

Two Accounts of the Normativity of Rationality

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Rationality seems to be normative. If you fail to do something rationality requires of you, you have failed in a serious way. The charge of irrationality is, in and of itself, a serious criticism. By contrast, other systems of requirements seem not to be normative. For example, if you fail to do something that etiquette requires of you, or that freemasonry requires of you, you may not have failed in a serious way. These requirements do not have the genuine normative force that rational requirements seem to have.

Here is another way to make the point. Suppose you are a full-blown error-theorist about the normative. You hold that all our talk of goodness, reasons, and oughts is systematically false – that the properties and relations such talk requires would be unacceptably ‘queer’. Would you nonetheless be willing to grant that certain things are rationally required? Surely not.¹ But you might well grant that there are requirements of etiquette and freemasonry. These requirements do not seem metaphysically threatening in the same way.

Niko Kolodny (2005) and John Broome (2005) urge us to have doubts about these appearances. They raise the question of whether there is *reason* to be rational. And they

¹ Indeed, anti-realist meta-ethical views have taken rationality as their target. See Gibbard 1990.

cannot find a positive answer. They conclude that there are genuine doubts about the normativity of rationality. Call this the *normativity problem*.²

It is not obvious why the normativity of rationality should hang on the answer to the question Kolodny and Broome fail to answer. In the first section of this paper, I suggest that the crucial assumption is the recently influential idea that reasons are the heart of the normative. I then argue, in section two, that even if we make this assumption, the normativity of rationality does not turn on the answer to Kolodny and Broome's question. I illustrate this point with reference to the *subjective reasons account* of rationality, defended by Derek Parfit (forthcoming) and Mark Schroeder (2007, 2009), amongst others. In section three, I consider why this point has not been more widely appreciated. My diagnosis is that the subjective reasons account is superficially similar to the importantly different *transparency account*, made prominent by T.M. Scanlon (1998) and Kolodny (2005). On the transparency account, rationality seems not to be normative. I think it is often assumed that what goes for the transparency account goes for the subjective reasons account as well. But I argue that this is a mistake. A corollary is that the subjective reasons account has an important advantage over the transparency account, given how plausible it is that rationality is normative.

1. Reasons and Rationality

² In my (forthcoming) I discuss a slightly different problem under this name. There the problem is to answer the question '*what* is the reason to be (instrumentally) rational?' This question assumes, with the views under consideration in that paper, that there is such a reason, at least under certain conditions. Here I am concerned with the prior question of whether rationality is normative in the intuitive sense I have tried to elucidate in the text – the sense in which morality and prudence are normative, and etiquette and freemasonry are not. As I explain below, further assumptions are required to connect the latter question to the former.

The normativity problem starts with the following broad picture of reasons and rationality (Broome 2005, Kolodny 2005). On the one hand, reasons are ‘external’. What you have reason to do does not supervene on your non-factive mental states. So for instance, the fact that there is petrol in your glass can be a reason for you not to take a sip, even if you do not believe it to contain petrol. On the other hand, rationality is ‘internal’. If you believe your glass contains gin, it may well be rational to take a sip, because of this belief.³ In this way, what rationality requires of you can come apart from what reasons require of you. You might be rationally required to take a sip, although you have most reason not to. Nonetheless, we can ask whether you must have at least some reason to A, if you are rationally required to A. Call this the *reasons question*.

However, the picture makes it plausible that the answer is negative. If you are rationally required to intend to take a sip, that will be because of certain mental states. For instance, it might be because you believe that you ought to take a sip, or because you intend to drink gin and think that taking a sip is necessary for doing so. But beliefs and intentions are not the kinds of things to be reasons to take a sip, on the above picture. And if what is in your glass is petrol, you seem not to have a reason to take a sip – taking a sip will be seriously unpleasant and harmful.⁴

How does this show that rationality is not normative? What is being assumed is that there is a tight connection between normativity and reasons. And much recent work assumes precisely this. For instance, according to Joseph Raz, ‘the normativity of all that is normative consists in the way it is, or provides, or is otherwise related to reasons’

³ The example is from Williams (1981).

⁴ This may lead us to consider more esoteric candidates for the reason to be rational. For instance, we might wonder whether the reason to do what rationality requires is that it is typically beneficial to do so, or that otherwise we risk losing our status as agents. See Kolodny 2005: 542-7 for discussion.

(1999: 67). And according to Mark Schroeder, ‘to be normative, is to be analyzed in terms of reasons’ (2007: 81). Many other writers share something like this picture: reasons are the basic normative unit, and the rest of the normative is to be explained by appeal to facts about reasons. Call this the *reasons first approach* to normativity.⁵ As examples of the approach in action, consider the following analyses:

Ought For it to be the case that you ought to A is for you to have more reason to A than not to A.

