Rationalizing Explanations

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Abstract. Practical reasons must be able to make sense of – to rationalize – action in terms of intentional psychological factors. In a widely influential paper, Warren Quinn has argued that desires are not sufficient to rationalize action. Many take his argument to be devastating to the Humean position. I argue here that it fails on several fronts, and that it does so in ways that help to illuminate the nature of rationalizing explanations. i) A crucial distinction in the structure of rationalizing explanations is conflated, thereby also obscuring the distinction between explanation and justification. ii) Affective desires can play an essential role in rational motivation, and a 'thick' Humeanism can meet the required rationalizing condition on practical reasons. iii) Quinn's method of argument itself is problematic, since it would show that even evaluative beliefs cannot rationalize.

Humeans claim that non-instrumental reasons for actions are constituted by end-desires, that is, by what we desire as our ends. Wanting to perform an act as an end in itself counts as having a reason. But in a widely influential paper[1], Warren Quinn argues that end-desires (together with factual beliefs) are not sufficient to rationalize actions, and that thus the Humean account of reasons is inadequate. *Rationalizing an action* explains that action in intentional terms and makes sense of it as rational. It is to be distinguished both from causally explaining action in non-intentional terms, and from justifying it in terms of the *good* reasons (moral or other justificatory reasons) for doing it. Quinn is ultimately interested in justificatory reasons and not merely intentional explanatory reasons.[2] But his focus is on whether desires can rationalize in terms of

[1] "Putting Rationality in its Place" [1993]. All page numbers refer to this paper, unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Quinn does not explain exactly what he means by 'rationalizing' action. Most often, he seems to take it to be synonymous with 'providing reasons for action' [cf. 231, 237, 244, 247]. On p. 250 he implies that it is equivalent with making intelligible, but on p. 248 he distinguishes between 'making intelligible' and 'rationalizing', though he does not explain the nature of this distinction. Finally, he sometimes speaks as if 'to rationalize' is to 'make sense of an act' [240], show that the act 'is sensible' [237, 241], 'has a point' [240], or 'makes the act rational' [236]. As this list suggests, whatever notion Quinn is referring to straddles both explanatory and third-person justificatory senses of 'reason'. Barring an argument that the two must be intertwined, it seems a good methodological practice that they be kept separate. Our topic

intentional psychological factors. If desires cannot rationalize, then a fortiori they cannot provide good reasons for action, since justificatory reasons, if they are to play a role in reason explanations, must be capable of rationalizing. If Humeans cannot succeed in the minimal task of rationalizing action, a Humean account of justificatory reasons cannot possibly get off the ground.

1. Quinn's proposed counterexample

At issue is the claim that wanting something as an end in itself gives one a reason to act. Quinn argues that no such end-desire can on its own rationalize action. His argument would count against even sophisticated versions of Humeanism that claim that only end-desires that meet certain conditions constitute reasons. But my focus here will be Quinn's attempt to undermine the less sophisticated view that all end-desires constitute having reasons. We can then assess whether he is successful in the less demanding task of showing that at least some end-desires do not provide reasons. I will argue that his argument does not establish even the weak claim that some desires do not provide reasons. His objection – a certain counterexample – fails on several fronts. The point of this paper, in arguing against Quinn, will be to present and defend several central theses about the structure of rationalizing reasons.

Quinn describes the following case. Imagine a person (he himself) who desires to turn on radios that are off – not in order to hear the radios play, nor for any other independent motive – he simply wants to turn them on. 'Given the perception that a radio in my vicinity is off, I try, all other things being equal, to get it turned on.... It is not that I have an inordinate appetite for entertainment or information,' he explains. 'Indeed, I do not turn them on in order to *hear*

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here is the agent's reasons for action, which can make sense of that action in intentional terms.

anything. My disposition is, I am supposing, basic rather than instrumental. In this respect it is like the much more familiar basic dispositions to do philosophy or listen to music.' [236-7] How can such a desire rationalize the action of turning on radios? This end-desire to turn on radios doesn't seem to have a point; nor is it a means to the satisfaction of another desire that has a point. The desire to turn on radios 'may in some way explain the fact that I turn on another radio, but it does not,' in Quinn's view, 'go one step toward showing it to be sensible'. [241] Because of this, he cannot see that he has any rationalizing reason for the action.

2. A crucial distinction

As a first response to Quinn's example as I've presented it so far, it seems plausible to say the following. Given his desire, his action of turning on radios makes sense even though his desires do not. It seems reason enough for turning on radios that the man wants to turn on radios. What seems senseless (to use Quinn's term, 238) is why someone should (in the normative sense) have such a desire – one cannot identify or relate to it. But to rationalize the *action*, we need not rationalize the desires that cause the agent to perform the action.[3] This is not to say that I see the intrinsic point in turning on radios, since *I* do not have a similar desire. Nor does it mean that I commend the action, since I may want him to be different: to have end-desires more like mine, for instance.

