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Rationalizing Rationality

Stephanie M. Seidl

Introduction

One of the most fundamental and basic issues in all of philosophy is the subject of reason, and its corollaries rationality and rational action. Current discussion on the topic tends to focus on what elements comprise reason and rationality, and to some extent what the purpose of “being rational” actually is.¹ Also, critiques of the concepts of reason and rationality have arisen in recent decades, particularly from various feminist authors.² However, virtually every discussion of reason fails to provide an adequate account of why being rational is necessary. Instead, in most cases it is just assumed that being rational and performing rational actions are better than the alternative – being or acting irrationally – but this idea is rarely discussed in depth.

The purpose of this paper, then, is two-fold. First – to explain, discuss, and evaluate some of the current claims and accounts of reason, rationality, and rational action. By evaluating the current literature on rationality and reason, it is possible to choose what elements of rationality to accept or reject based upon their merits. This will be necessary for the second section of my paper, which will attempt to advocate a particular type of rational action as necessary for a primary goal: life. In doing so, this paper is designed to accomplish a number of objectives. At a basic level it will work to clear up the muddled arguments surrounding rationality and reason, and to point out the particular characteristics a rational action should exhibit. Further, it will allow for a comprehensive definition of “rational act” to be devised. More importantly, this paper will explore two interrelated issues that often go unresolved in the current literature

¹ Authors such as Brandt, Nozick, Simon, and Tversky are among the philosophers who have written on this subject.

² See, for example, *The Man of Reason* by Genevieve Lloyd, or articles by Evelyn Fox Keller.

– what the ultimate goal of being rational is, and how being rational achieves this ultimate goal. With the purpose of this paper being explicitly outlined, I will now proceed with the discussion of the concepts of reason and rationality.

Understanding Reason and Rationality

In his book, The Nature of Rationality, Robert Nozick argues that “rationality provides us with the (potential) power to investigate and discover anything and everything: it enables us to control and direct our behavior through reasons and the utilization of principles.”³ Nozick’s contention raises a number of interesting points. Does rationality provide us with the potential power to investigate/discover *anything*? It would seem that there are limits to our knowledge. What those limits are is impossible to deduce, as they would require knowledge of what is outside those limits. To clarify this, if I am standing inside a large circle, and have been within that circle for my entire life, I can guess there is something outside the circle but may not possess the tools necessary to deduce what is out there. Further, I may have no reasonable justification for even thinking there exists something outside the circle; so why would I think of it in the first place?⁴ The second part of Nozick’s sentence, dealing with the importance of rationality in directing behavior through reasons and principles, seems much more agreeable.

But in terms of behavior direction, what constitutes a rational action? One necessary element of a rational action seems to be the presence of rational beliefs. Moreover, these beliefs need to be relevant to the act. Consider the following simple example: Suppose one wishes to take a walk. That person would need to know a number of different things, such as if it was cold outside, and if such weather dictates that a coat be worn. Further, one would need to have a basic understanding of how traffic lights

³ Nozick, p. 3.

⁴ The subject of the limitations (or lack there of) on knowledge would be too overwhelming to cover in this paper, Nozick’s argument, however, is an excellent starting point for this discussion.

work, so as not to get killed by an oncoming car. These things may be referred to as common sense, but I would characterize them as rational beliefs. One potential problem with the notion of “rational beliefs” is differentiating them from “true” or “correct beliefs.” In order to determine why these two concepts are distinct from one another, it is useful to examine Robert Nozick’s theory of the nature of rational belief.

The first argument presented by Nozick is that “rationality is a matter of reasons.”⁵ The second claim is that rational belief involves the reliability of a given process. In this case a rational belief is one that evolves from a process that is known to produce true beliefs.⁶ Nozick finds that both theories fail to encompass the totality of what it is to be a rational belief. He states that “reasons without reliability seem empty, reliability without reasons seems blind.”⁷ Because of this problem, Nozick wishes to unite the two primary definitions for rational belief. To this end, he claims that “the two themes, reasons and reliability, can easily be connected: you more often arrive at true belief if you hold your belief for supporting reasons. By giving reason the major role, we make the processes that form our beliefs reliable.”⁸

