RATIONALITY, APPEARANCES AND APPARENT FACTS

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Abstract: Ascriptions of rationality are related to our practices of praising and criticizing. This seems to provide motivation for normative accounts of rationality, more specifically for the view that rationality is a matter of responding to normative reasons. However, rational agents are sometimes guided by false beliefs. This is problematic for those reasons-based accounts of rationality that are also committed to the widespread thesis that normative reasons are facts. The critical aim of the paper is to present objections to recent proposed solutions to this problem, according to which the responses of deceived agents would be rationalized by facts about how things appear to them. My positive aim is to argue that accounts of reasons in terms of apparent reasons manage to capture the intuitions that seem to favor a normative account of rationality (more specifically, they capture the connection between attributions of rationality and praise and criticism).

1. Introduction

Ascriptions of irrationality typically constitute a form of criticism, while ascriptions of rationality are a form of praise (see Broome 2005: 336; Southwood 2008: 12; Way 2009: 1, forthcoming; Parfit 2011: 33; Wedgwood 2014; Kiesewetter 2017: 38-42; Lord 2018: 3). More specifically, charges of irrationality involve personal criticism, in which the agent is negatively evaluated for having responded in certain ways (Kiesewetter 2017:...
It is often thought that being criticizable is evidence that one has done something one ought not to do – something one had decisive normative reasons not to do (Greenspan 2005; Lackey: 2007: 594-595; Kiesewetter 2017: 26-38; Madison forthcoming). Assuming that this is so, the fact that charges of irrationality constitute a form of criticism suggests that there is a close connection between rationality and what we have reasons to do. This provides motivation for a normative, reasons-based account of rationality. According to this type of account, being rational is a matter of doing what one has most normative reasons to do (Kiesewetter 2017; Lord 2017, 2018).

Reasons-based accounts of rationality face, however, an immediate problem. It seems that an agent can behave rationally despite relying on false considerations (for example, in situations where the agent is guided by convincing, but ultimately misleading evidence). Yet, plausibly, only facts, and not false beliefs, can be objective normative reasons – this sort of view finds widespread support in the literature (Raz 1975; Scanlon 1998; Dancy 2000; Parfit 2011; Dancy 2000; Schroeder 2007; Álvarez 2010; Lord 2017, 2018). So, on the face of it, there are cases where rationality does not amount to responding to factual normative reasons, but rather to merely apparent reasons. In this

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1 We can think of acts of criticising and praising as typically expressing attitudes of blaming and crediting, respectively. However, if we do this, we should not understand these attitudes as necessarily having a moral dimension. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the evaluations associated with acts of rational criticism and praising (for discussion on the relations between blaming, evaluation and reactive emotions, see among others Strawson 1962; Hieronymi 2004; Zimmerman 2017).

2 Kiesewetter (2017: ch. 2) offers a detailed discussion of how a normative account of rationality is motivated by the relation between criticism and ascriptions of irrationality (see also Way 2009: 1; Southwood 2012: 12). Kolodny (2005) and Broome (2005, 2007) have famously cast doubt on the idea that rationality is normative. It should be noted, however, that when Broome reaches his skeptical conclusion about the normativity of rationality, he immediately goes on to try to explain the connection between charges of irrationality and criticism (2005: 336, 2007: 177-178). This shows that, also for Broome, this connection provides prima facie motivation for a normative account of rationality.

3 Gibbons (2010) appeals to the connection between reasons and rationality to argue against the view that reasons are facts. In this paper, I assume a factualist conception of normative reasons, and I try to defend a conception of rationality compatible with such a conception.
way, several authors have developed theories of rationality as sensitivity to those considerations that appear as normative reasons to the agent (Schroeder 2007; Way 2009; Parfit 2011; Vogelstein 2012; Whiting 2014; Sylvan 2015; Álvarez forthcoming). Given that merely apparent reasons have no normative force, these theories fail to make rationality a genuinely normative notion (Kiesewetter 2012).

There have been recent proposals that seem to offer a way out for factualist reasons-based accounts of rationality, in the face of the challenge posed by rational actions relying on false beliefs (Kiesewetter 2017; Lord 2017, 2018, forthcoming; also Ichikawa forthcoming). The way out would be to argue that there are always factual, normative reasons to which the behavior of a rational agent is sensitive and which rationalize such behavior. In particular, in cases where a rational agent seems to be guided by false beliefs, the reasons that rationalize her behavior would be constituted by facts about how things appear to her – that is, by reasons about appearances, rather than by apparent reasons.

This paper has two main goals, one critical and one constructive. The critical goal is to show that these sophisticated reasons-based accounts of rationality are still unsatisfactory, at least when combined with a factualist conception of normative reasons. The constructive goal of the paper is to argue that theories of rationality as responding to apparent reasons manage to do justice to the main intuitions seemingly supporting reasons-based accounts of rationality, in particular the connection between ascriptions of rationality and criticism and praise. The key move will be to abandon the view that being criticizable requires acting against one’s reasons, while being praiseworthy involves doing what one’s reasons actually recommend.

2. The reasons-based account of rationality

An intuitively attractive idea is that being rational is a matter of being properly sensitive to the reasons one has (Comesaña and McGrath 2014: 61; Kiesewetter 2017; Lord 2017,

As I explain in section 7, in order for a consideration to appear as a reason to an agent, she does not need to represent it as such – it may be enough if the agent is in a position to treat the relevant consideration as a reason (Sylvan 2015)
This idea leads to an account of rationality along the following lines (see Lord 2017, 2018: 23):

**Reasons-based account (RB):** A response \( \varphi \) by an agent S is rational if and only if \( \varphi \) is, on balance, sufficiently supported by the reasons possessed by S.\(^5\)

The response \( \varphi \) may be the performance of an intentional action or the adoption of some reason-sensitive attitude, such as believing or intending. Moreover, the reasons relevant for RB are normative reasons, that is considerations that count in favor of the response in question. I will take it that such normative reasons are facts. These assumptions are shared by the advocates of RB I will be concerned with (see Lord 2017, 2018; Ichikawa forthcoming; also Kiesewetter 2017\(^6\)).

I will further assume that reason possession is a perspective-sensitive relation, involving some form of epistemic access to the fact constituting the reason, although I will not specify whether this access amounts to knowing, being in a position to know, believing or something else. All the defenders of RB I am going to discuss agree that only possessed reasons determine what is rational for an agent to do (and also what she ought to do). One way of motivating this restriction is as offering an attractive account of three envelope cases, and of structurally analogous examples such as Parfit’s mine-shaft scenario or Jackson’s doctor cases (Jackson 1991; Parfit 2011; also Kolodny and

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5 Kiesewetter (2017: 162) explicitly proposes principles concerning rational belief and rational intention that capture something close to the left-to-right direction of the biconditional RB, even if presented in terms of support by decisive, rather than sufficient reasons (this difference will not affect the essence of the arguments below). I will consider rational responses more generally, and I will be interested in discussing whether correctly responding to reasons is both necessary and sufficient for rationality.

