In philosophy, choice of method matters. You’re about to read an advertisement for a method: namely, that the right way to do moral philosophy is to start by working out your theory of practical reasoning. By way of introducing the book-length argument, I want first to explain what I mean by that. Then I’ll give some reasons for using the method, and hand out some promissory notes for the reasons I can’t give up front; I’ll also flag some of the issues I won’t be taking up here. By way of clearing the ground, I’ll discuss so-called reflective equilibrium, which has been, for some time now, the method of choice, or anyway the default method, for moral philosophers of the analytic stripe. I’ll briefly indicate the advantages my proposed method has over the reflective equilibrium competition.

Next I’ll provide a site map for the volume, which will describe how the subsequent chapters advance the main argument. Almost all of these were originally written as freestanding papers, and have agendas of their own; since they are (with occasional exceptions) unrevised, their respective conclusions are not always the contributions I want them to be making to the argument of the book. Accordingly, I’ll provide more or less chapter by chapter orientation and reading instructions. Finally, I’ll wrap up by looking beyond the work I do in this volume, to some of the further possibilities of the Method of Practical Reasoning.

First, terminology. Substantive moral or ethical theories1 answer questions like: What is it morally permitted for me to do? (Is it all right to
Ethics Done Right

cheat on my taxes?) What actions are morally required? (Do I have to help out my neighbors, even if I dislike them for very good reasons?) What kind of person should I be? (Ambitious? Modest?) What sorts of outcomes count as generally positive, or as generally negative? (Is happiness a positive outcome? Everyone’s happiness, or just my own?) How should I treat my fellow human beings? (With respect? Even if they’ve done nothing to earn it?)

Substantive theories of practical reasoning, on the other hand, answer questions further upstream: What considerations should I look to in making decisions? (Am I just looking for ways to achieve my goals?) What makes one kind of consideration as opposed to another count as a reason to do something? (If it’s a reason this time, does it always have to be a reason?) More generally, what’s the right way to figure out what to do? (For example, should I be aiming for the very best, or is “good enough” good enough?)

If you were to try to give a step-by-step rendering of the Method of Practical Reasoning, it would look something like this. First, get an overview of as many different theories of practical reasoning as possible. Second, puzzle out what moral theories those accounts of practical reasoning give rise to (or anyway, leaving aside for a moment issues of what’s responsible for what, which of the former are yoked to which of the latter). Third, without appealing to any substantive moral theory, determine which theory of practical reasoning is correct. Fourth and last, adopt the moral theory with which you have paired it.

The stepwise rendering is too clunky to be realistic philosophical procedure, and when you get there, you’ll notice that the claims defended in subsequent chapters are more complicated than it suggests. But it will do as a first approximation, one which will help explain what’s new about the present approach. A moral philosopher attending to practical reasoning is nothing new: Immanuel Kant called his second critique The Critique of Practical Reason; Thomas Hobbes and David Gauthier built political and moral theories around their respective instrumentalist accounts of practical reasoning; and it is one of the higher priority items on the agenda of this volume to locate the theories of practical reasoning at the centers of the better-known philosophical moralities. What I am demanding over and above what we already find in the field is a systematic overview of the options, both of the theories of practical reasoning and the moral theories, with priority being given to the selection of a theory of practical reasoning.

Let me support the claim that it’s important for an overview to precede the choice of a moral theory. For most of the past, philosophers...
have not been especially self-aware when it came to their opinions about practical reasoning. Typically they didn’t notice more than one or two possibilities, and typically one of those seemed to them obviously right, and not to need much in the way of sustained argument or defense. But it is a good rule of thumb in philosophy that one’s positions will not be well constructed or well chosen if one does not keep a range of live alternatives in mind. For one thing, one’s arguments are not normally worth much if one is not attending to the variety of objections they will have to endure. And since those objections are normally launched from the standpoint of an alternative or opposing position, if one doesn’t have those alternative positions available, one’s arguments for one’s own position probably won’t be very good. An overview of the alternative theories will allow us an intelligent, and intelligently argued, choice of moral theory.

