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## *Reasons With Rationalism After All*

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### 1. Overview

Kieran Setiya begins *Reasons Without Rationalism* (2007) by outlining and arguing for a schema in terms of which he thinks we best understand the nature of normative reasons for action. This is:

*Reasons*: The fact that  $p$  is a reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$  just in case  $A$  has a collection of psychological states,  $C$ , such that the disposition to be moved to  $\phi$  by  $C$ -and-the-belief-that- $p$  is a good disposition of practical thought, and  $C$  contains no false beliefs. (12)

As Setiya points out, *Reasons* contrasts with both the 'advice' model of normative reasons (this is the view that  $A$  has a normative reason to  $\phi$  only if  $A$ 's perfect counterpart desires that  $A$   $\phi$ s), which is the view that I myself prefer

(Smith 1995), and the ‘imitative’ model (this is the view that A has a normative reason to  $\phi$  only if A’s perfect counterpart desires that he himself  $\phi$ s), preferred by the likes of McDowell (1995).

The intuitive idea behind *Reasons* should be clear enough. Insofar as normative reasons are *normative*, they are considerations that would justify an agent’s acting in a certain way in certain circumstances: there is, thus, a *justificatory* dimension. But insofar as they are *reasons*, they are considerations on which the agent might act in those very circumstances: there is thus an *explanatory* dimension as well. Part of the attraction of *Reasons* is that it tells us why the considerations that are normative reasons have these two features: a consideration is a normative reason only if, given other things that the agent believes and desires, the *disposition to be moved* by a belief concerning that consideration (this is the explanatory dimension) is itself a *good* disposition of practical thought (this is the justificatory dimension).

*Reasons* is, however, just a schema. To fully understand what it tells us about the nature of normative reasons, we have to say what makes a disposition of practical thought good. As Setiya notes, Rationalism provides us with one of the standard answers to this question:

According to the rationalist, . . . the standards of practical reason can be derived from the nature of agency or practical thought. The philosophy of action is thus the foundation of ethics. (14–15)

Given that one’s psychology is subject to certain norms of rationality simply in virtue of the fact that it is the psychology of an agent, it follows that good dispositions of practical thought are those that bring the elements of one’s psychology into maximal conformity with the totality of these norms of rationality. (Note, in passing that Rationalism, therefore, provides the standard account of what a *perfect counterpart* would be like, according to both the advice and the imitative models.)

Another answer, however, is that provided by Virtue Theory:

. . . one’s dispositions of practical thought are good, as such (and just to the extent that) they are good as traits of character. (8)

In saying what normative reasons an agent has, according to this alternative view, we must turn our attention not to the nature of agency, but to a theory of the virtues. In these terms, the overarching aim of *Reasons Without Rationalism* is to argue against Rationalism and in favour of Virtue Theory.

The book divides into two parts. In Part One, Setiya argues for a certain view of agency. In Part Two, he argues that that view of agency gives the lie to the suggestion that, since one’s psychology must be subject to certain norms of rationality simply in virtue of the fact that it is the psychology of an agent, so it follows that good dispositions of practical thought are those

that bring one's psychology into conformity with the norms of rationality. The view of agency he argues for is, he thinks, too thin to provide an account of good dispositions of practical thought. He thus concludes that *Reasons* cannot be understood in terms of Rationalism. We must instead understand it in the way suggested by Virtue Theory. In what follows I explain some misgivings about Setiya's overarching argument and about some of the claims he advances in the course of giving that argument.

## 2. *Setiya's account of normative reasons*

When presented with a theory of normative reasons, a good first question is to ask is what the theory tells us is impossible, and then to ask whether that really is impossible. According to *Reasons*, for example, the only considerations that can be reasons for action are considerations which the agent in question can both believe obtains and to which it would be good if he responded, having believed it, by being moved to act accordingly. But are all normative reasons like that?

