

Is There a Liberal Principle of Instrumental Transmission?

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Abstract: Some of our reasons for action are grounded in the fact that the action in question is a means to something else we have reason to do. This raises the question as to which principles govern the transmission of reasons from ends to means. In this paper, we discuss the merits and demerits of a liberal transmission principle, which plays a prominent role in the current literature. The principle states that an agent has an instrumental reason to ψ whenever ψ -ing is a means for him to do what he has intrinsic reason to do. We start by discussing the objection that this principle implies counterintuitive reason statements. We argue that attempts to solve this “too many reasons problem” by appealing to pragmatic strategies for debunking intuitions about so-called negative reason existentials are questionable. Subsequently, we discuss three important arguments in favor of *Liberal Transmission*, and argue that they fail to make a convincing case for this principle. In the course of the discussion, we also provide alternative, less liberal transmission principles. We argue that these alternative principles allow us to accommodate those phenomena that seem to support *Liberal Transmission* while avoiding its problems.

Some of our reasons for action are grounded in the fact that the action in question is a means to something else we have reason to do. For example, your reason to regularly visit the dentist is grounded in the fact that regularly visiting the dentist is a way of avoiding future toothaches. But how exactly do reasons for actions transmit to reasons to take the means to these actions? The following transmission principle seems plausible and widely accepted:

Necessary Means Transmission: If A has a reason to ϕ , and ψ -ing is a necessary means for A to ϕ , then A has a reason to ψ .¹

¹ For similar transmission principles about both reasons and oughts, see e.g. Bratman (2009, 424), Darwall (1983, 16), Kiesewetter (2015), Kolodny (forthcoming, §2), Scanlon (2014, 85), Schroeder (2009, 234 and 245), Setiya (2007, 660), and Way (2010, 225). Some of these authors maintain that reasons transmit with equal weight to necessary means, but this claim is more controversial. See e.g. Kolodny (forthcoming, §§2-3) and White (2017) for criticism of this stronger principle.

This principle can account for many normative phenomena that transmission principles should make sense of, but it is questionable whether it can account for all of them. In particular, it seems that taking means to an action favored by a reason is often something we have reason to do even if none of these means are necessary. Relying on observations such as these, some authors have proposed transmission principles that are much more liberal than *Necessary Means Transmission*, and which apply even when ψ -ing merely *facilitates* ϕ -ing. We shall focus here on the following principle, which best captures the spirit of various similar proposals discussed in the recent literature:

Liberal Transmission: If A has an intrinsic reason to ϕ , and ψ -ing is a means for A to ϕ , then A has a reason to ψ .²

(An intrinsic reason is, roughly speaking, a non-instrumental reason – we shall say more on this in §1.) The truth of *Liberal Transmission* is relevant for both practical and theoretical purposes. It matters practically, because it validates a certain form of practical inference, and it is important to know whether we may rely on it in practical deliberation. Whether *Liberal Transmission* is true also matters theoretically, because the principle figures in important philosophical debates about other matters. One prominent example is the debate over whether the ‘wide-scope’ interpretation of the principle of instrumental rationality can avoid implausible ‘bootstrapping’ of reasons.³ Further theoretical contexts in which *Liberal Transmission* plays a crucial role include

Throughout the paper, we use “A” and “B” as variables for agents and “ ϕ ” and “ ψ ” as placeholders for action terms. We treat “A has a reason to ϕ ” and “There is a reason for A to ϕ ” as equivalent.

² Compare: “People have reason to do what will bring them into conformity with reasons which apply to them” (Raz 2005a, 3). “One has reason to take the means to what one has ultimate reason to do” (Bedke 2009, 678). “If there is a reason to A, then the fact that B-ing facilitates A-ing is a reason to B” (Way 2012, 494). For similar proposals, see also Kolodny (forthcoming, §6) and Bedke (2017). We borrow the name “liberal transmission” from Rippon (2011, 6–7), who uses it for a related principle entailed by the one that we here refer to by that name.

³ See esp. Bedke (2009, 678–86), Broome (2005), and Rippon (2011). Raz seems to presuppose *Liberal Transmission* in his argument against the wide-scope account (cf. Raz 2005b, 11–14), but *Liberal Transmission* should be distinguished from his “facilitative principle” (see Raz 2005b, 5–6, and, for a more accurate statement, 2011, 148), which is more restrictive. Raz (2005b, 13, n. 18) notes himself that the inference on which his argument against the wide-scope account relies is not supported by the facilitative principle.

Mark Schroeder's Humean account of reasons and Jonathan Way's argument for skepticism about so-called reasons of the 'wrong kind'.⁴

A number of arguments can be and have been brought forward to support *Liberal Transmission*. First and foremost, this principle provides a natural and straightforward explanation of the fact that at least in many cases, we have instrumental reasons to take means to actions we have intrinsic reason to perform, even if none of these means are necessary. Second, as Matthew S. Bedke suggests, if ψ -ing is a means to an action we have intrinsic reason to perform, then other things being equal, we have *more reason* to ψ than to take no means at all, and this seems to entail that there must be *some reason* to ψ .⁵ Third, as Joseph Raz notes, agents that ψ in light of the fact that ψ -ing is a means to an action they have intrinsic reason to perform, *act for a reason*, and this seems to require that they have a reason to ψ .⁶

While these arguments seem to make a good case for *Liberal Transmission*, it also has not gone unnoticed that liberal transmission principles have counterintuitive implications. As John Broome points out, it does not seem particularly plausible to say that one has reason to kill oneself as a means to avoiding a feeling of hunger if one could simply have lunch instead.⁷ Similarly, Simon Rippon objects that liberal transmission principles license the inference from 'I have a reason to tell a joke' to 'I have a reason to tell a racist joke'.⁸ Both authors take such implications to provide a *reductio* of liberal transmission principles.

