

Title: Rationality and Responsibility

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Abstract: Broome takes the debate on rationality to be concerned with the ordinary use of ‘rational’. I argue that this is at best misleading. For the object of current theories of rationality is determined by a *specific* use of ‘rational’ that is intimately connected to blame and praise. I call the property this use refers to ‘rationality_{RESP}’. This focus on rationality_{RESP}, I argue, has two significant implications for Broome’s critique of theories of rationality as reasons-responsiveness. First, rationality_{RESP} is plausibly conceived of as a kind of reasons-responsiveness. Secondly, Broome’s dispute with internalists about normativity as well as his dispute with externalists about rationality both hinge on questions regarding the concept of responsibility. I conclude that philosophers should integrate discussions about responsibility in their debates about rationality.

Keywords: rationality, reasons, responsibility, reasons-responsiveness, internalism, externalism

1. Introduction

In his lead article, John Broome discusses views which understand being rational as responding correctly to one’s reasons. He first provides a genealogy of how ‘rational’ entered the English language, thereby fixing the object of his theory—i.e., the property to which our current use of ‘rational’ commonly refers. Broome then presents some careful objections against the views of Kieseewetter and Lord. He concludes that ‘it is false that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons’ (Broome 2021, [sect. 8](#)).

Broome also claims that ‘[m]ost philosophers who write about rationality intend to write about it as it is commonly understood’ (Broome 2021, [sect. 4](#)). That is, he claims that not only the object of his *own* theory is determined by the ordinary use of ‘rational’, but also the object of the theories he objects to. His claim is:

- (I) The *object* of theories of rationality is determined by our ordinary concept of rationality.

As Broome specifies, rationality is commonly understood as a mental property of a person; furthermore, rationality can be ‘reified’ in the same way as morality can be reified: it can be conceived of as an entity that places requirements on us. If we fulfil all those requirements, then we possess the property of rationality to the highest possible degree.

Another claim that is suggested by Broome’s brief remarks on the metaphilosophy of rationality should be distinguished from (I):

(II) The *method* of theories of rationality is to *analyze* ‘rational’.

I am not sure whether Broome analyzes ‘rational’. But many theorists of rationality don’t. Lord (2018: 6) explicitly says that he provides a ‘real definition’ of the property of rationality, which he contrasts with conceptual analysis. And Wedgwood (2018: 23) points out that he engages in ‘constructive theory-building’—a kind of theorizing that contrasts with philosophy that is ‘closer to everyday thought’. This suggests that what these philosophers do is to *explicate* a concept of rationality, maybe in order to carve normativity at its joints (Lord), or maybe just to show that we can conceive of a property that, say, supervenes on the mind, has normative authority, and is a good means to achieve an external aim, like truth (Wedgwood). Theorists of rationality might thus start out by making claims about our ordinary use of ‘rational’, but they then deviate from this use for specific theoretical purposes.

It can lead to significant misunderstandings in a debate if there are disagreements about its object or its method: we might end up talking about different things or engage in different kinds of projects. In this commentary, I focus on the *object* of current theories of rationality. I will argue that theorists of rationality are not just concerned with *the* ordinary use of ‘rational’ (section 2). Rather, due to their philosophical interests they pick out a *specific* use that is intimately connected to blame and praise. I call the property this use refers to ‘rationality_{RESP}’, because it presupposes the subject’s direct responsibility for their attitudes. I then present an argument why rationality_{RESP} is plausibly identical to a kind of reasons-responsiveness (section 3). However, this does not settle whether rationality is identical to normativity. In addition, we would either have to endorse internalism about normativity or externalism about rationality. I finally argue that Broome’s dispute with proponents of such views hinges on questions regarding

responsibility (section 4). I conclude that discussions about responsibility should play a central role within debates about rationality (section 5).

