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The plurality of good reasons
and the theory of practical rationality

Abstract:

There is a plurality of good reasons for action. An adequate theory of practical rationality must be compatible with it, even if it requires certain modifications of our everyday practices of reasoning. Usual theories of practical rationality do not pass this test. It is envisaged how to revise adequately our understanding of practical rationality.

I.

An action is *rational*, if there is a good reason to perform it. The theory of practical rationality is a theory of good reasons for action.

In our world-life language we speak of reasons not only in *normative*, but also in *descriptive* contexts. One can criticize an action by saying: "He had no reason to do this". But one can also utter a purely descriptive statement by saying: "She did that for the following reason". One can refer to reasons for action in order to characterize merely the subjective motives of the agent lacking any evaluative connotation, but one can refer to reasons for action also in order to distinguish right action. The philosophical conceptions of *internalism* and *externalism* originate in an ambivalence of our everyday language.

World-life reasons for action, be they normative or descriptive, are always *prima-facie* reasons. "To have a reason for doing x" is an elliptic way of expressing that (in the normative sense) one specific aspect of the decision situation (which is said to be the reason for the respective action), *together with* given circumstances and certain presupposed background assumptions (which also include normative and

descriptive theories), made this action seem obligatory (normatively) or that this specific aspect of the decision situation etc. was the motive of the agent (descriptively).

"Why did you close the window?", "Because there was a draught". The motive to stop the draught was the (descriptive) reason for the agent to close the window. Firstly, however, we can doubt whether this was the real reason for the agent to close the window. "In reality you did not want anybody to listen to our conversation." Secondly, even if we (descriptively) accept the motive to stop the draught as the real reason for the action of closing the window, we can still (normatively) reject it, denying it to be a good reason, taking for example the view that in these high temperatures a draught is just refreshing and cannot do any damage to one's health. Thirdly, we could also deny the motive to stop the draught in an *indirect* way, taking into consideration implicit background assumptions of the agent which could be proved to be wrong. We could for example find out that the draught was not coming from the open window, but from the open door.

Reasons as we use them in our everyday interactions and conversations are only rarely or never a sufficient justification for our actions. To give a reason for an action means to single out one specific aspect of the decision situation which in one or another way plays a particular role. This particular role might be that the person who asks for the reason for an action is given some information she did not have before and which is necessary to show the action to be justified. A - pragmatically - *successful* justification of an action is brought about, if the person who justifies her action and the person who asks for the justification have a sufficiently similar background knowledge, so that the reason which is given for the action, that is one specific aspect of the decision situation, for both persons justifies the action. An *objectively good* justification is brought about, if the reason given for it would convince an ideally rational person.¹

In many cases it is a specific aspect of the decision situation which motivates a person to perform a certain action. All other aspects - particularly in what concerns spontaneous decisions - become less relevant, they are not present in the person's mind. Research in cognitive psychology has shown that our perception system immediately registers unusual events and - after a check of relevance - stores them for longer than just in the short time memory. The evolutionary advantage of this particular capacity is obvious: Under normal circumstances we react in the usual way, exceptional things, on the other hand, sometimes require different, "non-usual" ways of behaviour. Actions are the steering instrument of our behaviour. The term action includes a cognitive component. The fact that we single out certain specific aspects in decision situations does not mean that the other, less relevant aspects do not play any role at all. Even if they are not each as such and simultaneously present in the person's mind, they have before been "checked" and only then - after having been found to be of no further interest - forgotten again. To give a reason for an action often means to refer to that aspect of a decision situation which was the trigger for an intervening control, that is to intervene with an action into the stream of behaviour. Even if it might be determined to a large extent by dispositions formed during the evolutionary process, this selective procedure is not totally out of the rational control of the agent. He can for example decide to increase his attention, and in doing so he will refine his selection.

Generally, science begins with distinguishing individual cases and with drawing up typologies. Important material for the subject we are concerned with here has been contributed by speech act theory. Speech acts are constituted by systems of norms which in many cases provide reasons for doing something. A person who has made a promise has a good reason to perform at the given time that action which fulfills the promise. It is here not the place to start with an analysis of the details of reasons for actions. The purpose of this article rather is to show that the common

reductionism in dealing with the theory of practical rationality is not convincing. In order to do this it will suffice to give some examples.

