

Reason, Reasons & Normativity

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I. Reasons and Reason

Why are the facts which constitute reasons reasons? As expected the answer is that there is an inherent relation between reasons and Reason – understood as our rational faculties or abilities. But what is it? Think of it this way (and I will focus here on practical reasons): that I am hungry is a reason to eat. But what has **Reason** to do with it? Would I not eat, if hungry and if food is available, anyway? Do not animals of species which do not possess Reason eat when hungry? If reasons do not call for Reason why are they reasons?

The facts that are reasons are reasons because they are part of the case for a certain response, for a belief or an action, or an emotion. The example of hunger shows that there can be, and sometimes there are capacities and processes which reliably lead to appropriate responses to reasons, without the mediation of rational powers. Nor are these absent in humans.¹

So why are reasons reasons if there are processes which align us with them independently of our rational powers? We cannot claim that in all domains reliance on rational capacities is better at bringing us into conformity with reasons than other processes. Often the automatic, Reason-bypassing processes are best. Though there need be no rivalry between them, and often rational capacities regularly interact with Reason-bypassing processes.

¹ The point is probably limited to practical reasons and reasons for emotions, and does not apply to epistemic ones. The reason is conceptual: ACTION is a generic concept, covering acting for reasons, as well as other actions, whereas BELIEF is the specific concept which marks one of various broadly cognitive states which essentially involve our rational capacities, being essentially responsive to reasons, as some of the others, like guesses, and hunches, are not.

Of course, some reasons can neither be brought into existence nor recognised except through the use of Reason. This is the case with most cultural creations. But even in their case, the explanation why they invite certain responses need not invoke that fact. For example, some epistemic reasons which can only be recognised as reasons by rational creatures can nevertheless be identified as facts calling for belief, because they are evidence for its truth, and their standing as evidence can be explained without invoking the way that they are identified.

So why are they reasons? Because Reason is our general capacity to recognise and respond to reasons. There are other capacities which also do that. But Reason is the universal capacity to recognise reasons, one which in principle enables us to recognise any reason which applies to us, and to respond to it appropriately.

This statement may appear formal and uninformative. Is not saying that reason is the universal capacity to identify and respond to reasons like saying that we dream dreams? Since 'dreams' are defined as the objects of dreaming, saying that we dream dreams is a mere formal statement. But the analogy with Reason and reasons ignores the normative aspect of the relations between them. Reason can malfunction. Therefore, reasons cannot be defined as what Reason recognises and responds to. As Reason may fail there are criteria by which success and failure are determined, and they determine what reasons there are to be recognised.

In conclusion we can say that Reason does not make reasons into reasons (Reason is not a source of reasons). But they are reasons because rational creatures can recognise and respond to them with the use of Reason. Being the general capacity to recognise reasons distinguishes Reason from other processes like hunger, or the instinctive avoidance of fire, which are specific to some kinds of reasons. We can also say that Reason is the capacity to **reflectively** recognise and respond to reasons. I mean by that not that rational capacities are engaged only in reflection, but that they can be engaged in reflection.

2. Reason and Reasoning

The thesis that Reason is the power to recognise reasons will be finessed and somewhat modified in Section 3. First, I will relate it to the more common view that Reason is the power of reasoning. Paul Grice combines both views:

No less intuitive than the idea of thinking of reason as the faculty which equips us to recognize and operate with *reasons* is the idea of thinking of it as the faculty which empowers us to engage in reasoning.²

Grice thought that the two ideas harmonise. He proceeds to explain:

Indeed if reasoning should be characterisable as the occurrence or production of a chain of inferences, and if such chains consist in (sequentially) arriving at conclusions which are derivable from some initial set of premises, and for the acceptance of which, therefore, these premises are, or are thought to be, reasons, the connection between these two ideas is not accidental.³

I will basically follow Grice, though my understanding of the way the two ideas harmonise is somewhat different from his. Reasoning is reason's way of recognising reasons. But Reason includes more than the power to reason, and since not all reasoning aims at identifying or operating with reasons the relationship of Reason and the power to reason is more complicated than may first appear.

Sometimes it is irrational for people to fail to engage in reasoning, as when they have an overriding reason to reason, and are in position to know that. Such irrationalities are non-derivative. Even when, as is only sometimes the case, failure to deliberate is a result of a decision, the irrationality of failure to deliberate does not depend on such prior decisions. Likewise, sometimes the very activity of reasoning, even when one is reasoning flawlessly, is irrational. There may be conclusive reasons, which are known or should be known, not to reason, thus rendering one's reasoning irrational. One can also be non-derivatively irrational in continuing deliberation for too long, failing to come to a conclusion. Besides, weak-willed intentions show that intentions can be non-derivatively

² Grice, **Aspects of Reason** (OUP 2001) p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*

irrational. They are intentions one forms against one's own better judgement. It follows that the irrationality of a weak-willed intention does not derive from failure to reason correctly.

These considerations suggest that Reason consists of more than the power of reasoning, and includes at least the power to form intentions and decisions. Two considerations support this conclusion. First, reasoning being an intentional activity, the power to form intentions and decisions is intimately involved in it, and given that their faulty use can render the whole activity of reasoning on a particular occasion irrational there is a case for counting the power to form intentions and decisions among our rational powers. Secondly, and more generally, I have been implicitly relying on a test which I will call the *irrationality test*. It says that if the exercise of a capacity can be non-derivatively irrational (that is irrational not because something else is irrational) then the capacity is one of our rational powers. I will further consider the test in the next section.

Still, the ability to reason is at the core of our rational capacities. How so? Some, like Harman, think that reasoning 'is a process of modifying antecedent beliefs and intentions.'⁴ But it is doubtful whether reasoning has to lead to modification of belief or intention. I may, for example, examine one of my beliefs, and, not having new information, I consider again the considerations I considered before and do not find grounds to change my mind. My reflections seem a straightforward case of reasoning, but they need not involve a change of belief or intention. There are other cases in which one reasons without changing beliefs or intentions. The reasoning may have been tentative, not reaching any final conclusions.

