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Teaching Rational Decision Making: A Commentary on Mark Battersby's "Practical Rationality: Critical Questions for Rational Decision Making"

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1. Introduction

I agree with Mark Battersby's main point that critical thinking courses should be thought of "as instruction in **applied rationality**", and I find helpful his division of applied rationality into "epistemic rationality (**what to believe**) and **practical rationality** (what to do), [and] **evaluative rationality** (what to value, what ends to pursue)". And he is certainly correct in thinking that, lamentably, most critical thinking courses devote a disproportionate amount of time and effort to epistemic rationality and not enough to either practical rationality or evaluative rationality. (When I teach critical thinking, I devote close to half the time to helping students think critically about what to do and only slightly over half to what to believe. But since hearing philosophers agree with each other is, well, boring, I will begin with a fundamental disagreement. I will then argue that, for Mark's purposes, this disagreement isn't as important as he seems to think it is. Thus, my commentary really consists of saying: He is wrong about something important. But given that he doesn't accurately characterize the position of those who are right about this important matter, the practical difference his fundamental error makes is not as great as he thinks. Finally, I will suggest that, for Mark's ultimate practical purposes, it does not matter which of us is right about the fundamental philosophic disagreement we have. Along the way I will mention (briefly, to avoid being boring) many things he is right about.

2. Humean passions

I am a Humean. Mark is not. Mark thinks, perhaps correctly, that Humeans tend to be committed to Rational Choice Theory (RCT). Why he thinks this is perfectly understandable. One of Hume's most famous claims (perhaps his most famous claim) is that "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (*Treatise*, Bk III, Part 3, Section 3). From this we get a picture of human motivation. We have certain desires (passions). Reason tells us how to satisfy those desires. It does not evaluate them. End of story. On this interpretation there is never any role for reason in evaluating a desire—only a role in how to satisfy that desire. It could never, for instance, tell one to rid oneself of a passion.

But this is an uncharitable interpretation of Hume (and of most Humeans). I will advance three arguments that, even for Hume, reason does sometimes have a role in helping us select desires. The first two are uncontroversial, the last is less so.

Suppose David has two desires: to go drinking with his friends tonight and to get a lot of work done tomorrow. Reason might well tell him that satisfying both desires is not possible. He needs to decide which passion is stronger and then use reason to help him rid himself of the other desire. David decides that, on balance, he would rather get work done tomorrow, so he turns his reason to the task of undermining his desire to spend the evening drinking with friends. Perhaps reason tells him that reading history is almost as pleasant a way to spend the evening as drinking is and that doing that would in no way impair his ability to satisfy his desire to be productive tomorrow. Using reason in this way—even though it tells one to eliminate or weaken a certain

passion in order to better satisfy another passion—maintains its Humean status as a slave of the passions.

Let us continue with the case above. David wants to be productive tomorrow not for its own sake but (let us suppose) because he believes that, by being productive, he will eventually gain fame. And he wants fame for its own sake. He intrinsically values fame and instrumentally values doing philosophy as a means of attaining fame. Presumably he values drinking with his friends instrumentally as a means of gaining happiness or pleasure, which he values intrinsically. His competing values (for working tomorrow and for drinking tonight) are both instrumental values. Of course, David might value working on philosophic problems or drinking with friends for their own sake. But notice that if he values each of them instrumentally, there has to be something he values them for intrinsically. It need not be the very next thing he values. He might value working as a means to solving some philosophic problem and solving some philosophic problem as a means to getting published and getting published as a means to becoming famous (which he values for its own sake). Even David will agree with Aristotle that a life that is devoted entirely to pursuing things that are valued only instrumentally is vain and futile. Reason tells us that among one's values there must be things that are intrinsically valued, and that any instrumental value worth having must be connected to something intrinsically valued.

On the Humean view, one can—without being charged with irrationality—value anything. One can intrinsically value that which (to the rest of us) seem to have no intrinsic value and sometimes no value at all (or even negative value). This is what makes the Humean view seem absurd to many people. Suppose Sheldon has a passion for annoying Mark. This is not something he seeks in order to accomplish something else he values; he just values annoying Mark for the sake of annoying Mark. Given Hume's famous dictum, it seems that reason's only role is to tell Sheldon how to best go about annoying Mark. (Will getting his commentary to Mark early or late be more annoying to Mark?) But of course, reason (even Humean reason) may well tell Sheldon a bit more. It might, for instance, point out to him that satisfying his passion for annoying Mark is going to frustrate his desire not to be seen to be a jerk. And, if the latter passion is stronger, then Humean reason will tell Sheldon to do what he can to squelch his annoy-Mark desire. But if Sheldon has no don't-be-seen-as-a-jerk desires, then reason's sole role is to tell him how annoy Mark. Yet this last point seems wrong to many—indeed most—people.