At least since the beginning of modern philosophy almost all theories of practical rationality have been largely reductionist: Following these theories, the plurality of reasons for action is just mere appearances, in reality there is only one single principle (one single rule, one single criterion) which decides whether an action is rational or not. We should take this claim seriously. If P is that single principle or criterion in question, every good reason must, with the help of P, be *rationally reconstructable*. An action h is rational, if h fulfills P. If this theory of practical rationality is adequate, the following must be true for whatever good reason for action G: If h is well-justified by G, then h must fulfill P. This is a strong assumption, and whatever the content of P is - prima facie there does not seem to be much in favour for the supposition that P could fulfill these conditions.

At dinner my neighbour at table asks me to pass her the salt. I give it to her. It is not very probable that somebody will ask me why I have done this. But in case somebody should ask me, I would have the answer ready: I passed her the salt, because she had asked me for it. Under normal circumstances the fact of having been asked to do h is a good reason for doing h.

Let us suppose that P is the principle to optimize the subjective consequences of one's own actions. To put this principle more precisely, something more would have to be said about it² - for example how it is compatible with a theory of moral valuation of these consequences - but even without giving any further details this simple example of a good reason already seems to balk at a reconstruction with the help of P. Under normal circumstances the fact of having been asked a favour is a good reason for doing this favour. Under normal circumstances this reason is sufficient and does not need any further justification. In particular the consequences (and my subjective valuation of these consequences) seem to be irrelevant. I have a

good reason to do my neighbour at table the favour to pass her the salt, even if I think that low-salt food is healthier. In any case I do not *only then* have a good reason to pass her the salt, if I assume that the causal and probabilistic consequences of this action are optimal. If I answered to the question why I have passed her the salt with an estimation of the consequences of my action (that is if I take P as a criterion of practical rationality), this would under normal circumstances be unpolite in respect to the person who asked, because then I would obviously not accept just the fact of her having asked me a favour as a reason for my action. Her having asked me this favour would then just be one of the circumstances which play a role in the estimation of the consequences of my action. This argument alone, however, does still not refute P. But if it is true that under certain circumstances the fact of having been asked a favour is a good reason for doing this favour, and if under some of these circumstances doing this favour does not have optimal consequences, then principle P, as we have defined it above - we can call it the consequentialist principle - gets into serious trouble. I think it really does³ - here, however, we can leave that open.

It is a good reason for action to do something because of having been asked the favour to do it. In my opinion this is not only *empirically* true as an element of an *internal* description of an institutional fact, but it also seems to be *normatively* true - hence the qualification of this reason for action as a `good` one. If somebody should convince me that it also meets my personal interests - as a rule and if it does not imply any further disadvantages - to do favours which other persons have asked me to do, then this might intensify my conviction that having been asked a favour by another person is a good reason for doing her this favour - but this information does not *replace* my conviction that having been asked a favour is a good reason for action. The example shows that a reduction of all possible reasons for action to just *one single* type, i. e. consequential reasons for action, can only be attained by deviating from the

established practices of justifying actions in our life-world. Having been asked a favour would then no longer be a genuine prima-facie reason, but only an apparent reason for doing something which, under certain conditions, will refer to another, totally different type of reason for action which then, in its turn, would rightly become action-guiding. A theory of practical rationality which opposes to the greatest part of generally accepted good reasons for action needs a specific justification. I cannot see from where or from what such a theory could get such a justification, hence it would have to be strong enough to overcome central and extensive parts of the system of our normative beliefs. Neither I see any possibility for this, nor - what is more important - any necessity.

II.