In such cases the reasoning, though not leading to their change, is undertaken in order to examine the case for a modification of one's beliefs or intentions. This is commonly the case, but it need not be. One may indulge in reasoning in order to pass the time. One is playfully examining hypotheses and their consequences, doing so as a game, a pastime, possibly doing so carelessly, off-handedly. It does not matter. Nor does

⁴ 'Practical Reasoning' in REASONING, MEANING AND MIND (OUP 1999) 46. His later paper 'Rationality' *ibid.* allows for reasoning which does not change judgement.

it matter if one's reasoning is affected by wishful thinking. That form of reasoning is part of our fantasy life. One would not change one's views as a result, for one does not take the activity, the reasoning, seriously. It is just an amusing pastime. One is not irrational on such occasions, even though the reasoning is faulty, and may display a propensity to commit fallacies, which may give ground to believe that one would be irrational when reasoning 'seriously'.

Bad reasoning, I conclude, is⁵ irrational when, and because one non-accidentally fails to respond appropriately to reasons. When one has reasons to form beliefs or to consider the merits of beliefs or actions, then if one does so irresponsibly, carelessly or negligently, or if one's reasoning is affected by motives which should not affect it, that is if one is guilty of one or another form of motivated irrationality, then one is failing to respond properly to those reasons. When this is so one's flawed reasoning is irrational. Motivated irrationality is a form of belief formation contrary to reason and so is negligent reasoning. Negligence is not merely carelessness. It is carelessness when we have reason to be careful. We can only reason negligently when we have reason to form beliefs or seriously to consider the merits of beliefs or of actions. The examples support the conclusion that mere bad reasoning does not constitute irrationality. Only failure to identify and respond to reasons does.

This leads to the main point: While not all reasoning aims at identifying and operating with reasons, the power of reasoning is essentially a power whose purpose is to identify and respond to reasons. Reasoning is an intentional mental activity, and a norm-guided activity in that it is governed by criteria of correctness. This is true of both 'serious' and 'non-serious' reasoning. Reasoning playfully is reasoning governed by the same norms, and mistakes remain mistakes (though their commission does not show that we act irrationally).

The norms of correct reasoning show that the point of reasoning is to enable us to detect and respond to reasons. The constitutive standards of reasoning determine both

⁵ Perhaps I should say 'deserves' to be regarded as irrational – one may well claim that the boundaries of the concept of 'irrationality' are vague on this point. It is the theoretical account of Reason which ultimately drives this view. So at most one can claim that it is not at odds with firm features of usage.

what is reasoning and what – successful reasoning. Reasoning is an activity which is held responsible to those standards, an activity whose success is judged by them.⁶ They determine the success of reasoning as a generic activity, though the actual reasoning one engages in on this occasion or that may be undertaken for some other purpose, and may be successful – though not as a reasoning – for some other reason even when flawed as a piece of reasoning.

This, then, is the difference between ‘serious’ and ‘non-serious’ reasoning. Serious reasoning is meant to serve its point, and, therefore, to be successful by its constitutive standards. Non-serious reasoning is the use of the same capacity, performing an activity of the same type, but detached from its normal purpose. The activity is still held responsible to its constitutive standards, but the reason which led to engaging in it may be served regardless of its success as reasoning. So non-serious reasoning is a marginal case of reasoning. It is understood and is broadly conducted as serious reasoning, but, as it is detached from its point, failure to conform to the norms governing the activity is not necessarily, on that occasion, a fault.

Reasoning’s constitutive standards are ones which ensure that, when followed, the conclusion of the reasoning is warranted, namely one which we have adequate reason (though not always a conclusive reason) to accept. Directly they warrant belief, Indirectly they warrant actions, emotions and other reason-sensitive attitudes. To be more accurate we need to take note of the fact that in most instances of reasoning one relies on some propositions whose credentials are not examined during that reasoning episode. Hence successful reasoning assures reasoners that the conclusion is warranted, on the assumption that so are the unexamined propositions relied upon. Its purpose is to establish that given that assumption, certain beliefs, intentions, and the like are warranted.

⁶ This gives rise to the question: when is an activity governed by those standards? I will not consider this issue here. It seems reasonable to suppose that it is so when either the person engaging in the activity is one who has the capacity to reason and takes himself to be so governed, namely accepts the legitimacy of judging his activity by those standards, or, if that person behaves in a way which is reasonably understood as presenting himself to others as someone who is reasoning. But much more need to be said.

The norms of correct reasoning determine the point of reasoning, and since the norms of correct reasoning are norms that warrant acceptance of the conclusion of a correct reasoning the purpose that they serve is to guide us in judging which beliefs and intentions we have reason to have. This establishes the connection between Reason as the capacity to respond to reasons, and reasoning.

3. The Scope of Reason

Characterising Reason as the general reflective capacity to recognise reasons raises the question of which mental capacities belong with it, which belong with our rational powers? I will say little on the subject. It is not my aim to suggest criteria capable of adjudicating various borderline cases, either between animal species which typically have Reason and those which do not, nor regarding the boundaries within a species between those who have Reason and those lacking it. The fate of borderline cases may well depend on additional considerations not canvassed here. But a few further observations on the core concept, relying on our general knowledge of it in a way which ties it to the account here proposed may be helpful.

Various connections between REASON and other concepts can be called upon in clarifying the concept. One is between Reason and personhood: Only persons have reason. Another is between Reason and accountability. Creatures that do not have rational powers are not accountable for their actions.⁷ Another is with the notion of irrationality. It led to the irrationality test suggested above.

The irrationality test suggests demarcations of Reason which are not dictated by its characterisation as a general power to recognise and operate with reasons. Decline in some mental capacities like the powers of memory and of concentration affects one's ability to detect and respond to reasons. But we do not stop being persons simply because of loss of memory and of concentration (at least not while we retain them to a minimal degree). Hence, these powers do not belong with our rational powers. But if so can Reason be identified with the reflective power to recognise reasons? This

⁷ This does not mean that we are only responsible for or accountable for the exercise of our rational powers.

identification of Reason is correct, so long as it is understood to represent the core of the concept of REASON, and is not expected to set its limits.

The irrationality test is one of a number which offer more help with marking the limits of our rational powers. It suggests that memory and the power of concentration are not among them because failures of memory and concentration, however bad, are not irrational. They are among many mental capacities which are ancillary to our rational powers, enabling them to function well. Some provide the input on which the rational capacities rely through perception, sensations (including those which are accompanied by drives: like hunger, thirst, discomfort at the surrounding temperature, sexual arousal, and more), or retrieved from memory.