Lord does not only endorse the biconditional RB, he goes further and defines what it is to be rational in terms of responding to reasons: ‘Rationality consists in correctly responding to the objective reasons one possesses’ (Lord 2018: 220).

6 Kiesewetter (20017: 6-8) agrees that normative reasons are typically facts, and argues against the thesis that normative reasons are generally mental states, although he leaves open the possibility that in certain particular cases there might be non-factual normative reasons (e.g. perceptual seemings). Anyway, my aim is to discuss whether Kiesewetter’s proposal can be made to work within the framework of a factualist conception of normative reasons.
In these examples, it is rational for the agent to do $\phi$ despite her being aware that there exist facts beyond her epistemic ken that constitute decisive reasons to do something else instead. The type of view I am considering here deals with these cases easily, insofar as the relevant facts beyond the agent’s epistemic ken do not figure among her possessed reasons, and thereby do not contribute to fixing what is rational for her to do (Kiesewetter 2017: ch. 8; Lord 2018: 188-194; Zimmerman 2008; for a perspective-sensitive proposal in an expressivist spirit, see Schroeder 2018).\footnote{A further way of motivating the restriction to possessed reasons is by appeal to guidance considerations (Kiesewetter 2017: 206-211; Lord 2018: 194-202; for discussion, Way and Whiting 2017).}

I will take it that the reasons possessed by an agent sufficiently support a certain response when the combined possessed reasons in favor of that response are at least as strong as the combined possessed reasons against it. Finally, if one wanted to specify what it is for an agent S to be rational in producing a response $\phi$, it would be necessary to add the further condition that S’s response is properly based on the sufficiently supporting possessed reasons. This condition sees to it that S produces her response for the reasons that rationalize producing it.

On the face of it, RB plus the standard assumption that normative reasons are facts leads to bad results in cases where seemingly rational agents are guided by false considerations.\footnote{Probabilistic reasoning can also be seen to be problematic for factualist versions of RB. On the face of it, rational responses are often based on probabilistic considerations (e.g. given that it is likely to rain, it is rational for me to bring an umbrella). However, some may doubt that there are facts that correspond to these probabilistic rationalizers (this problem is pressed by Wodak 2017). Although I do not have space to go into details here, I think that (factualist) RB can overcome this worry. One option is to think of the relevant probabilistic rationalizers as facts about probabilities on the agent’s evidence (e.g. the fact that my evidence makes it likely that it will rain). Otherwise, one can resort to expressivist understandings of probabilistic facts (as recently proposed by Schroeder 2018). Moreover, I think that it is plausible that such probabilistic facts constitute normative reasons counting in favor or against responses (see Kiesewetter 2017: 177-178). For instance, the fact that rain is likely on my evidence makes it risky for me not to take an umbrella, and arguably being risky detracts from the choice-}
on false beliefs, as long as from her point of view there appeared to be good reasons to behave as she did. If one has extremely convincing evidence that $p$, then it seems rational to take $p$ as a reason to produce a certain response, even if, unbeknownst to one, the evidence happens to be misleading and the belief that $p$ is false. Think, for instance, of the agent who drinks from a glass of petrol, thinking that it contains gin-and-tonic (Williams 1981). More radically, it is very plausible that an agent deceived by a Cartesian demon, or a brain in a vat, can be as rational as her lucky counterpart in an ordinary environment (Cohen 1984). In general, it seems that an agent will be rational if she takes proper heed of the considerations that, from her perspective, appear as good reasons, regardless of whether such considerations turn out not to be normative reasons after all. A deceived agent that is internally identical to her rational counterpart should also be regarded as rational (the deceived agent seems to be as blameless and as competent as her non-deceived counterpart).

Cases of deceived rational agents (I will call them ‘bad cases’) put pressure on RB, since in these cases the agents’ responses do not seem to be supported by normative, factual reasons and, nonetheless, they count as rational. Recent proposals by Kiesewetter (2017: ch. 7) and Lord (2017, 2018) suggest a reply to this problem on behalf of RB (see also Ichikawa forthcoming). I will call this reply the appearance reasons view of rationality. According to this view, whenever an agent behaves rationally, there will be factual, normative reasons that rationalize her behavior. In the bad cases where the agent relies on false beliefs, the facts that make her response rational will be, in general, facts about appearances – the fact that things appear to be to the agent as she believes them to be, or, more broadly, facts that appear to support the agent’s belief. On this view, if $p$ is

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9 I will consider that how things appear from the agent’s perspective is characterized by her non-factive mental states, including non-doxastic seemings.

10 Kiesewetter (2017: 174) claims more generally that in bad cases appearances provide normative reasons, leaving open whether these reasons are constituted by the appearance state or by facts about appearances. I will interpret his proposal in the latter way, since I am
a reason for a response in a good case, then the fact that it appears to the agent that \( p \) is a reason in the corresponding bad case. Thus, the central thesis of the appearance reasons view is that appearance facts can be normative reasons for the agent’s response: such facts count in favor of the response, they recommend it (Lord 2017, 2018: ch. 7).

**Appearance Reasons view:** If \( p \) is a reason to \( \varphi \) possessed by an agent \( S \), then the fact that it appears that \( p \) is a reason to \( \varphi \) possessed by an agent \( S^* \) in a situation subjectively indistinguishable from that of \( S \).

So, in the case of the glass with petrol, the fact that the glass appears to contain gin-and-tonic (the agent is in a bar and has ordered a gin-and-tonic) is a normative reason for the agent to drink from it, given that she is thirsty and fancies a gin-and-tonic.\(^{11}\)

At this juncture, one may ask whether appearance reasons in the bad case are as strong as the reasons given by the appeared fact \( p \) in the good case. Kiesewetter thinks that they are, whereas Lord takes them to be weaker. These answers lead to different versions of the appearance reasons view of rationality. I will argue that both versions of the view are problematic.

### 3. Do weaker appearance reasons rationalize?

Let us examine first views that assume that in bad cases the reasons favoring the response (call them *pro-reasons*) are weaker than in good cases. This assumption seems plausible. After all, these reasons are constituted by facts about appearances that \( p \) (where \( p \) is a reason in favor of the response), rather than by the fact that \( p \), and, on the face of it, if these appearance facts give reasons for the response, it is only to the extent that they...
reliably indicate that $p$ is the case (see Comesaña and McGrath 2014). I further discuss this issue in section 4; for the time being I will just grant that the assumption is right.

