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On Broome's notion of normativity

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Lead article: J. Broome, 'Rationality *versus* normativity'

Abstract: As a part of John Broome's stated aim to establish a clear distinction between rationality and normativity, Broome suggests a novel definition of normativity as a property term that applies to persons. Since this construal of normativity diverges significantly from most prominent renderings of the concept within contemporary philosophical discussions, it merits critical scrutiny. In response to Broome, I thus examine the technical advantage of Broome's approach, while also indicating some drawbacks of Broome's novel conceptualization of 'normative' and 'normativity'.

Keywords: normativity, rationality, reasons, John Broome.

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Intro

John Broome states the motivation and aim of his lead article with admirable clarity. The motivation for Broome's paper is a fact about recent philosophical debates: '...the distinction between rationality and normativity has not been clearly drawn in philosophy' (p. 1). Given this motivation, Broome's aim is straightforward: 'This paper begins to draw it [i.e. a relevant distinction between normativity and rationality]' (p. 1). It is hard not to applaud that aim, and to urge – along with Broome – that the distinction between normativity and rationality is more explicitly discussed even within the recent wave of philosophical works that insist on analysing their close interrelations.

Yet my commentary questions Broome's strategy in pursuing this explicit aim and, in particular, Broome's stipulative definition of 'normative' as a property term that is applicable to persons:

We do not usually apply the adjective 'normative' to a person, but I shall. I shall treat normativity as a property that a person may possess, like rationality. I shall say that a person is normative if she does whatever she ought to do, believes whatever she ought to believe, wants whatever she ought to want, and so on. That is to say: if she *F*s whenever she ought to *F*, where any verb phrase can be substituted for '*F*'. (p. 2)

This definition of 'normative' and 'normativity' merits commentary, since it diverges significantly from most prominent renderings of the concept within e.g. deontic logic [von Wright 1963], philosophy of language [Brandt 1994], epistemology [McDowell 1996], virtue ethics [Lovibond 2002], Kantian ethics [Korsgaard 1996] and legal philosophy [Raz 2011]. Broome anticipates scepticism by observing that 'some philosophers' may feel 'uncomfortable with my innovative use of 'normative'' (p. 2), but notes that he is free to adopt any definition as long as he is explicit and consistent in his use.

This is clearly correct as far as stipulative definitions go, but that does not rule out examining its potential drawbacks. Since these drawbacks are mainly terminological, they do not challenge the validity of Broome's main argument in the lead article, i.e. that normativity (as construed by Broome) cannot be identical with rationality (also construed as a property term applicable to persons), since the property of rationality supervenes exclusively on facts about our minds, while the normativity property does not. The core of that argument expands on Broome's groundbreaking work in *Rationality Through Reasoning* [2013], and I am confident that the debate of this view (see e.g. Cullity [2016]; Kiesewetter [2017]) will continue in the contributions to the present issue of *APR*. Yet while Broome's previous work commits him to a critical stance towards 'the reasons first movement' (e.g. Scanlon [1998, 2014]; Parfit [2011]; also see Broome [2007]), it is, I think, at least unclear whether Broome's previous work also commits him to the particular construal of normativity advanced in the present paper. Hence it makes sense to independently consider whether that particular construal is helpful or adequate to the philosophical debates on rationality and normativity that Broome's lead article sets out to clarify. My comments below raise a few issues to consider in relation to this latter topic.

The virtues and vices of Broome's definition

Broome points out that since the terms 'normativity' and 'normative' have no stable meaning outside philosophical discourse, he is at liberty to adjust them in accordance with 'technical purposes' (p. 2). Accordingly, a good first question is: what technical advantage is gained by Broome's definition? Broome's definition encourages us to conceive of the term 'normative' as a *property term applicable to a person* 'if she *Fs* whenever she ought to *F*' (p. 2). That definition can generate locutions such as "Charlotte is normative" and since Broome allows for the property to be 'a matter of degree' (p. 2), it also allows for the comparative form "Charlotte is more

normative than Peter.” The technical utility of these locutions for Broome’s argument is evident, since they are capable of closely mirroring ordinary locutions about rationality such as “Charlotte is rational” or “Charlotte is more rational than Peter”. Broome denies the identity claim between normativity and rationality, but in order for it to make sense to even consider an identity claim, he must conceive of ‘normative’ as having a form that is at least comparable to ‘rational’. If they were not at least comparable, then even entertaining the identity claim (as something which further philosophical considerations could force us to reject or accept) would make scant sense.