By the irrationality test the powers of reflection, deliberation and decision are rational capacities. Emotions, affective attitudes in general and actions are capable of being guided by our deliberations and decisions. Interestingly the irrationality test suggests that the capacity to have emotions is among our rational capacities because emotions can be non-derivatively irrational.

The test relies on a distinction between derivative and non-derivative irrationality. Something is derivatively irrational if it is irrational only if, and because something else is irrational. For example, actions are irrational only if and because the intentions or decisions which render them intentional are irrational.⁸ Cases of non-derivative irrationality are cases where the irrationality of what is irrational does not logically or conceptually depend on nor is it due to some other irrationality. If a flawed exercise of a capacity can only be derivatively irrational that capacity is not part of Reason. If, on the other hand, a flawed exercise of a capacity can be non-derivatively irrational then that capacity belongs with our rational capacities, is part of our Reason.

Arguably emotions can be irrational because they are founded on irrational beliefs. Fear based on an irrational belief that the shadow on the wall is the devil about to kill one is an irrational fear. But emotions can be irrational when they are disproportionate

⁸ One interesting result is that only intentional actions can be irrational, and not even all them, since not all intentional actions are actions undertaken with an intention.

reactions to rational beliefs. In such cases their irrationality is non-derivative, and therefore by the irrationality test, emotional capacity is part of our rational powers.

This conclusion will not surprise some, while seeming preposterous to others, who will take it as a reason to reject the irrationality test. There is, however, an independent case for including capacity to have emotions among the rational powers. For example, empathy is crucial for understanding other people, as well as animals of other species, and arguably emotional responses are essential to our ability to understand what response to various reasons is appropriate, and to motivate us to respond as we should. There are also separate reasons for confidence in the irrationality test. It seems natural to think that only failures of the power of Reason could be irrational, except when the irrationality is derivative, that is, when it derives from failure of powers of Reason. However, these matters require a more detailed exploration of the role of the emotions in our make up as persons, in our motivations, and in our cognitive powers.

There is one important clarification, indeed modification, of the slogan that Reason is the general reflective capacity to recognise reasons. The slogan may give an unduly passive image of rational powers, just tabling reports, as it were, of what reasons are to be found where. The slogan should be augmented to say that Reason is the general capacity to recognise **and respond** to reasons. Clearly that is so regarding theoretical reasons: recognising a sufficient case for a belief is adopting the belief. There is no separate step involved, no transition which, pathological cases apart, can fail. Properly recognising epistemic reasons is properly responding to them.

Things are somewhat different when it comes to practical reasons (including reasons for mental acts). Action may require intervention in the world regarding whose success agents have less control than over the response to epistemic reasons or reasons for mental acts, intentions, and omissions (on most occasions). Except for the capacity to reason, decide, form intentions and a few others capacities essential to be able to act with intention which are part of our rational powers by the irrationality act, the capacity to act is not part of our rational capacities. This has to be born in mind in interpreting the extended slogan.

Nevertheless the extended slogan, properly understood, is correct. For even regarding practical reasons rational capacities must involve response to them if they are to involve recognising them. People who recognise a conclusive reason to Φ (to eat, or whatever) and who fail to respond to it at all, fail (when the time comes) to form an intention to Φ , have no positive attitude at all towards Φ -ing, do not respond appropriately to other people Φ -ing, etc. are non-derivatively irrational. By the irrationality test this shows that capacity properly to respond to reason is part of our Rational capacities.

Furthermore, people who fail to respond appropriately in any way at all do not fully recognise the existence of the reasons. Attribution of belief depends on the existence of a variety of criteria of belief, and they include not only avowing the belief, and attesting to reasons for it, etc. but also responding to it appropriately: those who would not put an apple on a table (assuming normal circumstances), for fear that the apple may fall to the floor show themselves not to believe that there is a table there. At best theirs is a pathological case of belief. Hence, recognising reasons involves responding to them, and the mental capacities involved in setting ourselves to respond, the powers of decision and intention are part of our rational powers.

4. Practical Reason

Practical Reason is just Reason. There is – or so I shall claim – no distinctive ability designated ‘practical reason’. If you like, Practical Reason is Reason when dealing with practical reasons. As we saw practical reasons differ in important respects from other reasons. But the ability to reflectively recognise and respond to them is the very capacity to reflectively recognise reasons generally. The only way I can think of to support this contention is to examine some challenges to it. At least three kinds of challenges are possible.

- (a) The conclusions of practical reasoning are different in kind from those of other reasoning;
- (b) Some of the premises of practical reasoning are distinct.
- (c) The methods or standards of practical reasoning are different;

a) Special kind of conclusion

John Broome writes:

‘Aristotle took practical reasoning to be reasoning that concludes in an action. But an action – at least a physical one – requires more than reasoning ability; it requires physical ability too. Intending to act is as close to acting as reasoning alone can get us, so we should take practical reasoning to be reasoning that concludes in an intention’.⁹

The question is: does reasoning take us that far?¹⁰ Here are some doubts:

First, as Broome notices, his argument applies neither to mental acts nor to omissions. It may be that some acts can and others cannot be the conclusions of practical reasoning, but it makes one wonder whether the considerations which tell against physical acts being the conclusions of reasoning do not also tell against mental acts and omissions being such conclusions.

As Broome says, the question is how far can reasoning take us? One way of explaining why it cannot take us as far as to physical acts is that failure to perform the act need not be a failure of reasoning. That is, even when we reason with a view to act the failure to act as a conclusion of the reasoning need not be a failure of reasoning. But if that is the argument then it applies to mental acts and omissions as well. In both these cases people may fail to act even when they reason correctly, and their reasoning instructs them to act. Reasoning cannot take us as far as action for intentional action (which is the only kind of action reasoning can lead us to) depends on the will. The possibility of weakness of the will is precisely the possibility of failure to act which is not due to failure of reasoning.

