BOUNDS OF JUSTICE

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Contents

Four models of practical reasoning[1]

Any convincing account of justice builds upon some conception of reason: yet the more self-consciously we think about reason, the less confident we become that we know what reason requires, or what authority those requirements have. In the daily fray of life, science and politics few of us hesitate to appeal to reason, or to comment adversely on others' lack of reasons for what they say or do. We appeal to reason as an authoritative arbiter of disputes. But when we are asked to vindicate this confidence, it ebbs. This is hardly surprising. If reason is the basis of all vindication, how can we vindicate it? Will not each attempt end in defeat – if we invoke anything unreasoned – or in circularity – if we offer only reasons?

Despite this venerable dilemma, I believe that there is much to be said about the vindication of reason. Here I am mainly concerned with the sorts of reasoning that we attempt in contexts of action, and shall have little to say about theoretical reasoning. I hope that this will not limit the inquiry as much might be surmised. For I shall assume neither that theoretical reason provides the foundations for practical reason nor that theoretical reasoning itself needs no vindication. I suspect that, on the contrary, any adequate vindication of theoretical reasoning requires a vindication of practical reasoning; but this too is more than I can make plausible here.[2] For present purposes I shall simply bracket issues that are specific to theoretical reason, and shall consider what can be done to vindicate practical reason.

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[1] An earlier version of this essay appeared under the title 'Vier Modelle der praktischen Vernunft', in Hans Friedrich Fulda and Rolf-Peter Horstmann, eds., *Vernunftbegriffe in der Moderne* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1994), 586–606.

[2] Some reasons why a vindication of theoretical reason may build on rather than ground practical reason are sketched in Onora O'Neill, 'Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung III* ', in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 51–65 and 'Vindicating Reason', in Paul Guyer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 280–308.

I shall organize my thoughts around a consideration of four conceptions of practical reason, each of which has a long history and many variants, as well as many contemporary advocates and detractors. As I do so, I shall draw on a certain intuitive understanding of what we might hope that reason can provide either for practice or for theory. I begin by characterizing this understanding. This hope is not one that those who are sceptical whether anything can count as (practical) reason are likely to object to: their scepticism is, after all, a claim that nothing meets standards of reason. Sceptics about reason are not without views about what reason would provide; they simply hold that it cannot be provided.[3]

Reasoners and sceptics probably agree on two points. They hold, in the first place, that anything that could count as reasoned would make no arbitrary moves: when we reason we neither introduce assumptions arbitrarily nor move from one point to another arbitrarily. This formulation eschews the thought that reason must provide some non-arbitrary foundation on which all reasoned thought and action builds – perhaps it does so, but all that is presented in this initial thought is the demand that the moves made in reasoned stretches and aspects of thought and action avoid arbitrariness. In the second place both reasoners and sceptics expect anything reasoned to have a certain authority in guiding thinking and acting, which is quite generally discernible, and so does not presuppose any views – or prejudices – which are not, or might not be, generally shared. Ultimately these two considerations – non-arbitrariness and accessible authority – are not really separable: any sequence of thought or action based on principles that are not generally accessible and authoritative would seem arbitrary from some points of view, and any arbitrary move in thinking or acting will be vindicable only to those who share some arbitrary assumption or other, and hence would lack generally accessible authority. However, for expository purposes it can be useful to distinguish arbitrariness from lack of accessible authority.

It is hard to articulate these expectations more fully at this stage, but I hope that they can be made clearer and more plausible by considering four conceptions of practical reason, each of which would be presumed by its advocates to meet at least these meagre standards. I shall first consider those *teleological accounts of practical reason* which see reason as guiding action by connecting it to the ends of action, and then move on to more

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[3] Contemporary sceptics are in the main post-modernists of one sort or another, whose disappointment with what others take for reasoning is evidently based not on lack of views on what reason *should* provide, but rather on conviction that it is not available.

strictly *action-based accounts of practical reason* which take a more direct approach to guiding action. All the accounts I shall offer are schematic; even when linked with the names of particular philosophers they are not to be taken as textually accurate, but only as useful stereotypes.

TELEOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS OF PRACTICAL REASON I: REASONED ACTION AIMS AT THE OBJECTIVELY GOOD

One ancient and formidable account of practical reason unites it with theoretical reason and identifies both with apprehension of the Good. A clear knowledge of the Good can orient both knowledge and action with authority; both thought and action will be disoriented and more or less arbitrary where this vision is lacking or blurred. Reasoned action is action informed by reason's knowledge of its end and guided by its striving for that end. This conception of practical reasoning is most famously associated with Plato, but paler versions are to be found in many later writers.

