RATIONALITY AND ETHICAL RATIONALITY

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1. Introduction

When I originally promised to write this article, I planned it as a discussion of my views on rationality in connection with problems of ethical reasoning and ethical justification. I had explained parts of these views in a pedagogical way in lecture notes, and had tried to summarize them, first in a draft, written in Dutch, that was meant for colleagues in Ghent, and afterwards in my "Rationality and justification" (*this journal*, 14 (1974), 83-103). I did not, and still do not think there was anything particularly original about these views. I rather thought my 1974 article reflected and at most helped to systematize and articulate somewhat a notion of rationality which is implicit in large parts of present-day philosophical work[1]. Yet, the reactions I got on the aforementioned article reveal a large number of misunderstandings. Even some people working in the same building as I seem to read other things in it than I intended to write. Although I still agree with most statements made in that article, I must confess, after rereading it recently, that certain predictable objections are not answered in it, that some points may not be sufficiently specified, and that too much room is left in this way to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. For this reason I tried in the first place to articulate and defend my view somewhat better in this article, and hence had to limit the discussion of "ethical rationality" to some remarks brought together in the final section. I realize quite well, however, that I may only hope to have restricted the number of possible misunderstandings of the present formulation.

The main characteristics of my view on rationality is that I take rationality to be both "formal" and relative. By a formal rationality I mean a rationality which is not material, i.e. is not *defined* with respect to some given "content" and for which even certain

"contents" are not considered to be necessary conditions. (Such "contents" might be, e.g., the present or future results of scientific investigation, or "the" scientific method, or "the trends which progressively reveal themselves in history".) By relative rationality I mean a form of rationality which is opposed to absolute rationality in that it is defined as depending on sets of beliefs, on world-views (see later) and in that it does not entail that something which turns out to be rational for someone and at some time, will be rational for anyone at any time. I was not a bit enthousiastic when I first saw Larry Laudan's marvellous *Progress and its problems* (University of California Press, 1977) in which a view on rationality is defended in connection with (rougly) the choice between scientific theories, a view on rationality which is decidedly rational in the sense defended in my 1974 article. I shall refer several times to this book and hope to publish soon a review of it in this journal, where I than also shall try to put down the few objections I have against it. These are of little importance, however, in view of the fact that this is the first book which really answers in an elaborate, brillant and convincing way the implicit irrationalism of Thomas Kuhn and the explicit irrationalism of Paul Feyerabend in connection with theory change. Returning to relative rationality, some tried to convince me that 'relational rationality' would be a better term, but this remark is merely about words. Others tried to convince me that I might mislead students *(corruptio iuventutis ?*) by rejecting absolute rationality, absolute justification and absolute certainty, and trow them in the arms of irrationalists, gnostics, spiritists and transcendental meditationists. I agree with them if they mean that one should try to avoid this danger by sufficient qualifications and additional remarks, but all this cannot by any means be a reason to change my views.

In section 2 I try to summarize my views in the form of theses. Sections 3-6 contain a discussion of some points which turned out to be either in need of argument or in need of specification. The final section 7 is, as already announced, devoted to problems concerning ethical rationality. I warn the reader that the whole paper is quite "theoretical" and even somewhat programmatic. Such problems as the articulation of a rationally justified scientific methodology or a rationally justified methodology to tackle ethical problems make only a chance to be approached in voluminous books. I also warn the reader that some points made in my 1974 article are not repeated here, e.g., that a Humean position with respect to both the problem of induction and the fact-value problem is correct but irrelevant to both inductive decisions on the one hand and decisions concerning

evaluation or norms on the other hand. Finally, I want to stress that the results of the following pages apply both to individuals and to groups, but I have to confess that I sometimes might have been misled by the formulation with respect to individuals, in view of the lack of an adequate theory of collective action and decision making.

2. *Main views on rationality.*

I shall present these in the form of theses. Some of them were made clear already in my 1974 article, others will be discussed in subsequent sections.

(a) Rationality has essentially to do with justification. E.g., one is rational in making a certain choice if and only if one is justified to do so.

(b) By 'justification' I do not mean an *a posteriori* activity applied to given beliefs, methods, activities, etc., but rather the process which leads to justified beliefs, methods, activities, etc.[17]

(c) What rationality is, is itself an object of rational argumentation. That a method leads to a justified choice is a statement which should be justified itself.

(d) Justifications are always provisional and relative.

(e) Justifications are relative to the world-views of individuals and groups. 'World-view' should be understood here in the broadest sense, i.e. as including beliefs about the world (metaphysical ones not excluded), methods, ends, ideals, values, norms, wishes, evaluations of, e.g., decisions, etc.

These are my views on rationality in general. I consider them as applying to any individual or group, irrespective of the historical period and irrespective of his/its world-view. It seems to me, however, that more can be said about rationality if we take account of the fact that the world-views of most people — perhaps of all of them, but how to prove this I do not see — have certain common characteristics, e.g., that the knowledge of certain concrete facts is considered highly relevant to the realization of ends considered very important. Furthermore, precisely because of (c) and (e), it seems to me that I should at least take account of certain results which are at present generally accepted, at least by those who studied the matter. The subsequent theses about rationality should then be considered as my view on the minimal theory of rationality to which at least most present-day individuals and groups (the world-views of whom have certain common characteristics) should subscribe, given their world-views and given available results of inquiry[2]. First of all, however, I have to mention some theses about world-views.

(f) The elements of a world-view are ordered in that different degrees of certainty (epistemic category), different degrees of "adherence" (emotive-volitive category), and the like, are assigned to them.