One might object that an action cannot be rationalized if it refers to a desire that is itself not rationalized. But this would seem to be too strong a condition to place on rationalizing

[3] This distinction is not so pressing when speaking of *instrumental* desires – in that case, the rationalization for the means-desire will be the same as that for the action. That is, the action and the desire will have the same reason explanation: namely, some end-desire together with a belief that the best means to satisfying it is to perform the act in question.

action. Consider the analogous case of belief. It is widely accepted that an agent's beliefs 'that p' and 'that if p, then q' rationalize her belief 'that q'. They both make it intelligible in intentional terms and they make sense of it as rational, in the minimal sense of rationality required here. To think this, we do not need first to ascertain that each of these jointly rationalizing beliefs – 'that p' and 'that if p then q' – is itself rationalized.[4] It seems to me untenable to require that all the beliefs that figure into a reasons explanation of epistemic states must themselves be rationalized. One might reply that beliefs are different from actions in this respect. But, all things being equal, it would seem to be a virtue to recognize the same structural properties of rationalization in the case of both practical and epistemic states.

In sum, there is more structure to rationalizing explanations than Quinn indicates. There are *two* possible objects to be explained in his example: the desire and the action. We might want an explanation of each of these two different questions: Why does he desire to turn on radios? Why *does* he turn on radios? 'Explaining' action might involve answering both of these questions. Whether this is so or not, we should not conflate the distinction between rationalizing desire and rationalizing action.

3. A functional account of desire

Where we have spoken loosely of desires, Quinn is careful to speak only of functionally defined noncognitive states, which he thinks best captures the Humean notion of desire. According to what he calls the 'functional-dispositional' conception, a desire is something like a bare inclination to act, a simple dispositional state that makes one, in his words, 'set up' to act

[4] Note that, though the belief 'that q' is here rationalized, I am not claiming that the agent has thereby been shown to have good reason to believe q. For that, it would seem that the agent should have good reason to believe p and good reason to believe if p then q.

according to various circumstances [236]. Regarding this conception of desire, he states:

> A noncognitive pro-attitude, conceived as a psychological state whose salient function is to dispose an agent to act, is just not the kind of thing that can rationalize. That I am psychologically set up to head in a certain way, cannot by itself rationalize my Will's going along with the setup. For that I need the thought that the direction in which I am psychologically pointed leads to something good (either in act or result) or takes me away from something bad. [242]

If one rejects the claim in section 2 above that actions can be rationalized relative to desires that are not themselves rationalized, then perhaps Quinn is right. Purely dispositional states would not seem to rationalize, in part because they do not capture any sense in which the agent can be seen as a minimally rational agent. However, this would not be much of a victory for Quinn, since – as I will argue below – the Humean is not committed to a purely dispositional notion of desire. Since this point will count against Quinn's reasons for his positive view, as well as against his proposed counterexample, we should describe the basic elements of his view.

His position is both cognitivist and objectivist: he thinks that practical judgments about what one has reason to do are beliefs, capable of being true or false, and he thinks that the truth of these beliefs is determined by states of affairs. According to him, it is the agent's belief that an end is good (and therefore, her belief that pursuing that end is justified) that intentionally explains her action. In addition, he thinks that only what he calls an 'objectivist' account of practical reason can take as its object what is 'good in itself'. [232ff.] By 'objectivist', Quinn means the view that practical judgments provide reasons for action only in virtue of their cognitive content. [232] According to this view,

> one tries to determine what, given the circumstances, it would be good or bad in itself to do or to aim at. These questions are referred to larger ones: what kind of life it would be best to lead and what kind of person it would be best to be. ...An objectivist of the kind I wish to defend sees practical thought as deploying a master set of noninstrumental evaluative notions: that of a good or bad human end, a good or bad human life, a good or bad human agent, and a good or bad human action. Practical reason is, on this view, the faculty that applies these fundamental evaluative concepts. If there is no truth to be found

> in their application, then there is no point to practical reason and no such thing as practical rationality. [233]

Thus the consequences of rejecting the objectivist view are supposed to be dire; a Humean could not try to determine what it is best to do, or what kind of life it would be good to lead. She could not deploy 'a master set of noninstrumental evaluative notions.' Here is his diagnosis of what's missing in the radio example: there is a further element involved in desire that does rationalize action, an evaluative component according to which the man in the case would believe that radio-turning-on is *good*. [246-7] Presumably, Quinn takes the cognitive content of such an evaluation to prevent the reduction of the desire to a functional state. In any event, he correctly points out that such a cognitive evaluative component is not open to the Humean to invoke in rationalizing actions.

