

## Justifying Practical Reasons

Georg Spielthener

University of Dar es Salaam  
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies  
P.O. Box 110135  
Dar es Salaam  
Tanzania  
georg\_spielthener@yahoo.de

The concept of practical reason is central to contemporary thought on ethics. According to a widely held view, we are acting well if we act for good reasons. On this viewpoint, reasons are fundamental to ethics (and practical philosophy in general) because something matters only if we have some reason to care about it. In the current literature on practical reasons there is, however, a tendency towards regarding the concept of practical reason as primitive and indefinable (see Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2000). Authors simply state that reasons are considerations that count in favour of acting in some way and assume, or write as if they assume, that this phrase does not stand in need of further clarification. This paper will show that more can (and should) be said about practical reasons.

Since the nature of reasons for acting is not well understood, and the uses of ‘reason’ are many and diverse (see Audi 2001; Hubin 2001; Schroeder 2007), I need to distinguish between different legitimate senses of ‘reason’ in order to set aside the one I shall be dealing with in this paper. It takes little familiarity with philosophical discussions on the concept of reasons for action to know that there are competing theories of *normative* reasons. (In this essay, I have nothing to say about *explanatory* reasons.) A common way of classifying practical reasons is by distinguishing *subjective* and *objective* reasons. On the subjectivists’ account, the ultimate source of reasons for an agent is in the valuations of that agent. We have most reason to do whatever would best fulfil our present desires (or the desires we would have under some specified conditions). It is fair to say, however, that this account has recently attracted considerable critique. Some authors admit that agents have sometimes subjective reasons for acting (e.g., Scanlon 2000; Searle 2001), but they deny the claim that *all* reasons for action are based on desires. Others, most notably Parfit (2011), think that the subjectivist account is fundamentally flawed. They hold that “we have reasons to act in some way only when, and because, what we are doing or trying to achieve is in some way good, or worth achieving” (Parfit, 2011: 3). In other words, it is facts that give us reasons for action, e.g., the fact that some act would give us pleasure. Let me illustrate this distinction by way of a simple example. Since you believe that the liquid in the bottle is water and you want to drink water, it has been claimed that you have a *subjective* reason to drink it but, as it is actually petrol, you have no *objective* reason for drinking it (Lenman, 2009: 4).

In this essay, I will show that neither objectivism nor subjectivism constitute the proper view of the nature of normative reasons for acting. I will argue for an intermediary position between these two extremes. My focus is on practical reasons that we can prospectively or retrospectively give to justify what we are planning to do or what we have already done. That is to say, my primary goal is to explain when we have so-called justificatory reasons for  $\varphi$ -

ing (where ‘ $\varphi$ ’ stands in for some verb of action or for verb phrases). Perhaps it is easiest to grasp the basic idea of justifying reasons by an example. Searle (2001) holds that “for a long time people had a good reason not to smoke cigarettes [...] without knowing that they had such a reason” (Searle, 2001: 99). On this view, those people had an objective reason for not smoking—the fact that it causes cancer. I do not deny that there is a use of ‘reason’ that allows saying that they had a reason for not smoking, but I wish to emphasize that those people had no *justification* for not smoking. They did not know the dangers of smoking and they had no reason for believing that it is a health hazard. If a person quitted smoking, he could not (retrospectively) justify his action, and a person who did not take up smoking in the first place could not (prospectively) justify his refusal. Justificatory reasons, however, are meant to provide a justification for the actions they are reasons for. As we shall see below, neither subjective nor objective reasons provide such justifications. It should be noted that having a justifying reason for doing something does not imply that the agent does it. We can have reasons for acting without acting on those reasons. But if a person has a justifying practical reason he has a justification *for* doing it.

Against this background, the aim of this article is now simple to state. I try to answer the question, “When does an agent have a justifying reason for action?” The main thesis of this paper is that a piece of practical reasoning gives an agent a justifying reason for acting if he has a reason for the premises of this reasoning and a warrant for holding that they logically support the conclusion. To argue for this thesis, I shall (in Section 1) discuss the components of such reasons. Section 2 presents a principle of closure for justifying reasons and explains two key clauses of this principle. In the last section, I show how my account can avoid the regress problem in practical reasoning.