Good For A to be good is for there to be reason to value A (cf. Scanlon 1998).

If these analyses succeed, they explained goodness and oughts in terms of reasons, thus vindicating their normativity. So the reasons first approach introduces a test for normativity: can it be understood in terms of reasons? And this suggests the reasons question. For if you can be rationally required to A when you have no reason to A, how could rational requirements be explained in terms of reasons?⁶

2. The Subjective Reasons Account

However, the reasons first approach does not make a positive answer to the reasons question compulsory. Consider the subjective reasons account of rationality. According

⁵ Other influential writers attracted to the approach include Scanlon (1998) and Dancy (2004). For discussion and further references see Schroeder 2007: 79-81.

⁶ The opening pages of Kolodny 2005 also connect the normativity problem to the reasons first approach. The diagnosis needs a little modification in Broome’s case. For Broome, oughts are the basic normative unit. Thus his initial question is: if rationality requires you to A, does it follow that you ought to A? But, holding this to be answered negatively, Broome goes on to ask the reasons question. For Broome, this is a test for normativity because reasons are to be analysed in terms of oughts (2004: 36-39).

to a simple version of this account, what rationality requires is what you would have conclusive reason to do, if your beliefs were true (Parfit, forthcoming: 36). This view is naturally suggested by reflection on the kind of case described in section one. Suppose you are in the kind of situation in which you ought to be drinking gin, and you believe your glass to contain gin. Then you may be rationally required to intend to take a sip, even if your glass contains petrol. This might be what makes most sense, from your perspective. The explanation seems to be that you believe something – that your glass contains gin – which, if true, would give you conclusive reason to take a sip.

More generally, the subjective reasons account claims that to be rational is to respond to *subjective reasons* – believed propositions that would be reasons if true. There are many complications involved in developing an adequate account of this sort.⁷ But for the most part, the simple account just sketched will be adequate here:

Subjective For you to be rationally required to A is for it to be the case that you would have conclusive reason to A, if your beliefs were true.

On this view, it is very plausible that the answer to the reasons question is negative. If you are rationally required to A, then if your beliefs are true, you will have reason to A. But if your beliefs are false, you might not. However, the subjective reasons account should not claim that, because of this, rationality is not normative. The reasons first approach says that rationality is normative if rational requirements are explained in terms of facts about reasons. But the subjective reasons account does explain rational requirements in terms of facts about reasons: it explains them by appeal to facts about

⁷ For some discussion see Schroeder 2009.

what there would be reason to do, if your beliefs were true.⁸ Such facts are genuinely normative – they are, for instance, the kind of facts the full-blown error-theorist is committed to denying.

This shows that even if we accept the reasons first approach, the normativity of rationality does not turn on the answer to the reasons question. The subjective reasons account answers the question in the negative, but nonetheless implies that rationality is normative. Given the plausibility of the latter claim, this is an attraction of the subjective reasons account.⁹

3. The Transparency Account

We might wonder why this point has not been more widely appreciated. My conjecture is that it is because the subjective reasons account has much in common with a different account, on which rationality seems not to be normative. This is Scanlon and Kolodny's transparency account. This account begins by claiming that there is only one basic requirement of rationality (Kolodny 2005: 557):

Enkrasia If you believe that you have conclusive reason to A, then you are rationally required to A.

⁸ Errol Lord (ms) also makes this point.

⁹ It is worth noting that the subjective reasons account is not the only account of rationality to answer the reasons question in the negative but explain rationality in terms of reasons. Garrett Cullity's (2008) 'standard-fixing account' is another example.

All that rationality requires, on this view, is that we do what we take ourselves to have conclusive reason to do. If we accept this, we can accept a very simple account of what a rational requirement is:

Transparency For you to be rationally required to A is for you to believe that you have conclusive reason to A.¹⁰

On the face of it, the transparency account is very similar to the subjective reasons account. They seem to be slightly different ways of working out the common thought that what rationality requires is what you have reason to do, relative to your beliefs. The only difference seems to be that the subjective reasons account is somewhat broader. After all, if you believe that you have conclusive reason to A then, if that belief is true, you have conclusive reason to A. So the subjective reasons account accepts that Enkrasia is a rational requirement – it simply denies that it is the only one.

The transparency account is generally taken to imply that rationality is not normative. Kolodny says that it implies that ‘rationality is only apparently normative’ (509). And again, that on this account ‘[t]he (seeming) normative force of...rationality derives from a (seeming) reason, the reason that the subject believes he has’ (558).

