REASONS, IMPOSSIBILITY AND EFFICIENT STEPS:
REPLY TO HEUER

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Abstract:

Ulrike Heuer argues that there can be a reason for a person to perform an action that this person cannot perform, as long as this person can take efficient steps towards performing this action. In this reply, I first argue that Heuer's examples fail to undermine my claim that there cannot be a reason for a person to perform an action if it is impossible that this person will perform this action. I then argue that, on a plausible interpretation of what 'efficient steps' are, Heuer's claim is consistent with my claim. I end by showing that Heuer fails to undermine the arguments I gave for my claim.

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Ulrike Heuer rejects my claim that

(R)   There cannot be a reason for a person to perform an action if it is impossible that this person will perform this action.[1]

Instead, she argues,

(E)   There can be a reason for a person to perform an action that this person cannot perform, as long as this person can take efficient steps towards performing this action.[2]

In this reply, I will first argue that Heuer's counterexamples to (R) fail. I will then argue that, on a plausible interpretation of what 'efficient steps' are, (E) is consistent with (R). I will end by showing that Heuer fails to undermine my arguments for (R).

1. Heuer's counterexamples to (R)

Heuer gives two counterexamples to (R). The first is one in which a person is unable to

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[1] For my defence of this claim, see Streumer 2007. Both Heuer and I use the term 'reason' to mean 'normative reason' and take normative reasons to be facts that count in favour of performing actions.

[2] Heuer 2008, p. 8. Heuer also argues that there cannot be most success-related reason for a person to try to perform an action that this person cannot perform (pp. 9-10), where 'success-related' reasons for trying to perform an action are reasons that "depend on the reason to perform the action", as opposed to reasons for trying to perform an action "to acquire skills, win bets, prove an ability, express a certain attitude etc." (p. 9).

perform an action at a certain time t_1, but will be able to perform this action at a later time t_2 by removing obstacles or by improving his or her abilities. She writes:

> I cannot play the piano, say. Is there, therefore, no reason for me to do it? If there was no reason to play the piano for someone who can't play it already, there would presumably be no reason to learn to play it either. Reasons for learning something require that there is a reason for doing what (as yet) one cannot do.[3]

However, such examples are not counterexamples to (R) as I interpret it. In my defence of (R), I took the phrase 'it is possible that this person performs this action' to mean that there is a nomologically and historically accessible possible world in which this person will perform this action.[4] In cases where a person is at t_1 able to remove obstacles or to improve his or her abilities such that this person will be able to play the piano at t_2, there is at t_1 a nomologically and historically accessible possible world in which this person plays the piano at t_2. Therefore, (R) does not prevent us from saying that a person who cannot yet play the piano nevertheless has a reason to learn to play the piano.

Heuer's second counterexample to (R) is one in which at t_1 a person has a reason to perform an action at t_2, but then makes it impossible for him- or herself to perform this action at t_2. She writes:

> A person, call her Lilly, has a reason to attend a meeting which she dreads, but she can make it impossible that she will attend by, say, locking herself into a room and throwing the key away. Is it now true that she doesn't have a reason to go to the

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[3] Heuer 2008, p. 3. Heuer draws a general distinction between what she calls 'derivative reasons', which exist only because of the existence of other reasons, and what she calls 'non-derivative reasons' (p. 2). She claims that the reason to learn to play the piano is a derivative reason.

[4] Streumer 2007, p. 357. A possible world is nomologically and historically accessible if and only if its laws of nature and its past are the same as those of the actual world. Actually, in Streumer 2007, I was neutral between interpreting this phrase in this way and taking it to mean that there is a nomologically and historically accessible or close possible world in which this person will perform this action. This makes no difference to what follows.

meeting? After all, she can't. If so, it would be unclear why she has a reason not to disable herself, or to overcome the self-inflicted obstacle once it exists.[5]

However, such examples are not counterexamples to (R) as I interpret it either. Suppose that Lilly locks herself in at 9.00, and that the meeting starts at 10.00 and ends at 10.30. In that case, defenders of (R) will say that at 9.00 it ceases to be true that Lilly has a reason to attend the meeting. But opponents of (R) cannot plausibly say that it *never* ceases to be true that Lilly has a reason to attend the meeting.[6] Instead, they will presumably say that this ceases to be true at 10.30, since after 10.30 she can only attend the meeting by changing the past. However, for this example to be a counterexample to (R), it must be true that after 9.00 there is no historically and nomologically accessible possible world in which Lilly will attend the meeting.[7] Therefore, it is just as true after 9.00 as it is after 10.30 that she can only attend the meeting by changing the past. And therefore, the time at which it ceases to be true that she has a reason to attend the meeting must be 9.00 rather than 10.30, just as defenders of (R) claim.