Robert Audi also comments on the notion of having reasons for actions. He states that “if we are to distinguish rational actions from *rationalizable* ones, a particular action should be considered rational in virtue of a set of beliefs and wants expressing reasons for it, only if these wants and beliefs play a role in generating or sustaining it.”⁹ In this regard, having reasons for actions is not sufficient for the action being rational – the reasons must have played a role in determining which action to take. The following example should clarify this point. Suppose a person named John had agreed to see a friend named Jane one night, but decided against it at the last minute because they found

⁵ Ibid., p. 64.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

⁹ Audi, p. 427.

out that their arch enemy Harry was also invited to the Jane's house. Also suppose that that John had a minor cold. John may tell Jane that he weren't feeling well enough to go and see her, which may be true, but his true motivation for not visiting Jane was based upon an irrational hatred for Harry. Because of his cold John may be able to rationalize his decision not to see Jane. However, since the decision was based on an irrational hatred of Harry - it was not a rational act. Simply stated, reasons alone are not always sufficient for justifying an act as rational.

However, the concept that a rational action is based on reasons still relies on the concept of rational beliefs. These beliefs can be differentiated from simply true or correct beliefs. As Nozick points out, by having reasons for our beliefs and using a reliable process to arrive at our beliefs, the belief itself is more credible. To better explain this position, take the example that was used earlier of the person going for a walk. Perhaps they believed it was cold because they often watched The Weather Channel. They have observed that when the weather forecast calls for chilly weather, it is indeed cold outside, and likewise when the forecast predicts warm weather it is typically warm outside. However on this particular day, it was unseasonably warm despite a forecast for cold weather. Donning a coat for the walk, then, would not be an irrational act. (Although perhaps keeping on a down coat in 80 degree weather would be irrational once the person stepped outside and realized how warm it was.) Putting on the coat before the person ventured outside would be based on a rational belief, but not a true belief. Herein lies the distinction. The same could be said regarding obeying traffic lights. Crossing the street when the "walk" sign was lit may be based on a rational belief that it is safe to walk when the sign is lit, derived from a lifetime of experiences. The fact that on that particular day a car ran the red light and killed our oblivious walker does not indicate that walking across the street was irrational or based on a false belief about traffic laws.¹⁰

¹⁰ This is not to say people do not have errors in their judgment or have common irrational beliefs that they believe to be rational. For examples

The above claims do not in any way imply that truth and rationality are unrelated. On the contrary, being rational and holding rational beliefs are approximations of the truth. For example, if an individual has a rational belief ' p ', then ' p ' is most likely true. Stated another way, believing ' p ' indicates that the individual believes ' p ' is true. This statement makes the most sense when discussing future events. One can have a rational belief that crossing the street when the light says "walk" will ensure they will not get hit by a car. However, it is impossible to know if this is true, as the event of getting hit would occur in the future. Since absolute truth about future events is unattainable, at least in my opinion, having rational beliefs is the closest we can come to knowing the "Truth."¹¹

While Nozick himself does not advocate a particular action as a rational action, he does describe the "standard account" of rational action, which he contrasts with this formulation of rational belief. By this "standard account" whether or not an action is rational is dependent upon how the goal of the action (or the end) serves to maximize utility. According to Nozick, this account seems to discredit the idea that rationality involves a reliable process, as a desirable action may come about through a "series of miscalculations," which cannot be said to be a rational process.¹² Overall, Nozick contributes greatly to the discussion of reason, rationality and rational action. However he does not provide a reason to be rational. Stated differently, Nozick does not provide an ultimate goal to be reached by the reasoning process. This will be tackled in the second section of this paper.

At this point an important concept in the discussion of rationality should be explained. An act can be seen as being

of this see Tversky's article that looks at the errors of judgment and the flaws of common heuristics.

¹¹ This does not include the knowledge of absolute mathematical truths, or other truths that occur in all possible worlds. I will not get into this discussion here, however. I simply want to state that we cannot be sure we have true beliefs about what will occur in the future.