(g) The ends occurring in a world-view are ordered by end-means relations

(h) Orderings such as the ones mentioned in (f) and (g) may be quite independent of one another, both with respect to their results and with respect to their justification. E.g., even if end A is seen as a means to end B, it is possible that A is adhered to more strongly than B.

(i) World-views are always incomplete both with respect to beliefs about the world and with respect to other elements. E.g., some valuations may not be derivable from general value statements adhered to.

(j) World-views usually are inconsistent. E.g., ends may conflict either as such or under certain circumstances; other example : evaluations of certain facts may conflict with the general value statements adhered to.

(k) World-views usually are "open" in several ways; e.g., with respect to empirical evidence, with respect to alternatives to several parts of the world-view, with respect to critical arguments, etc. Such forms of openness may be passive (to take account of certain forms of information) as well as active (to search for information).

(l) Any justification, included the justification of some form of openness (see (k)), relies ultimately on a number of pragmatic factors[3]. The role of these pragmatic factors is such that they make possible the justification, but at the same time entail its provisional and relative character. Examples of each pragmatic factors are : the available observational means (e.g., properties of the senses), elements of the world-view (remember, e.g., the theory-ladenness of observation), contextual factors (such as the space-time location of the individual), etc.

(m) It is possible for an individual to make moves such that he may justifiably believe that the role of a pragmatic factor is reduced (analogously for groups). However, such a justification will always be relative to (other) pragmatic factors, viz. to parts of the world-view of this individual (or group) — see (d) and (e)[4]. Hence, pragmatic factors can never justifiably be considered as completely eliminated.

(n) It follows from (f)-(l) that a number of problems is connected with each world-view[5]. The belief that a problem exists and the conviction that it is more or less important than another such problem may or may not themselves belong to the world-view.

The preceding theses about world-views clarify the following

theses about rationality. As rationality is, in my opinion relative to world-views, I articulate my further views on rationality with respect to "subjects", i.e. individuals and groups. Other problems of rationality, e.g., that a certain decision is or is not rational *for a given subject*, may easily be derived from the following theses. Also, for the sake of simplicity, the theses are formulated in a classificatory way (rational/non-rational); it goes without saying that they may be rephrased comparatively (more/less rational) The main thesis is :

(o) A subject is rational if he/it tries to reduce maximally the role of pragmatic factors on the basis of the non-directly connected parts (see (v)) of his/its world-view and taking into account the orderings mentioned in (f) and (g).

The following theses are partly derivable from (o) and furthermore should be understood with reference to (o), e.g., as mentioned explicitly in (p).

(p) A rational subject tries to solve the problems (cf. (n)) of his/its world-view taking into account their importance and within the limits of (o).

(q) A rational subject searches for alternatives to all parts of his/its world-view, guided in this connection by the orderings mentioned in (f) and (g).

(r) A rational subject critically examines all parts of his/its world-view as well as the respective alternatives,and opts in favour of the (with respect to his/its world-view) most justified alternative. By 'citically examine' I mean : search for arguments pro and con both inside *and* outside his/its world-view. It goes without saying that the evaluation of all arguments (also of those from outside his/its world-view) relies ultimately on his/its world-view itself (cf. (e)).

(s) A rational subject strives to realize the conditions that favour the possibility of natural justification.

(t) The possibility of rational justification is favoured by a definite form of pluralism. More precisely, a subject's opportunities of being rational in the sense of (q) and (r) are favoured by a pluralistic society, i.e. a society in which alternatives as well as critical arguments are offered by subjects that adhere to a different world-view and at the same time are rational.

(u) The disadvantages of the ultimate circularity of the present notion of rationality are partly counterbalanced by the different forms of openness of world-views (see (k)).

(v) There need not be a hierarchy over the parts of a world-view with respect to critical examination or justification; i.e. even if the critical examination or justification of some part A relies among other things on part B, the critical examination or justification of B may very well

rely on, among other things, A. Example : although certain methodological rules play a role in the justification of the acceptance of certain facts, these facts may themselves play a role in the critical examination or justification of those very methodological rules.

(w) From the preceding "formal" view on rationality, applied as indicated in the paragraph following thesis (e), follow a number of consequences as to the content of rationality. Some of these pertain to the traditional domain of ethics; first example : the value of the kind of pluralistic society as meant in (t) derives from this view on rationality; second example : the preceding formal view determines the limits of rational argumentation versus coercion and persuasion, viz. that coercion and persuasion should be limited (in education and in other forms of social interaction) to cases in which they favour rationality, i.e. in which they oppose dogmatism and/or irrationalism.

3. The primacy of justification.

It should be obvious that it is neither my intention to offer a mere stipulative definition of 'rational' or 'rationality', nor to find out the common meaning of these words. I want to present and defend a view on a problem, viz. the problem which is usually referred to as 'the problem of rationality'. Again, I am not interested in an analysis of the meaning of 'rationality' in the ongoing debate on rationality; I am only interested in the problem this debate is about. In my opinion this "problem" is in fact a set of connected problems of justification. Let me at once add some comments.

If someone claims that something is justified, then he implies that his very claim itself is justified; and if someone claims something to be justified with respect to some justificatory procedure, he cannot escape the question why the procedure should be taken a justificatory one (and again, this question can neither be answered by offering a stipulative definition nor by offering an analysis of the common meaning of the word). Of course, it does make sense to offer conditional justifications such as 'p is justified if its justification depends on q only', but such a statement is not more relevant to p's being justified than 'if q, then p' is relevant to p's being true. This view has consequences for the discussion about "scientific rationality", "techniological rationality", "ethical rationality", etc.