## 1 Components of justifying reasons for action

Suppose you are on a mountaineering holiday in the Alps. You want to climb a certain mountain and you believe that there are only two routes: The eastern route that leads to the peak and the southern route, which leads to a glacial lake. Since you prefer standing on the peak to reaching the lake, you prefer taking the eastern route rather than the southern. Many writers in the field of practical reasoning, notably neo-Humeans, hold that, in the circumstances, you have a *pro tanto* reason for choosing the eastern route. In this section, I will show that this view is misguided by outlining a more sophisticated account of what it is for an agent to have a reason for acting.

Before going on to a detailed consideration of justificatory reasons, two clarifications are called for. First, in the interest of keeping matters as simple as possible, I shall here be concerned with reasoning *under certainty* only. Reasoning is said to be under certainty if the reasoner knows, at least for practical purposes, of each of his options what the outcomes of his taking it would be. Certainty is the simplest case of practical reasoning because no probabilities enter. Second, practical reasoning requires a choice. If we have no choice – when we slip off the ladder or when our body is held immobile – then we do not reason what to do. This may appear so obviously true as to be hardly worth saying, but many authors seem to have overlooked this fact, and they refer therefore to “desires” or other monadic valuations when they discuss practical reasons. However, when we have to choose between different options the relevant valuations are *preferences*. They are dyadic (or comparative) valuations. I take the term ‘*a* is preferred to *b*’ to mean that the agent assigns more value to *a* than to *b*.

Reasons for action are provided by practical reasoning. But when are the premises of a piece of reasoning a justificatory reason for its conclusion? On my view, three conditions must be satisfied. In what follows, I discuss them one by one.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Epistemic reasons

Authors often hold that the agent's *beliefs* create a reason for  $\phi$ -ing. For instance, Beardman claims that "if you have an end E, and believe that doing M is a necessary and available means to bring about E, then you have a pro tanto reason to M" (Beardman, 2007: 257). But surely not any belief will give you a reason. If you have good evidence that M is not a means to E but you obstinately refuse to accept this evidence, then you have no justificatory reason to M. This point may be thought to be rather trivial and obvious, but it is worth emphasizing here because it has generally been overlooked by authors who defend the subjectivist account of practical reasons.

Other writers claim that an agent has a reason to  $\phi$ -ing if it is a (necessary) means for achieving one of his ends. On this view, it is *facts* that generate reasons. These facts can be about an agent's desires (i. e., the fact *that* an agent desires  $x$ ) but they are "typically facts about valuable states of affairs that the action is likely to bring about, or valuable properties that the action itself will instantiate" (Gert, 2009: 319). For example, Parfit holds that "if I enjoy walnuts, this fact gives me a reason to eat them" (Parfit, 2011: 32) and Scanlon states that the fact that a friend likes Indian food is a reason for choosing an Indian restaurant (Scanlon, 2000: 50).<sup>2</sup>

Examples that state facts as practical reasons are often persuasive because they implicate that these facts are known and that they are valued or disvalued (see the examples above). In addition, when we give reasons for what we have done, we often express them in factual language. (I sold the car because it was old.) It is, however, not difficult to show that facts *as such* do not provide justifying reasons. Suppose you suffer from a rare disease and you can only be cured if you take substance X. Nobody knows this or has a reason to believe it. Quite the contrary, the prevailing view of experts is that the only thing that can help you is taking substance Y. I think it is clear that you have then no *justificatory* reason for taking substance X (even though it is a fact that it would cure you) and that you have a good justification for taking substance Y, even though it will not help you.

Neither mere beliefs nor facts can justify our actions. What we need is *reasons*. If you have a reason for believing that you can only reach the peak if you take the eastern route then, I submit, you have a justification for taking it (given that the other conditions are met). That is to say, I hold that you have neither a justifying reason for performing an action if this action is in fact a necessary means for one of your ends nor when you only believe that it is such a means; and you do not even have such a reason if the action is actually a means *and* you believe that it is one. What is required is a reason for believing (i. e., an epistemic reason) that this action is a means to something you have a reason to value.

A vital point to notice here is that justificatory reasons require only that the agent has a reason for believing that an action is appropriately related to something that he has a reason to value. It is *not* required that he actually believes this. There is a familiar epistemological distinction between so-called *doxastic justification* and *propositional justification*. Roughly, *S*

<sup>1</sup>Compare to this discussion (Spielthener, 2012) on which this section draws.

