

Kiesewetter, Benjamin. *The Normativity of Rationality*.

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Benjamin Kiesewetter has written an exceptional book on an important and challenging topic, the normative significance of rationality. He defends the view that rationality is normative by arguing that the requirements of rationality are in each instance generated by the normative reasons that determine what we ought to do. He develops a subtle view about the relationship between reasons and rationality, one that's designed to settle difficult questions about whether we ought to conform to the requirements of rationality and explain why it matters if we do. His book combines cleverness and originality with careful exploration of difficult terrain. It is ambitious. It contains genuine insight. I have been telling everyone who will listen that they should read it. I recommend it to you without reservation.

Let's suppose that Agnes believes that she ought to press one button, the green one. She intentionally presses the red button and not because she struggles to distinguish buttons by their colour. Because she loves The Platters, Agnes intends to turn up the radio. She knows that she has to turn the dial clockwise to do this. She turns the dial anticlockwise, turning down the song she wants to hear so that it is no longer audible. Most of us would agree that Agnes was irrational. We somehow know this even though we know little about the situation she is in or what reasons she had. It might appear, then, that she is irrational because she is incoherent in a certain way. It might seem that the irrationality is due to some structural flaw. Is that all there is to irrationality? If irrationality is nothing but a bad pattern, it isn't clear that we should care about whether we conform to its requirements.

Kiesewetter rightly observes that rationality matters to us in a way that mere mental tidiness does not. After introducing the problem of the normativity of rationality in Chapter 1, he argues in Chapter 2 that rationality is normative and that the charge of irrationality is a kind of personal criticism—we criticize the person for failing to respond to decisive reason(s). If each rational

failing corresponds to a failure to respond correctly to reasons, it isn't surprising that rationality matters. If anything matters, it matters if we respond correctly to reasons.

Chapters 3-6 are dedicated to identifying problems with views that treat rational requirements as fundamentally structural (i.e., as essentially being requirements to have or avoid certain combinations of attitudes). If rational requirements are indeed normative, it would seem that no narrow-scope or wide-scope treatment of these requirements could be right. The narrow-scope accounts (e.g., accounts that say that it's irrational not to intend to ϕ , say, *because* you happen to believe that you ought to ϕ) license an objectionable kind of bootstrapping and the wide-scope approaches have no plausible story to tell about why there should be decisive reason to have or avoid combinations of mental states if such reasons aren't in their first instance reasons to have or avoid having particular mental states.

In Chapters 7 and 8, Kieseewetter offers his non-structural account of rational requirements. On his view, rationality consists in responding correctly to normative reasons. Consider the Enkratic Requirement. Without getting too fussy about formulation, the rough idea is that Agnes was irrational because she intentionally pressed the red button having judged that she ought to press the green. Although this mismatch between normative belief and intention is sufficient to ensure that Agnes is irrational, the fundamental irrationality is not down to this mismatch but with her failure to respond correctly to reasons. Either Agnes lacked sufficient reason for the normative belief (so this belief's being an incorrect response to reasons was responsible for the rational failure) or she had sufficient reason for this belief and so had decisive reason not to act against it (so the failure to intend to press the green button was responsible for the rational failure). This proposal explains why some of us have been misled into thinking that rational requirements are fundamentally structural—there are truths about rationality that can be stated in structural terms, but they are in each case down to some non-structural mismatch between normative reasons and the agent's rationally evaluable responses to her situation. In Chapters 9 and 10, Kieseewetter works out in detail how an individual would fail to respond correctly to

reasons if she were akratic, if she didn't draw the known consequences of her rationally held beliefs when trying to settle some specific question, and if she were instrumentally irrational.

Readers are probably keenly aware of the standard objection to this idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. Recall Broome's fish. (John Broome, "Does Rationality Consist in Responding Correctly to Reasons?" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 4 [2007]: 349-74.) The fish looks and smells great. It is high in protein and low in cholesterol. You know all of this. What you do not know is that the fish contains salmonella. Surely this is a reason not to eat, one that outweighs all the reasons to eat. So, it would seem, you ought not eat it. Nevertheless, it seems perfectly rational to eat the fish given the information available. Broome concludes that rationality cannot consist in responding correctly to reasons. The rational response (i.e., eating the fish) differs from the correct response or the response supported by the weightiest reasons (i.e., throwing the fish away).

Kiesewetter responds to this objection by arguing in Chapter 8 that there are epistemic constraints on normative reasons:

Objective Perspectivism: What A ought to do depends primarily on the facts that are epistemically available to A (198).

