

HOW CAN THERE BE REASONING TO ACTION?¹

John Schwenkler, Florida State University

(I)

In general we think of reasoning as a way of moving from some body of evidence to a belief that is drawn as a conclusion from it. But is it possible for reasoning to conclude in action, i.e., in a person's intentionally *doing* one thing or another? Aristotle seems to have thought so:

for example, whenever one thinks that every man ought to walk, and that one is a man oneself, straightaway one walks; or that, in this case, no man should walk, one is a man: straightaway one remains at rest. And so one acts in the two cases provided there is nothing to compel or prevent. Again, I ought to create a good, a house is good: straightaway he makes a house. I need a covering, a coat is covering: I need a coat. What I need I ought to make, I need a coat: I make a coat. And the conclusion "I must make a coat" is an action. (*De Motu Animalium* 7, 701a12-20)

The details of this passage are obscure, but I'm going to take Aristotle to be drawing our attention to the way that what a person intentionally does—for example, the action of walking, remaining at rest, making a house or a coat, etc.—is similar to what a person believes in that both can be explained by displaying the reasoning that is their ground. This is the sort of thing we seem to do in real-life contexts. For example:

When I started *8 Faces* in 2010, it seemed like a crazy idea to start a print magazine. Not only was I a web designer, but everyone was going crazy for digital everything, especially iPad magazines. But I did it because I wanted to create something that would last; something that put me in touch with the physical world.²

So I think many Uber drivers are driving for, I mentioned one part of the reason I was driving was because I didn't have huge social network. The other part, the reason I was driving is that I moved from Minnesota to Chicago and Chicago is a very expensive city. I think a lot of Uber drivers drive for the same reason. I did it because

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² See <https://tinyurl.com/qsmk3vc>

life is expensive. You need that extra money, you need that extra income even if you do have a decent job.³

In each of these cases, the phrase “I did it because” is used to introduce the reason or reasons why the speaker did a certain thing. It seems fair to reframe the implied reasoning along Aristotelian lines: “I want to create something that will last, a print magazine is something that will last”—and so one starts a print magazine. “I need extra money, driving for Uber will give me extra money”—and so one starts driving for Uber. Let’s suppose we accept this framing. Our question then is: *How is it possible* that the action of starting a print magazine, or driving for Uber, and so on, could be a conclusion that is drawn from the considerations that are taken up as premises in practical reasoning?

A *bad* reason for saying that this isn’t possible after all is that action involves movement of the body, whereas reasoning can only conclude in something mental. This reason is no good at all: the implied division between the mental and the bodily is wholly without merit. Moreover, the better reasons that are given below for doubting the possibility of reasoning to action will apply just as much to so-called “mental actions”, such as calculating a sum or engaging in a guided meditation, as to actions that involve overt bodily movement.⁴ If it’s possible for one’s deliberation to conclude in the act of, say, consciously simulating a quiet walk through the woods, then there’s no good reason to think it couldn’t also conclude in taking an actual walk.

A *better* reason for doubting the possibility of reasoning to action is that it can be unclear how an action could ever *follow* from the considerations taken up as premises in practical reasoning, at least in the same way that a belief is supposed to follow from the considerations that one reasons from in arriving at it. Aristotle’s examples in the *De Motu* obscure this difficulty, by making it seem as if there’s a relation of proof or entailment that is at work: in his cases what seems to make the action follow “straightaway” from the considerations that one reasons from is that it appears to be something the reasoner *has* to do, on pain of irrationality, given the considerations that she has taken as her premises. As we’ll see, however, most cases of practical reasoning aren’t like this at all.

It’s this latter difficulty that motivates Jonathan Dancy’s argument in *Practical Shape* (Dancy 2018; cited hereafter as ‘*PS*’). Here is how Dancy puts the central question of his book:

To what extent is it possible for action that is a response to the considerations adduced in deliberation, to stand in the same relations to those considerations, taken as a whole, as those in which a belief that is a response to considerations adduced in reasoning stands to those considerations, taken as a whole? (*PS*, p. 27)

³ See <https://tinyurl.com/r8fqnxb>

⁴ Thanks here to Marshall Thompson.

