

Practical Reasoning, the First Person and Impartialism about Reasons

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Abstract

This paper considers the problem posed for impartialism about reasons by the claim that practical reasoning is essentially first personal. This argument, first put forward by Bernard Williams, has an obscure rationale. Barry Stroud has suggested that in the only sense in which it is true it misrepresents the issue which is that substituting in a particular identity to a conclusion true of anyone can change the degree of support for a practical conclusion. This paper develops a complementary line of argument. Developing Stroud's point and interpreting it as highlighting the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning, it is argued that the distinguishing feature of practical reasoning is that it terminates in an action as its conclusion. Actions are the expression of one's all things considered judgement and the expression of intentional states in action. The obvious rejoinders to this view are canvassed and deflected; this Aristotelian thesis is independently motivated as making best sense of the fact that practical questions may "turn out variously".

This paper evaluates Bernard Williams's claim that practical reasoning was "essentially first personal" in a way that ethical impartialism could not accommodate.¹ [Williams, 1985, pp. 67-68] Williams's target was reasons impartialism, a view that can naturally be formulated as a thesis about an informational restriction on moral judgement. [Sen, 1979] This view claims that the content of reasoning, taking the standard patterns of inference for granted, can be fully accurately represented as reasoning by anyone in a way that excludes information about any particular individual. The impartialist need not deny the importance of indexical modes of presentation in those descriptions under which a person

acts, so-called “essential indexicals”. [Perry, 1979] But that is because impartialism is restricted to the content of good reasoning and this content does not involve the first person. (This formulation clearly implies a distinction between the content of reasoning and the mode of presentation under which it is grasped.) [Nagel, 1970; Darwall, 1983] However, this paper argues that this set of assumptions leads to three serious problems for reasons impartialism.

First, it is incompatible with an independently attractive conception of practical reasoning as non-monotonic. [Brandom, 1998] Second, impartialism about reasons is incompatible with an independently attractive account of the nature of practical reasoning as reasoning that terminates in action as its conclusion. [Anscombe, 1957] Together, these two points explain how reasons impartialism underplays the ethical importance of first personal agency. It could, further, be argued that deliberation focuses the agent’s virtues in a way that is expressive of a personal point of view, as I have argued elsewhere.² [Thomas, 2005] That will not be main focus in this paper, but I will explore a different route to essentially the same verdict in establishing the claim that practical reasoning is essentially first personal.

I conclude that the nature of practical reasoning does indeed pose a serious challenge to reasons impartialism, thereby vindicating a version of Williams’s claim. One might therefore conclude that a division of labour is necessary: impartialism is a theory of reasons for an agent, not a theory of practical reasoning. However, I will show why that would be a highly unsatisfactory conclusion to draw. At the very least it is damaging to impartialism if it has to embrace the paradox that it is a theory of reasons but cannot be a theory of reasoning.³ More seriously, however, I will demonstrate below that some

evidence actually used in the determination of practical verdicts is essentially first personal, so impartialism cannot even be a complete theory of the reasons that there are. A necessary disclaimer for what follows is that this paper does not try to prove that all actions, because of their inherent first personality, are ethically significant. Its aim is the converse: to defend a view that allows some actions to be, in virtue of their first personality, ethically significant. I do, in fact, believe that it can be ethically important who actually performs an action. [Thomas, 1997] Proving that is not, however, the aim of this paper. It seeks, rather, to refute a view that makes recognition of this first personality impossible.

1 Impartialism About Reasons

There are various different forms of ethical impartialism that take different objects: standpoints, pragmatic constraints, sets of principles, or classes of reason. In this paper I will focus solely on the idea of an impartial reason.⁴ [Nagel, 1970; Darwall, 1983] This reflective account of reasons entails further claims about the nature of practical reasoning and action, both of which are subject to a particular impartialist construal of the demands of objectivity.⁵ In order to meet these demands it is claimed that reasoning directed to an ethical question must appeal solely to reasons for anyone, such that the particular character of the deliberating agent plays no essential role in the formulation of the content of such reasons nor in the conclusion that is the product of any process of reasoning. [Nagel, 1970; O’Day, 1998] One important way in which one might express this idea is in terms of an informational restriction. [Sen, 1979] The claim is that in reasoning about practice, certain forms of information can be excluded, namely, information about the

particular character of agents, expressible by such linguistic devices as proper names, the first person pronoun and essential uses of indexical modes of presentation. [Perry, 1979] One natural way to cash out this idea is via the thought experiment of thinking of oneself, for moral purposes, as one person amongst others who are equally real where the distinction between persons is not itself of primary moral significance. [Nagel, 1970] Certain forms of information are debarred in this thought experiment, but this restriction is irrelevant, impartialism claims, to the assessment of the content of the reasons and the reasoning to any practical conclusion.

A less often noted corollary of reasons impartialism, I will argue, is a derivative thesis about the scope of practical reasoning. First personal reasoning (deliberation) about what to do operates over contents that are accessible to anyone: one deliberates, comes to a verdict, and acts, but objectivity properly speaking only imposes constraints on the contents of thoughts.⁶ It constrains the contents deliberated about and plausibly further claims that the norms of good reasoning in the deliberative context also make no special claim to be characterisable by appealing to the particular character of the agent. However, the act itself strictly speaking falls outside the scope of objectivity. That is because practical reasoning is reasoning that comes as close to action as reasoning can, while still being thinking. Then reasoning (thought) terminates, and something happens, a token event in the world that is the event of a person acting in a way that can be intentionally characterised by appealing to the pro-attitude that motivated the action. This rationalising explanation displays those considerations that led the agent to favour that action.⁷ [Davidson, 1980a] Reasoning about practice involves an evaluative phase, that concludes

in the formation of an intention, and if we need to acknowledge a separable executive phase, that is simply the execution of an already decided upon intention in action.