Lord (2018: 193-198) concedes that appearance reasons are weaker than the reasons that would be given by the appeared facts. However, he suggests that, on balance, the reasons possessed by the agent in a bad case support her response \textit{as strongly} as in the corresponding good case, at least in an important sense. This is so because it is not only the pro-reasons that are weaker in the bad case. According to Lord (2018: 195), the reasons against the response (call them \textit{con-reasons}) will also be equally weaker, since they will be constituted as well by facts about appearances. So, on the view advanced by Lord, in bad cases the weights of the pro-reasons and the con-reasons are weakened by the same measure. As a result, the agent’s response in a bad case will be as rational (i.e. as strongly supported, on balance, by possessed reasons) as in the corresponding good case. In this way, the agent’s response in the bad case is as rational as her lucky counterpart’s in the good case.

Lord’s proposal is problematic in hybrid bad cases where the pro-reasons are appearance facts but the con-reasons are the same as in the good case (and therefore are as weighty as in the good case). It may well be that, in a hybrid case, only the agent’s pro-reasons are downgraded to appearance reasons due to the deceiving environment, while the con-reasons are left untouched (Comesaña and McGrath 2014; Dutant forthcoming; also Litteljohn 2018).\footnote{Comesaña and McGrath (2014) present this sort of argument against the view that possessed reasons are facts about mental states. These hybrid scenarios are also discussed by Littlejohn (2018b) and Dutant (forthcoming). Dutant argues that hybrid cases are problematic for a knowledge-first approach in which the only input to rational decision-making processes is the agent’s knowledge, including knowledge about appearance facts. Dutant proposes instead that the input to decision-making is given by \textit{what is supported} by the agent’s knowledge (where the considerations supported for an agent in a bad case are a counterpart of what the agent in the corresponding good case knows). I take Dutant’s positive proposal to be a knowledge-first version of apparent reasons accounts of rationality – note that what is supported may include false considerations. In the second part of the paper I explain why responses to apparent reasons (to what is supported) are linked to criticism and praise.} Think of a situation where the agent suffers visual illusions but her hearing remains reliable. If the agent’s pro-reasons are acquired visually but the con-reasons are acquired via her hearing, then it seems that the pro-reasons, but not the con-
reasons will lose weight. Consequently, the weight of the agent’s possessed reasons, on balance, will be different than in the corresponding good case (where her vision is also reliable).

Lord (2018: 199-200) acknowledges that in these hybrid scenarios, where deception affects only the pro-reasons but not the con-reasons, his account does not predict that the agent in the bad case is as rational as her lucky counterpart in the good case. However, Lord does not seem to recognize the undermining consequences that these cases have for his proposal. He claims that the agent’s response in these hybrid cases is still rational, even if less defensible than the corresponding response of her counterpart in the good case – in the sense that, on balance, the reasons to produce the response are less strong in the hybrid case (2018: 199). But, contrary to what Lord seems to think, there is no guarantee that, according to his account, the agent’s action will continue to count as rational in the hybrid case. Indeed, it could be that in the hybrid case, the con-reasons (shared with the good case) actually outweigh the downgraded appearance pro-reasons, so that producing the response stops being supported by sufficient reasons and therefore, according to RB, stops counting as rational.

The problem, thus, is not just that RB fails to account for the intuition that the agent in a hybrid case is as rational as her lucky counterpart in the good case. Furthermore, there can be hybrid cases where RB predicts that the agent’s response is irrational – even after one takes into account the relevant appearance reasons. However, it seems that the agent in the hybrid case can be rational (this is the intuition that the advocates of RB were trying to accommodate). At any rate, it seems weird to say that the agent in a completely deceiving scenario is rational while the agent in a partially deceiving environment (e.g. an environment where her visual evidence is misleading, but her hearing is reliable) is not. After all, from the agent’s point of view both situations are indistinguishable. I take hybrid cases to pose a decisive objection to Lord’s proposal. There is not much appeal in a position that holds that a partially deceived agent is irrational whereas her counterpart’s in a systematically deceiving environment is not.

4. Are appearance reasons as strong as reasons constituted by appeared facts?
It seems that the only way out for the defender of RB is to endorse the following view:\(^{13}\)

**Equal Weight:** The reason provided by the mere fact that it appears that \(p\) is, in the bad case, as strong as the reason provided by the fact that \(p\), in the good case (at least insofar as the agent has no further reasons to suspect that \(p\) is false).

I take this sort of view to follow naturally from factualism about reasons plus the Backup View defended by Kiesewetter (2017; see also Huemer 2007):

**The Backup View:** ‘If A’s total phenomenal state supports \(p\), and \(p\) would – if true – be an available reason for (or against) attitude \(a\), then A’s appearances provide an equally strong available reason for (or against) attitude \(a\).’ (Kiesewetter 2017: 174).

Note that the relevant back up reason cannot be constituted by the fact that, given the agent’s evidence, it is likely that \(p\). This reason is clearly weaker than the corresponding reason given by the fact that \(p\) in the good case, and therefore will lead to problems in hybrid scenarios, as discussed above.\(^{14}\) Thus, I will take it that the sort of fact that can generally act as the agent’s reason in bad cases is the fact that it appears to her that \(p\).

I shall argue that Equal Weight is in tension with the core motivations for factualism about reasons. Thus, Equal Weight should be unappealing for those who want to combine an account for rationality as responding to reasons with a conception of reasons as facts that favor some response.

I take it as prima facie plausible that when the fact that \(p\) is a reason favoring \(\phi\)-ing, the fact that it appears to the agent that \(p\) is a reason for \(\phi\)-ing only to the extent that

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\(^{13}\) Littlejohn discusses critically a similar principle, which he calls Exchangeability.

Exchangeability: if the fact that \(p\) constitutes a potent normative reason for \(A\) to \(f\) that has weight \(W\), the fact that it seems to \(A\) that \(p\) constitutes a potent normative reason for \(A\) to \(f\) that also has \(W\). (Littlejohn 2018b: 10)

Note that taken literally Exchangeability applies just to good cases where the worldly fact \(p\) is a reason available to the agent. Equal Weight, by contrast, applies as well to bad cases, where \(p\) is not a fact. I am sympathetic to most of Littlejohn’s objections to Exchangeability, although the arguments I present here are in general different.

\(^{14}\) So, when deciding whether to drink from a glass of milk, one’s rational behavior will be different on the assumption that the milk is not poisoned and on the assumption that it is likely that it is not poisoned.
there is some reliable connection between the appearance and \( p \). This idea becomes particularly natural when we note that appearance reasons are dependent on worldly reasons, in the sense that it is only because we take \( p \) to be a reason for \( \phi \)-ing that we would also be inclined to take the fact that it appears that \( p \) as a reason for it. Below I will say more about how factualist conceptions of reasons motivate this idea, but for the moment let us assume that it is on the right track.