Things are different when we reason with a view to examine the case for modifying our beliefs. Here if once the reasoning is complete we fail to have the belief which its

⁹ Broome, ‘Practical Reasoning’ REASON AND NATURE: ESSAYS IN THE THEORY OF RATIONALITY, edited by José Bermúdez and Alan Millar, Oxford University Press. DATE

¹⁰ The following discussion relates to the possibility that intentions are the conclusions of practical reasoning. But each of its arguments applies also to the suggestion that the conclusions are actions.

conclusion we should have reached then our reasoning failed, and we failed to reach the conclusion we should have reached. For to reach a conclusion is to believe it.

But this argument shows that reasoning cannot take us as far as intentions either. Weakness of the will is paradigmatically failure to form intentions when our best judgement, possibly based on impeccable reasoning, tells us that we should. So understood¹¹, Broome's argument refutes his own view that intentions can be conclusions of practical reasoning.

This argument does no more than remind us what we know. Suppose someone objects saying that the argument is guilty of *petition principii*. Those who claim that an action or an intention are the conclusion of practical reasoning would simply reject my claim that the failure need not be a failure of reasoning. They will claim simply that, given that action or intention is the conclusion it follows that failing to act or to intend are failures of reasoning. I failed, the objection goes, to produce an argument against them. But that is to misconceive the nature of the argument. It merely, but crucially, reminds us that we know that the reasoning is over before the act is performed or the intention formed. We know that if someone fails to act or to intend as he should have and is challenged: why did you not pursue your reasoning to its conclusion? Will be able to reply, truly, that he did. The problem was not with his reasoning but with his will power.

Second, often when reflecting on what to do we find that there are several eligible options, in that while each is supported by various reasons, the reasons for each option neither defeat nor are defeated by the reasons against it. When we form intentions to take one of the eligible options our intentions are based on the reasons for the option we chose. But given that the existing reasons do not determine that we should choose any one of the various eligible options, there must be other factors influencing our choice.

So how far can reasoning take us in such cases? Does it lead to an intention to proceed with all the incompatible but eligible actions? We can dismiss this option.

¹¹ This qualification is important because Broome's reasons for his view are not made explicit. But even if this was not Broome's reason for his position it is a good reason, and the refutation of his position is not affected.

Normally we do not have such incompatible intentions, and certainly not as a result of sound reasoning of the kind described. Admittedly, there are cases when it is rational to have several incompatible intentions, i.e. intentions which cannot all be realised.¹² But normally the mutual incompatibility of the different options would feed into the reasoning and it seems reasonable to think that it will indicate that there is no need to form all the intentions, and perhaps even that it is best not to form all of them, or even that one should not.

A more reasonable possibility is that the conclusion is an intention to perform one of the eligible acts. Generally speaking when aware of various eligible but incompatible options one may form an intention to perform at least one of them. But if that is the conclusion of practical reasoning then for those who engage in the appropriate reasoning it would be, under normal circumstances, irrational not to form that intention, and that is not the case. Here is one case, typical of many: My employer awards me a £1000 bonus. The question arises whether I must give it to charity. I deliberate and conclude that there are several (obviously incompatible) eligible options open to me. Giving the money to charity, or to my children, or buying a new computer, are all eligible. At this point I may form the intention to do one or the other of those three things. But I will not be irrational if I do not. For one thing my deliberation may have established that there is no single option that I have a conclusive reason to pursue without establishing the complete range of eligible options, and I may want to hold myself open to consider further options as and when I become aware of them. There is nothing irrational in declining to form any intention at the end of this kind of reasoning.

Or think of it from another point of view: Without engaging in any reasoning I may believe that I have a number of eligible but incompatible ways of using the bonus. I am not irrational if I do not form any intention yet. So long as at least one of the eligible options remains open, that is so long as I am not forfeiting the possibility of pursuing an eligible option and am forced to use the money on an inferior option, there is nothing

¹² See Kolodny. For example, when the intention is to perform the acts at some future time it may be reasonable to intend, and therefore prepare for doing all of them in case one may become impossible, and but for the advance intention and preparation so would the alternative, or it may become more costly or difficult.

wrong in not forming any intention. But if that is so when I do not deliberate how can just the fact that I deliberate turn a rational course (not having an intention) into an irrational one?

So if practical reasoning concludes with intentions then in such cases, however much we deliberate before we form our intentions, we do not engage in practical reasoning. Our reasoning is theoretical, ending with the conclusion that these options are eligible.

That is a surprising conclusion for it means that the character of the reasoning is determined rather late in the process. Until we conclude whether the reasons for the action that we end up intending defeat all conflicting reasons there is no fact of the matter regarding whether our reasoning is practical or not. If at the last stage of the reasoning the conclusion emerges that the reasons for the action defeat all competing reasons then the ensuing intention renders the reasoning practical. If the last stage shows that the action is eligible but that the reasons for it do not defeat all the conflicting reasons then it turns out that the reasoning was theoretical, ending with that conclusion, whereas the intention to perform the action we intend to perform is not the conclusion of the reasoning. Though dependent on the reasoning it is separate from it.

That is an implausible account of practical reasoning. According to it two reasoning events may be almost entirely identical, identical in all but their conclusion, and yet one is practical, the other theoretical. It seems more reasonable to conclude that practical reasoning consists only in the final step in which belief that there is a conclusive reason for an action leads to an intention. All the previous stages are essentially identical in both cases.

Yet that final stage is least likely to be part of any reasoning. Can practical reasoning be the step from the belief: this action is supported by conclusive reasons to the intention to perform it? There seems to be little here which can be characterised as reasoning. Of course, P entails P. but that is mere statement of an inferential relation between them. We do not deliberate from P to P. Do we reason or deliberate from I must do A to intending to do it?

One possible response¹³ is that sometimes we reason directly to the intention, without pausing to draw the conclusion that the act is one we have conclusive reason to perform. That would suggest the possibility of parallel pieces of reasoning: theoretical reasoning ending with the belief that one must Φ , and practical reasoning ending with the intention to Φ , which differ only in their conclusion. Someone who has already engaged in the theoretical reasoning may rationally acquire the intention to Φ without any further reasoning. But at times one would be reasoning practically to the intention to Φ , without first engaging in the theoretical reasoning.

