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Reasons and Normativity in Critical Thinking

Abstract

The reasons conception is the most prominent account of the nature of critical thinking. It consists in responding appropriately to reasons. Responding to reasons can be following a rule, it can be making an exception to a rule. It depends on the context each time what is the appropriate response. Critical thinking is the educational cognate of rationality. Reasons are generally normative. If this is true then it is to be expected that critical thinking is normative and also rationality. It depends on our character how reasons move us. This indicates that our character must be well formed to enable us to be appropriately moved.

Keywords

Reason, reasons, normativity, critical thinking, reasons conception

Introduction

I intend to explore the reasons conception of critical thinking formulated by Harvey Siegel, describe what it amounts to, and concentrate on what it means to “be appropriately moved by reasons” as he expresses it. First, I examine the notion of reason and its relation to critical thinking. This is necessary because it is basically reason that is moved by reasons. I look at two recent theories of reasons to see how this key notion might be interpreted. It is clear from both of them that reasons are closely related to normativity and rationality. It can be argued that reasons have a fundamental logical form but they are multifarious and reason must respond to them in endlessly varied ways. I inquire into being appropriately moved by reasons and come to the conclusion that being moved appropriately by reasons is to be warranted in what we believe, feel and do. But a well-developed character including reason is necessary for the spirit of critical thinking, meaning the process of critical thinking. This article is written in the analytic Anglo-Saxon tradition analysing thought into propositions, premises and conclusions considering informal logic to be an analysis of thinking.

The Notion of Criticism

Criticism as an essential element in rational thinking has a long history. It first appears in Plato’s works, in Socrates’ questioning of received ideas in his contemporary Athens. The

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clearest instance is perhaps his *Republic*¹ in which Plato subjects his own society to sharp criticism and argues for a different understanding of justice to the one accepted at the time. Theoretical investigations do not necessarily involve social criticism, or investigations of accepted social practices. But in Plato's case he made it perfectly clear that his conclusions had the implication that accepted practices and ideas did not stand up to scrutiny.

Plato is not the only influence on the importance of the notion of criticism in critical thinking. Closer to us in time, Immanuel Kant made criticism a fundamental feature of his whole philosophical enterprise. Three of his most important works are critiques, critique of pure reason, of practical reason and of judgement. He says in his *Critique of Pure Reason* "Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit".² To understand this statement we must remember that Kant was the major author of the German Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement challenging the authority of religion, of the state, of tradition, believing that everything must be examined by reason and if it did not stand up to such an examination it should be abandoned or changed in view of the results of the investigations of human reason. Human reason must even examine itself and it does not discover its principles in books and systems but in and through the activity of the faculty of reason.³ It can be reasonably said that the Enlightenment is still a powerful influence on our understanding of thinking, critical thinking and the status of philosophy.

In the twentieth century there has been a continuous discussion of the status of critical thinking in education and its fortunes have waxed and waned.⁴

Reason and Critical Thinking

Reason and rationality have been of fundamental importance for human beings both as a capability and a source of value. Reason has been endorsed by practically all historically important philosophers of education as an aim of education.⁵ Nowadays, reason is not thought of as a faculty but as an "ability to reason well",⁶ a domain where "diversity reigns",⁷ rationality "supervenes on the mind".⁸ It is clear from these quotations that these authors do not think of reason or rationality as a faculty enabling human beings to intuit truths

1 Plato, "Republic" in *Plato. Complete Works* ed. J.M. Hackett (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

2 Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan, 1933/1781), A xii, 9.

3 Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 138.

4 William Hare, "Content and Criticism: the Aims of Schooling," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29(1) (1995): 47-60.

5 Harvey Siegel, "Cultivating Reason" in *A Companion to The Philosophy of Education*, ed. Harvey Siegel, (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 305-319, 305-306.

6 Siegel, "Cultivating Reason", 306.

7 John Skorupski, *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 22, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199587636.001.0001.

8 John Broome, *Rationality through Reasoning* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 89, doi: 10.1002/9781118609088.

directly or indirectly. It is not my intention to inquire into what these three authors mean exactly by reason and rationality but it is necessary to have some idea what it is.