This view of practical reasoning sees it as a hybrid of a deliberative phase in thought followed by an event that is rationalisable by that deliberation. Why do I attribute this view to the reasons impartialist? I do so by working backwards from two claims that the reasons impartialist wants to avoid: action descriptions do seem to involve an essentially indexical mode of presentation and we seem ethically sensitive to which individuals actually carry out an act. Both of these facts threaten to re-insert into practical reasoning a particularising reference to the person of precisely the kind that reasons impartialism wants to avoid. It seems natural, then, to add to reasons impartialism the hybrid view that practical reasoning is thinking that gets as close to action as thinking can, without actually including actions as the conclusion of practical reasoning. Besides this naturalness, one can also point to the independent plausibility of the view that practical reasoning terminates in intention formation of a kind that expresses one's overall verdict about what is choiceworthy. Agents reason about what to do, come to overall verdicts about the choiceworthy and form intentions that are either immediately expressed in what they do or which justify future actions when the time of action arrives.

2 Williams's Critique

In Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy Bernard Williams characterised reasons impartialism in precisely the terms that I have used, in order to reject it. In the course of a critical discussion of one kind of impartialist ethical view, that of Kant, he claimed that theoretical reasoning is, when first personal, not essentially so. [Williams, 1985, pp. 66-

67] Such reasoning can always be recast in impersonal terms that make no particularising reference to the subject who is carrying out the reasoning, but the case of reasoning about practice is importantly different:

What [Kant's account of rational freedom] says about reflection does indeed apply to factual deliberation, but it does so because factual deliberation is not essentially first personal. It fails to apply to practical deliberation, and to impose a necessary impartiality on it, because practical deliberation is first personal, radically so, and involves an I that must be more intimately the I of my desires than this account allows. [Williams, 1985, pp. 66-67]

It is clear that Williams intended his point to generalise.⁸ He seemed to assume that a contrast can be drawn between theoretical and practical reasoning explained precisely in terms of a contrast between an impartial and a non-impartial standpoint. First personal practical deliberation cannot be understood in impartial terms. [Williams, *ibid.*]

I do not think anyone could pretend that the reasons given for this claim in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy are pellucidly clear. However, it does seem that part of Williams's critique raises the issue of how one best characterises practical reasoning as such, as in the following passage:

The action I decide on will be mine, and ... its being mine means not just that it will be arrived at by this deliberation, but that it will involve changes in the world of which I shall be empirically the cause, and of which these desires and this deliberation itself will be, in some part, the cause. It is true that I can stand back from my desires and reflect on them ... [But] The I that stands back in rational reflection from my desires is still the I that has those desires and will, empirically and concretely, act. [Williams, 1985, pp. 68-69, emphasis added]

I am not going to focus on every point in this passage, such as the issue of why desires from which one is reflectively detached are desires one ought to care about once they have been transformed into a source of evidence analogous to perceptions. I am going to develop a broader point to establish a rationale for a claim like Williams's: it seems to me best supported by the Aristotelian thesis that practical reasoning is reasoning that terminates in action as its conclusion. However, there is a very important further point about practical reasoning that acts as a bridge, as it were, between this phenomenological claim about the essential role of first personality and the thesis that practical reasoning terminates in action. That is the claim that practical reasoning is non-monotonic, a point explicitly brought to bear on Williams's claims in a rich and insightful paper by Barry Stroud. [Stroud, 2000]

3 Stroud on Williams

Stroud has argued that while Williams's thesis about the essential first personality of practical reasoning contains an insight, it does so very misleadingly; its only defensible rationale loses Williams's most distinctive claim. The issue is not essential first personality at all. The insight is that the impartialist is indeed mistaken to think that a particular individual can come to an overall practical verdict about what to do merely by substituting a description of him or her self into a conclusion that is true for anyone. There is a necessary incompleteness to practical reasoning, such that intention formation cast solely in terms of a conclusion for anyone may be overturned if, at the time of action, the agent re-opens the process of deliberation because she needs to take into account that these are her deliberations and that she will act. For, Stroud argues, practical questions

are settled by what an agent does. When the time of action comes, the agent may not act on her prior intention or, indeed, not act at all. [Stroud, 2000]

Some care is required in disentangling the three distinct strands of this argument: first, there is the claim, which I will defend in this paper, that practical questions are settled by what one does. Second, there is the claim that at the time of action an agent may re-open the deliberations that led to intention formation. Third, there is the rationale for why the agent might do this. The second point is the problematic one: if one has deliberated completely, and one has no reason to re-open one's deliberation, intention formation simply is to arrive at a reason supported conclusion such that one has no future reason to re-open the practical issue settled by the formation of a prior intention. [Bratman, 1987; Pink, 1996] (This is compatible with the fact of this decision accruing a further reason-giving role that has independent epistemic value.) If time elapses between intention formation and action, we have a case of action at a temporal distance; unless our beliefs have changed, the mere passage of time is irrelevant. [Pink, 1996] Why, then, does Stroud argue that an agent could re-open the deliberative question at the time of action?