Suppose someone falsely believes that he is Jesus. Does this fact provide him with a normative reason to (say) get help? On the advice model, it may well. For his perfect counterpart may well desire him to (say) walk into a doctor's office and announce that he is Jesus on the grounds that doing so might get him the psychiatric help he needs in order to rid himself of his wildly false belief. According to *Reasons*, in contrast, it is problematic to suppose that this fact could constitute such a normative reason. For how could it be a good disposition of practical thought for an agent to, first of all, believe that he falsely believes himself to be Jesus, and then, second of all, be moved by this belief to take steps to rid himself of his false belief?

Or suppose that acting in a certain way would be spontaneous. Might that fact provide us with a normative reason to behave in that way? The proponent of the advice model has no difficulty in supposing that it might well, as this simply requires that our perfect counterparts desire us to behave spontaneously. According to *Reasons*, in contrast, we would have to suppose that it would be a good disposition of practical thought to be moved to act by the belief that acting in a certain way would be spontaneous. But, of course, acting in a certain way because we believe that so acting would be spontaneous is hardly acting spontaneously, so it very hard to believe that that *could be* a good disposition of practical thought.

It is worth spelling out why *Reasons* and the advice model deliver such very different conclusions in these cases. According to the advice model, there is a quite general category of states of affairs that are the objects of the desires of our perfect counterparts, and it is very natural to suppose that this is the class of states of affairs that are *good* in some respect (Smith 1994). However,

these states of affairs subdivide. Some of them are not the upshots of options we have (the rising of the sun may be an example), whereas others are, and some of the states of affairs that are the upshots of options we have are not such that we could bring them about if we believed that they were the upshots of our options and acted on those beliefs (the two examples just described are cases in point), whereas others are. *Reasons* in effect narrows the class of actions that we have normative reasons to perform to this final sub-class. The advice model, in contrast, allows that the class of actions that we have normative reasons to perform may extend to the second last sub-class as well. *Reasons* thus makes it a conceptual truth that all normative reasons can be *followed*, whereas the advice model need not make this a conceptual truth. If there is any conceptual truth in the area, according to the advice model, the truth is simply that an agent has a reason to do something only if his doing that thing is an option that brings about something good.

So far my concern has been to spell out the implications of *Reasons*. However, it seems to me that what we have said provides the material for two quite different lines of objection. One objection is that *Reasons* mistakes a feature that just so happens to be shared by many normative reasons, the fact that they can be followed, for a feature of normative reasons as such. A second objection, one which I think should have some force even if, in end, we agree that *Reasons* is right to insist that all normative reasons can be followed, is that *Reasons* fails to display what those acts that we have normative reason to perform have in common with options that realize states of affairs that our perfect counterparts desire come about, but which we cannot realize if we believe that this is so and act accordingly, and those states of affairs that our perfect counterparts desire come about that are not the result of options we have at all.

The advice model, in contrast, is consistent with the claim that all normative reasons can be followed, as it could narrow the class of normative reasons to that sub-class if necessary, but it is also consistent with our supposing that some normative reasons cannot be followed, even though everything we have normative reason to do is an option for us. And the advice model also makes it clear what the various cases described all have in common. To repeat, they are all cases in which there is some state of affairs that is *good*, as what it is to be good, according to the advice model, is simply to be the object of a desire of our perfect counterpart. Our normative reasons are thus a *sub-class* of this category; they are those good states of affairs that are realized by our options. This is why it is a conceptual truth that something good would be brought about by our doing what we have normative reason to do. One reason for preferring the advice model to *Reasons*, even if you do think that all reasons can be followed, is thus that it explains why this conceptual truth is indeed a conceptual truth.

### 3. Setiya's arguments against the guise of the good

In Part One – this is the part of the book in which Setiya provides his own account of the nature of agency – Setiya proceeds by addressing a puzzle. G.E.M. Anscombe famously suggested that, whenever someone acts intentionally, he acts for reasons – that is, in Anscombe's terms, the question 'Why?' has application – and that he also has non-observational knowledge of what he is doing. I myself think that there are reasons to doubt that this is so quite generally, but let us suppose with Setiya that it is so. The puzzle is to explain why *both* of these claims about intentional action are true. As Setiya puts it:

What is it about being-done-for-reasons – or being susceptible to the question 'why?' – that requires the presence of belief? (26)

In attempting to provide an answer to this question, Setiya begins by asking what it means for the question 'Why?' to have application.

