

GOOD REASON THEORY OF RATIONALITY

JALEEL AHSAN ZARGER*

Abstract. The recent developments in philosophy and especially the post modernistic trends in thought have led to a problematisation of rationality as a privileged concept. Rationality means to have the “god reasons” the notion of god reason is the essence of the paper. By good reason we simply mean the reason, which are cogent in themselves and are not idiosyncratic. Rationality is not a matter of isolated good reason but entire network of good reasons. So to be rational is to have good reasons for one’s total behaviour. Reason which itself is a complex entity composed of two components; these are cognitive belief and network of rules. The fact is that only justified reason is a reason. Further the present paper endeavors to study that practices, beliefs and propositions are not rational or irrational but can be true or false, good or bad. It is only humans who are rational or irrational.

The words ‘Rational’ and ‘rationality’ are so common that not only Philosophers or students of Philosophy but laymen also use these words without any hesitation. For example, driving fast is irrational; committing rape, loot and murder and all such activities are irrational. But, strictly speaking, this is not the meaning of ‘rationality’.

‘Rationality’ is not as well defined a concept as one may wish. Etymologically, speaking, it is derived from a Latin word ‘ratio’, The English translation of which is “reason”.¹

*Dr. Jaleel Ahsan Zarger is Post-Doctoral Fellow at Indian Council for Philosophical Research (ICPR), New Delhi (India).

In fact, several definitions have been put forward for the concept of rationality from time to time. In contemporary discourse too, one comes across diverse definitions of rationality. For instance, Mullick, M. also brings into account the ends of action when she makes the two-fold assumption regarding the concept of rational action. She is of the view, first, that all actions, all beliefs are related to some end; second, that an action is characterizable as rational or irrational only in relation to that end.² Later a shift in her position is evident when she makes the claim

“that there is a sense in which the term “rationality” is currently used which identifies it with intelligibility – via the notion of rationale of doing things, the point of do into them.”³

Martin Hollis makes a strong claim that anthropology is possible only on the assumption that all societies are rational in precisely the way of Western rational thought. If anthropology is to be possible, the natives must share the Western anthropologist’s concept of truth, coherence and rational interdependence of beliefs. In other words, Western rational thought is not just one species of rational thought, nor rational thought just one species of thought.⁴

Stephen Lukes sums up the various definitions of rationality in a nutshell.

“There are well used senses of “rational” as applied to action, such as the widest sense of simply goal-directed actions; the sense in which an action is said to be (maximally) rational if what is in fact the most efficient means is adopted to achieve a given end; the sense in which an action is in fact conducive to the agent’s (expressed or unexpressed) ‘long term’ ends; the sense in which the agent’s ends are ends he ought to have.”⁵

Minimally rationality means to have reasons for one’s actions and beliefs. But this definition as it stands is incomplete. What is needed is not just reasons but good or adequate reasons. This

means that we have to analyze what are “good reasons”. Good reasons must be cogent in themselves and comparatively the best available referring to the real interests of the agent rather than mere wants. This matter of good reasons is not something subjective or idiosyncratic. It is objective and lies in the public domain.⁶

Rationality accordingly pivots on the deployment of good reasons; I am being rational if my actions are governed by suitable or good reasons, if I proceed in the cognitive, practical and evaluative contexts on the basis of cogent reasons for what I do. And the question of motivation is a crucial aspect of rationality; as with morality, it is a matter of doing the right things for the right reasons (if someone does what is, in the circumstances, the intelligent thing to do, but does it simply by accident or on a whim, he is not thereby comporting himself rationally). To be sure, the reasons that support beliefs, actions and evaluations may rest on rather general principles and lack any sort of fine grained particularity. My ‘good reasons’ for taking this medication is simply that the doctor prescribed it; my ‘good reason’ for believing that the population of Kashmir exceeds five million is simply that the encyclopedia says so. And that is quite good enough to support the rationality of my beliefs in the circumstances. Belief formation at a remove from the sort of substantive reasons at issue in first hand information still qualifies as rational.⁷

A rational agent’s “reason” for taking a certain step (adopting a belief or performing an action or making an evaluation) is a consideration or line of thought which provides this agent with a justifying ground for taking that step, and which can therefore – in the agent’s own view – serve to explain or validate it. Of course not all reasons for actions are good reasons in the sense of being cogent that is of such a sort that they would move someone who proceeded in an intelligent and sensible way.

So, to do something rationally is to do it for good and cogent reasons. And this is not the same as just having a motive for doing it. All of us almost always act from motives, but valid reasons are what motivate the rational agent and most of us do not

act rationally all the time. All too often we are moved to what we do by desires or wants, and these may or may not be rationally well advised. The crux is that it may or may not be in one's best interests to get what one desires – that very much depends on exactly what is it that one happens to want. People automatically have a motive whenever there is desire but they only have good reason for what they do when it is recognizably in their best interests. The thief has reasons for persevering for theft and the revenge-seeker also has reasons for stalking his victim. The mere fact that one wants something – that it accords with one's desires – is certainly some reasons for opting it and provides a ground of sorts. But such willful agents are rational only in potentiality and not in act.⁸ For mere unevaluated desires can provide us with 'reasons' for acting that are not necessarily anything like sufficiently good reasons. Our mere wants have very little significance in rational domain. In fact, these wants should be out-weighed by our interests and our needs.