The serious difficulty with this vision of reason as simultaneously theoretical and practical, *logos* and *eros*, arises from its ambitious metaphysical claims about the ends of action and the congruent claims about human beings, whose knowing and doing are both drawn to these ends. The metaphysical, cognitive and motivational claims of the Platonist vision and of its many descendants are hugely ambitious. Although they are deeply attractive to many people, they are also deeply unconvincing (often unconvincing even to those who find them so attractive). For those not convinced by the metaphysics of some version of Platonism and by a congruent account of moral knowledge and motivation, conceptions of practical reason which appeal to the Good as the arbiter of reasoned action invoke an arbitrary and illusory authority;[4] they purport to find

[4] The term 'practical reason' is more readily associated with Aristotle than with Plato, yet no single model of practical reasoning captures the full Aristotelian picture. Aristotle's reputation is so high that protagonists of various accounts of reason try, with some plausibility, to claim Aristotle as their own. Some see Aristotle's account as close to Plato's: practical reasoning is teleological since it bears on ends rather than on acts, moreover on objective ends. The differences are that for Aristotle the good is neither unitary nor separable from particular cases nor closely linked to theoretical knowledge. Others go some way to identifying Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* with subjective ends, and so begin to elide his account of practical reasoning with instrumental reasoning. Yet others construe Aristotle's view of practical reason as bearing directly on action, which should be guided by the judgements of particular acts made by the *phronimos*: the Good is not seen as orienting but as constituted by such judgements. Yet others identify the *phronimos* with historically determinate figures, and so arrive at the norm-based, relativized accounts of practical reason, favoured by Hegelianizing readers of Aristotle.

objective ends where there are none. It follows that the supposed guidance offered by such conceptions of practical reason is equally illusory.

Long before Hume scoffed that "tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger"[5] and concluded "tis in vain to pretend, that morality is discover'd only by a deduction of reason',[6] it proved notoriously hard to show that any ends are intrinsically reasoned or reasonable, or indeed intrinsically motivating, let alone to establish which ends these are. Those who scoff often think that all that remains of reason's pretension to guide practice is a subordinate role, and that in Hume's words again 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend any other office than to serve and obey them.'[7] Hume's arguments in these celebrated passages invoke no general scepticism about reason. They leave room for an account of cognitive and so of instrumental rationality; they merely reject the claim that practical reason provides either knowledge of the ends of reasoned action or motives for acting reasonably.

TELEOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS OF PRACTICAL REASON II: SUBJECTIVE ENDS AND INSTRUMENTAL REASONING

Hume's scoffing provides a canonical text for a reduced account of practical reason that is still widely accepted (mainly by writers who ignore Hume's broader naturalism about reason), and deeply despised by others. It is worth considering why instrumental rationality is still both the most admired and the most criticized conception of practical reason.

The admiration is evident in the enormous role this account of reason retains in philosophical writing on ethics, in certain social sciences (particularly economics and political science) and in daily life. The achievement of an instrumental conception of practical reason is that it retains the teleological structure of the older 'Platonist' vision, ostensibly links justification to motivation, sheds the metaphysical commitment to provide an account of the Good, yet claims to guide action with some precision. Practical reasoning is integrated into an empiricist conception of action and motivation, which appears to allow for a fruitful and measurable way of thinking about both individual and collective action, but rejects as illusory the idea that reason has ends of its own. If no account of objective ends is available, this is an appealing strategy. For what more

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[5] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), II.iii.3; 416.   [6] Ibid., III.i.1; 457.   [7] Ibid., II.iii.3; 415.

could we then demand by way of justification than the choice of action which is an efficient and effective instrument for achieving subjective ends? Since we are in any case motivated to seek subjective ends, justification and motivation will then be closely linked. The price to be paid for the fact that no objective ends are discernible is only that this link is less immediate than it was in the Platonist conception: justification will attach to means, and motivation will flow from subjective ends. In this picture the notion of practical reason has in a way been dismantled: where Plato thought of reason as erotic, Hume sees it as inert; in less vivid, Kantian terms, Hume denies that reason is of itself practical.

