

Ethics and Practical Reasoning*

Matthew Silverstein

How is practical reasoning related to ethical reasoning? The most common view is that they are identical: practical reasoning just is ethical reasoning. I criticize this view and then propose an alternative account of the relation between ethical thought and practical thought: ethical reasoning is reasoning *about* sound practical reasoning. I argue that this account of the relation between ethics and practical reasoning explains various phenomena that more familiar views leave unexplained. It also entails that the philosophy of action bears heavily on ethical inquiry.

We often think about what to do (or about how to act). When we do, we are engaged in the kind of reasoning that—upon successful completion—usually issues in an intention or action. I shall call this kind of reasoning *practical reasoning*. We also often think about what we ought to do (or about what we have most reason to do). This sort of reasoning—when completed successfully—usually issues in a normative or ethical judgment.¹

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1. Throughout this article I use the terms “ethical” and “normative” interchangeably. Like Bernard Williams, I understand ethics as a broad subject encompassing more than questions of morality. For more on this distinction, see Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 4–11. My concern here, though, is with the ethics of action—that is, with reasoning about what we ought (or have reason) to do. Both “ethical” and “normative” should therefore be taken to have a narrower reference than usual. Questions about how we ought to feel are standardly counted as ethical questions, but they fall outside the scope of this article. Similarly, questions about reasons for belief are standardly counted as normative questions; they too fall outside this article’s scope.

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I shall therefore call this sort of reasoning *normative* or *ethical reasoning*.²

How are these two kinds of reasoning related to one another? Perhaps the most common view is that there are not actually two kinds of reasoning here at all. For philosophers who subscribe to this view—which I shall call the *identity thesis*—practical reasoning just is ethical reasoning; thinking about what to do just is thinking about what one ought to do. Philosophers tend to arrive at the identity thesis from one of two directions. Some start out thinking about the practical side of the equation. They wonder what makes practical reasoning practical. What must practical reasoning be about—or how must its constituents function—such that its successful completion usually yields an intention or action? These philosophers answer this question by concluding that practical reasoning must be carried out under the guise of the good or, more broadly, under the guise of the normative. Practical reasoning results in action because it is reasoning about what we ought to do or about what’s good, and judgments about what we ought to do or about what’s good are—or are at least supposed to be—motivating or action-guiding. Plato and Aristotle are often regarded as the progenitors of this first line of philosophers, and their descendants include Aquinas, Kant, G. E. M. Anscombe, Donald Davidson, Gary Watson, Warren Quinn, R. Jay Wallace, Joseph Raz, and Sergio Tenenbaum.³

2. I have described each of these kinds of reasoning in two different ways: first, in terms of the question it seeks to answer and, second, in terms of its standard conclusion. I treat these two descriptions as equivalent. Here I follow Pamela Hieronymi, who argues that reasoning is essentially the attempt to settle a question and that all sorts of attitudes can “embody their subject’s answer to some question” (“Two Kinds of Agency,” in *Mental Actions*, ed. Lucy O’Brien and Matthew Soteriou [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 138). I do not believe anything important rests on this equivalence, though. The arguments below could be cast entirely in terms of the relevant outputs—with practical reasoning understood solely as reasoning that normally concludes with an action or intention and normative reasoning understood solely as reasoning that normally concludes with a normative judgment—without substantive loss.

3. Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* thus: “Every sort of expert knowledge and every inquiry, and similarly every action and undertaking, seems to seek some good” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 1094a1–1094a2). Here he may have been following Plato, who writes in the *Republic* that “every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake” (*Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and rev. C. D. C. Reeve [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992], 505e). See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (London: Blackfriars, 1964), I–II q.1 a.6; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 58–59; G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 4–6; Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 3–20, 6; Gary Watson, “Free Agency,” *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 205–20, and “Skepticism about Weakness of Will,” *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 316–39; Warren Quinn,

Other philosophers arrive at the identity thesis by focusing initially on the ethical side of the equation. In particular, they wonder what makes ethical or normative judgments action-guiding. Why do judgments about what we ought to do always (or almost always) figure prominently in deliberation about what to do? And why are such judgments always (or almost always) accompanied by motivation—by a tendency to act in the manner we judge favorably? These other philosophers answer such questions by concluding that ethical judgments must be essentially practical: ethical judgments are action-guiding and are generally accompanied by motivation because such judgments are themselves just conclusions of practical reasoning. This second line of philosophers includes R. M. Hare and latter-day expressivists Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn.⁴

Although these two sorts of theorists approach the relation between practical and ethical reasoning from different theoretical starting points—the former from the philosophy of action, the latter from metaethics and moral psychology—they arrive at the same conclusion: practical reasoning just is ethical reasoning. Of course, some of these philosophers think that practical reasoning concludes with a judgment, whereas others think that it concludes with an action.⁵ I take them all to be proponents of the identity thesis because they all agree that practical reasoning “takes a distinctively normative question as its starting point,” and so they all take there to be a single question that both practical reasoning and ethical reasoning seek to answer.⁶

Other philosophers reject the identity thesis and instead hold that practical reasoning and ethical reasoning are largely independent of

“Putting Rationality in Its Place,” in *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 228–55, 232–33; R. Jay Wallace, “Three Conceptions of Rational Agency,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2 (1999): 217–42; Joseph Raz, “On the Guise of the Good,” in *From Normativity to Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59–84; and Sergio Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 2. Raz’s paper includes an exemplary instance of the sort of inference I have in mind here: “What agents believe about the action leads them to do it, and guides their doing of it, all the way to its conclusion, and that suggests that they approve of the action, given what they believe about it. They so act because they approve of the action, and that in turn means that they think that it has some value, since value is what we approve of” (“On the Guise of the Good,” 116).

4. See R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 171–72; Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 9; and Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 1.

5. For the former view, see Donald Davidson, “How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?” in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 21–42, 38–39; and Watson, “Skepticism about Weakness of Will,” 327. For the latter view, see Aristotle, *Movement of Animals*, in *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J. L. Ackrill (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 701a10–701a15; and Anscombe, *Intention*, sec. 33.

6. R. Jay Wallace, “Practical Reason,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, summer 2014 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/practical-reason/>), sec. 1.

one another. According to these philosophers, determining what you ought to do or what you have most reason to do is neither necessary nor sufficient for settling the question of what to do. Arriving at an answer to the ethical or normative question leaves you still facing the practical question, and the kind of reasoning you engage in to answer that latter question may be utterly different from the kind of reasoning you engage in to settle the former. Proponents of this way of thinking about the relation between practical and ethical reasoning include various so-called externalists about normative judgment such as W. D. Ross, David Brink, Derek Parfit, Russ Shafer-Landau, and T. M. Scanlon.⁷ For these philosophers, the only connection between ethical thought and practical thought is a normative one. Rationality requires you to do (or to intend to do) what you judge you ought to do, and so insofar as you are rational, your practical reasoning will be in line with your ethical reasoning. If you are irrational, though, your practical deliberations may very well ignore your ethical convictions.⁸

The view I defend in this article lies somewhere between these two familiar approaches. I agree with the externalists that there are two genuinely different kinds of reasoning here: thinking about what to do does not require one to think about what one ought to, and one may arrive at

7. See W. D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 206; David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 45–50; Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2:386–87; Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 6; and T. M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), lecture 3. The internalism/externalism distinction I have in mind here concerns the motivational or practical upshot of normative judgments. According to normative judgment internalists, such judgments necessarily involve some degree of motivation; according to normative judgment externalists, there is only a contingent connection between these judgments and motivation. There are various complications, of course, some of which are discussed briefly below. (See n. 26 below in particular.) In the meantime, these versions of internalism and externalism should be distinguished from others, most notably the views often called existence internalism and existence externalism (or internalism and externalism about reasons). These views address the connection between motivation and the existence of reasons for action, whereas I am concerned here with the connection between motivation and judgments about reasons for action. For this way of labeling these two pairs of views, see Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 54.