According to one answer, when we say that the question 'Why?' has application, we mean that, whenever an agent acts intentionally, he acts under the 'guise of the good': that is, he acts in the belief, or at least in the grip of an appearance, that he is thereby achieving something good. As Setiya points out, this view sits well with a theory of intentional action according to which actions are the product of desires and beliefs, where desires in turn are appearances of the good. Moreover, for this very reason, it also sits happily alongside Rationalism. For if all action is the upshot of desire and belief, and desire is an appearance of the good, then a complete theory of agency would itself be able to tell us when desires correctly represent their objects: that is, it would tell us when, in acting on a desire, an agent not only acts on an *appearance of the good*, but also in light of *knowledge of the good*. A complete theory of agency would in this way be able to account for good dispositions of practical thought in terms of the capacities agents have to recognize and respond to the good. Since Setiya wishes to argue against Rationalism, he, therefore, has to say what is wrong with this 'guise of the good' conception of agency.

Setiya gives two arguments against this view. The first consists in giving a host of counterexamples aimed at undermining the view that to act on a desire is to act on an appearance of the good (28–38). The counterexamples are supposed to show that it suffices for intentional action that someone acts on the basis of desire in a more stripped down dispositional sense: the agent is disposed to do *that* when he believes that *this* will be achieved by doing *that*; he is disposed to *the other* when he believes that *this* will be achieved by doing *the other*; and so on. Thus, to consider an example that Setiya discusses briefly, we seem able to imagine that Warren Quinn's radioman sees nothing good at all in turning on radios, even as he goes around the house turning them on: that is, even as he manifests his various dispositions to act in

response to his beliefs about how his desire is to be achieved. But it seems quite wrong to suppose that, just because he sees nothing good in turning radios on, he does not turn them on *intentionally*.

Setiya is, however, unhappy with the strategy of arguing against the guise of the good on the basis of such counterexamples. He is unhappy because he thinks that the result is a *stand-off*. He thinks that the defender of the guise of the good can quite justifiably stand his ground and insist that, to the extent that we succeed in imagining (say) radioman having an answer to the question ‘Why are you doing that?’, we must be supposing that it at least appears to him that there is something good about radios being turned on. Setiya wants a decisive objection to the guise of the good; not a mere stand-off.

Setiya, therefore, considers a second and, to his mind, much more compelling response to the defender of the guise of the good (39–67). The more compelling response is to focus on what it is to take something as your reason to act and then to act because of that reason. According to Setiya,

... taking-as-one’s-reason is not simply belief, or desire, but a state that has features of both. Like belief, it represents its content as being true – after all, I know what my reasons are. And like desire, it has the power to cause or motivate the action it depicts, and to cause it to be done for the reason in question. (40)

This provides an alternative account of intentional action to that provided by the guise of the good theorist, as Setiya sees things, just in case we can spell out how taking-as-one’s-reason leads one to act without thereby assuming that the agent thereby believes, or is in the grip of an appearance, that what he is doing is good. In other words, the desire-like state that is itself part and parcel of taking-as-one’s-reason must not be an appearance of the good.

At least as I understand it, Setiya claims to explain how taking-as-one’s-reason can lead one to act without making such an assumption by making the attitude *self-referential*.

If the content of taking-as-my-reason is to depict me as acting for a reason, not just as being motivated by a belief, it must depict me as being motivated by the way I take the consideration that p. In other words, the attitude of taking p as my reason to act must present itself as part of what motivates my action. The content of taking-as-one’s-reason is thus *self-referential*: in acting because p, I take p to be a consideration belief in which motivates me to  $\phi$  because I so take it. This attitude does depict me as acting for a reason, since it depicts me as being motivated partly by itself, namely by the very fact that I take p as my reason to act. (45)

It is, however, unclear to me why the self-referential nature of the attitude of taking-as-one’s-reason should block the view that the desire-like state involved is an appearance of the good. Let me explain why.

