

Book Review
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The Architecture of Reason: The Structure and Substance of Rationality, by Robert Audi. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. xvi + 286. H/b \$65.00, P/b \$29.95

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The Architecture of Reason is an extraordinarily wide-ranging book—almost overwhelmingly so. Audi’s project is to articulate “a comprehensive, full-scale theory of rationality” (p. vii). Pursuit of such a theory, as Audi conceives it, requires tackling a great number of topics. In Part I, the focus is on epistemology: Audi defends a moderate foundationalism as against coherentism and a moderate internalism as against externalism, and offers accounts of inference and of the generation and transmission of justification more generally. Part II, the lengthiest section of the book, addresses issues in the philosophy of action, the philosophy of mind, and ethics. Audi defends a conception of motivation that give desires a foundational role (such conceptions are often labeled “Humean”, though not by Audi); advances interesting views about the role of intentions in the production of action, the experiential sources of desires, the contents of introspectively-based propositional attitudes, and the nature of value; and argues for the rationality of altruism. Finally, Part III contains a careful argument against relativism about rationality and normative standards.

The topic of the book as a whole is rationality. But what is that? Philosophers, along with decision theorists and psychologists, have offered an array of competing conceptions of rationality. Prominent among them are the idea that rationality is a matter of internal coherence among one’s attitudes (an idea found, for example, in writings on decision theory and, in a rather different form, in T.M. Scanlon’s book), and the idea that rationality is a matter of having the attitudes one has most reason to have (c.f. Alan Gibbard and others).

Audi is aware of these conceptions, but he regards them, fairly enough, as somewhat artificial notions introduced in response to various philosophical concerns. His own interest is primarily in a “quite common sort of rationality” which he characterizes as “consonance with reason” (p. 52). So construed, being rational is akin to being justified, but differs in two main respects. First, the former property has a broader range of application: “we can meaningfully attribute rationality to people independently of some proposition or issue they are rational *about*; but this does not hold for justification” (p. 50). Second, in the cases where both notions apply, rationality involves a weaker standard than justification: it is necessarily true that “justified beliefs are rational,” but “a rational belief need not be justified” (p. 196). For example, “We can imagine a point at which the evidence makes it rational for a juror to believe the accused is (say) innocent, but the evidence is insufficient to justify that belief” (p. 52).

Audi may be right that what he is gesturing at here is “a quite common sort of rationality”. That is to say, his characterization may reflect an ordinary use of the word “rational”. When, for example, one allows that a decision was “rational” despite expressing disagreement with it, it seems natural to interpret one as saying that the decision, despite not being the most justified of the alternatives, nevertheless met some weaker standard.

The problem, however, is that Audi says almost little more about the content of this notion of rationality than the characterization I just summarized. And that characterization does not give the reader enough to go on in evaluating Audi’s many assertions about the conditions under which beliefs, desires and other attitudes are rational or irrational. Knowing only that a belief requires *some* evidence to be rational but *less* than it takes to be justified, for example, does not provide an adequate basis for judging particular claims about the kinds of beliefs that count as rational.

I doubt that Audi would deny this. I suspect he regards his sketchy general remarks about rationality simply as pointing us in the direction of the “quite common sort” of rationality he has in

mind, at which point we are to rely on our intuitive grasp of that concept of rationality in judging what he goes on to say. But it's one thing to grant that Audi's conception of rationality corresponds to a use of the word "rational" in everyday discourse; it's quite another thing to suppose that there is a well-formed, shared, stable and context-independent conception governing that application, such that we can consult that conception in order to adjudicate any number of abstract but fine-grained claims about the scope of the 'rational'. On the contrary, the use of "rational" at issue appears vague and ill-defined. In this regard, "rational" is in the same boat as other words that can be used to characterize attitudes as somewhat, but not necessarily fully, justified. Consider, for example, the use of the word "logical" at work in remarks such as the following (said in the context of a discussion): "I grant that that's a logical assumption to make about her motives, but I think it's a mistake." Surely it would be odd to write a book concerned to identify which attitudes and actions are "logical" in this sense without making any significant effort to analyze, operationalize, or precisify the underlying concept.

Even setting aside the difficulty of evaluating Audi's claims, a question remains: what philosophical *interest* is there in Audi's brand of rationality? If "rational", when predicated of a propositional attitude or action, simply indicates that the belief or action falls to the positive side of a point located somewhere in the middle of the continuum from the wholly unsupported to the fully justified, why should philosophers care which beliefs and actions count as "rational"? There are, to be sure, interesting questions to be asked about what it is for an attitude to be justified. But supposing we have a story to tell about that, what is the additional payoff of an investigation of the "rational"? On the face of it, it seems akin to supplementing an account of the funny with an account of the mildly amusing.

