

PHIL 5983: Rationality Seminar

University of Arkansas, Fall 2004

Handout Topic: Questions, distinctions, and other points that have arisen thus far in the semester. This discussion can be used to generate paper topics—e.g., in answer to the questions below.

1. Is it an *a priori* truth that believers are largely rational?

--Dennett's *intentional stance*: Beliefs and desires are invoked simply to make sense of (i.e., predict and explain) the behavior of others. Beliefs are attributed, therefore, with the aim of interpreting the behavior of another. "Making sense of" or "interpreting" the behavior of another requires treating the other as a rational agent. So, rationality is partially constitutive of belief.

--Davidson's *principle of charity*: In order to interpret the speech of other people, we must attribute a majority of true beliefs (true by our lights, that is) to them, as well as a coherent set of beliefs and desires. Attributing beliefs and assigning meaning to utterances is an intertwined project.

--Cohen's *reflective equilibrium*: The norms of rationality themselves are not independent of human intuition. Since we (i.e., normal people) generate the intuitions that the correct theory of reasoning must coincide with, we (normal people) cannot fail to be rational (i.e., have full reasoning *competence*).

So, when we have breakdowns in rationality, as is the case in the delusions (and, later, self-deception cases) we discussed, how, if at all, should belief-desire attribution proceed?

2. Okay, let's say that believers must be rational. What are the more specific requirements, or even indicators, for being a believer? What are the symptoms of belief?

--Behavioral: A person who believes that *p* incorporates that belief with her desires, in a rational manner, to generate action. For example, if I believe that the cheese is in the fridge and want some cheese, then I will go to the fridge (as opposed to some other location).

--Linguistic: A person who believes that *p* will assent to that proposition, or will sincerely assert *p*.

--Evidential: A person who believes that *p* thinks that there is some reason or evidence to believe that *p*. Believers are responsive to reasons.

3. Tversky and Kahneman described several systematic cognitive biases (either performance errors or incompetencies) that result from using, generally helpful,

heuristics. Let's separate at least 3 questions here. First, how should the psychological evidence be interpreted? Does it show only performance errors (and "tricked up" ones at that)? Or, do the results reveal systematic cognitive incompetencies? Is good psychological methodology followed? Second, what is the norm of rationality by which we should evaluate subjects? Maybe the "failures" of these psychological subjects are only with respect to the incorrect standards for evaluation of rationality. Third, now that we have the appropriate norm selected, what do the psychological data (as interpreted in answering question 1) tell us about the rationality of these subjects? How do they fare with regard to the correct norms of rationality? Some brief comments about these questions:

1. The following two points are especially troubling about their results: 1) The fallacies are often committed by trained professionals (e.g., psychologists) who should know better, and 2) Many of the subjects refuse to acknowledge the mistake even when it has been explained to them, and the framing effect (if any) should be lifted. These point to the apparently deep-rooted nature of these incompetencies. But also recall Cohen's various ways of re-interpreting the data.
2. Tversky and Kahneman seem to share the typical philosopher's conception of rationality as reasoning in accordance with the rules of deductive logic and probability theory. Continuing our usage, let's call this *the standard picture of rationality*. In the next large section we will address whether this conception is correct, or at least partially so. If it is partially correct, we consider ways in which it can be augmented.
3. If Tversky and Kahneman are correct about the norm of rationality, and correct that these are competency problems, then they have demonstrated a limited case for human irrationality. Of course, one could object to Tversky and Kahneman on either ground.
4. Competing accounts of the proper norms for rationality.

*Before we present these accounts, let's raise a methodological question. To what degree should descriptive facts about how we actually reason determine the correct norms for reasoning? Should the study of rationality be *naturalized*? Surely some descriptive facts are relevant to the correct norms. A norm is something we should aim for, and if we are incapable of satisfying or approximating a proposed norm, then it is not the correct norm. (Here, we can compare the norms of rationality with the norms of ethics.) In particular, the norms of rationality should recognize our finitary predicament. We know where the Gigerenzer crowd stands on this one.

