THE RATIONAL VERSUS THE REASONABLE

1. Conflicting accounts of the role of reason in conduct. Probably few terms occur more frequently in the literature of moral theory than "rational," "reasonable," and their antonyms. Yet in philosophical discussion there always has been, and there continues to be, very considerable disagreement as to what such terms mean when applied to conduct. Many theorists see "reason" as a principle which demands of a moral agent some type of utilitarian attitude in matters of conduct: to them, the "rational" person is one who will act so as to "maximize values."[1] Others, like Kant, seek to derive from "reason" a principle of formal equity, such as the categorical imperative. Still others agree with the spirit of Hume's dictum, that "it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. It is not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian, or person wholly unknown to me."[2]

That able philosophers should disagree so violently on so cardinal and so long-discussed a matter as this can, surely, be explained on only one hypothesis: namely, that they are failing to discriminate among various senses of the term "reason" and its derivatives. This discussion sets itself the modest aim of removing at least one road block in the way of agreement, by pointing out a basic distinction between the meaning of the term "rational" and that of the term "reasonable." Most writers on ethics assume that these two terms (or their antonyms) are in every context synonymous. I wish to point out, however, that in some contexts at least, the term "reasonable" is used with implications not possessed by the term "rational," and that a distinction between the two is therefore necessary. Some of the consequences of this distinction will then be briefly developed.

2. Is unreasonable conduct necessarily irrational? Let us consider the following situation, in which two individuals *A* and *B* have an equally strong claim to a sum of money (perhaps, e.g., a commission on the sale of certain goods, in which sale both have played a part). *A*, however, is in a position to retain all of the money for himself, and this he elects to do, paying no regard to *B's* rights in the matter. Now,

[1] For an excellent recent statement of this position, see Part II of J. B. Pratt's *Reason in the Art of Living* (New York, Macmillan, 1949).

[2] *A Treatise of Human Nature,* II, iii, 3.

provided that *A* is fully aware of what he is doing, how, as a matter of fact, would we characterize his action? Certainly, we would characterize it as selfish, and also, if taking the moral point of view, as wrong. And—especially if *B,* or *B's* advocate, had expostulated with him—we would, I submit, apply to his conduct another adjective, *unreasonable.* The consequences of *A's* action upon *B's* welfare or rights do not constitute for *A* a circumstance which he is prepared to let count in reaching his decision—except, perhaps, insofar as those consequences might indirectly have an adverse effect upon *A's* own interests. That *B* will be injured is thus, to *A,* in itself no reason for deciding to act otherwise. Being selfish, he will not entertain any principle in terms of which *B* can reason with him.

But, in the sense in which "irrational" means "foolish," "absurd," "ridiculous," "senseless," "unintelligent," I submit that we would not necessarily, or at any rate not immediately, call *A* irrational. Assuming that *A* is an egoist, bent on maximizing his own welfare, we would be prepared to judge *A* to be foolish or unintelligent only if he has made a faulty estimate of the results of his own selfishness, and in so doing has really impaired his own ultimate welfare. In that event it would be correct to charge *A* with having acted not only selfishly but foolishly, not only "unreasonably" but also "irrationally." That every selfish or "unjust" action is also, in the final analysis, a foolish one, in terms of one's own real welfare, is a position as old as the *Republic.* It may be a sound position. The point is, however, that some additional argument (e.g., one based on an analysis of the real nature and needs of the human being) is required to establish it, to show that there is a connection between the unreasonable attitude displayed by the selfish man and mere intellectual folly. In short, to condemn *A* as unreasonable is not *ipso facto* to mark him as irrational; and hence these two terms are not, in this context at least, synonymous.

3. The meaning of "rational." Before proceeding further, let us try to specify more exactly the proper meanings of these two terms. I suggest that the term "rational," as applied to conduct, is used with the following implications:

(A) (i) With regard to the *ends* I propose to myself, it entails: (a) that I should have an informed awareness of the nature of the ends I am proposing to achieve, including in this awareness a realization of their significance as they affect other ends, not only of myself, but also of others affected by my actions; and (b) that in case of a conflict between two of my proposed ends, I select that end which I really prefer, i.e., that end which, after informed and careful reflection, taking into

account my own experience and what I know of the experience of others, I judge to be of more value to me than its competitor.

(ii) With regard to the *means* proposed to reach these rationally chosen ends, it entails that I select those means which, on the best available evidence, are the most effective way of realizing those ends; and that I take cognizance of all other measures lying in my power which are necessary to safeguard the attainment of my ends.