Rationality does not reduce to the classification of the members of a given set of activities or beliefs into two subsets, viz. the justified and the non-justified ones. Rather, the problem is to find out which member of a set of known alternatives is to be considered as (the

more) justified, and at the same time to look for other alternatives. The latter is not only important in cases in which none of the known alternatives is particularly justified. The consideration of new alternatives is indeed important in general, because it usually leads to a more critical examination of all alternatives. Summing up, the present notion of rationality contains a dynamic dimension and is truncated if reduced to its static components.

The following comment follows in part from the preceding one. In my aforementioned 1974 article I classified forms of rational thinking as follows : (i) deduction, (ii) valuation, including the search for and weighing of arguments and reasons, and (iii) construction, including the "discovery" and designing of alternative theories, rules, ideals, etc. In my view, justification does *not* belong to (ii). Quite to the contrary, the search for justified activities and beliefs will usually contain deductive steps as well as valuation steps as well as construction steps. Also, if follows from what I said that justification has a certain primacy among other rational activities, viz. a primacy resulting from the fact that whoever claims something to be rational cannot evade the question why this is so, i.e. why he takes the thing to be justified. On the other hand, it does not follow from anything I said that justification would be more important than any other rational activity; I shall argue indeed that rational activities are not even more important than any other activities (see section 5).

For all the weaknesses of the present view on rationality, it has at least the advantage to be safe for open-question arguments. Such an argument applies only if a "naturalistic" fallacy is committed in one way or another. But if one takes 'justified' seriously, then the question 'Why should one do what is justified ? ' is logically equivalent to the question 'Why should one do what one should do ? ' Of course, one might try to defend the position that nothing is justified (or that nothing is more justified than something else), but this would simply reduce to the position that there is nothing one should do, and hence this has nothing to do with the open-question argument. I shall deal later with the strong nihilist position that there is nothing one should do; all I want to argue here is that my approach to rationality is safeguarded against the open-question argument.[18]

My notion of justification is not clarified, but indeed totally messed up, by relating it to the so-called distinction between discovery and justification. As anyone familiar with the philosophy of science of the last twenty years knows, this distinction has been criticized with arguments that strong that little of it remains. If anything might still be made out of it, then only a distinction as to

aspect. Apart from this, however, philosophers as Reichenbach and Popper, who defended the distinction, clearly had in mind a notion of justification which is much narrower than the one advocated here by me. First of all, their notion of justification is restricted in its application to a *given* set of entities, viz. hypotheses, and does not involve any dynamic or creative aspect. Furthermore, their notion is restricted in its application to entities of one level only, viz. object-language hypotheses (about the world), and relies completely on a set of rules, expressed in the meta-language, which, once articulated, would constitute "the correct methodology". Even from theses (b) and (c) it should be obvious that none of these restrictions apply to my notion of justification[6].

4. Against absolute rationality

The position I want to defend in this connection is that we never are absolutely certain, except, perhaps, about some trivialities, and, consequently, that absolute justifications are illusions. Indeed, a justification of some A (a statement, a method) may always be construed as relying on two sets, viz. a (possibly empty) set S of statements and a non-empty set R of rules which guarantee that A is justified if the members of S are so. It follows that A cannot be considered justified in an absolute sense unless either S is empty or we justifiably are absolutely certain about the truth of members of S, *and* R itself is justified in an absolute sense. I cannot see how such a situation might ever occur, and consequently, I cannot see how something could ever be absolutely justified. I shall try to argue for this position by considering some examples of alleged "absolute certainties" and by making one general relevant point, viz. that, with respect to so-called certainties, one is always more certain about them than about any justification for them. Afterwards I shall argue that the restriction of rationality to "absolute rationality" is a move in favour of irrationalism. All this seems that obvious to me that I expect most readers to skip the rest of this section entirely.

Let us consider some statements that Mr. X claims to be justifiably absolutely certain about.
(1) Paris is the capital of France.
(2) This bottle contains H20.
(3) This is a dog.
(4) (p v~ p) is a theorem of the two-valued propositional calculus.
Notice first of all that each of these is quite trivial. Yet, it seems to me that Mr. X's claim may easily be challenged by asking him some questions as to the exact meaning of the statements or by requesting

him to offer his reasons for his claim. Some historical comparisons might be useful with respect to the latter request. Let us start with (1). What does X mean by 'capital'? Is this a constitutional term? In other words, is it defined in the constitution of France which town is the capital of France? If so, in which article of the constitution of France do we find this information? How does X know that there is such an article? Does 'capital' in (1) have the same meaning as 'capital' in 'Washington, DC, is the capital of the USA.' We probably have not to go beyond this elementary kind of questions in order to convince Mr. X that his reasons to believe (1) are somewhat unreliable. Of course, the situation is still worse with respect to (2). There is no way to find out that the bottle contains H_2O, unless by means of a number of tests which presuppose the correctness of a number of theoretical assumptions. Briefly, 'H_2O' is a theory-laden term. X can hardly claim to be justifiably absolutely certain about each of these theoretical assumptions. Maybe such a thing as H_2O simply does not exist. After all, we now accept that phlogiston does not exist. Should I go on? Any freshman will tell us that (3) is worse off that (2). Notice also that weakening (2) or (3) into the corresponding statement in phenomenalistic terms will not do for well-known reasons. Perhaps X hopes to get on safe grounds at least with statements "of logic" such as (4). Unfortunately, he is not. By (4) he presumably means that $(p \vee \sim p)$ is a theorem of, say, Frege's axiomatic system, i.e. that there is a proof of $(p \vee \sim p)$ from Frege's axioms and by means of Frege's deduction rules. Let us suppose that X knows what a proof is, and let us also suppose he is able to produce an ordered series of wffs which he claims to be a proof of $(p \vee \sim p)$. Simply ask him how does he know this series is a proof. He now will start telling us that the first member of the series is an axiom, that the second member follows from the first by the rule of uniform substitution, etc. But, of course, we shall ask him how he knows all this, e.g., how he knows that the second member follows from the first by a correct application of the rule of uniform substitution. If he offers a "proof" in justification of each of the steps in his proof of $(p \vee \sim p)$, then he presumably engages in a *regressus ad infinitum*. Of course, he may abstain from offering a further proof and claim that he knows "from inspection" that his last proof is correct. First of all, this will become more difficult the more proofs he has offered — proofs of proofs happen usually to be more complex than the proofs themselves — and, furthermore, arguments from "inspection" are simply claims on intuitive certainty about, in this case, the correctness of a proof, i.e. they reduce to claims on one's own performing abilities. How is X going to justify

