

Delineating The Reasonable And Rational For Humans

Michael D. Baumtrog

ArgLab - IFL
Universidade Nova de Lisboa
Portugal
baumtrog@fcsh.unl.pt

ABSTRACT: The notions of “rational” and “reasonable” have much in common but are not synonymous. Conducting a review of the literature points to (at least) two distinct but related ideas as well as a middle “grey” area. This paper investigates and compares some characterizations of these notions and defends the view that focusing on reasonableness is best for those interested in human instances of reasoning and argumentation.

KEYWORDS: argumentation theory, consistency, human, rational, reasonable.

1. INTRODUCTION

Glenn Greenwald, while speaking of his and his colleague Laura’s initial gut instinct affirming the credibility of the leaker who would later be revealed as Edward Snowden, explains that, “[r]easonably and rationally, Laura and I knew that our faith in the leaker’s veracity might have been misplaced” (2014, p. 13). Greenwald then goes on to offer reasons for this claim, such as not knowing the leaker’s name, recognizing the possibility that the leak could be an attempt at entrapment, or that the leaker could be someone just looking to ruin their credibility. As an accomplished journalist, author, and former litigator, Greenwald is no stranger to recognizing the importance of words, their definitions, and how they are received by his audience. Thus, I suspect he articulated the possibility of his and Laura’s error on *both* reasonable *and* rational grounds for a reason, even though he does not provide an explanation regarding the difference between them.

As van Eemeren and Grootendorst have pointed out, “[w]ords like “rational” and “reasonable” are used in and out of season in ordinary language. It is often unclear exactly what they are supposed to mean, and even if it is clear, the meaning is not always consistent” (2004, p. 123). Accordingly, the point of this paper is to investigate some of the differences between the ideas of the reasonable and rational from a philosophical perspective, but which I hope will also sound reasonable to the everyday language user. In what follows I will argue that there is some consistency in the two related but distinct ideas which emerge across a variety of texts. I will further argue that the notion of the rational is typically narrower than the notion of the reasonable and that those interested in investigating human reasoning and argumentation ought to focus on reasonableness. In order to proceed, I will start the second section by reviewing some characterizations of the notion of rationality. The third section, then, will discuss the notion of the reasonable, followed by a comparison of the two ideas in the fourth section. The conclusion will summarize the arguments presented and indicate avenues for future research.

2. THE RATIONAL

These days, discussions of the meaning of “rational” and what it is to be rational or to think or act rationally, commonly occur in economic and philosophical circles. While clearly there is not time enough to cover all of the conceptions of rationality which have been offered, in what follows I will use a general discussion provided by Amartya Sen which allows for easy connection to other views.

In his introduction to the book *Rationality and Freedom*, Sen notes that there are three common views of rationality described as “rational choice”. They are 1) internal consistency, 2) self-interest maximization, and 3) maximization in general. Internal consistency is described as the assessment of the relation between choices in different situations, comparing what are chosen from different sets of alternatives entirely in terms of the choices themselves (2002, pp. 19-20). In other words, they are internal “in the sense that they require correspondence between different parts of a choice function, without invoking anything outside choice (such as motivations, objectives and substantive properties)” (p. 122).

Leaving aside discussion of the term “internal” from the economic literature, the notion of consistency is crucial for some explanations of rationality found in philosophy. For example, consistency is a dominant idea in what has been referred to as formal deductive logic, mathematical logic, or the introductory level of these topics, ‘baby logic. All of these views support the notion that an argument is considered rational to the extent that the premises are true and the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises (Johnson, 2012, p. 121). This consistency is ensured through the application of formally valid rules of logic, demonstrable through the use of truth tables and other theoretical apparatus.¹

In terms of dialogue logic, rationality is also evaluated according to consistency. In the basic case of a simple question and answer dialogue that only permits ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers, “The questioner’s objective is to force the answerer to affirm a proposition that implies the denial of some proposition that he or she had earlier answered” (Blair, 1998, p. 327). In other words, the questioner attempts to have the answerer provide inconsistent answers.

Finally, John Broome also highlights the importance of consistency to rationality as a matter of requirement. For Broome, the property of rationality is defined by the requirements of rationality, so listing those requirements is the way to describe it (2013, p. 149). Importantly, while he admits to providing only an incomplete list of requirements, his first four requirements of synchronic rationality (attitudes at a single time) have to do with consistency and deduction (pp. 149ff). For example, the requirement of *No Contradictory Beliefs* says that “rationality requires of N that N does not believe at t that p and also believe at t that not p ” (p. 155).² As well, as the *Modus Ponens Requirement* states that “Rationality requires of N that, if N believes at t that p ,

¹ It should be noted that premise consistency is not a necessary condition for entailment. This has been clearly shown via the fact that any conclusion can be derived from a contradiction.