Our aim in this paper is to assess the merits and demerits of *Liberal Transmission*. We start with some preliminary remarks about terminology and the exact content of *Liberal Transmission* (§1). Subsequently, we discuss the objection that *Liberal Transmission* entails 'too many reasons'. We strengthen the case of those who reject the principle on grounds of its implausible implications by casting doubt on a common pragmatic strategy that Mark Schroeder and others appeal to in order to

⁴ See Schroeder (2007) and Way (2012, 494). See also Schroeder's conception of means/end-coherence in Schroeder (2009, 246).

⁵ Compare Bedke (2009, 683–4).

⁶ Compare Raz (2005b, 8–9).

⁷ Broome (2005, 7).

⁸ See Rippon (2011, 17). Neither Broome nor Rippon address the restriction to *intrinsic* reasons in the antecedent of liberal transmission principles, and their counterexamples might be put into question for this reason. We shall therefore focus on examples that we hope to be less contestable in this respect.

explain away the intuitions that the reasons implied by *Liberal Transmission* do not exist (§2). In the second part of the paper, we examine in detail the above-mentioned arguments in favor of *Liberal Transmission*, and argue that they fail to make a convincing case for it (§§3-5). In the course of the discussion, we also provide alternative, less liberal transmission principles. We argue that these alternative principles allow us to accommodate the phenomena that have been argued to support *Liberal Transmission* without being vulnerable to the ‘too many reasons’ problem. We close by considering the question of whether the phenomenon of instrumental transmission can be captured by one single principle (§6).

§1. Preliminaries

Let us start with some clarificatory remarks about terminology, the exact content of *Liberal Transmission*, and the aims of this paper. First of all, we use the expression “ ψ -ing is a means for A to ϕ ” broadly, as roughly equivalent to “ ψ -ing is something that A can do intentionally and that will help to bring it about that A ϕ -s”. We will understand this notion in a way that allows not only actions, but also omissions to be means. What we say will be neutral between probability-raising and other accounts of what it is for something to be a means.⁹

Secondly, we call a reason to ψ an *instrumental reason* if and only if it is explained by the fact that ψ -ing is a means to something else that there is reason to do.¹⁰ A reason that is not explained in this way is an *intrinsic reason*, and a reason that is referred to in the explanation of an instrumental reason is a *source reason*. Given these definitions, a source reason (but not an intrinsic reason) might itself be an instrumental reason. However, as we have formulated *Liberal Transmission*, only intrinsic reasons can be source reasons for instrumental reasons generated by this principle.

This restriction is necessary in order to avoid what Bedke calls “the problem of subversion”¹¹, which can be illustrated by the following example. Suppose you have an

⁹ See Bedke (2017, 7–12) for a helpful recent discussion.

¹⁰ Since instrumental reasons are reasons that are *explained* in a certain way, fully spelled out principles of instrumental transmission have to contain a ‘because of that’ clause. We omit this clause throughout this article for reasons of simplicity.

¹¹ See Bedke (2009, 679, n. 12), who credits the point to James Dreier. Rippon (2011, 17) also argues that subversion is a problem for liberal transmission principles, but he does not consider the possibility of restricting the source reasons to intrinsic ones.

intrinsic reason to make your friend happy. A means to doing this is buying him a present, and so *Liberal Transmission* entails that you have reason to do this. But now, one means to buying your friend a present is to steal money from him and use it to buy the present. To make things worse, one means to steal money from your friend is to actually kill him. If we allow all kinds of reasons to give rise to instrumental reasons in this way, we end up deriving a reason to kill your friend from a reason to make him happy in very few steps. Surely there is something wrong with this inference. The problem is that we are deriving instrumental reasons from instrumental reasons and thereby deriving reasons that fail to serve any intrinsic reason. We can avoid this result by restricting the antecedent of a liberal transmission principle to intrinsic reasons. Since killing your friend is no means to making him happy, *Liberal Transmission* does not let us derive a reason to kill your friend from a reason to make him happy.

Thirdly, we shall understand *Liberal Transmission* such that the instrumental reasons it generates are cancelled (i.e. cease to exist) once A conforms to the relevant intrinsic reason. This is already reflected in the above formulation, for once A conforms to the intrinsic reason to ϕ , what have been means for A to ϕ before are no longer means for A to ϕ . It follows that *Liberal Transmission* does not license the generation of instrumental reasons from reasons one has already conformed to.¹²

Fourthly, some authors seem to suggest further restrictions. Sometimes the source reasons of *Liberal Transmission* are restricted to sufficient or undefeated intrinsic reasons, and sometimes the means are restricted to sufficient means.¹³ In what follows, we focus on the unrestricted *Liberal Transmission* principle formulated above, since at least some of the relevant arguments in support of a liberal transmission

¹² We take it that this is also what Raz has in mind when he states that “we have reason to perform any one (*but only one*)” of the actions that facilitate conformity with the source reason (Raz 2005b, 5, our emphasis). As Raz’s response to Broome (2005, 6–8) makes clear, he really intends this statement to mean that we have a reason to perform *each* of the facilitative actions, though we do not have a reason to perform more than one that is sufficient for conforming to the source reason (Raz 2005a, 3, n. 8; see also Rippon 2011, 5, n. 13).