Although facts about the situation will typically be among those that determine what we ought to do and what would be rational to do, these facts are available to us because they're part of our evidence:

The Evidence-Relative View: A has decisive reason to ϕ iff A has decisive *available* reason to ϕ (199)

Synchronic Evidence Constraint: At t, R is a reason for A to ϕ at t, only if at t, A's evidence includes R (200).

By restricting normative reasons to those that are available to the agent, Kiesewetter tries to undercut Broome's objection to the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to

reasons. Rationality, he proposes, consists in responding correctly to just those reasons that help determine what we ought to do.

Kiesewetter offers a number of interesting arguments in support of this epistemically-constrained account of normative reasons. According to his misguidance argument (206-211), our judgments about reasons and 'ought' should be able to guide us. It should not be irresponsible to follow the guidance of reasons if they determine what we ought to do. To show that normative reasons must be epistemically-constrained, he asks us to consider decisions in cases of uncertainty. Recall Jackson's three-drugs case (Frank Jackson, "Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection," *Ethics* 101 [1991]: 461-482). A doctor has three drugs that she might prescribe her patient for a mild condition. One kills, one cures, and one will give a partial cure. She knows that the third drug will give a partial cure but cannot remember which one kills and which one completely cures. On pure objectivist views (i.e., views that recognize no epistemic constraints on normative reasons or the factors that determine what an agent ought to do), the doctor ought not give the drug that gives a partial cure—she ought to give the patient the drug that completely cures the patient. It would be irresponsible, however, for the doctor to give the patient anything but the partial cure. It seems rather intuitive to say that the doctor ought to give the partial cure even though we know that this could not be the best thing for the doctor to do. Kiesewetter thinks that it should be possible for an agent to make a responsible decision if she reasons in accordance with the right theory of reasons. This would rule out objectivist approaches that do not build in an evidence-relative constraint on normative reasons.

Let me identify a few areas where I would expect some critics to push back. One reason that I've been sceptical of the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to normative reasons is that responding correctly appears to involve two factors: identifying reasons and handling them and their demands properly. On any approach that identifies some reasons with facts about the situation, it seems that epistemic counterparts (i.e., non-factive mental duplicates) disposed to reason in just the same way might not do equally well in spotting or identifying the

reasons that apply to them even though they're disposed to reason in the same ways. They would manifest equal *de re* responsiveness, but their responses might differ in terms of whether they responded to actual reasons or merely apparent ones. Agnes might know, say, that a child is struggling to swim and Inge might falsely believe this because things look to her just the way they look to Agnes. I would say that they responded to their situations rationally if they both jumped in to help, but wouldn't say that there was equally good reason for them to jump in these situations.

In general, I think that for pretty much any application condition for a norm or any normal candidate for a normative reason, a fully rational agent might fail to identify the reasons that apply to them without thereby failing to respond rationally. (See Clayton Littlejohn, *Justification and the Truth-Connection*. Cambridge University Press 2012.) This is why I think we must distinguish a justified response (i.e., responding in ways that correspond to sufficient reason) from a rational response (i.e., responding in a way that manifests the kind of rational excellence on display with the proper processing of apparent reasons) where the former is a matter of rightness, permissibility, or acceptability, and the latter is sufficient only for a kind of excuse. Thus, I think we should weaken Reasons-Rationality Strong, the thesis that Kieseewetter defends, to allow that in some cases of mistaken belief the rational response is not right or justified:

Reasons-Rationality Strong: If A is properly criticisable for not ϕ -ing, there is decisive available reason for A to ϕ .

Reasons-Rationality Weak: If A is properly criticisable for not ϕ -ing, this is because A or one of A's epistemic counterparts has decisive available reason to ϕ .

The rough idea behind Reasons-Rationality Weak is that the counterparts of the agent who does in fact fail to respond to decisive available reason have all shown themselves to be equally insensitive to some normatively significant consideration even though they differ in terms of whether they actually were aware of the relevant normatively significant fact.

I think that error cases are good counterexamples to Reasons-Rationality Strong. Reasons-Rationality Weak isn't sufficiently strong to serve Kieseewetter's purposes because it doesn't support the view that rational requirements can be paired off with decisive reasons. The evidence-relativity of reasons doesn't help with error cases, only with cases of ignorance. Kieseewetter isn't unaware of this wrinkle. He thinks that he can handle error cases by introducing backup reasons (171-80). The rough idea is this. In the epistemically good case (i.e., the case in which the agent's beliefs about the circumstance constitute knowledge), an agent might be aware of a number of reasons that bear on whether to ϕ where those reasons consist of facts about the situation. In epistemically bad cases, an agent in the same or similar psychological states might harbour mistaken beliefs about her situation but nevertheless be aware of correlative 'backup reasons', reasons that the agent could know in the bad case that favour the same responses as the responses favoured by the reasons possessed in the good.

