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Article abstract

I discuss Christine Tappolet's treatment of so-called arational actions (chapter 8). Brought to philosophical attention by Rosalind Hursthouse, arational actions are actions done simply because we are in the grip of an emotion (as when we leap up to reach for leaves out of joy). I argue that certainly many instances of so-called arational actions are in fact rational.



EMOTIONS AND (ALLEGEDLY) ARATIONAL ACTIONS

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ABSTRACT:

I discuss Christine Tappolet's treatment of so-called arational actions (chapter 8). Brought to philosophical attention by Rosalind Hursthouse, arational actions are actions done simply because we are in the grip of an emotion (as when we leap up to reach for leaves out of joy). I argue that certainly many instances of so-called arational actions are in fact rational.

RÉSUMÉ :

Je discute de la manière dont Christine Tappolet traite des actions dites arationnelles (chapitre 8). Portées à l'attention philosophique par Rosalind Hursthouse, les actions arationnelles sont des actions accomplies simplement parce que nous sommes sous l'emprise d'une émotion (comme lorsque, par joie, nous sautons pour attraper les feuilles des arbres). Je soutiens que de nombreux exemples d'actions dites arationnelles sont en fait des actions rationnelles.

As Christine Tappolet observes in chapter 8, emotions influence our practical lives in many ways. They might lead us to act against our best judgment, as in cases of *akrasia* (pp. 140-142). Conversely, they might scaffold decision-making by helpfully drawing attention to what matters (pp. 147-149). And while the influence of emotions is sometimes bad (as when emotions prompt us to act against our best reasons), it's also true that emotions can have a good influence on our conduct. For instance, as Tappolet (pp. 145-147; 2003) and others (Arpaly, 2000; Jones, 2003) have argued, what inverse *akrasia* reveals is that emotions are sometimes better than conscious judgments at tracking our reasons for action.

There is yet another way in which emotions influence our practical lives. Sometimes, what we do amounts to little more than an expression of our emotions. Out of joy, I might leap up to reach for leaves on trees. Out of pride, I might posture to myself in the mirror. These familiar behaviours are ones that Rosalind Hursthouse has brought to philosophical attention under the label “arational actions” (1991).

Arational actions, Hursthouse believes, are puzzling. Unlike the sweating of my palms caused by fear, arational actions are *actions*: they are intentional behaviours. Leaping up to reach for leaves is not something that just happens to me, but something I intentionally do. Now, what Hursthouse finds puzzling is that, unlike standard actions, arational actions are done for *no* reason. Instead, they are done just because we are in the grip of some emotion or other. But how can it be that an intentional behaviour be done for no reason? If I don't see any good in leaping up for leaves (using action-theoretic jargon, if I don't see leaping up *under the guise of the good*), then is it really true that my leaping up is intentional? Rather than acting, am I not merely acted on by my feeling of joy?

That's the puzzle. There are different solutions to it.

One is to deny, as Kieran Setiya does (2007, pp. 52-53), that intentional behaviours are necessarily done under the guise of the good (that is, to deny that intentional behaviours are necessarily seen by the agent as good in some respect).¹ On Setiya's view, a behaviour can be intentional even when done for a reason that the agent merely sees as *explaining* the behaviour in question—and not as *justifying* it.² Another solution is to argue, as Tappolet does, that arational actions involve a conflict (p. 139). From the perspective of the joy that I feel, I see leaping up under the guise of the good. From a cold, unemotional perspective, I don't, and so the reason it seems I act on, from my joyful perspective, is one that I ultimately disavow.

My own view is that, in many cases of so-called arational actions, no genuine puzzle arises because in many cases so-called arational actions are in fact rational. I also think that my view is likely to be a view Tappolet should agree with.

A first consideration in support of my view that arational actions are in fact often rational is that acting on a reason does not require full awareness of the reason on which we act. Tappolet should agree with this given what she says about inverse akrasia. Borrowing Nomy Arpaly's example (2000), Tappolet invites us to imagine Emily who quits her chemistry graduate program out of restlessness and boredom (p. 145). It might not be fully clear to Emily, upon quitting her program, what her reasons are—especially given her best (but ultimately mistaken) judgment that she ought to have completed the program. That does not mean, however, that Emily is not acting on reasons. In fact, her conduct arguably responds to the consideration that, had she stayed in that program, she would have been miserable—which arguably is a reason to abandon that program. Given Tappolet's agreement with Arpaly regarding the rationality of Emily's conduct, Tappolet should accept that acting on reasons does not require full awareness of the reasons on which we act.³

A second consideration is that expressing our emotions is often good for us, a fact we might have some awareness of (even if not full), especially when in the business of expressing our emotions. Living out my joy by leaping up for leaves is presumably good for me, something I might have an inkling of, especially when leaping up. Likewise, yielding to the urge to cry is presumably good for me too, something I'm likely to have some awareness of, especially when crying.

I won't say much to support this second consideration, except that repressive coping seems generally unhealthy (Mund & Mitte, 2012) while acceptance of emotions (even negative ones) seems, by contrast, prudentially good (Ford et al., 2018). Of course, living out one's emotions is not always a good thing, all things considered. Breaking furniture out of anger is something we might rightly regret. It still seems plausible that exteriorizing one's emotions is generally good and healthy, a fact that many of us have some awareness of. And this is something that Tappolet might accept.

Taken together, these two considerations suggest that so-called arational actions (in at least cases in which expressing one's emotion is good for us, we have an inkling that that's the case, and that inkling relevantly contributes to explaining our conduct)⁴ are actions done for reasons—reasons we might have limited awareness of, but reasons nonetheless. If that's right, then in many cases there's no genuine puzzle about arational actions because the actions that that misleading expression refers to are most of the time *not* arational.

I have so far deliberately avoided Tappolet's main example, the example she borrows from Hursthouse in which Jane tears at Joan's photograph out of anger. In that example, there is not just some arationality, but arguably plenty of *irrationality*—specifically, the irrationality involved in Jane's wish that, by gouging the eyes of Joan's picture, she could harm Joan. This case, however, is pretty unusual, and I worry that foregrounding it, as Tappolet does, risks distorting the discussion of actions that express emotions. After all, ordinary expressions of emotions (as when I yield to my urge to cry) don't involve the kind of symbolic thinking to which Jane succumbs.

To conclude, I suspect that in certainly many cases the label “arational action” is a misnomer. And given her views, I believe Tappolet has reason to agree.

NOTES

- ¹ Like Setiya, Hursthouse also ends up denying this (1991, p. 65).
- ² For Hursthouse, explanatory reasons do not even seem necessary for intentional actions.
- ³ Perhaps what is required for acting on a reason is no more than an inkling of that reason, together with the fact that that inkling relevantly contributes to explaining our conduct. I will tentatively assume the truth of this minimal requirement in what follows (though I cannot argue for it here).
- ⁴ The last two clauses echo what I take to be a plausible minimal requirement on acting on a reason (see n. 3 above). Drop these clauses if you are not convinced.

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