The obvious question is how reason and rationality are related to critical thinking. We should expect there to be a close relation between rationality and critical thinking. There are various ways of conceiving critical thinking but to cut a long story short I think we should consider critical thinking to be the educational cognate of reason and rationality.⁹ Critical thinking has been important in education but it is not limited to that area of inquiry. Critical thinking is of importance in theoretical pursuits in general and it is a part of becoming a scientist of any sort, a learned person, or a philosopher to master the ability or capacity to think critically.

Let us look a bit closer at what critical thinking might consist in. A panel of experts investigated critical thinking for two years. The result of that investigation was that they understood “critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based”.¹⁰ These experts analysed critical thinking in terms of skills and they believed that it consisted in six distinct skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation.¹¹

This description needs some explaining. Critical thinking is said to be judgement having an aim depending on what the thinker is engaged in and that it can direct, control and evaluate itself. Critical thinking results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference. All these terms deserve detailed analysis but I will not go into it. The definition then adds that the judgement also explains the evidence upon which it is based and the key concepts and methods used. Also, it explains the criteria used and the context in which the judgement is formed. It must be said that this definition of critical thinking is complex and it is not clear how the different parts are related. It raises a number of questions. Note here that it is assumed that judgement is a cognitive ability that enables us to reach a conclusion when there is some doubt about what the conclusion should be of an argument we are examining. But this is not the only meaning of judgement. A judgement can also be a result of the operation of our cognitive ability. It seems clear from the context that the panel of experts conceived of judgement as cognitive ability and it is this ability that should lead us to the results mentioned above and explain the conditions for the operation of that ability. The panel of experts believes that critical thinking consists in a number of skills named above.

It is a part of critical thinking to aim to correct one’s mistakes as mentioned above. It comes more naturally to most people to correct other people’s mistakes, and critical thinking certainly attempts to do that but, more importantly, it is open to its own mistakes.

9 Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 32.

10 Peter A. Facione, *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction* (Newark Del.: American Philosophical Association, 1990) 3.

11 Facione, *Critical Thinking*, 15.

These are mistakes in forming our opinions, evaluating evidence, interpreting key concepts or coming to a conclusion about a decision or an opinion. It is more difficult to discover our own mistakes because our relations to ourselves or our opinions can be strong and complex and these opinions can be parts of our own identity and the decisions in question can issue from desires or beliefs important to us. It is also the case that most of us are sensitive to our own mistakes and are often not willing to admit to them. We often experience admitting to mistakes as a loss of dignity or status. This closeness of ourselves to ourselves often prevents us from seeing ourselves as clearly as we can often see others. This fact, if it is a fact, makes it even more important to keep an open mind about one's own mistakes.

It should be mentioned that to keep an open mind about one's own mistakes does not amount to being a wimp or changing one's mind in the blink of an eye if someone objects to what we say. It means that we are ready to consider seriously any objections or arguments against our own opinions or decisions and take them into account if we think that they are good or reject them if we think they are weak or bad. Usually this takes place in discussions with others but it is not necessary.

It is a notable feature of modern discussions of critical thinking, (see though R. Paul's views on strong and weak critical thinking¹² and Siegel's discussion of it¹³), that often it is not considered how problematic it is to examine and reject one's own opinions if they turn out to be wrong. This is a major feature of the elenchus in Plato's Socratic dialogues. In those dialogues Socrates decides to examine a belief or beliefs of his interlocutor and his method is to examine a particular belief, often a definition, see what it amounts to and find out if it is inconsistent with some other belief of his interlocutor.¹⁴ It was not Socrates' intention to demonstrate the stupidity of his interlocutors but his intention might be construed as shaming them into acknowledging their own ignorance. Socrates himself avows ignorance in these dialogues and in most of them he does not seem to teach anything in the sense of transferring to his interlocutors knowledge that they were not in possession of before, unless we want to claim that recognising their own ignorance is knowledge. But Socrates is not fully consistent in this respect because in two of the Socratic dialogues, *Meno*¹⁵ and *Crito*,¹⁶ he actually claims to teach something and to know something. Our modern conceptions of critical thinking are not limited to acknowledging ignorance and claiming not to teach anything. But accepting one's limited understanding and knowledge might well be a first step towards mastering critical thinking that examines both the beliefs of others and one's own.