Because Agnes is aware of the child in need of help, she is aware of an excellent reason to jump into the pond. Because Inge mistakenly believes that a child needs help, she is not aware of this reason. She is, Kieseewetter suggests, aware of a 'backup reason'—the fact that it appears that a child is in danger of drowning. According to the backup reasons proposal, if p constitutes a decisive available reason for one agent to ϕ , internally similar agents who mistakenly believe p would have a different decisive available reason to ϕ , something like the fact that it appears to them that p . In each case, the winning reason would be known to the agent, these reasons would favour the same responses, these reasons would do equally well in defeating reasons that favour alternatives, but the agent in a bad case might have some subset of reasons that an agent in the good case would have where these reasons are facts that the agent could know in the bad case.

I have two concerns with this backup reasons proposal. First, I think that the proposal isn't plausible in the case of emotion. I'll borrow an example from Maria Alvarez. (See Maria Alvarez, "Reasons for Action, Acting for Reasons, and Rationality", *Synthese* [forthcoming]). Change the play. What if Othello had known that Desdemona was unfaithful? Let's suppose that

under these conditions, it would have been rational for him to be upset with her *and* that he was aware of something that was a good reason for being upset with her. (Obviously, the actions aren't ones that anyone would justify.) As the story was told, Othello was mistaken in his beliefs about Desdemona. If, as Kieseletter believes, rationality supervenes upon an individual's non-factive mental states, Othello is equally rational in being upset with Desdemona in both versions of the story. Reasons-Rationality Strong tells us there must be some good reason that Othello is aware of to be upset with Desdemona even when his beliefs about her are mistaken. I think Alvarez is right that it doesn't seem that any of the facts that Othello was aware of are good reasons for him to be upset. It might be *rational* for him to be upset, but *not* because the facts he's aware of constitute good reasons to be upset with her. The fact that it appears that Desdemona was unfaithful is not a good reason for being upset with Desdemona. Othello wouldn't have thought so, at any rate. And if he did, we would think very differently of Shakespeare's play.

Second, I think the view has strange implications for epistemology. Inge should have low credence in the proposition that she'll win the lottery. Consider the disjunctive proposition that she'll win the lottery or there is beer in her fridge. She opens the fridge and looks inside. She sees beer and comes to know that there's beer in her fridge. For her part, Agnes looks in her fridge. It looks to her as if there is beer in the fridge, but she's mistaken. Consider four propositions:

b: There is beer in the fridge.

a: It appears to me that there is beer in the fridge.

d: Either I will win the lottery or there is beer in the fridge.

Before looking, Agnes and Inge had the same credence in *b*, *a*, *d*, and the various conditional credences concerning these propositions. Upon learning *a* and *b*, it seems that Inge ought to conditionalize and her posterior in *d* ought to match her prior conditional credence of *d* on everything she learned (i.e., *a* and *b*). Upon learning *a*, Agnes ought to conditionalize and her posterior in *d* ought to match her prior conditional credence of *d* on everything she learned (i.e., *a*). Since these aren't the same conditional credences (Inge and Agnes are both more confident in

d conditional on *a* and *b* than on *a* alone), conditionalization requires them to have different posterior credences in *d*. (They were both more confident of *d* conditional on *a* and *b* than on *a* alone.) If they're rationally required to have different credences even though they are epistemic counterparts, rational requirements don't supervene upon an individual's non-factive mental states.

I can see why someone might respond to this second worry by adopting an internalist view of evidence, a view on which Agnes and Inge ought to conditionalize on the same things because Agnes and Inge have to have the same evidence. If we adopt this view, it means that we need to complicate our story about how a thinker's evidence relates to normative reasons. At least, we do if we want to retain the idea that they include facts about the situation. (In turn, we would face difficult questions about how reasons that we're not certain to obtain determine what we should do.) I worry that we're left with some non-trivial problems if we accept Reasons-Rationality Strong. While I think that there are still some remaining difficulties to resolve, I still think Kiesewetter's book is a remarkable achievement, one that will rightly serve as a reference point for years to come.

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