

Rationality and Goodness

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The problem I am going to discuss here concerns practical rationality, rationality not in thought but in action. More particularly, I am going to discuss the rationality, or absence of rationality (even, as one might put it, the contra-rationality or irrationality) of moral action. And 'moral action' shall mean here something done by someone who (let us suppose rightly) believes that to act otherwise would be contrary to, say, justice or charity; or again not done because it is thought that it would be unjust or uncharitable to do it. The question is whether in so acting, or refusing to act, this person will be acting rationally, even in cases where he or she believes that not only desire but self-interest would argue in favour of the wrongdoing.

In starting out like this I shall be addressing the concerns of one whom I might label 'the moral doubter': one who has problems about the rationality of acting morally rather as many Christians have problems about the existence of evil in the world. This person wants to be convinced and may be particularly attached to morality, but has a worry about why 'in the tight corner' anyone has reason to do what there seems to be reason enough not to do, or again not to do what there seems reason enough to do. My moral worrier may not be in any doubt about what is right and wrong, and

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is therefore different from an immoralist such as Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*, who insists that justice is not a virtue but rather 'silly good nature.'

Concentrating on justice, I am going to assume that if anything is a moral virtue justice is, and so for the moment shall bypass that part of the immoralist dispute. Thrasymachus, in the *Republic*, Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*, and Nietzsche too in his own way, all argue that justice is not an excellence of character. But I assume that it is. People act well when they act justly, badly when unjustly. A further assumption will be about what justice is: that men and women are properly called *just* in so far as they are disposed to do certain things, such as keeping contracts and respecting the lives and property of others; unjust when they lie, cheat, bear false witness. To have the virtue of justice they must, of course, do these things for the right reasons, but the choice of a virtue word such as 'justice' does not commit me to what is nowadays called a virtue theory of ethics.¹

My problem, therefore, is about the rationality of acting on a moral judgment where there seem to be indubitable reasons for *not* doing what morality requires, but no ulterior reason for being just.

¹ I am thinking here of the undoubtedly interesting work of philosophers such as Rosalind Hursthouse, Christine Swanton, and Michael Slote who insist that dispositions, motives, and other 'internal' elements are the primary subjects and determinants of moral goodness and badness. I myself have never been a 'virtue ethicist' in this sense. For me it is *what is done* that stands in this position.

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These are the terms in which the problem of the rationality of acting justly confronts me. When does it do so? Not of course whenever a judgment has been made to the effect that justice demands that certain things be done or left undone, because there are often obvious enough reasons to act justly rather than unjustly. There are penalties for instance. The law may speak for justice. Or a good reputation may be at stake. But quite apart from the fact that a stern moralist such as H. A. Prichard will insist that these are not the right reasons for following justice; what if the rewards and penalties are predominantly, or even all, on the other side?

It will be useful at this point to introduce an example, and I choose one from the book called *Dying We Live* from which, in my book *Natural Goodness*, I took the case of anti-Nazis condemned to death, ones I partly invented and called 'the Letter Writers'.² Here I give as an example one very brief letter printed in *Dying We Live*, which was from a young man identified only as 'A Farm Boy from the Sudetenland.' On Feb 3, 1944, he wrote as follows:

'Dear parents: I must give you bad news—I have been condemned to death. I and Gustave G. We did not sign up for the SS, and so they condemned us to death. . . Both of us would rather die than stain our consciences with such deeds of horror. I know what the SS have to do.'³

² H. Gollwitzer, K. Kuhn, and R. Schneider (eds.) *Dying We Live* (London: The Harvill Press), 1956 11. See Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 94–6, 102.

³ *Dying We Live*, 11.

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The farm boy from the Sudetenland chose to be hanged rather than become a member of the SS, though joining would no doubt have gained him many rewards, and at the very least would have saved his life. Was this, I ask, a rational choice? How can we defend such a proposition? On what theory of practical rationality—of the rationality of choices—can this be made out?

This seems to be an example of the 'tight corner' that will test us. It will be obvious, for instance, that on neither of the two most favoured theories of practical rationality around today will it be possible to show the course taken by the farm boy and his friend to be a rational rather than a non-rational, irrational, contra-rational choice—whichever form you choose for the description of a choice made in the face of strong reasons against it—in the absence of an explanation as to why it itself was rational.