this in view of the numerous mistakes made by each of us all the time ? Notice that Mr. X will not be helped by letting a machine produce the proof, since he then would have to produce a proof of the correct performance by the machine.

It seems clear from what has been said about (4) that we are much more certain about (p v ~p)'s being a theorem of the two-valued propositional calculus than we are about a particular proof of this, and it seems also clear that we are more certain about the correctness of such a proof than we are about the correctness of a proof of this proof. An analogous statement could be made about (1)-(3). In general, it seems to me that we are (justifiably) *much more certain about a number of statements than we are about the correctness of separate justifications of this certainty*. There is nothing paradoxical about this if one keeps in mind that our belief in certain statements may derive from a large number of diverse justifying arguments. But if this is so in general, then justified absolute justifications (and certainties) are spurious. Methods too should of course never be considered as absolutely reliable. This holds even for justificatory methods.

It goes without saying that I do not intend to deny that even certain non-trivial statements may justifiably be considered as beyond reasonable doubt; neither do I deny that we may justifiable assign all kinds of degrees of certainty or credence to statements, and even very high such degrees to numerous statements. I explicitly referred to the role of such credence values for rationality in theses (o) and following. All I contend here is that such certainties are always provisional, that they never can be considered a *completely* safe rock-bottom on which other beliefs may be grounded.

Certain "absolute rationalists" might feel that I exaggerated their position. They might argue that the certainties from which they start should be considered as statements which they do consider as absolutely certain at the time, notwithstanding the fact that they realize quite well that (absolute) justifications for these statements are not available, and notwithstanding the fact that they realize, e.g., in view of arguments from historical comparison, that some of these statements might be false and might at a later time even be considered as false by themselves (i.e. by the absolute rationalist who at present takes these statements as absolutely certain). If this is so, however, then they simply misrepresent their own position by calling it a form of absolute rationality, their rationality being obviously relative and provisional[7].

I consider relative and provisional rationality as more mature than absolute rationality. The rejection of the latter (and of absolute

justification and absolute certainty) does not by any means commit one to irrationalism or scepticism. Quite to the contrary, the definition of rationality in terms of absolute justification cannot escape the conclusion that rationality is impossible for factual reasons. In a sense, the absolute rationalist is bound to come to the same conclusion as the irrationalist, viz. that rationality is impossible; and the irrationalist is better off after all, as he has no reason to be unhappy about this conclusion. It seems even to me that the fact that a number of people still today defend absolute rationality — at least as to the letter, for I cannot believe they really mean it as they say it — makes the case of the partial or total irrationalist easy to defend, viz. by convincing himself and others of the simplemindedness and falsehood of "rationality". Most of the time indeed, irrationalists avoid the intellectual complications that would result from a defence of their own positions and limit their arguments to attacks on rationality. All those I heard or read, whether total or partial irrationalists, whether Joe Eggs or Paul Feyerabends, always attack some form or other of absolute rationality — an easy prey indeed.

5. Rational subjects

Let me start by pointing out a distinction which is quite simple but often overlooked. Not only do I not consider justification to be the most important rational activity (see section 3) I even am convinced that a simple increase of the relative frequency of rational activities does by no means guarantee an increase in rationality. A person's rationality depends in part on his or her justification of his or her way of life, and I for me take it for granted that a human life which would consist of rational activities only (and not, say, of such "non-rational" activities as making love, listen to, perform or compose music, chatting with friends, etc.) would be completely unjustifiable. Analogously for the activities of groups. Many people seem to mix up the rationality, i.e. justifiability, of a way of life on the one hand, and the kind of activities this way of life is composed of on the other hand; and quite a few misunderstandings vanish in view of this distinction. Stupid "rationalists" will tell you to stay away from emotions and passions, and will refer to the Third Reich by way of argument. Equally stupid "anti-rationalists" will argue that you should not approach such problems as the existence of God by purely rational means, "because" man is "more than just his reason". The truth, however, is that it seems quite rational, i.e. justified, to live a life-with-emotions, and that arguments about

emotions (e.g., about their function) may quite well play a role in the justification of a way of life, but that this justification itself can never be an emotional process[7]. What was wrong with the Third Reich was not that its citizens engaged in all kinds of emotional processes, but rather that these processes were considered as (and sometimes explicitly promoted to) a justification of the system. In the same vein there might be nothing wrong with emotions with respect to God, provided that it would be possible to offer a justification for them; but such emotions can never constitute an argument for theism.