For two reasons that he does not clearly distinguish: first, adding in the fact that the intention will be implemented in action by you, involving particularising reference to you, adds information that may overturn the cogency of the reasoning to that practical conclusion. (You have, in fact, changed your beliefs.) Second, as Gilbert Harman pointed out in Change of View, we are dealing here with reasoned changes of view such that one can always take a set of assumptions as supporting a particular conclusion, or one can take the unacceptability of one's conclusion as undermining one of one's assumptions

(and you need not know which one). In the intervening mere passage of time one's beliefs may not have changed, but at the time of action the cogency of the support that they provide for the intention may strike one differently.

In my view this insight, in turn, has two distinct rationales. The first is the important point that your mind is your own to make up in a sense that another person's mind is not yours to make up, no matter how well you advise them. Considerations can function for you as evidence, or as verdicts, and in the latter case you determine what you think, not seek further evidence. [Foot, 1998; Moran, 2001] (This point spans both beliefs and pro-attitudes like desires and intentions.) The second rationale is that, in the case of action, we need to add to this point about contents and their functional role a further point about a capacity. You have the capacity to deliberate about evaluative questions, but you also have the capacity to execute those conclusions decided upon. A political metaphor used by Aristotle, echoed by Hume and repeated in the contemporary discussion by Stroud and Pears is that of government as containing both a legislature and an executive. [Pears, 1986, p. 96; Stroud, 2000] Intention concludes the legislative phase, but the separate executive phase is the responsibility of the will. [Donagan, 1987; Pink, 1996]

These are criticisms, then, of the impartialist construal of intention formation as that which concludes practical reasoning. Stroud uses one of the impartialist's own arguments against her: impartialists typically emphasise the importance of joint practical reasoning where one comes together with another, maybe in the roles of adviser and advisee, to determine what the advisee has most reason to do. But in that case one reasons to a conclusion about what it is best for someone to do, where one is not identical to that person. Stroud suggests we reserve the word "deliberation" for practical reasoning in the

first person about what one has most reason to do, where that is an input into the separate, executive faculty of mind that I have distinguished. [Stroud, 2000] Impartialism can then be criticised as an incomplete theory of deliberation as opposed to practical reasoning.

It seems to me more helpful to introduce a term that Stroud does not use, but that seems directly applicable to his arguments, namely that practical reasoning is a form of non-monotonic reasoning. [Brandom, 1998] Such reasoning is modelled by formal systems in which the consequence relation lacks the property of monotonicity; informally, good reasoning in non-monotonic domains is sensitive to the arbitrary addition of new information to one's premises in a way that can affect the cogency of the conclusion. [Horty, 2001] It follows directly from the property of non-monotonicity in materially good practical reasoning that we need to take seriously the claim that any arbitrary addition of information can change the degree of support for a verdictive conclusion.⁹ [Thomas, 2007] We can generalise Stroud's point: if impartialism is expressed via the idea of an informational restriction, then it is thereby debarred from being a theory of verdictive practical judgements if they exhibit non-monotonicity. Ex hypothesi, a restricted set of information can, in the context of non-monotonic reasoning, yield a defeasible practical verdict that can be overturned when further information is added to complement the set. Therefore impartialism about reasons can only be a theory of evidence and cannot give any account of verdictive judgements, including, most relevantly to present purposes, overall evaluative conclusions about what is choiceworthy.

As I have noted, Harman's distinction between logics and reasoned changes in view merely re-inforce the point: principles concerning reasoned changes in view are

only indirectly connected to a logic, and the exercise of judgement in the determination of belief leaves it open whether, for example, commitment to one's evidence and inferential principles leads one to a conclusion, or leads one, in the light of the unacceptability of the conclusion, to reject an assumption in one's evidence. The point of reasoning about practice is to act, and the role of "ceteris paribus" clauses in specimens of practical reasoning is not to remove its non-monotonic character, but explicitly to mark it.¹⁰ [Brandom, 1998] To act we need to detach a categorical conclusion from our practical reasoning. That involves determining that all else is equal and that, in turn, involves an ineliminable role for practical judgement, construed as the exercise of a capacity not the addition of a further premise to one's reasoning.¹¹

The problem with the latter move is highlighted by Brandom: the issue is not that a ceteris paribus clause might be infinitely long. The problem is that it is indefinitely long: we don't know, in advance, what a defeating condition to our reasoning might turn out to be. [Brandom, 1989, p. 133] This looks like a general epistemological problem and one, indeed, that encourages the philosophical sceptic. The way out of this predicament is to note that, for an agent with the right kind of status, derived from inculcation and training, epistemic responsibility is compatible with acting from default reasons that are unearned entitlements: you are entitled to them by default in normal circumstances unless they are challenged. Part of what it is to have received the right kind of training is to know when circumstances are not normal. [Williams, 2007; Bach, 1984] Placing a representation of the fact that all else is equal into the practical agent's premises is to mislocate a presupposition of detaching a categorical conclusion in the reasoning itself; it cross-classifies implementation and representation in an unhelpful way.

