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Introduction

1.1 Motivation

When you believe you ought to do something, your belief often causes you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. How does that happen? I call this ‘the motivation question’. I shall try to answer it in this book.

It is also true that, when you believe you ought to do something, your belief often causes you actually to do it. We could also ask how that happens. This question raises the mind–body problem. When you believe you ought to do some bodily act, and this belief causes you to do the act, a state of your mind causes a physical movement. One part of the mind–body problem is to understand how a state of mind can have a physical effect like that. I wish to set this problem aside, and I do that by focusing on your intention rather than your action. The motivation question is about your mind only. When your belief causes you to intend to act, your intention will in turn generally cause you to act, but that is not my concern.

The motivation question has an easy answer: most people are disposed to intend to do what they believe they ought to do, perhaps not every time, but often. They have the ‘enkratic disposition’, as I shall call it. This is a genuine answer to the question, and correct as far as it goes. It has a real content. It tells us that the explanation of why you often intend to do what you believe you ought to do lies within you: you are constituted that way. We can no doubt add that you have this disposition as a result of natural selection.

However, this easy answer is very thin. It leaves a lot to be explained. How does the enkratic disposition work, exactly? In what way does it bring about its effect?

One possible answer is that some causal process within people, whose details have no philosophical interest, tends to make them intend to do what they believe they ought to do. But this answer is unsatisfying. Some people have the enkratic disposition more strongly than others, and some may not

have it at all; some are strongly disposed to intend to do what they believe they ought to do, and others are not. We can classify people accordingly. Let us call the ones who have the disposition strongly ‘sheep’, and the others ‘goats’. Unless we are Calvinists, we shall not be satisfied with merely classifying people. We should expect it to be at least partly up to people themselves whether they are goats or sheep. We should expect that people by their own efforts can actually bring themselves to intend to do what they believe they ought to do. And we should be able to explain how they can do so. It is not enough to say it just happens because of some causal process within them.

Rationality and reasoning

We can call in rationality to help answer the motivation question. We can say that rationality requires people to intend to do what they believe they ought to do, and that it requires them to be disposed to do so – to have the enkratic disposition. No doubt this is true, and it follows that the goats are not fully rational. This is a criticism to throw at the goats, but it is still ‘merely classificatory’, to use Thomas Nagel’s term.¹ It gives us an explanation of why rational people are disposed to intend to do what they believe they ought to do, which is that they would not be classified as rational if they did not. But it gives us no explanation of how, in rational people, this disposition works.

In *Ethics and the A Priori*, Michael Smith undertakes ‘to explain how it can be that our beliefs about what we are rationally justified in doing play a proper causal role in the genesis of our actions’.² (Smith is interested in desires rather than intentions.) His explanation is that

In rational creatures . . . we would . . . expect there to be a causal connection between believing that it is desirable to act in a certain way and desiring to act in that way. . . . For the psychological states of rational deliberators and thinkers connect with each other in just the way that they rationally should.³

But this does not explain how our beliefs play a proper causal role in the genesis of our actions. It explains only why rational creatures are causally disposed to act in ways they believe are desirable. The explanation is that otherwise they would not count as rational.

Elsewhere, Smith mentions ‘the capacity we have, as rational creatures, to have a coherent psychology’.⁴ This is getting somewhere. Exercising a capacity is something we do; it does not just happen. So Smith is suggesting that we

may ourselves bring it about that we desire to do what we believe we ought to do. But we still need to be told how we do that.

Calling in rationality is definitely a step towards the explanation we are looking for. It points us towards reasoning. We know that people have a particular means of coming to satisfy some of the requirements of rationality, and that is reasoning. Reasoning is something we do. It is a mental activity of ours that can bring us to satisfy some of the requirements of rationality.

