

MAKING GOOD CHOICES: AN INTRODUCTION TO PRACTICAL REASONING

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: CHOOSING AND REASONING

A farmer had a very good worker. One day the farmer told him, "I must go into town for the day. Your only job while I'm away is to prepare for market those few bushels of potatoes we harvested yesterday by sorting them into 3 piles: big potatoes, middle size ones, and small ones." At the end of the day the farmer returned and was surprised to see that the worker had made very little progress sorting the potatoes. "Why so little work done?" he asked. "I was sure you'd be finished by now. What was the problem?" The worker replied, "It's all those damned decisions!"

Life presents us with all kinds of choices. Think of those that you confront. Some may not be very important. Should you answer the phone or let the caller leave a message? Should you stop and get fuel now at this service station or wait until tomorrow when you'll be driving near a place that has fuel 10 cents a gallon cheaper? The waitress has made a slight mistake with your order: should you return it or eat it anyway? It's Saturday night: should you go out with friends or stay home and finish reading that interesting book?

Other decisions are more serious and seem to have potential for trouble. Your boss has just asked you a delicate question: should you risk upsetting her with your honest opinion, or tell her what you believe she would like to hear? Should you end the relationship you are in, or give it one more chance in the hope that all you have invested in it so far will improve things? It's raining and there is a hitchhiker: should you give him a ride, or let him stay in the rain? You have a medical problem that will need to be taken care of: should you do it now and ruin your vacation or do it later with a slight chance the problem might be worse? You are at a party and already have had several beers: should you have another one now or hold off? Someone has insulted you: should you confront him or let it pass?

Some choices are truly momentous. College experience can have a life-long influence: should you go to this college, or to that one? You are starting out in your career: should you start a

family now, or put the decision to have a child off? It's late at night and you come upon a car that has hit a tree. The three passengers look seriously injured. You smell gasoline, it might ignite: should you attempt to move the injured to safety, or leave them in the car out of fear of injuring them more? You are having serious religious doubts: should you try to work through them privately, or discuss them with your very religious family members? You have been engaged and now it is time to decide on a marriage date. You are having some doubts but realize that this is normal: should you put your doubts aside and set the wedding date or take your qualms seriously and hold off marriage?

Life is full of choices, and sometimes life itself depends on a decision. Your terminally ill elderly relative has been in a coma, and the doctors ask you about continuing life-support machines: should you continue them? You are sixteen and have gotten pregnant: should you have an abortion, put the child up for adoption, or become a single parent? Aside from these, there are crisis decisions that have to be made daily in trauma units, in emergency and rescue operations, in police and military work, in which life itself hangs in the balance.

Choices, as you already well know – small ones and momentous ones, easy ones and tough ones – are unavoidable. You can try to avoid some of them and you might succeed for a few, but no one can completely avoid making decisions (if only because a decision would be needed to do so!). So, it is often not a question in life whether to make a decision or not, it is a question what is the right choice to make. What will guide us to the right decision? What should we think about, and how should we think, if we are to minimize making bad decisions and increase the chance of making good ones? How can we tell if the decisions we make are the right ones? While these are large and complex questions, philosophers as well as thinkers in other fields who are interested in decision making agree along broad lines that the answers are to be found in our ability to reason. It is believed that for human beings reasoning and making good decisions are closely connected, and that right choices and rational choices strongly overlap. We will be accepting this core belief, and this text can be thought of as showing how certain patterns of

reasoning foster making good decisions. Let's turn to the broad topic of human reasoning. I want to present the basic assumptions about reasoning that we will be accepting.

The ability to reason has long been considered one of the central, if not *the* central, parts of human nature. Being reasonable in what we believe and do, acting reasonably toward one another, using our reasoning skills to achieve our ends – these are ideals we try to live up to and we often experience regret when we fail to do so. In ancient Greece some of the early philosophers – Plato and especially Aristotle, for example – made reason and rationality itself an object of study. This is not surprising given the importance of reasoning in human life. These thinkers argued for a set of ideas about reasoning which are generally accepted today, and five of these will be accepted here without argument as part of our background assumptions about human rationality. Some of these background assumptions will also serve to help narrow and focus our area of study. Here are the five, each with brief clarifying comments.

1) Rationality is a property of the mind.

The ability to reason, to be rational, is a mental ability, not a physical ability. Reasoning is something we do with our mind not our body. We perform actions with our body, but if an action is judged “rational” or “reasonable” it is not because of the physical condition of our body while performing it, it is because of the reasons why we perform the action.