² In addition to the admitted incompleteness of the list, it is also important to note Broome’s flexibility on the formulation of the differing requirements. For example, he says about this requirement “... I would not object to weakening the formulae in some suitable way” (2013, p. 155).

and N believes at t that if p then q , and if N cares at t whether q , then N believes at t that q " - in short, that *Modus Ponens* holds (p. 157).

Returning now to Sen's discussion, given the difficulty in assessing the consistency of choices without invoking an outside principle, Sen claims that it is the second view of rationality that has dominated contemporary economics (2002, p. 22). Rationality on this view is the "intelligent pursuit of self-interest" wherein "the individual may value anything, but in this view he chooses entirely according to his reading of his own interests" (p. 23). One main difficulty with this view of rationality is the observed fact that people often work in cooperation and in situations counter to self-interest. For example, people often refrain from littering even if no one is around who might judge them if they were seen. A further problem is that such a view of rationality, because it comes from economic models, is focused on behaviour and action, i.e. practical reasoning and it says very little about the beliefs people come to, or their theoretical reasoning.

The third commonly held view, maximization in general, allows for people to act in cooperative and morally good ways - for example, by working toward a maximization of social welfare (p. 37). Such morality is, however, far from necessary. As Sen points out, "maximizing behavior can sometimes be patently stupid and lacking in reason assessment depending on what is being maximized" (p. 39). For this reason, as well as the reasons above,³ Sen rejects these three views as providing a sufficient account of rationality, even though he grants maximization in general the role of a necessary condition.

Instead, Sen champions a much broader view of rationality, interpreted, "as the discipline of subjecting one's choices - of actions as well as of objectives, values and priorities - to reasoned scrutiny... as the need to subject one's choices to the demands of reason." (p. 4). On this view, rationality is not a formula or an essentialist doctrine, but rather, uses "reasoning to understand and assess goals and values, and it also involves the use of these goals and values to make systematic choices" (p. 46). Thus for Sen, rationality extends as far as, and into all the domains, that reason does.

Placing reason and reasons at the centre of rationality is relatable to another description of rationality found in argumentation theory, namely Johnson's theory of Manifest Rationality. Building upon Siegel's view that, "[w]e need an account of rationality which recognizes various sorts of reasons and which provides insight into the nature and epistemic force of reasons, and which affords the possibility of the rational scrutiny of ends" (1988, p. 131), Johnson describes rationality as "the disposition to, and the action of, using, giving, and-or acting on the basis of reasons" (2000, p. 161). Providing reasons, for example as a premise conclusion complex, is what Johnson calls the illative core. The correct employment of the illative, however, is not by itself sufficient for rationality (p. 165). The important role of scrutiny referred to by both Sen and Siegel also appears under the title of the dialectical tier. Both the illative core and the dialectical tier are a part of argumentation and rationality becomes manifest through argumentation.

Argumentation on this view is teleological and dialectical, that is, is aimed at the rational persuasion of another. Argumentation, then, embraces, increases, and exhibits

³ As well as a number of others which are not crucial for our purposes here but are worthwhile nonetheless.

rationality while depending on the mutual rationality of an Other. This Other, is the source of reasoned scrutiny and responding to them is a central feature of manifest rationality (pp. 159-164). Although Johnson does not say it explicitly, it seems then that on this view one can be considered rational to the extent to which they accurately function with both the illative core and dialectical tier of argumentation.

Both Siegel (pp. 127ff.) and Johnson (2000, p. 14) explicitly highlight that understanding rationality in this way is important for allowing moral considerations into descriptions of rationality and thus overcoming the instrumental conceptions of rationality outlined earlier. For them, rationality is more than finding the most efficient means to your end. It is about the appropriate use and appropriate scrutiny of reasons and reasoning in all of the fields they may be used.

So much for our limited discussion of rationality. The notion of the critical scrutiny of another provides a nice link, however, with one of the most prominent views of reasonableness found in argumentation theory, the pragma-dialectical view developed by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, the topic to which we now turn.

3. THE REASONABLE

As one of the most well-known theories of argumentation in the world, the pragma-dialectical theory places the notion of reasonableness at its core. After rejecting the “geometrical” (formally logical) approach and “anthropological” (audience relative) approach, van Eemeren and Grootendorst defend the “critical-rationalist” view of reasonableness which “proceeds on the basis of the fundamental fallibility of all human thought” (2004, p. 131) and attributes “value both to the formal properties of arguments and to the shared knowledge that is necessary to achieve consensus” (p. 129). Reasonableness on this view is achieved though conducting a critical discussion aimed at the resolution of a difference of opinion on the merits. Together, these characteristics mean that any topic of disagreement is open for discussion and reasonableness is determined according to how well or poorly the ideal model for a critical discussion is followed. Thus, reasonableness is viewed as a gradual concept (p. 16).