Once we accept this account of practical reason, much of the contemporary agenda for ethics and the social sciences is fixed. First, the ambitions of practical reasoning to guide action and policy can strive to match the ambitions of the sciences in establishing causal connections. Second, if ends are subjective, reasoned action by different agents need not converge, so egoism, economic rationality and competition will be paradigms of reasoned action. Ethics and social science are thereby set the tasks of defusing or reducing or coordinating the Hobbesian implications of a conception of reason which is hostage to individuals' desires or preferences, and their beliefs, which seems the inevitable corollary of an empiricist and anti-metaphysical outlook.[8]

Other more critical approaches dispute the claim that instrumental rationality provides a full account of practical reason. The most standard criticism is the rather obvious complaint that on this account all that is reasoned is the choice of actions as instruments to intrinsically arbitrary ends, but that nothing shows why efficient or effective pursuit of such ends is reasoned. Although many approaches in ethics and in the social sciences speak of subjective ends as *values* or *valuable*, this merely asserts or stipulates the value of satisfying either actual or hypothetical preferences. Whenever the content of preferences is vile or reviled, doubt can be cast on the presumption that securing or pursuing those subjective ends is rational.

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[8] There have been many distinguished attempts to derive moral theory from theories of rational choice, where rational choice is seen as guided by preferences, beliefs and instrumental rationality. For example, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); John Harsanyi, 'Morality and the Theory of Rational Behaviour', in A. Sen and B. Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). In his later writing Rawls concluded that moral conclusions could not be reached by way of a conception of rational choice: see *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 53, n. 7.

The only arguments offered by the defenders of the varied empiricist conceptions of practical reason to show that preferences are not wholly arbitrary consist of quite limited claims about the rational *structure* of preference orderings: this structure is said to be reasoned if preferences are, for example, transitive, connected and commensurable. However, demands for coherence of these sorts among preferences cannot show that their pursuit (however efficient or effective) is intrinsically reasoned. The challenge that ends are in themselves arbitrary, so that the conditional claims which instrumental reason can reach lack authority for those whose ends differ, is one that those who identify practical reason with instrumental reasoning alone cannot rebut. They may show that omelette makers cannot reasonably refuse to break eggs, but they cannot show whether making omelettes is reasonable.

If this were all that could be said about instrumental conceptions of practical reason we would, in a way, have no more than a stand-off between its admirers and its detractors. The admirers would concede that the detractors were quite right that no ends were shown reasoned; the detractors would counter that this was not enough; the admirers would retort that no more is available. However, there are other troubling features of a merely instrumental account of practical reasoning. Two in particular seem deeply perturbing, in that they query the very empiricist model of action and motivation which is the background to this account of practical reasoning.

The first of these is that the accounts of the structure of subjective ends elaborated in models of rational choice are fictitious. In particular, the status of claims that agents' preferences are, for example, connected, transitive and commensurable is disputable. Here much is obscured by the fact that two rival and incompatible models of rational behaviour, which view desires and preferences quite differently, are often simultaneously deployed and not adequately distinguished.[9]

One view takes a realist view of preferences, which are seen as real states of agents at particular times. On this view the attribution of connected, transitive and measurable preferences to each individual is certainly speculative; in so far as we have information, it is false. On the second view, preferences and their structure are not understood as empirically ascertainable properties of agents, but are ascribed to agents on the basis of their choices *on the assumption that their preferences are*

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[9] Theses are hardly new worries; for discussion of the issues sketched in the next paragraphs see Amartya Sen, 'Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6 (1977), 317–44 and Chapter 2 below.

systematically structured, for example, that they are connected, transitive and commensurable. Under the second 'revealed' interpretation, the structural and metric properties usually ascribed to rational preference orderings *must* hold, since they are assumed in order to infer preferences from choices. On this model of preference-based action, agents cannot, by definition, act counter-preferentially: mistakes apart, whatever they actually do must be taken to identify what they most prefer in that situation, assuming the coherence of their preferences. By the same token, agents cannot on this model act counter-rationally: mistakes apart, whatever they actually do must be taken to disclose their judgement about efficient and effective pursuit of their preferred ends in that situation, assuming the coherence of their preferences. Action can then be criticized as irrational only when based on mistaken belief or calculation.

