

Rationality and normativity

5.1 *The normative question*

I do not use ‘requires’ as a normative term. If I said that archery requires you to use a bow, I would not be suggesting you ought to use a bow; perhaps you ought not to engage in archery. My term ‘requirement of rationality’ does not have a normative meaning, therefore. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that rationality is actually normative in some way. This chapter explores that idea.

What would it mean, exactly? The idea comes in different strengths. The strongest is the view that, necessarily, if rationality requires you to F then you ought to F , and moreover you ought to F because rationality requires you to F . A useful piece of terminology allows me to say this more briefly. When you ought to F because X , we say that X is *a reason* for you to F .¹ When, necessarily, you ought to F if X , we say that X is *sufficient* for it to be the case that you ought to F . When the two things are true together, we may say that X is *a sufficient reason* for you to F . The strong view is that, if rationality requires you to F , that is a sufficient reason for you to F .

Some philosophers find this too strong. They think that in some circumstances you ought to be irrational. They think, for example, that if you could prevent a nuclear war by believing a contradiction, then you ought to believe a contradiction. But they nevertheless think that, even though you ought to do it, believing a contradiction would still be irrational.

Here is a way to fill out their view. There are various sources of requirements that are normative: morality, prudence, and so on. Rationality is one of them. Morality requires some things of you, prudence requires some things of you, rationality requires some things of you, and all these requirements are normative. Sometimes there will be conflicts between normative requirements that arise from different sources. For example, sometimes morality requires you to F when prudence requires you not to F . When there are conflicts, somehow they are resolved, and from the resolution will emerge what you ought to do.

Conflicts between the requirements of rationality and requirements that arise from other sources are rare. That is because requirements of rationality particularly apply to relations among a person's mental states, whereas morality, prudence, and the rest are rarely concerned with those relations. Rationality has its own domain of application, where it is pretty much on its own. Examples of conflict between rationality and other sources of requirements tend to be far-fetched, like my example of a nuclear war.

So, according to this weaker view, when rationality requires you to *F* it is normally the case that you ought to *F*. But it is not always the case, so the fact that rationality requires you to *F* is not a sufficient reason for you to *F*. According to this view, it is nevertheless a reason of sorts. On this view, whether or not you ought to *F* is sometimes determined by the resolution of a conflict between different requirements. When requirements can conflict, we say that each constitutes a *pro tanto* reason;² there may be a conflict between *pro tanto* reasons for you to *F* and *pro tanto* reasons for you not to *F*. The view is that requirements of rationality must be *pro tanto* reasons: when rationality requires you to *F*, that is a *pro tanto* reason for you to *F*.

An even weaker view is that, necessarily, if rationality requires you to *F*, you have a sufficient reason or a *pro tanto* reason to *F*. It does not insist that your reason to *F* is necessarily the fact that rationality requires you to *F*. I shall call this 'the view that rationality is normative'. It is the generic version of the view; the view that rational requirements constitute *pro tanto* reasons is a stronger version, and the view that they constitute sufficient reasons is a stronger version still. One way to arrive at this weakest view without accepting either of the stronger ones is to believe that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. I shall examine that idea in section 5.4.

This chapter concentrates mostly on this weakest view.³ The question of whether it is true I shall call 'the normative question'. The question is: have you a reason to satisfy the requirements of rationality? I concentrate on the weakest view, because my conclusion will be sceptical: I can find no convincing grounds for even this weakest view. *A fortiori*, I can find no convincing grounds for the stronger ones.

5.2 Subjective and objective normativity?

Moral philosophers worry a lot about whether we have a reason to do as morality requires, and if so why. But the corresponding question

of whether we have a reason to do as rationality requires is not much discussed. Why not?

One possible explanation is that many philosophers investigate rationality in a context in which it is plainly false that rationality is normative. These philosophers investigate primarily the rationality of acts. They assume rationality requires some particular acts of you, and when they consider requirements of rationality, they think primarily of its requirements on your acts.

They start by recognizing there are some acts you ought to do. Which these are is determined first, in some way that is independent of which acts are rationally required of you. For example, it may be determined by the weighing up of pro tanto reasons you have to do one thing or another.

Then these philosophers suppose that which acts are rationally required of you is determined in some way that involves your beliefs about what you ought to do. For example, one theory is that, if you believe you ought to *A*, then because of that, rationality requires you to *A*. Another is that, if rationality requires you to believe you ought to *A*, then because of that, rationality requires you to *A*.⁴ Some philosophers treat the rationality of things other than acts in the same framework. For example, they may offer a similar account of which desires rationality requires you to have.⁵

This framework implies that the acts rationality requires you to do are not necessarily the ones you ought to do. They will be so only if some particular condition on your beliefs is satisfied. The condition is that you believe you ought to do what actually you ought to do, or that rationality requires you to believe you ought to do what actually you ought to do, or something of that sort.

