

A CONDITION OF RATIONALITY

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I

It has been claimed that one of the normally necessary conditions for rational action is the following. Let us call it A.

- A Those ends, which, from a dispassionate and informed point of view, one values absolutely higher than one's other ends, are the ends which, *ceteris paribus*, are to be achieved. A rational agent will, *ceteris paribus*, seek plans of action which will satisfy those ends; and plans to satisfy his other ends will be adopted only in so far as they are compatible with the satisfaction of those ends he or she values most highly.¹

However, there may be a problem here or a cluster of problems. Note first that A is stated *not* in terms of what *has* highest value or absolutely higher value, but in terms of what an agent under certain conditions values most highly. No clear commitment is made about what, if anything, can in any objective way be said to be of the highest value. It is perhaps possible that even those ends which many people dispassionately and when fully informed value most highly are not the ends which have the highest value.

Suppose first that some form of relativism about ends is true. Then while we can, of course, continue to talk about ends having an absolutely higher value such remarks can have no objectivity. What essentially A would come to, if relativism were true, is the contention that, *ceteris paribus*, a rational person will try to do what he or she on reflection most wants to do and if he or she wants to do (a) more than anything else, (b), (c), (d), etc., then he or she will prefer (a) to (b), (c), (d), etc. where they conflict. If

they conflict with the ends of others, with moral considerations, legal obligations, cohere badly with his or her other ends, or are terribly difficult or hazardous to obtain, then it may not be rational to prefer them, but unless some such conditions obtain it is rational for the agent in question to do what he or she most wants to do.

This (apart from any commitment concerning relativism), I believe, is how most of us think, but if challenged why we should continue to think this way or for the rationale for thinking that way, we would either have to deny that there is or could be any rationale here or claim something such as 'Whatever one wants is intrinsically good' or 'That something is wanted on reflection and with an understanding of why we want it and the consequences of getting it is the best and most ultimate reason for claiming it is intrinsically good.' But if relativism is true there can be no mandatory reason for accepting any such a claim, a claim which, if accepted, would give considerable plausibility to our assumption that, *ceteris paribus*, it is rational to have what is wanted. So while A seems to be some precisification of commonsense, it appears at least not to be justified if relativism is true.

If, on the other hand, some form of non-relativism is true, if, that is, it is possible to give genuine force to the distinction between merely thinking something has absolutely higher value and something actually having it, then other problems arise concerning A. If there is a genuine distinction between something actually having an absolutely higher value and someone thinking that it does, then a person might value some certain thing absolutely higher than anything else and be irrational in so valuing it. If some people so valued picking four-leaf-clovers to the exclusion of any other considerations, they would be irrational. However, such considerations do not actually undermine A, for the *ceteris paribus* qualification would naturally come into play here. If a person had such desires and articulated a plan of action which made everything subservient to his or her picking four-leaf-clovers, such a person would be a paradigm of an irrational human being and it would be one of the situations, allowed by the *ceteris paribus* qualification, where we would not grant that it was the rational thing for such a person to do to act on the principle of achieving that which he or she valued most. This would be true because if a person had such desires they would be irrational desires.

However, now it becomes evident that to sustain A (recall

relativism would not) we must be able properly to distinguish between rational desires and irrational desires. But here we clearly have something which is not unproblematic and we run into conflict with Hume and Russell. They would in some sense allow the distinction, but it would refer to the instrumentalities connected with the desires and not with the desires themselves. We might then say that it is irrational to want something if we know we could not attain it or attaining it would have consequences which we would in turn not desire. But the desire itself, Hume and Russell would claim, could no more be rational or irrational than a laugh could be green or red. That, as has been repeatedly recognized, is a very paradoxical claim. It does not have the sanction of ordinary language as does the comparable conceptual remark about laughter. Yet what it is for something to be a rational desire and whether there are agreed on criteria for rational desires is far from clear.

