

# Rationality

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## 1 Introduction

The following is the proposal posted for the topic:  
Some questions to consider.

- What is rationality?
- Is there a connection with “reason” and if so what?
- Is it always good to be rational, or might it sometimes be better to be irrational?
- Is there a conflict between rationality and emotional sensitivity or empathy? (rationality is the hallmark of the enlightenment, the revolt against which came as romanticism).
- I’m thinking that we might consider the rationality or otherwise of various possible policies concerning migration, terrorism and membership of the European Union or of the campaigns for and against Brexit.

## 2 Outline Plan

1. Preliminaries
  - (a) Suggested discussion plan.
  - (b) How are the words *rational* and *irrational* generally used (if at all)?
  - (c) The distinction between *unreasonable* and *irrational* in ordinary language.
  - (d) The wide variety of special usages in different academic disciplines, e.g. economics, sociology, law.
  - (e) In relation to its use in philosophy:
    - i. The relationship between *rationality* and *reason*.
    - ii. The difference between *reason* and *rhetoric*.
    - iii. *Theoretical* and *Practical* Rationality (definitions?).
2. Some reasons why the concept is important:
  - (a) Reason as an alternative to violence (connection with fundamentalist terrorism)
  - (b) The role of reason in the genesis and supposed character of Western Philosophy
  - (c) Reason as the foundation for science, technology and of our material prosperity.
3. Some applications for consideration:
  - (a) Refugees, Asylum, Terrorism
  - (b) NICE, health care ethics and politics
  - (c) EU membership “debate” and politics generally
  - (d) the rationality of Philosophy (and academia in general) - “academic freedom”.
4. Some general (theoretical?) Questions:
  - (a) rationality and morality (is rationality good?)
  - (b) rationality and emotion (enlightenment and romanticism)

## 3 Some Notes

### 3.1 Preliminaries

- (b) Not used a lot? The words “logical”, “illogical” has similar meaning, perhaps used more. Irrational is a strongly pejorative term. Irrational beliefs those which fly in the face of (are contradicted by) evidence known to the believer. Irrational actions are those which the agent knows to be incapable of securing his purposes.
- (c) Unreasonable means something different, connotes an unwillingness to compromise. Unreasonable behaviour is more common than irrational behaviour.
- (e)
  - (i) In philosophy the relationship between *rationality* and *reason* is typically much closer, so that rational beliefs and actions are those which conform to reason.
  - (ii) Rhetoric seeks to persuade by means of appeals to emotions, prejudices or other non-rational means. Reason, seeks objective conclusions which are based on evidence and are not influenced by other matters.
  - (iii) Thus philosophy may be concerned (since Aristotle) with theoretical and practical science, and we see in Kant ideas about the scope and limits of “pure reason” (“Critique of Pure Reason”) considered under the headings of “Theoretical Rationality” and “Practical Rationality”.

Theoretical rationality concerns our beliefs, practical rationality concerns actions.

Our beliefs are rational if they are consistent (logically?) with the evidence upon which they are based. Our actions are rational if, in the context of our beliefs and values, they can reasonably be expected to contribute to the realisation of the ends. To consider the rationality of actions, it helps to understand what they are intended to achieve. The ends themselves are not in themselves the subject of the judgement, rather whether the means can reasonably be expected to realise those ends.

### 3.2 Motivators

Why is *rationality* an interesting and important concept to discuss philosophically?

- (a) Reason provides a civilised alternative to physical violence in resolving conflicts of interest between individuals and groups. When such reasonable methods of conflict resolution are systemised into large scale social institutions, they facilitate a society which is fair and just in which individuals can flourish. The antithesis of reason, the resort to violence, is a prominent feature of terrorist organisations intent on imposing extreme fundamentalist religious ideologies. It seems important to keep a firm grip

on these values in responding to the threats we face, and in doing so, we should not be blind to the imperfections of our own society.

In these times, when our fundamental beliefs are under attack, it is important to be clear about what they are, and to ensure that they are not obscured or buried by multi-culturalism. Freedom of thought and speech are among the most important of these fundamental values.

- (b) The origins of the “Western” tradition in philosophical thinking are usually traced to the great flourishing of creative thought and culture located around Greece from about 600 BC. A hallmark of this thinking is its relative freedom from constraint by authority, or established ideology (and the relatively large class of citizens free to spend their time on such things).

These early philosophers sought truth by observing and reasoning about the world around them. They were also influenced by the effectiveness of deductive methods in establishing mathematics as a theoretical discipline, and sought to apply these methods more widely.

The distinctive feature of the resulting philosophical tradition which had dominated philosophy in the Western Hemisphere (and now globally), it that it aims to be *rational*.

- (c) Arguably, it is our ability to reason about our environment which is the principle cause of success as a species, insofar as science and technology result from observing closely and reasoning about the world around us.