Hence, Broome arrives at a property term view of normativity and when viewed relative to the argument that Broome wants to make, its technical virtues are evident: It allows Broome to analyse normativity as a property with a certain extension which may be compared to the extension of other properties such as rationality. In addition, it makes it easy to consider whether the normativity property supervenes on the mental just like rationality, on Broome’s view, supervenes on the mental. We can then judge, ‘[a]ccording to a standard criterion for identity of properties’ (p. 8), whether these properties are identical, and Broome’s main argument is directed at showing that they cannot be identical. Relative to the effective use that Broome’s subsequent argument puts it to, the technical utility of Broome’s definition is thus clear.

However, Broome’s definition also seems to come at a price: *First*, it seems to be a rather thin conception of normativity, especially when compared to Broome’s detailed and even etymologically elaborated conception of rationality. *Secondly*, Broome explicitly excludes ‘rules’ and ‘standards of correctness’ from consideration in spite of the fact that rules and standards constitute a quite substantial component of what is usually discussed under the philosophical rubric of ‘normativity’. *Thirdly*, there might be a risk that Broome’s definition will be viewed as

excessively restrictive such that broader philosophical debates on normativity and rationality will find it hard to see the relevance of a strict property conception of normativity.

Given Broome's more extensive treatment of normativity [1999, 2014] and of normative discourse [2016] elsewhere, I do not mean to imply that Broome is not aware of such potential drawbacks, but I contend that there is still something to be gained from briefly making them explicit below.

A "thin" conception of normativity versus a "thicker" conception of rationality

Broome's paper devotes an unequal amount of attention to the concepts of rationality and normativity respectively. On one hand, then, we are presented with a nuanced determination of rationality that seeks to identify the 'well-embedded conceptual feature[s] of rationality' (p. 6). This account differentiates three historically elaborated senses of 'reason' – an explanatory, a normative and mental one – just as it differentiates between reified and non-reified notions of rationality. This nuanced attention to the concept of rationality is due to the conviction that a philosophical analysis of rationality – unlike one of the merely technical concept of normativity – should be aligned not only with common sense intuitions, but also with what Broome dubs 'historically justified' uses of words like 'reason' and 'rational' (p. 6). Broome's engagement with historical sources like the *Ancrene Riwe* from the 13th century will not appeal to everyone, since it risks the conflation of etymological accidents with key conceptual features. Nonetheless, it seems unfair to say that Broome's reliance on etymological details is uncritical. In fact and especially when supported by Broome's previous work [2013], the historical account seems to provide a fuller picture of Broome's conception of rationality.

On the other hand and in a somewhat stark contrast to Broome's analysis of rationality, we are presented with a rather thin account of normativity that seems almost exclusively aimed at setting up Broome's stipulative definition. What I mean by "thin" is the following: The present paper

provides almost no information about the normativity property other than to say that it is the property that agents or persons have, when they satisfy certain conditions, namely when they do whatever they ought to do, when they believe whatever they ought to believe, when they want what they ought to want, etc. We might wonder what makes it possible for people to instantiate this property in the first place, i.e. what makes them capable of at least sometimes doing what they ought to do, but Broome's account provides us almost no information in this regard. In this sense, Broome's account of the normativity property is a very "thin" one. One attractive feature of an account like Korsgaard's [1996, 2009] is, of course, that it can begin to tell a story about how people become capable doing what they ought to, namely by being rational creatures. But such a story would apparently assert the kind of intrinsic connection between normativity and rationality that Broome wants to caution us against.

Rules and standards of correctness are excluded from consideration

Broome is explicit about one restriction of his view of normativity. He intends to focus on the sense of 'normative', which involves an 'ought or a reason' (p. 1). For Broome, this means that the philosophical conception of normativity related to rules and standards of correctness is excluded from consideration. While Broome does not give any explicit explanation of the mismatch between notions of normativity that involve reasons and those that involve rules, he offers the following example:

For example, a man may follow the rule of wearing a tie on weekdays. Each weekday morning, guided by the rule, he may carefully and deliberately tie his tie. But it need not be the case that he ought to do this, or has a reason to do it. Nor need he even believe he ought to or has a reason to. He may have been brought up to do it, and never

have given any thought to the rule. This rule is normative in the sense of involving correctness, but it is not normative in my sense. (p. 1)

While Broome is not explicit about it, he presumably follows Parfit [2011: 144–145] in contrasting the somehow ‘genuine’ normativity of reasons with the somehow ‘inferior’ normativity of rules [cf. Schroeder 2015]. This move is justifiable given the direction of Broome’s argument, but it is also worth noting the restriction that it sets for the wider prospects of his reformed notion of normativity: While rules have often been taken as paradigm cases of normativity, since they sort beliefs and actions into *correct or incorrect* [Kripke 1982; Brandom 1994] or alternatively into *allowed or disallowed* [von Wright 1963], such considerations are excluded from Broome’s account. All things considered, this makes it less likely that Broome’s reformed notion of normativity could be productively exploited within the sizable philosophical debate that discusses rationality and normative constraint with appeal to rules [Brandom 1994; McDowell 1998; Ginsborg 2018].

