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Mikael Stenmark does philosophers, theologians, scientists, and all others interested in the relationships among science, religion, and rationality an enormous amount of good in this book. As its title indicates, it presents four models of rationality and evaluates them from the scientific, religious, and everyday points of view. The chapters include an “Introduction,” “The Nature of Rationality,” “Science and Formal Evidentialism,” “The Scientific and the Evidentialist Challenge to Religious Belief,” “The Practice-Oriented View of Science,” “Social Evidentialism,” “Social Evidentialism and Religious Belief,” “Presumptionism,” “The Nature and Function of Religious Belief,” “Religious Rationality, Contextualism and Human Practices,” and “Some Concluding Remarks.” As Stenmark, Lecturer in Philosophy of Religion at Uppsala University, wends his way through the various models of rationality and how they fare in the three contexts of science,
religion, and everyday life, he deftly manages to argue that three of the four fall prey to serious challenges.

The first two, formal evidentialism (which holds that a belief is rationally acceptable only if it is obtained by following the appropriate rules) and social evidentialism (which rejects the rule principle and claims that rationality is guided by informed judgments rather than rules), fall prey to the charge that rationality is not independent of the agents and their circumstances. Contextualism (which holds that rationality is context dependent) fails since there is, in fact, a universal standard of rationality that is not evidentialist. The fourth approach to rationality, presumptionism, purports to take into account that no more can be expected of a rational agent than he or she is capable of and that we should presume that someone's beliefs are rational until shown otherwise. There is, Stenmark argues, a universal account of rationality, and presumptionism is it. He concludes with the very strong claim that “the debate on whether religious beliefs are rationally acceptable is over” (p. 359).

Stenmark sets out four theses in his introduction. First, he proposes to argue “against a too narrow conception of what ‘rationality’ is all about” (p. 5). Second, he claims that “most conceptions of rationality proposed by philosophers have been far too idealized or utopian to apply in an interesting way to actual human agents like you and me” (p. 7). Third, he argues that “much of the discussion of the rationality of religious belief has been irrelevant for whether people are rational in being religious believers, and it cannot consequently function as a basis for a recommendation of the appropriate standards for religious rationality” (p. 14). Finally, he defends the idea that “the demand of rationality is for everyone and everywhere the same, that we ought to do what can reasonably be demanded of us with the limited means at our disposal in the particular situation in which we find ourselves” (p. 15).

Does Stenmark successfully defend his four theses? The first claim needs, I believe, little defense these days, especially in the field of philosophy of religion. The work of the so-called Reformed epistemologist more or less broke the back of the overly rigid views of rationality a number of years ago. Nevertheless, Stenmark clearly lays out an overall argument for a broadly construed notion of rationality and does an excellent job of clearly presenting where work on rationality has been this last eighty or so years. Particularly helpful is his discussion of various philosophical research programs—the formal, the contextual, and the practice-oriented. Stenmark has a good command of these approaches and presents them in such a way that even those on the outside of professional philosophical circles should develop a sense of what is involved in the various commitments theorists of rationality make.

His second thesis also does not seem to need as much defense as it might have twenty years ago. Philosophers of rationality who were influenced by the logical positivism of the 1920s and 1930s held to idealized views of rationality. That this was too high a standard has been argued by any number of theorists in the last twenty years. Nonetheless, Stenmark presents his case well and clearly and in a way that outsiders to the conversation of the last twenty years or more can easily access.

The third and fourth theses are more needful of defense, and Stenmark’s approaches are more novel. His claim that discussions of rationality have been largely
irrelevant to religious believers seems to me to be right on target. Stenmark's main approach here is to give an analysis of what kinds of beliefs religious beliefs are and to note that more traditional accounts of rationality simply miss the mark. Religious beliefs (or more broadly, life-view beliefs, of which there are secular and religious versions) are existential beliefs—beliefs that should not be thought of merely in terms of truth and falsity but in terms of how we should live our lives. Choosing such beliefs is not simply a matter of making up one's mind but rather choosing how to live one's life. Since one must have a "life-view," the issue is not whether to have such a view but which one to have. Also, if it turns out that religious views are irrational in general, then secular life-views are as well. Stenmark's defense of this thesis is the most original aspect of his book.

The fourth thesis, in this day of contextual approaches, sounds the most radical and most difficult to defend. Stenmark does a good job of laying out his ground, and I believe on that ground he is successful. However, given our human, finite means of attending to rationality, the account Stenmark is forced to give will not satisfy many of the more traditional theorists of rationality. I once heard a comment about Reformed epistemology that ran more or less like this: "You want me to believe in God for that reason?" I suspect Stenmark's position on rationality will receive a similar response. From the fact that human agents are not capable of reasoning from an ideal point of view, does it follow that we should set the standards so low? Realism is acceptable in these discussions, but shouldn't we hold up somewhat more of a challenge to ourselves?

Be that as it may, Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life is an excellent overview of the issues in the grand conversation among religious believers, scientists, and philosophers. Its attempt to spell out terms in which rationality can be understood but not undercut is excellent. One strength of this work is its clarity of style and excellent English prose. Although the book does introduce a number of technical terms and descriptions, it does not do so beyond what is necessary for comprehensiveness. For those outside the fields of philosophy of religion and philosophy of science, the book is accessible with some work. Compared to other books in the field, Stenmark's is relatively free of arcane, technical discussion. A useful—but missing—feature is a good index to the work.

In addition, the book contributes to our understanding of rationality and the role that human agents play in it. When it comes to religious belief, the book is at its strongest and most original. I'm sure that Stenmark's suggestions for new directions will generate much discussion, and so I doubt that the last sentence of the book, in which Stenmark claims that "the debate on whether religious beliefs are rationally acceptable is over," is true.

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