

Rationality, Irrationality, and the Excuse of Ignorance

Katherine K. Biederman, Ph.D.

Bellarmino University
2001 Newburg Road, Louisville, KY, USA 40205

Abstract

I construct a novel account of some of the main epistemic conditions that explain what is rationally required of moral agents. I offer five conditions that are minimal requirements for ascribing rationality or irrationality to an agent's reasoning processes and explain how we ought to employ or apply reasoning processes. What I propose is a picture that shows how, through a reasoning process, we can ascribe rationality or irrationality. The account of rationality I put forth shows that moral agents who are in some way ignorant actually fail to act as rational agents. Illuminating the epistemological dimensions of moral agency aims to: (a) make sense of our intellectual endeavors and commitments in the moral domain by setting standards for how agents ought to be rational when engaging in belief-related activities that influence their action-guiding judgments and (b) identify the limits of the excusing force of ignorance.

Key Words: Ethics, Moral Responsibility, Ignorance, Rationality, Moral Agency

1. Introduction

In this paper, I offer a scaffolding of a theory of rationality that applies to the moral domain and illuminates some basic rationality requirements for moral agency. I present five essential conditions for rationality that draw out the epistemic dimensions of our intellectual commitments and specifies the limits of the excuse of ignorance. In so doing, I examine what is rationally required of moral agents and how they ought to carry out their belief-related practices. The account I propose outlines some generally accepted norms for proper reasoning in order to improve our understanding of the significance of rationality and overall intellectual endeavors in the moral domain. Thus, this project develops a strategic account of rationality to advance an improved picture of what it means to be a responsible moral agent.

My account subjects moral agents to more demanding standards of rationality than epistemic agents because, in the moral domain, our belief-related practices have a greater practical consequence. Moral agents have a greater set of expectations to satisfy for the reason that we expect that a responsible moral agent is one who demonstrates rational thinking and manifests rational qualities in her conduct. If rationality requirements are important for what we believe they are even more important for us when acting as moral agents. Our belief-related practices influence our actions and our actions affect other people; thus, we ought to be subject to more stringent standards in the practical realm because one's epistemic status can affect and impact other persons' lives and well-being. The complexity of our lives as moral agents is greater than as epistemic agents for the reason that we have norms for responsible epistemic conduct as well as moral standards to satisfy.

The epistemic requirements I propose require that agents satisfy rationality requirements for moral responsibility, demand that they be rational and avoid being ignorant, and regulate how agents ought to carry out their belief-related activities. While practical or moral standards cannot dictate one's attitude about a belief, one's practical and moral interests have epistemic significance. An analysis of rationality is not exclusively dependent upon epistemic matters but also ought to account for our practical interests.¹ This view implies that morality's demands can have epistemic significance and further, lends support to the view that a moral agent's belief-related practices ought to be subject to epistemic norms while at the same time being sensitive to her non-epistemic interests.²

¹ See Jason Stanley (2005).

² See Richard Foley (2002).

Accordingly, this account of rationality concerns legitimate standards for proper reasoning and, in virtue of our moral interests, these standards take on a new role when applied to one who engages in moral practice.

2. A Theory of Rationality

There is some general common conception of rationality. How we decide upon what such a conception entails is typically considered the result of a normative process designed to tell us how we ought to arrive at a belief, and an epistemological theory of truth requires this feature. The account of rationality I offer seeks to explain what agents ought to believe and the conditions under which it is rational for them to believe what they believe. This account is a theory about typical intelligent behavior that can be applied to a conception of practical reasoning and responsible moral agency. Further, it provides practical results for everyday living and moral practice.

Rationality can be viewed as an effective and sufficient reasoning process which produces true or reliable beliefs. Rationality can be understood according to a sliding-scale type model that takes into account such factors as cognitive ability, culture, and environment.³ By contrast, irrationality can be viewed as a faulty reasoning process or the absence of any reasoning process which in turn results in false or unreliable beliefs. Hence, I defend a pragmatic account of rationality.

My account of a theory of rationality involves five conditions. Taken together, these five conditions reflect a paradigm model of rationality for typical intelligent behavior to explain what ought to be rationally required of moral agents, to improve our understanding of what counts as rational or irrational behavior, and to reveal that ignorance is not always sufficient to excuse.

(IC) The Hidden Information condition: if an agent S consistently believes that A if Z will do no harm and Z does harm, there must have been directly relevant conditions that S in no way could have had information about or access to.