Heuer objects that, if Lilly no longer has a reason to attend the meeting once she has made it impossible for herself to attend the meeting, it is "unclear why she has a reason not to disable herself".[8] She discusses two 'principles of rationality' that could explain this, and rejects both of them.[9] However, I do not think that we need to appeal to principles of rationality to explain this. Instead, we can simply say that Lilly's reason not to make it impossible for herself to attend the meeting is the very same fact that is also her reason to

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[5] Heuer 2008, p. 3. Such examples have often been put forward as counterexamples to the claim that 'ought' implies 'can'. See, for example, White 1975, p. 149, and Sinnott-Armstrong 1984. For responses, see Zimmerman 1996, pp. 97-100, Haji 2002, pp. 47-9, Streumer 2003, Howard-Snyder 2006, pp. 235-6, and Vranas 2007, pp. 175-82.

[6] See Vranas 2007, pp. 176-7, and p. 201 note 10.

[7] Heuer's discussion of the example may suggest that Lilly could "overcome the self-inflicted obstacle once it exists". However, if that were possible, this example would not be a counterexample to (R).

[8] Heuer 2008, p. 3.

[9] Heuer calls these principles of rationality '(R)' and '(Q)' (2008, p. 4). Of course, her principle (R) is not the same as my claim (R) in Streumer 2007 and in this reply.

attend the meeting in the first place. For example, suppose that Lilly's reason to attend the meeting is the fact that an important decision will be taken at the meeting. If so, the fact that an important decision will be taken at the meeting is also her reason not to make it impossible for herself to attend the meeting.[10] More generally, I think that

> (F)   If a fact is a reason for a person to φ, this fact is also a reason for this person not to make it impossible for him- or herself to φ.[11]

Of course, not every fact that is a reason for a person not to make it impossible for him- or herself to φ is also a reason for this person to φ. For example, suppose that I benefit from being able to harm you, since you regularly give me money in response to my threats to harm you. In that case, the fact that I benefit from being able to harm you is a reason for me not to make it impossible for myself to harm you, even though it is not a reason for me to actually harm you. But (F) does not say that it is. (F) only says, much more plausibly, that *if* a fact is a reason for me to harm you, *then* this fact is also a reason for me not to make it impossible for myself to harm you.

Heuer also writes that I say that "while we can't blame [Lilly] for not attending the meeting, we can blame her for disabling herself".[12] However, I do not say this, and I do not think it is true. I think that, before Lilly makes it impossible for herself to attend the meeting, she both has a reason to attend the meeting and a reason not to make it impossible for herself to attend the meeting.[13] These reasons are both given by the same fact, and the second reason

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[10] I thus also reject Heuer's suggestion that the reason Lilly has not to disable herself is that "by disabling herself she will bring it about that, in the future (at t_2), she will not comply with a reason that she then has" (2008, p. 4).

[11] (F) does not entail that the fact that is Lilly's reason to attend the meeting is her *only* reason not to make it impossible for herself to attend the meeting. However, to show that we do not need to appeal to the principles of rationality that Heuer rejects, all I need to show is that the fact that is Lilly's reason to attend the meeting is always *a* reason for her not to make it impossible for herself to attend the meeting, not that this fact is always the only reason.

[12] Heuer 2008, p. 3.