Suppose that radioman is turning the dials of all the radios in the house and let us stipulate that he is in the state that Setiya describes as taking-as-one's-reason: he takes as his reason the fact that the radios in the house will then all be on. Radioman's attitude is, let us suppose, belief-like, desire-like and self-referential in exactly the way Setiya insists. It is belief-like and self-referential because he is in a belief-like state with the content that he is, thereby, turning dials because he believes that the radios in the house will then all be on, and it is also desire-like and self-referential because, since it motivates him, he is in a desire-like state that he is thereby turning dials because he believes that doing so will result in the radios in the house all being on.

The question is whether, *according to the defender of the guise of the good*, the fact that radioman is in this state entails that he sees something good in turning the dials. And the answer, I think, is that the defender of the guise of the good will think that this entailment does hold. The attitude does motivate radioman, after all, so it follows that he is in a state that is indeed desire-like, and, at least according to the defender of the guise of the good, the reason one can answer the question 'Why are you doing that?' when one is in a desire-like state is because the content of that state appears good to one. Indeed, the real question is why Setiya should think otherwise. For Setiya himself allowed the defender of the guise of the good to insist upon just such an entailment when responding to the counterexamples that he thought resulted in a stand-off.

The upshot, as I see things, is thus that the defender of the guise of the good need not take issue with Setiya on the nature of the attitude of taking-as-one's-reason. If Setiya is right, then in order to explain why Anscombe's two claims are true – the claim that when we act intentionally the question 'Why?' has application and the claim that we know what we are doing without observation – we must suppose that intentional action is the result of the distinctive attitude of taking-as-one's-reason, where this attitude is in turn desire-like, belief-like and self-referential in the way describes. But, if the defender of the guise of the good is right, it follows that taking-as-one's-reason is itself a matter of its appearing to one that what one is thereby doing is good.

#### 4. *Setiya's understanding of Rationalism*

In Part Two of *Reasons Without Rationalism*, Setiya explains why, in his view, the arguments of Part One entail that *Reasons* cannot be understood in the way Rationalism requires. Instead it must be understood in terms of Virtue Theory.

Rationalism holds that a consideration is a reason just in case the disposition to be moved by the belief that that consideration obtains is a good disposition of practical thought, where good dispositions of practical thought



are themselves fixed by the standards implicit in agency. Setiya agrees that, if we were to understand agency in the way proposed by the defender of the guise of the good, then that would comport well with what he calls the *recognitional* version of Rationalism: this is the view that good dispositions of practical thought are capacities to recognize and respond to the good (86–89). However, since he thinks that he has refuted the idea that agents act under the guise of the good, and since he thinks his own conception of intentional action does not itself imply that actions need to conform with any norms of rationality, he concludes that Rationalism gets no foothold. There are, however, a number of points with which the rationalist might take issue.

For one thing, as we have already seen, Setiya's arguments in Part One do not refute the idea that we act under the guise of the good. For all that we learn from Part One, *Reasons* itself should, therefore, be understood in terms of the *recognitional* version of Rationalism. For another – and this seems to me to be a much more serious criticism – even if we were to agree with Setiya that doing something because one has the attitude of taking-a-certain-consideration-as-one's-reason-for-so-acting suffices for intentional action, and even if we were to agree with him that the desire-like aspect of this attitude is in turn to be understood in the more stripped down dispositional way he prefers that precludes the guise of the good, this would already be enough for Rationalism to get a foothold. It would be enough because Setiya's own view commits him to a conception of intentional action according to which actions must conform to certain standards of rationality in order to be actions. To see why this is so, we need to dwell for a moment on a problem that he mentions in passing, but that he then puts to one side on the grounds of that it is irrelevant to his main concerns (31–32).

