

Joseph Raz

From Normativity to Responsibility.

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From Normativity to Responsibility is a valuable resource for anyone working on reasons and normativity simply by virtue of the fact that it gathers together essays which in many cases have shaped the current debate in this field, a field in which Joseph Raz is rightly acknowledged as a dominant figure since early and decisive contributions such as *Practical Reason and Norms* (1975 and 1999) and *Engaging Reason* (1999). The essays contain some revisions, mainly aimed at clarifying specific points that emerged from the earlier discussion and to fine-tune the argument. Raz's introductory notes make this more than just a collection of essays, however. They reveal the book to be part of an ongoing project, a study of the active aspect of 'our Being in the World' (2). Raz does not claim to be giving us an exhaustive account of this active 'Being in the World', but he does claim that attending properly to the relation between our rational capacities and the facts that are reasons for belief, actions, and emotions is of central importance to any such account. Drilling down to reveal the particulars of this relation adds detail and, unavoidably, complexity. It is therefore worth giving some general background as a foil to Raz's views before turning to Raz's use of the notion of a normative reason.

Raz, alongside others, has pioneered an approach to normativity in terms of reasons. In the practical sphere—on the objectivist model at least—reasons are facts to which a rational agent can point that show an action in a favourable light. The advantage of the approach is that it promises to connect what the agent thinks and does with how the world is. Raz recommends a further step, that the agent's response to the world be guided by reason in the singular. To see why it is worth treating 'reason' as the central normative concept we may contrast this to another way of looking at normativity where the basic notion is 'norm', which can refer to rules or laws. The focus here is on the 'ought' character of norms or their 'requiring' characteristic, the fact that normative standards make claims on us. This approach too seeks to connect the agent and her world but does so by making space in the world for norms, which on some accounts, for instance, Robert Brandom's, are conceptually and explanatorily prior to facts, form part of our social environment and depend for their enforcement on practices of which we are part. Brandom shares with Raz a broad conception of normative phenomena, not just to do with actions but also with beliefs. So, for Brandom, 'oughts' that determine the correct use of terms also determine the content of beliefs. The difficulty, which, as I see it, the reasons approach promises to resolve, is that one can still ask both for justification of the norms that communities are in the business of preserving, by regulating their uptake by individuals, and about how any one individual is able to recognise the normative demands of her community. In Raz's words, the facts that are reasons must be such that 'they can explain because they are normative reasons and by being normative reasons' (28).

Before we turn to see how this 'normative/explanatory nexus', as Raz calls it, works in practice, it is worth noting that there are resources outside the reasons view to address the difficulty identified with Brandom's account. To take an example, evolutionary accounts can cite selected traits and functions, which tie our sort of normative behaviour to purposive systems in the natural world, whereas voluntarist ones can focus on features of human agency

to make certain rules binding and answer the normative question ‘why should I do this?’ from the first personal perspective from which it arises in the first place. The problem with these solutions is that the less requiring and explicit you make the norms, the more difficult it is to account for their intentional following, the more requiring and explicit you make them, and the more difficult it is to account for culpable failure to follow them (relevant here is Raz’s discussion of ‘the guise of the good’ in chap. 4, also the discussion of ‘epistemic filter’ in chap. 6, 109–10). So the adoption of a different model to explain normativity is well-motivated.

Raz treats reasons as the sorts of things that make our having such and such belief, or emotion, or intention to act ‘appropriate’ or ‘eligible’ (4–5). Normative reasons are best seen as value-options presented to an agent (5), which is not to say they are all optional, but that they can be undefeated and still not compelling. So when Raz says that reasons ‘determine the ways people should relate to the world’ (47), this ‘should’ aims to capture a range of normative strengths: such reasons ‘favour, justify, or require’ (19, emphasis added). Raz’s normative question is: ‘why are the facts that constitute reasons reasons?’ which he elaborates as: ‘what about those facts makes them reasons?’ (85) The answer is disarmingly simple: it is their being perceived as such by Reason. Normative reasons have properties such as appropriateness or eligibility or requiringness by virtue of their relation to what a rational agent ought to do, or would do, or might do. So reasons connect to ‘Reason’ in the singular, understood as ‘our general capacity to recognize and respond to reasons’ (86).

On Raz’s account, Reason does not *make* reasons into reasons, it just helps us, when we reflect about our situation to recognise its normative features, the relevant facts. There is a delicate issue here: for a reason to count as a reason it has to have certain features, but for it to be a reason for someone it has to be recognizable by Reason. This preserves the ontological independence and epistemic priority of reasons, which are neither derived from Reason nor depend on it for their existence. Although this is not how Raz puts it, Reason is a detecting capacity, which is to say that it tracks reasons. This fits with the denial of a substantive doctrine of ‘reason’ in *Engaging Reason* (see chap. 4). However, whereas the earlier work suggests sympathy with a pragmatic and contextual understanding of reasoning practices and the principles that govern them, here it appears that the practices and principles of reasoning are evaluable by reference to their tracking success, presumably by allowing Reason to pick out value features in actions and epistemic features in belief. This brings the account much closer to both evolutionist or neo-Aristotelian accounts that make use of the idea of proper function to explain normative phenomena (see the characterisation of irrationality as a type of ‘malfunctioning’, 155 and 157). Reason is just a fact about ourselves not itself amenable to reasons (108). There are no reasons to follow or exercise our Reason. Interestingly, in the earlier published version of ‘The Myth of Instrumental Rationality’ (here chap. 8), Raz appeared to suggest that there are some goods that make worth it our while to exercise our Reason (a point that John Broome in his original response to that essay both emphasized and endorsed). In the present version, Raz makes it clear that there are no such meta-reasons for having the dispositions and abilities that allow us to function well and be rational agents, rationality ‘is not a capacity we use at will’, he remarks, it is ‘like perceptual capacities in being engaged willy-nilly’ (159; cf. also 95).