2. Rationality_{RESP}

Philosophers often pick out specific uses of a term in order to determine the object of their theory. Broome thinks that

[f]or the sake of philosophical analysis, we must expect to have to give ‘ought’ a more precise meaning than it has in common English. At the very least, we may exclude some ordinary uses of ‘ought’ in order to avoid ambiguity. (2016: 6)

The uses of a word on which a philosophical theory focusses are ideally determined by the philosopher’s interests. One of the central philosophical interests in thinking about rationality is to understand the significance of rational requirements—as a central interest in thinking about morality is to understand the significance of moral requirements. I argue in this section that this specific theoretical interest justifies a restriction to uses of ‘rational’ that refer to instances of rationality for which we are held responsible.

To see what I mean by rationality_{RESP}, consider how irrationality is used as implying criticizability in the debate. When Parfit uses ‘irrational’, he uses the term ‘in its ordinary sense, to mean, roughly, ‘deserves strong criticism of the kind that we also express with words like “foolish”, “stupid”, and “crazy”’” (Parfit 2011: 123). Kieseewetter (2017: chapter 2) points out that we use ‘irrational’ as *personal* criticism (see also Lord 2018: 4, Way 2009: 1). That is, we use this word (sometimes) in order to criticize another person for a response. This form of criticism contrasts with merely evaluating a response as bad and with merely criticizing the person’s rational subsystem for malfunctioning. Proponents of the current debate take the criticizability of irrationality to support the thought that rational requirements have a certain *authority* that other norms—say, those of etiquette—lack.

Insofar as theorists of rationality are interested in a property closely connected to criticism and praise, they restrict their argument to the uses of ‘(ir)rational’ that interest them, and exclude uses of ‘irrational’ that, for example, refer to pathology. In this vein, Kieseewetter writes that

[t]he notion of irrationality we are interested in when asking for the normativity of rationality—the one that is associated with legitimate criticism—does, I think, require the capacity to modify one’s attitudes in the light of reflection, and thus the absence of compulsion. (Kiesewetter 2017: 100)

Being irrational_{RESP} presupposes that the person is *directly* responsible for the attitudes that are evaluated as irrational. To see this, compare it with uses of ‘irrational’ that do not imply *direct* criticizability. Arachnophobia is irrational—a person suffering from it often fears a spider knowing that it is not dangerous. And yet we do not criticize arachnophobes *directly* for their fears. Rather, we hold them at most *indirectly* responsible (for doing therapy, for example). Such uses of ‘irrational’ do not raise any question for the authority of a requirement to be rational. There just is no requirement in place not to fear spiders if the fear is not something for which the person is directly responsible.

Thus, current theories of rationality focus on rationality_{RESP}. Furthermore, this restriction seems to be justified insofar as it is pointless to require someone to be rational in cases of irrationality for which one is not directly responsible. The normative authority of rational requirements can be in place only if we are responsible for whether we comply with these requirements.

3. Reasons-responsiveness

According to the normative sense of ‘rational’, what rationality requires is just what you ought to (do, believe, intend). Broome thinks that ‘the normative sense is an invention of philosophers’ (Broome 2021, [sect. 4](#)). The ordinary use of ‘rational’, he says, is not identical to the normative sense.

If only requirements of rationality_{RESP} are normatively authoritative, then this allows for the following reply to Broome: Even though our ordinary use of ‘rational’ is not identical with the normative sense, rationality_{RESP} can only consist in responding correctly to reasons. That is, while *other* uses of ‘(ir)rational’ that do not imply blame- or praiseworthiness could be understood as referring to forms of (in)coherence, rationality_{RESP} is more plausibly understood as a form of reasons-responsiveness. In this section, I sketch an argument for this idea.

As mentioned in section 2 above, a straightforward way of defending the authority of rational requirements is to argue that their authority is implied by the fact that violating rational

requirements makes us criticizable. Let me begin by pointing out a *prima facie* problem for any such *argument from criticizability*. I then modify this argument so that it builds on the idea that the criticism in question presupposes responsibility—i.e., amounts to a form of *blame*.