The two modern theories that I am thinking of can both be called instrumentalist.

There is 1) The Humean, or neo-Humean, theory of practical rationality that refers all rational decisions to the base of the agent's present desires. There is nothing here to call on for the case of the farm boy from the Sudetenland. It is true that he said he would rather die than join the SS. But for us to take his decision as therefore rational would be either simply to affix practical rationality automatically to actual choices, or else to suppose, quite unrealistically, that his present desire for life, and his fear of death by hanging had disappeared. If there is a way in which a moral judgment 'silences' desires incompatible with acting well, this is not it.

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2) Alternatively, practical rationality is often seen as belonging to whatever action is reasonably supposed by the agent to be for his own good on the whole, the fact that he may *at present* be indifferent to future happiness or unhappiness now being treated as irrelevant. Such a theory allows us, of course, to weigh on the side of morality all the furthest effects of acting badly, including such penalties as biting remorse, or the diminishing of the capacity for some innocent joys. But however far we press such (real) advantages of acting well over acting badly there will always seem to be some special pleading here, and a tendency to assume *a priori* what is supposed to be based on empirical fact. In truth a 'self-interest', or as we may call it a 'prudential' theory of practical rationality cannot deal honestly with the case of the farm boy from the Sudetenland. So long as the concept of future good is seen in terms of happiness or satisfaction it cannot help us here.

I want to stress how serious is the difficulty that we are now in. This is clear if we think about the use of the word 'should' in making moral judgments. Our farm boy from the Sudetenland was, in effect, saying to himself 'I *shouldn't* have anything to do with the SS. I *should* refuse to join them, because of the terrible things they do.' But how is it that 'should' and 'shouldn't' belong here? *These words speak of reasons for doing a certain action or not doing it.* So how can they be used unless the problem of reason for acting morally has already been solved? Isn't the use of the ordinary words 'should' and 'shouldn't' in question? Of course if their function in expressing moral judgment is thought of as not the ordinary one, but rather a mere expression of

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attitudes, feeling, commitments etc. —if *that* is offered as an account of their meaning—then it is, I suppose, possible to think that in moral contexts the necessary connection with reasons for action will have disappeared, in favour of mere persuasion or the expression of feeling or attitude. But I myself will have no truck with expressivist accounts of the special 'shoulds' of moral judgment, or indeed with anything but the ordinary use of the words 'should' and 'shouldn't,' found in moral judgments as elsewhere.

Two replies to the difficulty that I have just raised about the use of 'should' may, however, be given: both of which are attempts to down play the connection between what should be done and what there is reason to do.

A) It may be pointed out that there are uses of 'should' and 'shouldn't' that when fully expressed speak only of what by certain existing *rules* is forbidden or enjoined. This is true, but in moral judgments such words are obviously not to be explained like that.

B) It may be pointed out that 'should' even when it does imply reason for action may imply a *pro tanto* reason rather than a reason all things considered. But have we yet got the right to speak even of *pro tanto* reasons for acting in such a situation as that of our Farm Boy in his terrible situation? And in any case it was clearly an all-things-considered judgment of reason that would have been implied had the 'shouldn't' terminology been used by the Farm Boy when he spoke of joining the SS.

We therefore have fair and square on our hands the problem of rational action 'in the tight corner': the problem of the rationality of doing what morality enjoins where

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desire and long term self interest both speak on the other side. It is a problem that I myself have wrestled with unsuccessfully over the whole of my philosophical life: at one time (in a rather notorious article called 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives') going so far as actually to deny the rationality of action required by justice when opposed both to prudence and desire.⁴

The reason that I think I can do better this time round is that I have been much impressed by the resources that I see as offered in two papers of my friend Warren Quinn: one of the most brilliant of contemporary moral philosophers, by whose sadly early death we are much deprived. The two papers that I want to discuss tonight are both published in the collection of Quinn's writings called *Morality and Action*.⁵ They are 1) 'Rationality and the Human Good' and 2) 'Putting Rationality in its Place'. The argument of each is intricate, and I shall take what I want from them without going into all the moves that Quinn himself, a most rigorous and meticulous thinker, saw as necessary for the defence of his main thesis.