2) We are responsible, to a degree, for our reasoning.

The ability to reason, as well as the use of this ability, can be controlled by the person who is trying to be reasonable. We can control what subjects, topics, or issues we will reason about. We can control when we will use our reasoning powers. (Clearly, people need not be rational all the time; sometimes an emotional response like compassion, empathy, or even anger is called for and it would surely be unreasonable to reason with someone when such feelings would be the more appropriate response.) Further, we can control how quickly or slowly, superficially or deeply, partially or thoroughly we will reason about an issue. This idea of a person being able to

control their ability to reason is important because it means that people can learn when and how to use reasoning; it is something that can be increased, practiced and influenced by education. Further, because we assume that a person can learn how to use their reasoning ability, at least to some degree, a person can be held responsible for their reasoning activity, at least to that degree.

3) Rationality is normative.

Reasoning is an activity that is subject to success or failure; it can be done well or poorly. This means that there are standards or principles that make it possible to evaluate when reasoning is done well and when it fails. In assumption 1, reasoning and the ability to be rational were described as a human mental ability; in other words, it is part of the description of human nature to include a description of our reasoning powers. Here, in assumption 3, we are making an important addition to this, namely, that the idea of human rationality is connected to norms or standards of good reasoning. It is not good enough for a person simply to use their reasoning ability; the person must try to reason well – well, that is, according to the standards of good reasoning. Saying that rationality is a normative or value-laden concept, as well as a descriptive concept of human nature, is meant to capture a special obligation a rational being has, namely the obligation to try to reason well when trying to reason. Because reasoning is normative, we understand that anyone who reasons is agreeing to be judged by others as to how well or poorly they have performed. And, given assumption 2, like any skill we are trying to do well, to reason well requires learning and practice. The principles of good reasoning should be understood and the skill of reasoning developed and improved through practice. Poor reasoning or carelessness in reasoning can be avoided, at least to a large degree, by our own efforts.

4) Practical reasoning concerns choosing what to do.

Humans have only two possible broad areas in which to use reasoning: (a) belief, and (b) action. We all have beliefs, all sorts of beliefs about all sorts of things. In addition, we all do things, we are constantly performing all sorts of actions. With regard to beliefs, we don't just have them, we

also justify and support our beliefs; we examine and revise them, and provide reasons why they should be held or revised. Likewise, we justify and support our actions; we examine and revise our behaviors, and offer reasons why they should or should not be done. But the reasoning that takes place in each of these two areas is not the same. The assumption we are making is that there is one form or pattern of reasoning that takes place in the area of beliefs, having its own standards of rationality, its own principles, and its own domain of application. Likewise, there is another form or pattern of reasoning that takes place in the area of action, having its own standards of rationality, its own principles, and its own domain of application. The way reasoning proceeds and the patterns that rationality takes are different in each of these two areas. Reasoning in the area of belief is basically *inferential*, while in the area of action it is basically means-ends or *instrumental*. This assumption means that the study of reasoning cannot be accomplished by one approach or one set of methods; two are required, each specializing in one kind of reasoning. Let's look at this important assumption in a more detail.

Reasoning in the area of belief and the area of knowledge acquisition is traditionally called "theoretical reasoning", but is more commonly known as "critical reasoning" or the "critical use of reasoning" (the name often used for courses and texts that teach this reasoning). The central questions in critical reasoning are: What should I believe? Which beliefs should I give up? The answers, in one respect, are easy: believe what is true and give up what is false. The rational value (as opposed to the emotional value) that we are trying for in our belief system is *truth*. But which beliefs are true, and which are false? To answer this question, we are helped by gathering evidence and forming a structure called an "argument" that organizes our supporting evidence and our beliefs into premise-conclusion forms. The question: What should I believe given the evidence I have?, is transformed into a somewhat better understood substitute question: Given the premises, with what strength does the conclusion follow? The field of logic, itself very broad with many sub-fields, studies the use of reasoning and the standards of rationality in the area of belief by studying the strength of the connection between the premises and the conclusions of various kinds of arguments.