Neither interpretation of preferences shows that their efficient and effective pursuit has any unconditional claim to be viewed as reasoned. Strictly speaking, no *authority* is assigned to preferences in what passes for preference-based practical reasoning. A realist view of preferences might, at least in principle, be supplemented with arguments to show that there are good reasons for satisfying whatever preferences people actually have: Utilitarians and others have looked for such arguments, which have proved elusive. The 'revealed' or interpretive view of preferences cannot make this move. Rather it undercuts the basis for thinking that the satisfaction of preferences has either moral weight or social importance, by reading the aim of optimal preference satisfaction into all action. Once we infer preferences from choices on the assumption that preferences must have the stipulated structural and metric properties, and that their satisfaction is efficiently pursued in the light of whatever beliefs are held, we shall indeed and trivially discover that whatever is done counts as instrumentally rational attempted preference satisfaction – and if something other had been done, it too would have had to count as instrumentally rational attempted preference satisfaction.

Serious as these considerations are, they have not yet put in question work in the social sciences and in ethics which treats instrumental reason as the whole of practical reason. However, a second problem shows more signs of undermining this view. This is the fact that all real-world instrumental reasoning has to begin from some listing of the 'available' options, whose outcomes are to be reckoned so that their contribution to the satisfaction of preferences can be evaluated. Given that we cannot

individuate and list each possible act,[10] lists of options must be lists of act-types, specified by act-descriptions; typically they are short-lists of practical principles or of social norms, which incorporate a few salient act-descriptions. Instrumental reasoners cannot then begin by surveying all possible acts; rather they begin from some listing of act-descriptions. Typically these incorporate the socially accepted and prized categories of action which participants view as the 'real' options for a given situation. The weighing of preferences will be limited by this initial listing of options, which itself precedes, and so derives no vindication from, instrumental reasoning.[11]

In commercial or public-policy reasoning it may be appropriate to look only at options that take for granted the relevant established social framework, and privilege its norms and categories. However, instrumental reasoning that is premised on a short-list of 'established' options lacks warrant in less circumscribed contexts, and in particular in ethical reasoning. At most such reasoning could reach conditional conclusions of the form: given these norms, principles or commitments, the following action would be instrumentally rational. The reasoning will assume rather than support those norms, principles or commitments, which will escape critical appraisal and reasoned assessment. However, once actual norms and salient options are taken to provide the basis of practical reasoning, the instrumental aspects of reasoning are subordinate. The core of practical reasoning is no longer seen as result-oriented instrumental reasoning, but as the action-based and frequently norm-directed patterns of practical reasoning used in daily life and in institutional settings.

ACTION-BASED ACCOUNTS OF PRACTICAL REASON I: SHARED NORMS AND PERSONAL COMMITMENTS

For some advocates of instrumental rationality it may seem a discovery that instrumental reasoning presupposes action-based and often enough norm-directed reasoning. Others will view this sense of discovery as belated, having long held that practical reasoning can only deal with the

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[10] A physicalist account of action might provide ways of listing the available actions in a given situation exhaustively, by reference to spaces and times filled by each act token.

[11] For various lines of argument suggesting that preference-based reasoning presupposes norm-based, and hence action-based forms of reasoning see Sen, 'Rational Fools', n. 5; Martin Hollis, *The Cunning of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Onora O'Neill, *Faces of Hunger: An Essay on Poverty, Development and Justice* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986), ch. 4; Jon Elster, *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order* (London: Routledge, 1989), ch. 3.

link between action and its ends if it has some way of grasping or engaging with action. They will also point to the enormous part that action-based reasoning plays in daily life, in social practices such as law and administration, in social and theoretical inquiries within sociology, anthropology and jurisprudence and in philosophical work by historicists, communitarians and Wittgensteinians as well as by those more traditional Kantians who have not been seduced by empiricist accounts of self, action and rationality.[12]

One of the attractions of thinking of practical reasoning as directed basically at action is that it links very readily with all these familiar practices in which action is chosen under descriptions, which may form the content either of social norms and practices or of more personal commitments or projects. Action-based reasoning breaks away from viewing preferences, whether actual or hypothetical, as justifying action; it allows that there may be good reasons not to satisfy certain preferences. In place of preferences it starts with the thought that some types of action are justifiable not as instruments for achieving either objective or subjective ends but simply because they are actions of a certain sort. In doing so it construes practical reason as directly focussed on action, rather than seeing action merely as the instrument for producing results. In making this move we break away from the thought that practical reasoning must have an intrinsically teleological pattern.

The central question to be raised about any action-based conception of practical reason must, of course, be how it can distinguish rationally justified types of action from others that are thought unreasoned and unjustifiable.