The answer he gives is “To a considerable extent”:

The considerations that are adduced in deliberation, and to which the relevant action is a response, are conditions that together favour that response, or favour responding in that way. The considerations adduced in reasoning to belief, and to which that belief is a response, are considerations that favour that response, or favour responding in that way. It is, as far as this goes, the same on both sides. (*PS*, p. 29)

I accept Dancy’s answer up to this point: in reasoning to action, the thing that one does is intelligible as a response to the considerations one reasons from only to the extent that doing this is something that those considerations favor in some way. But the way that Dancy goes on to develop this position seems to me to obscure what I think is a deep difference between theoretical and practical reasoning. He continues:

when an agent deliberates well and then acts accordingly, the action done is of the sort most favoured by the considerations rehearsed, taken as a whole—just as when an agent reasons well and then believes accordingly, the belief formed (the believing, that is, not the thing believed) is of the sort most favoured by the considerations rehearsed, again taken as a whole. (*ibid.*)

The position Dancy takes here is a version of what in earlier work I called *Parallelism* about practical and theoretical reasoning: Dancy assumes “that practical and theoretical reasoning share a common form, and are distinguished only by their content or subject matter” (Schwenkler 2019, p. 120). However, Dancy’s own version of Parallelism differs from the position I critiqued there in two important respects. First, while I construed Parallelism as including the thesis that the conclusion of practical reasoning must be proved or “shewn to be true” (Anscombe 1963, p. 58) by the premises that one reasons from, Dancy argues that there is this much difference between reasoning to action and reasoning to belief: “Practical favouring is explained by appeal to values, but theoretical favouring is explained by the probability of truth (broadly speaking)” (*PS*, p. 8).⁵ Second, in that earlier work I followed G. E. M. Anscombe in saddling Parallelism with the further commitment to construing practical reasoning as a matter of proceeding from a general practical principle to a particular action that is an instance of it, whereas Dancy will strongly resist any such position.⁶

⁵ Again, a bit later: “The real difference between practical and theoretical reasoning lies in matters to do with explanation: that is, the relation that explains the ability of the considerations adduced . . . to favour the relevant response. As I have presented the matter, in the practical case it is what one might call considerations of value that play this explanatory role. In the theoretical case it is truth-relations or relations of probabilification” (*PS*, p. 97).

⁶ Here I have in mind Dancy’s defense of moral particularism in *Ethics Without Principles* (Dancy 2004).

Still, I'm going to argue here that the version of Parallelism that we find in *Practical Shape* is untenable. It is a mistake to think, as Dancy does, that in practical reasoning the action that is one's conclusion is meant to be, or to be of a sort, that is *most* favored by the considerations that one reasons from—whereas there clearly is a demand of this kind in the case of reasoning to ordinary belief. I'll argue for this in two ways:

- First, I will argue that the considerations treated as premises in practical reasoning frequently fail to favor a particular sort of action, let alone a particular action in all its detail, over any number of others—and even in such a case it's possible to reason one's way to an action that is a response to those considerations.
- Second, I will argue that it's possible for a number of different actions, or sorts of action, to be favored in incomparable respects, with no prospect of determining which should prevail according to some overarching standard, nor any real pressure to do so. In such a case, the question “Which is most favored?” is one that we are entirely unequipped to answer—but it's possible nevertheless to act in a way that is a reasoned response to our situation as we understand it.

Additionally, I will argue along the way that reasoning to belief is fundamentally different in both of these respects. I'll go on to explain why this should be: that in practical reasoning the correct conclusion to draw is not supposed to have been determined in advance, because this is a form of reasoning by which we *create* truth through acting rather than *reflecting* a truth that is independently so.

(II)

My first argument against Dancy's position is the more straightforward one. It's easily motivated by appeal to cases of what Dancy calls “equipollence”, i.e. situations in which “the case for one course of action emerges as no better or worse than the case for another” (*PS*, p. 137). Dancy continues:

Nobody denies that this happens. And the same thing can happen when we are wondering what to believe. The difference between these cases lies in the fact that, on the practical side, the deliberator has a perfect right to select either course of action as the one to pursue. On the theoretical side, by contrast, someone who recognizes that there are two equally probable options is rationally required to abstain from judgement. (*ibid.*)

As I'll explain in detail just below, I do not want to draw from the phenomenon of equipollence the conclusion that Dancy goes on to cite Joseph Raz as concluding from it,

namely that in cases like these “the action on which one eventually decides cannot itself be part of the reasoning” (*PS*, p. 138). Rather, I join Dancy in taking the opposite position: that even when there is no action, or way of acting, that is favored uniquely or to a greater degree than any of the alternatives to it by what Dancy calls the “shape” of one’s practical situation as it shows up in deliberation,⁷ nevertheless when a person acts in some way on the basis of this deliberation this action *is* the conclusion of her practical reasoning. The point I wish to emphasize is only that this need not be reasoning that the person takes to have shown that the case for doing what she did was stronger than the case for doing anything else.