For example, suppose you believe it is raining and that if it is raining the snow will melt. Plausibly, rationality requires you to believe what follows by modus ponens from beliefs of yours – in this case that the snow will melt – at least if you care about what follows. Suppose you do care whether the snow will melt; perhaps you are planning to ski today. But suppose you do not yet believe the snow will melt. (You have just woken up. You have noticed the rain, and you know that rain causes snow to melt, but you have not yet thought about the snow.) So at present you do not satisfy this requirement of rationality. But you can bring yourself to satisfy it by undertaking a process of reasoning. This process will set out from your initial beliefs and it will conclude with your believing the snow will melt. In doing this reasoning you are mentally active, and you bring yourself to satisfy a requirement of rationality.

Now suppose you believe you ought to oil that squeaky hinge. I have already assumed that rationality requires you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. You can bring yourself to satisfy this requirement, too, by a process of reasoning. The process will start from your initial belief that you ought to oil that squeaky hinge and conclude with your intending to do so. So reasoning can bring you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do.

Your ability to reason constitutes part of your enkratic disposition. No doubt you often intend to do what you believe you ought to do automatically, without reasoning. But this does not always happen automatically, and when automatic processes fail, sometimes you achieve the result through the activity of reasoning. I call this type of reasoning ‘enkratic reasoning’.

We have arrived at a more interesting answer to the motivation question. You have an enkratic disposition, and this disposition sometimes works through the philosophically interesting process. This process is enkratic reasoning, which is something you do. You have the ability to bring yourself, through reasoning, to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. I hope to justify this answer.

In one way, it is a very attractive answer to the motivation question, because it tells us that we can motivate ourselves by our own activity. But many moral philosophers will find it unattractive in a different way.⁵ In moral contexts, these philosophers think a truly virtuous person does what she believes she

ought to do automatically and without thinking. She does not reason about it. Indeed, they think a truly virtuous person often does what she ought to do without even forming the belief that she ought to do it. I do not deny these views. I say only that we *can* motivate ourselves through reasoning. Those of us who are not truly virtuous may find we need to do it often when morality makes demands on us.

I also need to stress at the outset that I am not concerned particularly with morality. ‘Ought’ is not particularly a moral word, and I do not treat it as one. It is a general normative word; chapter 2 examines its meaning. The motivation question as I mean it is about how people are motivated by normative beliefs in general. It is not particularly about moral motivation.

1.2 This book

The task of justifying my answer to the motivation question is large. As part of it, I need to present an account of reasoning in general. Since reasoning is a means by which we can bring ourselves to satisfy some of the requirements of rationality, I need as a preliminary to investigate rationality. Rationality in turn has connections with normativity: with ought and reasons. This book therefore starts with an examination of normativity, goes on to rationality and concludes with reasoning.

My initial motivation in writing this book was to answer the motivation question. However, this question itself takes up only this short chapter and the last one. In between, there is a lot of argument that I hope may prove independently useful. I have tried to answer, or at least contribute to answering, quite a number of fundamental questions within the philosophy of normativity. What are reasons? What is their relation to ought, and to rationality? Is there a logic of ought? What is rationality? Is rationality normative? How is it connected to our process of reasoning? What is the process of reasoning? What is practical reasoning in particular? When is reasoning correct? And so on.

My answer to each question is no doubt contentious to some extent. Since my answer to the motivation question is built on all of these answers together, it is the most contentious thing in the book. So even if you doubt my answer to the motivation question, I hope you may nevertheless be persuaded by some of my subsidiary arguments.

Chapters 2–4 describe the fundamental features of normativity. Chapters 2 and 3 are about ought, which I take to be the most fundamental feature. They do not try to define ought. Instead they distinguish various meanings of the word ‘ought’ and pick out the one that I call ‘central’. This is the ought I consider most fundamental and the one that plays a role later in the book.

I identify it through the principle I call ‘Enkrasia’: that rationality requires you to intend to do what you believe you ought to do. The central ought is the ought mentioned in this principle.

Chapter 4 goes on to reasons. It defines a reason in terms of ought. Indeed, it defines reasons of two sorts, which I call ‘*pro toto* reasons’ and ‘*pro tanto* reasons’.

Chapters 5–11 contain my account of rationality. They begin by rejecting in chapters 5 and 6 the common opinion that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons or to beliefs about reasons.