8. Strictly speaking, an externalist could accept the identity thesis. Externalism is a view about the connection between normative judgment and motivation, and one's normative judgment might fail to produce motivation even if that judgment is also the conclusion of one's practical deliberation. This seems to be H. A. Prichard's view in "Duty and Interest," in *Moral Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 21–49, 38–39. It is certainly Nishi Shah's view in "How Action Governs Intention," *Philosophers Imprint* 8 (2008): 1–19. I do not interpret Brink, Parfit, Shafer-Landau, and Scanlon as holding this view, since they all insist on the irrationality of acting contrary to one's normative judgment. As I argue in the final two paragraphs of Section I below, Shah's externalist version of the identity thesis cannot make sense of this charge of irrationality.

a conclusion about what one ought to do without settling the matter of what to do. Consequently, I believe that we can understand practical reasoning in nonnormative terms: practical reasoning is performed not under the guise of the normative, but rather under some other guise. Unlike the externalists, however, I take the relation between ethical and practical reasoning to be more than merely normative. In particular, I believe that normative thought can be analyzed in terms of practical thought: normative reasoning is reasoning *about* practical reasoning—either one’s own or someone else’s. This view of the relation between ethics and practical reasoning accounts for various phenomena that its more extreme counterparts leave unexplained, including both the possibility of clear-eyed *akrasia* and its philosophical significance. It also entails that practical reasoning is conceptually prior to ethical or normative reasoning, and thus that the philosophy of action bears heavily on ethical inquiry.

I

Why should we think that practical reasoning is conceptually prior to normative or ethical reasoning? Why, for that matter, should we think that there are even two distinct kinds of reasoning here? After all, the prevailing philosophical view seems to be that they are one and the same.

Perhaps the most familiar argument for the distinction between ethical thought and practical thought appeals to the possibility of *akrasia* or weakness of will. As David Wiggins observes, “Almost anyone not under the influence of theory will say that, when a person is weak-willed, he intentionally chooses that which he knows or believes to be the worse course of action when he could choose the better course; and that, in acting in this way, the weak-willed man acts not for *no* reason at all—that would be strange and atypical—but irrationally.”⁹ Cases of weakness of will are cases in which practical thought diverges from ethical or normative thought. That’s how they’re ordinarily described, at any rate. As Wiggins suggests, philosophers in thrall to theory frequently reject these ordinary descriptions and instead find ways to reinterpret the cases so that the relevant agents turn out not to be acting contrary to their better judgments. For this reason, appealing to cases of apparent *akrasia* has proved to advance the debate about the relation between ethical thought and practical thought very little.

Fortunately, there are simpler cases that promise to advance the debate much further. Consider my current situation. I firmly believe that I ought to have lunch at home tomorrow. Actually, I know it. When I dine out, I tend to overeat. Plus, money is rather tight at the moment, and

9. David Wiggins, “Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 79 (1979): 251–77, 251.

even a casual lunch out will cost notably more than a quick meal at home. Besides, I have all the fixings for one of my favorite sandwiches in the refrigerator, and so it is not as though I will suffer if I eat at home. Of course I know that there are also reasons to go out, but those reasons are not dispositive—not even close. It is quite clear, then—obvious, even—that I ought to have lunch at home tomorrow. I have firmly resolved the normative question; further reflection on the matter seems pointless. I have not, however, decided where to have lunch tomorrow. Frankly, I have not even thought about it. I have not made any plans, nor do I even have any expectations as to where I will eat. I have, in short, no intention one way or the other. I suppose I could decide now, but what would be the point of that? Practical deliberation about where to have lunch tomorrow can wait until tomorrow.

As I have described my current situation, normative or ethical deliberation has concluded even though practical deliberation has yet to begin. This description strikes me as obviously correct. In having firmly settled what I ought to do, I have not settled or even taken up the question of what to do. When I do eventually take up that question, my view about what I have most reason to do may very well figure in my reasoning. But it might not. Of course, as I deliberate about where to eat I will weigh various considerations against one another, and in so doing I will be taking stock of my reasons for action. But I can deliberate about my reasons without thinking of them in those terms. I can weigh the relevant considerations against one another and come to a decision about what to do without deploying any normative concepts, just as I can weigh evidence and come to a conclusion about what to believe without thinking of my evidence as reasons or about my conclusion as what I ought to believe.¹⁰ When I arrive at a belief on the basis of theoretical reasoning, I believe *for reasons* even if I do not think of my evidence in normative terms. Similarly, when I decide where to have lunch on the basis of some consideration, I act *for a reason* even if I do not entertain a normative thought. So, although practical reasoning may necessarily involve the weighing of reasons, it does not necessarily involve doing so under that description.¹¹ That is why tomorrow I can take up the practical question of where to

10. I can reason my way to a belief without deploying normative concepts because theoretical reasoning is governed by a substantive, nonnormative aim: truth. All I need to do in order to believe on the basis of reasons is believe on the basis of my evidence. If—as I argue below in Section IV—practical reasoning is also governed by a substantive, nonnormative aim, then I should also be able to reason my way to an intention or action without deploying normative concepts.

11. For more on how agents can act for reasons—and respond to those reasons *as reasons*—without doing so under that description, see J. David Velleman, “Introduction,” in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 14–20 (especially n. 20) and 28, n. 34.

have lunch without thereby also taking up the normative question of where I ought to have lunch, and why as of now I have settled the normative question without even considering the practical one.

Philosophers under the influence of the relevant theory will insist that my current situation could not possibly be as I have described it. But is my situation really so remarkable? Consider your own. Choose any matter where you have firmly made up your mind as to what you ought to do. It might be something you ought to do tomorrow, or something you ought to do next year. Choose something obvious—a case where reopening deliberation about what you ought to do seems utterly pointless—where, upon a moment's reflection, you think to yourself, "Of course that's what I ought to do!" Have you decided to do it? Perhaps in some cases you have. I suspect that in others you have not. I suspect that in some cases you have settled the normative question without even entertaining the practical one. With respect to those cases, you know what you ought to do, but you have not even thought about what to do.

One way to resist the force of such observations is to claim that normative reasoning has merely been suspended, not concluded. Come tomorrow, I will decide where to have lunch by reopening the question of where I ought to have lunch. My practical deliberation will therefore turn out just to be further normative deliberation. And once I have reopened the question of what I ought to do, who knows how I will answer it? Who knows how different my normative outlook will be tomorrow morning as lunchtime nears? Perhaps the allure of my favorite local restaurant will be so great that I will revise my assessment of the relevant reasons and decide that the considerations which seem clearly dispositive now are actually outweighed by other considerations. This, of course, is how Plato describes such situations in the *Protagoras*. According to Plato, my normative conclusions tonight fail to settle the matter of what I am going to do not because there is more to practical reasoning than normative reasoning, but rather because I lack the "art of measurement."¹² Under the illusion that things which are nearer are bigger or more significant, I afford proximate costs and benefits undue weight in my normative calculations. So, as lunchtime approaches, my normative outlook will change and further normative deliberation will be necessary.

As a description of what will happen tomorrow when I decide where to eat, this strikes me as thoroughly implausible. Nothing about its being closer to lunchtime is going to make the considerations that figured in this evening's normative deliberations any less dispositive. Remember, it's not a close call: I have no doubt that I ought to eat at home tomorrow. My normative outlook may shift somewhat, but it will not turn itself

12. Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 356d.

upside down.¹³ When tomorrow comes I will deliberate about where to have lunch, knowing all the while where I ought to have lunch.

Another way to resist this conclusion would be to maintain that although I have arrived at an all-things-considered normative judgment, I have yet to form an all-out or unconditional normative judgment, and so there is still some normative reasoning left to undertake. This is how Donald Davidson would describe my situation. According to Davidson, all-things-considered judgments—judgments of the form, “Given all of the relevant considerations known to me, I ought to φ ”—are only a step along the way toward the conclusion of practical reasoning. Practical reasoning concludes and I form an intention only when I detach the normative conclusion from the conditions and judge all out, “I ought to φ .”¹⁴ Perhaps, then, I have yet to take this final step of normative reasoning, which explains why I have not yet decided where to have lunch tomorrow.

This also strikes me as an obviously inaccurate description of my current situation. As far as I can tell, I have taken my normative deliberations as far as they can go. Although I may have paused along the way at an all-things-considered judgment, I did not stop there. The conclusion I have drawn—what I know right now—is that tomorrow I ought to eat lunch at home. Davidson will insist that I have therefore decided what to do and formed the relevant intention, but nothing about my situation supports that further conclusion. The intention to perform some action is usually accompanied by the disposition to assert that one is going to perform that action, perhaps because it is also usually accompanied by the belief that one is going to perform it. Yet I am not at all disposed to assert that I am going to have lunch at home tomorrow, nor do I believe it to be the case. I don’t know where I am going to eat tomorrow, even though I do know where I ought to eat. I have answered the normative question without arriving at an intention.

