
Rationality

Lecture 4

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We have distinguished between **practical** and **theoretical** reasoning:

- ▶ Practical reasoning is reasoning directed toward action: figuring out what to *do*
- ▶ Theoretical reasoning is reasoning directed towards an informational state: figuring out how the facts stand.

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Practical Reasoning

Practical reason is the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do.

1. How do we make sense of the fact that deliberative reflection can directly give rise to action?
2. Is practical reasoning genuinely a form of reasoning?
3. Which norms for the assessment of action are binding on us as agents? What about *moral norms*?
4. How should we understand what it means that we 'ought' to have some attitude: to believe, desire, intend, or feel something?

Is Practical Reflection *Reasoning*?

Theoretical reflection is reasoning about questions of explanation and prediction...it is concerned with matters of fact and their explanation. Furthermore it treats these issues in impersonal terms that are accessible to anyone.

Practical reasoning takes a distinctively normative question as its starting point: give a set of alternatives for action, none of which has yet been performed, what should/ought one do, what is the best thing to do? It is not concerned with matters of fact and their explanation, but with matters of value. This is a distinctively first-personal point of view.

Instrumental Reasoning

1. I ought to drink a beer
2. The necessary means for drinking a beer is going to a bar
3. I ought to go to the bar. *belief*

1. I shall drink a beer
2. the necessary means to my drinking a beer is that I go to the bar
3. I shall go to the bar *intention*

Is Practical Reflection *Reasoning*?

Practical reflections leads to claims about what it would be *good* to do, or normative conclusions about the actions that one *ought* to do.

Expressionism: evaluative and normative claims of these kinds do not represent genuine cognitive achievements, judgements that are literally capable of being true of false....they give expression to desires, sentiment, plans and other pro-attitudes.

Theoretical and Practical Reasoning

Theoretical reflection too is concerned with a normative rather than a factual question, namely with the question of what one ought to believe.

The contrast between practical and theoretical reason is essentially a contrast between two sets of norms: those for the regulation of action and those for the regulation of belief.

Theoretical reasoning leads to modifications of our beliefs, whereas practical reasoning leads to modifications of our *intentions*.

Intentions

Important distinctions:

1. (Present-directed) The intention with which someone acts
2. (Present-directed) Intentional action
3. (Future-directed) Intending to do some action

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Functional Description of Intentions

M. Bratman. *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason*. Harvard University Press (1987).

“intention is a distinctive practical attitude marked by its pivotal role in planning for the future. Intention involves desire, but even predominant desire is insufficient for intention, since it need not involve a commitment to act: intentions are conduct-controlling pro-attitudes, ones which we are disposed to retain without reconsideration, and which play a significant role as inputs to [means-end] reasoning” (pg. 20)

Functional Description of Intentions

M. Bratman. *Intentions, Plans and Practical Reason*. Harvard University Press (1987).

Committing to an action in advance is crucial for

1. our capacity to make rational decisions (as a *bounded agent*)
2. our capacity to engage in complex, temporally extended projects
3. our capacity to coordinate with others

Intentions and beliefs are *entangled*

1. Intending to act just *is* a special kind of belief that one will;

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3. Intending to act involves a belief that it is *possible* that one

Rationality constraints on intentions

1. *Consistency*: “one’s intentions, taken together with one’s beliefs fit together into a consistent model of one’s future”
2. *Means-ends consistency*: “it is irrational that one intends E , believes that E requires that one intend means M and yet not intend M ”
3. *Agglomeration*: “Intending A and Intending B implies Intending (A and B)”

M. Bratman. *Intention, Belief, Practical, Theoretical*. in *Spheres of Reason* (2009).

Practical Reasoning

“Practical reasoning is, like theoretical reasoning, holistic. In practical reasoning, one seeks a conception of one’s life that is both explanatorily coherent and coherent with one’s desires. One can increase coherence by adopting means to already existing ends—but that is not the only way. One can also increase coherence by adopting new ends, either because the adoptions of those ends will help get one something previously wanted, or because adopting those ends gives a significance to things one has already done or plans to do.”

