Rational Action

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Introduction

Understanding human action is understanding the product of people's beliefs and desires. Once the appropriate beliefs and desires have been attributed to the agent, the action is then explained and may also be justified. The concept of rationality has an important, but disputed, role in such explanations and justifications. According to the different relations which it is thought must, or should, obtain between beliefs, reasons, desires, and behaviour, so we have different views about the possibility of understanding or criticising the actions of both individuals and groups. Rationality may, for example, be thought to be primarily an evaluative notion in which particular actions are selected as being rational by contrast with others. These evaluations, in turn, may be thought to depend either on the interrelations between particular beliefs, desires, and behaviour; or, alternatively, on the independent assessment of particular beliefs or desires as being rational. In the former case, it is held that someone's beliefs and desires cannot by themselves be criticised as being irrational, but that, given that an individual has these beliefs and desires, then he is rational if he acts to get what he desires given that the world is as he believes it is. In the latter case, it is thought by contrast that someone's desires (for example, the desire to treat people in the same situation in different ways) can be independently criticised as being irrational, no matter how they relate to his beliefs or behaviour.

Alternatively, rationality may be thought to be primarily a descriptive notion so that, rather than selecting among human actions, all human action is considered to be rational. Rationality on this view is stipulative of humanity; it is the essential medium through which all human behaviour is viewed, and it is only because we assume it that we can attribute beliefs and desires to people at all. One form of this view is the doctrine of the 'holism' of the mental, associated with the American philosopher Donald Davidson. The thesis is that we attribute beliefs and desires to others as a whole: given a certain belief, we can attribute a certain desire; given a certain desire, we can attribute a certain belief; but what we are attributing are complete sets of beliefs and desires on the unavoidable presupposition

that these beliefs and desires fit together in a rational way. Rationality is the inevitable glue which holds the pairs of beliefs and desires together.

Whether evaluative or descriptive, these differing views of the nature or importance of rationality all relate to the explanation and justification of individual behaviour. They explain and control the place of desire in the moral economy of one individual human being. There is also the problem, or further area of dispute, about how the desires of individuals relate to the actions of groups, the structures of groups, or to the beliefs of groups. Can the actions and the beliefs (ideology) of the group be explained as the net product of the actions and beliefs of individuals? Or should we start with the language and moral beliefs as a whole in order to explain the beliefs and actions of an individual? Rationality can on the one hand be regarded as an evaluative notion in the language or ideology of the group which helps (or enforces) the selection of behaviour by individuals. On the other hand it can be a notion which describes the actions of individuals, as self-interested maximisers of their individual satisfactions, on the basis of which the behaviour of groups of individuals can be constructed and so explained.

The following collection of articles is concerned with the problems involved in the concept of rational explanation, that is with the interrelated set of problems with which I started. Taken from the standpoint of desire, we could put them in terms of the three questions, what is the nature of desire? What is the relation of desire to reason? And what is the relation of individual desire to social behaviour? I start the collection with Martin Hollis's paper not only because he opens up all of these three questions but also because he argues powerfully a thesis about the correct relationship between reason and desire. Used as a descriptive notion, Hollis does not think that rationality has much explanatory force; however he does not think that the concept can be used only descriptively, or even used evaluatively just in gauging the instrumental effectiveness with which someone links together particular antecedently given beliefs, desires, and behaviour. Reason for Hollis is a fully fledged evaluative notion in the light of which the particular desires themselves may be criticised. It is exactly this thesis which Bernard Williams attacks in the following paper. He distinguishes between what he calls 'internal' and 'external' reasons for action, according to whether the reasons are or are not based on desires which the agent already possesses. Williams concludes that statements about external reasons are either false or incoherent, or really statements about internal reasons. He holds, that is, that reasons which are unrelated to desires which an agent already possesses could not give rise to a new motivation for action, and so criticises any external, evaluative, use of reason of the kind which Hollis recommends.

