Why Pursuing the Good is Rational

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Abstract:

Can one be both vice-ridden and practically rational? Philosophers are divided on the question of whether practical reason is instrumental to any end or intrinsically pursues certain ends. This paper offers a unified case for the view that practical reason is intrinsically aimed at the good and that therefore, immoral decisions (and habits, etc.) are rational mistakes. I draw on Jennifer Frey's recent work to the effect that practical reason is necessarily constituted by a few general rational motives. An additional attraction of her view is that it solves related problems in metaethics that assume a divide between the external, biological view of oneself from the internal, human view.

> There could be no reasons unless a rational animal has a general conception of its own good, and thus a general sense of how to live. – Jennifer Frey, *The Will to Do Good* 79.

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Introduction

Everyone must live according to both instinct and choice. Instinct is automatic and unreflective; but once choice is introduced, one must reflect – or else live irrationally.

Call "practical reasoning" the process of reflecting on how to live. We answer all practical questions by practical reasoning from the most specific to the most general: what should I wear today? What career should I pursue? How should I live? By practical reasoning, we reflcet on our actions and those of others, evaluate them, and justify or blame them with reference to normative principles.

Given that everyone must engage in practical reasoning, how are we to understand this process? Philosophers dispute over major two rival views: The first view is that practical reasoning is intrinsically valuable and value-laden. Everyone *tries* to do reason well; the people who succeed are

wise. This traditional view is associated with Aristotle but extends far beyond him.[1] The second view is that practical reasoning is a more mechanical and value-neutral procedure. Everyone strategizes means to their chosen ends, but those ends are chosen by preference, passion, authority, whim, or aspiration. And those ends are some good, some bad.

The second view defines things such that one can fall into the grip of many vices and still be *practically rational*, even cunning and wise, despite one's inhuman ends. A scientist, philosopher, theologian, and public servant who is wicked could still be perfectly *rational* in cleverly adjudicating means to their ends. But is it true that one can be both vice-ridden and practically rational?

In this paper, I offer a contemporary defense of the traditional view that practical reason is intrinsically aimed at the good and that, therefore, immoral decisions and habits are rational mistakes. I first explain the "default" (Aristotelian) view of realism about goodness and practical reason and briefly summarize the rival contemporary (Humean) view. Then, I critique the Humean view and mount a defense of a neo-Aristotelian account of practical reason.

I. Realism about Practical Reason: The Default View

To speak with a broad historical horizon, the default view of practical reasoning in western philosophy was "realism". On this view, as it was expressed by Aristotle, human beings are rational animals. That is, we both respond to the world by instinct and evaluate the world by reason. Reason or 'rationality' has a double nature, both theoretical and practical, for we are able to think *theoretically* (about mathematics, astronomy, theology, history) but also to be able to think *practically* (about technical, ethical, and political pursuits).

On this view, practical reason is "a capacity for reflection about an objective body of normative truths regarding action."[2] In other words, realism says that good and bad are "objectively" real features of the world, or perhaps an objective relation between ourselves and the world. For example, some foods are actually good for me to eat and others bad, given the kind of thing I am and the kind of things they are. Puffball mushrooms are good while death cap mushrooms are bad, simply because they are deadly for human beings. The objective features of such mushrooms in conjunction with the features of human physiology make it that some actions are categorically *for us* and others *not for us*. To take a more ethically significant example, each human being is confronted with sexual desires. "How should I dispose myself as a sexual creature?" is a practical question of some urgency that most people cannot avoid. And some sexual behaviors are good (monogamy) because they are *for humans* while others bad (incest) because they are categorically *not for human beings*. Practical reasoning then, is a process of evaluating the world to discover what is worth pursuing and what merits avoiding. For this reason, Neo-Aristotelians are insistent that there can be no adequate theory of ethics without a theory of practical rationality.[3]

Practical reasoning begins with broad questions such as "Why should I act at all?" Given that some things are obviously worth pursuing, practical reason attempts to determine the major

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (University of Notre Dame, 1988).

2. R. Jay Wallace, "Practical Reason," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014, sec. 2. Wallace cites Parfit (2011) and Scanlon (2014).

3. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*.

decisions of life – career, relationships, hobbies, and so on. Answering these general questions with specific principles and even more specific actions is the business of being human.