<sup>2</sup>Other authors who hold this view include Hubin (2001), Schroeder (2007), Setiya (2007), Williams (2001) and Raz who claims that it is the fact that this medicine will alleviate your pain that provides you with a reason for taking it (Raz, 1978: 3).

has doxastic justification that  $p$  if he believes that  $p$  and is justified *in* believing  $p$ . If  $S$  has propositional justification for believing  $p$  then it is *not* implied that  $S$  actually believes  $p$ . In the theory of practical reasons there is a similar distinction. An agent has a justificatory reason for  $\phi$ -ing if he has a justification *for* believing that  $\phi$ -ing is a necessary means for achieving one of his rational ends. I shall use the phrases ‘having a reason for believing  $p$ ’, ‘having a justification *for* believing  $p$ ’ and ‘being justified *in* believing  $p$ ’ interchangeably. By all of them I mean, roughly, that if  $S$  were to believe  $p$  solely on the basis of his justifying reason then  $S$  would justifiably believe  $p$ .<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Valuational reasons

Some authors, notably decision theorists, hold that if some formal conditions are met, any occurrent or dispositional desire can provide a reason for action.<sup>4</sup> This, however, is in philosophy a minority opinion. Some philosophical authors admit that desires can give agents some practical reasons, albeit not the most important ones (e. g., Scanlon, 2000; Searle, 2001), and others, in particular proponents of the neo-Humean theory, restrict the set of reason-giving desires to a special class of intrinsic desires – e. g., those that the agent is not alienated from and that are not impulses (see e. g., Shemmer, 2007).<sup>5</sup>

But as I have already mentioned, in practical reasoning we need a choice between at least two alternatives. I therefore hold that it is more appropriate to focus on *preferences* (i. e., *comparative* valuations) rather than *desires* (which are *monadic* valuations). This raises the question as to whether preferences can provide justifying reasons for action. Here is a case of the simplest kind. You have to fly to Vienna today, and the only seats you can get are on Lufthansa and on Air France. Since you prefer Lufthansa, many theorists hold that this preference provides you with a reason for taking that flight. But there is a general argument, which I can only sketch here, that neither occurrent nor dispositional preferences provide justificatory reasons. It is logically possible that acting reverses an agent’s preferences. Suppose that an agent knows that due to his unfortunate psychological constitution, whenever he prefers  $x$  to  $y$  and chooses appropriate means for achieving  $x$ , then his preference changes. He then prefers  $y$  to  $x$ . If he knows this, he has no reason for choosing the means for what he prefers. Given his knowledge, he has rather a justifying reason for choosing the means for what he does *not* prefer.<sup>6</sup>

On the account presented here, we have a reason for  $\phi$ -ing only if we have a justification for the preference that is a component of this reason. To illustrate, let us return to our example at the beginning of this section. It should be clear by now that believing that the eastern route leads to the peak and wanting to scale that peak does not give you a reason for taking the eastern

<sup>3</sup>A similar explication has been given by Coffman (2006: 258). He explains the notion of good evidence as “evidence that would render justified a belief in  $p$  were  $S$  to so believe on its basis”. In a slightly different terminology, Audi states that a person has a situational (propositional) justification for believing  $x$  “if and only if the person has grounds [reason] for it such that in virtue of believing it on the basis of them the person would be justified in so believing” (Audi, 2001: 243, note 26).

<sup>4</sup>For example, Maurice Allais, a prominent decision theorist, is quoted by Broome as saying, “It cannot be too strongly emphasized that there are no criteria for the rationality of ends as such other than the condition of consistency. Ends are completely arbitrary.” (Broome, 1995: 104-105). Some philosophers have endorsed this view. For instance, Bertrand Russell has held that reason “has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends,” it only requires choosing the right means “to an end that you wish to achieve” (Russell, 1954: 8).

<sup>5</sup>As common in philosophical usage, these authors take ‘desire’ in a broad sense, in which it is a generic name for a large group of pro-attitudes (including intending, wanting, liking, caring, feeling committed) that an agent can have towards an action, outcome, or any other content of his attitudes.

<sup>6</sup>Please notice that I am assuming here that the agent is not pathological in the sense that whenever he chooses means for achieving  $y$  his preference changes again and he then prefers  $x$ . And so on, and so on.

route. And even if you have a reason for your beliefs and you prefer the peak to the glacial lake you have no justification for taking the eastern route unless you have a *reason for preferring* to stand on the peak.