¹³ Way’s *means-end transmission principle* (Way 2010, 224) applies only to sufficient means (in contrast, however, to the transmission principle in Way 2012, 494, which also applies to insufficient means). Raz’s *facilitative principle* (Raz 2005b, 5–6, restated in 2011, 148) restricts source reasons to undefeated reasons. Raz’s general position on this question is not entirely clear, however. On the one hand, he maintains that “there is no reason to facilitate conformity with a defeated reason” (2011, 145). On the other hand, the inference that he uses to argue against the wide-scope account of instrumental rationality in Raz (2005b, 12, and 2011, 152) relies on a liberal transmission principle that does not restrict source reasons to undefeated reasons.

principle would, if found convincing, support this unrestricted version. For instance, Raz's point that intentionally taking a means to an action one has reason to perform amounts to acting for a reason applies independently of whether the source reason is defeated and also independently of whether the means in question are sufficient. If this succeeds as an argument for a transmission principle that goes beyond *Necessary Means Transmission*, then it establishes a principle that is not restricted to undefeated reasons or sufficient means (we discuss this argument in §5). However, the considerations brought forward here against *Liberal Transmission* also apply to more restricted versions of this principle. So even though *Liberal Transmission* will be our primary focus in what follows, the relevant considerations for and against it can be generalized.

Finally, throughout this article we bracket the question of how much of a reason's *weight* gets transmitted to the means. Although this is no doubt a question of great interest for a theory of instrumental transmission, addressing it here would complicate issues in a way that is not necessary for the purposes of this paper.

With these clarifications in mind, we shall now first present what we take to be the most important objection to *Liberal Transmission*, before discussing those considerations that seem to speak in its favor.

§2 *Too many reasons*

Let us have a closer look at the objection that *Liberal Transmission* leads to questionable conclusions about what we have reason to do in a variety of cases. We have already mentioned Broome's and Rippon's examples in the introduction, but since it might be questioned whether these examples are based on *intrinsic* source reasons, we shall introduce two further cases to illustrate the problem.

Our examples are based on source reasons that we take to be relatively uncontroversial candidates for intrinsic reasons: the first being a reason to keep your promise; the second being a reason to avoid pain. Regarding the first of these reasons, suppose that you have promised your friend a surprise on his birthday. One way to keep your promise is to spend all of your life's savings on a ridiculously expensive and ugly hat that will amuse your friend for a brief moment, and thus *Liberal Transmission* licenses the conclusion that you have a reason to do this. To make things worse, another

way to keep your promise is to cut off your hand and give it to your friend as a birthday present, and so *Liberal Transmission* entails that you have a reason to do this as well. Regarding the second intrinsic reason, suppose that you – the president of a powerful country – have a mild headache, and that you could get rid of it either by taking a headache pill, or by launching a nuclear missile that would immediately kill you and hundreds of thousands of other people. Since this is a means to avoid being in pain, *Liberal Transmission* entails that you have reason to launch the nuclear missile. More generally: If you have an intrinsic reason to ϕ , *Liberal Transmission* implies that you have an instrumental reason to ψ for any ψ that is an almost ineffective, highly inefficient or otherwise extremely objectionable means to ϕ -ing. It seems, however, that in many of these cases, the mere fact that these actions are a means to doing what we have intrinsic reason to do is not enough to give us a reason to perform them.

There are two responses available for proponents of *Liberal Transmission*. The first is to throw *Liberal Transmission* into reverse. You think you have no reason to launch the nuclear missile? Well, perhaps then it is not strictly speaking true that you have an intrinsic reason to *avoid pain*, but rather that you have an intrinsic reason to *avoid pain in ways that do not involve unnecessary burdens for yourself and others*. By the same token, one might reply that it is not strictly speaking true that you have a reason to *keep your promise*, but rather that you have a reason to *keep it in a way that does not bring misery upon yourself or others*. Once the favored action is sufficiently specified, a lot of implausible reason claims will not follow anymore – or so the proponent of *Liberal Transmission* might argue.¹⁴

Even if we are willing to accept such a redescription in particular cases, the response does not seem to work as a general strategy for dealing with all of the potential counterexamples. Recall that *Liberal Transmission* implies that there is a reason to ψ for any action ψ that is an almost ineffective, highly inefficient or otherwise objectionable way of helping to bring about what one has intrinsic reason to do. Hence potential counterexamples of this type can always be generated unless one maintains that, strictly speaking, specifications of actions favored by intrinsic reasons must *always* be qualified by the complex phrase “in a way that neither involves nor requires taking ineffective, highly inefficient or otherwise objectionable means”. This requirement

¹⁴ Bedke (2009, 681) makes this point with respect to the specification of wide-scope reasons.

strikes us as *ad hoc* and artificial; it leads to implausible, hyper-specified descriptions of intrinsic reasons for actions and conflicts with many pre-theoretically intuitive judgments about what we have reason to do.

The second and more common response to the counterexamples is to accept the implications and to argue that intuitions to the effect that the relevant reasons do not exist are not to be trusted. According to this strategy, our intuitions about whether or not there is a reason for an action in a particular context do not reliably differentiate between circumstances in which we have *no reasons at all* for a given action and circumstances in which we have *massively outweighed* reasons for this action, i.e. reasons that are very weak in comparison to those reasons that suffice to decide the case under consideration.