Unless the appropriate condition is satisfied, you may not even have any pro tanto reason to do the act that rationality requires you to do. Your pro tanto reasons help to determine which acts you ought to do, whereas which act rationality requires you to do is determined separately on the basis of your beliefs.

Similarly, the desires that rationality requires you to have are not the ones you ought to have, unless some corresponding condition on your beliefs is satisfied. They may not even be desires you have any pro tanto reason to have.

So in this framework rationality is not normative: it is not the case that, necessarily, if rationality requires you to *F*, you have a reason to *F*.

Nevertheless, within the framework, some philosophers take rationality to be normative in a different sense. They divide normativity into two sorts: the objective sort and the subjective sort. They think that sometimes you objectively ought to *A* and you

subjectively ought to B , where B ing is different from A ing. The fact that you objectively ought to A is determined independently of what rationality requires. But the fact that you subjectively ought to B might be determined by the fact that rationality requires you to B . If so, the rational requirement would be normative in a subjective sense.

'Ought' is our most basic normative term. I understand it well. But 'subjectively ought' and 'objectively ought' are philosophers' terms, and their meaning needs to be specified. What is the meaning of 'You subjectively ought to F '? It is evidently supposed to assign some normative property to your F ing; the word 'ought' indicates that much. 'You subjectively ought to F ' is supposed to say something a bit like 'you ought to F '. But what like it, exactly?

It might just mean the same as 'rationality requires you to F '. In that case, it will be true that if rationality requires you to F you subjectively ought to F . But we were interested in the normative question of whether, necessarily, if rationality requires you to F you have a reason to F . This gives us no answer to that question.

Alternatively 'You subjectively ought to F ', might mean 'From your subjective point you ought to judge you ought to F '. This ascribes a complex normative property to your F ing, but it is not the sort of normative property we are after. It ascribes the property of *you ought* only to a judgement of yours, and it ascribes no property remotely parallel to *having a reason to* to your F ing.

Perhaps 'You subjectively ought to F ' can be defined in some way that makes it ascribe an appropriate sort of normative property to your F ing. If so, we shall have a genuine normative question to ask within this framework: if rationality requires of you that you F , is it the case that you subjectively ought to F ? So perhaps we can formulate a normative question within the framework I am discussing, by dividing normativity. We still have to answer this normative question, of course.

In any case, I see no need to divide normativity. It is one response to a difficulty that arises within this framework. In the framework, when rationality requires you to F , you may have no reason to F . This implies that rationality is not normative in my sense, whereas it seems intuitively plausible that it is normative in some sense.

I think this difficulty arises because the framework misformulates the requirements of rationality. It gives them a narrow scope. I think they have a broad scope: rationality requires particular relations to hold among a person's propositional attitudes. For example, roughly, it requires of you that, if you believe you ought to F , you intend to F . This is my requirement (5) from page 79. If the requirements of rationality are formulated like this, we can find room for the

normativity of rationality without any need to divide normativity. We could accept that requirement (5) constitutes a sufficient or *pro tanto* reason for you to intend to *F* if you believe you ought to *F*. In this sentence, 'reason for you' has a wide scope; I mean the clause 'if you believe you ought to *F*' to lie within its scope. That would make this rational requirement normative.

From this requirement, it does not follow that, if you believe you ought to *F*, rationality requires you to intend to *F*. That would follow only by contingent detachment, which is invalid. *A fortiori*, it does not follow that, if you believe you ought to *F*, rationality requires you to *F*. Suppose you ought not to *F* but suppose you incorrectly believe you ought to *F*. Suppose even that rationality requires you to believe you ought to *F*. All this is perfectly consistent with the normativity of rational requirements, because rationality does not require you to *F*. There is no need to say you subjectively ought to *F* in order to make rationality normative.

I think there is only one sort of normativity. But 'you ought' may govern various different things; it may have broad or narrow scope. To divide normativity into an objective and a subjective sort is to mistake a difference in the scope of normativity for a difference in the sort of normativity.

5.3 *Rationality and reasons*

Section 5.2 suggested one possible explanation of why the normative question is not much discussed. It described a way of thinking that gives the implied answer no to the question. Another explanation is that many philosophers associate rationality so closely with normativity that they do not see a real normative question to be asked. Their implied answer is yes.