The dependence of rationality on world-views is twofold. As I have by now stated *ad nauseam*, justification and rationality are always provisional and relative to world-views; they are relative to world-views because ultimately there is nothing beyond world-views to which we might have recourse[9], and they are provisional because world-views should always be considered as not completely adequate and as subject to further improvements. This obviously constitutes a weakness of relative rationality in that it is less reliable than absolute rationality would be, if it were possible. This dependence of rationality on world-views is one of limitation and interference (see thesis (1)). On the other hand rationality is also dependent on world-views in that the latter provide the required basis for rationality. I shall try to articulate this important point somewhat in detail.

It is important to realize that an individual or group, when confronted with a justificatory problem, does not start from a *tabula rasa*. Let us consider a typical example. If someone wants to realize an end and considers some action justified as a means to this end, then one might contend that performing the action cannot be justified because the end itself is not justified, at least not in an absolute way. Why then choose the "justified" means, rather than another one ? The answer is that the individual *wants* to realize the end, and, given that he wants this, is justified to perform the action of which he justifiedly believes that it will lead to the realization of the end. I do not want to be misunderstood in this connection. Obviously, performing the action is in no way absolutely justified, and, furthermore, if the individual is rational, he will also critically examine the end (at some moment, see theses (p) and (q)), and perhaps replace it by a more justified one. However, given his world-view as it stands, some action may quite well come out justified. In this sense, the epistemic, volite, and like attitudes of the individual provide a basis to start from for relative and provisional justification.

If this is what rationality comes down to, what reasons would there be to be rational ? Why, e.g., take a decision that turns out rational in the above sense ? Indeed, the world-view under consideration might be completely inadequate[10]. The obvious answer is that the subject in question cannot make a better choice, given his beliefs, wants, etc. Indeed, just as we are unable to avoid ultimately epistemological solipsism, we are unable to offer absolute justifications. Still, the relatively and provisionally justified choice is the most justified one. If the world-view is minimally adequate, the choice made might be better than some alternatives (although, of course, it should not be so), and if the world-view is totally inadequate, there is no way to decide in favour of whatever choice[11]. The point is almost commonplace; we all evaluate a life as Albert Schweitzer's[12] higher than one as Adolf Hitler's, and this notwithstanding the fact that it remains true from a theoretical and absolute point of view that there is no ultimate proof that the real consequences of Schweitzer's actions were not worse than those of Hitler's actions.

Still, some might want to go further, and question why, e.g., one should make the most justified choice. Here the answer is that there is indeed nothing valuable *in se* about being rational, but that, given the fact that we want to realize certain ends, rationality is our only guarantee for making the best choice of means to these ends, and even of making the best choice of ends (in view of alternatives, in view of the predictable consequences of pusuing them, etc.)

I have mentioned several times that rationality is itself a matter of rational argumentation. Not only "reasoning" but also knowledge about the world plays a role in the justification of a form of rationality. E.g., my rejection of absolute rationality does not rely on merely theoretical objections, but relies essentially on beliefs about humans and about reality as faced by them. Now, I do not claim that the form of rationality defended here may be met in every situation or by everyone, for it clearly presupposes certain sociological and psychological conditions. Were the actual situations are disadvantageous, one might try to change them in such a way as to make possible a situation which is more favourable to rational justification. It goes without saying, however, that the present view on rationality should be adapted, i.e. presumably weakened, in case its presuppositions would conflict with the actual situation as well as with possible situations (or, more correctly, with our justified beliefs about these situations, for it is we that will have to change them). Ideal rational men and ideal rational societies may be interesting but will not help us to change anything in case it is impossible to realize

them.

6. *The circularity of* "formal" *rationality*

The kind of relative justification defended here if affected by a form of circularity. In the absence of ultimately reliable justificatory procedures, the only alternative to circularity is a *regressus ad infinitum*. As comparad with the latter, circularity is the lesser evil in that it at least allows for an overall self-correction, whereas a justification by infinite regress allows for no correction at all.

By claiming a case of self-correction I do of course not mean to say that there is any absolute guarantee on "correction"; any guarantee is and always will be relative to the world-view (and to other pragmatic factors). Even such a guarantee would fail if the world-view under consideration would become static. This would result in a case of strict circular justification, and any hope on self-correction would thereby become spurious. Furthermore, that the world-view is not static does not seem to be a sufficient condition for self-correction. To see why this is so, consider a case of circular dynamics : part A of the world-view is replaced by A' in view of B, C_1, ..., C_n; next, part B is replaced by B' in view of A', C_1, ..., C_n; next, A' is replaced by A for analogous reasons; next, B' by B; etc. No doubt, self-correction would become a very weak notion in such cases. For this reason, it seems to me that the openness of a world-view (in different respects) and the fact that at least a part of the information received in virtue of this openness is considered relatively reliable, constitutes the main reason to believe that the changes made to the world-view make it more adequate (in the sense of section 5), and hence constitutes the main reason to regard relative rationality as a form of rationality at all. Apart from logical criteria, we have no external (i.e. external to our world-view) criteria to test parts of our world-view, except for the information acquired through some or other form of openness. In this sense a weak form of empiricism is defensible. No doubt, it depends on the world-view that certain forms of openness are considered justified; this solipsistic circle cannot be broken. But if such forms of openness are present, the world-view is at least one that "imposes certain test requirements to itself", and consequently the application of the criteria of rational justification to such a world-view may result in a case of self-correction.

This seems to be the place to say a word about "material" rationality, i.e. a notion of rationality defined with respect to its content; well-known examples are : to be rational is to apply

scientific methodology (presupposing that such a thing is given); to be rational is to further progress, a notion which is then defined as derivable from a study of the history of mankind; etc. Material rationality escapes all kinds of relativity, circularity and provisionality which are typical for "formal" rationality, and this is considered a major advantage by its proponents.

