

## Review of Paul Grice, *Aspects of Reason*

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January 21, 2003

Paul Grice, *Aspects of Reason*, edited by Richard Warner, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2001, pp. xxvii, 136.

*Aspects of Reason* offers a sketch of parts of an ambitious project to derive important philosophical consequences from the idea of a rational being, with hopes of improving on Aristotle and Kant. Jonathan Dancy offers a good account and critique of this project.<sup>1</sup> In this review, I will mention and discuss some important things that Grice says along the way about what reasoning is, what reasons are, the relation between theoretical, or “alethic”, reasons and practical reasons, and the analysis of practical and alethic modality.

As with all of Grice’s work, the book is rich with interesting, often competing, ideas. As usual, there is great power and compression of argument. It is not light reading and requires concentrated study. The value of the work lies in not its highly tentative conclusion but in its consideration of possibilities, suggestions, objections, and replies. The book is a significant resource for serious students of the issues it considers.

What is reasoning? Grice begins with a simple model based on logical argument or proof. “Let us, then, take as a first approximation to an account of reasoning the following: reasoning consists in the entertainment (and often acceptance) in thought or in speech of a set of initial ideas (propositions), together with a sequence of ideas each of which is derivable by an acceptable principle of inference from its predecessors in the set” (5). He then notes a number of problems with the model.

First, not all reasoning is good reasoning, but the model does not apply to bad reasoning. What makes some thinking an instance of bad reasoning rather than not reasoning at all? Here Grice suggests modifying the model to allow that “steps in actual reasoning . . . are *either* validly made *or* are thought to be validly made” (6).

A second problem with the model is that good reasoning often does not fit the model because of being inexplicit about what premises are appealed to and/or incomplete in specifying intermediate steps. We cannot just attribute reasoning to someone by adding premises and intermediate steps that would make the argument fit the original model. For one thing there are different ways to do so. For another, it would not allow us to distinguish good reasoning from bad reasoning.

Grice observes that we cannot determine what reasoning people had in mind by asking them, because when asked people typically construct a further argument rather than report on what they had in mind (12-13).

One idea is to count as good reasoning any reasoning which “may be converted into reasoning which conforms to canonical standards of respectability by the addition of further premises which the reasoner has in mind, either (i) explicitly or (ii) subliminally.” We might also include reasoning for which “the reasoner thinks that such premises exists . . .” (8).

This does not yet handle cases in which the explicit reasoning does not include needed intermediate steps. Grice compares filling in steps of some fairly bizarre reasoning by a fellow student he once knew with a logician who offers a proof (or sketch) that is six pages long whereas the filled in proof is eighty-four pages long (11). We might want to attribute the filled in proof to the logician but not the filled in reasoning to Grice’s fellow student.

Perhaps here we must add that the person in question must *reasonably* believe in the existence of the needed premises and intermediate steps. Must such a reasonable belief itself be the result of reasoning? If so, a possible regress looms. Anyway, one might reasonably believe in the existence of intermediate steps needed to get to Andrew Wiles’ proof of Fermat’s theorem, but that is not enough to attribute to one the reasoning that is spelled out in his proof. (Of course, even Wiles’ reasoning is not fully explicit.)

Perhaps what’s needed is that the person in question must have a good idea of how the proof would go and must know that he or she could spell out the argument in greater detail if necessary.

Grice’s third problem with the initial model of reasoning as a kind of valid

argument or proof is that it is too strong. One can produce a string of trivial consequences without it being appropriate to say one is reasoning. E.g., “inferring”  $P$  from  $P$ , or from  $P \& Q$ . Such performances “offend against something . . . very central to our conception of reasoning . . . *Mechanical* applications of ground rules of inference . . . are reluctantly (if at all) called reasoning” (15). “Some examples are deficient because they are aimless or pointless. reasoning is characteristically addressed to *problems* . . .” (16). In the extreme, if one supposes that corresponding to basic principles of logical implication are rules to be followed if one is to be rational, then once one was given some premises, one would forever be making inferences, with no way to stop (36).

Fourth, there are many cases of reasoning that do not seem to fit the logical argument model. Grice gives an example of someone who has promised to give a series of talks, which he hasn’t yet started to think about, who is asked for the titles of the talks so they can be announced. The speaker will think of various possibilities, will wonder whether to cancel, will recall how things have worked out in the past, and will do other things that do not seem to fit the model at all. But in doing those things the speaker will be reasoning.

So, the original model has various flaws. Nevertheless, Grice proposes in what follows to assume that some form of the model is acceptable. Since one thing that the model leaves out is that reasoning is an “activity” connected with “the will,” he proposes that “ $x$  reasons (informally) from  $A$  to  $B$  just in

case  $x$  thinks that  $A$  and *intends* that, in thinking  $B$ , he should be thinking something which would be the conclusion of a formally valid argument the premises of which are a supplementation of  $A$ .”

With Dancy, I think this is problematic. Reasoning may sometimes involve constructing an argument, but not always because one is reasoning from the premises of that argument. The argument is often an explanatory argument and one is reasoning from the conclusion of that explanatory argument to a conclusion that is a premise of the argument. Furthermore, it is not obvious that reasoning always involves construction of an argument or argument sketch. Perhaps we can understand Grice as concerned especially or only with those cases in which it does, but that can be very misleading, especially (as indicated below) with respect to practical reasoning.

