

On Being 'Rational' About Norms

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There is a strong tendency in contemporary meta-value theory to move away from the emotivism and value relativism which has prevailed for the past several decades in the direction of a revived rationalism and absolutism. Such theorists as Kurt Baier, William K. Frankena, Paul W. Taylor and others have attempted to revive the perennial philosophical hope that we can eventually arrive at a system of absolute values in the name of "reason". We are reminded that those who try to be rational in their thinking about values often do seem to be moving in the same direction, and the promise is issued that there is some set of ultimate values which must finally be universally accepted by all fully rational men, a system on which all competent rational authorities are ultimately destined to agree.

The theses of this paper will be: I. that the attempt to found absolute norms on rationality presupposes the availability of a single universal absolute conception of rationality but that no such conception is available; and II. that any conception of rationality which might be available for justifying one's *ultimate* normative commitments is itself evaluative. I shall try to show that such a conception of rationality presupposes agreement upon an ultimate set of norms and does not provide grounds for such, that it can and will always be disputed by those who share a different set of ultimate norms, and that unless one admits the evaluative character of a certain kind of conception of rationality and the relativity of the values it expresses to some concrete way of life, he is in danger of trying to

settle substantive disputes with a mere definition.

I. Is there a universal conception of "rationality"? The word "rational" is probably used more by Philosophers than by ordinary men, and in the ordinary language of philosophers the word doubtless has a variety of meanings. I will not attempt to make an exhaustive study of these but will suggest that there are at least two important senses of "rational" available, a) the logical sense and b) the evaluative sense.

a) Usually we speak of men and their decisions or of procedures of inference and their conclusions as "rational". An inference procedure is rational in the logical sense when it conforms to the canons of correct inference as given in inductive logic, deductive logic, or some other logic if there is a legitimate "third logic" alternative to induction and deduction. A man is rational when his inferences are logically correct, when he simply follows the rules of correct inference in arriving at his conclusions; and his conclusions are rational if they have been reached through such inference procedures. "Rational" in this sense is interchangeable with "logical".

It is obvious that no inference procedure used in establishing one's *ultimate* normative commitments can be

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rational in the logical sense and consequently that no man can be rational in this sense in making those commitments. Ultimate normative commitments are those which cannot be derived from any considerations which are logically more fundamental than themselves. Sentences expressing these commitments can function only as premisses and never as conclusions of arguments and thus cannot be arrived at through any process of logical inference. If sentences expressing ultimate norms are inferrable as conclusions in deductive, inductive or any other alternative logic, then they are not *ultimate*; (and if they are inferrable in inductive logic they are not normative but only naturalistic or descriptive). Hence no sentence expressing an *ultimate* normative commitment can be "rational" in the logical sense of being correctly inferred, and no man can be said to be rational in the logical sense with respect to his ultimate normative commitments since he cannot arrive at them by any process of logical inference. A new sense of "rational" is here required if the word is to be used at all.

b) What I shall call the "evaluative sense" of "rational" is the sense which applies to *decisions of ultimate principle* and the men who make them. The word often does have an evaluative force. Calling a man "rational" is often an indication that we positively prize his presence in the world, that we regard him as worthy of respect or admirable, and that we share his value commitments.

A sense of "rational" in which men and their decisions can be called "rational" has been explicated in some detail by Paul W. Taylor in Chapter 8 of his *Normative Discourse*.¹ This conception of rationality is explicitly designed to apply to ultimate decisions of value and principle after all inference procedures have been left behind. These decisions are justified when made under conditions of "rational choice", though

Taylor points out that no man can do more than approximate to the conditions of rationality under which such choices ideally should be made, the conditions of *complete* freedom, enlightenment and impartiality.² To be "rational" in this sense, a *decision* must be made under these conditions, and a *man* must satisfy them as best he can if he is to be "rational" in making such decisions.

Taylor makes several interesting claims about this conception of "rationality". He claims 1) that such a conception of rationality is universal and 2) that such a conception is valuationally neutral in the sense that it is independent of and does not prejudice the case in favor of *any one* concrete way of life with its ingredient points of view and systems of value. In this sense he would doubtless not agree with my calling the sense of "rational" which he explicates "evaluative", but I wish to show later in this paper that it is.