A common line of thought here is that the types of action that we can justify are those which express the fundamental norms of a given time or place, or the fundamental commitments or projects of a given person's life or identity. In this way action-based conceptions of practical reasoning may be said to make explicit what is done covertly by those whose practical reasoning is ostensibly merely instrumental. The more social, norm-directed versions of this view are mainly associated with 'Hegelian' writers, and in particular today with communitarians, who see the deepest practices and norms of a tradition or community as a bed-rock on which justification must build, and which cannot itself be put into question. The more individual versions of this view are

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[12] The picture is confused because many contemporary writers on justice are spoken of as Kantians, but in fact rely in some part on preference-based conceptions of practical reasoning.

particularly associated with more Wittgensteinian writers, who see the
integrity, commitments and attachments and other personal projects of
particular lives as providing a comparable bed-rock which cannot itself
be put into question,[13] and with the work of Bernard Williams, who sees
personal projects and commitments as a framework beyond which our
reasoning cannot pass.

   There is in fact much overlap between the more collective and the
more individualist versions of action-based reasoning. In both cases the
thought is that certain norms or commitments or projects are not ones
which we can regard otherwise than as reasons for action, because they
constitute, as it were, part of our community's identity or of our own
individual identity. Practical reasoning takes as its premisses those fea-
tures of our lives which we cannot 'go behind' or assume away without
undercutting our very sense of self, community or identity. In thinking
of an act as required by public attachments and loyalties, or as wrong
because it is cruel, or required if we are not to harm one we love, we do
not (it is claimed) simply invoke some arbitrary principle, but one that is
constitutive of a shared or individual sense of identity, and so part and
parcel of what we are. It is not that we think our way towards such
matters or that we decide on them, but that they are part of the frame-
work of our lives. There are no more basic norms, commitments or
values in terms of which these could be vindicated. Bernard Williams
expresses the thought that 'I must deliberate from what I am' with a
telling instance of the perversity of seeking to deliberate about one's
most basic commitments: in a shipwreck the husband who seeks a reason
to rescue his wife rather than an equally drowning stranger has 'one
thought too many'.[14] Practical reasoning starts from the norms and
attachments that are constitutive of our identity. It is not arbitrary, given
what we are; if it is accessible to others, their access will be conditional
on their understanding what our deepest commitments and attachments
are. Since their understanding will be premised on these, any 'external'
criticism of our commitments or projects will be stymied.

   One of the attractions of this account of practical reasoning is that,
like the other two considered, it links accounts of justification and of

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[13] More Hegelian positions have been put forward by Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles
   Taylor; more Wittgensteinian views in the work of Peter Winch and John McDowell.
   Elements of both positions are combined by Bernard Williams, especially in *Ethics and the
   Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985).
[14] Ibid., 200; 'Persons, Character and Morality', in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–80*
   (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19; 18.

motivation. Both the accepted norms and ways of life of a given society and the deepest commitments and projects of individual lives determine a sense of identity and will be deeply internalized. When they provide reasons for action, the reasons will be inward for those for whom they are reasons.

Of course, the well-internalized reasons invoked both by *norm-based* and by *commitment-based* accounts of practical reason will not invariably be reflected in action. There can be sharp divergences between what is done and what reasoning based on established norms or personal commitments enjoins. In some situations the various norms to which agents are bound by their tradition may come into conflict: Antigone's predicament has many parallels. Equally, in some situations an agent's deepest commitments may conflict with public norms or with other personal commitments: the figure of the conscientious objector epitomizes one such possibility. More prosaically, those whose action is guided by public norms or by personal commitments, or by both, may have desires and preferences that pull in quite other directions. The point is not that norms and commitments are invariably honoured, but that they are acknowledged, and that their flouting will be a source often of guilt and at the least of regret, remorse and other remainders.

On a standard, empiricist conception of action as based on, or at least revelatory of, preferences it can be obscure how norms or commitments could either motivate or justify. However, once we have appreciated the impossibility of specifying options except in term of act-descriptions, preference-based accounts of practical reasoning must lose their claim to provide a comprehensive account of motivation, while their claim to provide an adequate conception of vindication has never been strong.

Yet there is also a fair degree of mystery in the claim that action that expresses either established norms or deep personal commitments is reasoned. Does not practical reasoning that starts either from norms or from personal commitments itself introduce an arbitrary element? How can it have any generally accessible authority? In particular, it is often said that norm-based reasoning is intrinsically conservative and ethnocentric. Commitment-based reasoning might be thought conservative and self-centred for analogous reasons. Both types of reasoning argue unashamedly from what is actually respected or internalized to what ought to be respected or internalized. Both lack authority for those who do not begin by accepting the pertinent norms, who dispute the accepted categories or who abhor others' basic projects. Both privilege an intrinsically insider's view of what counts as reasoned vindication. For

outsiders norm-based or commitment-based practical reasoning is quite simply arbitrary, and its authority fades where norms and commitments are not understood or are not found acceptable.