In sum, the 'default view' is that practical reasoning is a distinctively human process of reflecting on objectively true practical reasons by which one lives a good and human life. This view may be wrong, but it is what Thomas Nagel calls a "defeasible presumption."[4] Even anti-realism's most sophisticated advocates, such as J.L. Mackie, admit that objective value is "the main tradition of European moral philosophy" and that it has "a firm basis in ordinary thought, and even in the meanings of moral terms."[5] Allan Gibbard goes so far as to suggest that realist "Platonism" about normative truths is *common sense*.[6]

The simple and powerful conception of human nature and practical reasoning held sway for many centuries and still holds sway in some circles. Nevertheless, realism is no longer the default view among philosophers, especially those who lean analytic.

II. The Rival View

The main objection against realism comes from a commitment to naturalism and a corresponding "threat of supernaturalism"[7] or "rampont Platonism". Philosophers such as Gibbard protest: "Nothing in a plausible, naturalistic picture of our place in the universe requires … non-natural facts and these powers of non-sensory apprehension."[8] There are no "non-natural norms" and there is no corresponding non-naturalistic human capacity to intuit them. Hence the anti-realist alternatives aim either to debunk the objective purport of practical reasoning or to reclaim it within the confines of a respectable naturalism.

The rival view, forcefully presented by David Hume, pictures practical reasoning as procedure for adjudicating one's own ends.[9] The Humean model of practical reasoning asserts that "cognition and volition are distinct."[10] Practical reasons cannot motivate, at least not by themselves:

4. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 143.

5. John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin UK, 1977); compare with Terence Cuneo, *Speech and Morality* (Oxford University Press, 2014); and with C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man's Sense of Morality* (Macmillan, 1947)

6. "It might be thought that ordinary conceptions of rationality are Platonistic or intuitionistic. On the Platonistic picture, among the facts of the world are facts of what is rational and what is not. A person of normal mental powers can discern these facts. Judgments of rationality are thus straightforward apprehensions of fact, not through sense perception but through a mental faculty analogous to sense perception. When a person claims authority to pronounce on what is rational, he must base his claim on this power of apprehension." See Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Harvard University Press, 1992) 154.

7. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 78.

8. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 154.

9. For a discussion of this distinction, see: Brad Hooker and Bart Streumer, "Procedural and Substantive Practical Rationality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Rationality* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 57–74.

10. John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 335.

"Reason is the discovery of truth and falsehood."[11] According to this view, what one judges to be good or bad is not directly a function of reason but of passions, preferences, desires, goals, aims, intentions, aspirations, and so on. What does one act at all? Because one finds oneself with motives, passions, desires. These, however important, are not subject to rational criticism in quite the same way as judgments of fact. Reason is the cognitive process by which we judge an object, passion is the conative process that moves us to act.

The rival view of practical reason we can call "proceduralism." On proceduralism, human beings are mere animals whose characteristic form of life involves highly rarefied neurological and cognitive processes we do not observe in other animals.[12] And nature is a closed physical system of cause-and-effect with no real normative or evaluative properties. Practical reason cannot be the identification of ethical facts "out there" but must be something we do to express and achieve our goals.

III. The Chief Difficulty of Proceduralism

Is there a way for contemporary, scientifically-minded philosophers to reclaim what is so satisfying about the traditional, realist view of practical reason? I think so.

The first point to be made is that even instrumental reason involves a minimal commitment to substantive realism about practical reason. Suppose for a moment that you could engage in practical reasoning without a commitment to some general good. Jay Wallace points out that, "Instrumental rationality, in its most basic form, instructs agents to take those means that are necessary in relation to their given ends." But on the anti-realists assumption, why should I care to take the means necessary to my ends? Why should I not aim to fly by jumping in the ocean, or aim to swim by getting on a plane? The only reply would be that *it is just rational* to adjudicate proper means to one's ends. But then the proceduralist is assuming the objective goodness of that kind of 'rationality.'

The first question practical reason asks is "Why act at all?" The proceduralist, no less than the realist, must provide an account of this question and its first answer. For without an answer, one would not act. The person who does not pursue anything would waste away, like Bartleby the Scrivener. Of course, we all act in pursuit of ends. And when practical reasoners act at all, they act *by definition* in pursuit of a particular object falling under a universal category.

Warren Quinn convinced Philippa Foot that practical reasoning aims at the good he argued that:

> Practical thought, like any other thought, requires a subject matter. And for human beings the subject matter that distinguishes thought as practical is, in the first instance, human ends and action insofar as they are good or bad in themselves… Practical thought deploys a master set of non-instrumental evaluative notions: that of a good or bad human act, a good or bad human life, a good or bad human agent,

11. (*Treatise of Human Nature*, Part I.1.)