Let’s consider a specific example. It’s time to make dinner. There are tofu, chicken, and sausage in the fridge. The kids are clamoring for sausage, but we ate this just two nights ago. Chicken is healthy but a bit of a mess to cook. No one likes tofu all that much, but it’s inexpensive and easy to prepare. Hmm—I guess we’ll have the chicken. In beginning to prepare chicken for dinner, need I take the case for doing this to be somehow *stronger* than the cases were for making sausage or tofu? Not necessarily: the cases might have been equally good, or each good enough in itself and beyond that point hard to compare. (This last idea will come up again in the next section.) And the fact that there’s no difference in the degree to which they are favored doesn’t prohibit me from picking one of the several good options I have, and going ahead with that. Indeed, it seems that this is just the thing that practical rationality requires me to do.

A similar thing can happen in situations of deliberative uncertainty. Suppose I am trying to figure out what route to take to my office. And suppose there is exactly one consideration—time spent en route, perhaps—that matters to me in my deliberation. The information that’s available to me might leave it uncertain which of these routes is going to be the fastest: is it the shorter route, or the one that tends to have less traffic? In a case like this, my uncertainty over which of the options is most favored doesn’t prohibit me from picking the one that *seems* to have the most to be said for it.

Notice how different this is from the way we reason to belief. Suppose, for example, that there are three suspects who may have committed a crime. Each of them has clear motive and the means to have done it, and none has a very good alibi. In that case, a response like “Hmm—I think it was the butler” would entirely unwarranted: the most I can reasonably believe is that it *could have* been him, or perhaps that he did it *unless* he was framed by the gardener. (Of course I can *bet* that it was the butler, but this action won’t be expressive of an outright belief that this is the case.) Indeed, the same point holds even if the case for tagging the butler as the culprit is stronger than the case for anyone else. Here, though the judgment “The butler did it” is more favored by my evidence than any of the other *unqualified* conclusions I could have reached, nevertheless I’m not going to be justified if that is what I come to believe. I am, as Dancy says, rationally required to suspend judgment on that particular question, or to settle for a

⁷ See the passage quoted in footnote 9 below.

conclusion that's qualified by words like "or", "if", "perhaps", and "unless". There is, by contrast, no such thing as *acting* in a way that has this kind of internal qualifiedness: if all I conclude through practical reasoning is that *perhaps* I ought to do a certain thing, or that I ought to do either it *or* something else, then I have not yet reasoned to any action at all. I have not made up my mind about what I am going to do.⁸

In *Practical Shape*, Dancy's main response to this argument is that while the phenomenon of equipollence is possible, in *good* cases of deliberation one's reasoning settles on a unique course of action that's favored over the alternatives to it. He writes:

we should not allow our account of what one might call the bad case, where the reasoning leaves us still with a choice, to infect our account of what one might call the good case, where the reasoning does hit on one way of acting as the sort of response most favoured by the situation, taken as a whole. In the good case, acting in that way is the response most favoured by the situation, and our action is done in that light. The fact that this arrangement is sometimes subverted by the discovery of a second way of acting no less favoured than the first is irrelevant to our account of cases where this is not what is happening. (*PS*, p. 138)

While I agree entirely that we shouldn't always let worries about bad cases infect the way we think about phenomena of philosophical interest, I don't believe that reply will work in this case. One reason for that is that it's not at all clear that Dancy is correct in regarding this case as the bad one: it is, rather, a perfectly normal situation to find ourselves in, and for a person who is in such a situation there is nothing at all irrational in picking one option or another. Any felt pressure to regard situations of equipollence as deliberatively non-ideal seems to stem from a prior commitment to construing practical reasoning as having the same form as reasoning to ordinary belief.