Nicholas Southwood makes similar claims. He says that the transparency account:

¹⁰ Kolodny often states the transparency account as a claim about what we are saying in making attributions of irrationality: ‘When we tell someone...that he ought rationally to have attitude A...[w]e are making the descriptive, psychological claim that he has conclusive reason for that attitude’ (2005: 557). However this makes the account vulnerable to the open question argument (Hussain, ms: 18-25). I therefore restate it as metaphysical claim.

is obviously incapable of meeting [the normativity problem]. This is because, in understanding rational requirements in terms of normative perceptions or beliefs, it implicitly concedes that they are *not* normative. On the [transparency] account, rational requirements are simply descriptive claims about the perceptions or beliefs we have regarding certain kinds of reasons we have. For this reason, the [transparency] account is better thought of, not as a vindicating but as an *undermining* explanation of the normativity of rationality – as an attempt to explain it away (2008: 24-5).

If Kolodny and Southwood are right then, given the evident similarity between the subjective reasons account and the transparency account, we might expect the subjective reasons account to have the same result – that rationality is only apparently normative.¹¹

I think this is a mistake. It ignores a further important difference between the accounts. As we have seen, the subjective reasons account explains rationality in terms of facts about reasons. To be rationally required to A is to believe things that would give you conclusive reason to A if true. So the subjective reasons account reduces rational requirements, in part, to facts about what there is, or would be, reason to do. By contrast, the transparency account reduces rational requirements to purely psychological facts. To be rationally required to A is just to believe that you have conclusive reason to A. But to explain rational requirements in terms of beliefs about reasons is not to explain them in terms of reasons. So rationality is normative on the subjective reasons account, but not the transparency account.

We can clarify this point by recalling the heuristic suggested above. Consider an error-theorist motivated by the putative queerness of the normative. If the transparency account is correct, such an error-theorist could accept that there are rational requirements. For it is no part of the error-theorist's remit to deny that people believe they have reasons.

¹¹ Kolodny (2005: n.47) appears to accept this inference.

But if the subjective reasons account is correct, the error-theorist must deny that there are rational requirements. For the proponent of the subjective reasons account thinks that there are non-normative propositions that are reasons if true. For instance, he might think that the proposition that there is gin in your glass is a reason to take a sip, if true. And this is something the error-theorist must deny. So the error-theorist should worry about rational requirements on the subjective reasons account, but not on the transparency account. Rationality is normative only on the former.

4. Subjective Reasons and Enkrasia

The argument so far may seem too quick. For it is not clear that the subjective reasons account implies that all rational requirements are normative. For instance, consider the requirement Enkrasia. As I noted, it seems to follow from Subjective that this is a rational requirement. This is because if you believe that you have conclusive reason to A then, trivially, you have conclusive reason to A, if your belief is true. But now notice that even the error-theorist can accept that if *this* belief is true, you have conclusive reason to A. So even the error-theorist can accept Enkrasia, if Subjective is true. So, by the heuristic above, the requirement Enkrasia is not normative, on the subjective reasons account.

My response to this objection begins by denying Enkrasia. Since Subjective implies Enkrasia, we must also deny Subjective. But as noted above, Subjective is only a first pass at a plausible subjective reasons account. The question is thus whether a better developed version of the subjective reasons account will imply that all rational requirements are normative. We cannot properly answer this question without working

out such an account – a task that is beyond the scope of this paper.¹² But I will offer a ground for optimism on the part of the subjective reasons theorist.

A problem with Enkrasia is that it implies that even if you *irrationally* believe that you have conclusive reason to A, you are rationally required to A. This is implausible. If you irrationally believe that you have conclusive reason to A, Aing may itself be irrational. But it is implausible that you can be rationally required to do the irrational. To come at the point another way, it is implausible that if you drop the irrational belief and do not A, you fail to do something rationality requires of you.¹³

A more plausible version of Enkrasia – one that an adequate subjective reasons account might imply – says that if you *rationally* believe that you have conclusive reason to A, then you are rationally required to A. However, it is plausible that the subjective reasons account will explain such requirements, in part, by non-trivial facts about reasons. This is because whether you rationally believe something depends on a range of your other beliefs and mental states. In particular, on the subjective reasons account, it depends on mental states whose contents are, or would be, reasons for this belief, and on the absence of states whose contents are, or would be, defeaters for this belief. Now the crucial point for our purposes is that some of these states will have non-normative contents. But this means that we have returned to the kind of facts about reasons that the error-theorist is committed to denying. The error-theorist cannot accept that non-normative facts are reasons, or defeaters, for belief. So if such facts are always part of the explanation of why, in a given case, you are rationally required to A, then all rational

¹² For some initial steps, see Schroeder 2009.

¹³ For this way of putting the point, see Brunero forthcoming.

requirements are normative – whenever you are rationally required to A this is explained, at least in part, by non-trivial facts about what is or would be a reason.

This suggests that an adequate version of the subjective reasons account will imply that all rational requirements are normative. If so, this is an important advantage of the subjective reasons account over the transparency account.¹⁴

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