Some proponents of the identity thesis might be willing to accept this description of my situation. Nishi Shah, for instance, acknowledges that sometimes our intentions do not comport with our judgments about what we ought to do: I may decide to eat lunch at a restaurant even though I know that I ought to eat at home. Yet Shah also maintains that practical deliberation proceeds by settling the question of what we ought

13. We can make this even clearer by adding moral considerations to the mix. Suppose that I have promised my wife—sworn a solemn oath on the grave of my beloved grandmother—not to go out for lunch this week, and that I therefore regard myself as under a binding obligation to eat at home. Only some conflicting obligation could make me even consider the possibility that I ought to go out for lunch tomorrow. Now it seems even more implausible that tomorrow’s practical deliberations about where to dine will involve my reopening the normative question. The relative proximity of lunchtime will not lead me to revise my views about the overriding and categorical nature of moral obligations.

14. See Davidson, “How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?” 31–42.

to do: “the answer to the deliberative question [*whether to A*] is a normative judgment.”¹⁵ According to Shah, then, although there is a gap between normative judgments and intentions (or actions), the transition from the former to the latter does not involve any further reasoning. Once we have settled the question of what we ought to do, practical deliberation has concluded.

The problem with this version of the identity thesis is that it makes it difficult to see how one’s intentions or actions could ever be proper objects of rational assessment. If, as Shah claims, no “further reasoning is required to mediate the transition from judging that we ought to *A* to intending to *A*,” then the failure to make that transition cannot be a failure of rationality.¹⁶ Put another way, if there is no rational or deliberative process leading from normative judgments to intentions, then it makes no sense to criticize me as irrational for intending to eat out even though I believe that I ought to eat at home. And more generally, if we cannot reason our way to an intention or action, then our intentions and actions cannot be rational or irrational. As Shah describes it, the process of deciding whether to act on the basis of one’s normative judgment is just a brute causal one: we arrive at an intention just by waiting to see whether our normative commitments will have their usual practical or motivational force. This description does justice neither to the phenomenology of practical deliberation nor to our sense that our intentions and actions can be more or less rational.¹⁷ Even when I already know what I ought to do, the process of deciding what to do is a deliberative one; even when I have answered the question of what I ought to do, I must still consider the question of what to do.

II

Why do so many philosophers think otherwise? Some of the most familiar arguments against the distinction between normative and practical thought rest on an impoverished representation of the theoretical alter-

15. Shah, “How Action Governs Intention,” 3. Shah actually characterizes the question we pose in practical deliberation as the question *whether to intend to A*, rather than as the question *whether to A*. For my purposes here, this difference is unimportant.

16. *Ibid.*, 11.

17. In “Skepticism about Practical Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 5–25, Christine Korsgaard suggests that intuitionists like Prichard do not actually believe in practical reason (10). I take her worry to be related to the one I am expressing here about Shah’s view. If the move from normative judgment to intention or action does not involve reasoning or deliberation, then there really is no such thing as genuinely practical reasoning, or reasoning that issues in intentions or actions. Shah claims that our normative judgments might still normally cause or be followed by intentions (“How Action Governs Intention,” 11), but these intentions will be by-products of deliberation, not conclusions of practical reasoning.

natives. Allan Gibbard, for example, starts with the platitude that “ethics concerns what to do.”¹⁸ He then argues that we can do justice to this platitude only by recognizing that “*ought* questions and *reason* questions are by their very nature questions of what to do”: “thinking what I ought to do amounts to deciding what to do.”¹⁹ The alternative—insisting that these questions are different—is tantamount to “driving what to do out of ethics.”²⁰ It leaves ethical thought inert and therefore otiose. Here Gibbard is echoing his prescriptivist predecessor R. M. Hare. In *The Language of Morals*, Hare begins with a similarly uncontroversial thought: “the function of [ethical judgments] is to guide conduct.”²¹ The only way for them to do this, according to Hare, is by directly answering the practical question of what to do.²² So, if we deny that ethical judgments are practical thoughts of some sort—thoughts about what to do—we must deny that ethical thought is essentially practical or acting-guiding.

Hare and Gibbard both assume that the only alternative to the identification of ethical reasoning with practical reasoning is a starkly externalist view according to which the former has nothing to do with the latter. On such a view, ethical conclusions will be stops along the way to practical conclusions only if agents happen to be motivated to do what they ought to do. Ethics becomes only contingently practical, just like any other subject. This rather extreme brand of externalism has had various distinguished adherents over the years.²³ Derek Parfit defends a position along these lines in *On What Matters*. According to Parfit, “when we conclude that we ought to do something, we are not deciding to do this thing, but coming to have a normative belief.” Although our decisions are commonly based on such beliefs, “these decisions are not the same as our coming to have these beliefs.”²⁴ In any particular instance of deliberation about what to do, then, there is no guarantee that one’s normative judgments will play a practical or guiding role.

Both Hare and Gibbard overstate the commitments of externalists like Parfit. They insist that externalists must allow for the possibility of agents whose normative judgments are *entirely* inert. Such agents might never act in accordance with their judgments about how they ought to act.²⁵ The problem with this characterization of externalism is that, as

18. Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*, 13.

19. *Ibid.*, 9, 17.

20. *Ibid.*, 13.

21. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, 1.

22. *Ibid.*, 29, 171–72.

23. For the term “extreme externalism,” see Michael Bratman, “Practical Reasoning and Weakness of the Will,” *Noûs* 13 (1979): 153–71, 159.

24. Parfit, *On What Matters*, 2:386.

25. See R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 68–69; and Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*, 12—in particular the discussion of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Com-

Gibbard acknowledges, externalists usually insist on a normative connection between ethical reasoning and practical reasoning: rationality requires agents to do what they judge they ought to do.²⁶ And so externalism would allow for agents who never act in accordance with their normative judgments only if it could allow for agents who are thoroughly or systematically irrational. Yet there are independent reasons to think that agents can be only locally irrational. Were we ever presented with agents who appeared to display a complete disconnect between their normative judgments and their practical conclusions, something akin to Donald Davidson's principle of charity would require us to interpret those apparently normative conclusions as judgments of some other sort.²⁷ The rational connection between one's normative conclusions and one's practical conclusions therefore ensures that any discrepancies between them will be merely local. In other words, once we accept the rational connection between ethical reasoning and practical reasoning, there are limits to just how far the two can come apart.

This rational connection also provides externalists with the resources they need to explain the logical link between ethical judgments and action identified by Hare. Even when those judgments fail to motivate us, they remain connected to our actions by the norms of rationality. Regardless of whether our ethical judgments influence our behavior, then, they guide our conduct by bearing on its rationality. And thus even for extreme externalists like Parfit, there is a clear sense in which ethical judgments are concerned with what to do.

I nevertheless agree with Gibbard and Hare that this sort of externalism is implausible. As I shall argue in Section III, the connection between ethical reasoning and practical reasoning is tighter than Parfit and other externalists suppose. Yet neither Gibbard nor Hare gives us any reason to think that extreme externalism is the only alternative to their rather extreme internalism. We can deny that ethical reasoning is identical to practical reasoning without claiming that one is only contingently (or normatively) related to the other. If there are other ways for ethics to

pare Bratman, "Practical Reasoning and Weakness of the Will," 158–59; and Sarah Stroud, "Weakness of the Will," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, spring 2014 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/weakness-will/>), sec. 1.

26. See, for instance, Derek Parfit, "Reasons and Motivation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol., 71 (1997): 99–130, 130. The view that agents will act (or intend) in accordance with their normative judgments *insofar as those agents are rational* is often categorized as a weak version of internalism rather than a form of externalism. See Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 60–62; and Ralph Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 23–28.