Reasoning in the area of action is better described as the process of reasoning that leads to a decision about what to do, and is called “**practical reasoning**” or the “practical use of reasoning.” The central questions here are: What should I do? What courses-of-action should I avoid? Again, there is in one sense an easy answer: choose to do what is best to do, or at least what is good to do, and don’t do what is bad. But this answer is ambiguous; it can be taken in two ways. It might mean: (i) do what is at least permissible and perhaps even obligatory to do, as determined by some system or other of laws, morality, or code of behavior. Or it might mean: (ii) do what achieves or results in something good, beneficial, or advantageous as determined by some measure or other of value. These two meanings are quite different: just because an action is good to do (in sense (i)) does not automatically mean that it results in something good, and just because an action results in something good (in sense (ii)) does not automatically mean that it is good to do. We’ll call (i) the legal-moral sense of the term “good”, and call (ii) the value sense of that term. In this text, we will be considering practical reasoning only in the context of choosing actions that try to result in something good in the *value* sense of “good.” An action that results in something valuable might be a legally-morally good action, but even if it is not, we are still interested in the reasoning that leads to the decision favoring it.

Restricting the meaning of “good” to “valuable,” then, we continue with assumption 4 concerning practical reasoning. The value a person is trying for in practical reasoning – reasoning about what to do – is contained in the person’s goal. In later chapters, the measure or degree to which a goal is achieved will be called “utility.” For now, consider this analogy: as truth is to belief, utility is to action. To the question, then: What should I do?, the easy answer is : Do what is most valuable (that is: do the action having the greatest utility). But which actions are these, which ones have high utility? We will use a special means-end structure that helps answer the question about what is good to do, a structure that organizes possible actions into a **decision problem** in which our choices are clearly linked to the goal (= the good) we are trying to achieve through our actions. The question, then: What should I do in order to achieve some good?, is transformed

into a somewhat better understood substitute question: Given my goal, what decision maximizes utility? The study of individual and group decision making, especially the strengths of the connection between decisions and goals in decision problems, is called the theory of rational choice. This theory provides us with the methods of practical reasoning and standards of rational choice that we will be working with throughout this text.

5) Practical reasoning is instrumental.

The last assumption we will be making is not about reasoning in general, it is about practical reasoning specifically, and even more narrowly about practical reasoning only in the context of making decisions. Importantly, it is a claim that was not accepted by either Plato or Aristotle, the founders of the study of reasoning. They believed that if a person is to be rational in the practical sense, then the person must have certain goals in mind in addition to making good decisions about how best to achieve these goals. There are certain goals, these thinkers argued, that would disqualify a person from being rational, and (even worse!) would qualify a person as irrational, as having failed the standards of practical rationality. For example, a person whose goal is evil would not be considered rational in the practical sense for Plato or Aristotle, no matter how well or skillfully the person acted in achieving the goal. A murderer, say, cannot be a person of practical reason, no matter how many “good” decisions the person makes in accomplishing the murder, even if it is done so well that it is the “perfect” crime.

The 5th assumption that we will be accepting goes contrary to this view. Within the theory of rational choice, we will follow the tradition that holds that practical reason is *instrumental rationality*. The idea is that practical reasoning operates within a means-end framework, and that in studying and evaluating our choices, and in analyzing patterns of decision making, a person’s ends or goals are in an important way “off limits.” **Goals** will be taken as “givens,” meaning that they will not be evaluated as good or bad, rational or irrational; only the deliberations and decisions about how best to achieve a goal will be subject to evaluation as rational or not. By

assumption 5, then, practical reasoning as “instrumental” means that it has to do with the choice of the action (the means) we might do to achieve our end, not with the end (the good) we are trying to achieve by our decisions. Standards of rational choice, then, are norms for evaluating practical *reasoning*, they are not standards for evaluating *goals*.

Assumption 5 is, to say the least, controversial. On first reading it, in fact, I hope that you had this reaction: aren't Plato and Aristotle right? Don't we, and shouldn't we, evaluate our goals as right or wrong, good or bad, rational or irrational just as much as we evaluate the reasoning behind our decisions about how best to achieve our goals? Isn't a subject that evaluates the means (decision making) without judging the end (the goal) horribly deficient? Let's examine assumption 5 in light of such questions.

One way to understand assumption 5 is by analogy with (informal) logic, the study of critical reasoning. Treating a goal as a given in order to evaluate the best way to achieve that goal is analogous to the way logic treats premises as givens in order to evaluate the inference strength of an argument. In both cases, taking something as a given is a requirement of the method of evaluation. Assumption 5 does not mean that goals can never be evaluated; similarly with logic, treating premises as givens does not mean that they are never evaluated as true or believable. Rather, the methods of analysis and evaluation require working on one thing at a time. In the case of critical reasoning, the unit is an argument and its premises are treated as givens (that is: not evaluated) in order to discover how well they support the argument's conclusion. It turns out, to the surprise of many when they first learn this, that a conclusion can be perfectly supported logically by premises that, by independent evaluation, are wildly false! In the case of practical reasoning, as you will see, the unit we will work on is not an argument but a decision problem, and its goal is treated as a given (that is: not evaluated as good or bad) in order to discover the best means to achieve it.