The other reason to doubt this reply is that even if we accepted that the good case of practical reasoning is one where the reasoner's situation calls for a unique way of acting that she needs to identify confidently, still we'd be left with the fact that practical and theoretical reasoning are different in that *in the bad case* it is both possible and reasonable to choose to act in any of the equally favored ways, while as we have seen the same thing isn't true when one reasons to belief. This fact demands an explanation, and below I'll suggest what the explanation for it is: that in practical reasoning the conclusion that one is to reach is not decided, but only constrained, by the considerations that one reasons from. Practical reasoning is a form of thought by which we *make* the world to be as we think it ought to be, rather than one through which we get our minds to reflect the antecedently given shape of our practical situation.⁹ Because of this, the conclusion that

⁸ I thank Marshall Thompson for helping me to improve the argument of this paragraph.

⁹ Contrast Dancy: "The notion of shape is a normative one, since the shape of the situation consists in the ways in which the various aspects of it combine to call for one form of response rather than another. ... The shape of our thought is simply the way we shape the situation up, but the situation has a shape of its

one ought to reach through practical reasoning isn't fixed by the considerations that one reasons from in the same way as when the correct answer has been decided in advance.

One might wonder, however, whether we shouldn't instead draw from the phenomena of equipollence and choice under deliberative uncertainty the conclusion that what happens when we pick from among a range of acceptable alternatives isn't a matter of *reasoning* to action after all. Above I noted that Dancy cites Joseph Raz as holding this position, and Sarah Paul has also advanced it in a recent paper, arguing that "once we reach the point of plumping for one of whatever particular means are available and perceived as equally acceptable, this should no longer be understood as an exercise of reasoning, for it requires no further judgment of choiceworthiness" (Paul 2013, p. 296). But there are good reasons to resist this conclusion.

First, the significance of saying that in the kind of situation I have been considering, in which a person performs an action that she sees as an acceptable means to some further end, this action is settled on as a conclusion of *reasoning*, is that this identifies an important difference between actions of this kind and things that are done, as we say, "for no reason" or "just because I wanted to". This distinction is central to Anscombe's position in *Intention*: she writes that "The mark of practical reasoning is that the thing wanted is *at a distance* from the immediate action, and the immediate action is calculated as the way of getting or doing or securing the thing wanted" (1963, p. 79). And such "distance" is notably missing when a person does something simply out of a desire to do it, or simply as a response to something that has happened in the past. It is characteristic only of those actions that have the means–end structure that is described through positive answers to her "certain sense of the question 'Why?'" (Anscombe 1963, p. 9), as for example in "Why are you chopping those onions?"—"Because I'm making chicken." "And why are you making chicken?"—"It's for dinner." In these answers, I reveal the *reasoning* that relates these different descriptions of what I am up to, in virtue of which they all count as descriptions of a single course of action.

Second, we should notice in the sort of case that Paul describes the process of decision isn't something that happens *within* the agent, as when motor systems in your brain calibrate the precise trajectory of the movements by which you carry an action out. The process by which we determine what to do as a means of getting, doing, or securing something we want is conscious, linguistically articulable, and propositionally structured, and it takes place at the level of the person rather than one of her neural subsystems. Indeed, it is only because of this that the ground of one's reasoned choice is available to self-consciousness: I'm making chicken *for dinner* and *because it is healthy*, not just as the result of a process that caused these movements to come about.

What seems to me to have gone wrong here is that Dancy, Raz, and Paul are all assuming that in anything that counts as reasoning to a conclusion, the considerations that

own, which we are trying to get our thought to fit" (PS, pp. 3-4). The idea that practical thinking is an attempt to get our minds to "fit" an antecedently given shape is exactly the one I mean to challenge here.

favor or support drawing that conclusion must favor or support doing this *rather than* doing something else entirely. This assumption is appropriate where theoretical reasoning is concerned: for example, any body of considerations that could justify believing that the butler was the culprit can't also justify believing that it was someone else. Indeed, in that case the opposite holds: any sufficient grounds for believing it was the butler will include sufficient grounds for ruling out any other suspects. But practical reasoning doesn't have this character. Below I will say some more about why this is. Before that I want to offer a further argument against Dancy's position.

