

Part I

The Moral (In)Significance of Reason

FROM PLATO through Kant to such contemporary writers as Alan Donagan and John Rawls, many mainstream moral philosophers have insisted that morality is a product of reason. The purpose of the four chapters in Part I is to bring that insistence into question.

These four essays do not provide a comprehensive, compelling argument for an alternative source for morality. Given the diversity of everyday moral practice, I doubt that morality has a single source and that any philosophical analysis that aims at demonstrating such a source can provide more than mental exercise. The method of these essays is to follow everyday moral practice, noting what "reason" and related terms mean and refer to here and there. In this way, we can arrive at a fair picture of reason's place in actual moral practice. For better or worse, this picture is rather different from the one a person would get by reading Plato, Kant, and many other Western philosophers. Perhaps this is because these philosophers have been more intent on showing us how morality ought to be practiced than on showing us how it actually is practiced.

Many people, not all of them philosophers, cite the human possession of reason vs. animals' lack of it when trying to justify the preferred moral status we commonly enjoy over animals, for example, to justify its being morally acceptable for us routinely to eat animals and to kill them in research for our benefit, although it would not be morally acceptable for them to feed on us or for us to be killed in research for their benefit. If reason is *the* source of morality, then that justification can seem plausible and can be formulated in the following way:

- A1: Since morality aims at the realization and proliferation of moral values, those who can produce these values are morally entitled to preference over those who cannot.
- A2: Only rational agents can produce moral values.

- A3: Human beings (ordinarily) are rational agents, but animals are not.
 A4: Therefore, human beings (ordinarily) are morally entitled to preference over animals.

On the other hand, to the degree that reason is *only one among several* weavers of the complex tapestry of morality, A2 is false, and citing human reason as moral justification for our sacrificing animals for our benefit takes on the appearance of an excuse. Thus, the following descriptions of the roles actually played by reason in our everyday morality point toward questioning the moral status we commonly assign to animals, a questioning we shall pursue throughout the subsequent parts of this volume. (Along the way, especially in Chapter 8, we shall be questioning the significance of A1. A3 will come up for discussion in Chapter 3.)

Chapter 1 discusses the idea of a moral obligation to be rational, a common presumption of many, if not most, mainstream, Western moral philosophers. Various senses of being "rational" are discussed, and it is argued that there are morally viable alternatives to being "rational" in each of these senses. Chapter 2 discusses what we would have to know about an individual's reasoning in deciding whether he or she deserves a commendation for heroism. It is argued that while issues concerning the agent's motives and practical understanding of the situation would be relevant here, issues concerning her or his capacity for moral reasoning would not. Chapter 3 discusses the concept of moral agency and the relation between being a moral agent and meriting moral respect. It is argued that being a moral agent is not an all-or-nothing condition and that being virtuous, even if not a fully moral agent, is what ought (morally) to be considered when questions of meriting moral respect are at issue. It is also argued that animals can be virtuous. Finally, Chapter 4 develops metaphysical and moral concepts of being a "person" and discusses the relation between being a rational animal and meriting moral respect. The humanist, egalitarian principle that all and only humans merit basic moral rights—"human rights"—is shown to be unjustified on four different grounds: logico-linguistic, phenomenological, transcendental, and consequential.

"No man is an island," the saying goes, and the same applies to moral issues. The following four chapters range far from explicitly animal liberation issues. This is because animal liberation issues arise in the context of a complex tradition of moral concerns, concepts, principles, and theories and must be resolved within that context, if calls for liberating animals are not to seem pretentious moral garb for personal preferences and affections. Consequently, we must begin by understanding that general context before we can fruitfully focus on specifically animal liberation issues, and, as just indicated, the dimension of that context that it is most important for advocates of animal liberation to explore and test is the moral (in)significance of reason.

Why Should I Be Rational?