For the moment I wish to examine only claim 1) that such a conception of rationality is universal. Taylor tells us that the three conditions of rationality which he offers "are the conditions which I presume *anyone* in *any* way of life, would accept as defining a rational choice, in the ordinary sense of the word rational,"³ though he invites us to improve upon the definition if we can. He further claims that he is only making explicit "the idea which we all have (no matter what may be our way of life) when we reflect about what an ideally rational choice among ways of life would be."⁴ Presumably he is suggesting that his conception of rationality is not a culture-bound concept but is present in all cultures, though perhaps not in the minds of the children, illiterate, and mentally defective citizens of those cultures.

One might suspect that Taylor is only doing a bit of wishful thinking

here, that he is suggesting that we all *could* have his conception of rationality if we all shared the same language or conceptual scheme or system of values, or that he is proposing that we all *ought* to have this conception. Such suggestions or proposals are harmless enough so long as we recognize them for what they are. But if we take Taylor's words at face value, it appears that he wants to make some sort of empirical claim, the claim that we all in fact have and share his conception of rationality no matter what might be our culture or way of life.

Unfortunately it is not completely clear what Taylor's empirical claim entails. If he is suggesting that every living human language has a word or set of words which could be correctly translated by our word "rational" used in Taylor's sense, then we should expect some documentation of the claim derived from the field of comparative linguistics, which Taylor has not provided. If Taylor is suggesting that all men in all cultures who have regarded their codes of behavior and systems of value as rationally justified have included the constituent notion of "impartiality" as an ingredient in their conception of rationality, his claim is clearly false. John Ladd has pointed out that the Navaho code of conduct is both rational⁵ and thoroughly prudential or partial.⁶ Indeed, Ladd has written that the "impartial spectator" approach to human codes of conduct "is ethnocentric, for not only is it not to be found among the Greeks but I find nothing resembling it in Navaho culture."⁷ Such considerations do make highly implausible Taylor's claim that his conception of rationality is universal.

It is not at all clear that even within ordinary English this is the *only* conception of rationality that we ever apply to decisions of principle and the men who make them. For example, sometimes we replace the notion of impartiality with the notion of partiality or

self-interest when we use the words "rational" or "reasonable". The soldier who insists that it would not be rational of him to volunteer for the suicide mission is doing just this, as is the critic of the Sermon on the Mount who insists that it just isn't rational to turn the other cheek or deny himself the visual enjoyment of feminine beauty. I would conjecture that even the rich young man justified his rejection of Jesus' demand that he give all that he had to the poor with the comment that this just wasn't a reasonable request! The conception of "reasonable" to which I am now calling attention is one according to which my decision is "reasonable" if it is in my partial self-interest, not because it is impartial. This conception has appeared occasionally in the writings of such philosophers as Butler and Sidgwick, who were themselves masters of ordinary English.⁸

Although many of us westerners or English speakers probably have the conception of rationality which Taylor explicates, even we do not *always* use it in talking about men and their decisions. In fact we sometimes use an opposing conception. This still leaves the question open whether it would be *best* to purify our language in such a way that only one of these senses survived. And any reasons we might give to explain why we *ought* always to speak consistently of rationality in only one sense would in all likelihood be evaluative and highly dependent on our way of life, as I shall next attempt to show.

II. How does the evaluative sense of "rational" reflect and depend upon the way of life to which we are committed? Here I wish to examine Taylor's claim that his conception of rationality is valuationally neutral in the sense that it is independent of and does not prejudice the case in favor of any one concrete way of life. I wish to show that these claims are misleading and that they involve the attempt to settle substantive disputes with mere definitions.