12 Richard Paul, "Teaching Critical Thinking in the "Strong" Sense: A Focus on Self-Deception, World Views, and a Dialectical Mode of Analysis," *Informal Logic* 4 (1981): 2-7.

13 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 10-13, 15-18.

14 Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory. The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 68-71; Thomas C. Brickhouse, and Nicholas D. Smith "Socratic Teaching and Socratic Method" in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education* ed. Harvey Siegel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 177-194, 181-186.

15 Plato, "Meno", in *Plato. Complete Works* ed. J.M. Hackett (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

16 Plato, "Crito", in *Plato. Complete Works* ed. J.M. Hackett (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

Matthew Lipman says, when discussing critical thinking, "...we want students who can do more than merely think, it is equally important that they exercise good judgement".¹⁷ Good judgement in this context is the ability to discern important features of any circumstance we happen to be in.

It should not be surprising that critical thinking, reason and rationality turn out to be polymorphous. One might be tempted to construe critical thinking as something radically different from reason and rationality. This would be a mistake. It may reasonably be said that critical thinking is either the educational cognate of reason and rationality, meaning they are coextensive, or that critical thinking is a constituent part of reason but does not coincide with it. Either way it indicates that reason and rationality are complex and we should expect descriptions of them and their justifications to be multifarious.

Now I want to turn to a conception of critical thinking that is more complex than the one I have discussed. It is the "reasons conception".

The Reasons Conception

The originator of the reasons conception is Harvey Siegel.¹⁸ We should keep in mind the distinction between reason and reasons. Reason consists in thinking rationally and reasons are claims on reason that it has to take into account in its reflections.

The basic idea is that "to be a critical thinker is to be appropriately moved by reasons."¹⁹ This is identical to being a rational person; she believes and acts on the basis of reasons. Critical thinking should be conceived of as the educational cognate of rationality. A critical thinker appreciates and understands the importance and force of reasons to support a conclusion and, hopefully, to convince. Reasons typically justify the belief in question or the decision but they can also justify rejecting the belief or decision. Reasons can be of various sorts, they can be appropriate for acting as a teacher, engineer or some other kind of professional and in that case they would be general. But reasons can also be particular, only applicable to the situation in question or the person the belief is about or desire aims at. If you are a parent or a lover then your reasons for the decisions you take are not or need not, some might argue must not, be based on general rules. It can be inappropriate to be moved by general reasons when you are in the position of a parent; you do something for your own child that you would not be prepared to do for any other child. It is part of the meaning of loving your child or your partner that their interests are naturally your reasons for believing or acting. A general rule seems to be misplaced in this context as a justification.

17 Lipman, Matthew. "Critical Thinking-What Can It Be?," *Educational Leadership* 46 (1988): 38-43, 43.

18 Siegel, *Educating Reason*.

19 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 32.

Siegel argues that there are two components of critical thinking as he sees it. The first is a reason assessment component, the second a critical spirit.²⁰ The first is an ability to evaluate reasons and their tendency to warrant beliefs and actions. This implies that the critical thinker must possess, understand and be able to use principles governing the tendency of reasons. She must, in other words, be rational.

These principles are of two types. They are subject specific and subject neutral. The subject specific principles are those principles that only apply to a particular context. Typical such principles are those that only apply to works of art and not to, say, morality or natural objects. These might be principles about the interpretation of novels or historical documents or electrical engineering. Principles or sensitivities mentioned above enabling you to understand other people, especially those close to you, are subject specific in the sense of applying to a particular human being or beings. Subject neutral principles are principles that apply to all contexts or to a wide variety of contexts. These are the principles that are usually called logical in a wide sense including both formal and informal logical principles. These are for example principles about logical fallacies, about inductive and deductive inference.