27. Here I am appealing to the sort of holism Davidson defends in "Mental Events" and "Psychology as Philosophy," both in *Essays on Actions and Events*. I am indebted to Nishi Shah for pointing out the relevance of Davidsonian holism.

be concerned with what to do—or for ethical deliberation to be action-guiding—we can capture the essential practicality of ethics without collapsing the distinction between ethical thought and practical thought. At most, then, Gibbard and Hare have challenged us to articulate an alternative account of the relation between ethical thought and practical thought, one that sits somewhere between their extreme internalism and Parfit's extreme externalism. I shall take up this challenge below. For now, the important point is simply that Gibbard and Hare have not given us any reason to think that it cannot be met.

A second argument for the identification of ethical reasoning with practical reasoning starts from the uncontroversial premise that practical reasoning is practical not only in its subject matter, but also in its issue.²⁸ It gets us going, even if it does not guarantee that we will act. In short, practical reasoning produces motivation. How could it do this if it concluded in anything other than a normative judgment? After all, practical deliberation has to conclude in something like a judgment, otherwise it is not clear how it could be a form of reasoning. And whereas normative judgments are commonly taken to be intrinsically motivating, other sorts of judgments are at most only contingently motivating. And so it seems that the only way to make sense of the fact that practical deliberation gives rise to action is to suppose that it is essentially normative deliberation.

This argument purports to show that we can explain the motivational upshot of practical reasoning only by assuming that practical reasoning is tantamount to normative or ethical reasoning. Yet philosophers of action have provided a number of plausible alternative explanations. Michael Bratman, for instance, has developed a theory of planning agency according to which practical reasoning concludes not in a judgment but in an intention, where that is a distinctive practical attitude—an attitude with its own motivational force.²⁹ J. David Velleman, meanwhile, has argued that we engage in practical reasoning in order to make sense of ourselves. According to Velleman, intentions are beliefs about what one is going to do (and why one is going to do it). These beliefs motivate action by engaging a desire or drive to understand oneself and thus to act in ways one will find intelligible. The beliefs are *necessarily* motivating because the drive in question is constitutive of agency.³⁰ Not only do these alternative accounts fully explain the motivational upshot of practical reasoning, they also provide powerful explanations of various other puzzling features of agency and practical thought—features that the normative conception of practi-

28. Compare Darwall, *Impartial Reason*, 51.

29. See Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

30. See J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

cal reasoning leaves utterly mysterious.³¹ It should be clear, then, that we can explain how reasoning can be practical in its issue without supposing that it is reasoning about what one ought to do.

A third argument against the distinction between practical thought and normative thought appeals to the difference between compulsion and autonomy or self-control. According to Gary Watson, if practical reasoning were distinct from ethical reasoning, we would not be able to distinguish cases where one's strongest desire overpowers one's will from cases where one's strongest desire just is (or at least determines) one's will. For when agents are moved by motives that are independent of their values, "their motivation is [always] 'alien' to them . . . they seem motivated contrary to their own wills."³² Therefore, Watson concludes, practical thought that is untethered from ethical thought can never issue in free or autonomous action. Sarah Buss argues against the distinction between practical and normative thought on similar grounds. According to Buss, "practical deliberators cannot set their own goals without holding evaluative beliefs about the goals their desires incline them to pursue," and so an action cannot be "self-directed" unless "the agent is motivated by the belief that there is something in favor of performing it."³³

Watson and Buss both assume that the only alternative to their normative conception of practical reasoning is a streamlined Humean view according to which practical reasoning is solely concerned with the satisfaction of our ultimate ends or desires. On this sort of view, we exercise our agency whenever our behavior is jointly caused by a desire for some outcome and a belief about how to effect or promote that outcome.³⁴ The driving force behind agency and practical reasoning is thus always some motive or desire. Yet our notion of autonomy requires that it be *the agent*—and not merely some motive within her—that undertakes practical deliberation and is thereby the force behind the ensuing action. The problem with the Humean view is that it leaves no work for the agent herself to do. Appealing to higher-order motives will not help, since—as Buss observes—"there is no reason to think that a desire reflects the point of view of the agent herself just because it is of an especially high

31. For an extended argument to this effect, see Kieran Setiya, *Reasons without Rationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pt. 1.

32. Watson, "Skepticism about Weakness of Will," 326–27. Compare Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good*, 263–68.

33. Sarah Buss, "What Practical Reasoning Must Be If We Act for Our Own Reasons," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1999): 399–421, 403, 401.

34. At least since Davidson, defenders of the Humean view have recognized that the behavior produced by desires and beliefs can rise to the level of autonomous action only if it is caused "in the *right way*." Donald Davidson, "Freedom to Act," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 79. Causation in the wrong way—often called *deviant* or *wayward* causation—must be ruled out.

order.”³⁵ The only way to get the agent into the picture is “to get her application of norms into the picture.”³⁶

Various philosophers sympathetic to the Humean account of agency and practical reasoning have attempted to deflect this charge. Even if these attempts fail, though—even if this objection is fatal to the Humean view—we need not retreat to the view that practical reasoning is identical to normative reasoning. There are other alternatives available. Consider again Velleman’s account of agency. Velleman also rejects the standard, Humean story of action, in part because he too thinks that the agent herself is missing from that story. Velleman’s solution to this problem is to appeal not to a higher-order motive, but rather to a motive “that drives practical thought itself”—a motive or drive that necessarily stands behind the lens of critical examination, even when it also is the object of such examination.³⁷ This motive operates behind the scenes, adjudicating among various other motives. It is therefore functionally equivalent to the agent herself. When this motive determines what she does, *she* determines what she does. Or so Velleman argues, at any rate. Bratman tells a different story about autonomy and self-control. Agents exercise control over their behavior when that behavior is driven by what Bratman calls “self-governing policies.” Self-governing policies are a particular species of intention: they are general policies or plans about how to weigh various kinds of considerations in practical reasoning. For Bratman, then, it is these general intentions that play the functional role of the agent when we act autonomously.³⁸

I cannot defend either of these accounts of autonomy here—although I think each is more compelling than the view that we exercise our agency only by acting in accordance with our normative judgments. The important point is just that—like the other arguments discussed in this section—Watson’s and Buss’s arguments rest on a false dichotomy. Were our only choices with respect to theories of practical reasoning the standard, Humean view on the one hand and the view that practical reasoning is essentially normative on the other, the latter would probably be the best option. Similarly, were our only choices with respect to theories of normative reasoning Parfit’s extreme externalism and Hare and Gibbard’s extreme internalism, I would be inclined to opt for the latter. Fortunately, our theoretical options are not so limited.

35. Buss, “What Practical Reasoning Must Be,” 411 n. 24.

36. *Ibid.*

37. J. David Velleman, “What Happens When Someone Acts,” *Mind* 101 (1992): 461–81, 477.

38. Michael Bratman, “Autonomy and Hierarchy,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20 (2003): 156–76, especially sec. 5.

III

If the foregoing is correct, there is little reason to accept the identity thesis. Practical thought is distinct from ethical thought, and the former need not be cast in terms of the latter. Practical reasoning does not aim at identifying what one ought to do or what one has most reason to do, at least under those guises. Yet it must aim at something; there must be something that counts as success in practical reasoning.

One account of this aim is uncontroversial: practical reasoning aims at figuring out what to do. This characterization, though accurate, is incomplete. It specifies only the formal object of practical reasoning, and—as Velleman has argued—“any enterprise that has a formal object must have a substantive object as well—that is, a goal that is not stated solely in terms that depend on the concept of being the object of that enterprise.”³⁹

In the case of a competitive game, there must be a substantive object of the game, something that constitutes winning but cannot simply consist in winning, so described. A game whose object was specifiable only as “winning” wouldn’t have an object—that is, wouldn’t have any object in particular. And if a game had no particular object, then there would be no such thing as winning it, and so it wouldn’t be a fully constituted competitive game. Similarly, a hunt whose object was specifiable only as “the quarry” wouldn’t be a fully constituted search, and the question “What is the answer?” isn’t by itself a fully constituted question.⁴⁰

Practical reasoning as well, then, must have a substantive object or aim: there must be something at which practical reasoning aims in virtue of which it aims at figuring out what to do.