Quinn's positive argument faces two main problems, one methodological and the other substantive. (i) His own attempt to provide a counterexample against the Humean view can be turned against his positive account, thereby casting suspicion upon his appeal to counterexample. (ii) He has not captured the most plausible form of Humeanism in his attack, and he thereby misses a possible understanding of 'desire' that he must rule out before he can claim that an evaluative belief is necessary to rationalize action. I will argue for these claims in order.

4. Tu quoque: a counterexample from the other side

To make the first point, let's construct a different case analogous to Quinn's. Imagine a man who engages in the same behavior as the one in Quinn's example. However, rather than harboring Quinn's strange desire, the man is in a strange cognitive state which motivates him to turn on radios that he sees are off. His *only* reason for this behavior is that he believes radio turning-on is *good*. It is a worthwhile activity for this man, regardless of any desire he may have.

He simply believes in the intrinsic value of turning on radios, for no other reason.

This is certainly a strange belief – but no stranger than the desire that Quinn posited in his case. It seems that the same intuitions that made the action seem so strange, to the point of not making sense, in the first scenario with the desire (for those who *had* such intuitions), should still be at work here. Following Quinn's lead, one would have to conclude that *evaluative beliefs* do not in themselves rationalize action.

One may reply that all I have shown is that *some* evaluative beliefs don't rationalize, a conclusion that Quinn is happy to endorse, at least sometimes. He does not suggest that just any belief can rationalize action. In fact, he seems to think that only *correct* evaluative beliefs succeed in providing reasons. [232] As Quinn puts it, 'the primary job of practical reason is the correct evaluation of ends, actions, and qualities as good and bad in themselves' [234], where 'good' is construed in an objectivist, realist, sense. He says that the state disposing him to turn on radios fails to provide a reason to do so 'for want of a point'. [240] So it would seem that he would want to say the mere belief that something has a point doesn't give it a point any more than does the mere desire for it. In Quinn's view, '*a reason to act in a certain way is nothing more than something good in itself that it [the action] realizes or serves, or, short of that, something bad in itself that it avoids*'. [234, his italics] Quinn clearly wants the rationalizing power of a reason to come from the objective property of goodness that an action realizes. The problem is not simply noncognitivism, the view that evaluative judgments are not truth-evaluable. Rather, the problem with Humeanism is the implication that anything that is wanted for its own sake can be seen as intrinsically good. So he might insist that the belief that turning on radios has a point is simply false. We need to look rather at beliefs that are true, in that they correctly identify a good that is served or embodied by some action.

But he is also forced to recognize that there are other forms of good, such as merely apparent goods (‘objects that appear good... but are not’ [248]). These merely apparent goods, he says, function just like bona fide goods in our reasoning processes, and yet he does not want to allow that they play the same role in the rational explanation of our actions and motivations. He thinks that objects that merely appear choice-worthy can make action neither intelligible nor rationalized – but in the same breath he qualifies this position by adding: ‘at least not in the way in which the special class of [truly choiceworthy goods] can.’ [248] In the next sentence he cedes even more: ‘Yet to the extent that we are taken in [by the merely apparent goods], they can, in a sense, do both.’ So he, reluctantly, allows that they can both rationalize action and make it intelligible.

On Quinn's account, then, something that is not in fact ‘good in itself’ can rationalize by virtue of an agent's belief that the end of her action is good in itself. And this seems right. The suggestion that we appeal only to true beliefs in rationalizing actions would set an impossibly high standard on the conditions of rationality, let alone intentionality. Surely at least some actions can make sense, and be rational, even when they involve false evaluative beliefs. We should avoid conflating justificatory and psychological questions by insisting that rationalizing reasons obtain only for those actions that are objectively good. That is not required for making sense of action. When we speak of rationalizing action, we should have in mind the identification of reasons that can rationally motivate a person, and not necessarily the good reasons that a person should find motivating. After all, we are interested in the agent's reasons, those that figure in an intentional explanation of her actions (and which *could* justify the action from her own point of view), so the sense of ‘rational’ that we have here is a subjective one.

My example does not include desires, and an anti-Humean might reply that all it shows is

that evaluative beliefs are not sufficient for having reasons; it does not show that they are not necessary. This sort of anti-Humean is happy to include desires in rationalizing explanations, but thinks that these desires are the result of having evaluative beliefs. Of course, if both desires and evaluative beliefs are included in the examples, it would become nearly impossible to be sure which are driving our intuitions. Be that as it may, the example is designed to show only that evaluative beliefs are not sufficient for having reasons – just as Quinn's case was designed to show only that desires are not sufficient. If you think that the former case does not accomplish its aim, then neither should you think that the latter case achieves its aim.

Let's turn now to the second main objection, that Quinn has not focused his attack on the proper target.