¹² Nozick, p. 65.

rational or irrational in one of two ways: 1) by the information the individual has at the time, or 2) by all available information, even if that information is unavailable to the individual performing the act. This has a number of different applications for the theory of rational action. First, it allows one to say an action was rational or irrational in hindsight. For example, if I take an umbrella on a walk and it doesn't rain, it would be possible to say that taking the umbrella with me was irrational given the lack of rain. This approach can be thought of as "rationality in retrospect." Second, this action could also be viewed in light of the information available to the individual at the time. If I had just seen a weather broadcast that called for heavy rain, it would be possible to say that taking the umbrella with me was the rational thing to do, because I had a rational belief that it was going to rain. Finally, the action can be viewed in terms of all the information available at the time. It could be the case that the weatherman I watched was an evil demon who enjoyed seeing people carry umbrellas around town when there was no chance of rain. If I was aware of this fact, taking the umbrella would be irrational.¹³ While the distinctions made here should be kept in mind when reading or evaluating pieces on rationality, the selections of literature used for this paper can all be viewed in terms of the second application above: that an act can be seen as rational or irrational only in light of what information a person has available to them at the time when the act was committed. This ties in nicely to the concept of rational belief.

Also useful to discuss in this project is an article by Herbert Simon entitled "Alternative Visions of Rationality." In it, Simon presents what he sees are the three main views of what it is to be rational. In addition, Simon explains some of the fundamental elements of reason, or at least the typical or common conception of reason. The first attribute of reason that Simon points out is its limitations. He points out that "reasoning processes take symbolic inputs and deliver symbolic outputs."¹⁴

¹³ Brandt (1990) came up with the umbrella story; I did the rest.

¹⁴ Simon, p. 190.

The inputs are axioms, and are themselves not open to the reasoning process or justification as “any attempt at such a justification would involve us in an infinite regress of logics.”¹⁵ Moreover, Simon states that reason is not value laden in that reason “cannot tell us where to go; at best it can tell us how to get there.”¹⁶ However, he does claim that value choices often involve reasoning when values conflict, such as if satisfying one value would have negative consequences upon other values.¹⁷ With these comments, Simon moves on to the three theories of rationality/reason.

The first theory examined is that of the subjective expected utility (SEU) theory, which he claims rests on four major assumptions. First, an individual has a *utility function*, and thus can “assign a cardinal number as a measure of his liking of any particular scenario of events over the future.”¹⁸ Second, it assumes that the individual has options to choose from. Third, it assumes that the individual can assign a probability distribution to each alternative. Finally, it assumes that the individual should choose the option that will maximize the expected value of his or her utility function.¹⁹ This is the theory that Nozick holds as the “standard account.” Simon points out that this theory is impossible to apply in the real world. At best it is a mere approximation of decision making processes.²⁰

Since SEU theory is not exact, Simon offers what he calls the “behavioral alternative” or “bounded rationality.” For this the primary assumption is that “the environment in which we live... is an environment that is nearly factorable into separate problems.”²¹ In order for an organism to have a bounded rationality, it must have emotions to guide choices and prioritize matters, a way to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 194.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 195-196.

²¹ Ibid., p. 198.

generate alternatives, and a method to gain facts about the environment.²² Simon finds that this method more accurately describes human behavior and how people solve problems than does SEU theory. Moreover, Simon claims that bounded rationality accounts for how people stay alive. Simon realizes that bounded rationality doesn't ensure consistent choices, but finds this is unnecessary and/or unimportant.²³

Given these setbacks, he looks next to the notion of "intuitive rationality." The main premise of this theory is that "a great deal of the success of human beings in arriving at a correct decision, is due to the fact that they have good intuition or good judgment."²⁴ As justification for this type of theory, Simon looks to the "aha!" experience, which is where people reach solutions to problems suddenly. This is attributed to an individual's experiences with what they are faced with. Simon claims that "in any field of expertise, possession of an elaborate discrimination net that permits recognition of any one of tens of thousands of different objects or situations is one of the basic tools of the expert and the principal source of his intuitions".²⁵ Furthermore, experience is only gained through intensive learning and practice.²⁶ Simon concludes his article by stating that there is no contradiction between the behavior and intuitive models of rationality, and that all serious thinking requires both.²⁷ While this may be the case, these "visions of rationality" do not explicitly describe what a rational action *is*; rather they describe three decision making processes that may be or would be rational.²⁸ In

²² Ibid., p. 199.