Let me elaborate by returning to the example involving tomorrow’s lunch. Suppose that the time for practical deliberation has come: I must now decide whether to eat at home or go out for lunch. In order to reason my way to a decision or intention, there must be some criterion or standard that guides my deliberation. There must be some object or aim I am attempting to achieve in deciding one way or the other. Could my aim be simply to identify “the thing to do”?⁴¹ Velleman’s point is that although I am indeed looking for the “the thing to do,” I cannot look for it solely under that description, just as I cannot conduct a search for something that is described solely as “the thing I am looking for.” There must be a mark in virtue of which something counts as the thing for

39. Velleman, “The Possibility of Practical Reason,” 700–701.

40. *Ibid.*, 701. Compare Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, 51–53.

41. This is how Allan Gibbard describes the aim of practical reasoning. See Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*, 7.

which I am searching if my activity is to constitute a genuine search. Similarly, there must be some mark in virtue of which a course of action counts as “the thing to do,” and practical reasoning must involve the search for that mark. Without such a mark, I would have no basis on which to determine whether eating at home or going out for lunch is the thing to do. Thus, just as theoretical reasoning is driven by the substantive aim of truth, so must practical reasoning be driven by some substantive aim of its own.

Moreover, if—as I argued above—the identity thesis is false, then the aim of practical reasoning cannot be to identify what one ought to do, at least under that description. For if that were the aim, then answering the normative question would never fail to answer the practical question. Practical reasoning must therefore be driven by an aim we can understand in nonnormative or descriptive terms.⁴²

But how, then, should we understand the relation between normative thought and practical thought? More specifically, what is the point of normative or ethical thought? What are our normative concepts for? If practical reasoning does not aim at what we have most reason to do (at least under that description), and thus does not require the deployment of normative concepts, why do we nevertheless so often conduct our practical deliberations in normative terms? Why do our normative judgments figure so frequently in our practical deliberations?

These questions are especially pressing for externalists like Parfit. If ethical thought is only contingently practical or motivating, why do our ethical judgments so reliably figure in our practical deliberations? Why, in other words, do we happen to care so much about doing what we ought to do? One familiar externalist explanation is provided by W. D. Ross: “When I ask myself why I do my duty (*when* I do it, and do it conscientiously), the truest answer I can find is that I do it because, then at least, I desire to do my duty more than I desire anything else.”⁴³ Ross is concerned

42. Considerations of space preclude my offering an account of the substantive aim of practical reasoning here. For a crude example of what such an account might look like, see Jeremy Bentham’s psychological hedonism: “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain*, and *pleasure*. It is for them alone . . . to determine what we shall do” (*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart [Oxford: Clarendon, 1996], 11). Somewhat more plausible is the familiar instrumentalist conception of practical reasoning associated with the Hobbesian and Humean traditions. According to instrumentalists, the point of practical reasoning is to help us achieve our ultimate goals or satisfy our intrinsic desires. See, for instance, David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), chap. 2. For a rather more complex and compelling account of the substantive aim of practical reasoning, see Velleman, *Practical Reflection*.

43. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, 206. Compare Prichard, “Duty and Interest,” 38; and Parfit, *On What Matters*, 2:416.

specifically with moral judgments here, but this sort of explanation is even more plausible when applied to normative judgments more generally: the reason why our normative judgments play such a significant role in our practical lives is that we all want to do what we ought (or have most reason) to do. Unfortunately, this explanation merely pushes the relevant questions back a step: we have not genuinely explained the practical significance of normative judgments if we have not explained why human beings tend to desire to do what they ought to do. Put another way, the ubiquitous desire to act as we ought is just a manifestation of the phenomenon that needs to be explained, and so it cannot explain that phenomenon.⁴⁴

Other accounts of the practical significance of our ethical commitments are similarly inadequate. According to Russ Shafer-Landau, for instance, “the near-perfect alignment of [normative] judgment and (some degree of) motivation can be explained by the intrinsic, *prima facie* motivational power of [normative] judgment.”⁴⁵ Like Ross, though, Shafer-Landau solves one explanatory puzzle only by creating another. We have not genuinely explained the practical significance of normative judgments if we have not explained why normative judgments are intrinsically motivating. This further puzzle is precisely what pushes philosophers like Hare and Gibbard in the direction of the identity thesis. For if the identity thesis were true, there would be no puzzle here: normative judgments would be intrinsically motivating because they would be conclusions of practical reasoning—they would be answers to the practical question of what to do. If, however, the identity thesis is false, then the intrinsic motivational power of normative judgments cries out for explanation, especially given that most other kinds of judgment lack this distinctive power.

Shafer-Landau suggests that the task of providing the relevant explanation should fall to evolutionary biologists and social scientists rather than philosophers.⁴⁶ Yet it is difficult to see how any evolutionary or sociological explanation could be forthcoming, at least if we take seriously Shafer-Landau’s view that normative judgments are beliefs about irreducibly normative nonnatural properties—properties that fall outside the purview of the natural and social sciences.⁴⁷ Presumably any scientific account of normative beliefs could explain their distinctive practical sig-

44. David Enoch proposes a number of explanations along these lines in *Taking Morality Seriously* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 252–55, and each exhibits the same failing: it leaves the larger phenomenon—the practical significance of our normative judgments—mysterious.

45. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 157. Michael Smith offers a similar explanation of the practical significance of moral judgments (*The Moral Problem*, 71–76).

46. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 160.

47. *Ibid.*, 17, 59–60.

nificance only by citing the natural or social phenomena those beliefs are about. But if, as Shafer-Landau and other nonnaturalists suppose, normative judgments are not actually about such phenomena, then there is no material out of which scientists and social scientists could construct the needed explanations. Nonnaturalism thus appears to rule out the possibility of any a posteriori explanation of the practical significance of ethical thought.⁴⁸

T. M. Scanlon attempts to deflect the demand for further explanation by claiming that the practical significance of normative judgments is conceptually guaranteed and therefore stands in no need of explanation. Scanlon frames his argument in terms of a “conception” of rational agency: “[The] familiar idea of rational agency explains the practical significance of [judgments] about reasons. If a rational agent judges *p* to be a reason to do *a* under certain circumstances, then he or she will normally treat *p* as weighing in favor of *a* on appropriate occasions. If he or she judges that *p* is conclusive reason to do *a*, then he or she will normally so act when the occasion arises.”⁴⁹ For Scanlon, the practical significance of normative judgments is built into our understanding of rational agency. Why do our ethical commitments figure so prominently in our practical lives? Because we are rational, and it is part of the very idea of rationality that rational agents accord practical weight to their ethical commitments.

Unfortunately, this is not the appropriate sort of explanation. The conceptual truth that normative judgments are intrinsically motivating or that rational agents tend to act in accordance with their normative judgments cannot explain the metaphysical or psychological fact that our normative judgments regularly have practical consequences. Conceptual truths cannot provide metaphysical or psychological explanations, and those are the kinds of explanations we are after here. Let me elaborate with an example. Suppose we are considering a theory of the nature of water that cannot explain why water is clear. And suppose I object that this explanatory failing is a strike against the theory: all other things being equal, we should opt for a theory that explains the clarity of water. It would be no response to my objection to say that water’s clarity is conceptually guaranteed and therefore stands in no need of explanation. That is, it would be no response to point out that water is clear by definition. This is the wrong sort of explanation. Reminding us that our concept of water

48. Nonreductive naturalists might have more to say here. See, for instance, Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 78–79. Expressivists definitely have more to say here. See Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), chap. 4. Unfortunately, Gibbard’s explanations—and expressivist explanations more generally—presuppose the truth of the identity thesis. Reductionists also have more to say here. See Section IV below.

49. Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, 55.

applies to the stuff in Lake Michigan partly in virtue of the fact that that stuff is clear does not explain why the stuff in Lake Michigan is clear. It may provide a partial explanation of why our concept of water applies to the stuff in Lake Michigan. It may also explain why the stuff in Lake Michigan would not be water were it not clear. It does not explain, however, why the stuff in Lake Michigan is clear, and that is what a theory of water should explain.