Under the influence of this attitude, many of us habitually describe the requirements of rationality in normative terms that beg the question. For example, in my paper 'Reasons', I said 'You ought to believe the world was made in less than a week, if you believe the world was made in six days', meaning to express a requirement of rationality. I should have said 'Rationality requires you to believe . . .', leaving open the question of whether you ought to satisfy this requirement. I have learnt better now.⁶

Many philosophers unhesitatingly associate rationality with reasons. For instance, they take it for granted that acting contrary to reasons is irrational. Presumably they assume there is an obvious conceptual connection between rationality and reasons. Since the concept of *a reason* is normative, an obvious conceptual connection

between rationality and reasons would make rationality obviously normative in some way or other.

What is the real connection between rationality and reasons? This section mentions some spurious, merely apparent, connections. They are connections between the words, not conceptual connections between the things the words designate. Nevertheless, they are misleading enough to need mentioning.

One connection is that the words 'rationality' and 'reason' have the same Latin root. Etymology can be suggestive, but it does not necessarily show us connections between concepts.

A second is that the mass-noun 'reason' in one of its senses designates a faculty – a bundle of abilities and dispositions – that is conceptually connected with rationality. There is a faculty of rationality, which is a part of the faculty of reason and perhaps the whole of it. This is a conceptual connection between rationality and reason. But it is not a conceptual connection between rationality and reasons. Reasons are designated by the count-noun whose singular is 'a reason' and plural 'reasons'. The count-noun and the mass-noun designate quite different things.

This ambiguity can be misleading. Take David Hume's remark that 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.'⁷

In the *Treatise*, Hume rarely uses the count-noun 'reason' in a normative sense, and never in the section entitled 'Of the influencing motives of the will', which contains this remark. In that section, 'reason' refers to the faculty of reason. The section aims to demonstrate that this faculty cannot motivate an action or oppose a passion. Hume means that, if he preferred the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger, his faculty of reason could not oppose this preference. He does not speak explicitly of rationality. However, since the faculty of rationality is at least a part of the faculty of reason, we can take his remark to imply it would not be irrational for him to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger.

Hume's meaning is clear, but the ambiguity of 'reason' leads some philosophers to read Hume as also saying something normative: that it is not contrary to *the reasons* to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger. In other words, that it is not the case that he ought not to have this preference. I am sure Hume did not mean that, and I am sure he did not believe it. Preferring the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger would be immoral, and for that reason Hume ought not to have this preference. I am sure he recognized that, since he was no less moral

than the rest of us. However, he thought morality does not arise from reason. He says this preference is not contrary to reason, but I am sure he thought it contrary to morality, and I am sure he thought he ought not to have it.

But, given that Hume thought he ought not to have this preference, would it not be irrational of him to have it? Is it not irrational to have a preference you believe you ought not to have? Let us suppose for a moment that rationality requires you not to have a preference you believe you ought not to have. I am not committed to this view (and it is not an instance of my requirement (5)) but let us accept it for a moment. Then if Hume believed he ought not to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of his finger, but nevertheless had this preference, he would be irrational. He would be failing to satisfy a requirement of rationality.

However, this does not refute what he actually says. He says this preference is not contrary to reason, which we are taking to imply it is not irrational. And indeed, although Hume would be irrational if he had this preference, the preference itself would not be irrational. His irrationality would not consist in his having the preference; it would consist in his having the preference and at the same time believing he ought not to have it. On page 85 I insisted on the distinction between 'you are irrational if you F ' and 'your F ing is irrational'. If we attend to that distinction, we shall see that Hume speaks the truth.

The requirement I assumed on preference has a wide scope. Spelt out more accurately, it is this: rationality requires of you that, if you believe you ought not to prefer a to b , you do not prefer a to b . It does not follow that, if you believe you ought not to prefer a to b , rationality requires you not to prefer a to b . Whatever Hume's beliefs, rationality does not require him not to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of his finger.

5.4 *Responding correctly to reasons*

One putative connection between rationality and reasons is a substantive one. It is the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. If this were so, rationality would indeed be normative. This section asks whether it is so. Up to now I have been considering why the normative question is not much discussed. But now I am asking the normative question itself.

If rationality consisted in responding correctly to reasons, rationality would be normative in only the weakest sense I specified on page ?. It would be the case that, necessarily, if rationality requires you to F , you have a reason to F . That is because rationality

would not require it if you did not have a reason. However, it would not be the case that, if rationality requires you to *F*, that is itself a reason for you to *F*. The opposite connection would hold between rationality and reasons. Rationality would not provide reasons; it would consist in responding to reasons that exist independently.