We might want to inquire if either type of principles is more basic than the other in regard to critical thinking. Siegel argues that both are necessary for critical thinking and one is in no sense basic to the other nor is there any empirical evidence to suggest that one of them is basic to the other.²¹ The skills associated with either sort of principles are not more fundamental than the skills associated with the other type. The skills involved in caring for somebody are certainly important for your life to go well because your personal relations depend on them: If you do not have them it is very difficult if not downright impossible to form normal relations with other people, to have other people as friends or lovers. The same point applies to the logical skills. If you do not know how to detect a fallacy it is easy to fool you, to convince you of something that does not stand up to scrutiny. In the context of using your professional or theoretical judgement then these general, subject-neutral skills are important for your professional life to go well. If you do not have a well-developed sensitivity to fallacious reasoning and a sharp eye for valid deductions or inductions then your professional life does not become impossible but it can become very difficult.

It seems probable to say that both of these types of principles are necessary and that one type validates and reinforces the other. In the context of personal relations it is sometimes true that this particular principle applies and it does not apply to anybody else in the same context. But to be able to say that we have to understand the concepts included in the sentence and to be able to do that we must understand the general principles these concepts imply. These general principles enable us to give reasons for particular statements, explain what we are doing and why. If, on the other hand, we do not have the sensitivity or the judgement to assess the context, see what is relevant and what is not, we would not be

20 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 34-42.

21 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 35.

able to apply the general principles or concepts in the situation we are in. This is what I take it to mean to be “appropriately moved by reasons” that is the key notion in Siegel’s theory of critical thinking. It is impossible to be appropriately moved by reasons unless we are both in possession of general principles and particular sensitivities. “A critical thinker is a person who can act, assess claims, and make judgements on the basis of reasons, and who understands and conforms to principles governing the evaluation of the force of those reasons.”²²

But, as was mentioned before, there is another part of critical thinking that needs to be fleshed out to get the full picture of what it is for a critical thinker to be appropriately moved by reasons. It is what Siegel calls the critical spirit. The critical spirit is the attitudes necessary for the critical thinker to act in a manner suited to support and express critical thinking. The critical spirit is the tendency or disposition to engage in critical thinking, to assess reasons with a view to ask relevant questions about them, to clarify them and see what they come to after having analysed them and understood them. The critical spirit is a critical attitude expressed in the way a thinker conducts her inquiry of anything she is interested in or that is important to her.²³ It is not sufficient that an agent or a thinker sometimes approaches her subjects in a critical way but she must do it regularly and it should come to her naturally; critical thinking cannot be a special posture for a critical thinker but must be a natural way of acting. This implies that the critical thinker must have a certain character. Having a character is to behave regularly in a certain way, in this context to engage in critically examining a question occupying your attention, finding an answer that suffices critical standards. The critical thinker must in all circumstances where it is appropriate be willing to use critical thinking.

This account of the spirit of critical thinking implies that it is not just a cognitive matter but also an emotional one, directly involving our feelings and emotions. Forming a character is impossible unless emotions are directly taken into account if Aristotle’s claim that emotions are non-expendable is true and I see no reason to doubt it.²⁴ It is certainly logically possible to conceive of a person who is cognitively committed to critical thinking and regularly thinks critically but her emotions are either not involved or work directly against her engagement. Of such a person we would say that her heart was not in critical thinking and she would engage in constant struggle with her feelings when thinking critically. We would hesitate to call her a critical thinker if we had all the relevant knowledge about her state of mind. It is clear that she does not have the character necessary for expressing the critical spirit.

There is another aspect to Siegel’s argument that should not be forgotten. He is thinking about education and how critical thinking fits in with the aims and methods in education. He says that critical thinking is the educational cognate of rationality, as has been mentioned earlier. Rationality is such a fundamental feature of human existence that it

22 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 38.

23 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 39-42.