12. R. Stephen Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature: A Defense of Ethical Naturalism* (Continuum, 2008).

> and a good or bad human action. Practical reason is, on this view, the faculty that applies these fundamental evaluative concepts.[13]

Philippa Foot found Quinn's point compelling and began to see "goodness as setting a necessary condition of practical rationality and therefore as at least a part-determinant of [practical rationality] itself."[14]

So the proceduralist about practical reason, no less than the realist, needs a sufficiently general starting point for procedural reasoning to even get off the ground. Call these "first principles." The alternative to aiming at the good is not aiming at some value-neutral "end" or goal; the alternative to aiming at the good is *ceasing to acting at all*. It turns out that the proceduralist is not *rejecting* first principles but *replacing* them. Where an Aristotelian enjoins everyone to "be human" or "be rational", the proceduralist offers the pseudo-technical injunction to "achieve your goals" or "configure the appropriate means to your chosen ends."

If we accept this point, and I do not see how to avoid it, then we are already committed to a minimally substantive view of practical reason, rather than a merely procedural one. So any rival to the Aristotelian account of practical reason cannot dispense with an answer to the question of "why act at all?" but must defend their own, rival answer.

IV. Practical Reason as Becoming Human

Now I shall try to sketch the neo-Aristotelian account more fully. Building on the work of Philippa Foot and on Jennifer Frey's recent discussions of Anscombe and Aquinas,[15] I shall argue that practical reasoning is not merely a procedure or instrument but necessarily an activity aimed at the good of human life. Let's unpack this thought.

The first point in this case is to notice that goodness, desire, motivation, and end-directed activity are not just features of human beings but features of all organic life. As Thomas Nagel argues, "The existence of value seems to be coextensive with the existence of living things."[16] All biological

13. Warren Quinn and Philippa Foot, *Morality and Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 223.

14. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 63. To one who objects, she points out that: "Many of us are willing to reject a 'present desire' theory of reasons for action because we think that someone who knowingly puts his future health at risk for a trivial pleasure is behaving foolishly, and therefore not well. Seeing his will as defective, we therefore say that he is doing what he has reason not to do. Being unable to fit the supposed 'reason' into some preconceived present-desire-based theory of reasons for action, we do not query whether it really is a foolish way to behave, but rather hang on to the evaluation and shape our theory of reasons accordingly. And it is exactly a generalization of this presumption about the direction of the argument on which I am now insisting. For what, we may ask, is so special about prudence that it alone among the virtues should be reasonably thought to relate to practical rationality in such a way?"

15. As Foot says: "It is my opinion that the *Summa Theologica* is one of the best sources we have for moral philosophy, and moreover that St. Thomas's ethical writings are as useful to the atheist as to the Catholic or other Christian believer." (*Virtues and Vices*, 2.)

16. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 117.

organisms exhibit teleological movement.[17] That is, they grow into maturity and exemplify their life form.

Things are specified by their activity.[18] Plants exemplify their life form this by simply growing: trees extend roots into the ground by nature, and apple trees deposit apple seeds in the ground, and so on. Animals incline toward their own good by instinct, pursuing life and reproduction while avoiding injury, death, and extinction. A "form of life" is what Aristotle and Aquinas call a "nature": wolf hunts in packs by nature, reptiles warm themselves in the sun by nature, and so on. Animals use sensory perception, and even social cooperation, to pursue their good and avoid the bad but they cannot use complex, recursive language or rational reflection. Animals do not perceive *as* – they do not perceive things as falling under universal categories.

Human beings engage in cognitive and deliberative activities that require the ability to recognize universals. While other animals have sensation and perception, humans have sensation, perception, and "intellection" – the power of abstracting formal properties from what is perceived. Other animals can respond to an informed, organized object but humans can acquire information from such objects. This extra ability creates the possibility of practical reasoning. For even my instincts, sensations, and natural desires can be taken up in a deliberative act. Confronted with some desire to say, eat some food, I can acquiesce to the desire or overcome it if there is some reason not to indulge (it looks good but it is poisonous). Confronted with some fear of, say, a spider, I can flee or overcome the fear for good reason (the spider is not poisonous and not dangerous).