There is a quick objection to the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. On some occasion, there might be reasons for you to *F* but, through no fault of your own, you might not believe these reasons exist. You will then not respond correctly to the reasons by *F*ing, but your failure will not imply any failure of your rationality. So rationality cannot consist in responding correctly to reasons.

This objection assumes that you cannot respond correctly to reasons unless you believe those reasons exist. A defence is to argue that that is not necessarily so. The rest of this section evaluates this defence. It turns out to be limited in its effectiveness. Nevertheless, it is important in this book about reasoning, because the one situation where the defence is effective is where the way you are supposed to respond correctly to reasons is by means of a process of reasoning.

Take this example. Suppose you believe it is raining and you believe that if it is raining the snow will melt. Let us call these beliefs of yours 'premise states'. Their contents form the premises of a valid inference whose conclusion is that the snow will melt. Let us call the belief that the snow will melt the 'conclusion state'. For the moment, let us suppose the fact you are in the premise states constitutes a reason for you to be in the conclusion state. (I shall speak loosely of the premise states themselves as the reason.) And let us suppose that a correct response to this reason would be to be in the conclusion state – to believe the snow will melt.

Now, you might come to be in the conclusion state through a process of reasoning that does not require you to believe you are in the premise states. Indeed, I shall be arguing later in this book that this is so. I shall argue that reasoning does not require you to have second-order beliefs of this sort – beliefs about your mental states. You can reason directly from the contents of your premise states – in this example the proposition that it is raining and the proposition that if it is raining the snow will melt – to a new belief that the snow will melt, and this reasoning process does not require you to have any beliefs about your beliefs. If this is right, then you can respond correctly to your reason to be in the conclusion state, without believing this reason exists – that is to say, without believing you are in the premise states.

In this example, you are irrational if you do not respond to your reason, and that is so even if you do not believe your reason exists.

You are irrational if you are in the premise states but fail to be in the conclusion state, and this is so even if you do not believe you are in the premise states. (In order to convict you of irrationality, we might need to add the condition that it matters to you whether the snow will melt. This condition appears in requirement (3) of rationality on page 75, but it is a complication I shall ignore here.) In this example therefore, the quick objection fails.

The example is special in that the supposed reason is a mental state of yours. It therefore does not offer a defence of the general idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. But it does suggest how we might be able to defend a more restricted version of that idea: the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to those reasons that are mental states of yours.

I think we should accept this restriction in any case. On page ? I insisted (with one minor qualification) that rationality is concerned only with relations among your mental states. If that is correct, rationality cannot possibly consist in responding correctly to all reasons. At most, it could consist in responding to those reasons that are mental states of yours.

However, even this restricted version is not restricted enough. It is still vulnerable to the quick objection. Suppose you believe gay couples should be allowed to marry, and suppose this belief is a reason to avoid discussing gay rights with your reactionary father-in-law, because it would only lead to unpleasantness. Here, the reason is a mental state of yours, but you could not respond to it correctly without believing it exists. If, oddly, you did not believe you had this belief, you could not be accused of irrationality should you broach the topic of gay rights with your father-in-law. So in this case the quick objection succeeds: you may fail to respond correctly to your reason and nevertheless be rational. Yet in this case your reason is a mental state of yours.

Evidently the idea that rationality consists in responding to reasons needs to be restricted still further. The rain example shows how a defence could be mounted against the quick objection to this idea, but the defence can work only in very special cases. It can work only when your reasons are mental states of yours, and moreover only when you have a special means for responding to those reasons. You must be able to respond by means of a process of reasoning that operates on the contents of those states, and does not require you to believe you are in those states.

When is a process of reasoning like this available? It is available for bringing you to satisfy some of the requirements of rationality, of the sort set out in chapter 4; that is what a process of reasoning can do for you. This is the best answer I can give now. The last part of

this book contains a proper account of what reasoning can do, and it supports this answer.

But even without a proper account, it is anyway very plausible that a process of reasoning is a way to satisfy a requirement of rationality. Your reasoning in the rain example brings you to satisfy an instance of requirement (3). In that example, responding correctly reasons is also coming to satisfy a requirement of rationality. This is so in general when you respond to reasons by reasoning.

This tells us how we should further restrict the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons, if it is to avoid the quick objection. We can say at most that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons that are mental states of yours, in cases where responding correctly to these reasons is also coming to satisfy a requirement of rationality. Once the idea is so severely restricted, the quick objection cannot be raised against it. That is what the rain example shows.

