just any rule-following activity that is an operation on the contents of your attitudes and that happens to satisfy a rational requirement counts as correct. I find this move *ad hoc*, however. Here is an example.

Suppose you believe that you ought to have children. After some deliberation, however, you realise that you have no intention of having children. From past experience, you know that your intentions (or the lack thereof) are the best normative guides you have available to you. You have internalised two rules: if you intend to *X*, you ought to *X*; if you have no intention to *X*, you ought to not-*X*. Applying the latter rule, you drop your belief that you ought to have a child on the basis of reasoning that you have no intention to *X*. Has something gone wrong?

Roughly speaking, this process qualifies as reasoning. But it does not qualify as correct reasoning. Rationality prohibits your basing not-believing that you ought to X on not-intending to X (141, 187). You cannot rationally base lacking a belief that you ought to X on not-intending to X. So, in the example above, you follow a rule that is not backed by a basing permission of rationality. Your reasoning is thus incorrect. The problem is that I do not see the mistake here. You rid yourself of an ought-belief by applying the most reliable rule available to you in your reasoning.

References

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