Williams's contribution to this collection is a natural consequence of

earlier articles in which he wished to assimilate moral judgements to desires rather than beliefs, holding that this could be seen from the different way in which the notion of consistency applied to them. In terms of the present dispute, this fits in with thinking that reasons are not antecedent to desire (and so may not be used to criticise desire) in the way that they are antecedent to belief (and so may be used to criticise belief). Holding beliefs that are inconsistent is one thing, holding desires or moral judgements that are is quite another thing. In my piece which follows, I criticise this position of Williams. I attempt to show that the role of consistency is much more analogous in the two cases of moral judgements and of purely theoretical beliefs than he allows. If this criticism is correct, it means that at least moral beliefs, and so some mental states which result in action in the way that desires do, are capable of independent rational criticism, and so that all reasons used in evaluating desires do not need to depend upon some desires being already given.

These conflicting treatments of the interrelation between desire and reason may well be thought to be over-simple in two quite different ways. On the one hand it might be thought that it ignores the much deeper understanding of the nature of desire that we have gained since the writing of Freud and Marx. On the other hand, in treating desires as separable mental states, it might be thought that it ignores the problem of the holism of the mental which I referred to at the beginning. These objections are met by the following papers together with one printed later in the collection. The first objection is met by Richard Wollheim, with respect to Freud, and by John Maguire, with respect to Marx. The holism of the mental is the topic of Christopher Peacocke's paper.

Richard Wollheim draws upon Freud in order to give a full and careful analysis of desire, and the way in which desire relates to normal and aberrant types of satisfaction. The paper which follows, by Christopher Peacocke, can be used to provide an argument showing that even if our description of an area is holistic in nature, this does not have the consequence that we are not able to handle and understand the separate parts that are so linked together. Peacocke adopts and defends an even more extreme form of the holism of the mental than Davidson, holding (against Davidson) that it does not admit even of the kind of surrogate for reduction which Davidson allows and which Peacocke calls 'quasi-reduction'. He establishes this, and other points about this kind of holistic explanation, by considering the explanation of someone's experience in terms of his spatial location and of the states of the world at those locations. Peacocke shows that there is a structural similarity between this case and the case of explanation of action in terms of beliefs and desires. I take it that part of the point of doing this, as well as the more specific conclusions he derives,

is that it provides the basis of a powerful *ad hominem* argument against anyone who thinks that the holism of the mental means that we cannot attribute individual beliefs and desires to people. The argument would be that since we can obviously handle independently spatial position and content in a structurally similar case, so here we should feel equally confident in our attribution of beliefs and desires. If this is right, it means that the holism of the mental is no block to the kind of explanation or justification described in the other papers in the collection.

If we suppose, therefore, that we have available an account of desire, and of its interrelation to beliefs and reasons, the next question is how we should use description of rational desires in the explanation of individual and social behaviour. There is a model of explanation, popular in economics and in sociology inspired by economics, in which it is assumed that individuals are utility-maximisers, and in which group behaviour is explained as the net product of the interactions of such 'rational' actors. I have already remarked how Martin Hollis attacks the truth and the explanatory force of this type of explanation in his contribution to this collection (and in his earlier books, *Rational Economic Man* and *Models of Man*). Lest it should be thought that Hollis in this work is tilting at unoccupied windmills, I have selected the piece by James Coleman. Coleman does exactly what Hollis attacks. He shows by means of several examples how rational behaviour models at the level of individual persons can prove fruitful in the explanation of social behaviour. Albert Weale, in his contribution which follows, also wishes to defend the use of this kind of explanation. He argues that the economic theory of rational choice is a coherent and successful way of explaining the actions of organised groups, in particular their political decisions. He wishes to show that use of this theory is also a practically efficient method of distinguishing what the correct choices of a group should be, given that they start with particular, potentially conflicting, political principles. For this it is important that he can demonstrate that the method is itself value-neutral, that is that it does not by itself bias the selection of public objectives, and this is the central point which Weale aims to establish in his paper.