Further, critical-rationalists hold that “the dialectical scrutiny of claims in a critical discussion boils down to the exposure of (logical and pragmatic) inconsistencies” (p. 132). Van Eemeren and Grootendorst are clear, however, that “[a] procedure that promotes the resolution of differences of opinion cannot be exclusively confined to the logical relations by which conclusions are inferred from premises. It must consist of a system of regulations that cover all speech acts that need to be carried out in a critical discussion to resolve a difference of opinion” (p. 134). Broadening the ground for regulations to all speech acts allows for extra-logical instances of unreasonableness, sometimes known as informal fallacies, such as the use of force.

The discussion above regarding rationality touched upon what has been referred to here as the “geometrical” view. We have also now just reviewed the basics of the “critical-rationalist” position, leaving us still to review what has been called the “anthropological” view. This view, attributed most commonly to Perelman and Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteca places the audience at the center of the notion of reasonableness, thus earning it the title “anthropological”. What is reasonable, then, is audience dependant. Perelman states, “a rule of action defined as reasonable or even as self-evident

at one moment or in a given situation can seem arbitrary and even ridiculous at another moment and in a different situation” (1979, p. 119). As we can also gather from this quote, in addition to the flexibility of the audience as determiner of reasonableness, the speaker must also be flexible with any rules of reasonableness. Thus, both rules and audience are context sensitive and play a role in determinations of reasonableness. On this view, the reasonable man, says Perelman, “is a man who in his judgements and conduct is influenced by *common sense*” (p. 118).

Nevertheless, on this view reasonableness is not so relativistic as to remain empty, since if everyone is reasonable, or has common sense, then to be reasonable is to “search, in all domains... for what should be accepted by all” (ibid). Reasonableness carries across instances because “what is reasonable must be a precedent which can inspire everyone in analogous circumstances” (p. 119. See also, Tindale, 2010)

4. COMPARISON

After reviewing such an array of viewpoints, a few comparative observations can be made. First, the first view of rationality, internal choice, seems to be in hard opposition to the last view of reasonableness, dubbed the anthropological view. Indeed, Perelman seems to have had this view of rationality in mind when he declared that, “[t]he *rational* corresponds to mathematical reason, for some a reflection of divine reasons, which grasps necessary relations” (p. 117). However, the two middle views presented, manifest rationality and critical-rationalist reasonableness, do not seem nearly as far apart.

What then are the characteristics of comparison from which we can assess the distance in views? Given this literature review a few characteristics stand out more clearly than others. The first is consistency. While a whole book (or more!) could be written about the role of consistency in notions of the rational and reasonable, I will limit that discussion here to only say that it seems to me that consistency is the ‘God’ of rationality, but only a ‘god’ for reasonableness. In other words, on the far side of notions of rationality, if consistency is violated, then immediately so too is rationality. On the far side of reasonableness, however, if consistency is violated, it may constitute pause for concern or questioning, but it far from immediately dismisses a positive evaluation of reasonableness.

The second characteristic is humanity. On the far side of rationality, humanity makes no appearance. Logic is true regardless of if there is a human mind to think it, or err in it. One of rationality’s greatest advantages is its independence from human fallibility. In this realm, calculations trump creativity and deduction holds in all possible worlds. On the other side, “reasonableness should contribute to the idea of the human” (Tindale, 1999, p. 202) and the idea of the human involves moral considerations crucial to reasonableness but nearly absent in rationality (see Boger, 2006).

When we move in from the ends, however, things are not so clear. Indeed there are aspects of Johnson’s theory of Manifest Rationality which clearly overlap with what has here been described as reasonableness. On the other side, the pragma-dialectical critical-rationalist view of reasonableness shares some clear overlap with some aspects which have here been identified under the title of rationality. For Johnson, manifest rationality calls for scrutiny which opens the door for morality, both of which are foreign to the far side of rationality but welcomed in reasonableness. For pragma-dialectics, the

rigid dictate to attempt to meet ideal rules and the focus on consistency, rings closer to the notions of rationality we have discussed than to those found on the far side of reasonableness (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, pp. 16, 132).

Aside from being an interesting literature review, one might wonder why this matters for those working on reasoning and argumentation. Part of my interest in the topic began as response to the questions I received after telling people I was working on practical reasoning evaluation. For some, that meant I was working on topics like decision theory as found in economics. On this view, clearly the universal reach of mathematical reason holds the superior position for evaluating decisions over the fallibility of mere human thought. And there is much credit to such a view. For others, it meant I was studying psychology, and how dare I feel pompous enough to offer advice on what counts as reasonable, especially across a variety of contexts! And there is something to this view as well. One of the lessons I took from these sorts of comments is that the same words indicate for people very different ideas.