24 Kristján Kristjánsson, *Aristotle, Emotion, and Education* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 53-54, 64-65.

cannot be limited to education. It seems to me that what Siegel says about critical thinking should not be taken to be limited to education and that critical thinking only has a special place there. Critical thinking is not only important in education; it is fundamental to any theoretical pursuit if it is to be successful and in our modern society, with its increasing emphasis on continuous learning and development, on thinking of institutions as learning institutions and even of the whole of society as a learning society, the importance of critical thinking both grows and it becomes relevant to more issues than before. In democracies critical thinking is a *sine qua non* for the citizens if they are to function as citizens are supposed to do, making up their own minds, evaluating the points of view presented by the political parties that offer them their general ideological leanings and organisational power to put their ideas into practice. Citizens may also want to take part in general discussions, argue for their convictions and influence, even persuade others. Some are ready to put themselves forward as candidates either on their own or as a part of a larger group making up a political party. Taking part in politics can certainly limit how you can use your critical thinking in public because you are committed to follow the party line. But thinking critically is important for the candidate in arguing her case with her fellow candidates and in putting her ideas for the public. I think it would be impossible in the present political climate to expect that political candidates engaged in self-examination of the sort mentioned earlier and that they admitted to mistakes and changed their opinions as a result of debates with their political opponents in a democratic dialogue. I take it that democratic political dialogues are not meant to change the attitudes or opinions of the participants but of the listeners, they should clarify the issues for the citizens so they can reasonably make up their own minds with the help of their own critical thinking.

So to be appropriately moved by reasons includes assessing the reasons both as general principles and as applied to the situation of the agent in question. It also includes the will or desire of the agent to engage in critical thinking, her regular inclination to apply critical thinking to any question she is dealing with at that moment in time. The question that needs to be asked now is what reasons are and how they really move us appropriately. In analysing reasons it is necessary to say something about normativity. But first I shall say something about reasons.

Reasons

Reasons are complex things and they come in various forms. I have mentioned two kinds of reasons from Siegel's text, subject-neutral reasons and subject specific. Both types of reasons are necessary for critical thinkers to be able to intend their actions, perform them and to reasonably form their beliefs and act on them. But there are also reasons that are agent-neutral and agent-relative.²⁵ Agent-neutral reasons apply to all agents; if somebody is

25 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 143.

in dire need her lot is a reason for everyone who could help her out. A relative reason is a reason for a particular agent but not for another one but it could be a reason for another agent if she were in a different situation. Subject-neutral reasons are reasons that apply to many types of objects, maybe all, like logical laws. But subject specific reasons apply to a specific area or to particular human beings. The distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons is not the same distinction as the one between subject specific and subject-neutral.

Until recently the status and nature of reasons in relation to reason, rationality and critical thinking had not been subjected to close theoretical scrutiny. Siegel's exploration of the reasons conception of critical thinking is ground-breaking even though it does not answer all possible questions.²⁶ His main concern in clarifying this conception is that the critical thinker should be able to assess "...reasons and their ability to warrant beliefs, claims and actions properly."²⁷ This is fine as far as it goes but it seems clear that reasons come in more guises than these and on the basis of the theory itself we should expect reasons to apply to more spheres of human life than indicated in the discussion above.

John Skorupski argues that there are three types of reason: epistemic, practical and evaluative.²⁸ Epistemic reasons are reasons to believe something, practical are reasons to do something and evaluative are reasons to feel something. He believes this trichotomy of reasons is irreducible and exhaustive. "In all three cases, the epistemic, practical, and evaluative, *being a reason* is a relation-between facts, persons, beliefs, actions or feelings."²⁹ This constitutes what he calls the R-predicate. So these three types of reasons constitute one basic R-predicate. There are two types of R-predicates that have to be taken into account: specific reasons and overall reasons. There is a third predicate that he calls S for sufficient reasons. Specific reasons are reasons of degree for a person at a particular time. When figuring out overall reasons we take into account all the specific reasons we have found and try to evaluate how strong our reason for believing or doing something is, everything considered. A sufficient reason for an action or a belief is a reason strong enough to guarantee the conclusion and it is not reasonable to seriously entertain doubts about it. If a reason is deemed sufficient to warrant a conclusion this does not mean that it could not be false or that it could not not logically follow from the premises but the agent in question assesses the reason strong enough to justify describing it as sufficient. It is not necessary for us here to go into the logical relations between these three R and S-predicates.³⁰

The idea in Skorupski's philosophical exploration is that reasons are basic both for rationality and for normativity. He says "...that the concept of a reason is the fundamental normative concept".³¹ He points out that the three R and S-predicates he identifies can be

26 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 32-47.