Why should we be giving priority to practical reasoning over traditional moral issues? For starters, if you don’t have good reasons to act on what your moral theory tells you – if doing what it says doesn’t count as a good decision – then, practically speaking, morality isn’t all that important for you. (Why do what it says? No reason.) So, conversely, if morality is important, then a successful moral theory will be shaped so that you have reasons to do what it says. This means in turn that the shape of your moral theory should be constrained by what reasons for action can be like. A theory of practical reasoning tells you what your reasons for action can be like. All of which suggests that, if morality is important, to figure out which of the many available (or possible) moral theories is the right one, you should look to your theory of practical reasoning. If the Method of Practical Reasoning works, it gives you a moral theory with a built-in advantage: you know why you have a reason to do what it says.

Some points (like that one) we can make up front; others we can be confident about only later on, after we’ve seen how they play out: a lot of the time, the proof of the pudding really is in the eating. Whether the Method of Practical Reasoning will work is something we can’t know up front, and no manifesto, however inspiring, will carry the day if we can’t get the Method to do its job. Since the best way of showing that a method is usable is to actually use it, I intend the papers in this collection to be taken as a feasibility demonstration. Singly or in groups, the papers trace connections between various substantive theories of practical reasoning and the moral or ethical theories with which they are coordinated, and in the course of the survey I hope to convince you of the following claims.

First, the strong moral theories of the past – the moral systems that have passed the test of canonization – have distinctive takes on practical reasoning.
Second, central structural features of those moral theories are consequences of the understandings of practical reasoning that underlie them. When you show how moral theories pair off with theories of practical reasoning, you gain theoretical insight into the deep structural features of your moral theories.

Third, problems in the moral theories can often be traced back to problems in the underlying theory of practical reasoning. This turns out to be important when the time comes to fix them; if you haven’t identified the level at which a difficulty originates, your response will be (what computer scientists call) a kludge, a perhaps clever but unprincipled and fragile trick, rather than graceful and effective philosophical engineering.

Fourth, the train of thought sketched a moment ago shows that your theory of practical reasoning ought to provide constraints on your moral theory, but, so far as the argument has progressed, possibly quite weak constraints, constraints perhaps almost any moral theory would satisfy. I want to defend a stronger claim than that: the treatments assembled below are meant to persuade you that theories of practical reasoning are the engines of strong moral theories, and that, once you focus on the otherwise viable candidates, the Method of Practical Reasoning is a powerful selection technique.

Fifth, if the Method of Practical Reasoning is successful at the second stage of the step-by-step rendition, that is, at pairing off theories of morality and of practical reasoning, it will prove to have a second built-in advantage: the moral theory it selects will come with an argument that it is the correct one. Such arguments will be of the form: Each viable moral theory presupposes a different theory of practical reasoning. This is the correct theory of practical reasoning. Therefore, the moral theory that presupposes it is the correct one; the competing moral theories, which presuppose incorrect theories of practical reasoning, are mistaken. The theory by theory survey is meant to convince you that the pairings are tight enough to support such arguments.

This volume focuses on the pairing-off stage of the Method of Practical Reasoning, and because the pairing is just one phase of the larger argument, I’m going to ask you to put aside a handful of worries and objections for the present.

First of all, if the differences among the canonical moral theories are to be accounted for by different underlying theories of practical reasoning,
then there have to be sufficiently many distinct theories of practical reasoning in play. This is not the occasion to argue that there are sufficiently many live options to make exploring the range of alternatives they generate intellectually interesting. But to make the point that there are many different theories of practical reasoning, I’ve edited another volume, suitably titled *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, which surveys a number of them.²