Broome’s argument reconstructed without normativity

A related and final worry might be that Broome’s proposal for a reformed notion of normativity is too geared towards the specific argument that he wants to make. Consequently, participants in broader philosophical debates on normativity and rationality might struggle to see the merits of Broome’s conception of normativity. Take a quote by Joseph Raz as an illustrative example:

Reason is inherently normative. That is its central characteristic. Therefore, the accounts of normativity and of reason and rationality, though not identical, are inter-related. [1999: 355]

While Raz is here denying the identity claim targeted by Broome, it is also dubious whether Raz would have any inclination to adopt Broome’s definition of normativity as a property term that

applies to persons. Raz's interest lies in the characterization of Reason (understood as people's general capacity for reasoning) and reasons (understood as the reasons that are relevant to people at specific occasions) as normative; not in analysing normativity as an additional and further property that people might possess.

One question that could arise, then, is whether Broome needs the highly specific notion of normativity to make his argument work? Or whether one could re-phrase the argument without appealing to any special notion of normativity? After all, we know from the very outset the conclusion that Broome wants to reach, namely that rationality cannot consist in responding correctly to reasons (p. 1). If we hold this in mind, we could offer the following summary of Broome's argument and premises *without* mentioning normativity:

1. Reasons are external (externalism about reasons).¹
2. The mental is internal (internalism about the mind).²
3. Rationality supervenes on the mental.³
4. Hence, rationality does not consist in responding correctly to reasons (from 1, 2 and 3).

While this admittedly rough formalization of Broome's argument draws heavily on his previous work [Broome 2013], it shows that Broome could arrive at much the same conclusion without appealing to a notion of normativity that is not likely to resonate with his opponents. Of course, it also shows that there are ways of resisting the negative conclusion in 4. For instance, one can

¹ Cf. Broome's rejection of Williams' "internalism" about reasons (p. 1) and Kieseewetter's "subjectivism" about reasons (pp. 8-9)

² Cf. Broome's rejection of externalism about the mind on pp. 9-10: "...externalism about the mind offends common sense" (p. 10).

³ Cf. Broome's remark on p. 4: "As a property of a person, rationality is specifically a mental property. Moreover, it depends on the person's other mental properties: rationality supervenes on the mind."

uphold that rationality does indeed consist in responding correctly to reasons, if one denies that reasons are external (premise 1). This is the approach taken by Kieseewetter's [2017] attempt at re-interpreting what counts as "external" reasons in light of the notion of available reasons. Or one could deny internalism about the mind (premise 2) like Williamson [2000] or McDowell [2002]. Equally one could question premise 3 by holding that the reified sense of rationality is at least as important as the non-reified sense that Broome focuses on. These recognized ways of challenging Broome's argument does not subtract from the importance of the argument. Yet if pressed make predictions about philosophical debates, I would suspect that the main point of contention in the philosophical debate surrounding Broome's view will continue to revolve around the notion of 'reason responsiveness' rather than around the somewhat restricted conception of normativity suggested by Broome in the present paper.

Conclusion

This commentary has focussed on the question of whether Broome's specific construal of 'normative' and 'normativity' is helpful or adequate to the broader philosophical debates on rationality and normativity that Broome's lead article explicitly sets out to clarify. In considering this question, I have highlighted three potential drawbacks of Broome's novel definition of normativity as a property term applicable to a person 'if she *Fs* whenever she ought to *F*'. First, Broome's account of the normativity property is a "thin" account in that it tells us very little about what makes it possible for people to instantiate this property in the first place. Secondly, it excludes from consideration philosophical debates of normativity that relate to rules and standards of correctness. Thirdly, I raised the worry that Broome's notion is unlikely to resonate with his philosophical opponents, since they are more interested in characterizing Reason and the force of reasons as normative than in analysing normativity as an additional property that people might

possess. As a partial response to these worries, the final section of the commentary briefly indicated a way of rephrasing Broome's argument without appealing to any special notion of normativity.

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