We do not get any further in the theoretical clarification by leaving our system of normative beliefs, developing a coherent and perhaps axiomatically structured system ab ovo based on the putative solidity of a new fundament. In the descriptive sphere this bold project of philosophical rationalism has since long lost any but historical interest, and hopefully its days are numbered in the normative sphere, too. The "reality shock" of applied ethics seems to have a considerable share in this. However, there is an astonishing delay to general methodological insights finally gaining influence in philosophical ethics, too. Rationalism in the sense of the deduction of knowledge from self-evident propositions (or axioms) still plays a central role in ethics inspired by Kantianism as well as by utilitarianism. The rationalistically stimulated overemphasis on the aspect of justification opposes the capitulation of institutionist⁴ ethics in the face of the plurality of good reasons. Whereas ethical theories influenced by rationalism⁵ regard our life-world moral convictions in the end as worthless for any ethical position, institutionist ethics restricts itself to the description of established, norm-constituted institutions. Between the

rationalistically inspired abolition of the life-world plurality of good reasons on the one hand, and its purely descriptive reconstruction on the other hand, there is room for an adequate theory of practical rationality.

A first step towards a theory of practical rationality is to distinguish different structural types of good reasons. First of all there is the vast field of consequential reasons. A person who wants to change the state of the world in a specific way has reason to perform an action which has the respective desired causal (or probabilistic) consequences. Some theories hold that among all possible consequential reasons there is only one type which represents a good reason: that which refers to the optimization of the subjective state either of the agent herself or of other persons concerned by the action or, more generally, of any animated being concerned by it.⁶ In the context of the discussion of the practical syllogism this is sometimes also called the intentionalist model of practical rationality.⁷ It seems indeed to be reasonable to assume that good reasons result from a further specification of the general scheme "I want to have x, action h is a good means to attain x, therefore I choose to do h". Further specifications can then for example refer to what can be reasonably wanted and to a more precise definition of the relation between means and their end. If one wants to keep this scheme, it is, however, important to avoid a consequentialist reduction: The "I want" does not necessarily solely refer to the consequences of my actions for the future course of the world, but it can also refer to past events, for example to obligations I have already taken on or to favours I have been asked before. Generally, however, it is not possible to translate these determinative reasons of our will into preferences over states of the world. The intentionalist scheme can only be maintained if one gives up its consequentialist standard interpretation.⁸

Therefore, to differentiate between consequential and non-consequential reasons for actions is no decision for or against their intentionalist reconstructability. Under normal conditions

the fact to have given a promise is a good reason to keep that promise; this reason may sometimes distinguish an action which has consequences that for the agent (or even in respect to a universal standard) are optimizing, but, nonetheless, this optimization is not the reason for keeping the promise. To have given a promise is, generally, a non-consequential reason for keeping it. But I choose an action which fulfills the promise, because I have at this point in time the *intention* to keep the promise, and I choose this action because it is an *adequate means* to realize this intention. This description is compatible with the fact that the causal (and probable) effects of the respective action might not be desired. It may indeed be that from the agent's point of view the state of the world, after having realized this action, is worse than the state of the world which there would be if she had chosen another action instead. Still, keeping a promise is as a rule not irrational, and still the subjective valuation standard is not wrong.⁹ Among non-consequential reasons for action there are reasons which refer to the social role of the agent. One can for example justify an action with one's parental responsibility for one's children or with specific duties of one's job in the civil service, etc. Reasons of this kind are, generally, not reconstructable as consequential reasons. This is connected with the fact that duties implied in a social role do not transmit themselves to an expected subjective valuation of states of the world of the respective person herself. A civil servant has the duty to refuse the bribe offered to him, even in case the expected state of the world after taking the bribe would not only be subjectively better, but would even from a universal point of view be preferable to the present state. Transfers of this kind are typically offered in situations in which the service offered and the service in return conjointly lead to a pareto-better state. The civil servant would achieve a better (financial) state, if he took the money; the person who offers the bribe would, for instance because of accelerated administrative proceedings, have advantages which prevail the disadvantages of her spending the

money for the bribe; other persons would so far not be involved. The civil servant who refuses the bribe must not necessarily be of the opinion that the state of the world which would follow from this transfer would be worse than the present state. He does not accept the bribe, because taking it would not be compatible with his official duties. The mere reflection on the possible consequences of taking the bribe can already be regarded as a breach of these official duties.