Second, why think that you can settle on the right theory of practical reasoning without appealing to your moral theory? If your theory of practical reasoning isn’t independent of your moral theory, won’t the Method of Practical Reasoning prove to be viciously circular? I expect that we will be able to proceed without circularity, but this is another point we can’t be sure about up front. In the meantime, here are three stopgap (but not decisive) considerations. One, most practical reasoning is directed toward decisions whose subject matter is, by almost anyone’s lights, nonmoral. (What shall we choose as our evening’s entertainment? Should I redecorate my apartment, or take a trip to the Canary Islands? What gauge of track is the subway we’re designing going to use?)³ If the logic of action and choice does not vary with the subject matter, then we ought to be able to determine the forms it takes, using subject matter to which moral considerations are irrelevant as a testbed. Two, you can find plenty of examples of arguments for and against theories of practical reasoning that do not invoke moral views: some in the anthology I have just mentioned, some in an earlier monograph of my own.⁴ Whether or not you accept that those particular arguments establish their conclusions, the examples may persuade you that arguments of the *sort* that the Method of Practical Reasoning requires are there for the assembling. Three, contrast the presumption about the burden of proof that the objection expresses with the similarly situated but opposite presumption regarding theoretical rationality (that is, reasoning about matters of fact). When it comes to the forms taken by theoretical inference, just about no one thinks that you can only choose your logic on the basis of your substantive theory of the world (your physics, your chemistry, and so on).⁵ Why, when it comes to practical logic, should it be the other way around?

Third, I’m going to leave the selection of the correct moral theory for another occasion. (I even want to leave it open whether what we get will be systematic and orderly enough to count as a *theory.*) What I mean to be demonstrating now is a *method*, a point about the order of argument, and not a substantive moral conclusion. I want you to agree that a theory of practical reasoning ought to be an input to your choice of moral theory, and that it ought to go a long way toward determining the output. I don’t want my own preferences over the inputs and outputs to occupy center
stage, and I’m not insisting that you accept them – although I haven’t suppressed them, and as you read along it will be fairly obvious what they are.

Fourth, I am trying to persuade you that focusing on practical reasoning gives you leverage on, and interesting results in, moral philosophy, because theories of practical reasoning pair off, pretty much one to one, with the canonical moral theories. But you might be wondering whether (and why) I am treating the canonical moral theories as though they were the only viable ones. Perhaps the right theory of practical reasoning is compatible with more than one moral theory, because not all moral theories are in the canon. There have been many attempts to graft a moral superstructure of one sort onto a theoretical base that canonically has supported a superstructure of a different sort. And what about hybrid theories, which try to get the best of two or more worlds by taking a bit of one moral theory and sewing it together with a bit of another?

At the end of this Introduction, I’ll return to the possibility of moving beyond the canonical moral theories. In the meantime, it’s an observation, and one which needs to be explained, that both hybrid and grafted theories fade from philosophical consciousness fairly quickly. My take on the matter (but this has to be made out by examining the cases, and, as before, isn’t something we can be sure about up front) is that hybrid and grafted theories vanish because they’re not viable, and they’re not viable because they don’t have a cohesive and unified theory of practical reasoning at their core. There are two likely explanations. One, inconsistencies between the theories of practical reasoning embedded in the grafted or hybridized components make theoretical failure a foregone conclusion. And two, the motivational impetus that the canonical moral theories derive from the understandings of practical reasoning to which they are yoked go missing in hybrid and grafted theories. But these proposals won’t be supported here.⁶

Fifth, and last for now, you might be wondering whether the Method of Practical Reasoning is in competition with one or another position in metaethics. That question, at least the way it’s usually put, seems to me to express what used to be called a category mistake. The contrast between moral theories and theories of practical reasoning cuts across (and is not the same as) the contrast between substantive ethics and metaethics. I introduced substantive moral or ethical theories as taking up questions like: What ought I to be doing? (Is lying always wrong?) By contrast, metaethical theories take up questions like: What does that “ought” mean? (What are you doing, when you describe something as “wrong”?)
same (or an analogous) contrast can be made out within the study of practical reasoning. A substantive theory of practical reasoning will tell you whether the reasons for action are (say) your desires, or universalizable maxims, or maximally coherent clusters of intentions, or whatever, and it will tell you what conclusions follow from what reasons; that is, a substantive theory of practical reasoning is a theory of the forms taken by (legitimate or correct) practical inference. (It will tell you what makes one kind of consideration count as a reason, as opposed to another kind.) A metaethical account of practical reasoning would take up questions like: What does it mean to say that something is a “reason” for action? What is meant by calling the conclusion of a practical inference “incorrect”? (It will tell you what it is for a consideration to count as a reason tout court.)

