**Alfred Tauber**

Alfred Tauber’s essay challenges us from several directions, of which we would like to respond to three: (a) his contention that our notion of rationality is injudiciously restrictive; (b) that our analysis of thinking, discourse, normativity and change of mind should be far more attentive to the empirical findings of the human and social sciences; and (c) that we should take a broader view of the process of normative realignment we study to make room for associationist “bolt of insight” accounts of human creativity as well as what he dubs, bordering on the oxymoron, “unconscious rationality”.

We indeed use the term ‘rational’ in a restrictive sense, and deliberately so (in more ways than one). First, we use it as an adjective restricted to a certain class of actions, namely, deliberated or reasoned action, as opposed to moves made unwittingly, impulsively or unconsciously, however desirable and praiseworthy they turn out to be. In other words, we reserve the term ‘rational’ for *exercises of agency*, and refrain, therefore, from common *derivative* uses the term, as depicting, for example, humans in general as creatures *capable* of rational action, or certain moves, implements, theories, institutions or strategies as, or as if they were outcomes of rational action. We prefer restricting the adjective “rational” literally to what we believe we have reason to do, and do so *thinkingly*.

We are aware that others, with whom we have no significant quarrel, use the term “rational” differently, and restate our preference merely to say what we mean by it in the book. Game theory, for example, employs the term in the latter sense, deeming a move to be rational, if it is in the actor’s interest (succeeds in maximizing her utility function), regardless of whether it was undertaken intentionally. We, by contrast, use ‘rational’ not as a category of acts, but as a dispositional category of (exclusively human) act*ing*. More on this in the postscript.

Our decision to exclusively focus by means of the term ‘rational on the subcategory of deliberated or reasoned human endeavor, is by no means motivated by imperial claims regarding the essence or outer limits of human mindedness, or those of human normative realignment. It is motivated by a particularly pressing and stubborn *problem*, of which the entire community of philosophers of mind, language, science and self, seem to have despaired: namely, how normative realignment could ever be considered rational *in that restrictive sense of term*, i.e. as the outcome of *reasoned deliberation*?

It is worth briefly rehearsing it in order to meet the first and then the second of Tauber’s objections.

In the most general terms: to act (or refrain from action) is to introduce (or refrain from introducing) some change into one’s world or picture of it. To have reason to do so is to find them sufficiently wanting or lacking (or not) to merit such intervention (or lack of it). Hence the immediate connection between rationality and criticism. To act rationally, on such a showing, is to take action in the face of perceived shortcomings and failings, to which one feels justified to attend.[[1]](#footnote-1) So much for background.

The problem begins to take form with the realization that criticism necessarily presupposes normative commitment. To deem anything to be sufficiently *wrong* to consider putting *right*, and the person criticized − be it ourselves or others − to be wrong not to attend to it, is to issue a complex normative judgment, for which, and this is crucial, prior standards of rightness and wrongness have to be firmly in place. Wrongs and failings are by definition breaches of norms, and will constitute reasons to act *only for those whose norms they are*. So far, so good, except that no coherent line can now be drawn between “objective” and “subjective” as Tauber proposes. Humans are fallible, and actors are liable to err at every level. But the Nagel-type distinction Tauber aspires to make is not between a person misjudging a situation and getting it right *from her subjective point of view*, but between that and getting it right in a way “to which all may subscribe”. But that is an illusion.

Normative diversity is a fact of human life, not a form of relativism to which one can refuse to subscribe. Moral, ethical, aesthetic, political, religious and epistemic norms have changed drastically over time, and are dramatically diversified across cultural, social and political divides. Some norms and standards are more widely committed to than others. But that in itself doesn’t lend them extra credence or value. (the global appeal of soccer, pop music or Hollywood bespeak at most a human commonality, not universal truth!). What constitutes problems, shortcoming and their viable resolutions are thus inherently and inescapably framework-dependent, and they, therefore, provide reasons and justifications only to those whose framework it is. Unbearable problems for some can be precious blessings for others, and leave yet others wholly indifferent. Put differently, and *pace* Tauber’s recruiting of Nagel, there is no such thing as a view from nowhere. Subjectivity and objectivity, like truth, realism, value and importance, are concepts with which no account of human mindedness can dispense, but, and this is a major premise of our work, they are nonetheless thoroughly framework-dependent, and hence, by definition irredeemably *thin*.

Unlike first-order urges, desires and impulses, which to some we willingly submit, while firmly resisting others, our normative commitments command our assent. We abide by them not merely as a matter of fact, but as a matter of *rational* demand - in our restrictive sense of the term. We hold ourselves and others *accountable* for failing to live *up* to what we and they deem respectively to be right, precisely because failing to abide by our norms is literally to act *unreasonably*. But the demands of rationality, still in our restrictive sense of the term, do not stop there. We regularly criticize others not for not abiding by their norms, but for the norms they abide by. The secular criticize the religious not for not being religious enough, but for being religious! - and vice versa.

