

Normativity and Rationality

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I

Broome formulates what he calls the “Normative Question” with respect to rationality in fairly dramatic terms: Is it true that “[n]ecessarily, if rationality requires N to F, that fact is a reason for N to F”? [Broome (2013), p. 192]. His answer in Chapter 11 of his book *Rationality through Reasoning* is quite disappointing: “I am without an argument for the normativity of rationality. Yet I believe rationality is non-derivatively normative” [p. 204]. Here Broome seems to sincerely acknowledge the difficulty such a question poses. One could wonder whether such a pessimistic conclusion was not forced by the demanding terms in which Broome formulates the question. For does it make sense to demand that rationality give us substantive and independent reasons to comply unconditionally with each particular requirement of rationality? [Southwood (2008)]. This demand for independent reasons could be seen as seeking an explanation in derivative terms. Broome is right nevertheless in claiming that if rationality is normative, it has to be non-derivatively normative. The Normative Question is inevitable and Broome’s formulation is appealing. This is why we do not follow those philosophers that challenge it by rejecting the way it has been formulated. It is important to provide a philosophical explanation of why rational requirements are reason-giving.

Secondly, we agree with Broome that rationality is non-derivatively normative, even if we hold that it is not unconditionally normative, as some constitutive approaches have assumed. In this paper, our aim will be to sketch a possible philosophical explanation of the normativity of rationality that agrees with the idea that complying with each rational requirement gives us reasons to adopt a particular position without demanding an explanation on derivative grounds. Our thesis

will be that each rational requirement gives us reasons to adopt particular attitudes because each of them reflects what it is for a subject to achieve a rational adjustment of her attitudes. We will argue that rationality is normative in the sense that within certain normative domains we extol some features which the agent manifests in her doings; from that, one doesn't need to draw the conclusion that necessarily such a feature is constitutive of being a (rational) agent or exhibiting first-person authority or such like. Thus, we will argue that the normativity of rationality can be referred to the constitution of certain normative domains, but also that these domains are grounded on certain practices and virtues which we praise.

II

According to Broome, the Normative Question is hard to answer. The question is nonetheless inevitable. The skeptic is always prone to ask for grounds to comply with the requirements of rationality. Let us flesh out the question starting with an example which Broome graphically reformulates in the following terms: "Take a person who is irrational. (...) Suppose she asks why she should satisfy the requirements of rationality" [p. 196]. Suppose further that she questions the very fact of being rational. Let us slightly force the Schelling's well-known example. Imagine that "a robber assaults your home and puts a gun to your head threatening to kill you or your family if you do not give to him all your money". A possible reaction is to renounce rational calculus and act in such a way that you avoid rational interpretability. A first reading of this example can be put in terms of prudential reasons, that is, not complying with the rational requirements could provide you with a prudential reason to attain your end, not to be killed. But there is room for a more radical interpretation. The example seems to point to some occasions in which it is preferable in general not to be rational. A deeper skeptical question arises: "Why should one be rational at all in this situation?" Remember that on this stronger skeptical reading being rational in such circumstances amounts to being interpretable and predictable, the last thing one would want.

Then, at first reading, the lesson to be drawn from the example could be that reasons provided by rational requirements, if any, cannot be unconditional. Sometimes, there can be reasons not to comply with a particular requirement. If we pose the Normative Question as "Are there

reasons to be rational?”, then examples like the previous one seem to suggest a sort of paradox, because in some cases “there are reasons not to be rational”. But, on this reading – one could argue –, Broome’s point about the normativity of reasons remains unchallenged, because the question is whether rational requirements provide any reason at all. However, there is a second, more radical, reading: not being rational is simply better for someone, independently of whether or not it constitutes a reason; it is better in the very same sense in which being alive is better than not being alive and this arguably could not provide a reason to live. This second reading forces a stronger skeptical question. Maybe rationality cannot be seen as normative at all. There is nothing to recommend in rational behavior. As a consequence, it is hard to see how rationality itself could provide its own reasons.