Animals and even plants *act*, but only human beings *act for reasons*. Frey summarizes:

> Rational animals, like any animal, have a natural inclination towards their good as a whole, and like lower animals this power is actualized through their apprehension of things in the world. But Aquinas argues that a rational animal relates to the world through the application of universal concepts, and thus it is inclined to pursue or avoid things under an intellectual, universal apprehension of them. Thus, Aquinas says that the will is inclined towards its objects under the formality of the "universal good," rather than the particular good.[19]

The second point, as we noticed above, is that practical reasoning must start somewhere. "Why act at all?" In other words, what first principle supplies a sufficiently general rational motive to get practical reasoning off the ground? Aquinas compares practical reasoning with theoretical reasoning. Theoretical reason begins simply by noticing that *things exist in general*. Practical reasoning begins by being *drawn to goodness in general*:

17. Foot, *Natural Goodness*; James Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology" (PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2011) Mark Perlman, "The Modern Philosophical Resurrection of Teleology," *The Monist* 87, no. 1 (2004): 3–51.

18. John Haldane, "On Coming Home to (Metaphysical) Realism," *Philosophy* 71, no. 276 (1996): 287–96.

19. Jennifer Ann Frey, "The Will and the Good" (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2012), 75.

> …as "being" is the first thing that falls under the apprehension simply, so "good" is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good… Hence this is the first precept of practical reason, that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.[20]

To put the point differently, Jennifer Frey's recent work argues that, "There could be no reasons unless a rational animal has a general conception of its own good, and thus a general sense of how to live."[21] The idea here is that practical reasoning is constituted by a few, very general, rational motives. Practical reason cannot address questions such as "what should I eat?" or "what should I do for a career?" without presuming upon a pre-existing commitment to some general ends, such as survival or a satisfying life that makes a positive impact on the world.

Of course, this way of framing things is quite general. We have some conception of how to live in the way (or set of ways) that is good for practical, rational animals like us. So the third point of my case is that we must connect this maximally general account of practical reason with particular ethical and prudential duties of human life. Intermediate goods, not quite as general as the principle that "good is to be done" are those goods that appear on an "objective list"[22]: virtue, wisdom, health, friendship, knowledge, and so on. These are human goods. And since everyone is human and practically rational by nature, every person has good reason to pursue them.

What is to be done with moral vice and error then? Even though I have argued, with Aquinas, that all people pursue the good by definition whenever they engage in practical reasoning, one can still make rational mistakes.

First, one can err in failing to correctly identify specific goods through lack of practical wisdom. John McDowell argues that virtue is a kind of wisdom, a practical knowledge or "disposition to act well." On this view, the skill of engaging in practical reasoning – reliably and successfully – is the virtue of practical wisdom. As Micah Lott argues, "humans characteristically acquire knowledge of human form through acquiring practical wisdom – an understanding of what is good and bad to do in various spheres and situations of human life."[23] The list of objective goods above (knowledge, virtue etc.) is general enough to accommodate a variety of controversial details about what one ought to do or not do. It is possible that, in a disagreement, both parties are basically rational, while one party is more accurately identifying what is to be pursued or avoided.

Secondly, one can err in mistaking the good for evil and mistake the bad for good. One can pursue the bad under the aspect of 'the good' because one (mis)judges it *as good*. But then that is no different from noticing that people who affirm falsehoods do not believe them to be false; they affirm the falsehoods because they (misjudge) them to be true.

Human beings who err in practical reasoning are vice-ridden. All living things move toward their own natural ends, yet biologists accurately judge that some specimens are defective; similarly,

20. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, n.d. IIa. Q.94. Art. 2.

21. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 79.

22. Roger Crisp, "Well-Being," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2016, 2016.

23. Micah Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form," *Social Theory and Practice* 38, no. 3 (2012): 421.

some agents – such as Dostoevsky's Underground Man – are practically irrational in failing to pursue their own natural ends.

Indeed, moral vice and practical foolishness are new and unprecedented errors in the animal kingdom. Human beings are *supposed to* practically reason well. When they do not, the defect that arises is more than merely animal. Any animals might be afflicted by sickness or injury; only human animals can inflict themselves with new injuries and even new illnesses. The person who fails to practically reason well fails to pursue what is objectively worthwhile and instead pursues what is worthless.

By contrast, the person who practically reasons well becomes wise. The practically wise person undertakes "mapping the landscape of value"[24] – that is, developing the knowledge and good intentions needed to pursue what is truly worthwhile and avoid what is worthless (even if it *seems* worthwhile). Practical reasons are objective in that it matters whether my subjective values match the reality of the situation. And, like all virtues, practical wisdom both *enables* one to live a distinctly human life and partly constitutes that life.