[13] Heuer writes that, before the time at which Lilly is due to leave home to attend the meeting, "there isn't anything yet that she has reason to do in virtue of having reason to go to the meeting

derives its normative force from the first, since she has the second reason in virtue of having the first.[14] When Lilly makes it impossible for herself to attend the meeting, it ceases to be true that she has these reasons. But it then becomes true that she *had* these reasons, and this is enough to enable us to blame her both for making it impossible for herself to attend the meeting and for failing to attend the meeting.[15]

It may be objected that this seems to make Lilly more blameworthy than someone who fails to attend the meeting without first making it impossible for him- or herself to attend the meeting. However, as I have said, Lilly's reason not to make it impossible for herself to attend the meeting derives its normative force from her reason to attend the meeting. Failing to act on the first reason as well as the second reason therefore does not make Lilly more blameworthy. Using a distinction made by Michael Zimmerman, we can say that the *scope* of Lilly's blameworthiness is greater than that of someone who fails to attend the meeting without first making it impossible for him- or herself to attend the meeting, since there are more things that Lilly is to blame for, but that the *degree* of her blameworthiness is the same, since she should not be blamed to a great extent.[16]

(2008, p. 4). That seems wrong to me: even before Lilly is due to leave home to attend the meeting, she has a reason not to make it impossible for herself to attend the meeting, and she has this reason in virtue of having a reason to attend the meeting.

[14] It may be objected that, since these reasons are both given by the same fact, it is misleading to say that they are two different reasons. However, if a single fact counts in favour of two different actions, this fact is a reason 'twice over', and we can then say that this fact 'gives us' two different reasons.

[15] Heuer writes that "it is a necessary condition of justified blame that we can blame a person only for (not) doing something that she has a reason to do (or not to do)" (2008, p. 3). Again, that seems wrong to me: we can also blame someone for doing (or not doing) something that this person *had* a reason to do (or not to do), if this person failed to do this thing. Even opponents of (R) will have to agree with this, since they will surely want to say that we can blame Lilly after 10.30 for not having attended the meeting.

[16] For this distinction, see Zimmerman 2002, especially p. 560.

2. Efficient steps

After rejecting (R), Heuer argues that we should instead accept the claim that

> (E)   There can be a reason for a person to perform an action that this person cannot perform, as long as this person can take efficient steps towards performing this action.

She offers the following definition of 'efficient steps':

> (S)   "A person takes an efficient step towards φ-ing . . . if her action is done with the intention to φ, and if it is a necessary part of a plan that, if completed, achieves the intended result."[17]

(S) only says that the plan of which this person's action is a necessary part must achieve the intended result *if* it is completed, which can be true of plans that it is impossible for this person to complete. For example, suppose that I plan to travel back in time to prevent the crusades, slavery and the two world wars. It is true of this plan that it achieves the intended result *if* it is completed, even though it is, of course, impossible for me to complete this plan. (S) therefore entails that, for any action, it is possible for a person to take efficient steps towards performing this action.

Clearly, however, Heuer does not intend (S) to entail this. She writes:

> Taking out a can of paint, e.g., is not a step towards painting the number seven [red], even if it is done with the intention of doing so. Whatever it is that the person does with the intention of painting the number, it will not get her any closer to the intended result.[18]

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[17] Heuer 2008, p. 7.
[18] Heuer 2008, p. 7.

So perhaps we should amend the definition of efficient steps as follows:

> (S')   A person takes an efficient step towards φ-ing if her action is done with the intention to φ, and if it is a necessary part of a plan that it is possible for this person to complete, and that, if completed, achieves the intended result.

But if we do this, (E) is consistent with (R).[19] For as I have said, in my defence of (R), I took the phrase 'it is possible that this person will perform this action' to mean that there is a nomologically and historically accessible possible world in which this person will perform this action. (R) can therefore be reformulated as:

> (R')   There cannot be a reason for a person to perform an action if there is no nomologically and historically accessible possible world in which this person will perform this action.

And if there is a plan that it is possible for a person to complete and that would result in this person's performing an action, there is a nomologically and historically accessible possible world in which this person will perform this action.

Perhaps (S') should instead be reformulated in a different way. Heuer also writes that efficient steps towards φ-ing are "steps which are appropriate in the sense that they get [a person] closer to φ-ing: they must be steps in the right direction".[20] However, it is unclear what constitutes a person's getting closer to performing an action if it is impossible that this person will perform this action. Does jumping up in the sky as high as I can get me closer to jumping 30,000 feet into the sky? If the answer to this question is 'Yes', then (E) implausibly entails that there can be a reason for me to jump 30,000 feet into the sky. But if the answer is 'No', as Heuer presumably thinks it is, then she needs to explain why the answer is 'No'.