Notwithstanding, the idea that rational requirements give reasons to us is a valid point insofar as we care about rationality contributing to an appropriate adjustment in our attitudes. Remember that the adjustment consists at least in responding correctly to reasons, but that this is clearly not sufficient. Broome claims that this adjustment needs to satisfy a set of rational requirements. Moreover, these requirements are normative to the extent that they demand something of us, the subjects entertaining the attitudes. There is something the subject ought to do on the basis of the requirement besides the reasons one can have for one’s attitudes. This explains why Broome thinks that rational requirements are reason-giving. Even what he calls “weak normativity” – the idea that rationality requiring you to F entails having a reason to F – admits that there are “reasons for rationality”. These are state-given reasons. They recommend an attitude by itself dependent on other attitudes held.

We face the following situation. On the one hand, the radical skeptic raises doubts about rationality being normative at all. On the other hand, we seem to expect people (and ourselves) to adjust their attitudes in a particular way, that is, by answering to reasons. Besides, not any way of answering to reasons will do. So if the skeptic is right, why should we care about it? Why should we answer to reasons in this particular way, that is, in the way rational requirements seem to demand?

III

Normativity is expressed in ought-propositions, though not all the contexts of use of “ought” are normative. Contrast the following uses:

- (1) “The train ought to have arrived by 10 o’clock”
- (2) “Peter ought to have returned the book by yesterday”

Only the second use is taken to be normative. True normativity, in Broome’s terms, has to do with “ought” in this sense and “helps determine what you ought to do” [p. 27]. But is that all there is to normativity? Far from it, we believe. Let us consider some intuitive cases of normative or evaluative domains, such as football or horse races. These are basically evaluative fields where some actions and attitudes are valued and assessed accordingly. Within these domains, agents are praised or blamed because of their contribution to their characteristic success; that is, winning by obtaining a greater score than the rival in the case of football or by crossing the finish line first in a horse race. Agents accomplish something of value by winning in the game, insofar as success is due to their appropriate contribution to the goal. A normative domain, in this sense, is constituted by the sort of achievement that is proper to it. What it normatively makes sense to do in each field is determined by its distinctive achievement. For instance, in football, when we say

- (3) “The defense line ought to close off spaces”

the normative demand that justifies the use of “ought” is conditional on winning the game and, what is more important, it specifies a valid way to obtain success characteristic of the normative domain itself. There is thus an alternative formulation in terms of requirements:

- (4) Winning the match requires: The defense line closes off spaces.

The question is then whether this requirement is genuinely normative and why. As we have seen, in this case, to win is highly conditional and yet constitutive of the normative domain of football (or of what it is to be a match in a competitive game). For instance, we can understand (4) as entitling someone to say: “we praise the fact that one of the teams won because winning by closing off spaces represents an achievement in the domain”. Here, there is a contingent historical trajectory that has contributed to shape a certain domain where to win because of certain praiseworthy features is constitutive of the very concept and practice of the game. This contingent fact, however, supports a particular set of diverse normative requirements, as for in-

stance “to score a point more than the adversary”, “to win the possession of the ball”, “to close off the spaces”, and so on. The first one, certainly, is a constitutive requirement because it defines the game as such, but the others can also be an essential part of what is normatively required by the game because they are part of the virtues we praise insofar as they contribute to the victory and explain it.

We find here three different components which participate in the genealogy of normativity of certain practices. Compare again the case of football: the first component is the contingent but constitutive fact that trying to win is what is required of a football team (another possible option is the Aztec ball game, where to score is merely an expedient to be recruited for sacrifice). The second is that winning is something we praise and give credit for to the winner. The third is that victory supposes that the team is motivated by this goal and attends to the conditions leading to it. The convergence of these components explains the character of achievement we concede to the victory. Firstly, in those domains where success is viewed as an achievement due to what we praise and blame in the agents, the so-called requirements provide us with reasons to act or not in a certain way; and, secondly, in these domains, the agents are normatively bound by these requirements insofar as they are engaged in the task at issue, and they do it by realizing¹ that they are involved in such a normative domain.