I think these arguments are important and highly problematic for any version of impartialism expressed via the idea of an informational restriction. But I do not think they go far enough; Stroud can make nothing of Williams's claim that practical reasoning is essentially first personal. That is, in itself, no criticism: Stroud takes himself to have identified the defensible core of Williams's claims and detached them from a defective justification. This is where, I think, the Aristotelian thesis that practical reasoning terminates in an action as its conclusion can take us further towards the reconstruction of an argument that makes better sense of Williams and is independently plausible. This is not to deny that Stroud has identified an important problem for the impartialist: but his jumping off point, Williams's discussion, is complemented by Stroud's arguments, not superseded by them.

Stroud suggests this way of complementing Williams's argument in the course of his own. While he does not explicitly discuss the Aristotelian thesis, he commits himself to it in his claim that one, paradigmatic, sense in which we settle a practical question is by seeing what the agent actually does. Furthermore, his important distinction between a legislative and an executive capacity suggests a further respect in which the impartialist argument is incomplete. If the Aristotelian thesis is true, the impartialist reasoning is incomplete because it stops at the conclusion of the evaluative reasoning, culminating in the formation of an intention (or evaluative judgement). But downstream from that, as it were, comes execution and action and the Aristotelian claim is that until the action is performed, the reasoning is not concluded. It is, I will argue, precisely downstream from intention formation that Williams's remarks about the connection between reflection and detachment in the two cases of theoretical and practical reasoning have application.

If the Aristotelian thesis is true, then the extent of practical reasoning would be increased to certain events, those events that are actions by individuals under certain descriptions. We would have to re-conceive reasoning about practice as no longer reasoning that gets as close to action as reasoning gets while still being thought: action would be an expression of a conclusion. And, in a conclusion that parallels that of Williams, my actions are more “intimately” mine than the actions of another person. They are irreducibly first personal in the sense that I perform them as an expression of the conclusion of my reasoning. They are, therefore, actions of mine for which I bear a special responsibility, for which I can be held to account, and which I can reasonably be asked to acknowledge as an expression of my rational agency. As I have noted, in making up your mind to do something you exercise a rational authority that you cannot exercise over the actions of another person. [Moran, 2001]

I want to emphasise that in the case of practical reasoning the involvement of the first person is in the expression of one’s executive authority over action, in an essentially indexical way, that goes beyond the point that your own mind is yours to make up in the way that the mind of another is not. That is why nothing less than the Aristotelian thesis can pose this deeper problem for impartialism. Richard Moran has argued that commitment to a content, whether theoretical or practical, always involves a deliberative standpoint of endorsement that gives a deeper rationale for such surface features of self-knowledge as first personal authority and evidential independence. [Moran, 2001] But these insights, important as they are, apply equally to theoretical and practical uses of reason: if the impartialist has to accept them, so be it, but it will take one only as far as the contingent involvement of the first person. We still do not have the asymmetry

needed to interpret Williams's thesis. Impartialism is only radically challenged if one adds two further distinctions to Moran's account. The first is that in the case of action one can point to a distinction between the capacities of legislation and execution. The second is the distinctively Aristotelian thesis that the form execution takes is to act as the conclusion of one's deliberation.¹² But I have said nothing, so far, directly to defend the Aristotelian thesis itself and it is to that task that I now turn.

4 The Nature of Practical Reasoning

Pears notes, laconically, that "practical reasoning is too large a topic for a single paper"; nor can I go into all the necessary ramification of the Aristotelian thesis in the scope of this paper. [Pears, 1986, p. 3] But I will try to formulate what seems to me the most plausible version of the view.

Any account of practical reasoning has to make an initial choice between two overall approaches summarised neatly by Philip Clark:

To put it crudely, the problem is that practical reasoning has to be both practical and reasoning. As practical, it seems it must be aimed at action, but as reasoning, it seems it must be aimed at knowledge. An account of practical reasoning therefore has two masters to serve, whereas an account of theoretical reasoning only has one. [Clark, 2007, ms p.]

But Clark immediately notes, in a footnote, "I don't mean to rule out, here, the possibility that success in practical reasoning is a kind of knowledge that is also action". [ibid] I will be following precisely the route of assuming that theoretical and practical reasoning have different constitutive formal aims, the true and the good respectively. But this thesis will be combined, precisely as Clark notes, with a conception of "success in practical reasoning [that] is a kind of knowledge that is also action."¹³

This initial division separates those philosophers of action more indebted to Anscombe from those more indebted to Davidson, as the latter aimed precisely to explain practical reasoning as knowledge about the good rather than directed towards it. But it is noteworthy that given their neo-Aristotelianism, both held that action could express the conclusion of practical reasoning.¹⁴ The reason for my choice of strategy is not to secure that point, but to claim that a stretch of practical reasoning, to be such, must contain a psychological content with the direction of fit of an intention or desire.