(B) With regard to my *will,* it entails that I act in accordance with the decisions reached by this process of reflection, not allowing any emotional influences to persuade me to a contrary course.

To fail in any or all of these respects is to be irrational, in the sense of being foolish, absurd, unintelligent. Thus, I behave irrationally when I do not bother to ascertain the true nature of the ends I set myself; or when I heedlessly sacrifice one end to a second, which when attained I find to be of less worth to me than the first would have been; or when I select unrealistic means; or when, having reached a rational enough decision, I fail to implement that decision in practice. Rationality—in these senses of the word at any rate—is essentially an *intellectual* virtue, though it includes secondarily a reference to the will as well.

It is pertinent to note that the mere characterization of a person as rational does not immediately entail any information concerning other dispositions or ends of that person. Egoistic or altruistic dispositions, for instance, are per se neither rational nor irrational. Such adjectives become applicable to dispositions or actions only when the latter are viewed in relation to some end taken by the agent as ultimate. Thus, it might be irrational of me to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger—but only if, for example, I were basically the kind of person who did not really wish to purchase an insignificant amount of personal welfare at the cost of calamity to others; or if, while being a thorough egoist, I failed to realize that the destruction of the whole world might well have worse consequences to me than the scratching of my finger. We cannot characterize any action as rational or irrational unless we assume knowledge of the agent's controlling dispositions or purposes. It is not in the least irrational of me to thrust my arm into the fire—if my aim is to cripple or destroy myself.

It is evident that in being rational, I must take into account all relevant factors; and among these will be the bearing of what I propose to do on the satisfaction of the interests of others. Otherwise I can scarcely be said to be intelligently aware of what it is that I am doing.

But there is an obvious difference between (1) taking account of the interests of others merely as factors in the situation capable of affecting the promotion of "my own" interests, where "my own" interests are opposed to, or at least distinct from, those of others; and (2) taking account of the interests of others as a disinterested, impartial spectator might do, i.e., putting them on a par with "my own" interests. Any prudent egoist takes account of the interests of others in the first sense. But to take account of their interests in the second sense requires something more than possessing an intellect capable of correctly calculating future consequences. It requires a positively sympathetic disposition toward others, a preparedness to be genuinely concerned with "their" interests per se, as well as my own, a preparedness to be "objective" not in a merely logical, but also in a distinctively moral sense. If I possess this *moral* virtue, I shall then be not merely *rational,* but I shall also be prepared to act, where the interests of others are involved, in a *reasonable* manner as well.

4. The meaning of "reasonable." When we judge that some one has acted reasonably, we may have in mind either a moral or a nonmoral situation. *"C's* investment has turned out badly," we might say, "but the risk involved was a reasonable one, and he took all reasonable precautions." Here "reasonable" means, as far as I can see, much the same thing as "rational." *C* has acted only after an intelligent survey of the situation, has accepted only those risks which, on the evidence, a rational person would be willing to accept, and has taken the precautions which prudence would normally dictate. But in a situation to which moral judgments are pertinent, if I desire that my conduct shall be deemed *reasonable* by someone taking the standpoint of moral judgment, I must exhibit something more than mere rationality or intelligence. To be reasonable here is to see the matter—as we commonly put it—from the other person's point of view, to discover how each will be affected by the possible alternative actions; and, moreover, not merely to "see" this (for any merely prudent person would do as much) but also to be prepared to be disinterestedly *influenced,* in reaching a decision, by the estimate of these possible results. I must justify my conduct in terms of some principle capable of being appealed to by all parties concerned, some principle from which we can reason in common. If I seek, for example, to justify my action by pointing to some good it achieves for me, I must be prepared to allow, as at least a prima-facie objection to it, that it results in what another deems harm to himself. Reasonableness thus requires impartiality, "objectivity"; it

expresses itself in the notion of equity. It is this demand, I take it, which is the essence of Kant's principle of universality. The appeal is either to this, or to force.

But, while Kant's formula may express the essence of "reasonableness," it is hopeless to try, as Kant did, to derive the notion of reasonable behavior from the notion of mere rationality. I will only act reasonably, in this sense, if I have the *desire* to be reasonable. Reason may serve this "passion" as it serves other passions, by pointing out to me what is demanded in my conduct if this is the end I have set myself to achieve. But reason does not choose this end, and it cannot give me any reasons for being reasonable. Reason comes into play only when some end is already proposed. To be sure, if I intend to be an egoist, reason may counsel prudence in my egoism; I may be warned to behave—externally at least—in a reasonable manner, for fear of the penalties that will ensue if I do not. Yet what reason then tells me is not simply: "Be reasonable!" but rather: "Be reasonable—if you have to!" It issues only hypothetical imperatives.