(III)

My argument in the previous section focused on Dancy's claim that in a case of successful practical reasoning, the action that is its conclusion must be "of the sort most favoured by the considerations rehearsed, taken as a whole" (*PS*, p. 29). I argued that situations of what Dancy calls equipollence, as well as ones involving deliberation under uncertainty, show that this demand is misplaced, and that in this respect reasoning to action is fundamentally different from reasoning to belief about how things are.

This argument leaves room, however, for a weakened version of Dancy's position, according to which the conclusion of practical reasoning must be only of *a* sort, rather than *the* sort, most favored by the considerations that one reasons from. According to this less ambitious position there will indeed be a deep difference between practical and theoretical rationality, namely that the former allows for the possibility of picking between options that are equally well favored by the premises one considers, and of reaching a conclusion in the face of uncertainty about how strongly favored it is. But the argument I'll put forward in this section will challenge that less ambitious position as well as Dancy's own, by calling into question whether there is any unitary relation of "favoring" according to which potential actions can be evaluated.

The easiest way to motivate this argument is by considering the many different *ways* that doing a certain thing can be good or worthwhile. The case of making dinner provided a simple example of this. The goods at stake included health, taste, cost, and ease of preparation, and it's not clear that we can give sense to the idea that these goods, or the combination of them that would be realized in choosing any of the available options, can be weighed against one another in a way that would settle which of these options were favored over the others. This is not just an epistemic point: the difficulty isn't just that we can't *figure out* which options are the most favored, but rather that it's not clear that there is any fact of the matter to figure out at all. Nor are we entitled to assert without argument that, say, if the tofu (which was inexpensive) was just as acceptable a choice as the chicken (which was tasty), this is because the two of them were favored *equally*, and no less so than any of the other options. It seems at least as natural to say that both of the

options I could have chosen were acceptable just because each had something sufficiently good to be said for it, and no decisive defect that would suffice to rule it out.¹⁰ I'll expand on this last idea a bit later on.

I can think of two reasons why a philosopher might believe that the degree to which possible actions are favored by one's situation must be comparable, at least in principle, in order for rational choice to be possible. One of these follows the line of argument that I considered in the previous section: it is that any choice that isn't made in light of a judgment of comparative choiceworthiness will amount to nothing more than "plumping" for one thing or another. I have already explained why I think this argument fails. In deciding what, for example, to make for dinner, my overarching goal is usually not *to make the best meal I can*, but may be only *to make a good meal that is healthy, tasty, reasonably inexpensive, and sufficiently easy to prepare*. The reasoning through which I come to do such a thing is what would be displayed in my answers to a series of questions "Why?": for example, I am chopping the onions because I'm cooking chicken for dinner. And the applicability of this series of descriptions is what sets my action off from the sort of thing I may be doing "for no reason" or "just because I wanted to", since the descriptions are related as a series of means that are ordered to an end. The thinking through which an action is calculated as a means of attaining an end is different in form from the thinking through which one may identify, for example, the person who committed a crime, since in the latter case there is a demand that one reach the particular conclusion that is supported over all others by the evidence. But both count as forms of *reasoning* nevertheless, since each consists in a conscious, linguistically articulable, propositionally structured process of thought through which a person herself works out the answer to some question. The fundamental difference is in whether that answer is supposed to have been determined in advance.

Another reason why one might think that practical reasoning aims at identifying the (or a) possible action that is "most favored" overall by one's situation is that this provides a way of accounting for the felt *difficulty* of practical deliberation, as well as the possibility of deliberating *well* or *badly*, including in situations where there are several

¹⁰ Ruth Chang's defense of the thesis she calls *comparativism*, according to which "comparative facts are what make a choice objectively correct; they are that in virtue of which a choice is objectively rational or what one has most or sufficient normative reason to do" (Chang 2016, pp. 213-214), explicitly restricts the possibility of comparison to situations in which there is a single "covering value" according to which the candidate choices are to be evaluated. This commits her to treating as "ill-formed" any choice situation in which this condition doesn't hold. My arguments here against Dancy's construal of the favoring relation are meant to apply in turn to a view like Chang's: I want to suggest that in many situations that call for practical deliberation, multiple different values are at stake, and the possibility of making a reasoned choice between the alternatives does not require a comparison of the relative importance of these values. On my view, what makes a choice "sufficiently good" is not that it has a degree of overall goodness that is no less than any of the alternatives, but simply that it is: *not bad*, and no worse than the alternatives with respect to the specific considerations that one takes to recommend it. This last characterization assumes the possibility of comparison with respect to some specific values, but not with respect to goodness or choiceworthiness *simpliciter* in a situation where multiple specific values are at stake.