Why should this be so? According to a popular proposal put forward by Mark Schroeder, we can systematically explain away intuitions about the non-existence of reasons by appealing to pragmatic factors that concern whether or not it is appropriate to *call* certain facts reasons in a conversational context. Schroeder argues that when people say that there are reasons to do something, they usually mean to imply that these reasons have significant weight and play a role in determining what one should do. According to Schroeder, this in turn explains why it seems unnatural to *assert* that there is a reason to perform a certain action if the relevant reason is a (comparatively) very weak reason that does not play a significant role in determining the overall balance of reasons in a certain situation. In Gricean terms, the crucial idea is that asserting the existence of a reason standardly carries the *conversational implicature* that the reason is *not massively outweighed*. That it seems odd to assert the existence of a reason is thus taken to be compatible with there being such a reason. Schroeder maintains that this suffices to debunk intuitions about negative reason existentials, which are taken to essentially depend on the felt oddity of making certain reason-claims.¹⁵ Applying the debunking strategy to potential counterexamples to *Liberal Transmission*, one might thus argue that intuitions to the effect that certain reasons implied by this principle do not exist can be fully explained by appeal to pragmatic considerations. What makes it unnatural to assert, for example, that there is a reason to launch the nuclear missile

¹⁵ See Schroeder (2007, 92-97).

because one has a headache, is simply the fact that the reason is massively outweighed.¹⁶

In reply to such attempts to debunk intuitions about negative reason existentials, we first want to point out that it is very often *not* misleading to call massively outweighed reasons “reasons” in standard conversational contexts. We take it that the reasons for saving one thousand valuable paintings from being destroyed, for example, massively outweigh the reasons for saving one other valuable painting, but contrary to what the debunking strategy seems to imply, it does not seem odd to assert that we have a reason to save the single painting as well in standard conversational contexts.

Since it is very often not misleading to call massively outweighed reasons “reasons” (even if pragmatic implicatures have not been cancelled), asserting the existence of a reason does not standardly carry the pragmatic implicature that this reason is not massively outweighed or that it makes a significant contribution to what one ought to do in the case under consideration. We are thus skeptical that the intuition to the effect that (for example) you have no reason to launch the nuclear missile can be explained in the way that Schroeder’s approach suggests.

What is more, even if Schroeder’s assumptions regarding the conversational implicatures of reason statements were true, it is not obvious that the pragmatic explanation of intuitions about negative reason existentials would amount to a sweeping debunking of *all* intuitions of this type and thus undermine the legitimacy of appeals to such intuitions. For useful as Gricean considerations are for explaining recalcitrant intuitions in many philosophical discussions, it is not obvious that they can be used for such an ambitious aim. Since the (alleged) standard conversational implicature of “There is a reason to ϕ ” can be cancelled, it is possible for us to address the question of whether or not some agent has a reason to (for example) launch a nuclear missile in a conversational context in which we have indeed cancelled the implicature. Thus, we might say: “Please let it be understood that when we talk about a reason in what follows, we do *not* mean to imply that it is a comparatively strong reason”, and we might then go on to ask whether one has a reason to launch a nuclear missile, given that doing so would put an end to one’s headache. That a reason to avoid being in pain

¹⁶ See Schroeder (2005, 7–9; 2007, 92–97). The same strategy is used by Raz (2005a, 3–4), Bedke (2009, 684–85), Kolodny (forthcoming, §6), and Way (2012, 496, n. 14).

provides a reason to launch a nuclear missile still strikes us as highly counterintuitive in such a context. It is difficult to see why intuitions about whether or not one has such a reason should not be reliable under these circumstances, when the conversational implicatures that might lead us astray in our judgment of a case have been explicitly cancelled.

Hence, the pragmatic debunking explanation for why it seems so plausible to deny that there are instrumental reasons to take certain means in the cases under discussion is much less straightforward than it might seem at first glance, and the ‘too many reasons’ problem for *Liberal Transmission* retains its bite. Although it does not amount to a full-fledged refutation of this principle, we think that a commitment to *Liberal Transmission*, and thus a commitment to debunking (for example) the intuition that one does not have a reason to launch a nuclear missile just because one has a mild headache, or that one does not have a reason to cut off one’s hand just because one has promised to surprise a friend, constitutes a considerable disadvantage for a theory. Since both of our examples appealed to *undefeated* source reasons and *sufficient* means, the same goes for liberal transmission principles that are restricted in these ways.

It would be premature to reject *Liberal Transmission*, however, before considering the considerations that seem to support this principle. If there are strong reasons for accepting *Liberal Transmission*, then accepting certain counterintuitive implications about instrumental reasons might be a bullet worth biting. As noted above, some philosophers believe that there are indeed certain normative phenomena that we cannot make sense of without committing ourselves to *Liberal Transmission*, and in what follows, we shall address whether this is indeed the case by examining three such suggestions in more detail.

§3. *First argument: instrumental reasons without necessary means*

The first argument in favor of *Liberal Transmission* that we want to consider revolves around a challenge for opponents of this principle. In practical reasoning, it seems that we need to suppose that reasons transmit to more than just necessary means. Very often, there are a variety of ways to conform to an intrinsic reason rather than a single necessary one, and we seem to have reasons to pursue such ways at least in some cases.