This marks one departure from Anscombe's approach. Anscombe, and those she has influenced, held a "use" theory of the nature of practical reasoning in which context determines when such reasoning is put to practical use in realising an agent's aims. [Vogler, 2001] One reason for this overall characterisation is that Anscombe pushed very hard an analogy between theoretical and practical reasoning in which both are radically de-psychologised: logic is not about psychological states, but is reasoning over propositions.¹⁵ [Anscombe, 1989] Similarly, practical reasoning is not about psychological states, but is about what those states represent. That is a quick route, as Sergio Tenenbaum notes, to the thesis that an action can be a practical conclusion: it acts as the content of the conclusion, in lieu of a "psychological state", such as an intention, in exactly the same way that theoretical reasoning terminates in a proposition, not belief in a proposition. [Tenenbaum, 2007c, p.6]

Philip Clark's defence of the Aristotelian thesis also makes an important use of the further Anscombian point that not every connecting principle in an inference can be explicitly represented within it, a remark that she restricted to explicit mention of an agent's wants. Clark distinguishes between the explicitly represented contents and the

principles warranting transitions between contents, such that the latter contain, in a mixed sequence, both theoretical steps and a sui generis “practical step” in his defence of Aristotle’s thesis. [Clark, 1997] That forms an important part of his argument but it also depends on Anscombe’s prior claim that what is reasoned over are not psychological states. Clark’s appeal to his regress argument is to alleviate the counter-intuitiveness of reasoning about practice not involving any mental state with a practical direction of fit. Practicality is located externally to the contents of the inference in one of its connecting principles.

But Anscombe’s first claim is far too quick. As Tenenbaum notes, it leaves open that the conclusion of practical reasoning is not an action, doing duty analogous to that of a proposition as the conclusion of theoretical reasoning, but something brought about by the action.¹⁶ And, as David Pears notes, in the case of theoretical argument what we would naturally say is that “a conclusion is true if things are as it says that they are, and it expresses the belief that that is how they are”. [Pears, 1986, pp. 9-10] So we can with equal justice speak of the conclusion of practical reasoning as the expression of one’s intention in action. In neither case are we forced to say that the upshot of materially good reasoning is a proposition as opposed to a psychological state like a belief, or an action as opposed to a psychological state like an intention. Anscombe’s dichotomy is a false one.

My own view is that one line of a cogent piece of practical reasoning involves a specification of the agent’s aim, as Anscombe insists, but this is not to exclude the idea that a state with a direction of fit characteristic of a practical plan or project lacks a truth condition. [Brandom, 1989, p 129; Tenenbaum, 2007c p. 10] Here is a representative statement from Brandom:

There are two species of discursive commitment: the cognitive...and the practical. The latter are commitments to act...The first are takings true, the latter makings true. Practical commitments are like doxastic commitments in being essentially inferentially articulated. [Brandom, 1989, p. 129]

As others, such as Edward Harcourt, have argued the distinction between states functionally characterisable as having different directions of fit does not map on to the distinction between states that do, and do not, have a truth condition. [Harcourt, 2006] Instead, as Harcourt puts it, while intentions have fulfilment conditions, the way in which they do is by having a truth condition. His argument, simply put, is that one can motivate an account of direction of fit in Anscombe's way by noting that a defect in an intention can be remedied by changing one's performance, as opposed to (say) altering what one believes. But there is an implicit standard in one's intention that guides the correction of one's performance, namely what state of the world would correspond to its successful performance. So the direction of fit distinction, however we understand it, is not simply equivalent to the distinction between possessing a truth-condition, or not. This will prove important in what follows as my defence of the Aristotelian thesis takes place in the context of a view of practical reasoning as, as Pears puts it, theoretical reasoning done with a view to eventual action. It is important for a conservative view of this kind that each line of the inference to an action as expressive of a conclusion possess a truth condition. This is so that the property transmitted along the lines of an inference is truth (so we do not need anything analogous to Clark's "practical step"). Requiring a premise of the inference to be a specification of an agent's aim does not violate this requirement, if intentions possess both a world to mind direction of fit and a truth condition.

This allows us to detach this approach from the attempt to reconstruct a logic of practical inference as a mixed sequence of sui generis practical inferences from imperatives to imperatives combined with theoretical inferences from imperatives to indicatives in the manner of Kenny’s ‘Practical Reasoning’. [Kenny, 1966] There are four reasons why one would want to detach the defence of Aristotle’s thesis from this version of the project. The first is Harman’s point that principles governing reasoned changes in view are quite distinct from a logic, a fortiori, reconstructing an Aristotelian view is quite distinct from the project of devising a “practical logic”. Second, the general presumption that the representation in language of reasons bearing on action must take the grammatical mood of imperatives looks like a dogma that, Pears argues, we have reason to resist. [Pears, 1983, p. 102] Third, Clark argues that, on pain of regress, not every connecting step in an argument can be represented within it, allowing one to locate a practical step in reasoned changes in view without the explicit representation of that step in a premiss taking an explicitly imperatival form. Finally, Pears has a simple and devastating argument against Kenny’s position, namely that the property of premises transmitted along the inference is not truth, but something relational such as uniquely satisfying the specification of the previous line. All well and good, Pears argues, but this account cannot be given of the first line of the inference, leaving the whole inference “hanging in the air like the Indian Rope trick”. [Pears, 1986, p. 94] If the Aristotelian thesis is radical, it is not because it calls for a revision in our whole notion of discursive commitments and inference.¹⁷

5 The Aristotelian Thesis

With this general framework in place, how might one defend the Aristotelian thesis? One must first be precise as to how the thesis is expressed: an action expresses the intentional state that is one's all things considered final verdict. If characterisable in this way we can move away from the idea that an action cannot, of its nature, be a conclusion of a reasoned practical change in view as it has neither syntactic nor semantic features and is a non-representational performance, something that troubles Pears but positively horrifies Ullmann-Margalit, who takes the Aristotelian thesis to be absurd for this reason. [Pears, 1986, p. 105; Ullmann-Margalit, 1986b; 2000b] An action is, in my view, a non-representational performance, but one that expresses an intentional state, namely the "intention in action" that is identical to the action, not a separable aspect of it. I think we have to say that to preserve another very important datum, namely, that one immediately knows what one is doing. (I will return to this point below.)

