

Second Version

Rationality and Reflection: How to Think About What to Think, by Jonathan Kvanvig.  
New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 1 + 198.

At the heart of epistemological theorizing is the desire to answer certain questions: What is the world like? What is true? What should I believe? In Rationality and Reflection, Jonathan Kvanvig takes this as the starting point for developing a theory of rationality. He argues that the right theory will be responsive to these questions, and to our need to ask them. It will also do justice to the ‘perspectival’ nature of rationality: the fact that questions about what we should believe are asked, and should be answered, from a particular point of view. To accommodate these desiderata, Kvanvig proposes a special role for reflection—that is, thinking about what to think—in determining what is rational to believe.

In the course of developing this view, Kvanvig also takes a stand on a number of questions of current interest. These include the nature of epistemic defeat, and its relation to propositional or doxastic approaches to justification (the main focus of chapter 1, plus two appendices); the question of normative fallibilism, or whether rational agents can be guaranteed to know that they’re rational (chapter 2; Kvanvig’s answer is ‘no’); the possibility of normative pluralism, or whether we need a second normative notion like ‘excusability’ (chapter 3; ‘no’ again); the epistemic significance of disagreement (chapter 4); and the question of whether rationality is restrictive or permissive (chapter 5). The story of when and how reflection can influence the rational requirements—the most significant contribution of the book—is not developed in detail until chapter 6. (Readers may find it helpful to go back to earlier chapters after reading chapter 6, to better understand how the positive role for reflection is meant to shed light on these other questions.) In this space, I will give an overview of the picture given in chapter 6, and

then highlight some of its purported consequences. As I will argue, some of these consequences may be less inevitable than Kvanvig takes them to be.

Kvanvig's overall picture of rationality is roughly as follows. At first, before we begin to reflect, our beliefs are governed by 'fundamental' (or 'beastly') rational norms. But if we do reflect, we can thereby come to change or replace the norms that we are subject to. Reflection, for Kvanvig, is an activity aimed at deciding 'what to make of one's evidence'. (In other words, then, reflecting amounts to doing applied epistemology.) It influences what one should believe not by providing *more* evidence, but by altering one's 'total perspective'. What is rational to believe depends on one's total perspective, including both one's evidence and what one has decided to make of it.

The way in which reflection alters one's rational requirements depends on the nature of the reflection itself. If reflection is genuine and 'uncorrupted'—that is, if it is motivated by purely epistemic goals, such as believing truth and avoiding error—then it has a fairly straightforward effect. A theory that one arrives at in the course of genuine reflection thereby comes to be true: a reflective agent's beliefs become rationally governed by the epistemic principles that she adopts. 'Corrupted' reflection can influence rational requirements as well, but does so primarily by introducing defeaters. Sadly, someone who engages in corrupted reflection will often find herself with no fully rational option, since her reflectively-endorsed epistemic principles are illegitimate, but the principles that governed her pre-reflectively have been defeated (p. 150).

What theory will genuine, uncorrupted reflection lead us to? Kvanvig leaves this as an exercise to the reader: what's rational for *you* depends on the outcome of *your own* reflection. And different people might reach different reflective conclusions. This is the basis of Kvanvig's endorsement of 'Optionalism' (which others have called 'permissivism'): the thesis that there can be multiple rational doxastic responses to a single body of evidence. If rational requirements depend on both one's evidence *and* the results of one's reflection—and if there is some leeway in the course that genuine reflection may take—Optionalism follows. Kvanvig embraces quite a strong version of this conclusion. Those who follow 'pathological' epistemic practices, as well as 'debunked disciplines such as astrology or phrenology' (p. 159) may end up counting as rational, as long as their hearts are in the right place. After all, any of these views might

result from sincere and well-motivated inquiry, from one's own perspective, into what one should believe.