Another way to think of assumption 5 is in terms of a division of intellectual labor. One subject can't study everything, it must draw boundaries separating the kinds of problems its methods and principles can investigate and what must be left to other disciplines to work on. There are several disciplines that propose and evaluate human goals and attempt to answer the questions: What goals are best for humans to achieve? What values should people be trying to achieve? Here are some possibilities to think about. The field of Religion might answer: spiritual peace (or at least a reduction in the forces of evil). The field of Education might answer: an educated mind (or at least the absence of wide spread illiteracy). The field of Medicine might answer: a population in good health (or at least the absence of wide spread disease). The field of Political Economics might answer: equality of well-being (or at least the absence of wide spread poverty). Certainly, the fields Political and Moral Philosophy argue that values such as justice and moral goodness are important goals for humans. Such areas of research as these, then, don't put our goals "off limits"; they systematically evaluate the goals that people are trying to achieve in order to discover which are moral or immoral, good or bad, valuable or worthless, right or wrong.

Other disciplines, however, seek to address a different (though related) question: what reasoning will help people discover the best way to achieve their goals, whatever they are? It turns out, to the surprise of many when they first learn this, that it is not necessary to evaluate goals in order to pursue this question. The methods of analysis and evaluation by which practical reasoning arrives at good decisions are independent of the question of whether the goals we are trying to achieve are good or bad, reasonable or crazy. By assumption 5, then, the study of practical reasoning and the theory of rational choice make it none of their business to evaluate goals, not because this shouldn't (or can't) be done but because it is best left to other disciplines that have perhaps better tools for doing so.

In light of assumption 5 that practical reasoning is instrumental and does not evaluate goals but takes them as givens, we will further assume throughout this text that the goals used in the examples and exercises have indeed been independently evaluated and found to be morally,

legally, and socially acceptable. We will pretend that we do not have to worry about goals in this respect. Any exceptions to this will be specifically pointed out.

Here is a third point to consider in connection with assumption 5. The idea that practical rationality is instrumental is based on a particular picture of human action and makes sense *if* this view of human action is held. It is called the “belief-desire theory of action.” We will not be arguing that this view is correct. What we want to consider is that *if* this view is accepted (and it is widely held in one version or another), then practical reasoning must be instrumental for those accepting it.

The picture, briefly, is this. A person’s actions are ideally the result of the decisions a person makes, and the decisions a person makes depends on two things: what the person values and what the person believes or thinks. (A simple example: a thirsty person values water and believes that drinkable water comes out of the kitchen faucet, and as a result the person will decide to drink the liquid she gets from the kitchen faucet.) But values and beliefs, according to this view, come from two very different parts of a person. A person’s value system is set by a person’s emotions, not the person’s thoughts; it is set by a person’s desires, likes/dislikes, feelings, attractions – what a person wants is what a person values. Note that this view limits the values in question to subjective values; it does not apply to objective values. For subjective values “valuable” equates with “desirable”; something has value *because* it is desired. If nothing were desired, nothing would have subjective value. (Objective value is a different kind of value, held to be independent of peoples’ desires. For the case of objective value, we would want to put things the other way around, namely: something is desirable *because* it is valuable. We will be discussing subjective value in connection with goals in Chapter 2.) Desires (wants, likes/dislikes, etc.) have two important properties. First, they always take an object; they are directed to things. There must be something desired when there is a desire. Second, they always have strength or intensity, how much or little something is desired. The more something is desired by a person the more it is of value to that person.

How do goals fit into this picture? Our goals, according to the belief-desire theory of action, are part of our value system – goals are simply those values a person is currently trying to realize or achieve. In other words, a goal is something that is desired by anyone who is trying to achieve it. By achieving a goal, in this picture of human action, a desire is satisfied and a value (a good) is achieved. Our goals, then, are set by our emotions (for desires are emotions), not by our beliefs or our thinking. The job our beliefs and thinking have in this picture of human action concerns not setting our goals but rather selecting the best way to achieve what is valued; that is, figuring out what course-of-action will most assure a person that a goal will be reached. Thinking and believing come from the rational (cognitive) part of human nature, not our emotional (affective) part. When we have true beliefs and when we reason well, we will discover the best way to get our goal. But if our beliefs are false or if we reason poorly, we will make mistakes and end up missing our goal; our desires will remain frustrated, our values unrealized, and something good will not be achieved.

