Rationality Through Reasoning
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Rationality Through Reasoning

John Broome

WILEY Blackwell
For Derek Parfit
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Preface

Long ago, Derek Parfit generously asked me to respond to a paper of his in a symposium at the 1997 Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association. Writing my response was the beginning of my work on the subject of this book. Traditionally, the two papers in a symposium were published in the *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* under the same title. But sharp-eyed readers may have noticed that, whereas Parfit’s paper was entitled ‘Reasons and motivation’, mine was entitled ‘Reason and motivation’. By that time, I had already concluded that rational motivation was less about reasons than many philosophers assume, and more about figuring out by reason what you ought to do and then coming through reason to do it.

The last stage brings a difficulty. If you come through reason to do a particular act, reason supports your doing it. But how could it support your doing an act unless it is one you ought to do? And it might not be one you ought to do; even if you have figured out by reason that you ought to do this act, you may have made a mistake. A solution came to me as I walked along Dag Hammarskjöld’s väg in Uppsala, one snowy day early in 1998. I was in Uppsala on the first of several long visits to the Swedish Collegium of Advanced Study. SCAS has always been exceptionally generous to me and given me the very best opportunities for working. Each visit has advanced my work on the subject of this book. That first time I realized that, when you come through reason to act, reason need not support your acting simpliciter. Instead, reason – rationality – requires of you that, if you believe you ought to do something, you do it. The condition is within the scope of what reason requires. Reason supports your making the conditional true, not your acting. This insight that the requirement of rationality has a ‘wide scope’ was not original; I soon discovered that Jonathan Dancy had mentioned it twenty years earlier in his paper ‘The logical conscience’. But it provided a foundation for this book. Later, a long correspondence with Niko Kolodny helped me to refine it.

Through the following years I slowly disentangled some of the relevant concepts. First, I disentangled rationality from normativity in general. Many
philosophers think of rationality as a sort of enforcer for normativity: it is your rationality that makes you do what you have a reason to do, or at least what you believe you have a reason to do. I now think that rationality is much less tightly connected with normativity than that. Second, I disentangled reasoning, which is something a person does, from rationality, which is a property of a person and her mental states. During these developments, I benefited from many discussions with those of my research students who were interested in aspects of the subject: first Andrew Riesner and later Julian Fink, Stephen Kearns, Yair Levy, James Morauta, Toby Ord, and Gerard Vong.

The last five years of my work on the book have mainly been occupied with trying to understand reasoning. My account of reasoning has gone through several revolutions, each correcting an initial mistake of mine. At first I was deceived by a similarity between the contents of instrumental practical reasoning and the contents of theoretical reasoning by modus ponens. I thought that the two were somehow fused together. I have now concluded that their similarity is only superficial. A second mistake was to assume that, when reasoning is correct, it is made correct by requirements of rationality. I now realize that reasoning is made correct by permissions, not requirements. Correct reasoning is not reasoning you are required to do by rationality, but reasoning you are permitted to do by rationality. This seems intuitively obvious, but I understood it properly only as a result of facing up to an objection to my previous account of reasoning that was shown me by Kieran Setiya. A third mistake was to assume that reasoning – at least when it is conscious and something we do – has to be conducted in language. This may be true, but a discussion with Paul Boghossian persuaded me it is best not to assume it. Boghossian also made me realize I should take more seriously the well-known difficulties of rule-following, which are associated with my view that reasoning is a rule-governed operation.

I gave three Blackwell-Brown Lectures in 2003. I was honoured to receive the invitation. This book exists because of it. The lectures drew together my work up to that point. It turned out to be an earlier point in the development of the book than either I or my publishers had anticipated. Still, from then on I possessed a draft book.

I have been honoured by subsequent invitations that have given me the opportunity to garner advice from philosophers in different parts of the world. I want to mention three in particular. First, I gave four Wedberg Lectures in Stockholm in 2004, where I benefited from the commentary of the four excellent discussants, Lars Bergström, Torbjörn Tännsjö, Folke Tersman and Åsa Wikforss. Second, there was a conference on my work in Canberra in 2007, with valuable papers from Geoffrey Brennan, Garrett Cullity, James Dreier, Andrew Reisner, Włodek Rabinowicz, Nicholas Southwood and Daniel Star.
Third, I gave two Whitehead Lectures at Harvard in 2011, where again I received very useful comments.

Many institutions have supported me with their generosity during the long writing of this book. I have mentioned SCAS already. My visits there have alternated with visits to the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Any philosopher who has spent time at the RSSS knows what wonderful stimulation is to be found there. My home universities – first St Andrews and now Oxford – have been very kind with the leave they granted me from teaching. For a whole three years, my research on this book was funded by a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust. Not only did the Trust finance me for all that time, but it has shown remarkable forbearance during the subsequent years while the book remained unfinished. I do hope it will think the result is worth the wait.

I have to express ironical thanks to another institution: the UK Research Excellence Framework. The REF is stupid in some ways. It demands that philosophy should have a demonstrable impact on society within fifteen years, whereas the actual impact of philosophy on society is wide and deep but takes decades or centuries to develop. However, the REF did have the merit of setting me a deadline. For its sake, this book had to go to press by the end of 2012. It went, with all the imperfections it still contains. I could have worked much longer on trying to eliminate each one. I am pleased I did not, and now I can even blame them on the REF.

Over the years I have been helped by a great number of philosophers who gave me their time. I am not adequately acknowledging my debts simply by including them in the great long list below. Many have sent me extensive comments and continued to do so for years. But when so many have helped me to a greater or lesser extent, what else can I do? I am worried, too, that I have probably forgotten to list some people whose contribution has been important. If you are one of those, please forgive my lapse of memory.

I have already mentioned Derek Parfit, who started me on this track, influenced the turnings I took, and also near the end sent me long comments about the whole book. Parfit’s own work was the stimulus for mine. Several chapters of my book implicitly or explicitly engage with it. I often obstinately disagree with Parfit, but I hope he will recognize that I am much more on his side than against it. Really, he has always been my mentor.

I have also already mentioned my students at Oxford. I have learnt a great deal from them, and some have taken the trouble to comment extensively on my writing. More senior friends and colleagues, with whom I have had many conversations about topics in this book, include Gustaf Arrhenius, Michael Bratman, Geoffrey Brennan, Krister Bykvist, Roger Crisp, Jonathan Dancy, Brad Hooker, Douglas MacLean, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Nicholas Southwood, John Skorupski and Ralph Wedgwood.