(HC) The Hindsight condition: excludes as irrational patently false beliefs in the absence of relevant or available information and allows an agent to revise her beliefs without explicitly calling into question the rationality of the original belief.

(RC) The Relevancy condition: describes what kinds of information or evidence are necessitated for something to count as a belief.

(CC) The Consistency condition: specifies that an agent's conduct ought to be consistent with the corresponding beliefs or cognitive attitudes she holds.

(EC) The Evidentiary condition: stipulates that a belief is rational just in case it is formed on the basis of and supported by reliable evidence.

(IC) provides for cases that account for information that an agent could not have reasonably had access to and prevents attributions of irrationality in cases in which she could not have reasonably held the relevant beliefs or gathered evidence pertaining to her state of affairs in the presence of factors beyond her control (e.g., 'acts of God' type factors). Thus, the agent cannot be said to be rational or irrational provided that there is hidden information. (IC) is reflective of an agent who is ignorant on the basis of lacking relevant information or beliefs. Specifically, she is ignorant to the extent that she is uninformed and acts without relevant information or evidence which constitutes hidden information. An agent cannot be said to be patently irrational if her belief is contradicted by hidden information. (IC) allows for rare cases that demonstrate the lack of certainty of this account of rationality.

(HC) is similar to (IC) insofar as it excludes as irrational false beliefs in the absence of available information. (HC) makes it possible for us to not call into question the rationality or irrationality of an agent's beliefs because of a lack of available information. This condition accounts for the evolution, development, and progress of belief-forming mechanisms. In a sense, rationality can only be as good as the available evidence and in this way, acts as a mitigating factor that prevents us from ascribing rationality or irrationality to an agent who hold beliefs that are false and yet no evidence is available to support the falsity of the belief.

³ I propose that there are degrees of rationality. See J.M. Weinberg (2001) and Stich (1983 and 1993).

(HC) stipulates that an agent is rational or irrational to the extent that she can access only current knowledge or information related to her beliefs and not (inaccessible) future information.

Having beliefs that are counter to or unsupported by what one's (hidden or unavailable) evidence actually supports does not fall under (IC) and (HC) provided that the (hidden or unavailable) evidence satisfies (RC). In other words, agents are subject to standards of evidence-gathering.

(RC) is a requirement of rationality that describes what kinds of information or evidence is necessitated for something to count as a belief. This condition establishes minimal standards for what kinds of information or evidence an agent ought to have with respect to her attitude about a belief. On this view, the agent is not required to have extraordinary evidence. Rather, only minimal, predictable, and conventional information is the required standard for typical intelligent behavior. (RC) highlights the requirement that an agent ought to possess a minimal amount of information required for endorsing an attitude about a belief.

(CC) stipulates that to be rational an agent's conduct ought to be in line with the corresponding beliefs or cognitive attitudes she holds.⁴ If agent S consistently believes that A if Z will do no harm or consistently does not believe A if Z will do no harm, then if S does not act consistently with her belief that A, S is irrational. (CC) requires that an appropriate relation hold between the belief that A and the corresponding exercise of belief that A in action.⁵

(EC) stipulates that a belief is rational just in case it is formed on the basis of and supported by reliable evidence. This regulative requirement places constraints on the range of beliefs that an agent can hold. In short, (EC) specifies that it is irrational to hold evidentially false or ridiculous beliefs and aims to ground rationality in some body of evidence which is bound up with reasoning processes. This condition supports the view that a rational agent is one who believes on the basis of good evidence and not simply in accord with the evidence.⁶

It is important to highlight a distinction between the kinds of beliefs that count as false beliefs and what it means to say that a belief is false. On one view, a false belief is not a true belief. On a different view, a false belief is not supported by or is counter to the evidence one has.⁷ These different kinds of false beliefs are not subject to the same standards of justification. (EC) involves truth-conducive standards of evidence that support one's attitude about a certain belief and should be interpreted as endorsing the following conception of justification.⁸ If evidence is available to support a given belief, that belief is not false.⁹ Also, if there is no available evidence but rather reliable heuristic methods to predict the reliability of the source of the belief, that belief is not ridiculous. An unlimited or limited standard of knowledge does not matter to, or negatively affect, this pragmatic interpretation of rationality. However, there must be some reasonable degree of practical accessibility. (EC) demands that to be rational an agent must adopt an attitude about a belief on the basis of reliable evidence. Thus, to assign rationality to agents, the causally connected body of evidence must in some way be either true or at least reliable.

