

Introduction

This book offers what with some qualification is a theory of practical reason. The main qualification is that the subject is so vast and complex that in a book of this scope I can only deal with certain central problems.

I sometimes work better when I can make a contrast between the view I am presenting and the views I am opposing. Philosophy often proceeds by debate. In this case, the opposing view is a conception of rationality that I was brought up on and that I believe is the dominant conception in our intellectual culture. I call this view, I hope not unfairly, "the Classical Model."

In criticizing the Classical Model, I am criticizing a very powerful tradition in Western philosophy. In this book I point out some of its limitations and try to overcome them. But it may seem excessively critical to be attacking a model of rationality that is in many respects correct, and which emphasizes the role of rationality and intelligence in decision making and in life in general, at a time when there are systematic attacks on the very idea of rationality. Various forms of relativism, sometimes under the label of "postmodernism," have attacked the idea of rationality as such. Rationality is supposed to be essentially oppressive,

hegemonic, culturally relative, etc. Why do I criticize a pretty good theory of rationality when rationality as such is under attack? I am as appalled as anyone by these attacks, but I do not bother to answer them because I do not believe they can even be made intelligible. For example, I have sometimes been challenged, "What is your argument for rationality?"—a nonsensical challenge, because the notion of "argument" presupposes standards of rationality. This book is not a defense of rationality, because the idea of a "defense" in the form of argument, reasons, etc. presupposes constraints of rationality, and hence the demand for such a defense is nonsensical. Constraints of rationality are universal and built into the structure of mind and language, specifically into the structures of intentionality and speech acts. One can describe the operation of those constraints, as I try to do in this book, and one can criticize other such descriptions, as I also do, but rationality as such neither requires nor even admits of a justification, because all thought and language, and hence all argument, presupposes rationality. One can intelligibly debate theories of rationality, but not rationality.

This book is a discussion within the tradition of philosophical accounts of rationality and an attempt to improve on the dominant view of the tradition.

In reactions to public lectures on these topics, I have found two persistent mistakes that intelligent people make about what can be expected from a theory of rationality, and I want to block those mistakes at the very beginning. First, many people believe that a theory of rationality should provide them with an algorithm for rational decision making. They think they would not be

getting their money's worth out of a book on rationality unless it gave them a concrete method for deciding whether or not to divorce their spouse, which investments to make in the stock market, and which candidate to vote for in the next election. For reasons that are implicit in the analysis that I provide, no theory of rationality will provide an algorithm for making the right decisions. The aim of such a theory is not to tell you how to decide hard issues, but to explain certain structural features of rational decision making. Just as a theory of truth will not give you an algorithm for discovering which propositions are true, so a theory of rationality will not give you an algorithm for making the most rational decisions.

A second mistake that people make about rationality is to suppose that if standards of rationality were universal and if we were all perfectly rational agents, then we would have no disagreements. Consequently, they suppose that the persistence of disagreements among apparently informed and rational agents shows that rationality is somehow relative to cultures and individuals. But all of this is mistaken. Standards of rationality, like standards of truth, are indeed universally valid across individuals and cultures. But given universal standards of rationality and rational deliberation by agents, massive disagreements are still possible, indeed inevitable. Assume universally valid and accepted standards of rationality, assume perfectly rational agents operating with perfect information, and you find that rational disagreement will still occur; because, for example, the rational agents are likely to have different and inconsistent values and interests, each of which may be rationally acceptable. One of the deepest mistakes in our social background assumptions is the idea

that unresolvable conflicts are a sign that someone must be behaving irrationally or worse still, that rationality itself is in question.

Many of the issues discussed in this book are traditionally thought of as part of philosophical ethics, in the sense that they are the sorts of issues talked about in university courses on "ethical theory." I have very little to say about ethics as such or about the implication of my views for ethical theory. I am not sure that there is a well-defined branch of philosophy called "ethical theory," but to the extent that there is, its necessary presupposition is an account of rationality in decision making and acting. You cannot intelligently discuss, for example, ethical reasons for action unless first you know what an action is and what a reason is. So this book, though not directly about ethics, deals with many of the foundational issues for any ethical theory.

This investigation is a continuation of my earlier work on problems of mind, language, and social reality. Each book in that work has to stand on its own, but each is part of a much larger overall philosophical structure. To enable this book to stand on its own, I have summarized in chapter 2 some essential elements of my earlier work that will help in understanding this book.