Why Pursuing the Good is Rational

Keith Buhler
University of Kentucky
February 2017
PDF version
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.

Introduction

Given that one must live in a particular way, one may act based on reflective reasons or without them. Call the process of reflecting on actions, justifying them according to certain principles, and constructing arguments in favor of against particular behaviors and ways of life the process of practical reasoning. Philosophers dispute over two rival views of practical reasoning: The first, more traditional, value-laden view presents practical rationality as intrinsically valuable. On this alternative, everyone naturally endeavors to reach the good but only the virtuous or wise person is successful. The second, more contemporary view presents practical reason as merely procedural or instrumental. On this alternative, everyone strategizes the proper means to their selected ends, but the ends we pursue are some good and some bad, commended to us by preference, passion, authority, whim, or aspiration. 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. 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.

Section 1 explains the "default" Aristotelian view of realism about practical reasoning and practical reasons. Section 2 briefly summarizes the rival Humean view. Section 3 points out the

chief difficulty with the Humean view. Section 4 mounts a new defense of the neo-Aristotelian account of practical reasoning, drawing on Jennifer Frey, Micah Lott, and Philippa Foot's recent work to the effect that practical reason is necessarily constituted by a few general rational motives. Section 5 highlights how two additional attractions of this account, namely, that it solves related problems in metaethics that assume a divide between the external, biological view of oneself from the internal, human view.

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 expressed by Aristotle: Human beings are rational animals. Our nature is not to be merely animals (who merely respond to the world by instinct) nor merely rational intelligences (who are not required to bother about food, water, sleep, and reproduction.) Rather, we are essentially double, both rational and animal.

In turn, rationality has a double nature. To be 'rational' is to think theoretically about mathematical, astronomical, and theological topics but also to think practically about technical, ethical, and political pursuits. The goal of theoretical reasoning is to judge the truth (and avoid falsehood) while success in practical reasoning is to pursue the good and avoid evil.

To take a trivial example, a practical question is something like, "What should I eat?" Aristotle would say, "Eat good foods". The 'goodness' we pursue is not a 'value' merely, something that *I value*. Rather, the goodness practical reason aims at is an objective property of the world, or perhaps an objective relation between ourselves and the world. In other words, eating some foods, puffball mushrooms is good – while eating death cap mushrooms is bad – because the objective features of such mushrooms in conjunction with the features of human physiology make it that some actions are for human beings and others are not. 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 not for humans.

On this view, practical reason is "a capacity for reflection about an objective body of normative truths regarding action."[1] Success in practical reasoning, then, 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. Call the rational principles that ought to influence the wise person's behavior "practical reasons". The practically wise person undertakes "mapping the landscape of value"[2] – 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. The practically foolish person either fails to identify what is really worthwhile or fails, for some reason, to pursue it.

1. 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).

2. Ibid., sec. 6.

Most broadly of all, the first practical questions are "Why should I act at all?" and "How should I live?" 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. Call this view 'realism.'

II. The Rival View

The simple and powerful conception of human nature and practical reasoning held sway for many centuries and still holds sway in some circles. It is what Thomas Nagel calls a "defeasible presumption."[3] Even anti-realism's most sophisticated advocates concede the that realism is the default view. For instance, J.L. Mackie admits that moral thought and language assumes objectivity, for the notion of objective value has "a firm basis in ordinary thought, and even in the meanings of moral terms."[4] Gibbard goes so far as to suggest that Platonism about reasons is *common sense*.[5] Nevertheless, realism is no longer the default view among philosophers, especially those who lean analytic.

The rival view worries that the "defeasible presumption" lying at the center of "the main tradition of European moral philosophy" commits one to non-natural norms and a corresponding non-naturalistic human capacity to intuit them. 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."[6] Hence the anti-realist alternatives aim either to debunk the objective purport of moral 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.[7] The Humean model of practical reasoning asserts that "cognition and volition are distinct."[8] Practical reasons cannot motivate, at least not by themselves: "Reason is the discovery of truth and falsehood."[9] 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,

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

4. Compare with Terence Cuneo, *Speech and Morality* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

5. "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.

6. Ibid., 154.

7. 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.

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

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

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, while the conative state provides the movement toward the object. For example, one is aware that one's friend is in trouble and that the friend is able to be comforted (the cognitive bit) and a desire (or motivation or inclination or settled passion) for helping one's friend (the non-cognitive bit). The expressivist would say that surely these two *together* – and neither in isolation – explains the behavior. Because the rival view presents practical reasoning as instrumental or procedural, let's call it "proceduralism".

III. A Preliminary Defense of Realism

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. When practical reasoners act at all, they act *by definition* in pursuit of a particular object falling under a universal category. In order to construct *any* practical syllogisms as we do, one needs a sufficiently broad "major premise." 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 proceduralist merely substitutes the traditional injunction to "be human, be rational, live a good life" for the pseudo-technical injunction to "achieve your goals, configure the appropriate means to your chosen ends." 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 rational* to adjudicate proper means to one's ends. But then the proceduralist is assuming the objective goodness of that kind of 'rationality.' He is not rejecting the realist's use of first principles but replacing it.

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."[10] The idea here is that practical reasoning is constituted by a few, very general, rational motives. The primary question is not "what should I eat?" or "what should I do for a career?" because these presume upon a pre-existing commitment to some general ends, such as survival or a satisfying life that makes a positive impact on the world.

Some philosophers try to begin with a fundamental duality in practical reasoning between prudential and moral reasoning. They argue that the first question of practical reasoning is whether I 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.