ALTHOUGH IT seems straightforward enough, "Why should I be rational?" is actually a rather peculiar little question. As a philosophical question, it seems to beg the question, for it presumes that we should be rational. "No, you shouldn't be rational" is a relevant answer to "Should I be rational?" but not to "*Why* should I be rational?" The question thus seems insincere, even unphilosophical. It asks for a rationalization of a commitment already made. It seeks reasons to cover a commitment not based on those reasons. But isn't that hypocritical? Isn't basing our commitments on the reasons offered to justify those commitments an essential part of being a rational person? Surely, sincerely rational people do not go fishing for supportive reasons after they have made their commitment. Thus, "Why should I be rational?" is a self-destroying question. Someone asking this question is not acting rationally.

On the other hand, if we ask the real question, "Should I be rational?," how would we go about answering it? Would we offer reasons in support of a positive answer? But if we are not already committed to rationality, of what relevance are reasons? Offering reasons in support of the conclusion that we should not be rational is even more absurd. We could turn to threats and fine rhetoric, of course, but are these *answers* to the question? Only reasons *answer* "Should I . . . ?" questions. Consequently, if we ask "Should I be rational?," we have either already answered it for ourselves or are asking a question that cannot be answered. Asking questions that answer themselves or that cannot be answered at all is foolish. So someone asking this question is also acting irrationally.

Thus, to ask "Why should I be rational?" or "Should I be rational?" is to be either a hypocrite or a fool. That is not a pleasant pair of options. Perhaps that is why Aristotle sagely advises us not even to bother trying to talk to someone who is not precommitted to the laws of reason and why Kant simply presumes, at the foundations of morality, that rational is what we ought to strive to be. But,

curiously enough, "Hypocrite or fool?" is also not an uncommon dilemma; the history of moral philosophy is studded with people who must be either hypocrites or fools. These are people who commit themselves to absolute moral principles. As soon as moralists say, "You should always . . .," they are deluged with counter-examples that force them either to start making myriad exceptions to their rules or to hold to those rules by staunchly maintaining that what is obviously wrong is right. Perhaps the would-be rationalist is just beset by the devils of absolutism. Perhaps "(Why) should I be rational?" is such a peculiar question because we presume "Thou shalt be rational!" is an eleventh, absolute commandment chiseled on those famous tablets by some wandering, irreverent member of Socrates' tribe. Perhaps the proper response to the question is "Sometimes I should be rational, and sometimes I shouldn't." That's not very exciting, but it may be rational.

I. "Rationality" and Its Alternatives

But what are we going to be when we're not going to be rational? Certainly the answer cannot be simply "irrational." That would be preposterous. Do we ever sit down and weigh the pros and cons of being rational, then conclude, "All things considered, I think it would be better for me to be irrational"? Of course not. Rational vs. irrational is—except, perhaps, for surrealistic artists—just a comical straw man.

If we set aside the straw man, in what contexts might we really be counseled to stop being or doing *X* and to be rational instead? What could be the alternative *X*s where being rational or not being rational is a real issue? And what would "rational" refer to in opposition to these alternatives? Only if we can answer these questions will we be able to make sense of "(Why) should I be rational?"

Like "moral," "rational" still usually has a strongly positive evaluative meaning. It is an honorific term (especially among philosophers). So if a proponent of *Y* can succeed in getting it labeled "the rational alternative," that is tantamount to winning the debate. Consequently, there are few, if any, cases where the alternative of rational vs. *X* would actually be debated with "rational" being used to designate one of the options. However, there are some cases where, before even getting to the evaluative issue, *Y* would be a much more natural candidate than *X* for being labeled "rational." Consider the following:

1. Being calm vs. being emotional. The opposition of reason to emotion is not merely part of philosophical lore. It is common to counsel someone who is letting her feelings or desires dictate her beliefs and actions to stop that and be rational.
2. Facing facts vs. hoping against hope. A mother who, ten years after her son was reported missing in action in Vietnam, still keeps his room clean, sets a place for him at dinner, and expects him home soon may be accused of not being rational.

3. Being a professional vs. being a crackpot. Someone who does research following procedures not respected by certified experts in the field or who develops theories using categories and hypotheses not accepted by the relevant professional community may be considered eccentric, possessed, to have lost his scientific perspective, or otherwise not to be rational.

4. Debating the issues vs. relying on rhetoric. We may accuse our opponent's speech, at least, of not being rational, if the opponent relies on rhetoric rather than facts and logic to sway the audience.