Now, in general the connection between the bare fact that it appears that \( p \) and the obtaining of \( p \) will not be perfectly reliable (appearances are sometimes misleading). Moreover, note that in the bad case the appearance reason cannot be bolstered by the further auxiliary consideration that the appearance is accurate or very reliable in the context the agent is in: this consideration would be false in the bad case, so it cannot be part of a normative, factual reason in favor of the response. Without the support of the assumption that appearances are reliable in the context at hand, the (evidential) probability of \( p \) given the fact that it appears that \( p \) will be generally lower than its probability given the fact that \( p \). The difference is easier to appreciate from a third person perspective. If you are not assuming that Jane’s appearances are reliable, then you will in general assign more probability to \( p \) on the basis of your knowing that \( p \) that on the basis of the bare fact that it appears to Jane that \( p \). In this way, we will feel more inclined to choose a response \( \phi \) that would be recommended by \( p \) if we rely on the fact that \( p \) than if we merely rely on the fact that it appears that \( p \). This suggests that the reason in favor of \( \phi \) given by the fact that \( p \) is stronger than the reason given by the mere fact that it appears that \( p \) (see Littlejohn 2018b for considerations in a similar spirit).

It is true that, in the bad case, the agent will be as confident that \( p \) as her lucky counterpart who, in the good case, knows that \( p \). But, arguably, this is so because the subject in the bad case forms such confidence on the basis of the non-factual consideration that \( p \) (which she takes to be a fact), and not merely on the basis of the fact that it appears to her that \( p \). The deceived agent will mistakenly take herself to know that \( p \), so she will see herself as being in a position to rely on the (apparent) fact that \( p \), and accordingly she will have high confidence that \( p \). Yet, plausibly, if she had relied merely on the fact that it appears to her that \( p \), her confidence in \( p \) would have been lower. We do not always form beliefs on the basis of facts; sometimes we rely on appearances that turn out not to be factual. In other words, if reasons are facts about which we are fallible, then it will be possible that an agent is mistaken about what reasons she actually has. In particular, it may be that the
agent’s actual factual reasons to believe $p$ are weaker than she takes them to be, so that her degree of confidence in $p$ does not match what is actually warranted by her possessed, factual reasons.\footnote{In a similar way, Williamson (2000) insists that, if evidence is taken to be constituted by known facts, then agents may be mistaken about what evidence they have.}

Actually, in deceiving contexts, it may well be that the connection between appearances that $p$ and the fact that $p$ is largely severed, so that appearances that $p$ are extremely unreliable. In a brain-in-a-vat case, appearances never match the facts. In such scenarios, therefore, the fact that it appears to the deceived subject that $p$ is not related at all to the obtaining of $p$—such an appearance fact would not actually be reliably linked with the truth of $p$ (even if the deceived agent mistakenly thinks that it does). In this sort of radically deceiving scenario, the putative reasons provided by appearance considerations are undercut (or at least, such reasons are greatly attenuated).\footnote{For the notion of reason attenuation, see Dancy (2004) and Schroeder (2007).} This is so because, in such scenarios, the fact that it appears that $p$ may be completely disconnected from the sort of features that contribute towards the fittingness of the response $\varphi$ (where $\varphi$ is the response that would be recommended by the fact that $p$). And, arguably, some fact favors $\varphi$-ing only if there is some suitable link between such a fact and features of $\varphi$-ing that contribute towards its fittingness or rightness. I am not assuming that the response is always made fitting by the reason-constituting fact itself. But, at least, the reason must reliably indicate that there exists some feature in the response that contributes to its fittingness. In other words, there must be some relevant reliable connection between the fact that constitutes the reason and fitting-making features of the response. Otherwise, it would not be clear in what sense the putative reason actually favors the response.\footnote{I remain neutral about whether the favoring relation can be accounted for in terms of the notions of fittingness or rightness, perhaps in combination with other notions such as evidence or explanation (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009; Chappel 2012; McHugh and Way 2016a; Whiting forthcoming; Howard forthcoming), or whether favoring is instead a primitive normative relation that explains which attitudes are fitting (for instance, Scanlon 1998; Schroeder 2007; Parfit 2011). I am only assuming that there is some connection between reasons and fittingness, without taking a stand on their relative primacy.}
Assume, for instance, that the fact that this glass contains gin-and-tonic is a reason for Theresa to drink from it because it will quench her thirst – and this makes (or at least contributes to making) drinking from the glass a fitting thing to do. In other words, quenching Theresa’s thirst is the feature of drinking from the glass that favors doing so. In a radically deceiving scenario, the fact that it appears that the glass contains gin-and-tonic does not count at all in favor of drinking from it, since such an appearance fact is disconnected from the properties that would make drinking from the glass fitting (i.e. the property of quenching thirst). In other words, in radically deceiving contexts the putative reasons provided by appearance considerations are weakened or even undercut, because the favoring relation connecting them with the relevant response becomes undermined.

If one wants to insist that radically deceiving appearance facts provide non-attenuated (normative) reasons for the relevant responses, one would have to postulate that whenever a fact \( p \) favors the response \( \varphi \), the fact that it appears that \( p \) also favors that response with the same intensity – even in deceiving contexts where appearances that \( p \) are completely disconnected from the actual presence of \( p \). While this is a possible position, I think it is not particularly attractive for those sharing the externalist intuitions associated with factualism about reasons (it would fit more naturally with an internalist view such as Huemer’s 2007). Anyway, this discussion points towards the more general question whether rational subjects can be reasonably mistaken in taking some fact to favor a given response. It is this more general issue that I address in the next section. I shall argue that it puts a great strain on the view that appearance facts generally provide non-attenuated reasons.

5. Reasonable mistakes about the favoring relation

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I will use interchangeably terms like ‘fitting’, ‘right’, ‘appropriate’ and ‘recommendable’. Although there may be differences of detail in the usage of these terms, I take it that they all point towards the sort of notion I am interested in (see McHugh and Way 2016a for further discussion).

18 Granted, it may be that Kiesewetter’s proposal has additional theoretical benefits that justify abandoning the externalist views associated with factualism about reasons. My aim here is to see whether we can satisfactorily account for rationality while preserving factualism and the externalist intuitions that motivate it.
On the factualist approach I am considering, a normative reason is a fact that actually favors some response. In general, it seems that one can be mistaken about whether a consideration favors a given response, and about the strength of that favoring relation (see Littlejohn 2014). For instance, Alice may mistakenly (even if perhaps reasonably) treat the fact that there is an electrical fire in the kitchen as giving her decisive reasons to pour water on it. Nevertheless, pouring water on an electrical fire is not actually a fitting thing for Alice to do: it can be extremely dangerous. The presence of electrical fire does not actually favor pouring water.