27 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 38.

28 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 35-37.

29 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 36.

30 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 37-41.

31 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 77.

considered as the fundamental normative concepts.³² He argues that normativity is not reducible to natural facts and that the reasons relation is a much clearer account of the relations between the natural and the normative than supervenience.

This is an ambitious theory about reasons and reasons relations. It argues that reasons relations are fundamental to our rationality and that the sphere or domain of reasons is the sphere of rationality. Reasons are essentially normative; they would not be reasons for us if they were not normative. This means that there is a close connection between normativity and rationality. This theory of reasons gives us an account of the basis of rationality, reasons being the constituent element of rationality. The scope of this theory coincides to a large extent with the reasons conception of critical thinking assuming that critical thinking is the educational cognate of rationality. To be appropriately moved by reasons is to be moved to believe, to act or to feel for the right reasons.

Normativity

Before going further we need to examine the concept of normativity which appeared in the last two paragraphs. The normative is distinguished from the descriptive in ordinary speech when we state that it is not the same to say “you ought to do x” and “you do/will do x”. In using “ought” we enter the sphere of the normative and it includes words like “good” and “bad” and “should.”³³ Skorupski believes that the three fundamental relations he identifies with the normative can be treated as “the fundamental normative concepts”³⁴ while at the same time accepting that the normative “vocabulary ...is diverse and wide”. He argues that the Reasons thesis, i.e. “that the concept of a reason is the fundamental normative concept” should be seen as a conjecture because it is impossible to investigate all normative concepts in detail.³⁵

John Broome approaches reasons differently from Skorupski.³⁶ He starts by analysing “ought” as a basic term for understanding reasons. Ought can be non-normative as in saying that the word mouse ought to be mouses in the plural. It is truly normative in sentences like “you ought to do your homework’ or ‘you ought to tell the truth”. It may appear that it is impossible to distinguish clearly normative and non-normative uses of ought in various different contexts but Broome³⁷ argues that “there is no continuity, and there is a sharp boundary.” He says that his examples that might appear to contradict this are ambiguous rather than borderline cases. But like Skorupski reasons are for him fundamental to understanding the normative realm.

32 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 77.

33 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 1.

34 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 77.

35 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 77.

36 Broome, *Rationality*.

37 Broome, *Rationality*, 10.

Broome does not give us an exhaustive categorisation of all possible reasons but distinguishes between two different kinds of them and leaves it open if there are other kinds.³⁸ One type is what he calls *pro toto* reasons, the other is *pro tanto* reasons. *Pro toto* reasons are explanations of deontic facts. A deontic fact is a fact that N ought to p. Examples of deontic facts are that Linda ought to keep her promises, John ought to tell the truth and Sarah ought to know how to behave at classical concerts. Deontic facts are normative but the reasons for or explanations of deontic facts need not be normative. *Pro tanto* reasons are some things that count in favour of F, acting or believing something, or against F. They are typically things which play a role in weighing different factors in an explanation of why an agent ought to F.³⁹

Rationality or critical thinking is essentially involved with reasons and their assessment. The domain of reasons is the domain of the normative. This follows from what has already been said about reasons. It seems to me to follow from this that rationality is essentially normative. It is not just involved with normativity but rationality also seems to be one source of normativity along with prudence and morality. Broome suggests that we should think of rationality as a source for normativity in a similar sense to morality and prudence. We can see it in examples of contradictory beliefs. If we discover contradictory beliefs in ourselves it is impossible for us to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time and be rational. It is certainly possible to hold contradictory beliefs unconsciously or consciously. But it is not possible to claim that we are rational in consciously doing so. Why is that? It is because both cannot be true and if we state that we believe something to be true that we know is false then our rationality is at fault. In his questioning Socrates tried to discover contradictions in his interlocutors' beliefs in order to refute them. The premise was that contradictions cannot be taken seriously in a rational agent. Admitting that your beliefs were contradictory was supposed to open the way for more coherent and hence rational beliefs. The interlocutor may not have realised that her beliefs were contradictory and was hence unaware of it. There is nothing wrong with holding contradictory beliefs unconsciously but as soon as the contradiction is pointed out it is obvious that the interlocutor is irrational if she is not prepared to correct one of her contradictory beliefs. Rationality is a source of normativity in this sense that you ought to correct your beliefs if they are contradictory. This does not seem to be limited to contradictory beliefs but can be applied to any belief, desire, intention or decision that we can justifiably call rational. It would need spelling out in detail but there is no need to do that here.