It is thus natural to assume that there is some general principle that allows the transmission of reasons to non-necessary means and that *Necessary Means Transmission* is not enough to account for all the instrumental reasons we have. Of course, it would not strictly follow from this that *Liberal Transmission* is true, but it nonetheless challenges those who deny *Liberal Transmission* to offer some viable alternative.

We believe that this challenge can be met. The first point to note here is that those who reject (for the reasons mentioned) the idea that reasons transmit to *just any* means, might still embrace the idea that reasons transmit to the *best* means or the *optimal* means:

Best means transmission: If A has an intrinsic reason to ϕ , and ψ -ing is a necessary part of every optimal sufficient means to ϕ -ing, then A has a reason to ψ .

Optimal means transmission: If A has an intrinsic reason to ϕ , and ψ -ing is a necessary part of an optimal sufficient means to ϕ -ing, then A has a reason to ψ .

These principles raise the question of the conditions under which a sufficient means can be said to be optimal. Although we cannot offer a definition, we wish to suggest that the relevant, intuitive notion of a ‘good means’ involves considerations not only of effectiveness in securing the relevant end, but also of efficiency in using agential resources and of conduciveness to conformity with intrinsic reasons more generally. A less efficient means may be on the whole better than a more efficient means if the latter precludes a valuable option that the former does not preclude.

To have a useful label, let us call *Necessary Means Transmission*, *Best Means Transmission* and *Optimal Means Transmission* “conservative” principles of instrumental transmission. Conservative transmission principles can vindicate a number of intuitive judgments about instrumental reasons for taking non-necessary means, but plausibly, they do not capture all important judgments to this effect. In particular, it seems that agents can be said to conform to instrumental reasons even if the means they take are suboptimal. However, it is important to note that this neither implies nor requires for its explanation that whenever ψ -ing is a means to an action one has an

intrinsic reason to perform, one also has *a reason to ψ* . It is enough to assume that whenever we have intrinsic reason to ϕ , we have reason to perform an action of the type *taking a means to ϕ -ing*. That is, it is enough to appeal to the following transmission principle for reasons, which we suggest as an alternative to *Liberal Transmission*:

Generic Instrumental Reason: If A has an intrinsic reason to ϕ , then A has a reason to take means to ϕ -ing.¹⁷

To clarify: *Generic Instrumental Reason* does not state that we have a reason *for each action ψ* that is a means to an action ϕ we have intrinsic reason to perform. It merely claims that we have reason to perform the act of *taking a means to ϕ -ing* in such cases.

It might nevertheless be objected that *Generic Instrumental Reason* entails *Liberal Transmission* rather than being an alternative to it. This would be so if *Generic Instrumental Reason* implied, for each means to ϕ -ing, a reason to take it. But whether this is so just depends on the truth of *Liberal Transmission* itself. If ψ -ing is a means to ϕ -ing, then ψ -ing is also a means to the act of *taking a means to ϕ -ing*, which, according to *Generic Instrumental Reason*, is an action that one has a reason to perform. But we cannot conclude from this that one also has a reason to ψ without relying on *Liberal Transmission*, which obviously cannot be presupposed at this stage of the discussion.

Quite generally, we believe that over and above the conservative transmission principles, *Generic Instrumental Reason* is a natural and plausible alternative to *Liberal Transmission* that can play a crucial role in accounting for the phenomena that might be taken to support *Liberal Transmission*. This is also why *Generic Instrumental Reason* will figure in our criticism of the second and third arguments in favor of *Liberal Transmission* in what follows.

§4. *Second argument: more reason to take the means than to take no means*

One might still doubt that the suggested alternative principles are enough to account for all the relevant facts about instrumental reasons. One argument to this effect is that for many suboptimal means, it seems true that we have more reason to take these particular

¹⁷ Generalizing, we also propose the following variant of *Generic Instrumental Reason* for sufficient means: If A has an intrinsic reason to ϕ , then A has a reason to take sufficient means to ϕ -ing.

means than to take no means at all. This seems to presuppose that we must have some reason at least for the particular suboptimal means, which in turn cannot be explained by any of our suggested alternatives to *liberal transmission*.¹⁸

Suppose, for that matter, that you can rescue a person on an island that is miles away, either by taking a boat, which would bring you to the island in a minimum of time, or by swimming, which would take several hours and be extraordinarily exhausting. In this case, it seems compelling to judge that you have more reason to swim to the island than to take no means to saving the person. It is not obvious how to make sense of this merely on the grounds of the conservative transmission principles and *Generic Instrumental Reason*.

Let us consider this idea in more detail. The assumption under consideration must be stronger than the claim that other things being equal, we have more reason to perform the act of *taking a means to what we have intrinsic reason to do* than to take no such means. As is easily seen, this latter claim can be explained by *Generic Instrumental Reason*. What is at issue is rather the claim that, other things being equal, if one has an intrinsic reason to ϕ , then for every action ψ that is a means to ϕ -ing, one has more reason to ψ than reason to take no means to ϕ -ing.