This is not a rhetorical question. There may be a good answer to it. But so far as I can see, Audi does not provide one. The upshot is that it is never clear why the central question of the book,

“What is rational, and what is not?”, should claim our attention. To the extent that what Audi has to say in the book retains interest—and the extent is considerable—this is because many of his arguments and views can be removed from the trappings imposed by that question.

I’ll devote the rest of this review to the most provocative chunk of the book: Audi’s extended defense of altruism, which is based on his unusual view of the relationship between experience and desire.

Audi aims to show that altruistic desires are rational in his sense, and that a persistent absence of altruistic desires, while not strictly irrational, nonetheless “bespeaks some deficiency in rationality” (p. 141). He argues as follows:

In my own case, I want [the experience of a cool swim] for its qualities; and in the basic case, I do not want it for *my* experience of those qualities, even though the experience I envisage is in fact mine. It is the qualities themselves that make the experience attractive to me; they are not attractive to me as features of *my* experience. Why, then, should not those same qualities, envisaged in [a daughter’s or friend’s] experience, or indeed the experience of anyone toward whom I have no negative feelings, make their having that experience attractive to me in a sense implying that it seems desirable to me? (p. 141)

Audi takes this to show that desiring that his daughter or friend have a swim would be “both natural and consonant with reason”, and that it would not be “entirely rational” were he to lack any such desire (p. 141).

The crucial premise is this: Audi’s desire to experience a swim is keyed to qualities of that experience whose appeal for him does not depend upon the thought that it is he who will have the experience. It is the qualities in and of themselves (“cool wetness and free movement”, he tells us elsewhere), and not the fact of their being qualities of *his* experience, that make the experience “attractive”. There is thus nothing to prevent him from generalizing his desire for the experience of a swim to include other people’s having that experience. Indeed, it would seem to indicate a kind of blind spot were he not to generalize in this fashion. For the properties of the experience that prompt his desire are equally present in experiences that are not his own.

We can start to see what is problematic about this story if we ask why it is nonetheless the case that people desire positive experiences for themselves with much greater frequency and strength than they do for other people. Audi's explanation, at least in part, is that we can "more clearly envisage" the qualities of our own experiences than those of others' experiences (p. 145). However, this does not appear to be true. I often believe that other people would have the same experience as me were they to be in a relevantly similar situation—e.g., were they to taste my delicious entrée. And if that is what I believe, then surely I can "envisage" the experience I expect them to have exactly as well as I can envisage it in my own case—it is, after all, the qualitatively same experience.

It seems to me that a plausible explanation of our greater concern with our own experiences must start with the following commonsensical thought: that when we want given people to have given experiences, it is a belief about the *people*, not about the experiences in and of themselves, that moves us. For example, we might believe that an experience will please or benefit a person, and that is why we want her to have it. Granting this point, the fact that we tend to care more about our own experiences than the experiences of others emerges simply as a reflection of the fact that we tend to care more about our own *good* than the good of others—something that is itself surely explicable. But to take this tack is to give up Audi's assumption that an experience's desirability to us does not depend upon facts about whose experience it is.

Audi's assumption about the grounds of experiential desires is held in place by a view about the contents of those desires. The latter view is that in "the primitive case, the most elemental and the most basic case" (p. 90), the content of an experiential desire makes no reference to the desirer. As Audi sees it, underlying his desire for *him* to experience a swim is a desire for there to *be* an experience of a swim, where the experience is not conceptualized as having any particular subject. This is a picture that Audi takes some time to defend, as in these remarks on pain:

Think of the desire for relief from backache. I want the pain to stop. Does this require that I want specifically that *I*, or *my back*, be free of it? Surely not.... My

simplest desire here would be just that *it* stop... [It is not the case that] I myself must enter into the content of those wants (pp. 90-91).

Just as, even if I am the man I see in the mirror, I can believe the man in the mirror to have a stain on his coat, without conceiving him as me (or as anyone in particular), I can want the backache to stop without conceiving it as mine (or as belonging to anyone in particular, though I am *disposed* to conceive it as mine if questions about it arise for me, thereby forcing me to conceptualize it in relation to myself) (pp. 91-92).

And in the case of the desire for a swim, “In wanting to swim for qualities intrinsic to it...I do not need to conceptualize my action as mine or to attribute the qualities to it conceived as mine” (p. 91). It should be clear that this view of the content of the desire renders Audi’s assumption about the qualities that make an experience attractive more or less unavoidable.