The *prima facie* problem for any argument from criticizability is that not all forms of criticizing a person imply that they violated a normative requirement. Take the forms of criticism Parfit mentions ('foolish', 'stupid', 'crazy'). Such expressions might be applied to a person because of some cognitive malfunctioning for which they are not responsible. If they are not responsible for it, then we could not say that the criticized person 'ought not' to be foolish (etc.). The criticizability-intuition thus can only support the authority of rational requirements if we take the criticism in question to presuppose direct responsibility for the irrational attitudes—i.e., if we take the criticism to be a form of *blame*.

I thus suggest the following modification: the *argument from responsibility*. It starts off by pointing out that merely being incoherent is not a good ground for blame. For incoherence might be pathological: if you believe that *p* and believe that not-*p* then you need not be blameworthy for holding your incoherent set of beliefs. In such cases, your incoherence might not be sufficiently responsive to reasons for you to be responsible for it. By contrast, reasons-responsiveness is a plausible ground for responsibility: in order for you to be directly responsible for your attitudes, they must be sufficiently responsive to reasons. Failing to properly exercise your capacity of reasons-responsiveness can make you blameworthy. Thus, since reasons-responsiveness is a much better ground for responsibility than merely having (in)coherent attitudes, rationality_{RESP} is more plausibly a form of reasons-responsiveness.

One could object that this confuses reasons-responsiveness—a capacity that grounds responsibility—with responding correctly to reasons—which is a specific way of exercising reasons-responsiveness. It might be true that any attitude that is evaluated as (ir)rational_{RESP} needs to be sufficiently responsive to reasons. But that does not imply that whenever we are (ir)rational_{RESP}, we (fail) to respond correctly to our reasons.

This objection assumes the falsity of the following principle:

NC. If you are responsible for whether you comply with norm *N* in virtue of a capacity *C*, then your praise- or blameworthiness for complying or, respectively, violating *N* is grounded in a successful exercise or, respectively, failure of *C*.

If NC was true, and if our responsibility for whether we are (ir)rational is grounded in reasons-responsiveness, then our praise- or blameworthiness for being (ir)rational is grounded in a successful exercise or, respectively, failure of reasons-responsiveness. That is, whenever we are responsible for our (ir)rationality, we respond correctly or, respectively, fail to respond correctly to our reasons. NC has initial plausibility when we think about moral requirements: It seems that *if* our responsibility for complying with moral requirements is grounded in our ability to voluntarily control our conduct, then we are praise- or blameworthy in virtue of our successful exercise or failure of voluntary control.

This is not the place to defend NC. My aim was to present an argument why rationality_{RESP} is plausibly understood as reasons-responsiveness. Discussing the arguments from criticizability or from responsibility would require discussing the concept of responsibility and its conceptual connections to norms and reasons. I think that both arguments are interesting enough to merit such discussions.

If the argument from responsibility is sound, then Broome could react in two ways. He could argue that his own theory does not focus on rationality_{RESP}. However, then his dispute with Lord and Kieseewetter might be only apparent. Or Broome could say that his theory is also only concerned with instances of (in)coherence for which we are responsible. However, together with the argument from responsibility, this would imply that whenever we are (in)coherent (in the relevant sense), we (fail to) respond correctly to our reasons. Broome's opposition to theories of rationality as reasons-responsiveness would then not be an opposition against the idea that rational requirements are requirements to respond to one's reasons. Rather, he then merely denies that we *ought* to respond to the reasons that we *possess* or that are *accessible* to us. I now turn to this dispute.

4. Internalisms and Externalisms

Lord and Kieseewetter argue that what rationality requires is what you ought to (do, believe, intend). A problem is that, intuitively, rationality supervenes on the mind, while normativity does not: what you ought to do can be affected by facts outside your ken; but what is rational for you cannot be affected by such facts. Kieseewetter replies to this problem by arguing that normativity supervenes on the mind (like rationality); Lord replies to it by arguing that rationality does *not*

always supervene on the mind (like normativity). Broome rejects both strategies. I illustrate in this section how questions about responsibility become relevant to these disputes if we talk about rationality_{RESP}.