Return now to the practical significance of our ethical commitments. Scanlon maintains that we can explain this significance by appealing to conceptual truths. In response to questions about why our normative judgments figure so prominently in our practical lives, he replies: if they did not so figure, then we would not be rational agents, for it is part of the very idea of rational agency that such agents are moved by their normative judgments. But as in the water example above, this is an explanation of the wrong sort. Observing that something satisfies our concept of a rational agent only if it regularly acts in accordance with its normative judgments no more explains why *we* regularly act in accordance with our normative judgments than observing that something satisfies the concept of water only if it is clear explains why the stuff in Lake Michigan is clear. The conceptual truth that normative judgments are practically significant may explain why our concept of a normative judgment does not apply to judgments that lack practical significance. It does not, however, explain why our normative judgments are practically significant. Any explanation invoking this conceptual truth would have to proceed in the other direction: judgments count as normative at least partly because they regularly figure in our practical deliberations.⁵⁰

Scanlon's explanation may appear stronger than this, since it might seem that we have independent reasons to think of ourselves as rational agents. If those reasons explain our rationality, then they can also explain the practical significance of our normative judgments. This appearance is misleading, though. It depends on a crucial ambiguity in the term "rational agent." According to one sense of this term, to say that we are rational agents is merely to say that we are capable of acting for reasons. And there are indeed all sorts of considerations that support the conclusion that we are rational in this sense. According to another sense of the term, though, to say that we are rational agents is to say that we (more or less) conform to the norms of rationality. Creatures that fail to be rational in this sense are not nonrational; they are irrational. Scanlon's "idea of rational agency" is

50. I am indebted to Mark Schroeder for helping me formulate the ideas in this and the previous paragraph. For a similar argument about the explanatory limits of this sort of conceptual connection, see Jon Tresan, "De Dicto Internalist Cognitivism," *Noûs* 40 (2006): 145–48.

clearly a conception of rationality in this second sense.⁵¹ The question, then, is whether we have any independent reason to think of ourselves as rational in this way. But this is no different from the question of whether we can explain or account for the practical significance of our normative judgments. Scanlon certainly cannot explain our status as rational agents by appealing to the fact that we tend to act in accordance with our normative judgments. That would make his proposed explanation of the practical significance of our normative judgments blatantly circular: our normative judgments have practical consequences because we are rational agents, and we count as rational agents because our normative judgments have practical consequences. We need some *independent* reason to think we are rational in this sense. After all, what we are hoping to explain is not why rational agents usually act in accordance with their normative judgments, but rather why *we* usually act in accordance with *our* normative judgments. A conception of rationality will contribute to such an explanation only if we have independent reasons to think we are rational in the relevant sense.⁵²

Where does that leave us? The connection between thinking about what we ought to do and thinking about what to do must be more intimate than the merely contingent one posited by externalists like Ross and Parfit. Shafer-Landau and Scanlon tighten this connection but in a way that leaves it mysterious. What we need, then, is an account of the relation between ethical thought and practical thought that preserves the tight connection while also illuminating it.

IV

One of the obstacles preventing externalists like Parfit, Shafer-Landau, and Scanlon from offering more enlightening explanations of the prac-

51. Scanlon writes: "A being is a rational agent only if the judgments that it makes about reasons make a difference to the actions and attitudes that it proceeds to have. . . . A rational agent will, for example, generally intend to do those actions that he or she judges him or herself to have conclusive reason to do" (*Being Realistic about Reasons*, 54).

52. It might seem that the Davidsonian considerations mentioned in Section II could provide the relevant explanation. On the assumption that rationality requires agents to act in accordance with their normative judgments, Davidson's principle of charity does guarantee that most of our actions will accord with our ethical commitments. If they did not, we would not be able to interpret or make sense of ourselves. But this "hermeneutic" explanation leaves the psychological phenomenon that interests us mysterious. It tells us that we cannot help but apply certain labels to us and our commitments, but it does not shed light on why we act the way we do. Put another way, it does not tell us why normative judgments alone have this distinctive constitutive connection to rationality. (Compare James Dreier, "Another World," in *Passions and Projections*, ed. Robert N. Johnson and Michael Smith [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 161–66.) A Davidsonian might insist that this is the only kind of explanation available of our tendency to act in accordance with our normative judgments. We could refute that claim, however, by providing a more substantive and illuminating explanation, which I attempt to do in Section IV below.

ticality of normative judgments is that they are also nonnaturalists: they all take normative concepts and properties to be irreducibly normative. Consequently, they cannot explain the practical significance of normative judgments by citing their content. They obviously cannot analyze that content in nonnormative or descriptive terms, for then they would no longer be nonnaturalists. They could, of course, analyze the content of one sort of normative judgment in terms of another—by saying, for instance, that judgments about reasons are just judgments about what counts in favor of what—but that would leave us with the puzzle of why judgments about the irreducibly normative counting-in-favor-of relation have practical consequences. Any such nonreductive analysis would merely relocate the puzzle rather than solve it.⁵³

Reductive hypotheses have much greater explanatory potential. In fact, I believe that even a fairly modest reductive hypothesis about the content of ethical thought can shed a great deal of light on the relation between ethics and practical reasoning. Here is my hypothesis: normative reasoning is reasoning *about* practical reasoning—to think about reasons for action or about what ought to be done is to think *about* practical reasoning rather than to engage in it. More specifically, normative reasoning is reasoning about sound or successful practical reasoning. When, for example, I conclude that I ought to eat lunch at home tomorrow, my conclusion concerns the outcome of sound practical reasoning. In particular, it amounts to the judgment that were I to reason soundly about where to eat lunch tomorrow, I would arrive at the intention or decision to eat at home. Similarly, when I judge that the fact that our finances are currently stretched is a reason for me to eat at home tomorrow, I judge that this fact about our finances figures in sound reasoning that would conclude with the intention or decision to eat at home.⁵⁴

According to this modest hypothesis, the difference between practical reasoning and normative reasoning is the difference between thinking about what to do and thinking about one's thinking about what to do. It follows that normative or ethical judgments are about practical reasoning rather than products of it, and that normative reasoning is a form of doxastic or theoretical reasoning. The conclusion of ethical deliberation—a judgment about what I ought to do—is just a belief about the outcome of sound practical reasoning. I can form such a belief without

53. For a possible exception, see Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, chap. 4.

54. This analysis of judgments about reasons needs refinement, of course. For my full account of how reasons figure in practical reasoning, see Matthew Silverstein, "Reducing Reasons," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 10 (2016): 1–22; and compare Kieran Setiya, "What Is a Reason to Act?" *Philosophical Studies* 167 (2014): 221–35; and Jonathan Way, "Reasons as Premises of Good Reasoning," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming). I have omitted most of the details here, since my focus in this article is on the broader picture.

deciding what to do: I can have a view about the outcome of sound practical reasoning or about considerations that figure in sound practical reasoning without engaging in practical reasoning. This is why I can conclude that I ought to have lunch at home tomorrow without having decided or even taken up the question of where to eat—and why more generally I can think about what I ought to do or about what I have reason to do without thereby deliberating about what to do. I can have a settled view about what the conclusion of sound or successful practical reasoning would be without engaging in practical reasoning at all.

This account of the content of ethical thought might appear circular, since soundness seems like a normative notion: to reason soundly is to reason well or as one should. If soundness is irreducibly normative, then my hypothesis will succeed merely in analyzing normative reasoning in normative terms—terms that are themselves subject to that very same analysis (and so on *ad infinitum*). The hypothesis will amount to nothing more than the claim that normative judgments are judgments about how practical reasoning ought to be conducted. And in that case we would still lack an explanation about how such judgments become practical for the conduct of that reasoning.

I accept that soundness is a normative notion, but I deny that it is irreducibly normative. I believe that we can understand the soundness of practical reasoning much as we understand the soundness of doxastic reasoning, and that we can understand the latter in purely descriptive terms. I have argued at length for this conclusion elsewhere, and I shall not rehearse those arguments here.⁵⁵ Instead I propose that we treat a descriptive account of soundness as a central component of my hypothesis about the relation between ethical thought and practical thought. If, as I shall argue, this hypothesis can explain various otherwise mysterious phenomena, then we will have additional reasons to take the idea that soundness is a descriptive notion seriously.