In the same way that one can be rational when guided by false considerations, one can also be rational when mistakenly taking some fact to favor a certain response – perhaps it reasonably appeared to the agent that there was such a favoring connection between the fact and the response. I am not assuming that in order for it to appear to an agent that \( p \) favors \( \phi \)-ing she needs to form an explicit belief that this is so. Arguably, she just needs to treat \( p \) as favoring \( \phi \)-ing (Sylvan 2015). Thus, the sorts of mistakes I want to discuss are mistakes in treating \( p \) as favoring \( \phi \)-ing, which need not involve mistaken explicit beliefs about such a favoring relation.

Now, it is not clear what could be said about these cases by those who want to make rationality a matter of responding to normative reasons (i.e. by advocates of RB). Again, note that, in these situations the agent is not relying on considerations that favor \( \phi \)-ing; rather, she would be relying on considerations that she mistakenly treats as favoring \( \phi \)-ing. But these considerations would not be real normative reasons for \( \phi \)-ing, insofar as the factualist is understanding normative reasons as facts that (actually) favor a response. Therefore, the defender of RB will not be able to say that the agent’s response is made rational by such considerations. Moreover, if the fact that \( p \) does not favor \( \phi \)-ing, in general the fact that it appears that \( p \) will not favor \( \phi \)-ing either, so appealing to this further appearance fact does not seem to help.

So, if proponents of RB want to be able to say that the agent’s response in the cases I am considering is rational, they seem committed to denying that an agent can be reasonably mistaken about whether some response is favored by the considerations available to her: if it reasonably appears to the agent that some consideration favors \( \phi \)-ing, then it would actually favor \( \phi \)-ing (or at least, there would be some backup consideration available to her that would actually favor \( \phi \)-ing). I find this position unappealing. I do not see why we should attribute such infallibility to our rational
dispositions to treat some consideration as favoring a response. At any rate, this commitment puts a heavy burden on those defending RB.

At this point, one option is to abandon the view that normative reasons are facts that actually favor a response. More specifically, one could say that normative reasons are facts that appear to favor the response. Yet merely apparent normative support is not actual support. Moreover, once this step is taken, I see no principled reason not to go further and claim that normative reasons are considerations that appear to be facts that (appear to) favor the response. If the important thing is not whether the reason actually favors the response but rather whether it appears to do so, why should one demand that the reason is a fact, and not just a consideration appearing to the agent as a fact? Since I am assuming the thesis that reasons are actually facts counting in favor of a response, I will leave aside this possibility.

An alternative strategy would be to suggest that, in good cases, the subject has as one of her possessed reasons the fact that the considerations she is relying on actually favor φ-ing. The idea would be to argue that the fact that the favoring relation obtains should be included as an additional available reason. Then, in deceiving scenarios one could replicate Lord and Kiesewetter’s strategy: in bad cases, the further reason would be provided by the fact that it appears to the agent that the considerations she is relying on actually favor φ-ing.

This proposal, however, is not very promising. As I have been arguing, it is doubtful that in general a response φ is favored by p just because of the mere fact that it appears to the agent that φ-ing is favored by p. Perhaps the agent was reasonable in treating p as favoring φ-ing, but this does not mean that φ-ing was actually favored. In certain contexts, our normative judgements about the favoring relation can be widely unreliable. In this way, the presence of an electric fire does not favor pouring water just because of the fact that it appears so to Alice. Likewise, making decisions with the guidance of tea-leaf reading does not become a fitting thing to do just because of the fact that it appears to be so in the community of Joe the Fortune Teller. At least for those of us committed to fallibilism about our epistemic capacities, it seems unmotivated to think that rational agents are always reliable about whether some response is favored by certain aspects of a situation.
Moreover, this proposal faces the charge of overintellectualizing rationality. Arguably, in order for considerations about the favoring relation to be part of one’s possessed reasons, one needs to be able to form beliefs about such considerations. However, beliefs about the favoring relation are rather sophisticated, and it is controversial that all rational agents need to be able to form beliefs with such contents (see McHugh and Way 2016b). Thus, it is problematic to require that rational agents always have among their possessed reasons considerations about the favoring relation.

A final line of resistance for the defender of RB would be to bite the bullet and maintain that in the examples I am discussing φ-ing is not actually supported by reasons and therefore is not rational, even if it may be rational for the agent to take φ-ing to be sufficiently supported by reasons (and, accordingly, it may also be rational for her to believe that φ-ing is rational). Several authors have recently argued that, when agents have misleading higher-order evidence about what attitudes are rational, there can be mismatches or incoherences between the actual rationality of first-order attitudes and the rationality of higher-order beliefs about what first-order attitudes are rational (see, for instance, Coates 2012; Wedgwood 2012; Lasonen-Aarnio 2014; Christensen 2016; Worsnip 2018; Weatherson ms). According to these types of views, it may be rational for agents with misleading higher-order evidence to believe (falsely) that φ-ing is rational and supported by reasons in cases where φ-ing is actually irrational and not supported by reasons (these proposals tend to focus on doxastic attitudes, but the arguments motivating them can be generalized to other attitudes and responses).

It should be noted that it is far from uncontroversial whether this type of mismatch between rational first-order and higher-order attitudes can actually take place (for objections, see among others Horowitz 2014; Littlejohn 2018a). Anyway, even if there could be such rational mismatches, I do not think that proponents of RB would be in a position to appeal to them in order to provide an attractive response to the worries discussed in this section. Remember that the advocates of RB I am engaging with are interested in a notion of rationality that captures the intuitive connection between rationality and criticizability and praiseworthiness – this was the main motivation for developing a normative characterization of rationality in terms of reasons (Kiesewetter 2017: ch. 2). However, authors who defend the possibility of rational mismatches between higher-order and first-order attitudes typically concede that, when it is reasonable for the agent to believe that φ-ing is rational, so that she is not criticizable for
having such a higher-order belief, she is not criticizable for φ-ing either, even if φ-ing happens to be actually irrational (see Lasonen-Aarnio 2014: 343). In this way, criticizability and irrationality (understood in this sense) would come apart. So, proposals that allow for rational incoherence between higher-order and first-order attitudes seem to rely on an externalist notion of rationality that swings free from criticizability and praiseworthiness. This is not the notion of rationality I am concerned with in this paper, since I am working under the assumption that there is an intimate relation between rationality and criticizability.\(^{19}\)

To sum up, the possibility of rational mistakes about the favoring relation creates problems for RB. It seems that agents can be rational not just when relying on false beliefs, but also when mistakenly taking some consideration to favor a certain response.\(^{20}\) More generally, it is not clear why we should think that rational agents are always infallible about what responses are actually favored by the reasons available to them.