The criticism of conservatism is one that can and has been answered by many proponents of norm-based conceptions of practical reasoning. Once we remember that the norms of a community will underdetermine action, that they will be open to interpretation and reinterpretation, we can see them in a historical perspective, as open to revision and reinterpretation. We shall then see that the norms of a society, and indeed the identity of its members, constitute a revisable basis for reasoning rather than a set of fixed and timeless conclusions. We may come to revise our norms and our beliefs. Norms and principles in their real historical contexts enable open-ended traditions of debate, and may allow for critical and revisionary practical reasoning.[15]

Norm-based practical reasoning is not, then, unavoidably conservative. However, the charge that it is ethnocentric is harder to dispel. Any set of norms or commitments which supposedly provides the framework of justification and the source of motivation will be those of a particular tradition, community or sense of identity. They may not be shared by outsiders. If norm-based reasoning is unavoidably insider's reasoning, it can be followed by outsiders only when they tacitly supply as premisses the norms or commitments which they do not themselves share.

This matters in two ways. In the first place, it matters for insiders. Once we become aware of the diversity and fecundity of traditions and identities, it is harder to maintain the conviction that only the traditions or identities 'we' have ourselves internalized have authority. Indeed, where many have internalized multiple traditions – Christian with liberal, Scots with European, British with Jewish and countless other groupings – the view that practical reason can rest on the achieved norms or loyalties of a tradition becomes suspect.

In the second place, the ethnocentrism of norm-based reasoning matters for relations between insiders and outsiders. Once upon a time it might not have mattered if those who lived in homogeneous but isolated societies reasoned in ways that could not have been accessible to hypothetical others with whom they had no connection. But today societies, cultures and traditions are not bounded or impervious. So it matters when reasoning is based on principles that are internal to some tradition yet not even accessible to outsiders. Ethnocentric reasoning will

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[15] This view is held by many communitarians, and was put eloquently in Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

fail or falter for those who attempt communication across boundaries; it will lack authority – and may prove inaccessible to others. Norm-based conceptions of reason will not suffice in a pluralist world. If any ways of organizing either thinking or action are to have quite general authority, they cannot presuppose the norms and opinions of a particular time and place.

Analogous points might be made about more individualistic, commitment-based conceptions of practical reason. These too need not be intrinsically conservative, since we can revise and change our commitments and projects across our lives. However, such reasoning, although not necessarily selfish, will unavoidably be self-centred: it argues from *my* commitments, *my* life-projects and *my* attachments. My commitments, projects and attachments may not be selfish, but equally they may not be noble: there are those who are moved to rescue their wives from drowning, and those who are not. There are even those whose commitments are selfish, who may be moved to drown their wives when opportunity arises. Even when a project is deeply internalized, its vindication may be meagre. Yet it is not clear what opening is left either for vindication or for criticism within a view that construes actual commitments, actual attachments and actual personal projects as the bed-rock of practical reasoning. These commitments will no doubt prove motivating, but it does not follow that it is rational to live lives that express whatever commitments happen to have been internalized. Can there not be reasons for revising or even for ditching rather than expressing certain commitments, for shelving rather than achieving certain projects, however much we have made them our own? Is it not intrinsically arbitrary to view existing commitments, and their internal revisions, as intrinsically justifying?

ACTION-BASED ACCOUNTS OF PRACTICAL REASON II: CRITICAL REVISION OF NORMS OR COMMITMENTS

The main advantage of both norm-based and commitment-based accounts of practical reasoning is that they provide a more direct way of grasping action than the teleological approaches which take either objective or subjective ends as the basis of reasoned action. The main disadvantage is that the privilege claimed for specific social norms or personal commitments may seem arbitrary from any other point of view. How might this arbitrariness be overcome? In the absence of a metaphysical framework, how could we envisage a reasoned critique of

those deep norms and practices, those commitments and projects which frame communities and lives?