Indeed, the idea is so restricted by this time that it looks as if it cannot fail to be right. The idea is now that rationality consists in responding to reasons in cases where responding to reasons amounts to satisfying rationality. How could that be wrong?

It is indeed wrong. The defence against the quick objection took a wrong turn at the beginning. To see the rain example as an example of responding to reasons, we had to assume that your premise states constitute a reason for you to be in the conclusion state. But that is false. The premise states of a piece of reasoning are never a reason to be in the conclusion state. That was one of my conclusions in chapter 3. So reasoning is not a case of responding correctly to reasons.

It follows that rationality does not consist in responding correctly to reasons. All cases of responding correctly to reasons, apart from those that involve reasoning, are subject to the quick objection: you can be rational even though you do not respond correctly to reasons. And the putative cases that involve reasoning are not truly cases of responding correctly to reasons. The view that rationality is normative can therefore get no support from the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons, since that idea is false.

Obscuring the normative question

That is my conclusion. However, at the end my argument relied on my view that the premise states of a piece of reasoning are not a reason to be in the conclusion state. I recognize this view is contentious. Since I can make my most important point without it, I shall do so.

Suppose you believe it is raining and you believe that if it is raining

the snow will melt, but you do not believe the snow will melt. It is agreed on all sides that you are irrational (at least if we add the condition that it matters to whether the snow will melt, which for simplicity I am ignoring). I think you are irrational because you are failing to satisfy requirement (3) of rationality. Some other philosophers think you are irrational because you are not responding correctly to your reasons. They think your premise states constitute a reason for you to believe the snow will melt, which you do not believe. Indeed, it is agreed on all sides that rationality requires you to believe the snow will melt, if you believe it is raining and you believe that if it is raining the snow will melt. Rationality requires you to be in the conclusion state if you are in the premise states.

Have you a reason to satisfy this requirement? For those other philosophers, the answer to this question is an easy yes. They think you do indeed have a reason, because the premise states themselves constitute a reason to be in the conclusion state. Generalizing, those philosophers easily answer yes to the normative question: they think you have a reason to satisfy the requirements of rationality.

But their answer is not as easy as they think. To justify it, they now need to explain why the premise states constitute a reason to be in the conclusion state. They express the relation between the premise states and the conclusion states using the term 'reason', which is a piece of normative vocabulary. They need to justify their doing so. Until they have, they have not justified their answer to the normative question.

I expressed the relation between the premise states and the conclusion state using the expression 'rationality requires', which I stipulated to be non-normative. That threw the normative question into high relief: have you a reason to do as rationality requires? These other philosophers express the relation using the normative term 'reason'. This obscures the normative question, but it does not answer it. For these philosophers, the normative question is transformed into the question of whether the premise states genuinely constitute a reason to be in the conclusion state, and if so why. Are they entitled to use their normative term? That question remains to be answered. So we still have no ground for the view that rationality is normative.

5.5 Does the normative question make sense?

It is natural to think there is something funny about the normative question. A person who needs to ask it – 'Have I a reason to satisfy the requirements of rationality?' – is presumably not satisfying the

requirements of rationality, and therefore not rational. But how can we answer a question that is asked by an irrational person?

This vague worry is articulated sharply by James Dreier in his paper 'Humean doubts about categorical imperatives'. Dreier says the normative question makes no sense: 'There is no sense at all to be made of the question of whether we have any reason to follow the rules of rationality'.⁸ It turns out he means we ought to follow them.

Dreier's argument depends on assuming that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. It is long and careful,⁹ and my sketch of it will not do it justice. But I hope it will be enough to let me make the point I need to make.

Take a person who does not conform to the rules of rationality, and suppose she asks why she should follow them. The only answer anyone could give her would have to be a reason for her to follow those rules. But this person is irrational, which Dreier takes to mean she does not respond correctly to reasons. Giving her a reason would therefore be ineffective, because she would not respond correctly to it. It would not motivate her to follow the rules of rationality.

Dreier next assumes that any reason there is for a person to do something must be able to motivate the person to do that thing. This is one version of the doctrine known as 'internalism'. Since our person could not be motivated by a reason to follow the rules of rationality, this version of internalism implies nothing could even be a reason for her to do so. So no answer could be given to her question of why she should follow the rules of rationality.

The correct conclusion to draw must be that this person has no reason to follow the rules of normativity. For her at least, the answer to the normative question has to be no. But Dreier's conclusion is different. He says:

'If you can't draw the practical inferences ... then nothing counts as a reason for you. That is why [rules of rationality have] a kind of ground-level normative status.'¹⁰

Dreier will evidently not countenance the idea that these rules might have no normative status, so instead he supposes they have a normative status that cannot be explained by reasons – that must be what 'ground-level' means. Dreier believes we ought to follow the rules of rationality, but no explanation can be given of why. This is surely wishful thinking on his part.