3. The Epistemic Conditions for Responsible Moral Agency

The rationality requirements that bear on the accessibility and availability of evidence, namely, (IC), (HC), and (RC) illuminate some of the ways in which agents can be ignorant. The epistemic conditions for moral responsibility that arise from (IC), (HC), and (RC) demand that moral agents: (R1) access and gather available information, (R2) satisfy higher standards of available evidence in light of one's moral interests and in doing so seek to minimize hidden information,

⁴ See Stich and Nichols (2001).

⁵ By contrast, Stich (1993) suggests that one's failure to act consistently with the corresponding belief is actually an instance of not genuinely holding that belief.

⁶ For more on this distinction, see Russell (2001).

⁷ Thus, on this view, a false belief may in fact be a true belief but is characterized as false because there is no evidence to support one's attitude about the belief in question.

⁸ I propose that rationality is grounded in some body of evidence that is tied to reasoning processes. (EC) does not aim to exclusively limit belief attributions to be merely internally-based but also aims to incorporate things about the external world that can causally influence our beliefs.

⁹ This claim may be too strong and should be understood to suggest that a belief supported by (reliable) evidence is a belief that one should adopt. While not necessarily a guarantee of truth, such a belief can be viewed as a rational belief.

(R3) acquire relevant information and satisfy higher standards of what counts as relevant evidence or information in the moral domain by utilizing alternative evidence-gathering strategies if information is unavailable (such as conferring with others, using past experience, and drawing inferences from similar situations), and (R4) employ cognitive practices to gather information or evidence by utilizing reliable means (such as consulting with experts and reflecting upon as well as evaluating one's current evidence in connection to one's moral interests and moral obligations in order to minimize one's biases, such as overconfidence or dubious assumption).¹⁰

Moral agents must pursue evidence and hence, satisfy (R1), (R2), and (R3) because their moral interests and obligations are at stake. (R4) demands that moral agents utilize reliable cognitive processes in addition to evaluating and reflecting upon their current beliefs. More specifically, this requires that agents satisfy basic conditions for coherence. Roughly, coherence among one's beliefs is a matter of those beliefs standing in an appropriate relation to one another provided that that relation corresponds to a body of reliable evidence. A rational belief is not solely determined by its standing in an appropriate relation to other beliefs in one's system of beliefs. Rather, if an agent holds a belief that appears to contradict or not cohere with other beliefs, she ought to employ reliable cognitive processes to evaluate those beliefs which may require that she gather additional evidence or consider the source of those beliefs. In the moral domain, an agent ought to adopt an attitude about her conflicting beliefs in light of her moral interests. For example, this may involve the way those beliefs cohere with other beliefs such as her beliefs about what is morally required of her and whether those beliefs adequately support her moral interests.

(IC) raises questions about whether an agent may be ignorant as a result of failing to take advantage of evidence-gathering strategies as well as belief-acquiring opportunities. It is important to determine to what extent hidden information can mitigate one's responsibility for not knowing what one (presumably) ought to know in light of one's moral interests. This suggests that moral agents ought to seek out hidden information in ways that are helpful to avoid holding false, unreliable, or beliefs insufficiently supported by evidence and/or the hidden evidence that one lacks.

The unavailability of evidence does not lend itself to the view that moral agents ought to be excused in virtue of being ignorant. It seems too strong to claim that an agent who didn't know better and couldn't know better could, in fact, know better. (IC) and (HC) exclude cases in which it is nearly impossible that an agent can acquire such information (i.e., future information). However, this does not excuse moral agents from doing the best they can by utilizing other strategies to mitigate or reduce the possibility of hidden or unavailable information. In the moral domain, agents ought to utilize more rigorous cognitive strategies to pursue (unavailable) evidence in light of their moral interests. Further, agents ought not to merely adopt an attitude at face value and in so doing rest the basis of their attitude about a belief on mere speculation, groundless inference, or wishful thinking.¹¹ This claim suggests that the excusing force of ignorance does not extend to cases in which an agent didn't or couldn't know better and at the same time, failed to do the best she could to prevent her ignorance, provided that the evidence satisfies (RC).¹²

(RC) is essential for identifying clear limits to the excusing force of ignorance. While (RC) demands that agents have access to conventional information related to their attitude about a certain belief, for moral agents, their moral interests are also at stake. One's practical and moral interests ought to factor in to establishing appropriate standards for what constitutes relevant information. This suggests that moral agents ought to be subject to greater relevancy standards for what counts as a belief and gathering evidence. Moral agents ought to be subject to greater requirements for accessing evidence to support their attitude about a belief in virtue of their moral interests and thus, there are more stringent standards for what counts as available information. That is, (RC) requires greater standards of information in the moral domain. A moral agent cannot effectively satisfy her moral obligations if conventional or reasonable information is not sufficient to account for her moral interests as well as make responsible and effective action-guiding judgments in light of these interests.

