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BOOK REVIEW

The Importance of Being Rational. By Errol Lord. (Oxford: OUP, 2018. 288 pp. Price $60.00.)

Errol Lord's *The Importance of Being Rational* is a systematic defense of 'Reasons Responsiveness' (RR), the thesis that being rational consists in responding correctly to the objective normative reasons you possess—where these are understood as the facts you are in a position to both know and use as reasons for what they favor.

This is a fascinating idea of great philosophical interest. Among other important upshots, it would (1) imply the falsity of the popular idea that rationality is a matter of coherence; (2) vindicate the intuitive—though recently controversial—thought that rationality is normative; and (3) provide an important element in, and so a reason to favor, two wider philosophical programs: 'Reasons Fundamentalism,' which seeks to understand all normative phenomena (among them, rationality) in terms of reasons, and 'Knowledge-First Epistemology,' which seeks to understand prominent epistemic notions (among them, justification) in terms of knowledge.

The work is divided into four parts, each with two chapters. Chapter 1 motivates RR. Chapter 2 argues that RR can account for the intuitive appeal of coherence requirements by trying to show that, when you are incoherent, you are failing to respond correctly to your possessed reasons for or against individual attitudes (as opposed to sets of them).

Part 2 explains what it is to possess a reason. A fact is a reason r you possess to φ iff you are in a position to (i) know that r, and (ii) manifest knowledge about how to use r as a reason to φ. Chapter 3 explains (i), the 'epistemic' condition. Roughly, to be in a position to know that r is to be able to come to know that r 'without significant change in your epistemic situation' (p. 91). Chapter 4 explains (ii), the 'practical' condition. Roughly, to be in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use r as a reason to φ is to be disposed to φ whenever r is a reason to φ and you are in a position to know that r (p. 121).

Part 3 spells out what it is to respond to reasons. Chapter 5 deals with normative reasons. You φ for a normative reason r iff you φ in virtue of the fact

that *r* is a normative reason to *φ*. You do this iff your *φ*-ing is either sustained or produced by that fact. It is thus sustained if you are disposed to revise your *φ*-ing whenever *r* ceases to be a reason to *φ*. It is thus produced if it is the manifestation of a disposition to *φ* whenever *r* is a reason to *φ* (p. 138–9). Chapter 6 deals with motivating reasons. You *φ* for a motivating reason *r* iff you *φ* in virtue of the fact that you conceive of *r* as a normative reason to *φ*. The exact nature of such conceiving is briefly explored, but ultimately left open (p. 173). (The 'in virtue of' relation is the same as before.)

Finally, part 4 deals with two familiar problems: Chapter 7 explains the sense in which Lord's externalist view of rationality can vindicate the intuitive idea that rational justification supervenes on the mind. Chapter 8, in turn, argues that what you ought to do is precisely what you are rationally required to do. In doing so, it fulfills the promise of accounting for the importance of being rational.

There is much I find admirable in this book. For reasons of space, however, I will concentrate on some worries I have.

1. A central aim of the book is to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for reacting for a reason and, in so doing, to provide a solution to the problem of deviant causal chains. I fail to see how it manages to do this.

Consider normative reasons first. Suppose I have an infallible guide—call it 'the Bible'—that tells me when exactly a fact *r* is a moral reason (and of what weight) to do something, and that I, for purely prudential reasons, always act in accordance with the moral reasons it specifies. I do so because I want to avoid going to hell and I believe I will go to hell unless I follow the Bible. Suppose I know that *r* and that the Bible says that *r* is a decisive moral reason to *φ*. Because of this, and because I want to avoid going to hell, I *φ*. According to the account, I *φ* for a moral reason, since my doing so is the manifestation of a disposition to *φ* whenever *r* is a moral reason to *φ*. This is the wrong result, and it shows that the conditions provided are not sufficient.

2. Now consider motivating reasons and, more specifically, the problem of deviant causal chains: a climber, holding his friend by the hand, realizes that he will survive only if he lets go of his friend. This consideration (call this '*r*') so unnerves him that it causes him to loosen his grip and let go. The consideration that *r* causes and rationalizes his letting go. But it is not the motivating reason for which he lets go. Why? Lord's suggestion is that, although he lets go in virtue of considering that *r*, he does not let go in virtue of conceiving of *r* as a normative reason to let go. He thinks this solves the problem of deviant causal chains (p. 175). But it does not. After all, we can simply suppose that the climber conceives of *r* as a normative reason to let go, and that this so unnerves him that it causes him to loosen his grip and let go. The exact same problem reemerges. This shows that the conditions provided are insufficient: the climber's letting go is the manifestation of a disposition to let go whenever he conceives of *r* in that way. But it works through a deviant causal chain: a

disposition to get nervous and loosen his grip whenever he conceives of such dreadful things.

3. If reasons for or against individual attitudes are supposed to explain what is rationally problematic about incoherence, then, in the absence of any such reason, incoherence should turn out to be rationally unproblematic. But it isn't. Cases involving immoral or imprudent ends show this: Caligula intends to torture. He knows that in order to do so he must intend to get up and turn the screws. But he is too lazy to form the intention to do so. Caligula is not only bad, he is also incoherent. Such incoherence is criticizable, and such criticism bears the marks of rational criticism (pp. 4–5). However, since he has no reason to torture, or to turn the screws, there is no reason at hand that could explain what is rationally problematic about it. Lord suggests that one could appeal to a deontic principle he calls 'Inheritance' to deal with this worry (pp. 62–3). This principle is implausible. Lord does not endorse it. In fact, he rejects it (p. 215). So we are left without a general explanation of what is rationally problematic about incoherence. RR does not provide it.

This issue is crucial for the following reason: Lord's argument for RR (in Chapter 8) is that it can best account for a central piece of apparent data that needs explaining: why you ought to be rational. He argues for RR by first arguing that what you ought to do is determined by the objective normative reasons you possess, and then suggesting that it follows from this that, if we understood rationality as RR, we would have an answer to why you ought to be rational (p. 241). Indeed we would. But there is a second central piece of apparent data that needs explaining: why incoherence is rationally problematic. If we understood rationality as coherence instead, we could explain this. RR does not. Unless one way of understanding rationality can explain (or explain away) both pieces of data, we are left in a stalemate.

Despite these worries, I think the book is an admirable philosophical feat that rewards careful study. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the nature, and worth, of rationality.

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