We may begin be reconsidering the initial sketch of the standards all ways of structuring thought and action have to meet if they are to count as reasoned. Reasoning about action needs, I suggested, in the first place to be accessible to others. Another way of looking at this thought is that reasons must be the sort of things we can present to others – we offer and accept reasons, criticize, reject and discard them. Any way of organizing thought or action along lines which others *cannot in principle follow* will fail to meet this condition, and so cannot count as reasoned. However, if accessibility is *required*, this requirement constitutes at least a minimal claim to authority. What will have authority is not each particular way of securing accessibility to others, but the demand that accessibility be maintained. The standard that *must* be met by any structure of thought or action that is to count as reasoned is simply that it *must* be such that others *can* follow it. In this very minimal explication of the authority of reason we can recognize a more general version of the Kantian conception of reason as doubly modal: as the *necessity* to adopt principles which we think it *possible* for others to follow. The best-known formulation of this conception of practical reason is, of course, 'act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it be a universal law'.[16]

In the present context my concern is neither with Kantian texts nor with the distinctive features of theoretical uses of reason. However, some further clarification of the sense in which reasoned thought and action must be followable is needed. When we are concerned with theoretical reasoning, the structures of thought, discourse and communication must presumably be such that others can follow them in thought or conversation. They must be intelligible. With others who share many specific beliefs the requirement is readily met. But where they do not, it will be demanding. Reasoning across social and ideological boundaries will often achieve conditional rationality. What both can follow will have a conditional structure, although it may be that only those of one persuasion are willing to affirm the antecedent of the conditionals which both find intelligible.

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[16] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, IV:387–460; 421, in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, tr. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Here and elsewhere references to Kant's work cite the standard volume and page numbers of the Prussian Academy edition and the title of a translation. A further page number is included only if the translation does not include this standard pagination.

Practical reasoning, by contrast, aims not just at intelligibility but at guidance – for oneself, for shared activities and for others. Here the requirement that reasoning conform to what is judged followable by others cannot be merely a requirement of intelligibility, of sticking to principles which others can follow in thought. Practical reasoners must find ways of acting that they judge can be recommended to others; they can offer reasons only for principles which they believe those whom they address could adopt as principles of action (whether or not others could act successfully on these principles in any particular situation is a further question). Using an old Kantian metaphor, we may say that practical reasoning must adhere to principles which have 'the form of law', which could be principles for all, and that any attempt to persuade others to principles which do not meet this condition must lack authority. Since in our world reasoning must reach beyond the like-minded, our practical reasoning must often be based on principles that are widely accessible; its authority will vanish if we duck the requirement to keep to such structures. Where we attempt to base practical reasoning on principles that do not meet this requirement, at least some others will find that we put forward principles that they cannot share, and will understandably judge our proposals arbitrary and lacking in authority – in short, unreasoned.

This stripped-down Kantian conception of practical reasoning shares the focus of norm-based and commitment-based conceptions of practical reason: it is directed at action, or rather at the norms and commitments, the practices and projects, by which we collectively or individually organize our lives. It is directed at actions as specified by certain act-descriptions, rather than at acts considered as instruments for producing results. Where it differs from norm-based or commitment-based conceptions of practical reasoning is in its view of the *scope of reasoning*, of the *fixity of identities* and of the *mutual accessibility of traditions*. It allows for the thought that what might seem a reason for me or for the insiders of some tradition, even a reason that is burnt into souls, may not be any sort of reason for others. Insiders' reasoning – Kant spoke of a *private use of reason*[17] – cannot reach outsiders except by linking it with other reasoning which they can follow. Where this is achieved, practical reasoning may be able to link those who are outsiders to one another's traditions and offer reasons for changes in deep commitments, even in sense of identity.

[17] Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, VIII:35–42, in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, tr. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

The critical account of practical reason sketched here neither permits arbitrary moves nor lacks accessible authority. Its vindication is simply that it meets these two meagre requirements, and that the other conceptions of practical reason considered do not. This is not, of course, to say that either instrumental or norm- or commitment-based reasoning can be discarded if we adopt a critical account of practical reasoning: rather both will be *aufgehoben* in a critical account of practical reason. What a critical conception of reasoning provides is the beginnings of an answer to the question whether particular norms and commitments, from which daily practical reasoning starts, can survive critical scrutiny or are merely arbitrary. It offers a framework for instrumental reasoning which discards the assumption that actual or idealized preferences have an automatic justificatory role, and provides some means for distinguishing those which can justifiably be pursued from others which cannot.