At the end of his paper Weale notes that he has not considered cases of lack of information, or uncertainty. This is normal, so that when choices of action are compared, it is supposed that the evaluations are independent of the amount of information we possess. In the standard model, we independently affix utilities and probabilities to various outcomes and then choose (or ought to choose) that course of action which leads to the greatest product of the two. Amartya Sen's paper suggests a wholly new way of looking at the question. He examines the interrelations between the information we possess and the way that we evaluate outcomes. He shows

how the relationship works in both directions, so that, on the one hand, moral principles can usefully be considered as limitations on the amount of information we are allowed to consider, and, on the other hand, that different amounts of information may lead to different choice of moral principles. Moral principles which might diverge if we possessed total information need not necessarily do so given the information that we actually possess; viewed like this much of the present conflict between moral principles might seem to be pointless.

The following two papers are, like Coleman and Weale, concerned with the emergence of social behaviour from independently given individual interests and desires. They are both concerned with justification, and with two famous and fundamental problems of how participation in social behaviour can be justified from the point of view of the individual. J. E. J. Altham is concerned with the legitimacy of the state, Richard Tuck with the free-rider problem (that is, why an individual should co-operate with society in the production of some benefit which would still be a benefit to him if he opted out). Altham criticises the recent arguments of the American political philosopher Robert Nozick, which have been held to provide conclusive justification of how a certain limited form of the state is both preferable to anarchy and does not require violation of individual rights. He argues that the possibility of a rational anarchism is still open, and that Nozick's project of explaining the political realm in terms of prepolitical rights alone is doomed to failure. He suggests that the only promising political theory that starts from a state of nature is one that makes direct appeal to the needs and interests that government might serve. For Altham, therefore, the long-running problem of the social contract is still a problem. By contrast, Richard Tuck thinks that the free-rider problem is not really a problem. After explaining why it has been taken as a problem by those concerned with justifying group behaviour in terms of the satisfaction of individual interest, Tuck draws upon co-operative games theory in order to show that it is soluble from this point of view. The real problem about the free-rider, Tuck holds, is quite different, in being a form of the Sorites paradox, the paradox that repeated application of a process which makes an imperceptible difference (removing a hair from a man's head) in the end makes a perceptible difference (makes him bald).

The objection urged by Hollis against the model of rational explanation which explained or justified group behaviour in terms of individual self-interest is that such explanation or justification was vacuous. An alternative objection is that it started at the wrong end. Rather than explaining group behaviour or interests in terms of antecedently given individual interests, what individuals desire (what they take to be their interests) should be explained by the group to which they belong and their

position in it. This is what happens in Marxist styles of explanation in which desires are expressed in terms of ideology, ideology reflects social structure, and social structure is determined by economic relations. In his final contribution, John Maguire gives an account of Marxist explanation which brings out this importance of the concept of ideology. However, Maguire is concerned to make comparisons as well as oppositions between Marxism and the prevailing individualistic styles of explanation represented by the majority of papers in this collection. He talks of the relations between classes in Marxist theory in terms of the kind of exchange, or bargaining, theory which is used by Coleman and Weale in their contributions. Furthermore, Maguire gives a subtle account of the causal relations between social structure and economic base in Marxist theory, holding that Marxism is not committed to the automatic temporal priority of changes in the economic base. He gives a similarly untraditional account of the room that is left for individual free choice and undetermined desire in Marxist theory.

This collection is a selection from papers orginally given to a series of meetings of philosophers and social scientists organised by the Thyssen Philosophy Group and financed through the generosity of the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung. They have all been specially rewritten for this volume, and have not appeared elsewhere. I would like, on behalf of the Thyssen Group, to express our thanks to the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, and in particular to its Director Dr Gerd Brand, for the financial support, encouragement, and advice which made possible an enjoyable and instructive series of discussions.