

## Asymmetrical Practical Reasons

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Current treatments of practical rationality understand reasons as considerations counting in favor of or against some practical option, treating the positive and the negative case as symmetrical. Typically the focus is on examples of positive reasons. However, I want to shift the spotlight to negative reasons, as making a tighter or more direct link to rationality—and ultimately to morality, which is what much of the current interest in reasons is meant to clarify. Recognizing a positive/negative asymmetry in normative force will let us reconcile the view of moral or other requirements as based on reasons with the denial that reasons as such, even all-things-considered reasons, yield requirements—or as I like to put it, rationally compel.

I want to say that only negative reasons would be irrational just to ignore and in that sense are compelling reasons. This claim rests on understanding a “negative” reason as literally counting *against* the option it applies to, rather than just amounting to a reason *for* not choosing it (a positive reason for an omission), though it implies such a reason. It is also the basis for a criticism of the option in question, in the sense of an objection to it as in some way defective or problematic.

Thus, I do not necessarily have a reason against choosing a blue jacket from my closet, a negative reason, just because I have a reason in favor of green—assuming I cannot choose both but that my positive reason for choosing green does not involve an objection to blue. Green may be my best color, but unless there is some reason why I need to look my best, blue may be perfectly acceptable. A reason against blue would be something on the order of the fact (if it were a fact) that blue would be boring; but let us suppose there is no such objection to blue.

Recognizing an asymmetry in normative force between positive and negative reasons will go against some deeply ingrained theoretical assumptions in the area of practical rationality—ways of simplifying rational choice such as those built into utility theory, and even the way we set up the logic of reasons—so there is much room for confusion and misunderstanding. But I want to be able to state the basic contrast I have in mind sharply, rather than risk obscuring its point with repetition of all the necessary clarifications and qualifications. So let me make it clear at the outset that I shall be taking for granted a general understanding of practical reasons as objective pro tanto considerations: facts holding independently of the agent’s recognition of them, with a bearing on choice that may be reversed by reasons on the other side. I shall insert reminders of these assumptions here and there in my discussion, but for the most part I shall take it for granted that the reasons I am discussing are the only serious reasons in question, or at any rate the strongest, and that the agent does recognize them as such. Since I tend to consider cases from a first-person standpoint, I shall also sometimes allow myself to refer to reasons in subjective terms. I shall sometimes speak, as we commonly do, of the *judgment that* one has a reason as itself a reason, but always on the assumption that the agent has accurate beliefs about his reasons.

In a nutshell, then, what I want to say is this: as reasons against some option, negative reasons tend to rule it out, hence grounding a requirement to take some alternative option that is not ruled out. Knowingly acting against such a reason without strong enough opposing reasons is the

paradigm of practical irrationality. But positive reasons, reasons in favor, unless they really conceal or are taken to imply serious negative reasons, seem to allow for rational alternatives—rational in the sense of rationally permissible. They ground at most only a recommendation.

I have come to this view in my own work by way of questions about motivation—questions about what kind of hold a reason is supposed to have over us and how states of experience such as emotions might fit in (see especially Greenspan 1995, 121-22). I shall suggest here, however, that in order to get a grip on the normative aspects of reasons we need to disentangle them from questions of motivation—more so than is commonly done even by approaches that avoid reference to experiential factors on the level of emotions but share a basis in the analysis of processes of practical reasoning.

I am following these approaches in interpreting reasons in their primary sense as objective. Ultimately, the aim is to use reasons to understand “binding” ought—with minimal metaphysical presuppositions, or none besides what we need anyway to understand action. But too tight a connection is commonly assumed between reasons and ought: there is a tendency in the literature to think of reasons as themselves pro tanto binding. A reason is seen as compelling action of a rational agent, in the sense that he would be irrational to fail to act on it, assuming that he acknowledges it as his only or his strongest reason pertaining to a given choice. Let me refer to this in brief as the view that reasons compel. To put it in Kantian terms: besides being objective, reasons “objectively necessitate” action.

Some recent authors, however, have defended a subclass of optional or noncompelling reasons, with different ideas of what these amount to, but starting from the intuition that many ordinary examples of reasons allow us options, in contrast with the widespread picture of reasons in moral philosophy as practical directives mandating choice. Typically these authors have in mind cases like the choice of jackets from my closet—a choice of jobs or entertainments, say, in which each of a set of competing reasons favors a different option. However, I want to suggest that what I shall call “purely” positive reasons count as optional in themselves, even without reference to any serious competing reasons.

