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IS THERE A NEXUS BETWEEN REASONS AND RATIONALITY?

When we say that a subject has attitudes that she is rationally required to have, does that entail that she has those attitudes for reasons? In other words, is there a deep nexus between being rational and responding to reasons? Many have argued that there is. Derek Parfit, for example, tells us that “to be rational is to respond to reasons” (Parfit 1997, p. 99). But I am not so sure. I begin by considering this question in the domain of theoretical rationality. The question in this domain is whether, when a subject has the beliefs that she is required to have by the norms of theoretical rationality, she is responding to reasons that there are for having those beliefs. Armed with a moderately clear answer to this question in the theoretical domain, I consider their relationship in the practical domain. When a subject has the desires that she is required to have by the norms of practical rationality, is she responding to reasons that there are for having those desires? Part of the interest of these questions lies in improving our understanding of reasons for action. I will say a little about this towards the end.

1. Reasons and Rationality in the Theoretical Domain

Let’s begin with a very simple case of theoretically rational belief formation. Suppose that the following is true:

TR: Reason requires that if I believe that $p$ and I believe that if $p$ then $q$, then I believe that $q$.

Furthermore, suppose that I believe that $p$, and that I believe that if $p$ then $q$, and that, abiding by TR, I rationally go on to form the belief that $q$ – let’s just assume whatever else needs to be true for this to be the case.

Should we conclude that, in such circumstances, there must be reasons for the formation of the belief that \( q \)? In other words, does the mere fact that I am theoretically rational in the formation of the belief that \( q \) entail that there are reasons to which I am responding?

It is important, in answering this question, that we do not move unwittingly between different senses of the term ‘reason’. There is a widely accepted distinction in the philosophical literature between two senses in which we talk of reasons for action (Woods 1972, Smith 1987). On the one hand, some of our talk of reasons is talk about psychological states that are capable of rationally explaining an action. On the other, some of our talk of reasons is talk, not of psychological states that explain, but about considerations that justify. In these terms, the concern is that there is a similar distinction to be made in our talk of reasons for belief. Specifically, what we have asked appears to be ambiguous between a question about reasons for belief in the sense of psychological states that explain our beliefs, and reasons for belief in the sense of considerations that justify our beliefs. In answering the question we must therefore make explicit the sense of the term ‘reason’ that we have in mind.

Let’s begin by considering reasons in the sense of psychological states that rationally explain. It is uncontroversial that, when I am theoretically rational in the formation of the belief that \( q \) in circumstances like those described, there are psychological states that explain my believing that \( q \): I believe that \( q \) because I believe that \( p \) and I believe that if \( p \) then \( q \), and it is in virtue of there being such a psychological explanation that I count as being theoretically rational. Since the nature of this psychological explanation will be important in what follows, let’s say that in such circumstances the beliefs that \( p \) and that if \( p \) then \( q \) evidentially explain the belief that \( q \). If the issue is whether there is a nexus between reasons in this sense and being theoretically rational then, in the circumstances described, the answer is that there is.

But what about reasons in the other sense? If, in circumstances like those described, I were asked what my reasons are for forming the belief that \( q \), in the sense of the considerations that justify my belief, then I would unhesitatingly insist there are such reasons, namely, that \( p \) and that if \( p \) then \( q \). But this doesn’t yet entail that there are in fact reasons for my forming the belief that \( q \), still less that the considerations I cite are reasons for doing so. Whether or not this is so turns on the relationship between the reasons that there are for forming the belief that \( q \) and the