With that in mind, let me introduce an analogy that may help to clarify my hypothesis. Consider the kind of reasoning or calculation we employ when we perform long division. Suppose you are taking an exam and are presented with a complicated long division problem. Suppose further that before you even attempt to calculate the correct answer, you already have a view about what the correct answer is. (Perhaps you saw the answer key before starting the test, or perhaps a mathematically gifted friend of yours reported the answer.) We can think of your view about the correct answer as a belief about the result you would reach if you calculated the quotient soundly. Put another way, we can think of it as a belief about the outcome of sound “divisional reasoning.” Notice, though,

55. See Silverstein, “Reducing Reasons,” secs. 2–3.

that in having formed such a belief, you have not yet engaged in divisional reasoning; you have not yet performed long division. This distinction between having a view about the correct answer and performing the actual calculation mirrors the distinction between having a view about how you ought to act and engaging in practical reasoning. Just as you can form a belief about the relevant quotient without actually performing long division, so can you form a belief about the outcome of sound practical reasoning without actually engaging in practical reasoning. The converse holds as well. You can perform long division to completion without forming a belief about the relevant quotient. If you have sufficient doubts about your arithmetic skill, you might work through a long division problem multiple times without being at all confident that the result of your calculations is the quotient you are looking for. Similarly, you can engage in practical reasoning and decide what to do without forming an opinion as to whether your decision is the product of sound practical reasoning.

I shall return to this analogy below. For now the crucial idea is just that the point of ethical concepts is to enable us to think about practical reasoning, either our own or someone else's. But why, you might be wondering, do we need special concepts in order to do this? After all, if practical reasoning has a substantive aim, we should be able to think about practical reasoning by thinking in terms of that aim. What need is there for the concept *ought*? We can shed some light on this question by noting that we may disagree about the aim of practical reasoning. If you happen to subscribe to a theory of practical reasoning that differs from mine, then my describing an action as the one that would achieve the aim identified by my theory (whatever that aim is) will fail to convey to you the thought I hope to convey, namely, that the intention to perform the action in question would be the outcome of sound practical reasoning on your part. This is what the normative concept *ought* is for. By telling you that you ought to perform some action, I can recommend that action as the outcome of sound practical reasoning even if I do not know how you understand the point of practical reasoning. Similarly, unless I know that you share my view about the aim of practical reasoning, I cannot recommend a consideration as relevant to your practical reasoning merely by describing it in terms of that aim. This is what the normative concept of a reason for action is for. In the presence of widespread disagreement about the nature of practical reasoning, we need normative concepts like these to think and talk about practical reasoning.

This account of the purpose of normative concepts suggests that where there is widespread agreement about the constitutive aim of reasoning, normative concepts should be less prominent than they are in the practical realm. That is precisely what we find. Consider the case of doxastic or theoretical reasoning. It is widely accepted that the goal

of theoretical reasoning is truth. This may be because, as Nishi Shah has observed, doxastic deliberation is transparent: deliberation about what to believe invariably gives way to deliberation about what is true.⁵⁶ Given the transparency of theoretical reasoning, I can recommend a consideration as relevant to your deliberation merely by identifying it as evidence—that is, by identifying it as something that bears on the truth of the proposition about which you are deliberating. Similarly, I can tell you that you would arrive at some conclusion were you to engage in sound theoretical reasoning merely by identifying that conclusion as true. This explains why everyday conversations about what to believe are seldom cast in terms of what we ought to believe or in terms of our reasons for belief. Instead these conversations are cast in terms of truth and evidence. If I think you have gone astray in your theoretical deliberation, I will declare that your conclusion is false or that you are ignoring important evidence. Of course I can also declare that you ought to believe otherwise or that you are ignoring important epistemic reasons. These normative notions are perfectly sensible when applied in the theoretical domain, but they are largely otiose. They are most useful in the philosophy classroom when we theorize about the aim of doxastic deliberation or the nature of knowledge. When we are outside of the classroom thinking or talking about what to believe, normative concepts play almost no role at all.

It is the relative opacity of practical deliberation, then, that explains the usefulness of normative concepts in the practical domain. In the absence of any agreement about the aim of practical reasoning, we need normative concepts to think and talk about each other's practical deliberations. Normative concepts also enable us to formulate general claims—or theories—about sound practical reasoning. Even if I have no view about the aim of practical reasoning, I may nevertheless believe that sound practical reasoning could never conclude with the intention to break a promise. If so, then I believe that one ought never to break one's promises. I might also want to make general claims about the kinds of considerations that regularly (or necessarily) figure in sound practical reasoning, which I can frame as normative principles about reasons for action.

In all of these contexts, normative concepts are helpful because they enable us to think and talk about the ingredients and outcomes of sound practical reasoning. As I argued above, though, we can engage in practical reasoning without making any normative judgments or even asking any normative questions. Practically speaking, normative thought is dispensable. This raises the question we pressed against various versions

56. See Nishi Shah, "How Truth Governs Belief," *Philosophical Review* 112 (3002):447–82, 447–48.

of externalism: If normative thought is dispensable, why do ethical considerations nevertheless figure so frequently in our practical deliberations? Why, when we are reasoning about what to do, do we so often accord significant weight to what we ought to do or what we have most reason to do?

A complete answer to these questions would presumably require us first to determine the substantive aim of practical reasoning. But even without an account of the nature of practical thought at our disposal, my hypothesis about the point of ethical reasoning can provide illumination here. If ethical reasoning is reasoning about sound practical reasoning, then it should not be surprising that our judgments about what makes for sound practical deliberation play a role in our actual deliberations. Consider again the analogy to long division. We should expect your belief about the correct answer to influence your calculations. After all, your aim in performing those calculations is just to identify that quotient. Your belief about the quotient therefore bears directly on your calculations. If you are sufficiently confident in that belief, it will guide your calculations in various ways, leading you to add a remainder here or notice a mistake there. It may even prompt you to run through your calculation again if the answer you reach is not the one you believe to be correct. The same goes for one's views about sound practical reasoning. The point of practical reasoning is to arrive at a conclusion about what to do that is supported by true premises. If I am sufficiently confident in my judgment that sound practical deliberation would conclude with the intention to eat lunch at home tomorrow, that judgment will almost certainly guide my practical deliberations in various ways, leading me to give weight to considerations that militate against going out and that count in favor of staying home. My normative judgment might even prompt me to rethink my practical deliberations in the event I arrive at the decision to eat out at my favorite restaurant.⁵⁷

57. Here externalists like Scanlon and Shafer-Landau might complain that my explanation of the practical significance of ethical judgments suffers from precisely the flaw I found in their explanations. I have suggested that our ethical judgments figure regularly in our practical reasoning because they are judgments about sound practical reasoning. Why do we care about reasoning soundly? Why must our aim in practical reasoning be to arrive at a sound conclusion? Because, I am inclined to reply, that is just what reasoning is. A train of thought would not be recognizable as reasoning were it not aimed at issuing in a sound or correct result. And now my explanation appears to have the same form as theirs: we each appeal to a conceptual truth—they to one about rational agency, I to one about reasoning—in order to explain a metaphysical or psychological phenomenon.

The parallels end there, though. Recall that my ultimate complaint about Scanlon's appeal to the conceptual truth that rational agents act in accordance with their normative judgments is that he cannot provide us with any independent reason to think that we are rational in the relevant sense. If the only evidence that we are rational is that we tend to act in accordance with our normative judgments, then our rationality cannot explain this ten-

Recall those platitudes about the practical significance of ethics from Hare and Gibbard: “The function of [ethical judgments] is to guide conduct”; “Ethics concerns what to do.”⁵⁸ Hare and Gibbard maintain that the only way to do justice to these platitudes is to recognize that ethical thought just is practical thought. It should now be clear, though, that the hypothesis that normative reasoning is reasoning *about* sound or successful practical reasoning can also account for the practical significance of ethics. Denying that “*ought* questions and *reason* questions are by their very nature questions of what to do” need not leave ethical thought inert or otiose.⁵⁹ After all, judgments about the outcome of sound practical deliberation (or about the considerations that figure in sound practical deliberation) are obviously and necessarily relevant to practical deliberation. *Pace* Hare, ethical judgments can guide conduct even if they do not directly answer the practical question of what to do. Instead they can guide conduct by being *about* the answer to that question.

V

Although our normative judgments necessarily bear on our practical deliberations, they do not always dictate the outcome of those deliberations. Sometimes we act contrary to our judgments about how we ought to act. Sometimes, in other words, ethical thought and practical thought come apart.