Perhaps, as Brandt does, we adequately can characterize 'rational desires' as 'fully informed desires,' such that we would say a desire was rational if it is a desire one would have or continue to have when one was aware of the causes of the desire and the consequences of satisfying it and when one would still desire it when one would have all this vividly before one.² Plainly this will not stand just as it is, for it is, of course, highly unrealistic to expect a full knowledge of the causes and consequences. Presumably something contextual is intended here. We want to say something such as 'the causes and consequences of which people could reasonably be expected to be aware.' But this, of course, will not do because it brings in with 'reasonably' a closely related notion to the very notion whose criteria we are trying to specify. So we need some qualifications on 'being aware of the causes and consequences' and it is not clear to me at present just what they should be. But I would be very surprised indeed if this should turn out to be a fundamental difficulty.

What may be a more fundamental difficulty is this: a rational desire is presumably any desire that would be sustained by a person under the circumstances specified. But it seems logically possible that a man might continue to desire, before all else, and at the expense of health, a career, job, security, ordinary pleasures and comforts, to look for four-leaf-clovers and still, in having such a desire, satisfy the conditions specified for a desire to be rational. Yet it would seem to me excessively paradoxical to call such a desire rational even though these conditions are met. If this 'intui-

tion' of mine is justified, then we have yet adequately to characterize 'rational desires.'

Perhaps, in arguing as I just have, I have mistakenly put too much weight on mere logical possibilities in a domain where such considerations are of little importance. My case is surely desert-islandish. Indeed, there is much irrationality in our own lives and all around us, but when do we ever come across people in such circumstances who have anything remotely like such a four-leaf-clover fetish. Yet perhaps such desert-island cases are of use in bringing out what we are committed to with the concept of a rational desire. We see that certain criteria, which would seem to be sufficient, are not. I do not want to try here to get to the bottom of the question of what it is for a desire to be rational, but only to point out that there is a problem about it and to leave the reminder that to the extent that this problem remains unresolved A is in an important way indeterminate.

However, to the extent we can be confident that an objective characterization of 'rational desires' is possible we can be confident that A is what it appears to be, namely one more of our stable criteria of rational action.

II

Something further needs to be said here. Adequately to characterize what it is for a desire to be rational, we also must be able to say at least something reasonably determinate and correct about what is meant by 'a rational person.' For if a person is thoroughly irrational his desires typically would be irrational even when he was fully aware of the causes of his desires and the consequences of satisfying them. Even if he was fully apprised as to the facts, given his character and set of irrational attitudes, his desires still could be thoroughly irrational. For such a person fully informed desires could still be thoroughly irrational. For such a person fully informed desires could still be irrational desires.

Concerning this a number of things come readily to mind which, though quite correct, are not, for reasons I shall give, of much help to us. A rational person is a person whose beliefs fit together in some coherent pattern; he is further a person who has the capacity to reason and indeed exercises that capacity properly. These conditions are necessary conditions for the rationality of persons but are not sufficient conditions. A person — say a thoroughly paranoid person — could fit together absurd beliefs in

a coherent pattern and reason acutely while still being thoroughly irrational. Only the 'properly' in the above statement of conditions may rule him out. But there is in such a context considerable ambiguity or at least vagueness in this normative term. If it just (in this context) means 'accurately' the paranoid may very well go through. If it means instead something like 'correctly' or 'in a sound manner' or 'as a sensible person would,' the paranoid does not go through and the conditions may, after all, be stronger than necessary conditions; however, the statement of conditions remains unhelpful until we have an elucidation of 'correctly,' 'sound manner,' and/or 'sensible person.' We are here pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps; we have important troublesome conceptions which are a) unexplicated, b) may be very context-dependent and c) may be very culturally determined, perhaps even to the extent of being ethnocentric.

Similar considerations to this last consideration about 'properly' apply to further OED-type statements about a rational person. It is surely correct but unhelpful to say that a rational person is a sensible person with sound judgment; he is a person who avoids absurd or extravagant postures and positions. But if we are troubled about the meaning of 'rational person,' we are going to be equally puzzled about 'sensible person' or 'person of sound judgment.' Just what kind of a person is a person of sound judgment and what is a sensible person? Here many conflicting answers are given; this clearly has a cultural and historical dimension and it is far from clear that there are objective criteria or cross-cultural (cross-form-of-life criteria) for 'sensible person' or 'person of sound judgment.' Similar considerations apply even more obviously to 'absurd beliefs' and 'extravagant postures.' Over the following list of historical figures – to show what is involved here concretely – there would be considerable dispute over which men (if any) were men of sound judgment who avoided extravagant postures: Burke, Carlyle, Nietzsche, Bakunin, Trotsky, Gobineau, De Maistre, Kierkegaard, Berdyayev, Reich and Marcuse. If a large and culturally diverse group of intellectuals who knew reasonably well the work of all these men were asked to say which, if any, of these men were sensible men of sound judgment, we would get rather varied answers depending in large measure on the cultural milieu, ideology and the preconceptions of the individuals involved. Those who would give high marks in this regard to Burke and Carlyle would be unlikely to give high marks to Bakunin and Marcuse and *vice versa*.