¹⁰ See also Gilovich (1991).

¹¹ See Rescher (2003) on wishful thinking.

¹² Gilovich (1991) suggests that people can do better than simply adopt an attitude about a belief in the absence of evidence to support one's attitude about that belief. The fallibility of human reason can be better managed if people adopt strategies to overcome their biases by making use of "consider the opposite" strategies.

Another implication of (RC) suggests that agents are required to utilize reliable cognitive processes in gathering evidence. If moral agents must pursue reliable evidence, this requires that they function properly. That is, a moral agent cannot do the best she can in gathering evidence if she fails to utilize reliable cognitive mechanisms or strategies. Alternative strategies are available that make possible minimizing one's ignorance (such as to seek out alternative evidence to better evaluate the reliability of one's beliefs).¹³

(IC), (HC), and (RC) all deal with questions about the availability and accessibility of evidence that is related to an agent's belief-related practices. Both (IC) and (HC) account for the degree of accessibility and availability of evidence and set clear limits to the excuse of ignorance. (RC) establishes reasonable standards for the amount of evidence an agent ought to access and thus, shows that agents ought to avoid being ignorant to the extent that they are subject to standards for accessing information. Moreover, in the moral domain, these standards are increased because one's moral interests can have epistemic significance and relate to one's action-guiding activities as shown in (R1), (R2), (R3), and (R4). These conditions set higher standards for what counts as relevant, accessible, and available evidence for moral agents.

Practical and moral interests provide defensible grounds for demanding that moral agents satisfy greater standards of rationality for belief as outlined in (R1), (R2), (R3), and (R4). In other words, moral agents ought to be subject to higher standards of what counts as relevant and accessible evidence for adopting an attitude about a belief in virtue of what is morally at stake. Thus, these conditions limit the excusing force of ignorance in moral practice. As a moral agent, one's belief-related practices come to bear on one's action-guiding judgments and moral interests. A moral agent's belief-related practices have a greater practical consequence because one's beliefs (tend to) issue in action.

A moral agent can be epistemically irrational according to (CC) if she fails to utilize her beliefs in action-guiding judgments and manifest those beliefs in action. In light of one's moral interests, (CC) demands more of moral agents by requiring that they act on what they believe provided that those beliefs are reliable. Thus, we can infer (R5): consistency is required among one's beliefs and their expression in one's action-guiding judgments and moral action.¹⁴ (R5) specifies that moral agents are subject to rationality requirements that bear on how they apply their beliefs to action. If an agent fails to act consistently with her belief she may be willfully ignorant or ignorant to the extent that she has disregarded (failed to act on) her beliefs. Not only has she failed to fulfill (R5) she may also fail to satisfy her moral obligations. An agent's ignorance, irrationality, and epistemically irresponsible conduct do not mitigate her responsibility just in case she failed to satisfy what morality demands of her. Rather, in acting as a moral agent, stronger standards of consistency are required. An agent is blameworthy for failing to satisfy (CC) (and in effect, (R5)) if: (a) she failed to act in accord with her beliefs, (b) she failed to reflect on her beliefs and evaluate possible courses of conduct in line with those beliefs, and (c) she failed to assess the possible outcomes of her acting as well as evaluate her beliefs in connection to her moral interests and obligations. Thus, moral agents ought to be consistent and hence, act in accord with their beliefs provided their beliefs are reliable (and hence, satisfy (RC) and (EC)).

As moral agents, we ought to hold beliefs that are reliable or justified on the basis of the evidence. (EC) illuminates the demand upon moral agents to believe not merely on the basis of their having reasons, but rather, that they believe on the basis of reliable evidence that provides them with reasons which function to produce and affirm (deny) those beliefs. Thus, (EC) governs what counts as a rational belief and accounts for rational belief-forming strategies. A moral agent ought to believe what it is epistemically responsible to believe rather than simply believe what may be morally beneficial.

¹³ Richard Foley (2001) endorses a similar claim. He contends that to be a responsible believer "requires that one monitor one's largely automatic processes of belief acquisition and revision" (p. 226). Moreover, he goes so far as to suggest that responsible beliefs are subject to higher standards of care than epistemically rational belief when the stakes are high. Foley's position supports the claim that moral interests can affect what is rationally required of moral agents.

