

# Author's Introduction to *Reasons without Persons*

## 1 Introduction

*Reasons without Persons* is a defense of a time-slice-centric conception of rationality, on which the locus of rationality, to speak metaphorically, is the time-slice rather than the temporally extended person. On this view, the relationship between two time-slices of a single agent (your earlier self and your later self, say) is not different in kind, as far as rational evaluation is concerned, from the relationship between two distinct agents. How you are, or how you believe you are, at other times plays no special role in determining what rationality requires of you right now.

I am not the first to defend or discuss this kind of view. The book's title is an allusion to Parfit's famous *Reasons and Persons*, where he defends theses about rationality which are similar to my own. More recently, theorists such as Earl Conee, Richard Feldman, and Sarah Moss have argued for epistemological positions on which one's justification at a time depends only on one's mental states (and in particular, one's evidence) at that time. Time-slice-centric theorists also have prominent opponents, perhaps most notably Alvin Goldman in epistemology and Michael Bratman in the theory of practical rationality.

My own time-slice-centric theory is committed to two theses. *Synchronicity* is the thesis that all requirements of rationality are synchronic, and so what you rationally ought to believe, desire, or do at a time depends only on how you are at that time. *Impartiality* is the thesis that requirements of rationality do not make reference to the relation of personal identity over time. Thus, what you rationally ought to believe, desire, or do at a time depends on

your beliefs about what attitudes *you* have at other times in the same way as they depend on your beliefs about what attitudes other people have.

I motivate time-slice rationality by appeal to two considerations. First, I endorse a mentalistic version of internalism, on which what you rationally ought to believe, desire, or do supervenes on your mental states. While this view is consistent with your present and past mental states determining what rationality requires of you, I argue that such a historical version of internalism is in tension with the underlying motivations for internalism. Internalists should be time-slicers. Second, I appeal to puzzle cases about personal identity over time. I don't need the conclusion, defended by some, that the puzzle cases show that personal identity is a metaphysically superficial, or even inconsistent, notion. Rather, I argue that, in the puzzle cases as elsewhere, we can determine what an agent rationally ought to believe, desire, or do without the need to first settle how things lie with the metaphysics of personal identity.

Much of the book deals with particular requirements of rationality. I argue against orthodox Bayesian requirements like Conditionalization and Reflection, and propose replacing them with synchronic, impersonal requirements. Diachronic Conditionalization is replaced by a synchronic analogue which says how your degrees of belief at a time should relate to your evidence at that time, and Reflection is replaced by a impersonal principle instructing you to defer to the opinions of those you take to be experts. I also consider parallel requirements of rationality governing preferences and intentions, in each case arguing that we should reject diachronic, personal requirements in favour of synchronic, impersonal ones.

Time-slice rationality can strike one as a radically revisionary theory, and to some extent it is. But I try to show how we can account for a variety of common-sensical thoughts about rationality, the kind that seem to militate in favour of diachronic and personal norms, within a time-slice-centric framework. I do this in several ways. First, I allow for facts about your mental states at a time to reach out into the past and future, so to speak. What you ought to believe, for instance, needn't depend solely on your present sensory experiences, on a time-slice view, but could depend also on what you know and remember, assuming knowledge and

memory are mental states. Second, I endorse stringent requirements that sharply narrow down how you are rationally permitted to be in light of your present evidence. In this way, if you are rational at each of a succession of times, you will display as a byproduct the kind of stability and intertemporal coherence that we take to be characteristic of rational agents. Third, I argue that some temporally extended phenomena, like reasoning and binding oneself to future courses of action, are not governed by distinctive diachronic norms, but are tools that we, as rationally imperfect agents, will try to deploy in judicious ways to help us come closer to the rational ideal. It is generally important to reason well and to form and stick to long-term plans, not because reasoning and plans are governed by their own diachronic norms, but because good reasoning and effective planning are good means to the ends of rational beliefs and rational actions.

I hope that even readers who remain unconverted will benefit from engaging with my project. Exploring analogies between temporally extended agents and collections of agents, between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal, can be illuminating. We can explore the role of memory by looking at testimony, for instance. Similarly, we can compare future-directed intentions with commands and laws, reasoning with dialogue, time-bias with social discount rates, and planning and strength of will with a variety of game-theoretic problems. Even if the time-slice-centric treatment of these cases is mistaken, identifying precisely how and why the intrapersonal phenomena differ from their interpersonal analogues will deepen our understanding of both individual and collective rationality.