different values at stake. If, for example, I am trying to find the fastest route to take to work, it may be hard to account for all the various sources of evidence that bear on the question of which route will be fastest, and if I choose a slower route when a faster one is available then we may wish to say that my reasoning went wrong.¹¹ And there is also such a possibility in situations where several different values are at stake. In our original case, even if I've identified which meal would be healthiest, which tastiest, which the least expensive, and which the easiest to prepare, it may still be difficult to decide which of these meals to cook—and isn't this just the difficulty of determining which would be best overall? Similarly, if I choose the chicken because it's tasty but have overlooked the fact that it's terribly expensive, or that one of my children has an allergy to it, while another meal would have been just about as tasty but without these further defects, then we may wish to say that my choice was practically irrational, since this other option would have been superior. And what concept of superiority does this come to, if not that of what is better overall?

I will treat these questions in order, though with much greater brevity than they deserve. First, there are many dimensions to the difficulty of practical reasoning that don't presuppose any demand to identify the most favored option or options: these include the work of identifying the available options and the specific values that ought to bear on one's choice, and of assessing how good the available options are in respect of each of these. Practical reasoning is also made difficult by the fact that the acceptability of a given choice doesn't extinguish the goodness of the alternatives to it in the way that a sufficient case for believing something to be true is also a sufficient case for believing that whatever contradicts it is false. The recognition of these real trade-offs is another reason why it can be hard to make up our minds about what to do.

Second, the possibility of deliberating badly in the way just imagined doesn't depend on the idea that a superior alternative would have been more favored overall, but only on the idea that the alternative lacks a crucial *defect* that was present in the chosen option. Incurring a great cost in the preparation of an everyday meal is the sort of thing that we want, in general, to avoid, and preparing a meal that one of our children is allergic to is something that we want to avoid absolutely. This means that a person who chooses to make such a meal has probably made a bad choice—*unless*, perhaps, there wasn't a less expensive option available, or the allergic child was going to be eating at a friend's house that evening. But what about this further possibility: that the meal one chose to make is just *so good* that it seemed worth making anyway? If the objection to the meal was that a child in one's family is allergic to it, then the reply seems insufficient, since making a meal for a child who can't safely eat it is the sort of thing that one simply never ought to do. In that case, however, the problem with preparing the meal isn't that other meals would have been better, but rather that it was simply *bad* to prepare the meal that one did.

¹¹ We *may* wish to say this: for it's also possible that I reasoned well according to the available evidence but was simply unlucky in how things turned out.

By contrast, while the excellence of a meal seems like the kind of thing that can in principle suffice to justify cooking it even though this is quite expensive, this needn't be seen as a matter of adding up value in one dimension so as to swamp the degree of disvalue in another. We might instead say that the expense of a meal ought to be limited unless there is a good enough reason for doing so, and that in *this* case there was such a reason. That's not, however, to say that the excellence of the meal made it an option that was "most favored" overall, despite its cost. It was merely one of the many options that were acceptable, all of them favored in any number of different ways.

It might be wondered what is at stake in this discussion. I haven't given anything like a decisive argument that there can't be such a thing as the action or class of actions most favored overall in a choice situation where multiple divergent values are at stake, even if it might be difficult to find out what it is. And I concede that the assumption that there is such a thing provides a neat way to make sense of the felt difficulty of practical reasoning and of the ways in which it has the potential to go wrong. But the deeper reason why I think we should resist building this notion into the very idea of practical reasoning is that conceiving of practical reasoning in that way can prevent us from seeing the substantial philosophical assumptions that are involved in thinking of practical rationality as a matter of *maximizing* goodness or value.¹² When rationality is conceived along these lines it can seem simply definitional that, for example, there is an obligation to aid a group of five people when there is a choice between doing this and aiding only one instead,¹³ or that sometimes the intrinsic badness of doing a certain sort of thing, such as killing an innocent person, can be swamped by the goodness of what would result from doing this such that it ought in this case to be done. Nothing in my argument here presupposes that these popular ideas are false. I wish only to insist that they are substantive philosophical theses that require a substantive defense, and so that any conception of practical rationality that entails them ought also to be defended on substantive, rather than merely definitional, grounds. For there are many philosophers who have thought that there is such a thing as practical wisdom but denied that it is a matter of maximizing goodness or doing "what is best".