I do not think Dreier's argument successfully supports his claim that no sense can be made of the normative question of whether we have any reason to follow the rules of rationality. The question makes good sense; it is just that Dreier does not like the answer no, which his argument leads him to. If Dreier's argument was sound, it would

answer the normative question. At least it would answer it for one class of people, the irrational ones. For them, the answer would be no. The argument says nothing about the correct answer for a rational person.

So have we found an answer to the normative question, at least for one class of people? We have not, because Dreier's argument is not sound. It assumes a version of internalism, and it assumes that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. I shall not question internalism in this book. But I have already rejected the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. So I reject Dreier's argument.

5.6 Responding correctly to what you believe to be reasons

Some philosophers modify the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons, no doubt recognizing the quick objection to it. They say instead that rationality consists in responding correctly to what you *believe* to be reasons. What would this amount to, more exactly? Suppose you believe the balance of reasons favours your *Fing*; what would count as responding correctly? One answer would be *Fing* itself. But if *Fing* is a bodily act, rationality cannot demand as much as that. You might be prevented from *Fing* by an external force that has nothing to do with your rationality; you might be unexpectedly tied down, for example. Then you might be entirely rational even though you fail to *F*.

A better answer would be intending to *F*. Then responding correctly to what you believe to be reasons would be intending to *F* when you believe the balance of reasons favours your *Fing*. The idea is that this is what rationality consists in. This is close to the truth. If you believe the balance of reasons favours your *Fing*, presumably you believe you ought to *F*. And I think rationality does indeed require you to intend to *F* when you believe you ought to *F* (provided you also believe you will not *F* unless you intend to *F*). This is requirement (5) of rationality on my own list.

However, this is not what rationality *consists in*. It is just one of the requirements of rationality. There are many other requirements on my list, which do not involve beliefs about reasons at all. The idea that rationality is responding correctly to what you believe to be reasons is very far from a complete account of rationality.

In any case, even for this requirement (5), there remains the substantive question of whether it is indeed normative. Have you a reason to intend to do what you believe you ought to do (when you believe you will not do it unless you intend to)? We still need to know

whether this is so, and if it so why. To say that rationality consists in responding correctly to what you believe to be reasons is a way of recognizing the requirement. It does not help at all to establish whether the requirement is normative.

5.7 *Rationality for instrumental reasons*

I have come to the end of my list of real or apparent conceptual connections between reasons and rationality. I hoped that one of them might help to answer the normative question. But I have drawn a blank.

I would still like to answer that question, though doing so is evidently becoming hard. I have one more line to pursue. But because the question is hard, I shall pursue this line in a generous spirit. I shall make assumptions I cannot properly justify, and rely on arguments that are frankly rough. The real conclusion of this chapter is sceptical: I know no good grounds for thinking rationality is normative. Given that, I want to see how far a generous spirit can take us in finding grounds.

The line I want to pursue starts by recognizing that, if rationality is indeed normative, that seems likely to be for instrumental reasons. It seems likely to be because of what we can achieve by being rational. In this book, I shall ignore the possibility of total scepticism about normativity. I take it for granted there are some things you ought to do, some things you ought to hope for, some things you ought to believe, some things you ought not to do, not to hope for, not to believe, and so on. There are some *G*s such that you ought to *G*. Rationality seems plausibly a good means of coming to *G* in many instances when you ought to *G* – of achieving much of what you ought to achieve, as I shall put it. Perhaps this explains why you have a reason to satisfy the requirements of rationality. This section explores that idea.

It cannot be applied directly to rational requirements. Suppose rationality requires you to *F*. If this implies you have a reason to *F*, it cannot always be for directly instrumental reasons. Sometimes, satisfying a particular requirement of rationality will not contribute to your achieving anything you ought to achieve. Indeed, it will sometimes prevent you from achieving something you ought to achieve. For example, suppose you believe you ought not to do something, but your belief is false and actually you ought to do this thing. If you satisfy requirement (5) of rationality on this occasion, you will intend not to do it. As a result of your intention, you will probably not do it. But you ought to do it. So in this case, satisfying a

requirement of rationality will probably prevent you from doing something you ought to do.

Sometimes no doubt, when rationality requires you to *F*, you have a direct instrumental reason to *F*. But that is not necessarily so. We cannot conclude on direct instrumental grounds that rationality is normative – that, necessarily, if rationality requires you to *F*, you have a reason to *F*.