²³ Ibid., p. 200.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 202.

²⁶ Ibid., 203.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ It could be the case that an rational act is simply one that occurs from a rational decision making process. However, since the ends of the action do not factor in to the decision of how rational the action itself is, I feel this opens up the door for "Evil Ends". For example, Hitler could have

order to try to explain what a rational action would be, I turn to an article by Richard Brandt, "Rationality, Egoism, and Morality."

Brandt's definition of rational action is equivalent to that of fully informed action. In particular, Brandt defines a rational action as

the action that [a] person *actually would* perform at the time if (a) his desires and aversions at the time were what they would be if he had been fully exposed to available information, and (b) the agent had firmly and vividly in mind... all knowable facts which, if he thought about them, would make a difference to his tendency to act, given his "cleaned up" desires.²⁹

Brandt continues his article with a further explanation of what a "rational act" is. He believes that "intense cravings," such a need for recognition by other people, can "vanish" when the person who has these cravings is "fully exposed to available information."³⁰ Moreover, he holds that his interpretation of a rational action is similar to that of other conceptions of rational action. To this end he gives two main examples. First "if two courses of action will achieve the same positive goal, then the one is rational which does so at less cost." Second, "if two plans will have equal costs, but one will lead to all the desired goals the other will lead to, but to further desired goals as well, that is the rational act."³¹

Brandt's position is unique in that he introduces morality into the question of what is rational. He morphs the two concepts by taking the egoist position on morality and combines it with his definition of what a rational act is. But this is clarified by his

planned mass killings using a rational process, but this does not in my opinion imply that the mass killings were rational. Even if this conception is plausible, I would still like to formulate a conception of rational action that has an ultimate end that could be considered Good.

²⁹ Brandt 1972, p. 682.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 682-683.

³¹ Ibid., p. 685.

contention that “it is not morally binding but rather... it is only *morally permissible* for a person to do what advances (or what he thinks advances) his welfare to some degree, irrespective of how it affects the interests of others.”³² He furthers this claim by holding that he doesn’t believe individuals have an obligation (moral or otherwise) to further their own interests, but may have an obligation not to jeopardize their own welfare. Moreover, Brandt claims that “X morally ought to do Y” should be taken to mean “X would be required to do Y by the moral system that all rational (in my sense) persons would, if they had the opportunity to choose, *collectively* agree in selecting as the moral systems for the consciences of adults of the society in which they knew that they and/or their children would spend their lives.”³³

The final section of the Brandt article looks at two major potential problems of egoism in relation to rational action. The first problem is that “rational people would *not* agree to choose, as the moral system for a society in which they expected to live, one in which the dictates of conscience correspond to the principle of egoism.”³⁴ This is because egoists would choose the method that best suits their own interests, and these methods would most assuredly differ. The second criticism is that there “*could not be* any such thing as an egoist moral system in society.” This is due to the fact that the conception of a system of rules contradicts egoism, and individual wants are not ranked in reference to each other. Further, “an egoist could not consistently teach others to be egoists, or proclaim and defend his views publicly, or show disapproval of altruistic behavior, or give sincere moral advice.”³⁵ Brandt responds to these criticisms, basically on the level that an

³² Ibid., p. 688.

³³ Ibid., p. 690-691.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 691-692.

³⁵ Ibid., 692.

egoist would be reasonable as well as rational, and that in and of itself would answer the critiques.³⁶

While Richard Brandt holds the benefit of rational action to be the advancement of one's self interest, Robert Nozick claims that the types of goals sought after when rational beliefs come into play are cognitive goals. The primary cognitive goal of the philosophers is truth, and truth is intrinsically valuable.³⁷ However, Nozick takes issue with this point in claiming that "not every fact is worth knowing" and having false beliefs about certain things, such as state capitals, is irrelevant.³⁸ Moreover, Nozick presents an instance of how believing something that is false may actually lead to finding out more truths, thus increasing the ratio of true to false beliefs. For example, Nozick states that if someone were to believe "one false thing, I will tell him many truths he otherwise would not find out."³⁹ Another argument Nozick presents is that it is possible that other types of goals may outweigh cognitive goals. Here he presents the case of a mother who is presented with evidence that her son is guilty of a serious crime, but yet refuses to believe it, even though the evidence convinces everyone else. It may be rational for her to believe her son is innocent, if it is the case that by not believing it her life would be miserable. However, even if being rational or committing rational acts leads to some particular cognitive goal, this does not in and of itself prove rationality to be necessary. It does not alone answer the question of why we ought to be rational. This subject will be tackled in the next section of the paper. In addition, the next section will tie in elements from the literature reviewed in this section in order to form a more cohesive theory of rational action.