If our ultimate normative commitments are to be reasonable rather than merely arbitrary, they *should* be made under conditions of "rational choice", according to Taylor. Notice that I said "should be made" and not "in fact are made". Taylor wishes to maintain that after all inferential reasoning about our value judgments has ended, our decisions of ultimate principle are still not *arbitrary*. There is still something more that the rational man will *want* to consider. He will want to make his decisions under conditions of freedom, enlightenment and impartiality—presumably because he prizes these conditions of rationality and the decisions made under them. Ideally our ultimate normative commitments ought to be made under conditions of complete freedom from external, internal, and unconscious compulsion,⁹ complete knowledge as to the nature of the way of life being chosen, its price, and its consequences,¹⁰ and complete impartiality in the sense that the person making the choice is not trying to give himself any special privileges or the way of life in which he was brought up any special favoritism.¹¹ Of course no one can ever be completely rational in the sense specified, but Taylor is willing to allow that in some sense it is still appropriate to call our choices "rational" to the degree that we can approximate the ideal.¹²

Taylor claims that the conception of rationality involved in his "rational choice" is universally accepted by everyone, that it is independent of all concrete ways of life, and that it does not prejudice the case in favor of any one concrete way of life. To his question: "am I not begging the question by giving conditions for a rational choice which are themselves part of a way of life?" he gives a negative answer.¹³ His main argument here is that a man making a rational choice between various ways of life is not logically committed to choosing a rational way of life. He informs us that "*there is no necessity that the preferred ways of life have*

the same characteristics as the rational choice itself." Presumably he means that a man could freely choose a life of compulsion, knowingly choose a life of ignorance, and impartially choose a life of prudential partiality. Even if we are willing to grant all this, it still does not follow that "rational choice" is normatively neutral. A rational choice of an irrational way of life must be regarded as a transition from one ideal way of life to another and not as a transition into an ideal way of life from a valuationally neutral standpoint. The difficulty that Taylor gets himself into with the manoeuvre at hand is that if the opposite of a way of life is evaluative, then that way of life itself must be evaluative. If there is an irrational way of life, then there must be a rational way of life. Furthermore, one just might rationally choose a life of rationality as *better* than a life of irrationality. Indeed without having already done so one would probably never be in a position to make a rational choice in the first place. And I suspect that since knowledge, freedom and the attitude of impartiality must be cultivated at the expense of considerable effort in order to place oneself in such a position and involve the formation of permanent dispositions and habits of mind, one would be strongly predisposed psychologically to rationally prefer rationality over irrationality!

Assuming that we did rationally choose to live a rational life, let us now inquire as to what kind of life we would be committing ourselves to in the name of rationality. Obviously we would be committing ourselves to cultivating and using freedom and knowledge, but I should like to focus attention especially on the fact that we would be committing ourselves to live impartially rather than partially. If we accept Taylor's definition of "rationality" and then try to live a rational life, we are thereby committing ourselves not only to think but also to act impartially. Thus in the name of "reason" it would be logically

impossible for us to assert the primacy of the prudential point of view! It turns out that the rational man is by definition the moral man, and in committing ourselves to be rational in Taylor's sense we would thereby be committing ourselves to the primacy of the moral point of view since "impartiality" is one of the defining characteristics of that point of view. It would be logically impossible for us to assert the primacy of the partial, self-interested point of view of prudence in the name of rationality.

As Philosophers who presumably are committed to living rationally, let us now ask ourselves if we are satisfied with the outcome of all this. How many of us realized that we were committing ourselves to be moral men at the same time we chose to be reasonable men? The dilemma which now faces us is this. Either we must say that prudentialism is irrational, or we must offer an alternative conception of rationality to the one which Taylor has explicated. The first alternative is perilous, for if we adopt it the sincere prudentialist will not thereby be persuaded that his position is an unreasonable one. He will accuse us of verbal trickery, of trying to settle disputes over questions of substance with a mere definition. The same sort of trick is involved here as is involved in the definition of "morality" as having as a part of its meaning "the point of view which is always supreme or overriding",¹⁵ and the prudentialist will have none of it.

That prudentialism would be irrational given Taylor's conception of rationality can be more clearly seen if we look briefly at some important differences between the moral and prudential points of view. I am fully aware that any definition of "morality" which I provide might be controversial,¹⁶ and I regard the following as a minimal rather than a complete characterization of the moral point of view. First of all, the man who is committed to the moral