There are a number of things to be said here, of which I will mention two. First, the analogy to the man in the mirror does not give Audi what he needs. The sense in which it is true to say that I can conceive the man in the mirror to have a stain on his coat without conceiving him as “anyone in particular” is just that I can believe this about the man without having a view about “who he is” in the colloquial sense at issue when, say, you ask a friend who has just said hello to a passer-by, “Who was he?” But if I believe that *that* man—the man I see in the mirror—has a stain on his coat, then I have a belief that predicates a property of a specific person. It is not a belief about a stain that fails to conceive the stain as any particular object’s stain.

The second problem is this. We may grant that when one acquires through introspection a belief or other propositional attitude about an experience one is undergoing, one does not *identify* oneself as the subject of that experience—one does not judge, or in any other respect establish or note, that it is oneself who is having the experience at issue. In this sense, I do not need to “conceive the backache as mine” in order to form the desire that it cease. It’s tempting to move directly from this observation about the introspective mode of attitude-formation to the conclusion that the contents of introspection-based propositional attitudes (such as desires) do not make reference to the subject. I suspect that Audi makes this move. But in fact, the former does not

entail the latter. There is another option: we can acknowledge the absence of an identification component in introspection while avoiding the conclusion that introspectively formed attitudes lack self-reference by taking it that the self is *automatically* present to the introspecting subject. That this option is the correct one, and that the other option leads to insoluble difficulties, is the central thesis of Strawson's well-known version of Kant's argument in the Paralogisms (as further refined by Gareth Evans and John McDowell).

I turn now to one final strand in Audi's thinking on desire, experience and morality. When Audi asserts that "the rationality of wanting things *for* [experiential qualities] is grounded in the qualities themselves, not on those qualities *conceived* as experienced by *me*" (p. 101), he is not just saying something about why we have the desires we do; he is saying something about how those desires are justified. Audi believes that experiences can have intrinsic value and thus generate reasons for action (indeed, his "axiological experientialism" [p. 98] holds that experiences are the *only* items in the world that have intrinsic value), and he believes that they have the value they do in virtue of qualities they possess independently of any facts about whose experiences they are. As Audi sees it, this entails that we are "prima facie equal in at least one major kind of basic worth: our experiences can have the kinds of qualities that ground basic reasons for action", and that this in turn entails that "only moral principles that embody a prima facie requirement of equal treatment of persons will be justified for us (p. 158). In this way, according to Audi, his treatment of experience provides "some of the basic ingredients of a good argument for a version of the intrinsic end formulation of Kant's categorical imperative" (p. 158).

This assessment strikes me as nearly the reverse of the truth. Even if we were to grant that everyone is capable of having experiences with valuable qualities, we can hardly deny that people vary significantly in the *degree* to which their experiences can realize such qualities. And if what makes an experience valuable and hence generates reasons for action is independent of the question

of whose experience it is, then surely what we have most reason to do is to direct our efforts and resources toward facilitating the pursuits of those who are best positioned to have experiences with the qualities in question. We have correspondingly little reason, in the first instance, to attend to someone who is not thus well-positioned, say, because he has a short life expectancy, or because he is too depressed or stressed to seek out meaningful experiences or to take pleasure in them.

The point, of course, is that Audi's view conduces to consequentialism, not Kantianism. On a Kantian conception, moral principles specify the kinds of claims people may place on the agent: they specify how the agent is constrained in dealing with people, and what she owes to them. The question we must answer if we wish to motivate such a conception is: in virtue of what are people, in Rawls's memorable phrase, "self-authenticating sources of valid claims"? The natural place to look for an answer to that question is surely in a conception of the person, and perhaps in a conception of social relationships. By the same token, it's extremely difficult to see how we might justify Kantian moral principles if our starting point is Audi's, according to which the fundamental concern is to promote a kind of good whose status as good largely floats free of the question of who has it. The whole point of Audi's view of experience is that at the deepest level, the circumstances that generate reasons for action involve no reference to particular people at all.

Regardless of these criticisms, *Architecture* is a rich and illuminating work of philosophy. Much of its richness lies in the connections Audi draws among the topics he discusses. He spends a good deal of time developing subtle analogies between the practical and theoretical realms, and is perceptive throughout about the extent to which questions of justification and of explanation are interwoven in our thought about reason and rationality. Anyone writing in any of the myriad fields touched upon by *Architecture* will profit from its depth of thought and breadth of perspective.

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