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The Architecture of Reason: The Structure and Substance of Rationality by Robert Audi

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The architecture of reason: The Structure and Substance of Rationality.

By Robert Audi

New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 286 pages.

Audi's aim is admirable. Epistemology, decision theory, and to some extent ethics, confront special cases of a wide question: how does a rational person think? Moreover the cases interact, since what it is rational for a particular person in a particular situation to decide or want is affected by what it is rational for her to believe. And though what it is rational for her to believe *may* be independent of what it is rational for her to want and decide, what enquiries it is rational to undertake and how it is rational to carry them out certainly do depend on what choices and desires are rational. So questions about particular kinds of rationality are best investigated with an eye to the more general case. Audi wants to put together a big picture of how a rational agent thinks, in particular of the similarities and connections between rational belief and rational desire. The result is interesting and often convincing, with many sharp points and stimulating distinctions. I recommend it to anyone interested in the fusion of epistemology and the theory of choice, or in the variety of normative concepts we apply to persons.

Any such reader will need some patience, though. The book moves very slowly and repeats itself a lot. The urge to turn pages and skip sections is irresistible. One basic cause is Audi's poor sense of what will count as news to his typical reader. One is treated to detailed expositions of thoroughly familiar points, while interesting ideas sometimes pass by in a flash. Audi rarely sums up his view in a few carefully chosen sentences labelled as definitive. Instead he slowly develops his position with a number of asides and warnings, and then usually performs a semi-retraction in which he argues that what he has been saying is compatible with various apparently opposed views. So in the end you are not sure quite how strong the claims are.

Here are some ideas he definitely is defending.

Normative concepts of justification and rationality apply to beliefs, desires, and actions. They are different: a rational belief or action is one that an agent can hold or perform without compromising her rationality, while a justified one is rationally compulsory. Scepticism, both epistemic and moral, can for many purposes be dealt with by showing that one can believe in the world or in science, or treat others decently, without thereby being irrational.

Justification is a matter of relating a state to experience. The relation is thus generally foundational, with the vital qualification that the basis is defensible: what might in the absence of other considerations justify a state may in some contexts be insufficient. Both beliefs and desires are justified

by experience, beliefs by standard inductive reasoning (in which one experiences something and expects more of the same) and desires by something analogous where a person has a pleasant experience and comes rationally to want more of the same. The desire that is justified is for the objective features of the experience, so that a desire that someone else have a particular pleasant experience can be made reasonable by one's own appreciation of it. (I think Audi intends that such specific altruistic desires can be justified as well as reasonable, though I am not sure in my reading of him, simply in the absence of defeating considerations.) There are *a priori* beliefs, in the sense of beliefs which in the absence of contrary evidence it is reasonable to hold, and essentially desirable conditions, which also, other things being equal, it is reasonable to want. These too play a role in shaping the pattern of a rational agent's beliefs and desires.

There are coherent internalist conceptions of the justification of beliefs and desires. That is, justification can be understood in terms of inferential relations between purely psychological states. At various points Audi says that externalist accounts—for example reliabilist accounts of the justification of belief and analogous accounts on which a desire is justified if satisfying it does in fact tend to the satisfaction of basic needs—could also fill out his architecture, but he does not investigate what changes might be necessary. Given the adequacy of the internalist account that Audi develops, externalist considerations would become alternatives or supplements, rather than rivals. The model would be externalist accounts of knowledge, which need not challenge internalist accounts of justified belief.

These are Audi's central conclusions. In presenting them he makes many other points, connected in different ways to the theme of the general structure of reasonableness. But I shall ignore these further points and in the rest of this review I will state some ways in which I suspect Audi's architecture may be wrong. The most basic issue is his internalism. If we are considering rationality in the large, should we express it in terms of articulable reasoning whose validity can be appreciated by the person in question, or in terms of processes which in specific environments give particular kinds of good results? In the case of belief the internalism/externalism debate is now well-rehearsed. In the case of desire and action it is much newer, and it is harder to make out the possible defensible positions. In order to make the justification of desire parallel to that of belief, Audi bases justified desires on pleasant or satisfying experiences. But it is not really clear how the justification proceeds, and how it is to equip a person with a full life-supporting set of rational wants. After all, many things which we just find ourselves wanting, striving for which has good results for us, do not actually give us much pleasure. The worry intensifies when we add the distinction between rational obligation and permissibility justification versus reasonable). For there are many desires which it is perfectly alright to hold, in that they play a role in one among many possible ways one could live one's life. Need these bear any relation to fundamental experience at all, let alone one that the agent can consider and reflectively approve of?

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The most fundamental form of the worry, though, attaches to the project of combining the different domains of rational assessment. On Audi's account the justification of beliefs is more or less autonomous, while those of desires and actions depend on those of beliefs. But this is far from obviously right. Suppose that your thinking time and intelligence are limited, and you have various matters that you could investigate. You are going to have to consider some of them with intense care, some in a looser manner, and ignore some completely. The decision about which matters get which treatments surely depends in part on your fundamental desires. And the other way round, when you are revising your desires, which ones get the full Socratic treatment and which are given a quick once-over will depend in part on what you believe. Moreover the decision to expend a certain amount of your cognitive resources on revising either your beliefs or your desires depends in part on the amount you are going to expend on revising the other.

'Depends on' here is surely best not considered internalistically. Agents do not often think out how they are to distribute their cognitive resources. If they did the effort would be an additional drain on those resources. They adopt balances between the different demands on them, and these balances are either satisfactory or not. So a person who accepts her everyday desires to cooperate with others in small matters, and to trust her intuitions about which people are dealing honestly with her, while getting on with her main business of working out the genetic codes of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, need not consider whether such cooperation is inherently pleasant or conducive to her well being, or whether she should be thinking more about everyday cooperation and less about genetics. As long as it works, that is: as long as her life proceeds well and her basic aims are achieved, she is proceeding in a perfectly reasonable way just by instantiating a formula that happens to fit her situation. If she were a game theorist, or a philosopher working on the other minds problem, the situation would be different.

My suspicion, then, is that global questions of rationality, in which the interaction of belief-forming, desire-forming, and act-choosing mechanisms become central, and in which questions of the allocation of resources between the different rational activities arise, will force us to ways of thinking about justification in which externalist considerations are ineliminable. Global rationality looks less like traditional epistemology than Audi thinks. This suspicion, even if I had conclusive arguments for it, would not show that Audi's project is misguided, though it would force revisions in many details. In fact it would show that Audi's project has a more fundamental importance than he claims for it. Real clarity about the rationality of beliefs, desires, or actions can only be achieved by considering all three at once.

Adam Morton