To illustrate the kind of case I have in mind: I recall an occasion when a University administrator, trying to offer positive motivation for faculty to serve on committees, appealed to the possibility of attaining power in the University. Now, I would grant that this *is* a reason to serve—and a reason for me, a reason I “have”, at any rate once it is brought to my attention—though I think I would still be within my rights, rationally speaking (as well as otherwise), to turn it down. Nor do I have to refer to the various academic and other goals I have, as competing reasons that serving on a committee might tend to undermine. We might suppose that I have the extra time but feel no need to fill it with anything. Even considered just in itself, apart from any competing reasons, power of the sort in question is something I could see as a potential benefit and in that sense take as a reason but not as a compelling reason.

Of course, a positive reason might motivate by way of an underlying or associated negative reason: maybe it is a serious reason against failing to serve on a committee that some degree of power in the University, more than I would otherwise have, is needed to keep others from instituting policies that would undermine my academic or other goals. In that case—if I were persuaded that I had better serve on a committee to prevent some bad outcome—it *would* seem irrational not to serve. This is on the assumption, again, that no other reasons are in play. When I contrast negative with positive reasons, then, I shall also generally take it for granted that the positive reasons operate on their own, not by implying negative reasons.

On the view I propose, in short, it takes a negative reason to turn a positive reason into a requirement. This means that purely positive reasons do not compel, but instead are optional, rendering an option eligible for choice, or justifying it, without requiring it, in the various terms in which recent authors have put this possibility. However, if we grant that there are negative reasons that do have compelling force, we can still take reasons as generating the “binding” quality of strong moral (or other practical) “ought”.

A positive/negative asymmetry may strike some readers as on the face of it logically untenable, since we can always translate a positive statement of a reason into negative terms. The administrator in the case just sketched might instead have represented the prospect of my continued lack of power in the University as a reason *against declining* committee service. But this amounts to a negative reason in my intended sense only insofar as it implies a criticism of my current level of power. As thus interpreted, however, it seems to add something to the positive reason I was originally offered, which apparently cited the possibility of augmenting my power as a pure inducement to committee service, a point or consideration in favor.

To avoid this and similar possible confusions, we might think of negative as “disqualifying” reasons and positive as “qualifying” (in line with Raz’s talk of reasons as rendering options “eligible” for choice in Raz 2000, 90-117). Though I shall still use “positive” and “negative”, these terms make sense in light of an underlying conception of practical reasons as invoked primarily to offer or answer criticism of action or other practical options—in contrast to the widespread treatment of them as essentially action-guiding. I call this the critical conception of practical reasons. It interprets the function of practical reasons (or more strictly, the judgment that they *are* reasons, with a certain bearing on action) as in the first instance evaluative, with an emphasis on negative evaluation. Their action-guiding role might be said to follow from this as a consequence of the need to feel justified in what we do by either avoiding being subject to significant criticism or having a response to it available.

There are different views in current debate—“internalist” versus “externalist”—about what supplies the motivational force of a reason, rationality itself or some further, potentially variable feature of the psychology of a rational agent. I would take motivational force to rest on unease at the thought of being subject to significant criticism without an adequate response. Being concerned about criticism you regard as significant does seem to be required by rationality, so I think this will support a version of internalism for negative reasons. But it is crucial that this source of motivation operates by reference to a threshold—of adequate justification, let us say. To count as rational an act need only get one above the threshold. Rationality does not require getting as far as possible above the threshold, though that may be rationally commendable, as a way of shoring up one’s defenses against criticism.

Getting above the threshold means either avoiding or having a response to significant criticism. A negative reason grounds a criticism, whereas a positive reason grounds a response to criticism—meaning (here and elsewhere) potential criticism, not just criticism that is actually “put” to the agent or that the agent anticipates as likely to be put. An agent would be acting at cross-purposes, and hence would be irrational, if he thought there was no answer to a significant criticism of his envisioned act but did it anyway. This gives us the sense in which rationality requires acting on a negative reason—a conclusive negative reason that is recognized as such by the agent. However, in the absence of significant criticism, a positive reason for action just posts it farther above the justificatory threshold but does not raise the bar on other options, setting a higher standard that they must meet. All that rationality requires is fending off criticism.