This claim contains an important “other things being equal” clause – it is clearly not *always* the case that one has more reason to ψ than reason to take no means to ϕ -ing if one has an intrinsic reason to ϕ and ψ -ing is a means to ϕ -ing. It is not the case if the reasons *against* ψ -ing are stronger than the reasons in favor of ϕ -ing: for example, you do not have more reason to launch the nuclear missile than to take no means to avoid being in pain. It is also not the case when the reasons against ϕ -ing outweigh the reasons in favor of ϕ -ing: if all things considered, you ought not to rescue the person on the island (for example because doing so would prevent you from rescuing your own children on the mainland), then you also do not have more reason to swim to the island than to take no means to rescuing the person on the island. Hence, the assumption on which the second argument for *Liberal Transmission* rests needs to be restricted as follows:

¹⁸ This argument is inspired by one that Bedke (2009, 683–84) brings forward against the view that we do not generally have reasons to take very inefficient means to actions we have reason to perform.

More Reason Claim (= MRC): If A has an *undefeated* intrinsic reason to ϕ , and if ψ -ing is a means for A to ϕ , and if A does not have reasons against ψ -ing that are at least as strong as A's reasons for ϕ -ing, then A has more reason to ψ than reason to take no means to ϕ .

Liberal Transmission can be used to provide an explanation of why *MRC* is true. However, as we shall argue now, one can also explain everything that needs to be explained with regard to *MRC* without relying on more than *Generic Instrumental Reason*. We contend that sentences of the form “There is more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ ” admit of two different interpretations. Under the first reading, *MRC* turns out to be uncontroversial and can be given a straightforward explanation by appealing to *Generic Instrumental Reason*. Under the second reading, *MRC* cannot be presupposed as a normative *explanandum* in the debate about *Liberal Transmission*.

An example can illustrate this ambiguity. Suppose that you have a strong reason to help your neighbor Paul with his gardening work (you have promised to help him), and that you also have a weaker reason to help your neighbor George with his gardening work (your help would make it less wearisome for him). Suppose further that you also have a very strong reason *not* to help Paul (your ex-spouse will be at his place, and your joint presence will cause a lot of trouble for everyone involved). Finally, assume that this reason outweighs the reason you have in favor of helping Paul with his gardening work, and assume that there are no further relevant reasons involved. Do you have more reason to help George than reason to help Paul in this scenario?

Although there is some temptation to answer “no”, the most natural answer seems to be “yes”. This is easily explained by distinguishing two ways of understanding the phrase “more reason to”. The most common way of using sentences of the form “A has more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ ”, we take it, is to make comparative judgments about the *overall balance* of reasons that count *for and against* the various actions under consideration, i.e. to make comparative judgments of overall choiceworthiness. Understood this way, there is more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ if, and only if, ϕ -ing is preferable to ψ -ing in the light of all of one's reasons. The “more reason” phrase can be used more narrowly, however, in order to express comparative judgments about the overall strength of just those considerations that *specifically count in favor* of the

actions under consideration. According to this second interpretation, “There is more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ ” is equivalent to “The reasons in favor of ϕ -ing are stronger than the reasons in favor of ψ -ing”. Depending on which interpretation we have in mind, “A has more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ ” either refers to a ranking of these options that is determined by the overall balance of reasons that count *in favor of and against* ϕ -ing and *in favor of and against* ψ -ing (the broad reading), or to a ranking of these options that is fully determined by the strength of the reasons in favor of ϕ -ing and the reasons in favor of ψ -ing (the narrow reading).

Following the broad interpretation, you have more reason to help George than to help Paul, since in light of all the reasons *for and against* both courses of action, helping George is the preferable option. According to the narrow interpretation, however, you have more reason to help Paul than to help George, since the reasons *in favor of* helping Paul are stronger than the reasons *in favor of* helping George.

One crucial difference between these two interpretations is that only the narrow understanding of “There is more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ ” implies that there is a reason to ϕ . The broad interpretation allows us to say of a pair of actions ϕ and ψ that there is more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ even if there is no reason to ϕ at all, as long as there are suitable reasons that count *against* ψ -ing.

In order to see why this is so, consider actions that are such that there are no reasons either for or against them (“perfectly neutral acts”, in what follows). Examples may include touching one’s own nose, or staring at the wall for 5 seconds (under normal circumstances). Given the broad interpretation, it is clear that one has more reason to perform a perfectly neutral act than to kill an innocent person, since given the strong reasons that count against killing an innocent person, performing a perfectly neutral act is preferable to killing an innocent person in the light of all of one’s reasons. Since, per definition, there are no reasons to perform perfectly neutral actions, the broad interpretation of “There is more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ ” does not imply “There is a reason to ϕ ”.¹⁹

¹⁹ Note that this argument does not presuppose that there are any perfectly neutral acts. It might well be that there is, for any act, some fact that counts against it or in its favor (whether this is indeed so is a substantial normative question). All we need for our argument is the claim that, given the broad interpretation, it is *coherent* to judge that one has more reason to perform a perfectly neutral act than to

Since the “more reason” phrase is ambiguous, *MRC* allows for a broad and a narrow interpretation. On the broad interpretation, *MRC* seems beyond reasonable doubt. However, it is easy to account for this reading of *MRC* without going beyond *Generic Instrumental Reason*. To illustrate this, consider the rescue case again. If you have an intrinsic reason to save the person on the island, *Generic Instrumental Reason* implies that you also have a reason to take means to saving that person, and this reason is trivially also a reason against taking no means to saving the person. That the reasons for saving the person are stronger than the reasons against swimming to the island suggests that the reasons against taking no means to saving the person are also stronger than the reasons against swimming. This is enough to conclude that swimming is preferable to taking no means in the light of all reasons. And this is equivalent to the claim that there is more reason to swim to the island than to take no means to saving the person, on the broad interpretation of the ‘more reason’ phrase. Thus, even though swimming to the island is a suboptimal means to saving the person, we have explained why there is (on the broad interpretation) more reason to swim than to take no means to saving the person without appealing to *Liberal Transmission*.