We will argue that rationality is a normative domain in this sense. Being rational, understood as satisfying rational requirements, is a sort of achievement, that is, something whose normative value is dependent on an agential contribution to success consisting in an adjustment among one’s own attitudes. Remember, in Broome’s sense, rationality being normative entails that rationality gives us reasons. In this case, a subject S ought to F because rationality requires S to F. The fact that rationality requires S to F is a reason for S to F. Thus rationality gives S reasons to F. The question is whether our account is able to preserve this characterization of the normativity of rationality. We will argue that it does, insofar as we value the adjustment of our attitudes as an achievement, that is, as something we contribute to.²

IV

Is rationality normative? Let us posit that rationality is a set of requirements that a subject has to comply with. The requirements con-

cern the conscious attitudes of the subject and aim to link them in an appropriate way. Compliance with these requirements deserves merit and is admirable. But maybe this is not enough to establish that they are normative. It is arguable that one could be criticized for failing to comply with the requirements, but that genuine normative criticism presupposes that failure consists in not achieving something one ought to achieve [Broome (2005)]. We are faced with genuine irrationality when a person fails *in a particular way*. She fails not only because she does not well according to her own standards, but mainly because she is not reason bound by the set of requirements she has a reason to comply with. How to understand then the requirements as reason-giving? How to account for their normativity?

A first option is to adopt what we can call a merely *declarative attitude* that states that rationality is constituted by demands imposed on a subject as genuine “oughts”. This declarative statement can either take a moralized form or, less dramatically, outline a set of requirements, as Broome seems to prefer. This move could be understood as aiming to grasp the common content of rationality by an extensional list of requirements. Given the fact that Broome is skeptical regarding the prospect of justifying the normativity of rationality, this approach appears to be a coherent strategy. Thus, the demands the requirements impose on us, and especially those of *Enkrasia*, seem to describe the minimal intuitive use of the concept of rationality (with the exception of the controversial formulation of their scope). In a way, by describing rationality by means of a list, Broome avoids answering questions about the nature of rationality. However, the issue about why to respect those requirements remains, and hence Broome could be heading to the well-known problem which deontology confronts, i.e., a dilemma between an infinite regress and a vicious circle in the foundations of rationality. Thus, when Broome decides to formulate rational requirements by coining the phrase “Rationality requires that...,” he is at once casting light on the meaning of rationality and unfortunately raising doubts similar to those relating to other sorts of normative requirements. One could argue that, as Broome is simply stating the usually stipulated content of a concept, he could be in a good position to avoid the dilemma of the deontological option. But a semantic defense does not work here. Remember how Stephen Stich in his book *The Fragmentation of Reason* tells a story from Nisbett [Stich (1990), p. 9] who very often was challenged by the subjects in his experiments, because some of them did not consider that

an inference was wrong. They typically say: “Why? — who can say what the good and the bad inferences are?” The point is that similar questions can be directed against any requirement. Certainly, this kind of skeptical doubt cannot be answered by semantic considerations (an epistemic skeptical doubt can never be turned into a semantic one). The possibility of raising skeptical issues like these suggests us that something else is needed in order to elucidate where the seat of normativity lies in the case of rationality.

Broome considers a different strategy to establish the normativity of rationality, but he correctly dismisses it. This strategy regards rationality as a disposition seen as the best means to achieve other ends. A prototypical version of this strategy is based on empirical evolutionary considerations, as for instance the supposed benefits that being rational has for survival. A second, more philosophical instrumentalist argument, is that rationality is a necessary means to our social life, for instance to being understood by others. Nevertheless there can be other more abstract formulations of the instrumental approach, as for instance the Dutch Book Argument in probability that predicts losses for those who do not follow the rational requirements. Broome adduces that depending on the circumstances there could be better ways to achieve the same ends. This is certainly right. But even if such a disposition really is the best means, the strategy does not work either. If being rational is a necessary means to obtaining other ends, those ends are the important and valuable thing and not rationality itself.³ In general, even if these strategies were right, they do not touch the core of the Normative Question or, to mention Moore’s tactics, they keep the question open. All these approaches are liable to the same criticism: the normativity of rationality seems to be in fact a sort of heteronormativity. Although there could be a grain of truth in this strategy of instrumental grounding, the problem is that the “ought” does not emerge from the very exercise of rationality itself.

Lastly, Broome argues that rationality, if normative, must be non-derivatively normative. He considers transcendental strategies which find normativity in the very constituency of the agent. Correctly, he says that, even if they are right, they do not add anything significant to the requirements as he formulates them. There is no direct argument from ideas about the constitution of agency or of a first-personal point of view to the normativity of rationality. Besides, this sort of strategy is easily challenged by cases in which the desirability of being irrational is

a real possibility. In these cases, being a subject or an agent or exhibiting first-person authority are not undermined despite the attraction of not being rational. So is it possible to find a new strategy to argue in favor of the normativity of rationality?