This suggestion seems attractive, provided there is a form of valid reasoning which leads to an intention to Φ via a reasoning route which does not include as an intermediate conclusion that one must Φ . If such an intermediate conclusion is required then we are back where we were before. But, I will argue, there is no such valid reasoning form. First, the premises of a reasoning which would yield an intention to Φ as its conclusion would also entail, or at any rate warrant the conclusion that one must Φ . Second, unless one reasons to the conclusion that one must Φ one would not be justified in forming an intention to Φ **as a result of the reasoning**. That is, though the intention may be justified it cannot be regarded as a result of the reasoning. The existence of reasons to Φ is not sufficient to justify an intention to Φ . The intention is justified only if the reasons are not defeated. So if the intention is the conclusion of reasoning then the reasoning must include, as an intermediate conclusion, either that the reasons to Φ are not defeated by the conflicting reasons, or, that the reasons to Φ are conclusive. But if the intermediate step is that the reasons to Φ are undefeated then the intention is not warranted by the reasoning, as explained before. So if the intention is warranted by the reasoning the intermediate step must be that the reasons to Φ are conclusive. Hence we are back with the objection.

A third difficulty with the thought that practical reasoning is characterised by having intentions as its conclusion arises out of comparing a first person with a third person deliberation, namely cases in which I deliberate about what I am to do, and cases

¹³ Suggested to me by a remark of Peter Railton, made in another context.

in which you deliberate about what I am to do. Imagine that I asked you to think what I should do about a particular matter and come back tomorrow and we will compare notes. We meet again and you describe your reasoning: I thought that this would be a risk to be avoided, that not a bad result, it can be achieved in several ways, etc. etc. At each stage I echo your words: I thought exactly the same, I affirm. Since all our premises and deliberative transitions are the same it would seem that we should reach the same conclusion. But if so it cannot be my intending to do anything since that is not a conclusion open to you. As before, there is reason to resist the conclusion that while our reasoning is essentially identical only one of us is engaged in practical reasoning, as well as the alternative that practical reasoning kicks in only at the last stage, i.e. from the conclusion that this is to be done to intending to do it.

A parallel objection points out that if intentions are the conclusions of practical reasoning then the occasions on which joint practical reasoning is possible are fewer than one might otherwise assume. Instead of my asking you to reflect on my problem at home and report back, we may decide to reason together. One or the other mentions a factor, one or the other adds a second, one or the other draws some preliminary conclusions, and so on. We can reason together about my problem. But will only one of us reason practically? We could of course say that in that case we jointly engage in theoretical reasoning. But this is particularly puzzling. If I engaged in exactly the same reasoning on my own it would have been practical, but as I did it jointly with you it turns out to be theoretical.

Yet another objection relates to a possible time gap between deliberation and action. I may deliberate about what to do in 10 years time (or next week, etc.) and conclude that the thing to do is to Φ . I assume that it is possible to come to that belief without intending to Φ . Without that possibility weakness of the will could not occur. So the question is: what makes me irrational if, aware that I have a conclusive reason to Φ in 10 years time, I stop there and do not now form the intention to Φ ? The only answer I can think of is that I would be less likely to Φ or less ready to Φ then if I do not form the intention now. But that seems false, and groundless. Knowing what to do is as good a

guarantee that I will do it as any I can have (without, Ulysses style, changing my circumstances).

None of these objections entails that the view that practical reasoning is a distinct form of reasoning characterised by having intention as its conclusion is false. Rather, they suggest that this way of classifying types of reasoning responds to no theoretical concerns and may mislead and confuse (though I will not stop to point to confusions that it helped breed).

Still, the third objection (regarding first and third person reasoning, and joint reasoning) can be resisted. First, one can bite the bullet and accept either that such joint reasoning is theoretical after all, or that it is practical because one of the reasoners concludes with an intention, which is all that is required. Regarding third person reasoning: one can deny that it is essentially identical with first person reasoning. I am the only one who can have one of my intentions as a premise. You can only have the proposition that I have such an intention as a premise, and that is a fundamental difference between our reasonings, which undercuts the objection. To consider this response we have to examine first the alternative characterisation of practical reasoning, as reasoning with a distinctive kind of premise (among others).

b) Special Premises

At least two types of premises may be thought to be acceptable in practical reasoning, but not in theoretical reasoning: intentions and accepted, but not believed, propositions.

We regularly rely on propositions we accept, but do not believe, in forming intentions and in reaching decisions. An obvious example is the presumption of innocence. There are many common situations in which we should decide what to do on the basis of presumptions. Suppose that what is to be done depends on the truth of a proposition, whose truth is unknown to the agent. The situation may arise when, even though there is not enough evidence for the agent to form a belief about the truth of that proposition, there is a case for not prolonging deliberation, for concluding right there and then what is to be done. In such cases agents typically accept the proposition

at issue or its negation, and form intentions on the basis of reasoning which accepts a proposition which the agent does not, and should not believe.¹⁴

It appears that while one may be warranted in accepting a proposition which one would not be warranted to believe, that acceptance cannot extend to accepting it as part of a course of reasoning leading to the formation of belief. How could a belief be warranted by considerations which themselves do not merit belief? Two qualifications are obvious: First, one can accept a proposition in order to refute it, as in *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation. Second, beliefs in normative propositions may be based on accepted propositions.¹⁵ One may rightly conclude that one ought to offer someone a job because one accepts that he ought to be treated as innocent of any offence, given that he has not been convicted.

Even so, one is warranted in accepting a proposition (other than for the purpose of examining its implications and presuppositions) only if one would be warranted to believe that it is justified to act on the assumption that the accepted belief is true. So the fact that accepted propositions feature in different ways in practical and theoretical deliberations does not represent any deep difference between them. Both rely on believed propositions, or at least on considerations which would warrant belief.

Some readers may have felt for some time that at various points I have begged the question in arguing against some alternative views. In particular I have been assuming that practical reasoning proceeds from propositions which are either believed, assumed, hypothesized, etc. That made it natural, perhaps inevitable, to hold that evaluative propositions express the content of the conclusion of such reasoning, and that concluding is coming to believe. The alternative view identifies practical reasoning with reasoning which proceeds from intentions, or goals one set oneself, which makes it

¹⁴ I should clarify (a) that the point presupposes that while there are degrees of belief, meaning degrees of confidence in one's beliefs, and also degrees of belief meaning degrees of willingness to give them up in face of conflicting evidence, believing that something is the case is an on/off condition. I also presuppose that people may withhold belief, and that in principles there are rational grounds for all these reactions; (b) sometimes in situations of this kind people form intentions ignoring the disputed propositions. My only point is that sometimes they do not, and are right to proceed on the basis of accepting a proposition that they do not believe.