The obvious criticism to any kind of material rationality is that any attempt to justify it results in a position which is subject to the open-question argument. Indeed, the justification of a form of material rationality cannot refer to a formal rationality, for such a move would be abortive. Hence, any justification for it will always be either that it is a stipulative definition, or that it is an explication of some (common sense or other) use of the term, or that it is a description of the way people behave in certain privileged situations, or something of that sort. No such kind of justification can cope with the question 'Why is it rational (in the serious sense)to be "rational" (in the defined sense) ? ' or, in other words, 'Why should one be rational, if so and so is meant by 'rational' ? '

It seems to me that the discussion between formal rationality and material rationality rests largely on a misunderstanding. Proponents of material rationality always come up with arguments of the following kind : it cannot be rational to regard scientific theories on a par with astrological theories; it cannot be rational to stick to moral rules which are alledgedly justified on religious grounds, come what might, i.e. wahtever facts might become known, whatever cruelty they might result in, etc.; it cannot be rational to let one's decisions be determined by spiritism; etc. I grand that all this is true enough. But I would like to stress that such forms of behaviour are not irrational *in se*, that they should be considered irrational in view of our justified but nevertheless only relatively certain beliefs, which are themselves dependent in part on empirical evidence. Spiritism might be a good method to find out certain truths if we lived in another world than we do; and it is not because certain theories are called scientific that they are any better than astrological theories. The reason why I consider the aforementioned statements true is not that science (or its methodology) would be "constitutive" for rationality, or that spiritism and some (or all) forms of religion would be "constitutive" for irrationality. The reason why I consider these statements true is that they seem justified in relation to my world-view; and the reason why I believe that almost everyone (now living) should consider them true is that I believe that almost everyone has such a world-view that, if the kind of rationality defended here is applied to it, will necessarily be transformed in such

a way that the aforementioned statements will be considered justifiedly true[13]. The heart of the misunderstanding on the side of proponents of material rationality is, it seems to me, that they consider formal rationality as a construction "in the air" and henceforth as irrelevant to concrete and real behaviour in the concrete real world. They certainly are right that formal rationality is a construction "in the air", but they overlook the fact that, formal rationality, at least in the form it is defined here, is not applied "in the air", but is applied to concrete and real world-views. The absolute variant of formal rationality might indeed be completely irrelevant to real life situations, the relative variant on the contrary is not. Analogously, the absolute variant might lead to inactivity and conservatism, the relative variant has not these consequences; its device is not that one should, e.g., fight for and only for what has been justified in an absolute way, it is that one should fight for (and only for) what is justified and justifiedly important on the basis of one's world-view.

7. "Ethical rationality"

In the literature we currently come upon such expressons as 'scientific rationality', 'technical rationality', 'ethical rationality', etc. It was an explicit request of the organizers of the present volume that authors should take a stand with respect to the difference, if any, between such forms of rationality and with respect to their status. I shall now try to characterize my position in this connection. It will be clear already that I consider it meaningful to speak about rationality in general, that rationality should not be restricted to kinds, each of which would apply to one sort of contexts in which certain problems are to be solved either by any means or by means of a defined set of methods. Here too I agree with Larry Laudan who claims that his characterization of rationality holds with respect to all kinds of problems, and not only to the kind of problems studied in detail in his aforementioned book, viz. the choice between scientific theories.

On the other hand, I do not see any objection against the definition of restricted forms of rationality or, as I called them in section 3, forms of conditional rationality. In this sense scientific rationality might be characterized by articulating the methodology which turns out the justifiedly best means to gather knowledge on a number of aspects of reality. Analogously, technical rationality might be defined by pointing out the methodology which justifiedly can be taken as leading to the most efficient realization of a given set

of aims, either in general, or, in a more restricted form, with respect to a given set of theories and of knowledge about singular facts.

Having stated that I regard such forms of conditional or restricted rationality as meaningful, I would like to stress at once that their independence of other forms of conditional rationality and of rationality in general should not be overestimated. To mention just two examples : it is obvious that the ideology of a scientist may influence both the empirical evidence he will collect and the theories he will come up with[14], especially in the human sciences; and it is also obvious that the organization of the scientific community, both globally and locally, will influence the choice of a research project[15], and hence will ultimately influence the body of scientific knowledge we shall arive at. As a further remark it should be mentioned that someone who is rational in the sense of some form of conditional rationality need not for that reason be rational in general. Hence, there is no reason to evaluate positively conditional rationality as such. A technically rational nazi is not to be evaluated as better than a less efficient one as far as their intentions are concerned, and has to be evaluated decidedly as worse than a less efficient nazi as far as the consequences of their actions are concerned.

In my opinion ethical rationality is neatly different as to status from forms of conditional rationality as the ones mentioned in the preceding paragraph. In any serious sense of the term ethical rationality is *not* a form of conditional rationality. To act rationally on the basis of a given and not critically examined set of ends, norms and value-judgments can only be called ethically rational in an abortive sense (it might be called technically rational). The form of conditional rationality that might be the best candidate for the label 'ethical rationality' would be one in which at most a set of beliefs about the world would be considered as beyond discussion; but precisely because of the relevance of factual beliefs for norms, value-judgments, and the like, even this use of the term would seem too restrictive. In general, it seems to me that ethical rationality in the serious sense should be taken to mean rationality with respect to actions and decisions. If this is correct, ethical rationality coincides with rationality in general, and hence incorporates (improvements of) all forms of conditional rationality. Some might judge my characterization of ethical rationality too wide, and argue, say, that it is not ethically relevant which plate I will order at the restaurant at lunchtime. I think this argument rests on a misunderstanding. It is, of course, ethically relevant how much money (and time) I spend in restaurants, it is ethically relevant what food I eat, it is ethically relevant where I buy my lunch; but there may be so large a number

of possibilities which turn out to be equally justifiable, that one
might get the impression that the matter in ethically irrelevant.