And yet this is too passive a picture of Reason. Reasoning and deliberation ‘are mental activities we can decide on’ and this is a practical matter, of our conduct as deliberators (97). What is not up to us is how we respond to epistemic reasons, responsiveness to which is ‘constitutive of believing’ (*ibid.*). But if this is so, then what

space is left for ‘rational reaction to this awareness’ (35) of the facts that are reasons? It is definitely part of what Raz wants to argue in order to locate our responsibility as epistemic and practical agents, yet it is not always clear that we do have that much of a room to maneuver. Here is the relevant principle:

‘there is no gap, no extra step in reasoning between believing that the case for the truth of the proposition is conclusive and believing the proposition’ (38)

The ‘No Gap Principle’ describes normal functioning. It is also meant to explain what sort of epistemic features are reasons for belief, what sort of facts are normative for belief, namely that it is true. If we stick with the thought that reasons for belief are normative just like reasons for actions are, then a stronger normativist commitment than can be gathered from the discussion so far appears to be at work here, something like ‘one ought to believe that p, if p’ and so the feature that reasons for belief must have to be such is truth. However in articulating No Gap, Raz emphasizes the subjective side (evidence-gathering) over the objective side (truth): ‘the No Gap Principle states that one comes to believe that P upon realizing that there is conclusive evidence for it’ (39). So the key notion behind the No Gap Principle is that of our duties as epistemic agents, that is, what one ought to do in order to find out whether p, for example, adhere to the evidence-gathering maxim. If this is the underlying notion behind the No Gap Principle, provided the evidence gathered supports p, then one may blamelessly believe that p, which leaves idle the truth preserving condition in ‘one ought to believe that p, if p’. Raz’s control thesis lends support to this way of looking at things:

The limits of our voluntary control over our belief are not the limits of our control over them: we are in control over our beliefs by functioning properly as rational agents, that is, we are in control, and active, so long, and to the degree that our beliefs are governed by Reason, by our rational powers (98).

Two questions arise here. First, given the practicality of epistemic agency, the action features of evidence-gathering and of deliberating, it is not clear why Raz wants to keep a separate category for normative reasons for belief, unless he is after all committed to normativism about belief, i.e., ‘one ought to believe that p, if p’. Relevant here is his argument for rejecting epistemic akrasia (42). Second, it is not clear on what grounds extrinsic reasons are ruled out for belief, since they may well be good ones. One may for instance think of Pascal’s wager, in which belief in the existence of the deity is presented as rational, yet the belief is also such that for it no evidence can be gathered, and it is assumed by the experiment that its truth cannot be established and that it may be even be false.

Raz is a pluralist about normative reasons: as we saw, it is not necessary that they require, they may merely favour or justify (19). But if reasons have these multifarious features, what makes them the same kind of thing nonetheless? Maybe the variety of normative phenomena, from valuing to drawing inferences, calls for a variety of explanatory items, which may relate to normative reasons only indirectly. Or, to put it differently, if one is a pluralist in the manner just described, on what grounds are some well-motivated bits of epistemic behaviour ruled as pathological or irrational? When at the outset Raz describes his project as concerned with the *active* aspect of our Being in the World, this suggests an alternative way of unifying normative reasons (which would still allow for different normative dimensions), namely an exclusive focus on action, with deliberation being treated as a type of action. I suspect this approach is not favoured because it would skew the picture

towards the requirements of Reason, which is something Raz wants to avoid, presumably because the requirements of Reason would thus trump the facts that are reasons. Being in the World is way of negotiating the tension between two basic views of reasons: one that says that the reason that φ -ing is right is all anyone needs to provide a normative explanation for why it is a good idea to perform the action, and another that says that evidence that φ -ing is right shows why a well-functioning rational agent may be disposed to perform the action. The emphasis in Raz's account is on a conception of normative reasons in the first sense, i.e., on facts that explain why it is a good idea to perform the action (or to hold the belief). However, Raz also seeks to alleviate the tension by showing how these facts *can* dispose a rational agent to act in a certain way. Raz makes his argument with patience, subtlety, and a modesty that belies the magnitude of the task. It goes without saying, given the range of topics discussed in this book, that the aspects touched in this review are but a small part of the whole, which contains extensive treatment of specific aspects of agency and of judgement with a view to showing not just what is within our control but also what is not.

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