It is agreed on nearly all sides that, to act intentionally, an agent's action and the attitudes that produce it must stand in the right kind of causal relation. Imagine an actor playing a role that calls for her to shake as if extremely nervous. It is easy to imagine that though the actor wants to play her role and believes that she can do so by shaking, once she gets on stage her desire and belief so unnerve her that she is overcome and rendered totally incapable of action. Instead of playing her role as required, she stands there, shaking nervously. Examples like this suggest a common problem for action theorists: all action theorists, Setiya included, need to rule out the possibility of such internal wayward causal chains. Though some are pessimistic about the possibility of doing this in anything other than a completely uninformative way – the attitudes that cause action must do so *in the right way* (Davidson 1973) – others think it is plain what is needed, at least in outline (Peacocke 1979). The crucial feature in all such cases, they say, is that the match between what the agent does and the content of her desires and beliefs is entirely fluky. In the case just described, for example, it is entirely fluky that the actor wanted to make just the movements that her nerves subsequently caused. We must, therefore, ensure that her movements are



*differentially sensitive* to the contents of her desires and beliefs, as opposed to being sensitive to the operation of wayward factors like nerves.

They, therefore, suggest that the movement of an agent's body is an action only if, if the agent had had a range of desires and beliefs that differed ever-so-slightly in their content from those she actually has, she would still have acted appropriately. Suppose she had desired to act nervously and believed that she could do so by making her teeth chatter. Then she would have made her teeth chatter. Or suppose that she had desired to act nervously and believed that she could do so by wringing her hands. Then she would have wrung her hands. And so on. This further condition of non-flukiness, understood in terms of differential sensitivity, is violated in cases of internal wayward causal chains. For even if the actor had had such ever-so-slightly different desires and beliefs, her nerves would still have caused her to shake when she went on stage.

But now consider the differential sensitivity requirement itself. What does *it* amount to? This is where Rationalism gets a foothold, because the requirement seems to be nothing less than the requirement that the agent *has and exercises the capacity to be instrumentally rational in a very local domain* (Smith 2009). What the differential sensitivity condition guarantees, after all, is that when an agent acts intentionally he does not just try to realize his desires, given his means-end beliefs, on that occasion, but that he would have tried to do so in a range of nearby possible worlds in which he has desires and beliefs with ever-so-slightly different contents. This is so even in the limit case of an agent's performing some basic action like moving his finger in a certain way. For even in this case, the agent must put his desire together with his belief that moving his finger in that way is something that he can do – that is, his desire must be put together with his knowledge how to move his finger in that way – and here too a differential sensitivity condition must be met (Smith 2004a). Agency itself – that is, the *existence* of dispositions of practical thought as such – thus requires that agents have and exercise a *minimal* capacity to be instrumentally rational. But the fact that agency as such requires the possession and exercise of this minimal capacity suggests a very natural picture of what *good* dispositions of practical thought amount to. Agents have good dispositions of practical thought when they possess and exercise *all* of the capacities required for thought and action to the *maximal* extent. Moreover, it seems plain what this would require.

Possession and exercise of *all* of the capacities required for thought and action to the *maximal* extent would require possession and exercise of the capacity to be instrumentally rational, not just locally, but globally; it would require that the beliefs involved in the production of action are themselves the product of maximal capacities for epistemic rationality; and, if there are any norms of rationality telling us which intrinsic desires to have, it would require that the intrinsic desires that produce action are the product of maximal capacities to conform to such norms too (Smith 2004b). (Without wishing

to labour the point, note that this is exactly how the defender of the advice model tells us we should understand the perfections of our perfect counterparts.) To repeat, the possession and exercise of such capacities is not required for action as such. But, according to the Rationalist, the possession and exercise of such capacities is plausibly required if action is to be the product of *good* dispositions of practical thought.

Setiya does not consider the possibility of deriving Rationalism from the minimal rational commitments of agency in the way just suggested. This is too bad, and not just because it seems to me to that this is much the most promising way of deriving Rationalism from an account of agency. It is too bad because, if Rationalism can be so derived, then it follows that *Reasons*, which is Setiya's own preferred schema for understanding normative reasons, can itself be filled out in terms of Rationalism after all.

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