I am not implying or suggesting that these conceptions are essentially contested and that there cannot be agreement here. I am, however, giving to understand that disagreement runs deep and there is no evident way of arbitrating in a non-question begging manner such disagreements.

However, there are more helpful things to say. We could say that a rational person is a person who generally acts in accordance with certain other very obvious criteria of rationality such as A and criteria such as consistency, coherence, criticalness, concern to base judgments on the evidence and the like. Here we have something which, while remaining general – so general as to apply to all cultures and historical periods – still functions to set, though with the indeterminateness we have noted, the orientation of a rational person so that we in general know how such a person must comfort himself to be a rational person.

There is, however, at least one problem here. We attempted a characterization of 'rational person' in the first place because we seemed at least to need it to distinguish adequately rational desires from irrational desires. And we in turn needed to do that to sustain A. But now we appeal to A – along with the other criteria – to help us ascertain what a rational person is and via that what a rational desire is. Thus we go or at least seem to go in a circle, again pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

In response to this we should note that we are using A in conjunction with the other criteria. Thus it is the case that more is involved than what a person prizes most highly in the circumstances characterized by A. But with other criteria, e.g. criticalness, consistency, efficiency, we have gone a long way toward specifying what a rational person is and limit what could count as a 'rational desire.'

That it is one's strongest desire and indeed remains so, after it is knowingly reflected on with an understanding of its causes and a grasp of what the probable consequences of satisfying it will be, is *not* enough to make it a rational desire. Fully informed desires need not be rational desires. But if it so desired when the other conditions mentioned above obtain, then it is a rational desire. If this is to go in a circle, it is a large circle of a benign sort which brings out the central and interconnected features of rationality.

I want to add, as a coda, some further conditions of rationality which help us in a way compatible with, but also additive to, the remarks made above. A rational person is a person in control of himself who is not extensively self-deceived. A central element

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in the not crystalline notions of being in control of oneself and avoiding self-deception is that of being aware of one's own situation and in that situation and any expectably achievable situation a) to be aware of one's own interests, needs and wants and b) to have some reasonable understanding of how to satisfy one's interests, attain what one needs and get what one wants. A rational person will desire what is in his own interests, though he may not desire it for its own sake, and he will act in such a way as to efficiently satisfy his wants, needs and interests.

In fine a rational person has a good understanding of what is in his own interests and *ceteris paribus* acts efficiently to satisfy his own interests; moreover, such a person will desire what is in his own interests and *ceteris paribus* not desire what is not in his own interests. But this is not to say or to suggest, as Brandt and Gauthier do, that the only thing a rational man will desire for its own sake, whilst behaving rationally, is what is in his own interests or what he takes to be in his own interests – that to know what is in his own interests is to settle conclusively for him what is rational for him to do, namely always to act in accordance with these interests.³ But a rational man will, *ceteris paribus*, act in accordance with what is in his own interests and, unless we are justified in giving a very subjective or relativistic reading to 'interests,' it will not be the case that our four-leaf-clover-man, who puts the seeking of four-leaf clovers above all else, acts rationally or has, in so seeking four-leaf clovers, a rational desire.

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NOTES

¹David A. Richards, *A Theory of Reasons for Action* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 229.

²Richard Brandt, "Rational Desires," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. XLIV (1969-70)

³Richard Brandt, "Rationality, Egoism and Morality," David Gauthier, "Brandt on Egoism," and Kai Nielsen, "Ethical Egoism and Rational Action," all in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXIX, No. 20 (November 2, 1972), pp. 681-99.