On its narrow interpretation, the *More Reason Claim* is equivalent to:

*MRC**: If A has an undefeated intrinsic reason to ϕ , and if ψ -ing is a means for A to ϕ , and if A does not have reasons against ψ -ing that are at least as strong as A’s reasons for ϕ -ing, then A has a reason to ψ , which is stronger than any reasons A might have for taking no means to ϕ -ing.

Generic Instrumental Reason will be of no help in accounting for *MRC**. However, it is difficult to see how the defender of *Liberal Transmission* could support *MRC** with any considerations that do not already presuppose what is at issue in the present context. For this reason, we do not believe that *MRC** can be taken for granted as an *explanandum* in the debate over whether we need to go beyond *Generic Instrumental Reason* and the conservative transmission principles in order to give a satisfying account of instrumental reasons.

kill an innocent person. This already suffices to show that under the broad interpretation, “There is more reason to ϕ than reason to ψ ” does not *imply* “There is a reason to ϕ ”.

To sum up, on its broad interpretation, the *More Reason Claim* can be accounted for by *Generic Instrumental Reason*. On its narrow interpretation, the *More Reason Claim* cannot serve as an *explanandum* in a debate concerning *Liberal Transmission*. The second argument for *Liberal Transmission* therefore fails to support this principle as well.

§5. *Third argument: intentionally taking the means amounts to acting for a reason*

The third and final argument for *Liberal Transmission* that we want to consider has origins in considerations proposed by Joseph Raz, but we shall present it in a slightly different way.²⁰ The general idea is that intentionally and knowingly taking means to actions one has intrinsic reason to perform itself amounts to acting for a reason, and that accepting this involves a commitment to *Liberal Transmission*. Here is a way to spell out this argument explicitly:

- (1) If A's ψ -ing is guided by her awareness of the fact that ψ -ing is a means for her to do what she has intrinsic reason to do, then, in virtue of this, A can correctly be described as ψ -ing for a reason.
- (2) If A can correctly be described as ψ -ing for a reason in virtue of the fact that A's ψ -ing is guided by her awareness of the fact that p, then p provides a reason for A to ψ .
- (3) Therefore, the fact that ψ -ing is a means for A to do what she has intrinsic reason to do provides a reason for A to ψ .

The conclusion may be avoided by restricting premise (1) to necessary, best, or optimal means. However, we take it that the premise has considerable plausibility in its present form. We propose to reject premise (2) instead. This premise assumes that the only way for a guiding consideration to be one in virtue of which an action counts as being done for a reason is for this consideration to be such that if it is true, it provides a reason for this action. Two aspects of this claim may reasonably be denied. For one thing, it seems that a true proposition p may be the relevant guiding consideration without providing a

²⁰ Compare Raz (2005b, 8–9).

reason. For example, that there is a reason to ϕ may be the guiding consideration in virtue of which an agent counts as ϕ -ing for a reason, but it is far from clear that this consideration provides a reason to ϕ . For another thing, it seems that an action ϕ can be performed for a reason (in virtue of being guided by the awareness of some fact) without there being a reason that specifically counts in favor of ϕ -ing at all. As we will argue in what follows, all that needs to be the case for it to be possible that an agent (with the relevant true and no relevant false beliefs) ϕ -s for a reason is that ϕ -ing is *a way of doing what she has reason to do*.

What seems to drive premise (2) is the idea that in order to understand the guiding role of that particular kind of deliberation about reasons for ϕ -ing and non-necessary means to ϕ -ing that is often involved in acting for a reason, we need to assume that such deliberation leads one to recognize reasons that count in favor of those actions that are means to ϕ -ing. If being aware of a reason to ϕ and of the fact that ψ -ing is a means to ϕ -ing does not also potentially disclose a reason that specifically favors ψ -ing, it might seem that this awareness cannot guide one all the way *towards* ψ -ing. For in this case, there remains a normative gap between what the agent is *guided towards* and what the agent has *reason to do*.

However, note that the same problem does not arise when we consider an agent's reflection about means/end-relations and *decisive reasons*. A normative gap between what one has decisive reason to do and what one is guided towards if one reflects on one's decisive reasons and the relevant means/end-relations is not problematic at all. In particular, one can be guided towards ψ -ing by recognition of the fact that one has a decisive reason to ϕ and the fact that ψ -ing is a way of ϕ -ing even in cases where there are *no decisive reasons to ψ* , as long as ψ -ing is a way of doing what one has decisive reason to do. Buridan's ass missed this point when starving to death in front of two equally attractive piles of hay. He could have easily avoided this by recognizing that even though he did not have decisive reason to eat one particular pile, doing so would still be a way of doing what he had decisive reason to do – namely, to eat a pile of hay.

The same point applies to the structurally similar phenomenon of acting out of duty: Suppose that it is your duty to donate 100 € to some organization that helps

refugees. You could send them a 100 € note and thereby perform this act out of duty without it being your duty to *send them a 100 € note*. For if you sent them a check or made a money transfer instead, you would not be failing to do your duty. Hence, one can ϕ out of duty without it being the case that it is one's duty to ϕ , as long as ϕ -ing is a way of doing one's duty.