This, very briefly, is the belief-desire model of action. *If* we accept it, then it follows that the study of practical reasoning has nothing to do with judging a person's goals, for a person's goals have nothing to do with a person's reasoning and everything to do with a person's emotions and desires. Practical reasoning, then, is purely instrumental – it is limited to bringing a person to a decision as to the best means to achieve an end. The theory of rational choice, under this view, attempts to discover and provide the standards by which a decision (but not a goal) can be judged rational or not. (Caution: *if* the belief-desire theory of action is accepted, then practical reasoning will be viewed as instrumental; but the converse does not follow: if practical reasoning is viewed as instrumental, it does not necessarily mean that this belief-desire theory is being accepted! By accepting assumption 5, we are not committing ourselves to *this* theory of human action.)

Here is a final consideration to think about concerning assumption 5. The instrumental view of practical reasoning is not only a convenience of method, and not only fits a useful division-of-intellectual-labor scheme, and is not only based on a widely accepted view of human action, it can also be connected to an important value: freedom. By assuming that rationality is normative (assumption 3), we are saying, in effect, that people are *not free* (at least in principle) to reason any-which-way they please; they should adhere to standards of good reasoning and we will not respect reasoning that fails such standards. But concerning a person's goals, we are imposing no such restrictions. By assumption 5, in our study of practical reasoning we are taking people to be free to determine their own goals, (though typically people do not have this freedom in the eyes of the moral, religious, legal, or social codes they live under). Assumption 5 says, in effect, that in the field of practical reasoning there is a basic presumption of openness concerning a person's desire to achieve something. It may not be what you or I would want to achieve; we might judge a person's goals silly, or too self-limiting, or too ambitious, or perhaps even self-destructive. Such a judgment would be coming from our value-system, our moral and social codes, and our concern or love for the person. But – and this is the point being made – it would not be coming from methods of practical reasoning or norms of rational choice. In this text we will be taking the person's point of view and, by making goals judgmentally “off limits,” granting a person a basic freedom in whatever the person sets for herself as a goal.

These, then, are the five background assumptions we will be accepting. Let's review them.

- 1) Rationality is a property of our mind not our body.
- 2) Reasoning can be learned and controlled to a degree that reasoners are responsible for their reasoning activity.
- 3) Rationality is normative, meaning that there are standards of good reasoning.
- 4) Practical reasoning results in a decision about a course-of-action that best achieves a goal.
- 5) Practical reasoning is a means-ends or instrumental form of reasoning whose evaluation treats ends (goals) as givens.

To say that we are accepting these five assumptions as the basis for the system of practical reasoning that will be presented in the rest of the text, is not to imply that they are unquestionably true. Quite the contrary, they are in different degrees controversial. For example, a materialist who holds that mind equals brain, and that reasoning is really brain activity, would be (or should be) uncomfortable accepting assumption 1. A Post-modernist who thinks that standards of rationality are nothing but weapons of oppression wielded by those in power would not agree with assumption 3. Assumption 5 is especially controversial and is at the center of active and ongoing philosophical debate. What will you think of these five assumptions once you finish this text?

With these five assumptions and the narrowing of our topic kept in mind, we now turn in the next chapter to two central parts of a decision problem: the agent and the goal.

Sources and Suggested Readings:

A classic discussion of means and ends is in the early books of Aristotle's *N.Ethics*. For the roles of belief (knowledge) and desire in motivating goal-directed action, Book III of Aristotle's *De Anima* is regarded as a foundational source. David Hume's influential analysis of the roles of reason and desire (the passions) in action are found in Books 2 and 3 of his *Treatise of Human Nature*. An important contemporary version of the belief-desire theory of action is in Davidson (2001) essays 5 "Intending," and especially 12 "Psychology as Philosophy." For a rich reflection on several themes connected with the above assumptions, especially 4 and 5, Chapter 1 "Introduction: Rationality and Freedom" in Sen (2002) is highly recommended. A wonderful online resource for articles on Aristotle and Hume, covering their theories of practical reasoning and

action, as well as excellent articles on practical reasoning and action in general, is the Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html>).