Broome explores the connection between rationality and normativity.⁴⁰ We might want to ask why we believe that we should respond to reasons. The answer we might give could be that rationality consists in responding to reasons because reason is a source of normativity. I think Broome might accept this but he examines if rationality could consist

38 Broome, *Rationality*, 62.

39 Broome, *Rationality*, 53.

40 Broome, *Rationality*, ch. 11.

in responding correctly to reasons. He rejects this idea. I do not think we should worry about the details of his arguments but ask ourselves if that rejection has the logical consequence that we should reject the idea that rationality or critical thinking consists in being appropriately moved by reasons. The first thing to notice is that the reasons conception says that rationality or critical thinking consists in being appropriately moved by reasons. It does not say that it consists in being correctly moved by reasons. Being correctly moved seems to imply that there is one correct way to respond to reasons. Being appropriately moved has no such implication. These two ways of describing the relation between reason and reasons are not logically equivalent. So we can reject the idea that Broome's argument denying the idea that rationality consists in responding correctly to reason has the conclusion that we should reject the reasons conception.

Rationality and morality carry their own rewards in the sense that it seems to be impossible not to give a moral reason for being moral and not give a rational reason for being rational. You might want to say that here we hit the limits of rationality and we only had the option of being irrational in persuading our interlocutor and that it can sometimes be rational to be irrational as Siegel puts it.⁴¹ Or we might try to make our interlocutor care about our idea or explanation.⁴² Or we might use still other methods like diplomacy, mediation, disruption or interest group politics.⁴³ The problem with all these other methods to persuade our interlocutor is that they are not conducted along lines that are necessarily rational. Sometimes it might be rational to use them but their special characteristics are not parts of rationality. They are power based, terror based or love based or whatever. It seems part and parcel of being moral and being rational that the reasons we act on or base our beliefs on must be moral and rational. This seems to me one consideration for saying that rationality and morality are sources of normativity.

How Do Reasons Move Us Appropriately?

When moving in the realm of reasons we must ask how reasons actually move us appropriately. One answer might be that they connect up with our desires, either our actual desires or desires that we would have if we were fully rational. This answer is problematic because the former option implies that we should be able to capture normativity and hence rationality in terms of our actual desires. This is implausible both because the actual desires people have vary and because some people might have irrational desires or immoral ones. There is no way that this account could capture normativity and rationality and demonstrate how reasons move us appropriately. What about the second option? This says that the desires we would have if we were fully rational would move us appropriately. But this

41 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 133.

42 Harvey Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed? Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 186.

43 Emily Robertson, "The Value of Reason: Why not a Sardine Can Opener?" in *Philosophy of Education 1999*, ed. Randall Curren (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2000), 1-14.

way of demonstrating being moved appropriately by reasons assumes rationality as a condition for the desires we have. This has the logical consequence that we explain what it is to be moved appropriately by assuming rationality. But the idea is that being moved appropriately by reasons constitutes reason or rationality. We cannot explain reason by reason.