My own account of rationality depends on the notion of a requirement of rationality. Next therefore, in chapters 7 and 8, I describe the nature and logic of requirements in general. Chapter 8 considers the vexed question of the logical scope of requirements.

Chapter 9 describes some synchronic requirements of rationality. It concentrates particularly on Enkrasia and the instrumental requirement that you intend what you believe to be a means to an end that you intend. Chapter 10 continues the description of rationality by describing some diachronic requirements. It concludes with a discussion of some particular permissions of rationality (negations of requirements) that I call ‘basing permissions’. These are crucial to my later account of correct reasoning.

Chapter 11 considers the question of whether rationality is normative: whether, when rationality requires something of you, that fact constitutes a reason for you to do what it requires. I believe rationality is normative, but the chapter explains that I cannot demonstrate that this is so.

Chapters 12–16 are about reasoning. Chapter 12 rejects the common view that reasoning necessarily involves a normative belief. More exactly, it rejects the view that reasoning necessarily involves the belief that you ought to have a particular attitude, such as a particular belief or a particular intention. No normative beliefs are involved in my first-order account of reasoning, which follows in the next chapter.

The basics of the first-order account are in chapter 13. This chapter argues that reasoning is a mental process in which you operate on the contents of your attitudes, following a rule. It explains how reasoning is an activity – something you do – and it identifies reasoning as correct if the rule it follows corresponds to a basing permission of rationality.

Chapter 13 uses theoretical reasoning as its example; chapter 14 extends the first-order account to practical reasoning. It examines correctness in more detail.

My account of reasoning does not assume that we necessarily reason using language. But there is a case for thinking that we do, so that we have to express our attitudes in language in order to reason with them. That condition places some constraints on our reasoning. Chapter 15 considers what they are.

Chapter 16 returns finally to enkratic reasoning. It explains that enkratic reasoning fits my account of reasoning in general. If my account is right, therefore, enkratic reasoning is indeed something we can do to bring ourselves to intend to do what we believe we ought to do.

Metaphysics

You will not find in this book any discussion of the metaphysical nature of normativity.

True, my answer to the motivation question does have a metaphysical motivation. Some philosophers find it puzzling that a person can be motivated by a belief, so they are puzzled about the enkratic disposition. They find it puzzling that you can be caused to intend some action by the belief that you ought to do it. Their puzzlement has led some of them to be noncognitivist about normativity. They have concluded that the belief that you ought to do something cannot be an ordinary belief. They think it must be some other sort of mental state, in which motivation is already embedded.⁶

In this book I shall try to account for the enkratic disposition in a way that is not puzzling. My account leaves it open whether or not the belief that you ought to do something is an ordinary belief, but it removes one reason for thinking it is not. So it is intended to remove one of the grounds for noncognitivism. This is a modest metaphysical aim.

It is true too that my language is metaphysically presumptuous; it is realist. For example, I shall say that one sort of reason is an explanation of a deontic fact, and by a deontic fact I mean the fact that someone ought to do something or other. ‘Fact’ and ‘explanation’ are realist words. But our normative language just is presumptuous in this way, and I see no point in being squeamish about it.

Part of the job of metaphysics is to account for what we know about normativity. In this book I aim to provide some data for metaphysics to account for, by identifying some of the things we know. If it should all turn out false, or true only in a fiction,⁷ so we do not know these things after all, that would be disappointing. But I trust the metaphysicians to do better than that.

Notes

- 1 Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, p. 109.
- 2 p. 35.
- 3 p. 36.
- 4 *Ethics and the A Priori*, p. 4.

- 5 See, for example, Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* and Nomy Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue*, pp. 51–63.
- 6 For example, in Allan Gibbard's noncognitivist theory, set out in his *Thinking How to Live*, the belief that you ought to do something is a sort of intention.
- 7 In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J. L. Mackie argues that all ethical statements are false. In *The Myth of Morality*, Richard Joyce agrees, but argues that they should be taken as fictional. I do not know of anyone who takes either view about normative statements in general.