If there is one argument that seems decisively to refute the Aristotelian thesis, it is the claim that one's practical reasoning can be over, yet for various reasons the deliberating agent not act. Deliberation and action both take time, and during this interval a person's execution of her all things considered intention might be prevented by all kinds of factors, of which death is one that focuses the mind nicely. One might initially be suspicious of this argument on the grounds that it has the general form of faulty switching arguments. [McDowell, 1982] It seems to proceed by isolating a highest common factor across a successful piece of deliberation (concluding in action) and a failed action (that ended solely in intention formation) and concluding that this highest common factor (a trying) is a sub-part of both successful and failed actions. I will return to why this suspicion is well-placed, below.

To develop a response one ought to begin with Davidson, who noticed that we have to be dealing in cases of practical reasoning with categorical judgements. [Davidson, 1980b] I have already touched on this point above in the discussion of non-monotonicity. So not all thinking about ends and the aims of one's action can, as Tenenbaum also notes, be hypothetical in form.¹⁸ The Aristotelian thesis is only plausible as a thesis about detached categorical conclusions; this is what practical reasoning is for (as Stroud emphasised when he claimed we could always establish what an agent has practically concluded from what she does). But this poses a problem for the view that deliberation concludes in an intention; given the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning such reasoning can only be for the most part so, or qualified by a *ceteris paribus* clause. But we seek, when we aim to realise the point of deliberating about action, something unconditional – an action expressive of a detached and categorical conclusion. One might try to eliminate this by making one's intention so fine-grained that every possible way of executing it is contained within that detachable, categorical conclusion but as Tenenbaum further points out, further reasons become relevant during the “execution phase” in which you carry out your intention.

This fact is connected to the very point of reasoning about action. Anscombe argued that the premises of a practical, as opposed to a theoretical, piece of reasoning are “on active service”. [Anscombe, 1957, p. 60] What can that mean? Anscombe explains it with a further point of Aristotle's: in practical matters “things may come out variously”. Perhaps the most helpful way to understand that remark is to think about its converse: when a practical question is settled by what someone does, that doing resolves a question that had a particular kind of openness to it. There were various things one could have

done, indeed, various things one could have been justified in doing; the things one could justifiably have done could, in each case, have been done in various different ways. The action itself, then, resolves those implicitly general open questions in a way that is specific, particular and determinate. [Tenenbaum, 2007c] And not every way in which things may come out can be anticipated in the formation of an intention.

Given that not just any way of carrying out the intention is warranted by the reasoning...in order to know how to act I must also know which ways of carrying out the intention would be appropriate. [Tenenbaum, 2007a, p. 17]

Tenenbaum's conclusion is that thought is general; action is particular, hence nothing less than the intention expressed in action will cut in a fine-grained enough way to be cogently supported by the reasoning leading up to it.

This seems to me a very plausible line of argument, as far as it goes, but I would prefer not to connect it to a wider thesis about the generality of thought versus the particularity of action. After all, some thoughts can, in the relevant sense, be particular too (such as singular thoughts). Furthermore, that is not simply an abstract possibility: singular thoughts might be very important in making choices between equally valuable alternatives. Suppose that decisions can act as "tie-breakers". [Pink, 1996, pp. 123-124] Confronted with an array of identical packets of biscuits in the supermarket of which I only want one, it would be absurd to end up in a Buridan's Ass situation where I cannot pick any packet in particular because my beliefs and desires do not determine which packet I ought to choose. Suppose I resolve this problem by simply deciding: it seems

that the demonstrative thought “I will take that one” has to be particular to play this distinctive tie-breaking role, particularly important for action.

So a better formulation is that intentions are less determinate in their content and actions more determinate in their content. They represent a way something is determinately done in the particular way that it is done. We now have, as Tenenbaum argues insightfully, a compelling response to the switching argument: if you die before executing your intention, your reasoning remained subject to a *ceteris paribus* clause as you never detached your categorical conclusion. [Tenenbaum, 2007c] We can, therefore, resist the claim that what is shared by successful and failed actions are their highest common factor, namely, a trying.

I have already noted that the appropriate formulation of the Aristotelian thesis is that actions express the intentional state that is the conclusion; this is because one wants, independently, to accommodate the fact that one can answer the question “what are you doing?” by expressing one’s intention in action. If one cannot accommodate this fact, we seem to have the paradoxical conclusion that until you have completed an action, you don’t know whether or not you were justified in acting in that particular way. (And some actions can be very extended through time.) At no point, it seems, until we know the particular way in which you have carried out the action, are we justified in taking your reasoning to this conclusion to be sound. This seems flatly to contradict another view that Anscombe defended, namely, that you can know immediately what your current intentions are at the time of acting.

6 The Role of Expression in the Formulation of the Aristotelian Thesis

How is the Aristotelian thesis best formulated: as the claim that actions are the conclusions of practical reasoning or as the claim that actions express the intentional states that are the conclusion of practical reasoning? Tenenbaum uses both formulations, but it does seem to me that the latter is preferable. I have described one's practical conclusion as both an intentional state and as a non-representational performance. The latter can be characterised as a concrete particular, an event. But a state cannot be an event. That is why it is more helpful to describe the action that is one's conclusion as the expression of an intentional state. That expression of a state is identical to the event that is one's performance of the action. Another reason to prefer this formulation is that it accommodates the further claim that one knows immediately and without observation what one is doing and that one can report on one's "intentions in action".