Bayesians often deploy so-called ‘pragmatic arguments’ in arguing that you ought to satisfy some of the Bayesian requirements of rationality. These arguments take it for granted that there is some aim you ought to pursue. Then they show that, if you constantly have to deal with exploitative types such as Dutch bookies and money pumpers, you will best pursue this aim if you satisfy the Bayesian requirements. However, we do not constantly have to deal with exploitative types, and sometimes you may better pursue the aim by failing to satisfy a Bayesian requirement than by satisfying it. Therefore, a pragmatic argument of this sort cannot show directly that, necessarily, if it is a Bayesian requirement that you *F*, you ought to *F*.

Pragmatic arguments may be more convincing if they are aimed at showing you ought to have a disposition to satisfy Bayesian requirements, rather than that you ought to satisfy each of these requirements in each particular instance. I now turn to a wider version of this idea.

An indirect instrumental argument?

We cannot say that, for directly instrumental reasons, you have a reason to satisfy requirements of rationality. However, it is much more plausible that, for directly instrumental reasons, you ought to have the rational *faculty*. By ‘the rational faculty’ I mean a bundle of dispositions and abilities that causes you to satisfy many of the requirements of rationality. This is only a rough description because of the vague term ‘many’, but it will serve for my purposes.

Possessing the rational faculty is plausibly part of the best means of achieving much of what you ought to achieve. By ‘best’ I mean better than other means that are psychological possible for you. In principle, there might be an alternative faculty that could form part of an even better means of achieving much of what you ought to achieve. On some occasions, the rational faculty will steer you wrong; it will cause you to fail to achieve something you ought to achieve. The alternative faculty would be like the rational faculty, but altered a little to correct some of these glitches. But I assume this alternative would not be psychologically possible for you.

So I shall assume the rational faculty is part of the best means of achieving much of what you ought to achieve. If it is so, then it is plausible that, first, you ought to have the rational faculty and that, second, this is so because having the rational faculty is part of the best means of achieving much of what you ought to achieve.

I am sorry to say I cannot offer a proper argument to support the first of these claims. One difficulty standing in the way is that a proper argument would have to depend on an accurate account of the way in which normativity is transmitted from ends to means. If you ought to achieve some ends, how does that determine what means you ought to take to those ends? An accurate answer to this question would be complicated,¹¹ and would take all the resources of decision theory, at least. There is no need for that sort of detail here. Since I am only looking for rough arguments, I am happy to accept the plausible claim that you ought to have the rational faculty.

The second claim I made is that the first claim is true for the instrumental reason that having the rational faculty is part of the best means of achieving much of what you ought to achieve. I can give this claim some support by considering a world where the rational faculty is not instrumentally effective in this way. If it is a fact at all, it is only a contingent fact that the rational faculty is part of the best means of achieving much of what you ought to achieve. There could be a quirky world where that is not so.

In the quirky world, people with the rational faculty generally satisfy the same requirements of rationality as rational people do in our world. They generally intend to do the things they believe they ought to do, they generally do not have contradictory beliefs, they generally believe what follows by modus ponens from the contents of their beliefs, and so on. But because of the way causal processes work in their world, these people who have the rational faculty tend not to have the beliefs they ought to have or do the things they ought to do, and so on. They do not achieve much of what they ought to achieve.

In this quirky world there are also people who do not have the rational faculty. Those people just do what they feel like doing, believe whatever comes into their heads, and so on. The causal processes in the quirky world tend to ensure that these people achieve much of what they ought to achieve.

Surely, it is not the case that people in the quirky world ought to have the rational faculty, since it is not a means of achieving much of what they ought to achieve. On the contrary, it is plausible that they ought not to have it – that they ought do what they feel like doing, believe whatever comes into their heads, and so on. This suggests that, if the rational faculty were not instrumentally successful, it

would not be the case that we ought to have it. So it supports the view that, if we ought to have the rational faculty, that is because it is instrumentally successful.

So let us suppose you ought to have the rational faculty for instrumental reasons. Might it follow that rationality is normative? If it did, we would have an indirect instrumental explanation of why rationality is normative, rather than the direct one I rejected on page ?.

We are supposing you ought to have the rational faculty. If you have it, it will cause you to satisfy many particular requirements of rationality in particular instances. But unfortunately, it does not follow by a general principle of inference that you have a reason to satisfy those requirements in those instances. 'You ought to *F*; if you *F*, your *F*ing will cause you to *G*; so you have a reason to *G*' is not a valid pattern of inference.