There are important connections between the substantive theory of practical reasoning and its metaethics, and we won’t be able to leave these entirely to one side. For instance, Chapters 6 and 7 tease out Hume’s metaethical arguments for his own theory of practical reasoning; the postscript to Chapter 3 tries to account for Kant’s substantive theory of practical reasoning by attributing to him a (not fully articulated) view lying on the border between the substantive and the metaethical; Chapters 9 and 10 trace connections between value theory – more or less, the metaphysics of values – and practical reasoning. Nevertheless, the topic of this volume is the way in which substantive theories of practical reasoning drive substantive moral or ethical theories. Distinguishing the questions isn’t meant to discourage metaethics-based moral theory, but does suggest the form it should take. If you would like to use metaethical considerations to select a theory of practical reasoning, and thereby a moral theory, by all means give it a go.

It is a familiar and characteristic part of the practice of philosophy to stop in one’s tracks and look around for a new and different way of thinking about things. But of course it is not always appropriate. So why, you may be wondering, does moral philosophy need a new method, when we already have a method that does perfectly well, that is, the method of reflective equilibrium? By way of forestalling this objection, I now want to explain why I think the Method of Practical Reasoning is a better choice. I’ll give a brief (and, I hope, uncontroversial) description of reflective equilibrium, and then go on (more controversially) to describe the more important advantages of the new method over the old.
Reflective equilibrium was introduced into the contemporary philosophical repertoire by Nelson Goodman, with the following characterization of how we determine rules of inference for reasoning: “A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend.” Its current popularity is due to John Rawls, who adapted it to the political problem of determining how basic social institutions should be configured. Early on in his enormously influential *Theory of Justice*, Rawls explained how to select an idealized bargaining situation, one in which social principles get chosen:

if…[our] principles match our considered convictions of justice, then so far well and good. But presumably there will be discrepancies. In this case we have a choice. We can either modify the account of the initial [bargaining] situation or we can revise our existing judgments, for even the judgments we take provisionally as fixed points are liable to revision. By going back and forth, sometimes altering the conditions of the contractual circumstances, at others withdrawing our judgments and conforming them to principle, I assume that eventually we shall find a description of the…[bargaining] situation that both expresses reasonable conditions and yields principles which match our considered judgments duly pruned and adjusted. This state of affairs I refer to as reflective equilibrium.

It has become routine to distinguish between “narrow” and “wide” reflective equilibrium. The “narrow” recipe for using reflective equilibrium in moral theory has come to look roughly as follows. First, collect a number of moral reactions to actual or imagined circumstances. (These are usually called “moral intuitions,” but philosophers no longer think of them as the deliverances of some special faculty; sometimes, following Rawls, they just call them “considered moral judgments.”) Then formulate a general principle whose instances or consequences largely agree with the intuitions. Lastly, negotiate the remaining disagreements: for each point at which principle and intuition conflict, either allow the principle to override the intuition, or, where you can’t bring yourself to do that, adjust the principle to accommodate the recalcitrant intuition. Iterate until done, and adopt the revised principle.

“Wide” reflective equilibrium differs in taking into account not only judgments about particular instances, but further principles to which you have an antecedent commitment, background theories, values, arguments of all sorts, and in fact just about anything that might be considered relevant. Since the requirement is that everything be made to hang together, it is an ethics-specific variant of what in epistemology gets called
coherence theory. So much for what I mean to be an uncontroversial and fair characterization of the opposition.