That is a capsule summary of the view I propose. It rejects maximization of perceived value as a requirement of rationality. More generally, instead of understanding reasons in terms of value, it lays special stress on a kind of relational disvalue: the negative bearing of considerations on action, or in short, criticism. But accentuating the negative in this manner might seem to mean misrepresenting the phenomenology of ordinary rational choice.

Our usual stance in making a rational choice does not seem to be defensive, that is, in the way the critical conception of practical reasons might suggest. The critical conception might be thought to apply readily only to an agent who is unduly self-critical or concerned about what others think. In a standard case of choice among practical options, criticism is likely to be far from our minds, except insofar as it follows from the reasons favoring a competing option. What has our attention is the element of attraction, the “pull” toward action exerted by a positive end.

Thus, in deciding to become a professional philosopher as opposed to a university administrator, I might have been swayed by the unscheduled time and opportunities for reflection that academic life affords. This is not on the face of it just a rejoinder to drawbacks that others might have mentioned such as lower income or less power in comparison to my other options. So why treat it as such? My suggestion is that the normative relation of positive and negative reasons is often in reverse of their order of motivational salience.

Jonathan Dancy in a recent essay on Raz’s account of optional reasons (Dancy 2004) defends a distinction between “enticing” and “peremptory” reasons, arguing that these categories capture different normative relations, rather than different types of reason, as Raz had alleged. Dancy apparently limits his own notion of optional reasons to cases whose enticing aspect rests on the prospect of fun, amusement, enjoyment, or the like, in contrast to the broader range of cases I have in mind.<sup>1</sup> But the main point of his account is that, instead of always issuing an ought or directive, a reason sometimes just guides us by appeal to a notion of “the best”.

Dancy’s account provides a foil for my own insofar as it does seem to reflect what goes on in ordinary rational choice. But “enticing” cannot be taken as referring to the normative relation he has in mind for optional reasons. It is a motivational notion, describing the effect that some

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1. Another recent author, Joshua Gert, defends a distinction between justifying and requiring “strengths” of a reason, spelling out requiring strength initially in just the sorts of negative terms I have in mind, as the tendency to make irrational something that would otherwise be rationally permissible; see esp. J. Gert forthcoming, 5; cf. Gert’s final account on p. 17. Justifying strength on Gert’s account amounts to the opposite tendency, to make rationally permissible something that would otherwise be irrational. Gert’s aim is to allow for rational options in a broader range of cases than Dancy’s, including serious cases of moral choice, such as the choice between making a contribution to public radio and spending the same amount on famine relief. But while the terms “justification” and “requirement” seem apt for the different functions of reasons I have in mind here, and I shall make use of them below, I would resist Gert’s interpretation of them as embodied in separate (in the sense of independently characterized) “strengths” of a reason—with reasons apparently individuated independently of their bearing on action, just by the facts that constitute them. Also, my basic notion is that of a criticism—an objection to an act or other option—in contrast to Gert’s use of rationality/irrationality. Gert here follows Bernard Gert (e.g. in B. Gert 1998), whose view of reasons as rationally optional across-the-board the distinctions in strengths is meant to modify. I follow Scanlon 1998, 25ff., in interpreting irrationality, or the most basic form of irrationality, in terms of the conflict between attitudes, including reason-attributions and intentions.

feature of an option might have on a rational agent's will—though presumably not as a requirement of rationality, if the notion is to capture cases of noncompelling reasons. Higher income, say, if it speaks in favor of a certain career choice, is the sort of thing that might entice or attract a rational agent, but one would not be irrational not even to be tempted by it, as well as not to act in light of it. By calling optional reasons enticing, then, I take it Dancy just means that they have the capacity to influence the rational will in virtue of some more fundamental property they have that is strictly normative.

Dancy's basic normative relation seems to be "favoring". He wants to characterize the stronger kind of normativity, the kind that yields peremptory reasons, reasons that do issue directives, as a different "style" of favoring. His two styles of favoring amount to the evaluative (appealing to the best) and the deontic (appealing to ought). But I think we can simplify his account. The deontic style might be seen as having a negative basis, if deontic favor or "ought" depends on ruling out alternatives. My proposal is essentially that we reverse the natural way of looking at things, which pertains more to motivation, and take "ruling out" as the single normative relation in question and "favoring" as a way to prevent it. This means acknowledging that the explanation of normativity need not reflect what goes on in our minds when we make a choice on the basis of reasons. Rather than picturing normativity as an influence on choice—a rationalist variant of motivational force, as it were, substituting something more authoritative for Stevenson's "magnetism" of moral judgments—we should understand it as a logical or justificatory relation that might sometimes be clear to us only upon reflection and analysis.