This puzzling aspect of self-knowledge of action was explained by Anscombe in terms of the agent's conception of what she takes herself to be doing as constituting what is done. There is a perfectly "ordinary" sense of knowledge in which one can speak of practical, as opposed to theoretical knowledge when a person sets themselves an aim in acting such that what they do is only intentional under the description of the action that the agent would cite as the answer to the question "why are you doing that?". This kind of knowledge, Anscombe claimed, fitted Aquinas's formula of being "the cause of that which it understands", where in successful action "I do what happens". [Anscombe, 1957, pp. 52-3]

The bearing of this on the argument I have given for the Aristotelian thesis is well brought out by Richard Moran:

"...in referring to some event as an intentional action, we are constrained to descriptions that will capture 'what happened' as something the agent had a reason to make happen, and this provides us with a way to circumscribe the extent and specificity of the agent's practical knowledge. For when an action is successful, it extends as far as the descriptions under which the agent has a reason for pursuing the end which his action is aimed at realizing". [Moran, 2004, p.59]

This helps with Anscombe's claim that practical knowledge is not, in and of itself, observational, even if it depends on observational knowledge. That is because practical knowledge sets an agent's aim and you don't find out what that is, in the first personal case, by looking. Your aims set up an intensional context that determines what counts as the realisation of your aims in action, and that has a consequent effect on how we understand possible failures. I think Anscombe's points here are helpful as it ameliorates what may seem otherwise a ground for scepticism about the Aristotelian thesis in the form in which I have described it, namely, that specific ways of acting are becoming too relevant to the ways in which we assess the cogency of the reasoning supporting a practical conclusion. It looks as if, to put it crudely, every particular way in which one does something bears on the cogency of the support for the verdict that its performance thereby expresses. Given that there are too many fine grained ways of describing (and re-describing) an action that are relevant to its evaluation the sceptic may reasonably conclude that we never know what we are doing.

The way out of this difficulty is to invoke Anscombe's constitutive descriptions that, as Moran put it, "circumscribe the extent and specificity of the agent's practical knowledge". [Moran, 2006, p. 59] Those ways relevant to the assessment of the cogency of the reasoning to the conclusion that realises one's aim are determined by their bearing on the specificity of the agent's intention as formulated in the constitutive description.

Therefore, not every way in which action is more fine grained or determinate than thought counts as relevant to the justification of the action. The agent's conception of what she is doing makes it matter, that, for example, that what is done constitute the writing of her signature legibly, but also makes it not matter that the ink of the signature be blue as opposed to black. Things may come out variously, and not every way in which things come out will leave the soundness of the reasoning to that action as conclusion unscathed, but, equally, not every particular way of doing something is relevant to the characterisation of what is done and hence relevant to the justification of the action.

Conclusion

This paper has identified two problems for reasons impartialism, namely, its incompatibility with the non-monotonicity of practical reasoning and its incompatibility with the truth of the Aristotelian thesis that practical reasoning terminates in action as its conclusion. As a thesis defended via the idea of an informational restriction, reasons impartialism is embarrassed by the fact that practical reasoning is non-monotonic. Adding to a conclusion framed as a conclusion for anyone that you, yourself will act on that conclusion may overturn the cogency of its support. One could engage in damage limitation and claim that impartialism concerns contents deliberated over, such that practical reasoning terminates in intention formation, but this thesis is also false in a way that dovetails neatly with the point about non-monotonicity. This move is incompatible with the truth of Aristotle's view that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action. Detaching a categorical practical conclusion involves nothing less than intentions in action, those intentional states that are the expression in action of one's all things

considered verdict. Further support for this overall position, I have argued, comes from reflection on the fact that one can immediately avow what one is currently doing.¹⁹

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¹ Interestingly, Williams later withdrew the claim formulated in this way, citing the influence of Donald Davidson – but he does not say why! Williams, [1995].

² This paper is a companion piece to Thomas [2005] that focuses on this issue of character, also discussed in Thomas [2008]. I will, for that reason, not devote any part of this paper to the issue of the role played by moral character in explaining why practical reasoning is essentially first personal.

³ A response put to me by both Roger Crisp and Ryan Wasserman on behalf of the impartialist, and one I take very seriously.

⁴ Thomas [2002] and [2006, chapter 4] discuss impartiality as a pragmatic norm; Thomas [2005] criticises impartiality as stance or point of view. I am no happier with the idea of an impartial principle, if understood other than as “any principle chosen from an impartial stance or point of view”. Understood purely in terms of content, impartial principles are standardly defined as agent-neutral and universal and I am unhappy with the definition of agent-neutral standardly used in the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction, ‘Agent Relativity and Practical Scope’, undated ms. My overall conclusion is that a pragmatic norm of impartial defensibility has a limited role in ethical thinking but that we ought to dispense with impartiality in its other forms.