5. Being tough-minded vs. being tender-minded. Certainly, those who condemn belief in unverifiable propositions and reliance on revelation, intellectual intuition, and other such mystical sources of "truth" consider themselves to be the Swiss guard of rationality.

These cases give us something concrete to work with. The contexts of opposition give content to being rational and indicate what may be presented as evidence for and against "the rational alternative." These are real issues, without the foolishness of trying to sway an irrational person with reasons or of presenting reasons in defense of being irrational. Advocates of emotion, hope, revolution, rhetoric, or tender-mindedness can, without making fools of themselves, respond to the imperative "Be rational!" with the irreverent challenge "Why *should* I be rational?"

How might we try to answer such a challenge? What sorts of reasons are there for the rational alternative in each case? Old, reliable self-interest is a likely candidate for all five cases. If we can show that someone's emotion, hope, revolution, rhetoric, or tender-mindedness is more likely to lead to failure, frustration, and unhappiness than the relevant rational alternative, we will have given that person good reason to take that alternative. If the challenger is a utilitarian, we could appeal to the adverse consequences of nonrational attitudes or actions for the general welfare in any of these cases. Questioning the consistency of proposed nonrationality with an individual's other beliefs and actions and the appeal to "What if everyone did that?" could also be made in each case. Fairness and respect for the audience might be additional issues in the case of rational vs. rhetorical.

Thus, we could argue for the rational alternative in each case on the basis of its superior contributions to self-interest and to attaining the goals of traditional moral principles. The only logical exceptions to this are traditional moral principles, such as Kant's categorical imperative, which presume we should be rational and would, therefore, yield only circular arguments. With these exceptions, however, there are no peculiar conceptual problems with arguing these cases of rational vs. X.

But must there always be a compelling argument in favor of the rational alternative? Is it always counter to self-interest and to moral principles to be

emotional rather than calm, to hope against hope rather than facing facts, and so forth? Obviously not.

Revulsion, anger, and the actions born of them are appropriate responses to atrocities. Calmly calculating the likely consequences for your own or the general happiness of the possible responses to rape, sadism, and genocide could be immoral. "That *must* be stopped!," we say; "those who won't take risks to stop such savagery are cowards," and "we'll worry about the consequences later!" The idea, let alone ideal, of a calm, calculating morality stripped of emotion is what so appalled Charles Dickens about the utilitarians. Outside the philosopher's study, calm calculation is not always preferred over emotional commitment and exuberance. Out there, rational vs. emotional is an open issue to be settled by the specifics of differing cases.

The same is true in our other four cases. Hoping against hope is sometimes the only way of preserving sanity, struggle, and life itself. How can we be faulted (*ceteris paribus*), on the basis either of self-interest or moral principle, in holding fast to hope in such circumstances? Such hope can be the stuff of which heroes are made. Again, pursuing crackpot ideas can lead to scientific revolutions, and inspiring but unsupported rhetoric may be the only way to move an audience in an emergency. Finally, if believing in something that is unverifiable (e.g., the existence of a benevolent God) merely comforts and inspires people, what is wrong with such belief? Those who condemn such belief *a priori* simply convict themselves of being intolerant, evangelical positivists.

Being rational is in any of these cases at best a *prima facie* obligation. It may not even be that. Being intellectuals, philosophers are predisposed to believe that taking the rational alternative will usually lead to maximizing self-interest, the general welfare, and/or the attainment of other moral ideals such as justice and respect for human rights. But is that obviously true? If we did not repress our emotions, would we be worse off? Rousseau, Marcuse, and others all argue we would not. They maintain that the repression of emotion is not the answer to immorality but the source of it.¹ Again, if we encouraged anarchy in scientific research, would that cripple such research? Paul Feyerabend claims the opposite.² Finally, if we took away people's religions, would we increase the general happiness? That certainly is unlikely. Even the *prima facie* status of an obligation to be rational may simply be a prejudice cherished by philosophers and others who have already committed themselves to the life of reason.

II. The Methodological Counterattack

But now we must face the philosopher's revenge, the step up to a higher level of abstraction. Even if we are not morally bound always or even *prima facie* to be