10. Jennifer Ann Frey, "The Will and the Good" (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2012), 79.

Foot explains that at the time when she wrote her famous "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," she had not discovered a way of showing "the rationality of acting, even against desire and self-interest, on the demand of morality."[11] What changed her mind was an argument from Warren Quinn to the effect that if practical reasoning is to be important at all it must be *by definition* the pursuit of some good. Quinn says:

> 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, and a good or bad human action. Practical reason is, on this view, the faculty that applies these fundamental evaluative concepts.[12]

What Foot found so compelling is the change to "seeing goodness as setting a necessary condition of practical rationality and therefore as at least a part-determinant of [practical rationality] itself."[13]

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. The alternative to aiming at the apparent good is not aiming at some value-neutral "end" or goal; the alternative to aiming at the apparent good is *not acting at all*, like Bartleby the Scrivenr.

If this point is well taken, the project of developing an account of practical reason is identifying the proper first principles. Even if my answer (below) to the "why act at all?" question is mistaken, I believe my opponent is obligated to provide *an answer* to this question.

IV. Practical Reason as Becoming Human

I will now endeavor to sketch an account of practical reason that is plausible in its own right and more adequate than the rival, anti-realist, procedural view. I build on the work of Philippa Foot and

11. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 63.

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

13. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 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?"

on Jennifer Frey's recent discussions of Anscombe and Aquinas.[14] In short, my Aristotelian account, as developed by Aquinas is that practical reasoning is by definition an end-oriented activity that aims at the perceived good of one's form of life. Let's unpack this thought.

Human beings act *for reasons*. But other animals and indeed all living beings act. "Values", desires, motives, and goals do not come into being merely with human minds but exists minimally in the biological world. As Thomas Nagel argues, "The existence of value seems to be coextensive with the existence of living things."[15]

All living things exhibit teleological movement.[16] In proper circumstances, organisms grow into a maturity that exemplifies their form of life. Lower organisms naturally incline toward their own good by instinctually pursuing life and avoiding injury and death. This form of life is what Aquinas calls a thing's "nature": wolf hunts in packs by nature, trees extend roots into the ground by nature, reptiles warm themselves in the sun by nature, and so on, because these activities realize the organisms state of maturity and flourishing.

Now, higher organisms such as animals are able to perceive objects in way that lower organisms cannot. Still, higher organisms do not perceive things *as* falling under universal categories. By contrast, a human being can recognize universals. Human beings are specified by their "power" – their capacity to engage in cognitive and deliberative activities. While animals can not only sense but *perceive*, humans have the capacity of "intellection" – the power of abstracting formal properties from what is perceived. An animal can *sense* an informed, organized object; an animal can be affected by the object. But the human animal can *acquire information* from the organized object. Animals may perceive something *as* dangerous or *as* desirable. Human beings perceive *that* the dangerous thing is a predator or the desirable thing *is food*.[17]

The extra ability to perceive under universal categories brings with it the human capacity for taking up natural inclinations or aversions in a deliberative act. Natural inclinations may be underwritten or overridden. Confronted with a delicious and healthy salad sitting on someone else's plate, I recognize it *as not mine* and hence choose not to reach for it. Confronted with a lion in a zoo, I choose not to flee, for I recognize it *as not dangerous*. 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

14. 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.)

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

16. 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.

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

> says that the will is inclined towards its objects under the formality of the "universal good," rather than the particular good.[18]

By the same token, human beings are capable of an extra ability to err. The conclusion that all living things move toward their own natural ends is compatible with the biological judgment that some specimens are defective, just as it is compatible with the ethical judgment that some agents – such as Dostoevsky's Underground Man – are practically irrational in failing to pursue their own natural ends. 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.

If all action aims at some good, then where does the process begin? How can one pursue ends *before* actualizing the natural ability to practically reason? We can again compare practical reasoning with demonstrative or theoretical reasoning. Aquinas puts the comparison this way:

> …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. Consequently the first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that "good is that which all things seek after." Hence this is the first precept of practical reason, that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.[19]

Aquinas's answer to the question, "Why act at all?" is the "The first precept" of practical reason: "'good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIa. Q.94. Art. 2.)

To connect this maximally general account of practical reason with the particular ethical and prudential duties of human life requires understanding how pursuing our life form is good. 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."[20] Since everyone is human and practically rational by nature, and because some goods are categorically *for us*, every person has good reason to pursue them.

Of course, this way of framing things is quite general: it is some conception of how to live in the way (or set of ways) that is good for practical, rational primates like us. The substantive good or set of goods is general enough to accommodate a variety of controversial details about what one ought to do or not do. In other words, the substantive view of practical reasoning allows for the possibility that, in a disagreement, both parties are basically rational, while one party may be more accurately identifying what is to be pursued or avoided. However some items will appear on

18. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 75.

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

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

any minimally adequate "objective list"[21]: virtue, wisdom, health, friendship, knowledge, and so on. One can also, of course, mistake 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.

IN sum, the person who does not is failing importantly in the task of pursuing what is objectively worthwhile; the person who is impeded from doing so (say, by injury, illness, or social injustice) is suffering objective tragedy. This conclusion goes to explain why Neo-Aristotelians are insistent that there can be no adequate theory of ethics without a theory of practical rationality.[22] John McDowell, for example, 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. Like all virtues, practical wisdom both *enables* one to live a distinctly human life and partly constitutes that life.

V. Two Puzzles

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.

My Good or The Good?

The first is the problem of 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.[23]

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.

---

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

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

23. 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 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.

A second puzzle in the vicinity has to do with moral motivation. Expressivists are among those who puzzle about Hume's opposition between theoretical reason (which is inert) and active deciding (which does not judge true and false). 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."[24]

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 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, even the clever villain who is able to calculate the means to his ends cannot be practically rational until he comes to realize that his pursuit of (what appears to him) good is preventing him from being fully human.

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