⁵ By objectivity here is meant the kinds of constraints derivable from treating the content of a reason as akin to a Fregean Thought: constraints such as mind-independence, inter-subjective accessibility and guaranteed communicability. [Frege, 1918/1967]

⁶ A terminological stipulation: following Barry Stroud I will restrict the term “deliberation” to practical reasoning in the first person. [Stroud, 2000]

⁷ This interpretationist perspective does not require the reasons in favour an action to be consciously rehearsed by the agent. Nor does it deny that cognitively limited agents such as ourselves perform many actions that have been assigned to planning sub-routines, like cleaning one’s teeth or parking one’s car in the same parking spot day after day. But while the agent performing these actions is not consciously rehearsing the arguments for them, they are reason sensitive. A sudden earthquake might make one stop cleaning one’s teeth and do something else, for example, like take cover in the door frame.

⁸ Most notably, it seems to me, to the argument of Nagel’s The Possibility of Altruism.

⁹ Brandom indepently stresses another point he takes from Sellars, namely, the relative explanatory priority of materially good inference, as opposed to a formalism that emphasises the priority of logical vocabulary, formally defined, to the goodness of inference.

¹⁰ Contrasting formalist treatments of logical vocabulary with a contrasting Sellarsian view of its expressive function, Brandom notes that “The reasoning we actually engage in always permits the construction of inferential hierarchies with oscillating conclusions like this. A certain kind of formalist about logic will want to insist, for reasons of high theory, that material inference must be like formal inference in being monotonic. And at this point in the dialectic, such a *monotonous formalist* will invoke *ceteris paribus* clauses...I would content that *ceteris paribus* clauses should be understood as explicitly marking the nonmonotonicity of an inference, rather than as a *deus ex machina* that miraculously removes its nonmonotonicity”, [Brandom, 1989, p.133]

¹¹ Not even, it seems to me, a premise stating that one has all the relevant information and that everything else is equal, as Tenenbaum concedes (briefly) for the sake of argument at pp. 16-17 of Tenenbaum [2007c], an excellent paper to which I am (clearly) much indebted.

¹² This point also seems to me to suggest a revision to Moran's own account that was originally formulated in terms of a strong analogy between one's deliberative stance towards oneself expressed by one's capacity to avow and action. The suggestion was that one's self-relation was more like a practical relation than a theoretical one. If action has the special features I am suggesting then in fact the distinctive features of rational control of thought and rational control of action are quite different. But Moran has, in any case, in his later formulations of his view reverted to the claim that our self-relation is a matter of deliberation, not strongly analogous to action. That more careful formulation of his important insights seems to me both true and plausible, but it does not depend on a faulty analogy with action control.

¹³ In this respect I am following the lead of Sergio Tenenbaum, [Tenenbaum, 2007a; 2007c] whose views Clark is characterising in his paper, Clark, [2007]

¹⁴ The difference between them, as Pears put it, was that Davidson identifies the action with the all things considered evaluative judgement only when there is no prior deliberation; "They only apply to cases in which the usual candidate for the post of conclusion do not put in an appearance and so the action wins by default", p. 104.

¹⁵ The connection between the two theses are that given this strict analogy, inspecting an inference will not tell you if it is theoretical or practical; only the use to which it is put will.

¹⁶ He offers, as a grounds for this, Jennifer Hornsby's insightful discussion of the dangers of mixing the speech of the learned with that of the vulgar, in [Hornsby, 1997, pp. 88-90]. When we ordinarily speak of action, we speak of things done. Davidsonian actions are events, that we then pick out by their causes. Run these two ways of speaking together and "His thesis about re-describability holds, for instance, that 'her raising of her arm' and 'her casting her vote' may be alternative descriptions of the same action...if we want something more general, so that we are no longer only talking about the single case, then we may say that her doing one thing was doing another thing. But this way of putting it would be unavailable if actions got confused with the things she does. The Davidsonian view...gives us criteria of identity for *actions*...If the thing done were in question, then there could hardly be an identity; she did *two* things, raise her arm and cast her vote; *these* are not identical; she did one by doing the *other*. The claimed identity does not consist not in one of these things being the other of these things (of course not) but in her doing's one of them being her doing the other.", pp 89-90.

¹⁷ My grounds for requiring a premise stating an agent's aim is that, in my view, practical reasons have to meet Williams's internal reasons requirement, but that is a large assumption I can only advert to here. [Thomas, 2006, chapter 4] In fact, like Tenenbaum, I want to remain agnostic on this point so as to prove that the Aristotelian thesis is compatible with as wide a range of views of practical reasoning as possible. Clark's point that practicality can be located outside the explicit premises of practical reasoning, and Brandom's point that non-monotonicity means that one cannot insist that a particular kind

of representation must figure in one's premises, would seem to count against the internal reasons requirement. In fact, it seems to me that both points are compatible with the internal reasons requirement, but that is an argument for another occasion.

¹⁸ “Thus, more generally, we can say that the Aristotelian Thesis is a thesis about the proper termini of practical reasoning, not about any conclusion of any thinking about that has possible human ends as a subject matter.” [Tenenbaum, 2007c]

¹⁹ I am very grateful to Tom Pink for a lengthy discussion of his own work that cast a great deal of light on much else in the theory of action; special thanks, as ever, to Kathryn Brown for her help with this paper. I am also grateful to the participants in the Value Workshop in the philosophy department of the University of British Columbia and the members of the Western Washington department, especially Hud Hudson, Ned Markosian, Ryan Wasserman and Dennis Whitcomb for their helpful discussion of the early drafts that greatly improved the finished product.