### 6. Appearance facts and justifications

Before moving forward, I will consider a further awkward consequence of Equal Weight. If this view were right, then subjects would be wise to cite appearance facts as their reasons when asked to justify themselves. After all, reasons constituted by appearance facts would be safer. In good cases, where the belief that \(p\) is true, the fact that \(p\) and the fact that it appears to the subject that \(p\) would provide the subject with equally weighty reasons, so there is no loss in relying on the latter. Moreover, in a deceiving situation where the subject falsely believes that \(p\), the fact that it appears to her that \(p\) would still constitute a normative reason. Why should one recklessly appeal to the riskier putative

\(^{19}\) Note, moreover, that Kiesewetter (2016) explicitly argues that agents have decisive reasons to φ only if they have sufficient reasons to believe that they have decisive reasons to φ. Thus, he does not seem to be willing to allow for the kind of rational incoherence between higher-order and first-order attitudes discussed above.

\(^{20}\) It is worth observing that such mistakes are compatible with the view that whenever an agent actually has reasons to φ, she has sufficient reasons to believe that she has reasons to φ (Kiesewetter 2016). I am only claiming that one can be reasonably mistaken in believing that one has certain reasons to φ. In particular, one may actually lack reasons to φ despite not having sufficient reasons to believe that this is so.
reason (i.e. the consideration that $p$), if there is nothing to gain from it? When two putative reasons are equally strong, it is a sound argumentative strategy to rely on the safest one (i.e. the one that is less likely to be false), in order to limit the chances of error. By doing this, one does not always implicate that the more insecure consideration is false: it is just that one does not need to run the risk of relying on it. Thus, when writing a paper, it is common to announce that, in order to defend some thesis, one is going to focus on an argument for it that involves as few unnecessary commitments as possible (even if there exist further, more controversial arguments). In this way, one avoids unnecessary exposure to objections.

Thus, according to the Equal Weight, when asked about one’s reasons for $\phi$-ing, one should cite the fact that it appears to one that $p$, rather than directly appealing to the (less safe) consideration that $p$. However, this is not how we generally proceed. In most cases, we justify ourselves by referring to those worldly considerations that support our responses, instead of appealing to facts about appearances (Dancy 2000; Álvarez 2010). Perhaps there are situations where one is not sure enough and retreats to the fact that things appear to be in a certain way. But, precisely, these are cases in which I will be seen as recoiling to a weaker reason.21 For instance, if you ask me why I am taking an umbrella, I may reply that my reason is the fact that it is raining. If I say instead that my reason was the fact that it appears to me that it is raining, you will probably take me not to be in a position to undertake the commitments associated with citing the stronger, but riskier putative reason that it is actually raining. According to the Equal Weight, by contrast, appealing to appearance facts should be our justificatory policy all across the board, and not just in special cases. This, I think, is a distorted picture of our practices of giving and asking for reasons. At any rate, it seems that such a picture should be unappealing for those moved by the arguments supporting the thesis that normative reasons are facts and not mental states – in particular, the argument that, when justifying ourselves, we tend to

21 Actually, it can be argued that sometimes in such cases I will be giving an excuse, rather than a justification (see the discussion in section 7).
refer to external facts rather than to features of our mental states (Dancy 2000; Schroeder 2007; Hornby 2008; Álvarez 2010; Kiesewetter 2017: 7-8).

To be sure, one may try to find ways to resist this line of argument. A possible option is to offer some pragmatic explanation for our tendency to appeal to worldly facts rather than to facts about appearances when justifying ourselves. For instance, it may be argued that, in most situations, our conversational aims are not only justificatory but also informative, and in general citing the fact that \( p \) is more informative than merely referring to the fact that it appears that \( p \). It is not clear, however, that in justificatory contexts (which are often non-cooperative) speakers generally have the additional goal to communicate worldly information, even at the expense of the strength of their justificatory position: it may well be that the speaker’s only aim is to offer the safest justification possible for her behavior. Anyway, this sort of pragmatic explanation, if successful, would undermine the motivations for factualism about reasons, since a similar story would be available to mentalists in order to explain why speakers typically justify themselves by citing worldly facts rather than mental states.

A second option is to endorse some form of error theory, and claim that ordinary speakers are usually unaware that Equal Weight holds. Again, this proposal would diminish the appeal of factualism about reasons, given that mentalists could appeal to an analogous type of error theory. Moreover, it would have the costs generally associated with error theories; in particular, it would be necessary to offer an explanation of why ordinary speakers are systematically mistaken about their justificatory practices.

As I see it, the considerations I have been discussing put a great deal of pressure on Equal Weight. The underlying problem is that if we admit (equally weighty) reasons given by appearance facts, then the reasons given by worldly facts become in a sense normatively superfluous: the former, on their own, would be enough to figure out what we ought to do and to justify ourselves. I take it that this conclusion will not satisfy those with sympathies for factualism about reasons. Perhaps there is some way of defending Equal Weight, but it would prima facie desirable to have a satisfactory account of rationality that does not undertake its weighty commitments. I conclude the paper by

\[ \text{Gibbons (2010: 358-359) suggest that proposals along the lines of Lord’s and Kiesewetter’s are mere ‘notational variants’ of a non-factualist, mentalist conception of normative reasons, according to which reasons are given by features of the agent’s psychological states.} \]
showing how an account of rationality in terms of apparent reasons manages to do so, while accommodating our intuitions about the normative implications of being rational.

7. Rationality and apparent reasons

Apparent reasons are considerations that appear as reasons to the agent, perhaps mistakenly (Way 2009; Parfit 2011; Vogelstein 2012; Whiting 2014; Sylvan 2015; Álvarez forthcoming). A merely apparent reason would not actually be a reason, in the same way that a fake Picasso is not actually a Picasso (even if it may appear to be one). The contents of false beliefs can be apparent reasons for agents that take them to be true. Thus, if rationality is seen as a matter of responding to apparent reasons, we can account for the possibility of being rationally guided by false considerations (Schroeder 2007; Way 2009; Parfit 2011; Vogelstein 2012; Whiting 2014; Sylvan 2015). This sort of view can be sketched as follows:

**Apparent Reasons account (AR):** A response φ by an agent S is rational if and only if φ-ing is, on balance, sufficiently supported by S’s apparent possessed reasons.

We do not need to assume that an agent must believe that p is a possessed reason for φ-ing in order for p to appear to her as such a reason. It may be enough if the agent treats (or is in a position to treat) p as a possessed reason for φ-ing, for instance in her reasoning and as a guide for action (see Sylvan 2015; Lord 2018: 171-175). In this way, p can appear as a reason to agents that do not have the conceptual resources to form explicit beliefs about reasons, thereby avoiding charges of overintellectualization.