On a construal that is not so easily conflated with motivational notions, normativity involves setting a standard of correctness, thereby allowing for the possibility of defect or error.<sup>2</sup> If optional reasons (meaning reason judgments) were normative in this sense, the failure to act on an optional reason would come out as incorrect in some way. Rather than being irrational, it might just be subject to some other criticism, and Dancy suggests "silly", in application to cases involving failure to act on one's strongest enticing reason. However, I would not be so ready to grant this of the broader sort of optional reasons that I have in mind. Is it really so silly not to succumb to any and every lure, such as power, that I acknowledge as a potential benefit? Even if I have no objection to amassing the benefits in question, who needs all that?

"Normativity", of course, is a term of art, and a relatively recent one at that. Dancy himself understands it very broadly, as applying to concepts that (as he puts it) play "pivotal roles in direct answers to the question what to do". This is a weakened version of a common definition in ethics, which is stated in terms of the question what one *ought* to do, thus apparently disallowing optional reasons.<sup>3</sup> On either version, "the practical question" (as Dancy refers to it) is

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2. I see this most consistently in philosophy of mind (though there is disagreement about whether the account of error *requires* normativity). Thus, e.g., John McDowell writes (in McDowell 1996, *xi-xii*): "To make sense of the idea of a mental state's or episode's being directed towards the world, in the way in which, say, a belief or judgement is, we need to put the state or episode in a normative context. A belief or judgement to the effect that things are thus and so—a belief or judgement whose content (as we say) is that things are thus and so—must be a posture or stance that is correctly or incorrectly adopted according to whether or not things are indeed thus and so".
  3. I think the formulation originally comes from Darwall 1983, e.g. p. 19. However, Darwall immediately goes on here to talk of *recommending* action. I note that Dancy's version apparently would include arbitrary ways of deciding what to do as reasons, but perhaps that is appropriate (and would also apply to the stronger version) for decision procedures that are authorized by the agent in some way.

set up in positive terms, so that a negative reason, spelling out only what *not* to do, presumably would not by itself yield a “direct” answer, though it plays a pivotal role in a direct answer. For a direct answer, it needs to be supplemented by the defense of some option that is not thus ruled out. So the weaker sort of positive reason also might be said to play a supporting normative role, insofar as it helps to ground a permission. What I would deny is just that this makes the positive reason normative in itself.

On the account I favor, normativity can be said to apply in the first instance to negative or disqualifying reasons, and derivatively to requirements. Positive or qualifying reasons make a contribution to requirements but do not have normative force themselves. Answering the practical question in negative form—specifying what *not* to do—will be enough to supply a standard of correctness: it is irrational to take an option one knows to be rationally ruled out.

Is it an objection to this account that it limits the normative force of a positive reason to that of a mere permission? In a discussion of Jean Hampton’s interpretation of reasons as exhibiting a single but positive type of normative force, that of a requirement or directive (see Hampton 1998), Dancy notes that the negation of a directive could not capture what he has in mind by an enticing reason, since it would not imply that the action in question is actually worth doing but only that there are no decisive reasons not to do it. I would want to say that there is at least one criticism available for any action, namely that it takes a certain effort or time that could be spent on an alternative. After all, “worth doing” essentially means “worth the effort” or other cost of action; “worthwhile” means “worth one’s while,” a reference to time. But a positive reason that does no more than answer this basic criticism adds something to the negation of a negative reason to the extent that it counts in favor of the action in question.

Not every criticism is serious enough to require an answer, so in some (perhaps many) cases it would not be irrational to make a choice for which there is no positive reason. Here is where we might have an act that is “merely” rationally permissible. The critical conception does not demand a reason except as needed to answer a significant criticism. Some degrees of effort expended or time lost or other considerations against action are just too trivial to worry about—meaning too trivial to demand a response, though one might respond anyway, also without irrationality.