Good reasons are those whose guidance optimally serves our real or best interests in the matters at issue. What makes a reason a good reason is the fact that its implementation leads our efforts in the appropriate direction and the best reasons are those that achieve the most in this way. But the answer to the question "what are good reasons" seems still inadequate and vague. I wish to make it clearer by referring to Dr. Sayeed's "Cross Cultural Rationality" in which he holds:

"A reason is of course a complex entity, it could be logical, causal or some other kind. This complex entity comprises at least of two components. The first component represents a cognitive belief and second a network of rules."⁹

Let us make the above point clearer by an example. Suppose someone says it is going to rain. If we ask him the reason for his belief, the answer would be something like. "The sky is dark and cloudy and there is a cool breeze." But this is not the complete answer as far as the statement of the reason is concerned. There is a second component which is usually left implicit which would be something like. "And whenever the sky is cloudy and there is

cool breeze, it rains.” This second component states the rule which connects the first component with the belief in question. One might say that in a narrow sense the first component is the reason for the belief and the second component is the justification of the reason, and the two constitute a unit since, properly speaking, only a justified reason is a reason. The first component which represents a cognitive belief refers to a state of affairs. It is connected to other such beliefs and it would ultimately terminate in what would be regarded as cognitively self-evident or foundational belief. The second component which represents the network of rules states a rule or a criterion and while it may be grounded in more basic rules or more general rules of which it is an instance or an application, it would constitute an element in a network of several such rules. Any belief system whatsoever involves both: the chains of cognitive beliefs and the network of rules. So to be rational is to have good reasons for one’s total behavior. This implies that rationality cannot be determined in a significant sense by the presence or absence of good reasons for occasional behavior. It also implies that rationality is not a matter of isolated good reasons. Rather it is a matter of an entire network of good reasons.¹⁰ Here we wish to emphasize one more important point regarding which there has been considerable confusion, *viz.* who is ‘rational’? Traditionally it is thought that beliefs, propositions and actions are rational, but as Dr. Sayeed argues, beliefs can only be true or false, similarly a proposition can only be true or false but not rational or irrational. In fact, no inanimate material object or an abstract entity can be rational or irrational.¹¹

Let us examine why beliefs, belief-systems and practices or even facts are not rational-irrational. Let us begin with facts: there are no such things as rational or irrational facts. Facts might be intelligible or unintelligible. But this feature of facts does not warrant us to say that facts are rational or irrational.

How about practices? At first sight, practices would seem to be amenable to the definition given above. Practices must have reasons. Irrational practices, then, would be those which are backed by bad reasons while rational practices are those that have

sound reasons behind them. But as Dr. Sayeed says, as far as practices are concerned it is not probably so difficult (as opposed to beliefs) to sort things out. Practices are deliberate, purposive activities and to say that a practice has a good reason behind it is to say that it will achieve the purpose intended.¹² But intentions, once again, are entertained only by persons. Strictly speaking, a practice does not have an intention. In other words, if an action P is such that it leads to the consequence Q, and if I intended Q, I would have good reasons for doing P. In fact, actions have neither purposes nor intentions. To say that an action has a purpose is just an elliptical way of saying that the person performing the action intends the consequences that would follow from that action. This in turn means that to say that a practice has good reasons behind it is to say that the agent engaged in that practice correctly believes that consequences intended by him will result from the actions which constitute that practice. Hence in the strict sense practices do not have reasons, and consequently the question of their being rational or irrational does not arise. To say that a certain practice is irrational is just a loose way of saying that the person engaging in that practice does not have good reasons (however determined) for doing so.¹³ Let us now analyze beliefs in the same way. One does hear a great deal about rational/irrational – beliefs and by extension about irrational belief – systems and cultures and so on. Superstitions are usually defined as irrational beliefs. Discussion on notions like relativism and other related issues one way or the other involves taking a stand about the rationality and irrationality of beliefs. But precisely what sense are there such things as rational or irrational beliefs? Well, one does speak of reasons for beliefs. It would appear reasonable to say that an irrational belief is one without good reasons for holding it. But certainly this does not mean that beliefs have reasons. We have reasons for holding the beliefs. Beliefs are by themselves simply true or false. They would be taken as true or false depending upon their relations to facts or on logical relations to other beliefs whose truth is not in question. That is to say, we decide whether they are true or not on the basis of their relations to facts etc., or more accurately on the basis of our perception of their relation to facts, etc.¹⁴

Furthermore, propositions by themselves do not point to the corresponding facts nor do facts point by themselves to the corresponding propositions. We identify a fact and this identification is not always a matter of simply picking out one fact from a collection as the one corresponding to the propositions under consideration. To put it more simply, beliefs are true or false and they have criteria which determine their truth or falsity. But criteria are applied by us according to certain rules. And rules, as Wittgenstein pointed out, are not part of the furniture of the world. We make the rules and we decide which rules to apply. Which rules are to be applied in turn depends on the contexts. However, we must be very clear as to what such an assertion means. Contexts are not given. It is not as if its respective context surrounds a fact or a belief or a rule like atmosphere and all we have to do is to refer to it. Nothing exists in a vacuum. But everything has infinite number of overlapping facts surrounding it, standing in some relation to it. Whatever has a relationship with an entity – no matter how remote the relation – is an element of its total context. But when we talk about contexts what we mean is not that total context but the relevant context. And relevance is a matter of selectivity, of decision. But the decision in turn is guided by our reasons. So, persons decide whether or not a belief is acceptable on the basis of what they regard as pertinent reasons.¹⁵ Therefore, rationality is not an attribute of facts, beliefs, practices or theories. It is an attribute of persons and it has to do with the rightness of the reasons which prompt them to say, believe or do something. Any talk of rational or irrational belief and practices is at best a rather misleading short-hand for saying that a person is rational or irrational in connection with those particular beliefs or practices.

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