It’s an indication of how respectable the notion has become that on occasion I see “reflective equilibrium” typed into the method blank of a philosopher’s grant or fellowship application. Probably an even more important indication of its respectability is the family of overlapping responses you encounter when you press practicing philosophers on the reasons for using reflective equilibrium: One, what else could you do? Two, you do it anyway. Three, you don’t need to give an argument for it, or any special reason for doing it this way. And four, you can’t argue for something as basic as this. Call these the Coffeeshop Responses, because you get them over coffee, after class, and during Q & A sessions. Answers like the Coffeeshop Responses are normal practice only when what’s being defended is itself normal practice.

A tendency to identify reflective equilibrium with wide reflective equilibrium makes the Coffeeshop Responses seem reasonable, but also makes the notion uninteresting: any philosophical argument (with a qualification I’ll get to in a moment), including putative alternatives such as my own, ends up counting as an application of the method of (wide) reflective equilibrium. And so of course reflective equilibrium is what you do anyway (Coffeeshop Response One), something to which there is really no alternative (Coffeeshop Response Two), and a method which requires no special justification (Coffeeshop Response Three). And what would count as an argument for doing – well, anything? (Coffeeshop Response Four). But if anything you do counts as an instance of Method X, then Method X is not a method.

Narrow reflective equilibrium may be a method that gives real guidance, but it isn’t supported by an argument to the effect that it’s a method appropriate for moral theory; rather than try to supply one, ethicists have almost uniformly abandoned it in favor of wide reflective equilibrium, presumably because it is visibly unsuited to the domain. Wide reflective equilibrium comes with something like an argument (the Coffeeshop Responses), but isn’t a method. The Method of Practical Reasoning comes with the arguments we’ve already reviewed, and it promises the guidance one expects from something that advertises itself as a method.

Wide reflective equilibrium is almost content-free, but not entirely. The residual content is the methodological commitment to giving up principles (or values, or theoretical views, or whatever) when they generate (a large enough number of) consequences at which one balks. Now
you might think that this is what one does whenever one engages in theory construction, and so it can’t possibly be a problematic aspect of the method. But notice that one balks at a consequence of a moral theory (in the fancier vocabulary, one has a moral intuition or considered moral judgment that the consequence is to be rejected) when one does not like the consequence. (Which does not preclude accepting some very inconvenient consequences, say, the theory’s insistence that you keep your promises: one’s dislike may be quite impersonal.) Consequently, adopting wide reflective equilibrium as a method amounts to deciding to give up your moral theories when you don’t like their results (or, anyway, when you really don’t like their results). That is to say, wide reflective equilibrium is a method formally indistinguishable from intellectual dishonesty.

The Method of Practical Reasoning does not have this kind of built-in invitation to complacency. As we will see, it has the potential to produce results that are not only genuinely surprising, but very hard to take. Both approaches give you results in which you have a stake, but the kind of stake is very different in the two cases. Reflective equilibrium gives you a theory that agrees with most of what you already think. The Method of Practical Reasoning gives you a theory on whose dicta you have reason to act. Your stake in your prior opinions is inertial, a matter of habituation or emotional comfort (thus the invitation to complacency); whereas what you have reason to do may not match your prior opinions on any point (thus the potential for hard-to-take results).

If you think that moral theory ought to be powerful enough, in principle, to tell us that we have been thoroughly mistaken in our ethics, then the Method of Practical Reasoning should look much better than reflective equilibrium, wide or narrow. The motivation I am trying to invoke now is not metaethical: my worry about reflective equilibrium arises within ethics. If you’re about to adopt a method which guarantees that what you happen to already think can’t be very wrong, you need to show—and this is a moral demand—that it’s not just an expression of self-righteousness, or smugness, or laziness, or an aid to self-deception. After all, if you were very wrong about moral matters, and you made reflective equilibrium your sole method of ethics, you’d never find out. So it would be a tempting method to adopt if, deep down, you suspected, or worse than suspected, that you were very wrong. . . . so tempting, in fact, that you’d better have a convincing argument that this isn’t what’s going on. I’ve never seen such an argument, and so, I think we’re better off with the Method of Practical Reasoning. 

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Cambridge University Press
0521839432 - Ethics Done Right: Practical Reasoning as a Foundation for Moral Theory
Elijah Millgram
Excerpt
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