In fact, some of the prime examples of optional reasons involve trivial negative reasons. A case I discuss elsewhere (Greenspan unpublished) involves ignoring the finding in the mid-’70’s that “red dye #7” in jello and other foods has a slight correlation with cancer in rats. One could accept this result as sufficiently well established in application to humans and still not be irrational just to disregard it as too minor to be worth bothering to read food ingredients and the like.

So on the critical conception of practical reasons—my proposed alternative to the action-guiding approach that Dancy has in common with Hampton—there are optional negative reasons too, below a certain threshold of significance. Rational justification on the critical conception requires only that one act so as to avoid or respond to *significant* criticism. Some reasons are optional, not because they are mere enticers, weaker than peremptory commands, but rather because they are mere distractions from more serious considerations at stake in the choice situation.

In addition to the basic (but sometimes insignificant) criticism of any action in terms of the time and effort expended, we might want to say that there also is a criticism available for any nonideal action: namely, that there is something else better to do. We could thereby express how



appeal to the best functions as a source of normativity within the critical conception. But sometimes this criticism, too, will be insignificant. There is no need to respond to miniscule differences in value; and larger differences might be said to pale into relative insignificance over a certain value-threshold, or when something more important is at stake. Further, one might question whether high levels of value have to yield correspondingly strong criticisms (see Green-span in progress). So even if a positive reason implies a criticism of alternatives—if we take it as a criticism of wearing blue, say, that it would keep me from wearing my best color, green—it is another question whether the significance of the positive reason as a ground for choice is reflected in that of the implied criticism. If not, we have the sort of “purely” positive reason I have identified as optional.

I shall not attempt to make the term “significant” precise, but note that we now have some optional reasons on both sides of the positive/negative divide. The asymmetry lies in the fact that a standard of correctness and hence normativity is restricted to a subset of negative reasons: those that ground significant criticism. Positive reasons play a role in directing the agent *toward* some action, which is why they seem more salient than negative reasons when the question is motivation. But they are optional insofar as their normative role is just to fend off significant criticism.

That sums up my response to the objection that the critical conception of practical reasons fails to reflect what goes on in ordinary rational choice. I have responded to the objection essentially by embracing it, drawing a sharper line than Dancy and others seem to do between normativity and motivation. The critical conception indeed departs far from an account of our motivation in standard cases, if that means a description of what is on our minds when we make a reasoned decision. But the usual approach errs in simply borrowing the normative account of reasons from their motivational uses—even with attention restricted to that reflective form of motivation that we think of as practical reasoning.

Statements ascribing *needs* amount to a familiar kind of reason attribution that should help to illustrate the role of negative reasons on the critical conception. Needs certainly motivate us in a positive direction, towards whatever fills them, but their explanation more fundamentally involves avoidance of the bad: the state that someone or something would be in without the needed item or action. To say that the roof needs repair is to say that otherwise it would threaten to collapse; to say that I need a vacation is to say something similar about me. But my eye may be only on the needed item as I act on a need or make the statement expressing it. Where my action heads off the threatened bad state early or automatically enough, I may not be aware of it at all, though I may be able to specify it if challenged. By the same token, on the critical conception, positive reasons function normatively as answers to potential criticism, even though that is not how they motivate in standard cases.

For a compact way of summing up my overall point in this paper, we might think of a judgment of the form OA, answering the practical question in its original form, as spelling out the normative content or import of a reason in a *prima facie* ought judgment. O, the ought-operator in deontic logic, is here applied to acts or act-compounds. Whereas a negative reason has the force of  $O\sim A$ , I have argued that in normative terms a purely positive reason merely denies this. In the absence of stronger countervailing reasons, a negative reason binds the agent, whereas a positive reason, however strong, at most serves to block a negative reason from binding, unless it really conceals or implies a competing negative reason that is strong enough to defeat it. It is in reference to motivation rather than normativity that the strength of a positive reason has its

impact. We act under the aspect of good, as Aristotle said. But what justifies us in acting may instead be something we want to avoid—namely, unanswered criticism.<sup>4</sup>

## Literature

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4. A condensed version of this paper was read at the 27<sup>th</sup> International Wittgenstein Symposium of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society in August 2004. For comments on earlier drafts let me thank John Broome, Joshua Gert, Scott James, Karen Jones, and Mark Schroeder.