Now, if the normative gap between being guided towards ψ -ing and having decisive reasons to ϕ does not prevent one from being guided towards ψ -ing by one's awareness of a decisive reason to ϕ and a means/end-relation between ϕ -ing and ψ -ing, then we should assume that the same point applies to non-decisive reasons as well. That is, we should assume that the normative gap between being guided towards ψ -ing and having *non-decisive reasons* to ϕ also does not rule out being guided towards ψ -ing by one's awareness of a non-decisive reason to ϕ and a means/end-relation between ψ -ing and ϕ -ing.

Indeed, this is just what we should expect when revisiting some of the examples discussed above in connection with the 'too many reasons' problem. These examples all represent cases in which it seems plausible to describe agents as ψ -ing for a reason, but not at all plausible to assume that they have a reason to ψ . It is plausible, for example, that a person who spends all of her savings on an ugly hat or even cuts off her own hand in order to keep her promise to surprise a friend is indeed acting for a reason – but it is not plausible to assume that this person has a reason to spend all of her savings on an ugly hat, or a reason to cut off her hand. By the same token, although a president who launches a nuclear missile in order to get rid of his headaches might be correctly described as acting for a reason, it does not seem correct to say that he really has a reason to launch a nuclear missile just because this is one way of getting rid of his headaches.

These considerations support the view that intentionally ψ -ing for a reason, even for the person with all relevant true and no relevant false beliefs, does not require the existence of a reason that specifically counts *in favor of ψ -ing*, but merely entails that ψ -ing is *a way of doing what one has reason to do*. In light of these considerations, premise (2) needs to be revised. A consideration that guides an agent A towards ψ -ing in the relevant sense need only disclose to A that ψ -ing is a way of doing what A has

reason to do. Its guiding role can be taken to consist in just *this*. We thus propose rejecting premise (2) in favor of the following, weaker claim:

(2)* If A can correctly be described as ψ -ing for a reason in virtue of the fact that A's ψ -ing is guided by her awareness of the fact that p, then, in virtue of p, ψ -ing is a way for A to do what A has reason to do.

In order to see how the retreat from (2) to (2)* successfully blocks an inference to *Liberal Transmission*, recall that *Generic Instrumental Reason* guarantees that there is always an action supported by a reason in cases where ψ -ing is a means to an action ϕ that one has intrinsic reason to perform – the relevant action just is the act of *taking a means to ϕ -ing*.

Hence, if A is guided by her awareness of the fact that ψ -ing is a means for her to doing what she has intrinsic reason to do, and if A, in virtue of this fact, can truly be said to ψ for a reason, then (2)* implies that ψ -ing is a way for A to do what she has reason to do – which is true, since ψ -ing is a way of *taking some means to ϕ -ing*. Consequently, that A ψ -s for a reason whenever her ψ -ing is guided by the consideration that ψ -ing is a means to doing what A has intrinsic reason to do, does not imply that A has a reason that specifically counts in favor of ψ -ing. It only implies that ψ -ing is a way for A to do what she has reason to do – from which we cannot infer a reason to ψ without presupposing *Liberal Transmission*.

Assumption (2)* and *Generic Instrumental Reason* suffice to make good sense of the idea that the consideration that an action ψ is a non-necessary means to doing what one has intrinsic reason to do can guide us towards ψ -ing in a way that amounts to acting for a reason. We do not have to assume that such guidance requires reasons that count in favor of each particular means that we might deliberately take, as premise (2) implies. The suggested inference to *Liberal Transmission* can thus reasonably be resisted by rejecting premise (2) in favor of (2)*.

§6. Conclusion and outlook

In this paper, we hope to have shown that a commitment to *Liberal Transmission* is not forced upon us by those phenomena that an account of instrumental reasons needs to accommodate, and that rejecting this transmission principle is a viable option for which good reasons can be given. In addition, we have argued that other principles of instrumental transmission can account for a number of ideas that seem to support *Liberal Transmission* in the first place. On the one hand, there are the more conservative principles that allow transmission from intrinsic reasons to reasons for necessary, best, or optimal means. On the other hand, there is the generic principle that allows transmission to a reason for the act-type of *taking a means*, but not for particular means.

It is natural to ask whether these principles can be unified or reduced to each other, and we shall conclude by briefly considering this question. The first point to note is that all necessary means are trivially necessary parts of every optimal sufficient means, and necessary parts of *every* optimal sufficient means are trivially necessary parts of *some* optimal sufficient means. *Necessary Means Transmission* can therefore be derived from *Best Means Transmission*, which in turn can be derived from *Optimal Means Transmission*. How does *Generic Instrumental Reason* fit into this picture – can it be derived from one of the conservative transmission principles? This will be so if for any action ϕ , taking some means to ϕ -ing is a necessary means to ϕ -ing or a necessary part of taking an optimal sufficient means to ϕ -ing. Whether this is indeed the case depends on subtle questions concerning the proper understanding of the notion of a means and, in particular, on whether or not it makes sense to say of an action that it facilitates its own performance. Such questions are beyond the scope of this paper, however. We think that there is at least some reason to be optimistic that *Generic Instrumental Reason* can be derived from the conservative principles, but this is an issue that we have to leave for another occasion.

In any case, we hope to have shown that a theory of instrumental transmission that appeals to no more than the conservative principles and the generic principle is a serious alternative to theories appealing to liberal transmission principles.²¹

²¹ This is a draft of 1 March 2018. [Acknowledgments.]

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