(G. Harman, “Practical Reasoning”)

Practical Rationality: Internalists vs. Externalists

Suppose that Jack has a disease from which he will die in thirty years' time, unless he takes a certain medicine now. If he takes this medicine, it will cure him completely, without any side effects. Jack knows all this, but he lacks the desire to take this medicine.

Proceduralists/Internalists: Jack can be open to rational criticism for lacking this desire only if he has beliefs and other desires from which he can rationally reach the desire to take this medicine now, but fails to reach this desire.

Substantivists/Externalists: Jack is open to rational criticism whether or not he has beliefs and other desires from which he could rationally reach a desire to take this medicine, he fails to have this desire.

Humeanism

“ ‘Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. ‘Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter”

Practical rationality cannot require that we have certain desires when we cannot reach these desires from our present desires.

That is, practical rationality is merely a matter of our desiring efficient means to the fulfillment of our *noninstrumental* desires, which are not themselves the subject to rational appraisal.

Reasons for Action

Practical rationality and responding to reasons for action are very closely related.

A Reason

Reasons are “favorers”: ‘a reason for something’ is ‘a consideration that counts in favour of that thing’ (T. Scanlon)

“A reason for you to perform something is a consideration that favours you performing it; a reason to believe some fact is a consideration that counts in favour of believing it; there being a reason to feel a certain way indicates that there is some feature of one’s situations that favours or merits so feeling.”

Reason can be used non-normatively

1. The reason the care broke down was my heavy clutch work
2. He rejected her application for the reason that she is a redhead
3. The reason he believes the moon is made of cheese is that he is eccentric

Reasons and Oughts

Reasons in this sense are *pro tanto*: “as far as it goes”

Oughts entail reason but not the other way around.

That you ought to perform a particular action entails that you have reason to do so; nonetheless there may also be reasons not to perform the action, as well as reasons to perform other other actions you ought not to perform.

A reason can be only one reason amongst many others

'A has a reason to φ '

A relation between some agent A and some act φ (e.g. an action, belief or feeling).

“the fact that p provides A with a reason to φ ”

- ▶ the fact that it is raining provides A with a reason to take her umbrella
- ▶ the fact that drinking a cold beer would be pleasant is a reason to drink it
- ▶ the fact that she paints with such subtlety is a reason to admire her.

'A has a reason to φ '

the set $\{p_1, \dots, p_n\}$ contributes to there being a reason for A to φ

That you would enjoy climbing the mountain, together with the fact that the rock is in good condition today, that it will rain tomorrow and that your equipment has just arrived all contribute to you having a reason to go climbing today.

Many issues:

- ▶ Shouldn't 'double count' reasons by citing different facts as providing different reasons when they do not
- ▶ Not all fact contributing to a given reason-relation contribute in the same manner (pre-conditions, intensifiers)
- ▶ Evaluative facts may also be reason-giving: that she is an excellent painter is a reason to admire her.

A rational agent is a *reason sensitive* agent.

A has reason to φ iff, were A to deliberate rationally on the relevant (non-normative) facts, A would judge that he has a reason to φ .

1. What is the relation between correct normative conclusions and the (non-normative) facts, knowledge of which is relevant to arriving at such conclusions?
2. What is the nature of this rational deliberation?

B. Williams. *Internal and External Reasons*. 1981.

Components of Williams' Theory

Subject motivational set: There is a set S that includes the agent's present desires, plus the agent's "dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties and various projects as they may abstractly be called, embodying commitments".

Practical deliberation:

- ▶ ascertaining what way of satisfying some element of S would be best in light of other elements in the set
- ▶ deciding which among conflicting elements in one's subjective motivational set one attaches most weight to
- ▶ "finding constitutive solutions, such as deciding what would make for an entertaining evening, granted that one wants entertainment."

The Internalist Position

Internal practical reasons: reason that can come to motivate the agent if the agent engages in rational deliberation that starts from his or her motivational set.

External practical reasons: reason of which it does not need to be true that they can come to motivate this agent if the agent engages in rational deliberation that starts from his or her subject motivational set.

Does every element of S give rise to an internal reason?

Elements of S may be based on false beliefs:

“The agent believes that this stuff is gin, when in fact it is petrol. He wants a gin and tonic. Has he reason, or a reason, to mix this stuff with tonic and drink it?”