Reasons for action which result from *obligations* taken on also are, as a rule, non-consequential. This type of reasons for action is different to the one discussed before in that it is constituted only by a *preceding action* of the person herself.

Finally there are reasons for action supplied by rules which have an action-guiding effect *independent* from our *social roles* and from *obligations taken on*. We talk of "*principle-guided reasons for action*". To save a person from drowning, for example, is an action which is founded on the principle to help other people in their need. Principle-guided reasons also are, as a rule, non-consequential, especially those which refer to individual rights - whereas the promotion of the general welfare, on the other hand, is no principle established in our life-world. The idea to reduce the plurality of good reasons to this one single principle which is not even established in our life-world seems to be just one of those admirable naivities that sometimes come over philosophy. But still, even if this reduction is erroneous, there would remain a certain feeling of uneasiness if we took that as an argument to restrict ourselves just to a mere recognition of the plurality of good reasons. Theoretical comprehension as well as our normative judgment require coherence. Even if the three categories of good reasons we have discussed above were exhaustive and disjunct, little would be gained for a coherent theory of right acting. To preserve complexity is one thing, to capitulate in face of it is another.

Theories establish connections between propositions. They have to be tested against those elements of our belief system which we are not willing to give up in favour of a theory. Our

life-world descriptive beliefs do not need any theories to be regarded as guaranteed. Generally, we trust in what we see; the statement "The sun is shining" does not need any justification that goes further than our mere judgment by appearances. Nonetheless the way of talking about direct and indirect knowledge is misleading, because it introduces a dichotomy where speaking of different grades in a continuum of more or less direct propositions is more adequate. These general features of our belief systems and their dynamics also characterize our normative beliefs. There are more or less direct reasons for actions. Just as it is rational to assume by mere appearances that the sun is shining, an action is directly justified if it fulfills a given promise. And just as there might be "intervening evidences", for example, if I realize that those mere appearances I relied on were the product of a skillfully arranged deceit, there might also be a case in which another "intervening" reason is a good reason not to fulfill the promise. Our descriptive as well as our normative theories are based on what directly appears, and on this basis they try to clarify other realms to which we have only indirect access. We try to make our descriptive and our normative convictions coherent with the help of theoretical links. The plurality of our empiric evidences is not abolished by theory, but gets integrated into a theoretical framework. Correspondingly, an adequate normative theory will not abolish the plurality of good reasons, but will embed it in a theoretical frame. In the concluding paragraph I want to show how this could be done, taking as an example cooperative reasons for action.

III.

In the *narrower sense cooperative reasons for action* refer to collective actions which have these characteristic features: The potential actors each have an individual interest in the realization of the collective action; if other persons contribute their part to its realization, it would be more advantageous for

each of the potential agents not to do her share in it.¹⁰ In this situation a person has a good (cooperative) reason to contribute to the collective action, although, independent from the contribution of other persons, it would be better for her personally not to contribute to this collective action. The approval of a collective action offers even then a good reason to contribute to it, if this doing her share in it does not optimize the consequences for the individual contributing person herself. *Cooperative reasons for action are, per definitionem, non-consequential reasons.* If each person has a good reason to look after her own interests, cooperative reasons for action integrate these prima-facie reasons into a normative theory of collective action which then, in its turn, can become action-guiding for each individual person. Cooperative reasons for action are therefore based on preceding "primary" reasons.

A slight extension of this concept of cooperative reasons, including not only primary reasons which are determined by personal interests, but also to other, among them genuinely morally determined types of primary reasons, allows to encompass a plurality of situations of interaction. If for example a specific type of social interaction is approved of by the individual, not because it optimizes respective personal interests, but because it guarantees the individual rights (for example human rights) of all persons involved, then acting in accordance with this structure can be understood as cooperatively justified in the wider sense. This explains, for example, why persons with a democratic attitude also support the rights, let us say, of their political rivals. From my point of view the state of the world could be better, if some people were restricted in their right of free expression of opinion. Nonetheless one can at the same time, without becoming incoherent, want that this right is preserved, because one can, on the basis of genuinely moral reasons, prefer that system of social interaction where the right of free expression of opinion is guaranteed to any other system where this would perhaps not be the case.