Where the conclusion of the preceding paragraph reads that any
decision, any action, is ethically relevant, is an object of
considerations of ethical rationality, I now want to add that not one
action or decision can be justified on ethical grounds alone, and even
that if ethical reasons are distinct from rational reasons in general,
then ethical reasons simply do not exist. This point has been argued
for, convincingly it seems to me, by Jon Wheatley ("Ethics does not
exist", *Ethics*, 84 (1973-74), 62-69).

Separate actions or separate decisions to accept some norm or
value judgment as a guide to future behaviour and evaluation cannot
be justified independently of world-views, i.e. of ends, norms, value
judgments, etc. on the one hand, and of factual beliefs, metaphysical
beliefs, methods, etc. on the other hand That this is so follows
already from the very nature of relative and provisional rationality.
There is, however, a further point in contradistinction to, e.g., the
justification of factual beliefs. If one is a realist (in the ontological or
metaphysical sense, not, heavens beware, in the epistemological
sense) then one might take 'believe that A is true' to mean believe
that A is true in the correspondence sense of the term, i.e. one might
relate factual beliefs to something independent of world-views. I
hasten to add that one can never controll in a direct way, let alone in
an absolute way, that some belief does indeed "correspond to
reality"; metaphysical realism is after all a metaphysical thesis; but if
it is subscribed too, the justification of a factual belief may be
considered a justification of the correspondence of the factual belief
with something independent of the believing subject. The situation is
quite different, it seems to me, with respect to the justification of
actions, or of norms, etc. Although I do believe that such items are
objects of rational consideration and discussion, although I believe
that some such items are more justified than others, I cannot see
what entities existing in reality, or even what aspects of reality might
be identified as "the correct action" (in a given situation) or "the
correct norm". Of course, certain actions are performed in reality
and "exist" in this sense, but only by virtue of their being
performed; alledgedly more justified actions may be conceived of
and "exist" as such, but only on condition of being indeed
conceived; in what sense the "most justified action", the "absolutely
justified action" (always in relation to some situation) could exist I
do not see. The fact that we do perform actions, that we behave
according to norms and take decisions on the basis of (the same or,
more realistically, partially other) norms, is a consequence of the fact

that we are beings who have needs and drives, wishes and desires. Not only the justification, but the very existence of actions performed or of norms, not only as objects of reflection but, more importantly, as actually working mechanisms, derives only from the fact that human beings with properties so and so do actually exist. Hence the asymmetry between factual beliefs on the one hand and normative, evaluative and like parts of world-views on the other hand. This asymmetry does not result in the rejection of ethical rationality, it does not result in the conclusion that all (or even some) actions or norms (etc.) are equally justifiable, but it does lead to the rejection of a value-objectivism which would entail the further claim that such animals as a "correct norm" do "exist".

The space allowed for this article prevents me from even mentioning the justificatory problems connected with sets of norms, value judgments and ends; so I shall keep my remarks on the matter very sketchy. All kinds of problems may arise with respect to such a given set, even if it is considered isolatedly. These problems might be classified roughly into two sets : problems of inconsistency and problems of incompleteness. Just to mention one example of each : an inconsistency results from the fact that something is prescribed whereas some other alternative is rated higher on the basis of a value judgment; we have a case of incompleteness if some end is present without being justified with respect to some value judgment. Furthermore, problems of inconsistency or incompleteness (in the above sense) might arise between, on the one hand, such general entities as norms or value judgments, and, on the other hand, such singular entities as the evaluations of separate facts, whether real ones or possible ones. There are three main points I want to make in this connection.

First of all, factual knowledge is relevant to the justification of ends, norms, and value judgments. Remember in this connection that such questions as what will be the consequences of acting in conformance to a norm, or what will be the consequences (with respect, e.g., to the realization of some other end) of performing a particular action as a means to the realization of some end, are answered by providing purely descriptive statements. And remember also that the study of world-views or partial world-views, i.e. the study of ideologies, the study of ethical, political, social theories and like systems, will result in a body of knowledge which is relevant in this connection. The second point is that the application of the criteria of relative rationality to ends, norms and value judgments leads indeed to the reduction of the role of pragmatic factors. The point is obvious if one remembers which entities are denoted by the

term. The third point is that the form of pluralism mentioned in section 2 may play an important and indeed irreplacable role in the justification of ends, value judgments and norms. The presence of such a pluralism is the best guarantee for being confronted with alternatives (not only "theoretical" ones, but ones that are indeed applied in real life by adherents of world-views different from ours), with serious arguments against parts of our world-view (serious because they are offered from the point of view of and in defence of another world-view, and in attack to ours), with factual statements supporting the arguments mentioned (factual statements which we would probably fail to see if it were not for the presence of alternative world-views).