In any event, given this model of reasoning, Grice is concerned with whether the basic principles of reasoning and rationality apply equally to alethic and to practical reasoning. He suggests that modal terms like “must”, “ought”, and “necessary,” might be seen as applying univocally both to things to be believed and things to be done.<sup>2</sup> Although a sentence like “Jack should leave soon” has at least two interpretations, “It is likely that Jack will leave soon” and “It would be good if Jack were to leave soon,” Grice argues that this does not show any ambiguity in “should”. The ambiguity lies in whether the underlying clause to which “should” applies, has an alethic or a practical interpretation. According to Grice, this clause combines a sentence “radical” together with a mood (or “mode”) operator applied to that radical

and indicating the relevant mode, practical, alethic, or interrogative. (He is mostly concerned with the first two only.)

As Dancy explains, Grice introduces the following formalism. He uses “!” for the imperative form and “⊢” for the propositional or “alethic” form. So, “⊢ Jack go” means *Jack goes* and “! Jack go” means *Jack is to go*. Then the two interpretations of “Jack should leave soon” are represented as “Should ⊢ Jack leave soon” and “Should ! Jack leave soon.”

Grice explains how the meanings of these mode operators might be explained within his general theory of meaning. He also suggests that it may be possible to explain various modal notions in terms of derivability from some system of principles, where the operators ! and ⊢ might help to indicate (or put constraints on) the system to be used.<sup>3</sup>

Grice proposes further that variation in these principles might account for a kind of ambiguity in practical uses of modals that does not appear to occur in alethic uses. There seem to be at least two interpretations of “Jack should leave soon.” One interpretation assigns a certain responsibility on Jack for leaving; the other does not. The one interpretation appears to treat “should” as specifying a relation between Jack and a certain possible action. The other interpretation appears to treat “should” as a sentential operator indicating the desirability of a certain state of affairs, not implying any responsibility on the subject of the sentence.

Suppose that Jack and Bob are to play tennis and consider the remark,

“Jack should beat Bob,” said not as a prediction but with one or the other of the practical interpretations. In the relational interpretation, this remark is not equivalent to “Bob should lose to Jack.” In the sentential operator interpretation, the two sentences are equivalent. (Analogously, “It would be good if Jack beats Bob” and “It would be good if Bob loses to Jack” are equivalent, but “Jack has duty to beat Bob” is not equivalent to “Bob has a duty to lose to Jack.”)

Grice’s idea is that this ambiguity is due not to an ambiguity in “should” but to variations in the system of principles in relation to which the sentence is to be evaluated. In the relational interpretation the relevant system specifies principles concerning what that particular subject is to do. Just how the relevant principles are determined needs to be worked out, however, and it is not clear that this can be done.

As an example of a principle of reasoning that applies both to practical and to alethic reasoning, Grice offers a “Principle of Total Evidence.” The idea is, roughly, that one can infer from  $P$  *supports*  $Q$  and  $P$  to  $Q$  only if one does not accept some further assumption  $R$  and believes that  $P \& R$  *does not support*  $Q$ . This holds both for the case where accepting  $P$  is accepting  $\vdash P$  and for the case where it is accepting  $! P$ .

This particular example seems right, although I worry that the real reasoning in a case like this is the thinking that is used to get the support statements, which are therefore derivative of that reasoning and not clearly appealed to by the reasoning.

But other principles that Grice states seem to yield bizarre results. Consider the principle that an alethic disjunction is true just in case one of its disjuncts is true. Grice proposes to extend that to the principle that a disjunction of any sort is satisfactory just in case one of its disjuncts is satisfactory. This implies that if “Mail these letters!” is satisfactory, so is “Mail these letters or burn them!”

Much depends on how practical reasoning is to be understood. If practical reasoning modifies intentions, then it is plausible that there is a common requirement of consistency: one’s beliefs and intentions should be consistent with each other. On the other hand, if practical reasoning is reasoning that modifies desires, then consistency seems less relevant. There is nothing rationally troublesome about having desires that one knows cannot all be fulfilled in the way that it is rationally troublesome to have intentions that one knows cannot all be fulfilled.

Dancy notes a significant difference between alethic and practical reason when there is support for a disjunction of two incompatible possibilities and no sufficient reason for choosing one rather than the other. In the alethic case, one clearly ought to suspend judgment. In the practical case, failure to decide in such a case can be deeply irrational.

Grice does not address these last points, but he does emphasize a related point, namely, that beliefs play an important role in practical reasoning and that goals play an important role in theoretical reasoning. Practical and alethic reasoning are deeply intertwined in ways yet to be fully understood.

In short, Grice's book does make several significant contributions to our understanding of reasons and reasoning. Some of these contributions have to do with understanding when we can attribute a particular argument or proof to someone. His discussion of mood or embedded "mode" operators may have some importance for philosophy of language and linguistics, especially if these operators can be shown to be connected with more usual classifications of embedded clauses into tensed *that* clauses and tenseless infinitive clauses. Grice's proposal to account for relational interpretations of modals in terms of contextual selection of certain sorts of systems of principles deserves further study too. In fact, the book is teeming with interesting ideas.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This issue.

<sup>2</sup>Compare Roger Wertheimer, *The Significance of Sense; Meaning, Modality, and Morality*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972.

<sup>3</sup>Wertheimer, *op. cit.* makes a similar proposal.