*The most basic account is the standard picture of rationality (or, what has also been called *coherence rationality* and *procedural rationality*). Some may say that following the rules of logic and probability theory is necessary and sufficient for being rational, and others say that it is only necessary. The necessity claim is obviously weaker, and therefore more difficult to deny. But, we read both psychologists and philosophers who argue for the denial. To deny the necessity condition is to claim that the rules of

inference that apply to propositions do not carry over into the psychological world, which deals with rules of inference for beliefs. This debate is deep and historic. Gigerenzer argues against the standard picture under even the necessity-only interpretation (or, what he calls the *coherence criteria*), and offers ecological rationality in its place. This is a very pragmatic account of rationality, informed by evolutionary and other descriptive facts about our actual reasoning faculties. Bermudez also offers some passing observations against the standard picture in the article by him that we read. Gil Harman has provided more developed, book-length objections.

*So, a good first step in determining what you hold to be the correct norms of rationality is to see if you accept the standard picture, in either its necessary-and-sufficient or necessity-only versions. If you think that the standard picture is correct, so far as it goes, you nevertheless may want to deny the necessary-and-sufficient claim and add one or more of the following additional norms:

--It is well noted that logic is, in one sense, content-blind, and does not inform us of how to revise our beliefs when conflict arises. But, it seems that there are more or less rational ways of revising our beliefs. If so, we should have a norm that reflects this fact. This is what Bermudez calls *epistemic rationality*. You might want to add this norm to your account.

--Perhaps some things are simply ruled out for rational belief in virtue of their content. David Lewis thinks so, and adds *content rationality* as a norm (at least for beliefs and desires). We find a further addition, in the same spirit, by Gold and Hohwy. They offer *experiential rationality*. Experiential rationality is content-sensitive in the same way as Lewis' content rationality. For this reason, I propose that we think of it as a species of content rationality. However, experiential rationality is also far less plausible as a norm, as it seems difficult to consider experiences themselves either rational or irrational.

--The suggested additions to the standard picture mentioned above, with the possible exception of experiential rationality, are traditional, truth-conducive, epistemic norms. But, one might take the more extreme position that there should be non-epistemic norms of rationality. These are likely to be pragmatic, evolutionary, or desire-satisfying norms like those espoused by Gigerenzer (ecological rationality, which makes decision-making procedures rational only relative to a particular environment) and Bermudez (inclusive rationality).

--Perhaps you can add others to the list, or systematize the norms of rationality in an altogether different fashion.

5. Do Tversky and Kahneman, and the Gigerenzer group, have a substantive disagreement over rationality, or are they simply talking about different things?

6. A plausible norm of epistemic rationality is that more information, other things being equal, is better than less when it comes to reaching belief. But Gigerenzer's group

provides various examples of fast and frugal heuristics that appear to show that more accurate results can be achieved with less information. Is this convincing?

7. Is the heuristics and biases literature, as discussed by Tversky and Kahneman and opposed by Gigerenzer, a worthwhile research area for studying rationality? Is Gigerenzer's naturalistic, computational, research program an improvement over that of Tversky and Kahneman?

8. Let's distinguish 3 parts of Stone and Young's account of the Capgras delusion. First, there is an anomalous perceptual experience. Second, an attributional bias (of suspiciousness) prompts a hypothesis with a particular content—namely, one that assigns “wrongness” externally. Finally, this hypothesis is accepted and maintained in virtue of a reasoning bias favoring observational adequacy. There are various ways in which you can evaluate this proposal. For one, is the general psychological story plausible? Do Capgras patients seem to be like inverted prosopagnosiacs? Are these 3 parts sufficient to explain the disorder? Another, and more philosophical approach, is to consider the rationality of such a patient, and see whether the behavioral, linguistic, and evidential symptoms (see 2 above) point to, or even allow for, the assignment of such beliefs. Do deluded patients *really* believe what they avow? How can their so-called beliefs be circumscribed and disconnected from the actions one would expect of such a believer? Perhaps such beliefs are justified in virtue of being inclusively rational?

Also, like Davies and Coltheart, as well as Langdon and Coltheart, you might wonder whether the Stone and Young procedure generalizes to a wide class of delusions (e.g., delusions of misidentification).