(IV)

A crucial passage in Anscombe's *Intention* singles out for criticism what she calls the "incurably contemplative conception of knowledge" that is taken for granted in modern philosophy. According to this conception:

¹² Here, and in much of what I say in the preceding paragraphs as well, I owe a great deal to conversations with Marshall Thompson.

¹³ On which, see Anscombe 2005 and Taurek 1977.

Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge. (Anscombe 1963, p. 57)

There is, I believe, a similarly “contemplative” construal of practical deliberation that is taken for granted throughout Dancy’s argument in *Practical Shape*. On his account, values play the same role in reasoning to action that considerations of truth and probability play in reasoning to belief about how things are: in each case there is a response, or way of responding, that is most favored by the shape of the situation one is in, and one’s reasoning is successful only if it concludes in a response of this sort. And I have tried to show why this underlying picture should not be taken for granted, especially if we wish to uphold the Aristotelian idea that practical reasoning concludes, not merely in a description of the normative landscape, but in something a person actually does. The person who takes a walk or comes to rest, makes a house or a coat, starts a print magazine, takes up driving for Uber, or chops up some onions to make chicken for dinner, does what she does as a conclusion of reasoning, but not because she takes this action to be “of a sort most favored” by the demands of her situation. It is, rather, something that is done on the ground that it is a good way of getting, doing, or securing an end that the agent rightly desires.

This alternative picture of practical reasoning is available to us if we see this reasoning as giving an answer to the question “What shall I do?”, where answer that is to be given to this question is not supposed to have been determined in advance of the reasoning that leads a person to it.¹⁴ What accounts for this possibility is the agent’s freedom, and the way that her actions are such as to depend on the reasoning in light of which she acts. To the extent that this condition does not hold, a person is in a position only to *predict* what will happen to her, in light of the available evidence. And in that situation we lack the freedom that is characteristic of practical deliberation—as when I have to accept, for example, that given my current fitness I’ll probably run this mile in a bit under six minutes, but certainly won’t get anywhere near five. By contrast, within the space of options that are available to me given my abilities and the circumstances I am in, the question of what I will do does not have an answer other than the one I choose to give it. And the way that I give this question an answer is by *acting* in the way that I decide.

I have tried to explain above why this conception of practical reasoning doesn’t require seeing deliberative rationality as entirely unconstrained by any independent normative landscape.¹⁵ Aristotle characterizes the goodness of choice as “the attainment of truth corresponding to right desire” (*NE* VI, 1139a30)—a formulation that excludes things that are done for the sake of something bad, or that involve taking a means that one

¹⁴ Here I merely sketch, without the necessary detail, a view of practical reasoning that I proposed in earlier work: see Marušić and Schwenkler 2018, pp. 310-313 and Schwenkler 2019, ch. 5.

¹⁵ However, on the extent of what’s required to see vice as necessarily irrational within a broadly Aristotelian framework, see Vogler 2002.

should not desire to adopt. He is, of course, also insistent that some human goods are greater than others, and that a life lived with practical wisdom will consist in the pursuit and attainment of greater goods rather than lesser ones. All of this means that practical reasoning can require a lot of hard work, and that there are many ways that our lives can be misaligned with what is truly good for us. But it is an anachronism to read into these views the concern with maximizing value or moral goodness that is taken for granted in so much contemporary theorizing.

I expect that Dancy may wish to resist the charge that his talk of doing what is most favored necessarily carries with it any commitment to a conception of practical rationality as concerned with maximizing goodness or value. It is difficult, however, to see how else to make good on that talk, once we have recognized the diversity of goods that are available for a person to pursue in most of the situations where practical deliberation is called for, and the diversity of ways that are usually available to pursue any of these goods, each of them recommended in quite different ways from the others. One way of responding to this recognition is by holding that practical reasoning comes to an end somewhere short of what a person actually does, so that reasoning concludes once we have laid out the permissible alternatives and action is downstream of this, issuing from something like a bare act of the will. My arguments here give reason to think that, in order to follow Aristotle in rejecting this picture of the conclusion of practical reasoning, we may need to take on something like Aristotle's view of the character of practical reasoning itself.

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