Hume is thus correct in seeing that morality does not spring from reason alone. It springs from a distinctive disposition, which may or may not coexist with intelligence. One cannot argue this disposition into the mind of a man who lacks it, although one might, by other methods, inculcate it in him. On the other hand, however, it is a mistake to suppose that, when we seek a moral justification of our behavior, we abandon reasoning altogether and resort merely to various techniques of nonrational persuasion. Once a man decides that he wishes to act morally, reflection can tell him what principles he is implicitly committing himself to, and thereby inform him what propositions are relevant, and what propositions are relevant and sufficient, to the process of moral justification of his conduct. Having desired to be reasonable, he is then bound to adduce reasons—not emotions.

5. Does rational conduct "maximize values"? One aspect of the matter in hand calls for further discussion. It is contended that a rational person "prefers the greater value to the lesser," and some writers proceed to infer from this that a rational person will "maximize values" after the manner proposed by utilitarian theory. I would admit the contention, but deny the inference. Suppose—to modify our earlier example—that *A* is in affluent circumstances, while *B* is in desperate straits, with heavy responsibilities; yet, as before, *A* seizes the money, to *B's* disaster. Will it not be argued: "Surely, *A* has here preferred the lesser value to the greater; would it not have been *better* if he had

given the money to *B*? and is not such a failure to achieve the better, to maximize values, the essence of irrationality?"

But such common expressions as "preferring the greater value to the lesser," "maximizing values," etc., must be used with caution, or notable muddles will result. Such expressions (I am here assuming) are always elliptical. That is, we must inquire from *whose point of view* it is better that *B* should receive the money. Not, I suppose, from the point of view of our egoistic specimen *A*. Agreed, that his action spells disaster to *B;* but *that the loss of the money means disaster to B* means nothing at all to *A*. *B's-being-happy* is not, for *A,* a positive value at all. *A's-being-rich* is the only thing *A* values; from *his* point of view, values *have* been maximized, and we cannot say (without further evidence at least) that he has been irrational.

Now I agree that we would make such a judgment as: "It is better that *B* should have the money." But who are "we"? If such a judgment is to have any objective sense, we are implicitly required to assume some point of view which is a *standard* one. We locate this standard in the point of view of an informed, impartial, sympathetic spectator *C*. His preferences become, for moral judgment, the normative or standard ones. It is *C* who prefers, and judges it to be better, that *B* should be rescued from disaster, rather than that *A's* already swollen bank balance should be further increased. But *C,* in charging *A* with failure to do what *C* deems better, will not thereby automatically judge *A* to be irrational. He will judge that *A* has acted wrongly, and he may also, with propriety, charge *A* with being unreasonable, for to be reasonable is equivalent to being willing to settle disputes as *C* would settle them. Before *C* can pronounce *A* to be irrational, however, he must know what *A's* controlling dispositions are. If, as in our example, *A's* dispositions are purely egoistic, then *C* would have to prove that *A* has been shortsighted in his egoism. Alternatively, if *A*—to change the example somewhat—possesses a genuine interest in acting reasonably but through some cause failed to do so on this occasion, so that he later exhibits regret, he might again be said to have behaved foolishly; for the presence of regret is a sign that he did not act in the direction of his basic preferences.

A man who is rational, then, is not *ipso facto* a utilitarian. *Qua* rational, he will act so as to achieve what is to him a greater value; he will do what he really *prefers* to do. But this fact sheds no light on *what* he really prefers to do. If, however, he does prefer to act reasonably, then he will necessarily, in reasoning out his conduct, heed the

sense of the utilitarian maxim. While the egoist never discounts the issue of the ownership of the "pains" and "pleasures" produced by an action, the reasonable person does, and therefore—other circumstances being equal—the fact that action X, for example, causes a "small pain" to A but a "large pleasure" to B, would influence him to approve of X. Utilitarian calculation is perhaps not sufficient, but it would surely be pertinent.

6. *Summary.* The following conclusions emerge from our discussion: (1) Knowing that a man is rational, we do not know what ends he will aim at in his conduct; we know only that, whatever they are, he will use intelligence in pursuing them. (2) Knowing, however, that a man is disposed to act reasonably, where others are concerned, we may infer that he is willing to govern his conduct by a principle of equity, from which he and they can reason in common; and also that he will admit data concerning the consequences of his proposed actions upon their welfare as per se relevant to his decisions. This disposition is neither derived from, nor opposed to, the disposition to be rational. It is, however, incompatible with egoism; for it is essentially related to the disposition to act morally.

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