4.1 Internalism about normativity

Consider Broome's argument against Kieseewetter's claim that normativity supervenes on the mind. Broome argues that normativity sometimes requires us to act on the outside world, and thus cannot supervene on the mind. But rationality does supervene on the mind. Thus, normativity and rationality are not identical (see Broome 2021, [sect. 6](#)).

One way to respond to this is to reject that theories of rationality are concerned with actions: the most they can do is to show that the *attitudes* that rationality requires are the ones we ought to have; they do not claim that the *actions* that rationality requires (if it requires any at all) are the ones we ought to perform. However, it is not clear to me whether all philosophers engaging in the debate would accept this restriction. Internalists might instead want to find a way of rejecting Broome's assumption that normativity does not supervene on the mind if it sometimes requires us to act on the outside world.¹

Even if internalists are successful in making this intelligible, Broome's objection will provide another challenge for them, stemming from the concept of responsibility. For the debate's focus on rationality_{RESP} suggests the following version of Broome's argument:

- (1) We are not responsible for things that we could not foresee.
- (2) If (1), then rationality_{RESP} cannot require us to act on the outside world.
- (3) However, we sometimes ought to act on the outside world.
- (4) Thus, what we ought to do is not always what rationality_{RESP} requires us to do.

One could object to (2) that our actions are not always unforeseeable—namely, in cases where we have a certain amount of control over (and thus knowledge of) whether our actions will be successful. In reply, Broome could modify the notion of 'acting on the outside world' in such a way that it means 'acting when our success is not under our control'. However, then (3) is

¹ See Kieseewetter (this edition) for both strategies mentioned in this paragraph.

implausible if one accepts ‘ought implies can’: if our success is not under our control, then it is also false that we *ought* to act on the outside world.

I suspect that Broome would object that it is possible that we take all reasonable means in order to ensure that we do what we ought to do and yet fail to do what we ought to do due to circumstances outside our control (cf. his case where we ‘ought to insure our house against fire’ (Broome 2021, [sect. 6](#))). If we accept this, the only way to respond to his argument is to reject (1)—i.e., to allow that we can be responsible for things that we could not foresee.

4.2 Externalism about rationality

Questions concerning responsibility also matter for Broome’s dispute with Lord. Lord thinks that his view about rationality allows him to account for our intuitions about the equal rationality of persons in good and bad cases (bad cases are those in which a subject is radically deceived about their environment, but which are, from the subject’s perspective, indistinguishable from good cases, in which the subject’s duplicate is not deceived). However, Lord (2018: 198) concedes that, according to his account, there will always be cases conceivable in which the subject in the bad case is *less rational* merely because they were systematically deceived.

Whether Lord’s view is maintainable will depend on what conception of responsibility is plausible. If we are responsible for being less rational in the bad case (than in the good case), then the subject in the bad case could be *more* blameworthy than their good-case duplicate. Our blameworthiness could change due to mere luck. In ethics, there is discussion about the possibility of ‘moral luck’. Defending an externalist account of rationality_{RESP} is to argue that there is a corresponding thing when it comes to rationality—call it ‘rational luck’. If holding someone responsible for their (ir)rationality is a matter of adjusting our attitudes towards the person in certain ways (by forms of praise and blame), then the dispute is about the following question: Can it be appropriate to have different attitudes (of the relevant kind) towards A than towards B even though A’s and B’s situations are identical from their perspective?

5. Concluding Remark

Questions concerning responsibility are central to the rationality debate. The focus of the debate on rationality_{RESP} supports the idea that to be rational is to respond correctly to one’s reasons, and might thus be identical to normativity. Furthermore, this focus implies that debates between

internalists and externalists (about normativity and rationality) hinge on questions concerning responsibility. Theorists of rationality should thus engage in debates about responsibility.

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