point of view is thereby committed to regarding the welfare of others as one of his own final ends and not as merely a means to his own immediate or even long range welfare. By contrast, being committed to the prudential point of view involves regarding only his own welfare as his own final end and looking upon the welfare of others as a means to his own long range well being. Secondly, the moral point of view may require the man who is committed to it to sacrifice even his own long range welfare for the greater good of others, while the prudential point of view never requires long range self-sacrifice. Thirdly, the moral point of view always involves a high degree of impartiality, whereas the prudential point of view is precisely that of partial self-interest. It is at this point that "morality" and "rationality" in Taylor's sense overlap, and at which "prudence" and "rationality" fail to coincide. In distributing privileges and good things, the moral point of view requires that no one (including myself) be given special treatment or consideration without some *general* reason for doing so, whereas the prudential point of view requires that I give all the special treatment and consideration to myself that I can get away with for no general reasons at all. Finally, the moral point of view is a universal point of view in the sense that moral standards and rules must be regarded as universally applicable to everyone, whereas anyone who adopts the prudential point of view may regard his standards and rules as applicable only to himself.¹⁷

Of course the prudentialist can always be criticized for not wanting to universalize his norms, but such criticisms are always made from the moral point of view and not that of prudence itself. To expect the prudentialist to take such criticisms seriously is to expect him already to have adopted the moral point of view, which he has not done. On his own grounds he is immune to such rebuffs. Similarly, from the moral

point of view, his partial self interest can be called "irrational" in Taylor's sense of rationality because that sense has the moral point of view written into its very conception; but the prudentialist is again immune to such rebuffs on his own ground. He can point out that such a conception of irrationality is question begging, which it is.

At this point the prudentialist may want to fall back on the prudentialist conception of rationality to which Butler and Sidgwick call attention and claim that his position is rational in that sense. However, he must recognize that this conception of rationality is itself evaluative, that it has the prudential point of view built into its very meaning just as Taylor's conception of rationality has the moral point of view built into it. This conception begs the question from the opposite direction, and *the moralist* should be quick to recognize it.

I will now propose that a revised conception of rationality which is neutral with respect to morality and prudence be adopted. This could be done for example by omitting all reference to either impartiality or partiality and

retaining the aspects of knowledge and freedom which Taylor includes.¹⁵

I wish to further point out that the *logical* sense of "rationality" discussed earlier is also neutral with respect to morality and prudence. We *may be* but do not *have* to be committed to either morality or prudence in order to reason correctly in the logical sense, but Taylor seems to confuse the logical and evaluative senses of rationality when he argues that the person who asks "Why should I be rational?" is already presupposing rationality in asking for *reasons* for being rational.¹⁹ Such a person certainly is presupposing the validity of logic and is already committed to rationality in the logical sense. But it cannot be inferred from this that the evaluative sense of rationality is presupposed by the request for reasons for being rational, and Taylor at least leaves the impression that such is involved. The question "Why should I be rational?" might mean "Why should I be impartial?" and this question can never be satisfactorily answered by saying that the questioner is already committed to being impartial in asking for reasons! No shrewd prudentialist can ever be dislodged from his position by such verbal chicanery!

¹ Paul W. Taylor, *Normative Discourse* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, 1961), pp.

² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.
151-188.

⁶ John Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1957), p. 204.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 292-297.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸ For a summary of Sidgwick's position and his relation to Butler, see Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 6th edition (Macmillan and Co., New York, 1901), pp. xvi-xix.

⁹ Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-174.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁵ Kurt Baier seems to beg this question when he writes: "The very *raison d'etre* of a morality is to yield reasons which overrule the reasons of self-interest in those cases when everyone's following self-interest would be harmful to everyone. Hence moral reasons are superior to all

- others." Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Random House, New York, 1965), p. 150.
- ¹⁶ Many of the problems involved in defining "morality" are explored in W. K. Frankena's article titled "Recent Conceptions of Morality" which appears in Hector-Neri Castaneda and George Nakhnikian, *Morality and the Language of Conduct* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1965), pp. 1-24. See also Frankena's article titled "The Concept of Morality," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXIII, No. 21, Nov. 10, 1966, pp. 688-696.
- ¹⁷ This is especially true of the position which John Hospers has identified as "personal ethical egoism." See John Hospers, *Human Conduct* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1961), p. 158.
- ¹⁸ Such a conception would still be evaluative in a way because it would still suggest that enlightenment and freedom are *better* than ignorance and constraint, but at least the concept would be neutral in the dispute between morality and prudence.
- ¹⁹ Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 182.