Another answer to how reasons might move us appropriately is to say that we are moved by the reasons we have. But what does that mean? It means that a reason for an agent to do, believe or feel something is a fact that rationally requires the agent to count that fact in favour of doing, believing or feeling something. It seems that we should say that being appropriately moved by reasons consists in rationality getting a grip on the agent and the agent treating this something as a reason.⁴⁴ The important part here is that rationality is assumed to be a feature of the agent, we might say that it “supervenes on the agent’s mind.”⁴⁵ Treating something as a reason is a necessary condition of being appropriately moved by reasons. But we need something more, something that elucidates this idea. One suggestion might be that when we are warranted in seeing something as a reason for or against believing, feeling or acting, we are appropriately moved. Skorupski⁴⁶ defines warrant as sufficient reason for acting, believing or feeling something. But warrant can come in two ways; it can be a reason that we can in principle know by careful reflection or it can be a reason that we have but do not know and cannot know by reflection alone. Even though Skorupski argues that reasons have three basic logical forms he accepts that reasons can vary enormously and we respond to them in multifarious ways. If we are warranted in responding to reasons we act, believe and feel rationally. This account explains being appropriately moved by reasons as being rationally moved by reasons. This coheres well with what Siegel says about being appropriately moved by reasons.

There is more to rationality and critical thinking than responding to reasons. We also need “the critical spirit”, meaning general attitudes and dispositions making us sensitive to evaluative aspects of critical thinking. It has been argued that the critical spirit is a necessary feature of critical thinking and the character traits specified. But it is not critical thinking as described in terms of its propositional product that necessarily involves traits of character but the process of reaching those conclusions in question.⁴⁷ The process in question is reasoning and it is something we do, not something that happens to us. In reasoning the motivating force are reasons and their normative power. Reasons motivate us through captivating our attention, through rational curiosity, our rational passions. If we are not prepared to accept this power of reasons it does not seem to be possible for us to reason well. Rationality and normativity call for judgement and sensitivity, not for pure skills.

It is important to realise that becoming a rational agent is not something that happens naturally to human beings. It takes considerable effort by children, parents, teachers and

44 T.M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 7.

45 Broome, *Rationality*, 89.

46 Skorupski, *The Domain*, 107-109.

47 Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 39-42; Siegel *Rationality Redeemed*, 55-71.

society in general to help make children rational agents. To become a rational agent is an achievement by any young person. I do not intend to discuss that process because it is complicated and takes a long time. But I want to mention one part of it that is of major importance for all human beings in becoming rational agents. It is the formation of their character. This is part of the spirit of critical thinking that Siegel has discussed.⁴⁸ I do not intend to deal with some of the objections raised to the possibility of making sense of talking about character or of thinking that character can have actual influence on agents' actions and beliefs. But character is a stable mixture of traits that govern the behaviour of persons. These traits gradually develop into virtues. The virtues are the most important moral features of each person. Rationality or reason is one of the virtues and mastering it is difficult and takes a long time. Children and adolescents need guidance, encouragement and reprimands when appropriate. If this part of their education is successful the good reasons we have for acting, believing and feeling have a better hold on the rational agent. Her judgement is more discerning of what constitutes a good reason. Achieving this development is important for the rational agent herself, for her closest relatives and for society in general.

Conclusion

I have inquired into the reasons conception of critical thinking as put forward by Harvey Siegel. First, I looked at reason and critical thinking and argued that reason is not a faculty but a way of responding to reasons, discerning what good reasons are. Then, I asked what reasons are, how they move us and how they are related to rationality and normativity. I argued that reasons are closely related to normativity and rationality, and that they are polymorphous and affect us in various ways. Even though it can be argued that they have fundamental logical forms this does not reduce their variety. The key notion of being appropriately moved by reasons seems to be best elucidated in terms of being warranted in what we believe, feel or do. But we do not get a hold on responding appropriately to reasons unless we develop a character including rationality leading to a critical spirit.

If reasons, *pro toto*, *pro tanto*, epistemic, practical or evaluative, general or subject specific, govern our beliefs, feelings and actions we must learn to assess and judge reasons well and wisely. They are our best way to truth and reality. Critical thinking seems to be the best way to learn to formulate our judgements, take into account the evidence we have and aim for truth.⁴⁹

The reasons conception of critical thinking captures well the constituent parts of critical thinking.

⁴⁸ Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 39-42; Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed*, 35-36, 105.

⁴⁹ Harvey Siegel, "Truth, Thinking, Testimony and Trust: Alvin Goldman on Epistemology and Education," *Philosophy and Phenomenology* 71 (2005): 345-366, 353, doi: 10.1111/j.1933-1592.2005.tb00452.x.