I then thought, given that argumentation theorists call their theories, or at least describe the results of argumentation evaluation, rational and/or reasonable, perhaps there is some consensus there. As I hope to have shown, that is not entirely the case. While I have argued that a few general trends can be identified, many of the authors seem content to either use the terms interchangeably or to offer stipulative definitions meant only to hold for that individual work. Although I acknowledge the big gray area in-between the terms, I still think as a community we can be at least a little more precise and consistent. For example, if our work is more focused on human aspects, we can try to stick to reasonableness. If we are less concerned with the human experience, we stick with rationality.

One main reason for holding this position is because, as I also hope to have illustrated above, the human divide seems to already be a prominent aspect in much of the literature. So, going with the flow and keeping the term reasonable for that idea seems more efficient than needlessly fighting the tide. Another reason, however, is because of how I see the relationship between reasonableness and rationality.

I agree with Rigotti and Greco Morasso when they state that reasonableness “exceeds rationality, as it also involves a more comprehensive and more articulated attitude of the human reason” (2009, p. 22). This means that the rational and the reasonable are not always in conflict. Indeed, I also agree with Perelman’s sentiment (1979, pp. 121-22) that when the rational and the reasonable mutually support each other there is no problem. But when fidelity to the spirit of a system leads to what seems to be an unacceptable conclusion, accounting for the human components of the system *may* justify rejection of its suggestion in favour of a more reasonable alternative.

5. CONCLUSION

Back to Greenwald. Using our observations, can we explain why he would use both “rationally and reasonably” to explain why his faith in the authenticity of his then unknown leaker might have been misguided? According to our discussion it could be argued that since faith is not a rational enterprise, but a human one, and it was faith that he had in the leaker, he recognized that faith as irrational. Faith, which it can be reasonable to have, is then also rejected based on the reasons he provides. i.e., the

possibility of being entrapped or having been set up in an attempt to ruin his credibility. Thus, both rationally and reasonably his faith in the leaker's veracity may have been misplaced.

Given that we have only scratched the surface of such a big, but I think important topic, there are many areas for future work. Due to space and time, I have knowingly omitted some very common views on rationality and reasonableness that will have to be addressed in future work - for example, scientific notions of rationality and legal/political notions of reasonableness. A future work could study the extent to which those notions are in congruence with the observations made here.

To conclude: In this paper I have argued that two distinct but related notions of the rational and the reasonable exist. Further, because of how different these ideas can be, it would be helpful to consistently distinguish between them. I have characterized them based upon observations from a variety of sources where the ideas are commonly employed. The two main observations I have drawn from these characterizations is that while consistency can be viewed as the God of rationality, it is only one of many contributing factors to a notion of human reasonableness. In other words, inconstancy can be reasonable, but it is never rational. The other related observation is that reasonableness is predominantly a human characteristic while rationality remains largely abstract. Finally, while there are already invaluable works and no doubt crucial works still to be done in the realm of rationality, it seems that those most interested in the human experience of argumentation ought to keep the expanded notion of the reasonable in mind as they continue to conduct their research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Special thanks to Christopher Tindale for spurring my interest in the topic. Many thanks also to all of the members of ArgLab for their patience and supportive discussion as my ideas continue to develop. In addition, during the presentation I benefited from very helpful comments from David Hitchcock, Hans Hansen, Dan Cohen, and David Godden. I would also like to acknowledge the support of IFL-Nova for the grant FCSH/IFL – PEst-OE/FIL/UI0183/2013 which has helped fund my research.

REFERENCES

- Blair, J. A. (1998). The Limits of the Dialogue Model of Argument. *Argumentation*, 12, 325-339.
- Boger, G. (2006). Humanist Principles Underlying Philosophy of Argument. *Informal Logic*, 149-174.
- Broome, J. (2013). *Rationality Through Reasoning*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Greenwald, G. (2014). *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State*. Signal.
- Johnson, R. (2000). *Manifest Rationality*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Johnson, R. (2012). Informal Logic and Its Contribution to Argumentation Theory. In J. Riberio (Ed.), *Inside Arguments: Logic and the Study of Argumentation* (pp. 117-138). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Perelman, C. (1979). *New Rhetoric and the Humanities*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Rigotti, E., & Greco Morasso, S. (2009). Argumentation as an Object of Interest and as a Social and Cultural Resource. In N. Muller Mirza, & A.-N. Perret-Clermont (Eds.), *Argumentation and Education: Theoretical Foundations and Practices* (pp. 9-66). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Sen, A. (2002). *Rationality and Freedom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Siegel, H. (1988). *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking and Education*. New York: Routledge.

- Tindale, C. W. (1999). *Acts of Arguing: A Rhetorical Model of Argument*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Tindale, C. W. (2010). Ways of Being Reasonable. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 337-361.
- van Eemeren, F. H., & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.