³⁶ Ayn Rand could defend ethical egoism against these positions, but I do not feel that a refutation of the critiques is necessary here. Rather the point is to explain Brandt's position and the potential problems with it.

³⁷ Nozick, p. 67.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

Rationalizing Rationality

By looking at the contentions of Nozick, Brandt, and Simon, a number of important characteristics of rationality and reason can be deduced. Among these qualities is that rationality and reasoning are processes toward a specific end. While each author provides some elements of what reason most likely entails, none of the authors put forward a comprehensive theory that I find reasonable. Thus, by combining elements of all three articles, along with introducing some new concepts into the reason, rationality, and rational act discussion, it may be possible to present a unified theory that both describes what a rational act is and what its primary function should be. Moreover, it is my intention to justify rationality as a necessary condition for the ultimate goal. In this way I hope to “rationalize rationality.”

There are a number of different elements that have been articulated in the preceding section that are useful to a comprehensive theory of rationality. First, from Nozick it is helpful to use his conception of rational action that is based on rational beliefs. By centering a theory of rationality on rational beliefs rather than on true beliefs, it is possible to account for how people actually act. People act on rational beliefs, and cannot act on true beliefs if those beliefs require information about future events. Moreover, this allows for a discussion of rationality that does not rely on hindsight, in that an act can be viewed as rational or irrational in terms of what information they have at the time when the act was performed. Nozick’s conception of rationality as having both reasons for actions and by using a process that produces reliable results is particularly useful. By introducing the notion of a “reliable process” into rationality, this conception avoids the problem Audi presents of an action being rationalizable while not being rational. This problem is avoided by stretching Nozick’s claim to say that the reasons for action must play a part in the decision making process.

Simon and Brandt also contribute to a cohesive theory of rational action, although to less of an extent than does Nozick. Simon, for example, points out the limits of rationality, in that

reason “cannot tell us where to go; at best it can tell us how to get there.”⁴⁰ Moreover, he argues for a conception of rationality that includes a process, as does Nozick. Finally, Simon’s “visions of rationality” are useful in that they can be utilized to point out flaws in the current literature on the subject. As stated earlier in the paper, none of the versions of the rational decision making process provide an adequate account of *why* one ought to be rational. This in and of itself displays a large gap in the current theories on rational action, and provides a purpose to my paper.⁴¹ Brandt falls into the same problem that Simon does: he articulates what a rational action is, but he fails to say why one ought to be rational. Brandt does, however, contribute to what a comprehensive rational decision making theory should look like. In this regard, Brandt states that one ought to have “cleaned up desires.” That is, when an individual is deciding which action to perform, they should be aware of their desires and where their desires originated from, and all things should be equally vivid in their mind. Thus although the concept of rational action can only take into account what information an individual has at a given time, the individual should attempt to have all information possible before taking a specific course of action. Brandt’s attempt to include morality in his discussion of rational action is also notable. However, due to space considerations, I cannot include a similar discussion in this paper.

Each of the authors cited above contributes to a theory of rational action, yet the theory I propose is unique in that it takes into account *why* people ought to be rational. In this regard, my account of why it necessary to be rational goes beyond the typical argument that being rational is simply better than being irrational. To this end I propose that being rational is a necessary condition, but not sufficient condition, for an ultimate goal: life.

⁴⁰ Simon, p. 191.

⁴¹ Of course, my paper has a purpose in that it is needed to get a good grade in the class, however this probably is not significant on a philosophical level.