One may think that a problem with AR is that it does not capture the normative dimension of rationality (Kiesewetter 2012). Arguably, merely apparent reasons do not have genuine normative force. Therefore, it would not always be the case that being rational is a matter of responding to actual reasons, of doing what one ought to or may do. Although I will grant that this last claim is right, I will argue that it does not undermine AR. It is possible for defenders of AR to make justice to the considerations that seem to support a normative account of rationality.

As discussed at the beginning of the paper, I take it that the main motivation for thinking that there is something normative in rationality is that ascriptions of rationality
are directly connected with criticism and praise. Thus, ascriptions of rationality have a *hypological* dimension, i.e. they have to do with blame, credit, criticizing and praising (for the notion of hypological judgment, see Zimmerman 2002; also Littlejohn 2012).

Now, it could be that hypological and deontic judgments sometimes come apart. There are views that hold that the hypological and the deontic may diverge in several ways (see Austin 1956; Strawson 1962; Wallace 1994; Baron 2005; Gardner 2007; Capes 2012; Littlejohn 2012, 2014, forthcoming; Srinivasan 2015; Williamson forthcoming). According to these types of views, doing something wrong or impermissible does not always make one deserve criticism. Conversely, one may think that agents can be criticizable without doing something wrong or impermissible. Similarly, it can be argued that being praiseworthy does not always come hand in hand with doing what is right or what one ought to do. If this is on the right track, then the fact that being rational is generally praiseworthy (and being irrational, criticizable) does not entail that rationality amounts to doing what there are most reasons to do. Let me present some examples that motivate the sorts of divergences between hypological and deontological appraisals that I have in mind.

Excuses provide examples of situations where one does something wrong or inappropriate but is not criticizable for it (Wallace 1994; Gardner 2007; Littlejohn forthcoming). Imagine that you accidentally step on someone’s toe. You may excuse yourself by claiming that it was an accident. Blameless ignorance can also serve as an excuse. If you offer your friend a glass of milk that, unbeknownst to you, is poisoned, you may excuse your action but claiming that you had no way of knowing that the milk was unsafe. In these sorts of cases, by giving an excuse you try to exonerate yourself from blame, while acknowledging what you did is not something that should be done (you are not trying to justify yourself, to claim that you actually had reasons to do what you did).

There are also cases where the behavior of agents that fail to do what is right seems to be praiseworthy, not merely excusable. More generally, one’s performance can be praiseworthy despite not achieving its fitting aim. As long as one behaves competently and does what is in one’s power to act appropriately, one can be worthy of praise, regardless of the ultimate success of one’s performance. Think of the archer who performs masterfully a difficult shot, but who fails to hit the mark due to the unforeseeable, last moment interference of a hidden magnet. Surely, this archer deserves praise, given the skills she has revealed.
Promise-keeping offers another example. An agent that goes far beyond what most people would in order to honor her promise may be praiseworthy as a promise-keeper, despite failing to do as promised. This can be seen as a situation where an agent is praiseworthy while failing to do what she ought to. By contrast, it can happen that an agent who fulfils her promise merely out of luck is criticizable as a poor promise-keeper, if she showed no care for her promise and made no effort whatsoever to keep it. This reckless promise-keeper would be criticizable despite having done what she had most reasons to do. More generally, agents may be criticizable for doing something that is actually permissible (i.e. it is sufficiently supported by the reasons available to the agent) if they do it for the wrong reasons – analogously, an archer may hit the target out of luck despite shooting in an incompetent way that deserves criticism.

The examples I have examined only illustrate some relevant ways in which deontological and hypological statuses may come apart, without covering all possible combinations of such statuses.\(^{23}\) I do not intend these examples to offer decisive evidence for the view I want to consider, but rather to motivate it. To be sure, one could always try to interpret some of the examples as cases where the agent fails to do what is right to do, but nevertheless is praiseworthy for something else she has done (e.g. the agent was praiseworthy for doing her best to keep her promise). Ultimately, one could retreat to arguing that agents have reasons to try to do what they ought to do, or more generally to do their best to pursue their fitting aims. However, I take it that these examples can also be naturally interpreted as revealing a divergence between deontological and hypological appraisals of the agent’s behavior: they would be cases where agents are praiseworthy for doing something that was actually not right, or where agents are criticizable for doing something that was the right thing to do. More to the point, this interpretation of the cases would suggest that agents may be praiseworthy while failing to do what they had most reasons to do, and criticizable despite doing what they had most reasons to do. In what follows, I sketch a plausible theoretical framework that makes this interpretation attractive, and explains why agents are worthy of praise or criticism in these types of cases. This framework allows for an account of rationality as responding to apparent

\(^{23}\) For instance, one could also imagine an agent who does what she ought to do for the wrong reasons, but who is nonetheless non-criticizable (maybe even praiseworthy) because such reasons appeared to her as sufficiently good.
reasons that does justice to our practices of rational criticism and praise while avoiding the difficulties and problematic commitments of RB.

The ideas I want to explore can be perspicuously expressed from the perspective of virtue theory (see Sosa 2010; Sylvan 2015; Boult forthcoming; Miracchi forthcoming). Appealing to virtue-theoretical language, praise and criticism could be said to be primarily related to evaluations of the agent’s competence, rather to evaluations of the success or aptness of her performance (where an apt performance is a performance that is successful or correct due to the exercise of the agent’s competence). Competences are a type of reliable disposition to perform well of fittingly, at least in favorable circumstances (Sosa 2010, 2015; Sylvan 2015). No matter how competently an agent behaves, it can always happen that she is unlucky and, due to external interferences and factors out of her control, her performance turns out not to be successful (it fails to achieve its aim). So, someone extremely careful may (blamelessly) end up doing something actually dangerous, despite behaving in a way that manifests a careful disposition. In these cases, the agent’s display of competence can still be praiseworthy, as the example of the archer shows.