Proponents of the identity thesis must deny this, of course. At most their view allows for cases of compulsion or addiction. In such cases our intentions are formed in line with our normative judgments but are then overridden by pathological urges or fears: practical thought remains concordant with ethical thought but is overwhelmed by brute motivational forces. When we act out of compulsion or addiction, we do not act on the basis of our practical reasoning, and so our actions are not intentional or autonomous. We do not exercise our agency: our actions are traceable to psychological states within us, rather than to ourselves.

dency. Now, it may seem that my explanation is similarly empty: if the only evidence that we engage in practical reasoning is that we care about soundness, then the fact that we are reasoners cannot explain our concern for soundness. But this is not the only evidence. Any kind of deliberation that lacked the aim of soundness would not be able to produce the kinds of intentional or autonomous actions our deliberations are clearly capable of producing. Pick any account of practical reasoning drawn from the philosophy of action. If we remove the aim of arriving at a sound conclusion from that account, we vitiate its explanatory power. There are, then, plenty of independent reasons to think that our practical deliberations essentially aim at soundness. Thanks to Jamie Dreier for pressing me on this point.

58. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, 1; Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*, 13.

59. Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*, 9, 17.

Although the identity thesis leaves room for this sort of weakness of will, it does not allow for less extreme kinds of weakness or *akrasia*. More specifically, it does not allow for cases where our judgments about what we ought to do fail to govern our practical deliberations—cases where we freely and intentionally perform some action even though we judge that we ought to act otherwise. These are cases of clear-eyed *akrasia*, and they are lamentably familiar. As J. L. Austin observed, “we often succumb to temptation with calm and even with finesse.”⁶⁰ Recall my firm conviction that I ought to eat lunch at home tomorrow. Sometime tomorrow morning, I will take up the question of where to have lunch. I will engage in practical reasoning. My judgment that I ought to eat at home certainly bears on that reasoning, and I imagine it will figure explicitly in my thoughts. I am not at all confident it will dictate the outcome of my deliberation, though. If past experience is anything to go by, there is a decent chance I will decide to go out. And if I act on the basis of that decision, I will do so freely and intentionally. It is a fatal flaw of the identity thesis that it cannot accommodate this sort of behavior.

My hypothesis that normative reasoning is reasoning about sound practical reasoning leaves plenty of room for the possibility of *akrasia*. It can also explain why *akrasia* is psychologically distinctive and thus philosophically interesting. According to my hypothesis, there is no guarantee that our practical deliberations will track our normative convictions. My judgments about the considerations that bear on my practical deliberation may not line up with the considerations that actually figure in that deliberation. Put another way, the considerations I believe would be premises in sound or successful practical reasoning may not be the considerations on which I rely in my actual practical reasoning: the considerations I judge to be reasons may not be the considerations I respond to as reasons in my practical deliberation. So, I may act intentionally (indeed for reasons) yet contrary to my judgment about how I ought to act.

When I do, though, I recognize that something rather odd has happened. My behavior is accompanied by cognitive dissonance: it feels like a kind of malfunction. After all, I am always trying to reason soundly, yet in cases of clear-eyed *akrasia* I arrive at a conclusion I judge to be the product of unsound reasoning. My judgment about the outcome of sound reasoning conflicts with the outcome of my attempt at sound reasoning. Something has clearly gone awry.

Return to the analogy with long division. My attempt to calculate the quotient may produce an answer that differs from the one I believe (for whatever reason) to be correct. I may then run through the calcula-

60. J. L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” in *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175–204, 198.

tion again, but there is no guarantee I will arrive at a different result. And if I don't, I am bound to experience some sort of discomfort or dissonance. My attitudes do not strictly contradict one another: on the one hand I have a belief about the outcome of sound long division and on the other hand I have the product of my attempt to perform sound long division. My belief nevertheless leads me to expect that my calculation will produce a certain result. When it does not, I am likely to feel confounded.

There is no guarantee that my calculation (rather than my belief about the correct answer) is the source of the problem, however. My mathematically gifted friend may have made a rare mistake, or I may have misread the answer key. Similarly, when the outcome of practical reasoning does not comport with one's normative convictions, there is no guarantee that one's practical reasoning (rather than one's normative reasoning) is to blame. Sometimes, of course, we do act contrary to what we *know* is best. Other times, though, it is our normative judgment—our normative theory, as it were—that is mistaken.

Consider the case of John, who has grown up in a fundamentalist family and has internalized various problematic normative beliefs about gays and lesbians. Like his parents, John firmly believes that homosexuality is immoral and that gay people should be shunned. Put in terms of reasons, John believes that the fact that someone is gay is a decisive reason to shun that person. When John arrives at university, however, he comes into contact with people whose sexual orientation differs from his own for the first time. At first he shuns these people, as his values countenance. Over time, though, he begins to treat his gay and lesbian classmates with respect. In his practical deliberations—his deliberations about what to do—he no longer treats the fact that someone is gay as relevant or significant: he no longer accords weight to such considerations in his practical reasoning. Yet he continues to believe—and even to profess—that homosexuality is a sin and that gays and lesbians are to be shunned. Although his practical orientation has shifted, his normative outlook has lagged behind. Consequently, when he finds himself treating his gay and lesbian classmates respectfully, he experiences cognitive dissonance.

My hypothesis about the relation between normative thought and practical thought can help us understand why. According to that hypothesis, John's judgment that he ought to shun gay and lesbian students concerns the outcome of sound practical reasoning. It is tantamount to the judgment that were he reasoning soundly, he would arrive at the intention to shun his classmates. But he does not arrive at that intention. By his own lights, then, John is reasoning unsoundly. Every time he considers the question of how to treat his gay and lesbian classmates, he arrives at the intention to treat them respectfully. But he also believes that sound

or successful practical reasoning would conclude with the intention to shun these classmates. The conclusions John is reaching through practical reasoning are not the conclusions he believes to be sound—hence his psychological discomfort.

VI

Any compelling account of the relation between ethical thought and practical thought must steer between two extremes. On the one hand it must avoid the extreme internalism of the identity thesis, according to which ethical thought just is practical thought. Although the identity thesis captures the practical significance of normative thought, it ignores the fact that ethical thought and practical thought frequently diverge. On the other hand a successful account of the relation between ethics and practical reasoning must avoid the extreme externalism of nonnaturalists like Parfit and Scanlon. Externalism of this sort allows for the possibility of clear-eyed *akrasia* but leaves the practical relevance of normative judgments mysterious.

In this article I have attempted to chart a middle path. I have argued that we can illuminate the relation between ethics and practical reasoning by focusing on the content of ethical thought. My hypothesis is that ethical thought is *about* practical thought. More specifically, ethical or normative reasoning is reasoning about sound or successful practical reasoning. Although ethical reasoning is not itself practical reasoning, then, there remains a close and necessary connection between them: the latter is the subject matter of the former. I have defended this hypothesis by pointing out what it can explain, including the practical relevance of ethical deliberation and both the possibility and philosophical interest of clear-eyed *akrasia*.

Let me conclude by noting one further implication of my account of the relation between ethics and practical reason. Recall that my hypothesis presupposes that we can get some sort of independent purchase on the nature of practical thought. It presupposes, in other words, that practical reasoning is carried out under the guise of something other than the good or, more broadly, the normative. Notice, however, that if practical reasoning does indeed aim at something other than the good, and if ethical reasoning really is reasoning about practical reasoning, then there is an important sense in which practical thought is conceptually prior to ethical thought. We cannot understand what our normative judgments are really about without first understanding the aim of practical deliberation. Put another way, if we do not understand the aim of practical reasoning, then we cannot get any sort of grip on the real subject matter of ethics—beyond, of course, knowing that its subject matter is sound practical reasoning.

If my hypothesis is correct, then, it turns out that insofar as the philosophy of action has anything to tell us about the aim of practical reasoning, the philosophy of action is indispensable for ethical inquiry. For according to that hypothesis, the subject matter of ethics is practical reasoning, something that is inextricably intertwined with various other phenomena studied by philosophers of action, including intention, agency, autonomy, and action for a reason. And if that is what ethics is about, then we cannot hope to develop a suitable ethical theory without first studying agency and the nature of practical thought. We cannot be good ethical theorists without also being good action theorists.