I offer two accounts of life to which rationality is necessary. The first account is based upon a common sense or simple account of life, and a dictionary definition is useful to explain what this conception is. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines life as: "the quality that distinguishes a vital and functional being from a dead body [and/or] the period from birth to death."⁴² The first aspect of life to which rationality is necessary, then, is to maintain life as a physical condition. The second aspect of life that is considered is quality of life. Life is more than merely the absence of death. There are certain qualities that can either improve or take away from the "life experience." However, I am not going to put forward or defend any particular traits that contribute to quality of life – this in and of itself would be too massive an undertaking for a paper of this size. Nevertheless, I will argue that a quality of life is a trait or feature that when present is better than its absence, all else being equal. An example of this could be health. One could argue that being healthy is better, all else being equal, than being unhealthy. While health may be the most basic feature that contributes to quality of life, I will not attempt to justify it here. Rather, I will assume that quality of life varies between individuals, and that the individual can determine which elements contribute to their own quality of life. Furthermore, this conception also includes the ability to achieve goals. What goals ought to be sought is also debatable, but some aspect of goal achievement or attempted goal achievement is included in this aspect of life. What follows in the final part of this paper is how each of these two aspects of life are served by being rational and committing rational acts. Further, the rest of this paper is designed to show how being rational is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for life in each of these two aspects. Also included are some potential counter-examples to the claims I have put forward.

⁴² Merriam-Webster, p. 670.

Life as a Physical State

In order to maintain life as a physical state – that is, in order to actually be alive – one must commit at least some rational actions. (Or, life of an individual can only be maintained when someone commits rational acts on their behalf.) Take eating food for example. Eating food is necessary for an individual to stay alive. In order to maintain life by eating food, one must have a rational belief as to what food is – a carrot and not a candle – and how to access food. Further, eating when hungry is a rational act, in that eating provides sustenance for life. Choosing never to eat, then, is irrational, because it ultimately causes death. A potential counter example to this could be that a person could be lucky and still stay alive. One could cross a major highway blindfolded and make it across without injury, but the act of doing so would still be irrational. This is true for two reasons. First, the person would have a rational belief that crossing the highway in such a fashion could lead to injury, and thus, with the information they have at the time, the act would still be irrational. To say it was rational requires the “rationality in retrospect” approach, which has not been included in this formulation of rational action for reasons articulated earlier in this paper. Second, some level of rationality is still required for life, such as eating; so rationality is still integral to life.

Quality of Life

In order to maintain some level of quality of life, rationality is required. Whatever it is that one determines to be their personal component to quality of life, be it health, intelligence, happiness, shelter, maintaining relationships with friends and/or family, etc., rationality is instrumental in providing these types of traits/features. Take again the example of health. In order to continue to be healthy throughout life, one must eat well, exercise, see their doctor, or otherwise go through a continual process of ensuring their health. In order to do such things, rationality is required. One must have rational beliefs about the healthiness of a burger compared to broccoli, and have an idea of

how eating either one will impact their health. Further, they must have rational beliefs about what pain is and know that in order to reduce pain or attend to it they should see a doctor or take some medication. The process of seeing a doctor when one is ill, then, is a rational process. A possible counter example to this is that some elements to quality of life do not require rationality. Happiness could be achieved, for example, by a series of irrational actions. Yet this too shows a rational process. If I know that irrational actions bring me happiness, and I seek happiness, than committing irrational acts is indeed a rational process. This may not be satisfying from a philosophical standpoint, but it serves to disprove the counter example. All elements of quality of life, then, require rationality in some sense. And as stated previously, quality of life is a part of life itself.

Conclusion

While this project is only a beginning to a larger discussion on what it is to lead a rational life, and what secondary goals people ought to pursue, the process of writing the paper was still useful for a number of different reasons. First, it provided a context for discussion of the nature of rationality, reason, and rational actions, by discussing some of the current literature on the subject. Second, it advocated an ultimate goal of life that requires rationality, both in the sense of maintaining life as a physical condition and maintaining quality of life. Third, it situated the goal of life and rational action within the current literature. Finally, it attempted to justify the conclusion that people ought to be rational on a basic level, in that rationality is required to maintain life. The purpose of the paper was to “rationalize rationality,” and it has begun to accomplish that – until I hear otherwise.

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