1. He has no reason to drink it, though he thinks he does
2. If he does drink it, we do have a “reason-for” explanation of this action.

On the objective analysis, because reason are determined by the facts — here including the fact that the stuff before you is petrol, then no matter how rationally your judgement that there is a reason to drink the stuff before you proceeds from your false beliefs, *there is no such reason*

Is this plausible?

The internal reason connection is not concerned *only* with explanation but also with the agent's rationality.

A member of S , D , will not give A a reason for φ -ing if either the existence of D is dependent on false belief, or A 's belief in the relevance of φ -ing to the satisfaction of D is false.

- ▶ A may falsely believe an internal reason statement about himself
- ▶ A may not know some true internal reason statement about himself

An agent may have a reason to φ , though he does not know it.

But we should notice that an unknown element in S , D , will provide a reason for A to φ only if φ -ing is rationally related to D .

Internal reason statements can be discovered through deliberation

A has reason to φ does not mean the action which A has overall, all-in, reason to φ . He can have reason to do a lot of things which he has other, stronger reasons not to do.

We should not then think of S as statically given. The processes of deliberation can have all sorts of effect on S , and this is a fact that the theory of internal reasons should be very happy to accommodate.

External Reasons

Owen has no desire to join the army. But his family urge on him the necessity and importance of joining the army, since all his male ancestors were soldiers and family pride requires him to do the same.

His family might express themselves by saying *there was a reason for Owen to join the army* despite knowing that nothing in Owen's *S* would lead to him join the army.

If something is a reason for action, then it could serve as an explanation for that action.

Now, no external reason statement could, *by itself*, offer an explanation of anyone's action.

A's believing an external reason statement about himself can explain the action.

Owen might come to join the army because (now) he believes that there is a reason for him to do *so that his family has a tradition of military honour*.

Does believing that a particular consideration is a reason to act in a particular way provide, or indeed constitute, a motivation to act?

This agent, with this belief appears to be one about whom, now, an internal reason statement could truly be made.

Explanation

- ▶ It must be possible for a reason for doing something to explain why an agent does this thing.
- ▶ A reason can explain why an agent does something only if this agent is motivated by this reason to do this thing.
- ▶ An agent can be motivated by this reason to do this thing only if the agent either already believes that he or she has this reason or can come to believe that he or she has this reason by rational deliberation.
- ▶ All reasons that an agent either already believes he or she has or can come to believe he or she has by rational deliberation are internal reasons.
- ▶ So, all reasons are internal reasons.

The content of an external reason type of statement will have to be revealed by considering what it is to *come to believe* such a statement.

So, by coming to believe an external reason statement, Owen must acquire a new motivation. How can that be?

Hume: “reason is the slave of the passions”

The external reason theorist must conceive, *in a special way*, the connection between acquiring a motivation and coming to believe the reason statement.

Owen might be so persuaded by his family's rhetoric that he acquired both the motivation and the belief. BUT "the agent should acquire the motivation *because* he comes to believe the reason statement."

If the agent rationally deliberated then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to φ .

But, by hypothesis, there is no motivation for the agent to deliberate *from*, to reach this new motivation.

What is it that one comes to believe when he comes to believe that there is reason for him to φ , if it is not the proposition, or something that entails the proposition, that if he deliberated rationally, he would be motivated to act appropriately?

Content of “reason for” statements

- ▶ The only intelligible content of the claim that there is reason for an agent to ϕ , or entails, that the agent would be motivated to ϕ if he or she deliberated rationally.
- ▶ The content of the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ cannot be, and cannot entail that, the agent would be motivated to ϕ if he or she deliberated rationally.
- ▶ So, the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ has no intelligible content.

One Response: “Full-Information Analysis”

There is reason for A to do φ is revealed by what A would judge there is reason for him to do were he to deliberate rationally *in light of all the relevant non-normative facts*

1. I believe that she has ingested poison and needs urgent medical attention; I therefore judge I have a reason to phone for an ambulance. However, she is fine and needs no such assistance.
2. I am lost in the forest and have the quite reasonable aim of escaping before darkness encloses.

Externalist: there is no reason for me to phone for an ambulance and you should take the *objectively* quickest way out of the forest even though you don't know what it is.

Next week: Rational beliefs