¹⁴ Consistency among one's beliefs and behavior may appear similar to instances of *akrasia*. *Akrasia*, or weakness of will, can be likened to an instance of practical irrationality (see Wedgwood (2007)). *Akrasia* does not necessarily arise as a result of one's epistemic irrationality or epistemically irresponsible conduct and typically does not directly result from ignorance of what one may falsely or irrationally believe.

Moral agents ought to hold beliefs that they epistemically ought to hold and not hold beliefs merely because their moral practices provide reasons for what they morally (and perhaps, irrationally) ought to believe. Moral agents ought to adopt beliefs on the basis of reliable evidence that is consistent with (EC). Thus, (EC) illuminates how ignorance is not sufficient to excuse in the moral domain.

To hold a rational belief is to adopt an attitude toward that belief that is consistent with and supported by one's (reliable) evidence. (EC) aims to ground belief content in some kind of tangible truth-conducive standard.¹⁵ A moral agent ought to have good epistemic reasons for affirming or denying a certain belief and not simply moral (or practical or prudential) reasons.¹⁶ The epistemic conditions that derive from (EC) include: (R6) an agent must adopt an attitude about a belief for which there is evidence, (R7) an agent ought to believe in conformity to reliable standards of evidence or reliable heuristic methods, and (R8) an agent must not let moral standards or reasons exclusively dictate her attitude about a belief.¹⁷

It is important that moral agents pursue true or reliable beliefs and in doing so not believe merely on the basis of non-epistemic reasons because this may actually result in greater problems for agents. Our moral interests help to shape what agents ought to believe (and what agents are justified in believing). Further, the more important the issue, the more demands placed on agents to make an effort to increase one's epistemic situation.

4. Conclusion

This outline of a theory of rationality is directed at reasoning processes which are necessary in manufacturing belief. The five conditions presented are minimal requirements for ascribing rationality or irrationality to an agent's reasoning processes and illuminates how we ought to employ or apply reasoning processes. These conditions help to set clear limits on the excuse of ignorance by providing a framework that sketches the limits of its excusing force. In fact, this account suggests that moral agents who are in some way ignorant actually fail to act as rational agents. An agent's action-guiding judgments cannot be separate from her belief-related practices. Thus, any account of responsible moral agency must account for what is rationally required of agents because if we are not rational then the fulfillment of moral standards may only be a matter of luck. To deny the importance of rational agency makes the assignment of responsible moral agency to be a valueless and meaningless endeavor.

A theory of moral responsibility must demand that agents satisfy rationality requirements in order for them to be responsible moral agents. To satisfy the epistemic conditions for responsible moral agency ((R1)-(R8)) demands the following: (1) satisfy higher standards of what counts as accessible and available evidence in virtue of engaging in moral practices that can affect the well-being of others, (2) gather evidence if they lack information relevant to their particular state of affairs, (3) engage in effective and reliable evidence-gathering practices such as conferring with others, using past experience, drawing inferences about similar cases, consulting with experts, and evaluating/reflecting upon their current evidence, (4) utilize reliable cognitive processes to gather evidence, to form and generate beliefs, and to reflect upon their current set of beliefs, and (5) adopt beliefs on the basis of what the (credible/reliable) evidence supports and not let moral standards dictate one's attitude about a belief.

By contrast, an irresponsible moral agent is not simply one who fails to satisfy what morality requires but is also one who fails to satisfy epistemic conditions, namely, (R1)-(R8). An irresponsible moral agent holds beliefs counter to or unsupported by evidence. Such an agent is ignorant because she lacks rational or justified beliefs. An irresponsible moral agent is one who does not gather evidence and remains ignorant by being uninformed. Also, an irresponsible moral agent is one who fails to utilize reliable cognitive mechanisms in her belief-generating processes. As a result, an agent is ignorant because she is either engaging in sub-rational cognitive practices or fails to form reliable beliefs. Thus, an irresponsible moral agent is one who is ignorant as a result of her epistemic and cognitive failings and further, is one who fails to avoid being ignorant.

¹⁵ (EC) requires that an agent's belief connects with a body of true evidence. And yet, to exclude as irrational all agents who hold patently false or ridiculous beliefs on the basis of (EC) would seem too strong. One ought to believe in accord with epistemic norms and not solely on the basis of moral, practical, or prudential reasons.

¹⁶ See Hawthorne (2004) and Fumerton (2006).

¹⁷ Foley (2001) supports condition (R8) by denying that all-things-considered rational belief should give a reason for and outweigh the importance of holding epistemically rational beliefs.

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