The difficulties these different strategies face lead us to think that we need to reconsider the criteria that a conception of normativity for rationality should meet.

Firstly, we should seek an internal, non-derived source of normativity, i.e. what sometimes has been dubbed an *autotelic* conception. Thus, normativity should emerge from rationality's own exercise, from the effective adjustment the subject achieves among her mental states and attitudes.

Secondly, we suggest that the normativity of rationality is intimately tied to the fact of being a valuable thing. There is a sense of normativity that sees it as tied to what we value, though not necessarily as an ultimate value. Thus, for example, health is something good for its own sake, even a normative aim all things equal, but there are circumstances in which we could prefer to answer to other values than living a healthy existence. A MSF aid worker can prefer to risk her well-being balanced against other more important aims and values, as for instance the health of poor people in an underdeveloped country. In this sense, we can understand rationality as an achievement of the subject that exercises and adjusts her attitudes according to the requirements of what we consider rationality. This category of achievement is what we need to avoid the Scylla of a declarative (or transcendental) notion and the Charybdis of the derived sources of normativity. Moreover, from our point of view, this approach could also avoid the skeptic radical doubts about rationality mentioned earlier.

In the following section, we propose to draw an analogy with the epistemology and the very close epistemic normative domain, where the same normative question has been raised with parallel virtue theories proposed in response. The idea is not to translate mechanically the same solution to the rationality case; however, we suggest that the similarities are strong enough to test the analogy.

V

A recent controversy in epistemology regarding the value of knowledge can help clarify some of the problems surrounding the nor-

mativity of rationality. In a post-Gettier era, an influential tradition pursued the idea of including anti-luck clauses in the definition of knowledge (as for instance, the garden varieties of reliabilism or virtue epistemology). The objective was to exclude those situations in which true beliefs are reached just by luck. The debate originated in Plato's question whether knowledge adds any value to the value of mere true belief. The question about the normativity of knowledge was addressed in the controversy within the context of the value question. Does knowledge have any distinctive value? This is one of the most radical forms of putting the value problem for knowledge: the value of knowledge goes beyond the value of true belief or even justified true belief.

An interesting answer to this question has been to consider knowledge as an achievement due to certain characteristics of the agent, for instance, her epistemic character, her epistemic motivations, her abilities or competences. Knowledge is a fundamental value in the epistemic domain because success (true belief) is non-accidentally obtained on the basis of these features of the agent. These features become valuable and *constitute* the characteristic achievement of the epistemic domain. Insofar as they are part of the "epistemic game" and an aspect the agents are praised or blamed for, they give rise to a set of requirements tied to the fact that knowledge is non-luckily obtained from gifts of the subject. The question here is that knowledge is valuable because of certain requirements that define it. These requirements establish in different ways the following: in the context of the search for truth, knowledge requires that true belief derives in an appropriate way from gifts of the subject. Thus, in order to know that *p*, the true belief that *p* must be obtained through the exercise of our competences. Therefore, we find a certain basis for drawing the analogy between knowledge and rationality. Compare this last formulation with the previous example of the normativity in a game such as football where the value of the victory is attributed to certain characteristics of the competing teams. The point is that it is fundamentally normative for a team to win because of the superiority of its play. Although this requirement is obviously conditional and defeasible, and things often happen in very different ways, we value football because in the long term the best teams win and all of them compete fiercely.

It is significant that the different readings of the idea that knowledge represents an achievement on the part of the subject put the emphasis, first, on how the nature of knowledge is connected to

the particular value it has and, second, on how this value is distinctive and cannot be reduced to other normative properties that are fundamental in the epistemic domain (such as truth). The idea is that if it has any value (and it imposes requirements) it is because of its distinctiveness. If knowledge is normative, it is not (and cannot be) instrumentally normative within the epistemic domain (though it can also be instrumentally valuable because it contributes to obtaining other goods). Therefore, the explanation of why knowledge is normative cannot be that it is instrumentally valuable. Certainly, as in football, one can have reasons to win, for instance to support the prestige of the town or the country, but these instrumental reasons, although legitimate and valuable, can be dismissed against the reasons that originate in the fundamental value and normativity of the domain.