And the same should apply to self-criticism. To aspire to conduct ourselves rationally requires us to subject *ourselves* to both forms of normative critique to which we invariably subject others – holding ourselves responsible not only to live up to our commitments, but to live up to commitments worthy of living up *to*. We are required, in other words, to maintain critical distance from our norms and hold them in normative check – which is another way of saying that to live up to our full rational capacity, again, in our restrictive sense of the term, is to be committed to norms *we have reason* to be committed to. But this is where the glass ceiling is hit, for we have no normatively critical resources other than the norms to which we are committed. How is it then at all possible to subject to our critically appraisal the very norms by which we perform such appraisals?!

*That* is the problem, the very specific, yet pressing problem, that animates *The View From Within* – a problem, which to the best of our knowledge, no one else seems to deem surmountable. It is the problem we purport nonetheless to solve.

There is no need to rehearse the solution to it we propose in the book in order to meet Tauber’s critique. The fact that other conceptions of rationality abound, does not render the problem of normative self-critique less acute. It cannot be brushed aside as the unwanted consequence of our overly-restrictive concept of rationality, as if adopting a decision- or game-theoretic approach could make it go away. Much good work is done in the sciences, and many an advancement made that is not problem driven. Much of mathematics is done by playfully trying out different options for size with the hope of hitting on one that proves fruitful. That too will not make the problem go away. It is also quite unclear how attention to the empirical findings of the human sciences can be relevant to it. Are there findings capable of convincing us that we *are* able to normatively self-scrutinize our commitments, or that not being able to do so is not a problem?

Normative commitment can intensify and wane uncontrollably in ways irrelevant to the question we set ourselves. We fall unwittingly in and out of love with people, forms of art, ideas, groups and places. We find ourselves caring less about what we once deemed of crucial importance and vice versa. As Harry Frankfurt urges, we are under obligation to “getting ourselves right”, telling apart real commitment from mere infatuation, and keeping track of what we’re committed to.[[2]](#footnote-2) But to discover such normative waxing and waning in retrospect is a matter very different than subjecting the norms to which we *are* committed to normative appraisal. Taking responsibility for *finding out* who we are, and taking responsibility for who we are, are two very different things! If the latter is humanly impossible, we cannot be held *accountable* for who we are.

The problem of normative self-critique, or, better, that of the inevitably normative constraints on self-critique, emerges vividly in the context of our admittedly restrictive notion of rational action, but it is not an otherwise avoidable by-product of endorsing it. Put differently, it is a problem for all and any normative framework, and is, therefore, of itself *not* dependent of any specific one! It is a quite general philosophical problem that, as we argue, plagues the entire contemporary discussion of agency, normativity, science and self[[3]](#footnote-3); it is a problem for which empirical scientific findings are, in principle, to no avail.

Nor is it a problem about how new ways of thinking and seeing the world present themselves to creative individuals – an intriguing topic of study in its own right. The problem is not in the least eased by the fact that our minds can become radically changed as the result of inspired moments of revelation, sudden brainwaves, or ‘bolt of insight” experiences out of which creative new ways of seeing suddenly and inexplicably present themselves, as Tauber’s several real and literary examples amply prove – whether or not they are deemed to be romantic inexplicable flashes or owe to an involuntary associationist knack.

Again, the difference between finding one’s identity-forming framework to be sufficiently normatively lacking to seek replacements, and deeming it so retrospectively from a newly acquired vantage point, is categorical. Put differently, it is one thing to produce a highly creative Alice in Wonderland scenario, and quite another to find it scientifically viable, let alone to frame it prospectively to that end,

The solution we propose in the form of exposure to potentially ambivalalting external criticism, can be debated, of course, but the essentially philosophical problem of normative self-critique that motivates us will remain a major stumbling block for any non-reductive account of human agency adamant not to reduce normativity to neuro-physical impulse.

1. Deeming a problem sufficiently pressing to merit intervention, is not yet sufficient reason for *me* to intervene. In normal circumstances, it would be wildly irrational for me to attempt root-canal treatment on anyone, even if I was right in assuming she needed it. And by the same token, just as rationality demands casting a wary eye around for possible flaws and failings, it requires us to be wary also of our liability to misjudge problems and the ways of putting them right. Rationality’s critical dimension extends willy-nilly to self-critique. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harry Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting it Right*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a detailed discussion of how it has stumped the field see Menachem Fisch, *Creatively Undecided: Toward a History and Philosophy of Scientific Agency*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017, ch.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)