Let me suggest that even on a Humean account of reason, reason can tell us that some things—even if just very general things—about what it is appropriate to value for its own sake. There are certain very general facts about humans: that we are conscious and tend to prefer pleasure to pain, that we (usually) prefer being happy to sad, that we are social animals who are highly dependent on others for our well-being (a feature Hume thought grounded our sense of justice), that fulfillment often comes from succeeding at tasks we take to be worthy and difficult, that organizing one's life so that meeting the demands of morality is not extremely burdensome, and that we are all (or almost all) moderately altruistic—and these very general features suggest that some passions one might be unfortunate enough to have just by nature should be starved rather than cultivated.¹ So, despite the point made in the previous paragraph, there is a weak role for Humean reason to play in regulating our passions.

¹ In *The Concept of Law*, H.L.A. Hart defends the separability thesis—the thesis that law and morality are conceptually distinct so that even highly immoral rules might nevertheless be properly seen as laws within a legal system. However, he notes that, given certain very general features of the human condition—that we are vulnerable to being harmed by others, that we are approximately equal in strength and ability, that we have limited altruism and limited resources available, and that we suffer from limited understanding and strength of will—there are certain things that are almost inevitably going to be part of the content of any legal system and any morality that has any hope of lasting for very long. My suggestion here regarding the passions an individual is likely to need, should they hope to have a successful life, is similar to Hart's argument about what it takes for a legal system to do well.

3. Hume and Rational Choice Theory (RCT)

It is often thought that Humeans must be committed to rational choice theory. There is a sense in which this is true, but not in the way that some critics standardly take it to be so. I agree with Mark's important points (taken from Simon's work). I will just add—and I think this point is implicit in Mark's arguments—that while RTC recommends that one consult the maximize expected utility principle in situations of uncertainty, it is important to remember that it does not always (indeed it often does not) maximize expected utility to consult the maximize expected utility principle when deciding what to do. There are several reasons for this. One is that the costs of using the principle every time one is making a choice may be too great. (As Mark correctly points out, the use of a checklist often offers great benefits. And this is something of which any Humean would want to take advantage. For these reasons, a Humean should find the procedures outlined in the box Mark has included as a helpful guide when making important decisions.²) Another is that, as with the well-known paradox of happiness, seeking to maximize expected utility is often a bad way to gain much utility.³ And, as Mark points out, trying to maximize utility may well serve to enhance our natural tendencies toward self-bias.⁴ Furthermore, the maximize expected utility principle (as the literature on Newcomb's Problem and on the Prisoner's Dilemma shows) is poorly suited when making decisions that arise in game theory. Any good Humean will want to avail themselves of the various principles of choice that game theorists have shown work well in the wide variety of situations where one is interacting socially.

4. Critical thinking textbooks and Rationalists vs Humeans

Most critical thinking textbooks devote most or all of their space to discussing matters relevant to epistemic rationality. (Of course, there is substantial disagreement about just what proportion of the available space should be devoted to the various relevant topics. Is it worthwhile to include truth tables? Formal derivations? Argument mapping? Fallacies? And so forth.) Mark and I agree that, in addition to these topics, a good deal of space should be devoted to practical rationality and evaluative rationality. Of course, we differ about the ultimate philosophic basis for evaluative rationality. But for purposes of a textbook this does not matter. Here is my argument.

Suppose you are writing a critical thinking textbook. You decide to devote some space to truth tables. You likely have a favoured account of the nature of truth. But you know that, among the instructors using your text, there will be some who are disquotationalists about truth, some who will be coherence theorists, some who are correspondence theorists, and others. Your text has to talk about truth and falsity in a way that is neutral between competing conceptions of the concept of truth. (Even better, it should present this in a way that will get students to consider thinking about these matters and take another philosophy course in epistemology or metaphysics.) The same goes for practical rationality. Some of the instructors will share Mark's views, some mine, most some other view about the role and limits of reason in determining what to do and what one should

² It might seem that the issues raised under item 2 in both parts of Mark's box would be a problem for a Humean. But this is not so. If the Humean account of reason is correct, our moral duties and obligations are among the most highly valued ends (or restrictions on means to ends, in some cases) that people have. Of course, it seems odd to say these are just parts of their preference set, as though one's commitment to treating others with respect rather than not were just like one's preference for chocolate ice cream over vanilla ice cream.

³ The classic discussion of this problem is found in Joseph Butler's *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* and in Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*. Bertrand Russell's discussion is in *The Conquest of Happiness*.

⁴ For a good discussion, see Ballantyne, N. (2015), Debunking biased thinkers (including ourselves). *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*. 1, pp 141-162.

do. The textbook has to be written in such a way that instructors can comfortably teach from it in a way that is compatible with their own deeper account of the role of reason.

The important point—on which I am in complete agreement with Mark—is that critical thinking courses should both help students develop skills in adopting beliefs that are appropriate to the evidence they have and should also help them make wise decisions. This latter task that has for too long been neglected.