V. Further Attractions

My account is basically complete. I now wish to highlight to further attractions of this view for solving related problems that are being discussed in the metaethical literature.

Practical or Rational?

Humean philosophers puzzle about how practical reason can be both practical (motivating, action-guiding) and rational (judging true and false). On my account, this puzzle does not arise. We *already* find ourselves pursuing the good; the only task is to grow in *specific knowledge* of the good. Practical reasoning is both *practical* by resolving what to do and *rational* in that it takes into account important truths about the world and human nature when resolving what to do. "Death caps are poisonous to human beings" is a *good reason* not to eat them, even if I like the taste.

On my account, practical reasoning is not something one does *before* resolving what to do, as one picks up an item in a store *before* purchasing it. Practical reasoning is the name we give to the process of *resolving what to do*, as checking out from the store is the process of purchasing. Just as the appraisal of overwhelming evidence for p is not utterly distinct from the affirmation that p, the deliberative conclusion that one ought to ϕ is not utterly distinct from the decision to ϕ. To co-opt Gibbard's unforgettable phrase, practical reasoning is "thinking how to live."[25]

Prudence or Morality?

Some philosophers puzzle over an apparent fundamental duality in practical reasoning between prudential and moral reasoning. They argue that the first question of practical reasoning is whether I

24. Wallace, "Practical Reason," sec. 6.

25. Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

should pursue my own good (self-interest, pragmatism, egoism) or that of others (altruism, morality). This can't be right, for even the contrasting of moral and prudential considerations assumes a conception of 'rightness' or 'goodness' that belongs to both moral and prudential actions but is not reducible to either.

Objective or Subjective?

Another problem is the apparent disjunction between knowing "internally", "subjectively" from the "moral point of view" or the "point of view or morality" versus knowing "externally", "objectively," from the "scientific point of view" or the point of view of God or the universe. For example, if I suppress my own internal, human point of view, it seems objectively good for any living organisms to grow and thrive and reproduce – it seems just as good for a tiger or dinosaur as for a hominid. But from within my own internal point of view, the survival of myself and my species seems *more good*. I can understand the calculation according to which it is worth it for me to render another species extinct in the pursuit of my own aims.[26]

So what is my good? I think this apparent dilemma is specious, arising from a refusal to accept that human nature is already both natural and good. In other words, my (individual) good is my (species) good, the good of my life form. Since I am (by nature) a human being, I can and naturally should become (by intention) a good human being – rendering 'good' here as 'mature', virtuous, and practically rational.

The objection is sometimes stated that goods can not be known "scientifically" and hence they are not "objective." This is a misunderstanding. The objection assumes that the scientific point of view is somehow contrasted with the moral point of view. Certainly descriptive (or theoretical) modes of thought are distinct from normative (or practical) modes of thought. However, the distinction between theoretical and practical *runs through* the scientific/ethical distinction. There are really four modes here: scientific theoretical/scientific practical and ethical/theoretical/ethical practical. So one of the scientific points of view *is evaluative*; evaluation is one of the scientific points of view. We know what is good for daffodils or caterpillars, say, from the outside. We are not them. Nevertheless, we can evaluate them. We know human nature both from within and from without, and can evaluate ourselves. The fact that we can see our good from both vantage points does not entail that the vantage points are opposed.

Conclusion

To be born into the human race requires that one take responsibility for determining the course of one's life. One can either undertake this all-important endeavor randomly or according to certain norms – practical norms – that govern a well-lived life. I have argued that practical reasoning is

26. We can further subdivide "the moral point of view" into altruistic and prudential domains, as we did above. What is "good" for me might be in conflict with what is good for you. Certainly, as Foot says, some practical reasons have to do with "obligations, duties, and charitable acts" to others; but others pertain to what is required for oneself and even for third-person objects such as the environment, possessions, and perhaps even abstract objects.

the name of a process by which rational animals pursue their own good and which is constituted by very general motives, such as that one 'does good and avoids evil', which are further specified by reflection upon the contours of life as lived. The person who successfully "maps the landscape of value" is rightfully called practical wise, and knows how to live. The person who indulges in practical foolishness inevitably develops co-morbid afflictions – that is, vices of many kinds. On this account, no clever villain who is able to calculate the means to his ends can be practically rational. No clever but wicked scientist, philosopher, theologian, politician can be rational until he realizes that his pursuit of (what appears to him) good is preventing him from being fully human.