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[19] At least, it is if we take the phrase 'as long as' in (E) to mean 'if'. I take it that we can then reformulate (E) as: if a person can take efficient steps towards performing an action, there can be a reason for this person to perform this action even if this person cannot perform this action.

[20] Heuer 2008, p. 7. Immediately after this, she says that 'getting closer' requires that the action is part of a plan that, if completed, achieves the intended result.

Presumably, jumping up in the sky as high as I can does not get me closer to jumping 30,000 feet into the sky because it is impossible for me to jump 30,000 feet into the sky. But if this is the reason why Heuer's answer is 'No', (E) is again consistent with (R).

3. My arguments for (R)

When I defended (R), I gave three arguments for this claim.[21] According to what I called 'the argument from crazy reasons', (R) is the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the non-existence of what I called 'crazy reasons', such as reasons to travel back in time to prevent the crusades, slavery and the two world wars, or reasons to jump 30,000 feet into the sky. According to what I called 'the argument from tables and chairs', (R) is the simplest and least *ad hoc* explanation of the fact that inanimate objects like tables and chairs do not have reasons. And according to what I called 'the argument from deliberation', (R) is a consequence of the fact that rational deliberation should not result in a person pointlessly trying to do what it is impossible for him or her to do.

Heuer objects to the argument from crazy reasons that the best explanation of why some reasons are crazy is that a person cannot take efficient steps towards performing the actions for which they are reasons.[22] However, since it is unclear which definition of efficient steps Heuer means to endorse, it is unclear what this explanation amounts to. As we have seen, Heuer cannot mean to endorse (S), since this definition entails that, for any action, it is possible for a person to take efficient steps towards performing this action. But she clearly does not mean to endorse (S') either, since this definition makes (E) consistent with (R). And it is unclear how else to reformulate (S). By contrast, (R)'s explanation of why some reasons are crazy is perfectly clear: these reasons are crazy because it is impossible for a person to perform the actions for which they are reasons, in the sense that there is no nomologically and historically accessible possible world in which this person will perform these actions. Therefore, unless Heuer can give a better definition of efficient steps, this objection to the

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[21] Streumer 2007, pp. 358-68.
[22] Heuer 2008, pp. 6-8.

argument from crazy reasons fails.

Heuer objects to the argument from tables and chairs that it is ultimately "just the argument [from crazy reasons] under a different guise".[23] However, it seems to me that there is a clear difference between these arguments. The argument from crazy reasons says that agents do not have reasons of a certain kind, and that (R) is the best explanation of their not having reasons of this kind. By contrast, the argument from tables and chairs says that there is a difference between agents and non-agents, and that (R) is the best explanation of this difference. Heuer is right, of course, that my response to one objection to this argument resembles the argument from crazy reasons in certain respects.[24] But that does not make these two arguments one and the same, and it does not mean that the argument from tables and chairs fails.

Heuer objects to the argument from deliberation that it assumes that having most reason to perform an action always gives rise to having most reason to try to perform this action, and that this assumption is false.[25] However, the argument does not assume this. Instead, it assumes that when rational deliberation gives rise to the belief that we have most reason to perform a certain action, it should result in our trying to perform this action (which may, if we succeed, coincide with actually performing this action). This is not an assumption about the relation between reasons to perform an action and reasons to try to perform this action, but an assumption about what rational deliberation should result in. Therefore, Heuer's plausible claim that there cannot be most success-related reason to try to perform an action that we cannot perform does nothing to challenge this argument.

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[23] Heuer 2008, p. 6. Heuer also writes that the argument from deliberation "seems misguided to me anyway, because at any given time a person has a great number of reasons to act. If that would in itself pose a problem for deliberation, it would be an inevitable problem for any account of reasons" (2008, p. 6, note 5). This misunderstands the argument: the argument is not that, if (R) is false, there would be too many reasons to act, but is instead that, if (R) is false, rational deliberation would often result in a person pointlessly trying to do what it is impossible for him or her to do.

[24] Streumer 2007, p. 364-5.

[25] Heuer 2008, pp. 8-11.

4. Conclusion

I conclude that Heuer's arguments and objections fail to undermine either (R) or my arguments for (R). I therefore continue to think that there cannot be a reason for a person to perform an action if it is impossible for this person to perform this action.[26]

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