5. Rationalizing desires: thick Humeanism

The Humean need not be saddled with the non-psychological notion of desire described in purely functional terms. She can appeal as well to 'affective' attitudes, such as attraction, enjoyment, liking, sympathy, fondness, and so on. These are paradigmatic noncognitive states, and as such, the Humean has the resources to recognize their role in practical reasoning (I call this position 'thick Humeanism').[5] Recall Quinn's diagnosis of what is missing in his radio case. He thinks that the missing element that is necessary to rationalize the action of turning on radios is an evaluative belief. I want to suggest instead that his example seems weird to us, if it does,

[5] Quinn considers the possibility that his argument misses noncognitive features of desires that might secure their ability to rationalize. One might mistakenly think he comes close to identifying the proposal I will present above when he speaks of 'the pleasing light that positive attitudes, and the unflattering light that negative attitudes, cast on their objects.' [242] But he refers only to the hedonic quality of the future fulfillment or frustration of desire. Thus he considers only the idea that desires might rationalize in virtue of the prospect of pleasure which the fulfillment of a desire promises [242-3]. I do not rely upon thoughts of future pleasure or satisfaction in my proposal. I am interested instead in the qualitative aspects of desire

because he has left out affect: if that were included, we would *understand* his radio case. This presents a way of making sense of the desire itself, albeit not by appeal to reasons. Consider desires that are expressed by the following: 'I yearn to, am drawn to, long to, am turned-on by, turning on radios.' We might describe such desires as 'flavored' with affect. (In thinking of these affect-flavored desires, we should not import cognitive elements such as the judgment that one will enjoy some activity or that one tends to like it. What I mean to refer to instead is the *experience* of various forms of desire.) Affect-laden desires do not fit Quinn's model of desires. Yet relying on such a characterization helps to rationalize action by making the agent's states – her desires – more intelligible to us. I submit that we cannot relate to the example (of the one who has nothing more than a disposition to turn on radios) because his only relevant state is an affectless disposition to act – and not because, as Quinn would have it, a cognitive evaluation is missing.

Thinking about how things seem introspectively, one might deny that affect plays any role in having desires. Donald Regan [1997] offers an argument to this effect. He charges that something very like my proposed conception of desire (which he describes in terms of 'feeling-like' desires) is actually unintelligible [149]. One reason that he finds 'feeling like' desires unintelligible is that, upon introspection, he finds no state that corresponds to the description. 'Paradoxical as it sounds,' he writes, 'I have no idea what these pure "feeling like" desires are supposed to *feel like*.' [148][6] Here is his description:

> Like everybody else, I have occasionally caught myself wondering whether I "feel like" orange marmalade or blackberry jam on my morning toast. But if I try to see what really goes on during my fleeting, semiconscious "deliberation" on this question, it seems that what I am doing is trying to imagine how each conserve would strike me in the eating that morning and, specifically, how fully I would appreciate and enjoy its particular

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itself.

[6] As he points out, Regan is not alone in this opinion. Cf. Raz [1997: 117].

qualities. [148-149]

Regan's description here strikes me as overly intellectualized. He seems to be leaving out the role of anticipatory affect. I would think that such affect would be central to one's choice of, say, blackberry jam over orange marmalade. ("Yummy blackberry jam!") When I introspect, it seems clear that there is something that it feels like to be desiring something. Indeed, there are many states that it feels like. Yearning feels much different than liking, which feels different than being pulled or merely 'feeling like' doing something. Some of these states are subtle, and seem to require a good degree of sensitivity to one's physical state in order to become aware of. Be that as it may, apparently not everyone experiences their desires in this way. I am prepared to believe that the phenomenon Regan reports is real.

But it is not so clear how much this fact counts against the thick Humean. The Humean can allow phenomenological notions such as affect into his explanation of some desires. It doesn't follow from this that there cannot be desires to which one has no phenomenological access. Indeed, including affect in one's account does not mean that all desires must be conscious or occurrent. Furthermore, it does not follow that everyone who looks for affect in her own states must find it. In fact, in introducing affect-laden desires into Quinn's case to make it more intelligible, one need not assume anything about whether the agent in question is explicitly aware of how he feels about turning on radios. And in general, we can explain an agent as acting rationally without attributing any thoughts about her reasons to the agent herself. It is in part for this reason that I do not want to suggest that the Humean conception of desire must be a phenomenological one.

I have argued that at least some qualitative states are capable of rationalizing action. Granted, the normative condition of being able to rationalize is a minimal one; I am not

suggesting here that feelings provide justificatory reasons. But it seems to me that – at least in some cases – they can clearly be essential to making action intelligible as intentional action, and thus that they can be essential to reason-explanations of action. Quinn crucially overlooks the possibility of a noncognitive account of desire that goes beyond a purely functional characterization. Adding affect to his example makes the person more intelligible, and thus helps to rationalize the desire that constitutes the reason for turning on radios.[7]

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[7] [Acknowledgements.]