It became clear from oral discussions that numerous people misunderstand my plea for pluralism, and for that reason I add the following remark. The kind of pluralism defended here does not entail that one considers all world-views as equally justified or as equally valuable. Such a conviction would indeed gravely undermine the adherence to one's own world-view, and is furthermore indefensible in view of the obvious partial irrationality of most people with respect to a number of problems. The kind of pluralism defended here does, however, entail the belief that the presence of other world-views will result in meaningful arguments against our own world-view and in meaningful partial alternatives. At the same time, our attacks against the world-views of our opponents, including attacks against their internal irrationality, may be justified by the very fact that the other world-views are more useful to the justification or justified change of our own world-view according as these other world-views are themselves more justified internally. If we believe that ends, value judgments and norms are not a matter of sheer choice, then we may hope that our opponents will arive at our conclusions if they solve in a rational way the problems we confront them with. And if our opponents do indeed arrive at our conclusions, then this very fact constitutes a further justificatory argument to these conclusions[16].

I add a final remark on scepticism in ethical matters and amorality. Some might agree with whatever I wrote here, and remain convinced that there are no reasons to apply rational justification to their own moral views. Their argument might be that rationality will not make their moral system any more justified for both or one of the following reasons. (i) They might believe that the available knowledge and its possible extensions resulting from further investigations and from a discussion with the opponents that are actually around, will not lead to conclusions relevant to the central

parts of their moral system. (ii) They might believe that an improvement of the (pluralist) conditions for ethical rationality is impossible in view of the world-views and actual behaviour of the individuals around or in view of the existing societal structures. It seems to me that such persons, if rational, could be convinced to be at least partially wrong, i.e. to be wrong at least with respect to some ends, value judgments or norms. I cannot, however, present much of a proof for this statement. The fact that I have some hope in this connection (remember Ernst Bloch) is not much of an argument. Still, I believe that the importance of the problem and the arguments in favour of the possibility of ethical rationality constitute good enough reasons to start developing a moral science, i.e. a science that studies moral, political and social systems from the point of view of justification, both internally and with respect to the results available from other sciences, a science which would point out urgent problems to other sciences, which would point out the aspects in which other sciences are value-laden, etc. I cannot but consider the absence of such a moral science as one of the scandals of our century.

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NOTES

[1] It obviously does not follow that I was or would be looking for a kind of linguistic definition; *cf.* section 3.

[2] As becomes clear later, it does not follow from this that I should presuppose certain scientific or philosophical results to be rational *a priori,* and even less that I should consider them as beyond discussion.

[3] I now prefer 'pragmatic factor' to 'epistemic factor', the term used in my 1974 article.

[4] To rely on thermometers rather than on mere sensorial impressions involves the elimination of a pragmatic factor, but cannot be justified unless in view of certain theories (etc.), i.e. in view of other pragmatic factors.

[5] This is of course a direct reference to Larry Laudan's *Progress and its problems.* It seems to me, however, that Laudan neglects the fact

that a decision about the importance of problems is itself an object of justificatory considerations.

[6] I furthermore disagree with Reichenbach's and Popper's thesis that discovery is a merely psychological and intrinsically nonrational process.

[7] Furthermore, they use a notion of certainty such that the changes in their degrees of credence cannot be reconstructed on the basis of underlying probabilities in the sense of probability calculus. Perhaps, however, they might find a way out of this problem along the lines of L. Jonathan Cohen's *The probable and the provable* (Oxford, 1977).

[8] I realize quite well, of course, that any human mental process is accompagnied by emotions. This, however, does not prevent us from distinguishing emotional processes from argumentative processes in terms of their internal dynamics.

[9] For those that still are not convinced : anything external to a world-view is only given in a world-view and cannot be relied upon unless by virtue of a world-view.

[10] The adequacy of a world-view depends on the adequacy of its parts, and the adequacy of each of these depends on the kind of attitudes it contains, the actual properties of the world (the subject included) and the rest of the world-view. I presuppose that some but not all world-views are adequate, although I do not want to exclude that more than one is.

[11] As mentioned in my 1974 article (p. 99-100) Hume's "problem of induction" and Hume's "is-ought problem" are irrelevant to the type of rationality defended here.

[12] This holds even for the real man, and not only for the myth; see Manuel M. Davenport, "The moral paternalism of Albert Schweitzer", *Ethics*, 84 (1973-74), 116-127.

[13] Risking triviality I repeat once more that the absence of an absolute justification for the rejection of, e.g., spiritism does not make it less irrational not to reject it.

[14] I do not mean that he will "cheat", but simply that his prejudices will prevent him to do otherwise because of mechanisms beyond his control.

[15] In some university departments fundamental research is made impossible by the group structure, the tenure opportunities, etc.

[16] The kind of pluralism that goes with and is considered by some as

derivable from ethical scepticism, seems unjustifiable to me. If I consider all moral systems equally good, I may be tolerant to other moral systems — other than mine, that is — if my moral rules tell me to do so; but I might also physically eliminate my opponents, if this is what my moral rules tell me to do (and if I have the power to do it). Tolerance from scepticism has no theoretical merits.

[17](Added in proofs :) This is formulated in an awkward way; what I mean is that the problem is not to justify given beliefs (etc.), but rather to arrive at justified beliefs (etc.).

[18](Added in proofs :) I should probably have explained better why I take 'what is justified' (in the serious sense) and 'what one should do' as logically equivalent. If a decision D is justified for some person X, then D is justified in X's world-view; D is justified from parts of X's world-view, and more exactly from parts that X considers sufficiently justified and reliable to ensure that D is justified; and D is justified according to methods that belong to X's world-view and that X considers non only as the best available ones, but also as justified to that extent that they ensure that D is justified. If D is justified for X in this sense, and if X is not a nihilist, i.e. if he does have the conviction that some things should be done by him, then I cannot see how he could deny 'I should take decision D' (see also section 5). If someone would merely balk at 'logically equivalent', I would be willing to drop the expression in favour of, say, 'pragmatically equivalent'.