The various differences between these models of practical reason can now be summarized. Like norm- and commitment-based accounts of practical reasoning, a critical conception does not take the efficient pursuit either of actual or of ascribed preferences as intrinsically rational. Unlike these conceptions of reason, a critical conception does not take the expression of the basic norms of a community or of one's own personal commitments as intrinsically rational. Like Platonist conceptions of reason, critical accounts take it that reason affords a critical view of actual preferences, norms and commitments; unlike Platonist conceptions of reason, a critical conception takes it that the substance of reason's demand is not given to us but has to be constructed without arbitrarily taking elements of self and community as premises.

Many further questions could be raised about the form and implications of any critical conception of practical reason; I shall try to anticipate three of them.

The first is the matter of motivation. All the other conceptions of practical reasoning discussed link rationality and motivation very closely. This is not surprising, for in each case what it is reasonable for me to do is defined in terms of something that is very central to what I am: the sovereignty of the Good over my real self, my actual or inferred desires and preferences, my internalizations of shared norms or of personal commitments. However, it should be noted that these claims are more honoured in theory than they are felt in practice. The ideal sovereignty of the Good may well be eroded and replaced by empirical desires in actual lives; the motivating power of preferences is decently obscured by the disputes between realist and revealed conceptions of preference; the

norms of community and the commitments of individuals are both matters of struggle rather than automatically motivating.

The gap between justification and motivation is more explicitly thematized in critical conceptions of practical reasoning. This gap is such a commonplace of human existence that we may not notice that instrumental, norm-based and commitment-based accounts of practical reason ascribe it to quite particular circumstances – to the divergence between the preferences of different individuals, or to the clash between social norms or fracturing of personal commitments or projects. However, this phenomenon may, for all we can discern, be less local than any of these diagnoses suggest. There is no general reason to expect that motivation will emerge to endorse vindication *unless we have subscribed to an account of vindication which builds in the elements of motivation*. Critical accounts of practical reason are compatible with the assumption that preferences and identities often help motivate us to act in ways that are rationally vindicable, but leave no basis for thinking that motivation will automatically buttress justification. On this account motivation must be fostered rather than found. The locus of a critical account of practical reason is a strong conception of human freedom.[18]

The second question that I shall try to anticipate to a small degree concerns the implications of accepting a critical account of practical reasoning. Some at least will contend, and with long precedent, that they see nothing wrong in the criterion of accessible authority except its total emptiness. To regard reasoned recommendations as confined to those principles of action which all can follow – which are universalizable – has at least some implications. Others will have the converse worry that universalizability, far from being empty, is regimenting. Yet a moment's reflection shows that this too is an illusion. No constraint on principles of action can overcome the indeterminacy of principles, or supersede the need for judgement. Many constraints are in fact rather weak, and

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[18] I shall say nothing about this here. Discussion of a critical conception of practical reason is rare, indeed overlooked in much would-be Kantian writing; at present the issues are explored most thoroughly in the secondary literature on Kant's writings. See recently, for example, Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Richard Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Kant's approach to freedom is distinguished from most current approaches because he does not seek to establish theoretical reason and its causal claims, only to find human freedom threatened and in need of rescue. Rather he views practical reason as part of the framework within which the authority of theoretical reason and so of causal claims can be established. See also the references for n. 2.

do not require that very specific types of acts be uniformly done or even universally done, but only that those who seek to reason propose basic principles which they think others too could adopt.

The requirement of acting only on principles which are taken to be accessible to others is not empty. For example, principles which enjoin destruction or coercion or deceit *could not* be recommended to all; among mutually vulnerable beings a principle of mutual indifference *could not* be recommended as accessible to all. In every case the widening adoption of such principles would create victims who were disabled – by others' action on these very principles – from adopting the same principles. Of course, this is only a gesture towards the detailed arguments that would be needed to show just how much guidance can be derived from a critical conception of practical reason. These sample practical principles are formulated at the highest level of generality. Much further consideration would be required to show which institutions, which practices and which ways of life could best embody principles such as those of rejecting destruction, coercion, deceit and indifference for a given time and place.

The third question that I shall briefly address is how far a critical conception of practical reason differs from a discursive conception. Once again, I shall not refer to texts, but rather to tendencies. In so far as a discursive conception of reason is anchored in *actual* discursive practice, it amounts to a form of norm-based reasoning. It may be reasoned relative to those norms; but cannot provide reasons for those norms. In so far as a discursive conception of reason is anchored in certain supposed ideals – for example, an ideal speech situation – it invokes a transcendent vantage point, and its vindication will incur the problems faced by other metaphysical theories. In so far as it is understood as a matter of sticking to practical, including discursive, principles that are accessible to all – that can be followed by all – then we are dealing with a critical account of discursive rationality.