Let me simply summarize what I take to be most important and most *a propos* of Quinn's arguments. The structure of his argument is notably idiosyncratic. For the rest of us usually try now this now that way of showing that it must be possible to show that it is rational to act justly even in the tight corner, *starting off with some old (or new)*

⁴ *The Philosophical Review*, volume 81, Number 3 (3 July, 1972).

⁵ W. Quinn, *Morality and Action* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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theory of practical rationality, into which 'moral' action will somehow be made to fit. Quinn suggests a reversal of the direction of these thoughts. He suggests that so far from supposing that moral action must be in some way 'irrational' if it cannot be made to fit with a preconceived idea of rationality, we should rather count any theory of rationality deficient if an action known to be shameful (like joining the SS) would be tolerated or even recommended by its canons.

How does Quinn argue this remarkable case? What he does is to take a particular theory of practical rationality—or strictly two—that he labels neo-Humean, corresponding to the two instrumentalist theories that I mentioned above. One is a neo-Humean theory identifying practical rationality with policies designed to maximize fulfilment of an agent's desires; the other a prudentialist theory in which practical reason aims at the agent's well being. In each case the theory is characterized by an absence of moral input: all desires, are as such on the same footing, and well-being is also understood in morally neutral terms.

Quinn points out that on either theory it would be possible for *morally disgraceful* actions to be tolerated or even recommended under the heading of the practically rational. And then he makes the crucial move of asking why, if this were true, we should think practical rationality so important? We think of practical rationality as a kind of master virtue. But what would be so important about it if it would license or even mandate disgraceful actions? How in such a case could it keep its supposed status as the master virtue? Why should *its* criteria have to be met in a satisfactory theory of moral virtue?

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The asking of this question seems to me to be a move of great originality in the context of modern moral philosophy, which has for long assumed that the direction of command must go the other way: that morality must somehow be brought under the mantle of practical rationality, rather than a theory of practical rationality having to fit in with moral judgment. That command goes the other way is what Quinn himself argued in the two articles that I am considering. To be sure in these articles he was explicitly concerned only with instrumentalist theories of practical rationality: arguing that *they* should be seen as discredited by their undoubted dissonance with moral judgment. But if one theory of practical rationality can be so discredited, so can another. That is why the reach of his argument is so great.

Quinn is talking about precedence. But it is important here to be clear about just what it is that has precedence over what: the answer being that the rationality of acting morally has precedence over any assumption about practical rationality that would put this in doubt. If an instrumental or prudential theory of rationality tells us that to follow the dictates of justice can be contrary to rationality, *it is that theory of rationality that is defective*. And this is a very important conclusion indeed, which should bring to an end desperate attempts to 'rationalize' the action of the Farm Boy from the Sudetenland in refusing to join the SS by showing it to be instrumental to maximum happiness or maximum fulfilment of desire. If, according to a particular theory of rationality, a good action such as his seems dubiously rational, then so much the worse, not for the moral

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judgment, but rather for that theory. This is what I meant when I said that Quinn was suggesting a change in direction of authority or command.

Here, however, I must warn against a possible misunderstanding of what is being said: the mistake of thinking that Quinn was supporting the old idea that 'moral considerations are overriding,' having *a priori* precedence over considerations of self interest or of the fulfilment of desire. This was not implied by anything that he said. In arguing that by any *acceptable* theory of practical rationality morally shameful actions must be judged to be irrational (non-rational) he was saying, of course, that where the actions *really were* shameful then this must be the verdict about their rationality. And he developed examples in which the considered verdict really was on the side of morality. But that, I must insist, did not imply any *a priori* difference of status between moral and other considerations *going towards* an all-things-considered judgment. Nor would that thesis have been anything but a mistake. It is often said that 'moral considerations are overriding,' but I think that belief in that edifying sounding pronouncement is due to a confusion. For what are 'moral considerations'? A moral *consideration* is some fact such as that a promise has been given, an utterance is truthful or mendacious, or a course of action likely to be seriously helpful or harmful to others. These considerations do indeed give good *pro tanto* reasons for acting in a particular way; that is reasons relative to a certain fact. But as these reasons are not always conclusive, in speaking of them we are not yet committed to saying how all-things-considered it would be good or rational to act. For in some