The method of cooperative reasons for action can even be applied in the case of a conflict between different fundamental moral beliefs. If moral beliefs are extremely divergent, it is difficult to find out collective actions which can be generally approved of and which can therefore offer to all persons involved a good reason to contribute their part to the respective collective action. Nonetheless there are - so to speak on the next higher level - possibilities of coordination even in the case of extremely divergent fundamental moral beliefs. These coordinations of a higher order typically find expression in principles of tolerance. Cooperation results in this case from obeying to general rules which have as their object the restriction of conflicts between different moral world views. The concept of (secondary) cooperative reasons is here once again applied on *moral world views* which on their part provide primary reasons.

Cooperative reasons for action are not always effective, they are often superseded particularly by primary reasons for action. It is in fact a difficult question for the normative theory on which conditions cooperative reasons can become good reasons for action, that is, on which conditions they should become action-guiding. It would certainly be inadequate to prescribe cooperative behaviour in any prisoner's dilemma situation.

The approach of cooperative reasons for action cannot only be applied on situations of *interpersonal interaction*, but can also be employed on the action coordination of one single person, i. e. in the *intrapersonal case*. Against this background the way of speaking of duties against oneself gets a new sense. The respective optimizing actions - whether the optimization criterion be guided by personal interests or not - would make up a form of life which would not conform to the underlying primary reasons. The postulate of cooperation is also valid for any single person who wants to organize her life in a reasonable way. Cooperation integrates different primary reasons, with that it shapes - interpersonally - the *form of society*, and -

intrapersonally - the individual *form of life*. The normative theory of practical rationality can fulfill one part of its systematizing task in developing criteria of cooperation, thus integrating the plurality of good reasons into a theoretic normative context. Theoretical integration often demands modification, in this case the modification of our primary reasons. In this way the theory of practical rationality obtains its critical normative competence.

Notes

- 1) As the concepts of justification and rationality are closely linked, this characterization of an objective justification might at least seem to be circular. Only a more detailed characterization of the content of good reasons can give it more substance.
- 2) I have tried this in *Kritik des Konsequentialismus*, Munich: Oldenbourg 1993, 1-14.
- 3) Cf. *Kritik des Konsequentialismus* (op. cit.), 9, 14, 27, 43.
- 4) The common term "institutional ethics" would be misleading, as it rather refers to the ethics of institutions. An ethical theory which in its normative criteria is based on intuitions is called "intuitionist ethics", the term "institutionist ethics" is to be understood analogously.
- 5) Cf. Julian Nida-Rümelin, "Begründung in der Ethik", in: LOGOS, no. 3 (1994).
- 6) The first type is represented, at least implicitly, by the decision-theoretic model of L. J. Savage: *Foundations of Statistics*; New York 1954 (2nd ed. New York 1972), the second one is represented by a specific type of utilitarianism.
- 7) Cf. G. H. v. Wright: *The Varieties of Goodness*, London 1963. Later, v. Wright has given up the intentionalist approach in favour of supplementary 'imperativist' and 'normative' reasons for action, cf. v. Wright, "Das menschliche Handeln im Lichte seiner Ursachen und Gründe", in: *Handlungstheorie - interdisziplinär*, Vol. 2, Munich 1979, 49-51.
- 8) Cf. Julian Nida-Rümelin, *Kritik des Konsequentialismus* (op. cit.), 1-14.
- 9) Some readers might doubt whether these statements are compatible with the revealed preference-concept of decision theory. Such doubts are legitimate. Here, however, it must suffice to point out that the revealed preference-concept cannot be reconciled with the consequentialist standard interpretation of the rational choice-paradigma. Cf. Julian Nida-Rümelin, "Das rational choice-Paradigma - Extensionen und Revisionen", in:

Julian Nida-Rümelin (ed.), *Praktische Rationalität*, Berlin: de Gruyter 1994, 2-29.

10) This corresponds, of course, to a n-person prisoner's dilemma.