We can follow Sylvan (2015) in thinking of guidance by reasons from such a virtue-theoretical perspective (see also Boult forthcoming). Rational agents aim to be guided by normative reasons, so that they produce fitting responses. Behaving rationally would amount to behaving in a way that reveals one’s competence in responding only to reasons. Competent agents, however, will not always succeed in answering only to normative reasons. A response that is not actually supported by the agent’s possessed reasons may still display the agent’s (fallible) competence in being guided only by normative reasons. For instance, in deceiving scenarios, the most competent reasoner may end up relying on considerations that are not actually normative reasons for her response. Nonetheless, this does not need to be seen as tarnishing her rational competence (see Sosa

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24 Kelp (forthcoming) regards competences as aim-directed dispositions characterized by their etiology, in particular by the selective conditions under which they are formed or sustained. By contrast, Sosa (2015: 195-206) takes the notion of competence to be a normative primitive. We could also conceive of competences as the sorts of dispositions displayed by virtuous agents. For instance, competences could be seen as those dispositions shared with an internally indistinguishable virtuous agent who succeeds in behaving aptly.
If by relying on such considerations the agent displays her competence in responding to reasons, she may be praiseworthy. Competently responding to one’s possessed reasons is in general something praiseworthy, insofar as exercising such a competence demonstrates one’s sensitivity to the fitting-making features of one’s choices. It could be said the manifestation of this competence reveals a virtuous character trait (Svavarsdóttir 2003; Wedgwood 2014; Boult forthcoming). Another way of putting it is to say that exercising this competence reflects positively on one’s quality of will or mind (Littlejohn 2014; for the relation between criticism and the quality of will, see Strawson 1962; Hieronymi 2004; Zimmerman 2017).

Identifying rationality with mere blamelessness is problematic because being rational is a positive status, rather than just an exculpatory one (Baron 2005; Gerken 2011; Boult forthcoming; Littlejohn forthcoming; Madison forthcoming). However, as we have seen, manifestations of competences aiming at fitting targets deserve positive appraisals, not just exculpatory ones. Arguably, there is derivative (albeit non-instrumental) value in properly valuing and respecting something that is itself valuable (Hurka 2001; Sylvan forthcoming). Manifesting competence in being guided only by reasons is a way of showing proper concern for the fitting-making features of one’s responses. So, if fitting responses are valuable, then the manifestation of rational dispositions will (derivatively) deserve positive evaluations (Miracchi forthcoming; Sylvan forthcoming). By contrast, behaviors that involve a poor exercise of one’s competence as a follower of reasons may be subject to criticism, to the extent that such behaviors show a lack of concern for what is fitting. It is important to note that an agent can engage in such criticizable behaviors without stopping to be responsible for the exercise of her rational faculties (that is, without being excluded from the realm of rational beings). In the same way, an agent that breaks a promise in a criticizable way may keep having promise-keeping capacities, even if she exercises them poorly in relation to that particular promise. Thus, the idea is not that the agent is criticizable for lacking some virtuous trait, but rather that she is criticizable for failing to manifest a competence she possesses and is in a position to exercise (say, the
failure may be due to the interference of some vicious disposition that reflects lack of concern for the fitting-making features of one’s choices).  

Thus, if AR is spelt out in terms of competences, the picture we get is that rational responses manifest the agent’s competence in being guided only by reasons, a competence that involves being sensitive to those considerations that appear to one as possessed reasons (Sylvan 2015). One way to go here is to offer an independent analysis of what apparent reasons are, and then appeal to it in order to further illuminate the notion of rational competence. To a first approximation, an apparent reason could be seen as a consideration believed by the agent and that would be a normative reason if things were as the agent takes them to be (Schroeder 2007; Parfit 2011; for more sophisticated accounts, Vogelstein 2012; Whiting 2014).  

This approach, however, is problematic in cases where the agent has crazy beliefs that go wildly against the evidence available. One may want to say that such an agent is irrational, even if she behaves as would be rational if things were as she takes them to be (for this line of criticism, Kiesewetter 2017: 31-33). Whiting (2014: 6-7) avoids this problem by requiring that the relevant beliefs are themselves rational (of course, this makes the view unsatisfactory as a reductive account of rationality, but this is not Whiting’s goal).

An alternative strategy is to characterize the idea of apparent reason in terms of the notion of competence, which would be taken as more basic. On Sylvan’s (2015) view,  

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25 When the agent lacks the relevant competence, her responses are not rational or irrational, but rather arational (e.g. compulsive behaviors). Kiesewetter (2017: 37-38) discusses cases where an agent who lacks some virtuous trait is not criticizable for failing to do what a virtuous person in her position would do (for instance because she knows that doing so would trigger an uncontrollable response with undesirable consequences). These cases, however, are not problematic for the competence-based approach I am sketching. Insofar as the agent in such cases is not in a position to manifest the relevant competences, she is not criticizable for failing to do so. To be sure, the agent is perhaps criticizable for not having cultivated the sort of faculty that would have conferred her rational control over those responses, or for not avoiding situations where such responses are to be produced. In general, I think that the competence-based view I am presenting avoids Kiesewetter’s objections to virtue-theoretical accounts of criticizability and rationality, although I do not have space to develop this issue in detail here.  

26 This type of account of apparent reasons in terms of normative reasons has been recently criticized by Wodak (2017). For a possible reply to some of these worries, see Schroeder (2018).
some consideration is an apparent reason for an agent if she is in a position to competently treat it as a reason. In turn, competence in treating considerations as reasons can be understood as a reliable disposition to be guided only by normative reasons, or by reference to the way in which some virtuous or ideal agent would be disposed to respond (see Sylvan 2015; Williamson forthcoming). An agent that recklessly holds the belief that $p$ against all available evidence will not be competently treating $p$ as a reason (her holding that belief would manifest a very unreliable disposition to be guided only by reasons), so $p$ would not be among her apparent reasons and would not make the agent’s behavior rational. Indeed, insofar as the agent is in a position to treat competently her available evidence as providing reasons for some response, such evidence would be included among the agent’s apparent reasons (even if she happens to disregard it). Thus, this approach is not affected by the problem mentioned in the previous paragraph.

I will not commit myself to any specific understanding of the notions of apparent reasons and competence. For my purposes here, it is enough that these notions make room for the distinction between being praiseworthy and doing what one has most reasons to do. More specifically, the framework I have sketched allows for the possibility of inappropriate responses that are not only blameless, but perhaps also deserve praise. In this way, one can capture the intuition that ‘rational’ is used as a term of praise, without having to assume that being rational is a matter of conforming to one’s reasons.

8. Conclusions

Let us take stock. Ascriptions of rationality typically involve a form of praise (and attribution of irrationality a form of criticism). This seems to motivate a normative account of rationality, according to which behaving rationally is something one has reasons to do. This account, however, is problematic. In particular, when combined with a factualist theory of reasons, it has difficulties with cases where rational agents are guided by false considerations.

In the last section, I have suggested that we do not need such reasons-based accounts of rationality in order to explain the connection between ascriptions of rationality and praising and criticizing. One may deserve praise as a follower of reasons in doing something there was actually no good reasons to do, as long as one’s performance manifests one’s competence in responding to reasons. Relying on this idea,
I have recommended a view of rationality according to which there is no reason to be rational, but you are rational if you try competently to follow your reasons. You are rational when you do your best to do what you ought to do.27

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