We might worry that if rationality leaves us this much leeway, it will lose any robust connection to truth. Kvanvig acknowledges this objection (pp. 161–2), and suggests that the connection is as follows: when a body of evidence supports taking some attitude, it also supports believing that that attitude is a good one to adopt for the purposes of getting to the truth and avoiding error (p. 162). Is this connection strong enough? Maybe not. Kvanvig only argues that this connection will hold for 'prima facie', or unreflective, rationality. But 'all-things-considered rationality', which includes one's reflection, is where Optionalism takes off. One might worry that any meaningful connection between rationality and truth gets lost at that stage. All we can expect to retain is the following, weaker connection: one should take one's *own* rational beliefs to be responsive to one's *own* epistemic goals. We can't expect rationality more generally to be a good guide to truth, if reflection is so permissive.

Optionalism—in particular, leeway regarding genuine reflection—also plays a significant role in Kvanvig's treatment of peer disagreement (chapter 4). Kvanvig argues that the proper response to peer disagreement depends, in part, on one's 'view of self', which is part of one's reflective perspective. Because reflective perspectives can differ, a case of disagreement that would call for one person to revise might call for another to remain steadfast. Kvanvig thus argues against 'Mollificationism', a strong view that says that disagreement calls for compromise across the board.

In one sense, Kvanvig's view here has much in common with 'conciliatory' or 'equal weight' views (the less-committal cousins of Mollificationism that have been defended in the literature). A common motivation for these views is the thought that disagreement provides evidence that one has made a rational mistake: put in Kvanvig's terms, it rationally affects one's view of self. Disagreement is significant, according to this line of thought, in part *because* there is pressure to align one's beliefs with one's view of self. It is true that, as Kvanvig remarks (p. 108), considering the possibility that we have rationally erred can 'alienate' us from our (former) view of our evidence and our abilities. But this is arguably the challenge that disagreement poses: it provides pressure to adopt a *new* perspective, consistent with our *new* view of self. So something like

Mollificationism might be compatible with Kvanvig's view after all. To support it, we would need to argue that disagreement provides pressure to revise one's reflective perspective.

Optionalism is an interesting and controversial thesis in its own right. And it's clear that, in Kvanvig's view, much depends on how properly-motivated reflection is characterized, and how much leeway it allows. Although Kvanvig takes the boundaries of reflection to be quite loose, it is worth asking whether this must be the case. It seems to me that there are at least two places where opponents of Optionalism might find support for their view, without departing from Kvanvig's general framework.

The first is the notion of genuine reflection itself. For Kvanvig, recall, reflection influences the rational requirements to the extent that it is motivated by purely epistemic goals. But which goals, and which ways of pursuing them, count? Kvanvig rules out some obvious examples of epistemic 'corruption'—for example, trusting Wikipedia to impress a potential love interest (p. 150)—but it is quite plausible that we can rule out more than this. For example, consider someone who only cares about believing truth, and is unbothered by the possibility of error. If this person goes on to believe everything, contradictions included, on the basis of her reflection, should those beliefs count as rational? Arguably, they should not. Continuing this line of thought, we might plausibly argue that the conditions for genuine reflection are quite restrictive. (Kvanvig, it should be noted, finds this conclusion implausible: see pp. 120 and 140, for instance. But we might disagree with that even if we adopt his more general view about the role of reflection.) This would open the door to a more restrictive overall theory of rational belief.

Anti-Optionalists might also appeal to another element of Kvanvig's overall picture: unreflective, or 'beastly' rationality. Recall that before we begin to reflect, on Kvanvig's view, rationality gives us a head start in forming our view of the world. Once we have started down a particular epistemic path, however, is it obvious that reflection might lead us to such a wide variety of possible theories—rational phrenology, grue projection, or skepticism? Maybe not—especially if the reflective theory that one develops is in part based on one's pre-reflective view of the world. Depending on how we

fill out the details of the theory, then, rationality might end up much more restrictive than Kvanvig predicts.

Rationality and Reflection highlights some important—and, to my mind, entirely correct—desiderata for a theory of rationality. Kvanvig’s theory offers an interesting way to accommodate those desiderata, and provides a new setting in which current debates can play out. The framework does not force us to adopt any particular conclusion in those debates, especially those that depend on Optionalism. But this is good news. These are hard questions, which are still worth reflecting upon.

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