¹⁵ Though, arguably, this is true only of a conclusion about what is to be done in particular circumstances. That is arguably, belief in, as against acceptance of, general propositions cannot be justified in that way.

natural to take intentions to be the conclusion. At the very least, it may be said, one has to agree that there are cases of reasoning from intentions to intentions, from imperatives to imperatives, from goals to goals, and not only reasoning from normative or evaluative beliefs to other such beliefs.

Intentions are subject to consistency and inferential relations with other intentions and beliefs. But, of course, statements of consistency and inferential relations between intentions or imperatives and actions, between goals and actions and the like, are not to be confused with rules of reasoning. Establishing that certain intentions are, given other propositions, inconsistent can figure in reasoning leading to a belief in their inconsistency, or to other beliefs. The question is: Is there reasoning from intentions, goals and beliefs to intentions as conclusions? Possibly, but I suspect that when reasoning in order to establish what to do the intentions are not essential to the reasoning, that is that the reasoning will be essentially the same without them.

Suppose that I intend to read philosophy this evening, and that reading Kant's *Grundlegung* would constitute reading philosophy. Can I validly reason from these premises to the intention to read the *Grundlegung*? Of the many difficulties with this suggestion the one relevant here becomes evident if we substitute "murder someone" for the first intention and "murder my neighbour's child" for the second. It becomes clear that while there is a necessary relation between the two intentions (namely that realising the second would realise the first) it is not the case that I would be warranted in forming the second because I have the first. It seems more appropriate to reason from the first intention to an intention to find a way to rid myself of murderous intentions.

For reasoning to warrant adopting or endorsing an intention it must include, at least as an interim conclusion, that the intention in the conclusion is one that one has an undefeated reason to have.¹⁶ Once we have arrived at that interim conclusion is there any further reasoning left to be done? We are back with some of the arguments

¹⁶ A conclusion which sometimes, but not always, depends on the intentions which figure among the premises being ones which one has undefeated reason to have.

rehearsed above: It does not appear that the move from 'I have a conclusive reason to Φ ' to 'I intend to Φ ' involves any reasoning, and nor does ' Φ -ing is an eligible option' lead by a process of reasoning to an intention to Φ ; an intention that one would be justified not to form or endorse, even in the face of that interim conclusion.

c) Norms governing deliberation:

Is practical reasoning governed by distinct norms of correct reasoning? As before we need to distinguish rules of inference from the norms governing deliberation and reasoning. Many deductive rules of inference derive from conditions of consistency for the application of concepts. (e.g. from X is a bachelor it follows that X is not female). Some writers on practical reasoning alert us to consistency conditions applying to concepts such as OUGHT, INTENTION, OBEYING a command or an instruction. Important as such conceptual clarifications are they do not establish norms of deliberation.

Aristotle thought that practical reasoning involves, or consists in syllogisms of a special kind. The form of reasoning he described can be represented as governed by distinctive principles of deliberation. Tony Kenny, endorsing Aristotle's account, provided a formalisation of practical inferences which he informally explains as follows:

A piece of practical reasoning must contain a premise which sets out a goal to be obtained (such as 'Charles is to be kept warm'). The other premises commonly set out facts about the present situation, plus information about ways of reaching the goal from that situation. Indeed the commonest pattern of practical reasoning is: 'G is to be brought about. But if I do B then G; so I'll do B'.¹⁷

Noting that this is not a pattern of valid theoretical reasoning he explains:

Practical reasoning is the reasoning we use in planning how to achieve our goals. If there are rules of practical logic their function will be to see that we do not pass from a plan which is adequate to achieve our goal to one which is inadequate to

¹⁷ A. Kenny, THE METAPHYSICS OF MIND (Oxford UP 1989) p. 43.

achieve them. So in the sense in which rules of theoretical reasoning are truth-preserving, we can say that rules of practical logic are satisfactoriness-preserving.¹⁸

Let us call a goal 'absolute' just in case it is (a) independent, that is it remains a goal whatever the circumstances, and (b) overriding, that is the reasons for it are conclusive whatever else is the case (as we say: 'whatever the consequences'). That I need a coat (which can be read as stating the goal of getting a coat) is not an independent goal since if it gets warm (and is likely to remain warm) I will not need a coat. Nor is it overriding: it should not be pursued if the only way to pursue it is to kill someone.

Aristotelian practical syllogism, while possibly helpful in identifying what we are to do given known absolute goals, cannot be taken to represent the general form of practical deliberation. Arguably, we are never warranted in assuming that any goal is absolute. In any case, much practical reasoning does not take any goal to be absolute. Aristotle's examples, a need for a coat, etc., are no exception. Much practical reasoning concerns identifying (a) what goals we have, and (b) what are we to do when goals conflict, as they regularly do, or when there are goal-independent considerations against pursuing some of our goals or against taking some of the means to their realisation. Aristotelian practical syllogism is no help in either task. It does nothing to help with resolution of conflicts of reasons and even in the absence of conflicting reasons the premises of Aristotelian practical syllogism do not warrant any conclusion for they do not include a closure premise, like "all other things are equal", without which no conclusion is warranted, but with which the inference is no longer distinct, being similar to probabilistic reasoning.¹⁹

More generally, Kenny rightly argued that practical reasoning is defeasible and non-deductive, but more and more we realise that theoretical reasoning in many of its forms is also defeasible. I do not know of any suggestion which establishes that practical reasoning is subject to distinctive standards. Absent any reason to think that Practical

¹⁸ *Op.Cit.* p. 44

¹⁹ As Chisholm and Davidson pointed out.

Reason is a distinct form of Reason, we can conclude that it is simply Reason, when dealing with practical reasons.