Therefore, our thesis is the following: if one understands rational requirements as conditions for a subject to achieve something with fundamental non-derivative value, then one can build an explanation of why compliance with these requirements is normative, that is, provides reasons to the subject. A rational requirement is the expression of what it is for a subject to achieve something with non-derivative value in the domain of rationality. They are normative because they reflect the engagement of the subject in obtaining something valuable [Broncano and Vega (2011)].

In brief, truth is valuable; but, in the epistemic domain, we also value *how* we get the truth. Answering to reasons is valuable to us; but, in the rational normative domain, we also value *how* we respond to reasons, that is, how the subject is adequately engaged in the task of adjusting her attitudes. This is a distinctive value, not reducible to merely responding to reasons. This sort of normative rational exercise demands compliance with a set of requirements whose claims become visible in those contexts in which the subject is involved in the task of rational adjustment.

We think that our view can be exemplified well with the central requirement of *Enkrasia*. We have reasons to comply with such requirement because this is the way in which being responsive to reasons is due to the involvement of the subject. It is analogous to the case of knowledge, where its fundamental value reflects the way in which the subject is appropriately connected with obtaining true beliefs. Analogously, with respect to rationality, we can say that it has normative force because it reflects the way in which the subject is ap-

propriately responding to her reasons. In a sense, this means that a rational subject sees her rational activity as something valuable and as something she has reason to promote. Detecting that responding to reasons is not something that she is doing (or that it is the result of luck) undermines her commitments, and hence, gives a reason to adjust the attitudes which she is committed to.

VI

In conclusion, we consider rationality as a normative domain. As other normative domains, it has to be understood in terms of its characteristic achievement. An achievement is success that excludes luck and is due to the particular involvement of an agent. The sort of achievement characteristic of rationality has to do with the appropriate adjustment in a subject's attitudes. This is a condition for a subject to correctly respond to reasons. This does not mean that the normativity of rationality derives from the nature of the attitudes themselves, but it is also true that these attitudes become what they are in so far as they are subject to rational requirements. These requirements reflect a peculiar way in which a rational subject adjusts her attitudes. This way of adjusting her attitudes is valuable insofar as it is constitutive of the achievement proper of the domain of rationality, meaning that it is something the subject deserves merit for. A subject engaged in the rational domain responds to reasons by being able to attend to the demands of the task, demands that are reflected in the set of rational requirements. That is why these requirements can provide the subject with substantive, independent, though defeasible and conditional, reasons.

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NOTES

¹ Realizing that one is involved in a normative domain does not demand a reflective second-order attitude on the part of the subject. It can be modelled in terms of paying attention to the requirements of a certain task without making them explicitly available for reasoning.

² We think that our approach, based on the identification of conditional normative domains, avoids the danger of bootstrapping identified by Kolodny [Kolodny (2005)]. It seems to be true that, given the contingent fact of competing in a football game, it is perfectly admissible to say that intending to close off spaces is required (under the appropriate circumstances) to win the match, in the way that to win the match provides a reason to close off spaces. Why? The response could be the following: “I am intending to close off spaces because, provided we are playing a match, this is what we ought to do in order to win the game, and to win the match requires to close off spaces”. In a certain constitutive sense we are obliged to win the match, supposing we are sincerely engaged in the task, but in another sense to win the match through the use of certain strategies is something we achieve and because of that we receive credit and praise.

³ See Kvanvig’s arguments for the case of knowledge [Kvanvig (2003)].

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RESUMEN

En este artículo abordamos la Cuestión Normativa con respecto a la racionalidad. Establecemos una analogía con el dominio epistémico y argumentamos que la normatividad de la racionalidad ha de entenderse en términos de su logro característico, a saber: en términos de cómo el sujeto responde a razones. Los requisitos racionales reflejan una manera particular en la que un sujeto particular ajusta sus actitudes y proporciona así a un sujeto que está involucrado adecuadamente en esta tarea un ajuste con razones genuinamente independientes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *racionalidad, Cuestión Normativa, razones, conocimiento, logro, valor.*

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we address the Normative Question with respect to rationality. We draw an analogy with the epistemic domain and argue that the normativity of rationality has to be understood in terms of its characteristic achievement, that is, in terms of how the subject responds to reasons. Rational requirements reflect a particular way in which a rational subject adjusts her attitudes and thus provide a subject adequately engaged in this task of adjustment with genuine independent reasons.

KEYWORDS: *rationality, normative question, reasons, knowledge, achievement, value.*