This should be uncontroversial, but an example may help. Suppose you ought to be disposed to flee when threatened with an irresistible attack. Perhaps this is because having this disposition is part of your best means of minimizing your chances of injury as you go through life. If you have it, then when you are threatened with an irresistible attack from a grizzly bear, you will flee. However, we may consistently suppose you ought not to flee but instead lie down and play dead. So there is no sufficient reason for you to flee. Moreover, we may consistently suppose there is no pro tanto reason for you to flee – no reason that counts against the terrible danger of doing so.

True, if you have the disposition, you flee, and the bear's threat is the reason why you do so. But that is only to say that the attack explains why you flee. 'The reason why' here has a non-normative meaning equivalent to 'the explanation of why'. There should be no temptation to think there is a reason for you to flee in this example.

However, in the case of the faculty of rationality, there is a corresponding temptation. This faculty differs from the disposition to flee in one respect. I assume the disposition to flee causes you to flee automatically and unthinkingly when you are threatened. Therefore, although the bear's threat is the reason why you flee, we would not say it is the reason for which you flee. We only say a person does something for a reason when the explanation of why she does it passes through her rational faculty in some way. That is not so in the case of the bear. But when your rational faculty causes you to satisfy a particular requirement of rationality, then the explanation of why you do so passes through your rational faculty. So in that case, we will say you satisfy the requirement for a reason: there is a reason for which you satisfy it. This makes it tempting to think there must be a reason for you to satisfy it.

But this temptation must be resisted. There are many clear cases where you do something for a reason, but there is no reason for you to do it. Suppose you want a gin and tonic, and you believe the liquid in front of you is gin, and you mix it with tonic. You may mix it with tonic for a reason. That is to say, the explanation of why you do so passes through your rational faculty. However, if the liquid is actually petrol, there is actually no reason for you to mix it with tonic. So, just because there is a reason for which you satisfy a requirement of rationality, it does not follow that there is a reason for you satisfy it.

I assumed you ought to have the rational faculty, for instrumental reasons. This faculty will cause you to satisfy many requirements of rationality. Nevertheless, no general principle of inference allows us to derive the conclusion that you have a reason to satisfy those requirements.

There may be some more specific way to derive that conclusion from the premise that you ought to have the rational faculty. For example, perhaps we could add some further premise that would allow us to derive it. It still seems intuitively plausible to me that rationality is normative, and that this is so for a broadly instrumental reason. However, I can find no way to put the derivation through. I am sorry to say I cannot find solid, direct or indirect instrumental grounds for thinking rationality is normative.

5.8 Conclusion

After all this, I have been unable to show that rationality is normative: that, necessarily, when rationality requires you to F , there is a reason for you to F . For all I know, rationality may not be normative. Often when rationality requires you to F , you have a reason to F , but I have to assume this is not necessarily so.¹²

When we accuse someone of irrationality, we are surely criticizing her. But how could we be entitled to criticize her if she may have no reason to be rational? Here is an answer. I said that, plausibly, you ought to have the rational faculty. If you do not satisfy some particular requirement of rationality, that is evidence that you do not have this faculty, or at least that you do not have it to the highest degree. So it is evidence that you are failing to achieve something you ought to achieve. That makes it grounds for justified criticism.

If you fail to satisfy a particular requirement of rationality, that may show you have gone wrong. But where you have gone wrong may not be in failing to satisfy the requirement. You may have gone wrong in failing to have the rational faculty, which your failure is evidence of.

In any case, the conclusion of this chapter is sceptical. I can find no grounds for thinking that rationality is normative. If there are grounds, I do not know them. Therefore, in this book, I shall avoid assuming that rationality is normative. Fortunately, my own account of reasoning does not require that assumption. But an alternative account does rely on it. The next chapter rejects this account, for this reason and others.

Notes

- 1 In my 'Reasons', I defined it as a 'perfect reason'.
- 2 A pro tanto reason is also defined in my 'Reasons'.
- 3 As Jonathan Dancy suggested to me it should.
- 4 Ralph Wedgwood, 'Choosing rationally and choosing correctly'.
- 5 For example, Parfit, 'Rationality and reasons'.
- 6 I learnt better from Andrew Reisner, who makes this point in his *Conflicts of Normativity*.
- 7 *Treatise*, book 2, part 3, section 3.
- 8 'Humean doubts', p. 29.
- 9 The main argument is in 'Humean doubts', pp; 38–42.
- 10 'Humean doubts', p. 42.
- 11 As Carsten Nielsen helpfully reminded me.
- 12 Jonathan Dancy in 'Reasons and rationality' and Niko Kolodny in 'Why be rational?' draw similar conclusions.