5. Normativity and Personhood

The difference between practical and epistemic reasons is central to the attempt to understand **what hold reasons have on us**. One way with this question is to claim that reasons for belief are only conditionally normative, which means that they are only conditionally reasons. They are reasons when it is good to have that belief, but not otherwise. Epistemic reasons help towards having true beliefs, and this matters only when there is a reason to have them. Epistemic reasons are a type of instrumental practical reasons.

This view flies in the face of the fact that all judgements which go with reasons apply to epistemic reasons unconditionally. To mention but one: we are not irrational for failing to conform to a conditional reason until the condition is met. But it is irrational not to have the beliefs one has adequate reason for whether or not the condition obtains, that is whether or not there is value in having them.

Like many others I think that to understand **the hold** that reasons have on us is to understand the way in which they are constitutive of being persons. In a nutshell: the powers of having beliefs and of acting intentionally are constitutive of being persons, and we have them only if we have reasonably well functioning rational powers, that is only if we respond to reasons through their use.

Let me start clarifying and modifying this bold statement by considering epistemic reasons. First: neither the question of the hold epistemic reasons have on us nor the question of their normativity is the question 'why be rational?' We can fail to conform to reasons which apply to us and still be rational. That would be the case so long as our failure is not due to a malfunction of our rational powers, for example, so long as our failure is due to non-culpable (e.g. non-negligent) mistakes and ignorance. There is no normative standing to being rational as such. There is no reason to be in a state in which

one failed to identify reasons through a non-culpable mistake, even though the failure is not a failure of rationality.²⁰

There is, of course, another question: what is the point, one may ask, of being successfully rational, of functioning rationally well? The point is obvious: it is a way of identifying and responding to reasons. There can, of course be non-standard reasons for functioning rationally well, or badly. One can bet that one will not fail or that one will fail to function rationally and so on. Such bets then provide reasons to try to do what it takes to win them. Clearly the question of normativity is not about the existence of such occasional reasons.

There are two common mistakes which may be responsible for some writers focusing on reasons to be rational. First, they fail to notice that we need no reasons to function rationally, just as we need no reason to hear sounds in our vicinity. So long as we are conscious our powers of hearing and our rational powers are engaged, though not always successfully.

But if the question is not why be rational, nor is it the question of the reasons for conforming with reasons. Such reasons do not explain the hold reasons have on us as these supporting reasons need as much explanation as the supported reasons.

Second, some writers confuse conformity with some logical principles with being rational. Many of the examples often adduced are not conditions of rationality. Most commonly avoiding contradictions is mistakenly said to be a condition of rationality. To be sure those who have contradictory beliefs have some false beliefs, but that does not show that they are irrational, or that they ever did something irrationally. One can come to endorse a set of contradictory beliefs without ever committing an irrationality.

These preliminaries illustrate the difficulty we have in locating the question we are after. Perhaps the following illustrates the difficulty: suppose one defies an epistemic reason, what is wrong with that? The answers seem to be internal to the concepts

²⁰ Of course we do not commend a person for failing non-negligently to identify reasons which apply to him, and therefore we do not say to him 'you were very rational in what you did'. But that is a point about the implications of saying. At other times we may say so: 'Oh, I have become totally irrational' he exclaims in despair, and we reassure him: 'You are perfectly rational, You just made a mistake'.

involved: we say – if you defy reason you are irrational. So what? Your beliefs are incoherent – well suppose they are, what of it? And so on. The temptation to say: ‘if you disregard reasons you will fall down and break your neck, or point to some other adverse practical result, is overwhelming. And as we saw has to be resisted.

We, some of us, want to step outside the conceptual web, and find an explanation for the hold that reasons have on us. This we can do since their hold on us depends on the fact that responsiveness to reasons is constitutive of personhood.

I should immediately make clear that I do not share the thought of some philosophers that a constitutive account of reasons will settle what reasons there are. Thinking of practical reasons, Korsgaard, e.g., claims that “Action is self-constitution and accordingly, ... what makes actions good or bad is how well they constitute you.” She suggests that all practical reasons can be derived from this insight: we have a standard of being a good person, and you have reasons for actions which will constitute you as one, or something which includes this idea. My constitutive account of rationality can yield no such results. It is a mere formal account, and we will have to consider whether such a formal account is, even if true, of any significance.

Here is the formal constitutive story: Reasoning and deliberation are mental activities which we can decide on. There are practical reasons for or against reasoning and deliberating. But we cannot decide how to respond to epistemic reasons. It is constitutive of belief that it is governed by our responsiveness to epistemic reasons, governed gaplessly, automatically as it were. Responsiveness to epistemic reasons is constitutive of believing.

Responsiveness to reasons can, of course, fail: through mistakes, fallacies, wishful thinking, self-deception and more. But if so how are these standards constitutive of belief? Does not failure establish that conformity to reason is only contingently related to belief? Conformity to reason is indeed contingent. What is essential to belief is, first, its subjection to the normativity of reasons, its being subject to evaluation as warranted or unwarranted depending on its conformity with reasons; and, second, the fact that it is automatically, as it were, self-correcting. Failures to conform to reasons are self-

correcting when we become aware of them. Again, no gap exists, no decision to correct is required, no involvement of the will.

That is why the responsiveness to epistemic reasons is a form of constitutive normativity, normativity built into the very possibility of belief. Not all our mental states are responsive to reasons. I may think that I am a feathered bird, and not respond at all to evidence that I have no feathers nor beak, etc. But then that kind of thinking is fantasising, imagining, day-dreaming or the like; not believing.

There are two lessons here: first that we recognise the difference ourselves. We know the difference between belief and imagination, and we know that it consists, in part in that belief is, while imagination is not, subject to the full discipline of reasons (though imagination may be partially subject to it, in a variety of different ways).

The second lesson is that our control over belief differs from our control over various forms of imagination. Regarding the imagination control consists entirely of voluntary control. It depends on the degree to which we can imagine at will. Not so with belief.

We cannot always imagine things at will, and when we do we cannot always make ourselves stop imagining at will, and, most noticeably, even when we imagine something at will our voluntary control over the details of the imagining is very limited. In all these respects our voluntary control over belief is generally similar (we can decide what to deliberate about, have some ability to remember at will, can often decide to stop considering a matter, and so on). But distinctively, we have little voluntary control over the way our beliefs respond to reasons we think we have. We also have limited voluntary control over whether to have beliefs. We can shut our eyes, but when open we cannot just refuse to believe what we see (whatever we say) without having some reason to doubt what we see.

What is important is that the limits of our voluntary control over our beliefs are not the limits of our control over them: we are in control over our beliefs by functioning properly as rational agents, that is, we are in control, and active, so long as, and to the degree that our beliefs are governed by reason. That is what makes us persons. Roughly

speaking we are persons while we have rational capacities, and by and large our beliefs and actions are governed by them, which is the same as saying so long as we have beliefs.

In brief outline: responsiveness to practical reasons is constitutive of being a person for without it there is no action with the intention of doing it. While not all actions are performed for a reason, when we do something with the intention of doing it, which is roughly when we have a purpose in doing it, see a point in doing it, we act for a reason, that is we act in the belief that there is a reason for the action.

Such actions, which I will somewhat inaccurately refer to as intentional actions, are governed by reason somewhat less directly than beliefs. Both intentional action and belief are subject to failures to correctly identify reasons, failures to follow through with the implications of reasons one identified (as in failures of memory or lapses of attention) as well as to irrationalities, including motivated irrationalities. In both cases we recognise such failures for what they are in principle, thus acknowledging that belief and intentional actions are inherently governed by reason. There is, as we know, a keen debate about the difference between the conditions for rationality of belief and of intentional action, e.g. whether there is epistemic akrasia. For our purpose suffice it to note that whatever differences there are they are secondary to the basic point that we cannot, while acting intentionally, but act for a (perceived) reason (albeit not always the one we believe to be the best reason). Rationality, namely responsiveness to reasons, is thus constitutive of being persons.

The relationship of Reason and reasons has been the thread going through the observations of this paper. Trying to understand what motivates one to search for, say, the foundations of normativity, we realise that the search cannot even as much as be stated from 'inside' as it were. From 'inside' we can only look for reasons for reasons, or note that disregarding reasons is, under appropriate circumstances, irrational, that is a symptom of the malfunctioning of our rational powers – All such internal investigations inevitably move in a circle, and do not reach the puzzle.

So we went outside, and raised a question about reasons, stated in non-normative terms: what is the hold reasons have on us? The answer was that we cannot ignore them because we are persons, or more precisely, because rational powers are

constitutive of personhood, and because they are powers whose use does not depend on our will. That is, these powers are engaged and active willy nilly, independently of any decision to use them, so long as we are awake and do not suppress them. They are like our hearing rather than like our ability to speak. Hence, so long as we are persons we engage with reasons, generally trying to do it well, however imperfect our success.

Now, you may object that even if true these observations do not explain normativity, let alone justify its standing. They say something about rational powers, but nothing at all about reasons. I emphasised early on that explaining why reasons call for a certain response need not invoke our rational powers which are merely powers to recognise and respond to what is there independently of them – well, at least sometimes, given that some reasons would not exist but for the powers and activities of rational creatures.

In a way the objection is justified. Rejecting the feasibility of a reductive explanation means that once we step outside, as it were, and examine normativity as a whole we lose the ability to explain it. That explanation is inevitably internal – reasons are what we should follow, disregard of which is unjustified, etc. etc. But we can explain from outside the inescapability of normativity, the hold reasons have on us. We do so, to be sure, by pointing out features of rational powers, but rational powers are essentially powers to recognise and respond to reasons. So in explaining their place in our life we also point to the hold that reasons have on us, though that hold is subject to mistakes and irrationalities.

Still, disquiet may persist: does any of this amount to more than saying that we are boxed into treating certain considerations as if they were reasons? Does it not fail to vindicate them as reasons? Are reasons normative in the deeper sense that there is a point to being guided by them, that being guided by them is not an arbitrary, albeit a natural response? Is our responsiveness to reasons just a fact rather than a response to a normative consideration? Is it not like saying that we are persons only so long as we breathe, a fact which we must acknowledge, but can find arbitrary, and are free to resent?

I'll say nothing about breathing. But reasons are different. Here, I think, the fact that the account is confined to their formal characterisations is – far from being a shortcoming – a key to its success. The maxims characterise reasons as part of the case for the truth of propositions, for the value or point of actions, and so on. Such characterisations are relatively formal in that they do not directly yield a way of establishing what is a reason for what. But they focus discussion about what properties make for reasons: a piece of evidence is an epistemic reason, but what is evidence? Are there other epistemic reasons (normative, conceptual, or logical reasons – for example: is the fact that you promised to do something reason to believe that you intended to undertake an obligation to do it?)? Similarly there are debates whether practical reasons must derive from the well-being of the agent to whom they apply, whether there is some property which constitutes some facts as moral reasons, and so on. The formal characterisations serve to focus and frame thought about which more substantive properties constitute reasons. My point is not to suggest an epistemic priority of the formal characterisation. I do not think that there is such priority. The point is that the hold of reasons on us is not like being boxed into some arbitrary mode of thought and behaviour. We can understand, explain and justify the structures of thought we are locked into, and this includes explaining and non-reductively justifying what constitutes reasons.

But, some will say, the question remains: Assume that I am right in emphasising (a) that subjection to the discipline of reasons is semi-automatic, (b) that it is normative in being a response to a standard, an adjustment of our beliefs and intentions in light of reasons; and (c) that the capacities so manifested are constitutive of being persons. But, having conceded that this is so only shows that a general rational capacity is constitutive of personhood, and not that reasons or normativity are constitutive of personhood, the three points fail to vindicate normativity. It is not enough to point out that creatures with no rational capacities are not persons. Clearly there is nothing amiss with pigeons, even though they do not have rational capacities. A vindication of normativity has to show what is amiss with failing to conform to reason on this or that occasion.

At this point I have to admit that I no longer understand the sense of puzzlement. What is amiss with failing to conform to reason is just that. It can be specified further: it may be defrauding a person of his money, or it may be wasting one's talent, or missing an opportunity to make a lot of money, or remaining confused about black holes. It all depends on the nature of the reasons one flouted. But clearly that is not the puzzle. It has something to do with vindicating reasons or normativity in general, without assuming their cogency. So what is it? We do know that people who flout reason sometimes prosper. Is the desire for some further vindication of reasons a hope that philosophical argument can show this to be an illusion? But there is no illusion there.

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