Since there is wide agreement among authors in the field of practical reasoning that reasons for action require a justification for the valuational element they contain, I shall not expand on this point here.<sup>7</sup> Leaving details for later (Section 2), I only want to emphasize one implication of my view. In analogy to the epistemic reasons discussed in the previous subsection, having a reason for valuing a state of affairs does not imply that the agent values it. That is to say, we can have a reason for valuing  $x$  without in fact valuing it. We often say, and correctly so, that someone should do something even though he does not want to do it (for instance, should exercise despite the fact that he hates it). But we also say that someone should not do something even though he wants to do it (should not smoke although he craves for it). This is consistent with my view because the notions of *preferring  $x$  to  $y$*  and *having a reason for preferring  $x$  to  $y$*  are logically independent, and justifying reasons depend on the latter concept only.

Since we can have a reason for doing something without having a preference, my account is not subjective and it is therefore not affected by the critique levelled against subjectivism (see e. g., Parfit, 2011 or Scanlon, 2000).

### 1.3 Warrant for logical support

Even if an agent has reasons for the premises of a piece of practical reasoning he may still not have a reason for its conclusion. Having a reason for the premises of a valid argument does not imply that a reasoner has also a reason for the conclusion because he may be completely unaware of the logical relationship between the premises and the conclusion. The issue of how justification for the premises of a valid argument is transmitted to its conclusion has been extensively discussed in epistemology with regard to reasons for believing.

Some philosophers hold that we have a reason for the conclusion of a piece of reasoning if we have a reason for its premises and the premises *in fact entail* the conclusion, no matter whether we have a reason for believing that this entailment holds.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, wide agreement that this view is mistaken. A simple example will suffice to make this clear. A student has a reason for believing that a certain shape is a right triangle. This does not give him a reason for believing that the square on this triangle's hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on its two legs, despite the fact that this is deducible from what the student believes. What the student believes about the triangle provides him only with a reason for holding the conclusion if he has a justification for believing that the conclusion is deducible from his premise-belief. In addition, any set of premises entails many conclusions, which will always include conclusions that are so complex that the reasoner does not even understand them. It is quite implausible to hold that a reasoner is justified in believing all of them just because he is justified in believing the premises (Boghossian, 2001; Feldman, 1995).

Other philosophers take a similarly extreme view by holding that a reasoner only needs to *believe* that the premises entail the conclusion. It is, however, obvious that this view is inadequate. An agent can believe that the premises logically support the conclusion even though they do not support it and there are good reasons for holding that the reasoning is

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, Korsgaard (1997) and Schroeder (2007). Hubin characterizes this view as holding that "no reasons will be transmitted to the means unless there is a reason for the ends" (Hubin, 2001: 462), and he holds that "everyone should admit that a person has reason to undertake means to those ends she has a reason to bring about" (Ibid: 459).

<sup>8</sup>Among the authors who hold this or a similar view are Boghossian and Williamson (2003) and Cross (2001).

invalid. If you believe  $p \rightarrow q$  and  $q$ , you may think that these statements entail  $p$ . But this does not give you a reason for believing  $p$ , even if you have a reason for believing the premises.

Since this view is obviously too weak, some authors prefer formulations that seem to be somewhat stronger. Audi holds that the entailment relation must be “within the scope of one’s understanding” (Audi, 2001: 43Page number before or after citation?). Other writers state that a reasoner must *competently deduce* the conclusion (see McBride, 2014), that he must be *aware* of the logical relation between the premises and the conclusion (Meiland, 1980), that he must *realize* that the premises imply the conclusion (Bogdan, 1985: 55) or that the entailment must be *obvious* (Brueckner, 2000; Coffman, 2006). I think it is fair to say that these formulations are too unclear to be helpful for resolving the issue under consideration.

Some theorists require that a reasoner *knows* that the premises entail the conclusion (Stine, 1976; Okasha, 1999). This may be appropriate if we investigate when the premises of a piece of reasoning guarantee knowledge of the conclusion. But the problem with which I am concerned in this paper is when premises provide a *justification* for the conclusion, and for resolving this problem it is not required that the logical support is known. I therefore agree with Klein (1999) that this requirement is too strong.

What is then required for transmitting the justification for the premises to the conclusion? On my view, an agent needs to be justified in holding that the premises logically support the conclusion. This, I submit, is an intermediate position between the untenable extremes that have been discussed thus far. Be it noted that my account does not require that an agent can present a logical theory that shows that the premises entail the conclusion.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, an agent is neither expected to self-consciously draw a conclusion (we are often not fully aware of our reasoning), nor is he required to believe that an entailment relation exists (as said, having a reason for believing  $p$  does not imply believing it). My account even permits that the premises do in fact *not* entail the conclusion (one can be justified in believing something that is false). All that is required is that a reasoner has some sort of warrant for holding that, given his premises, it would be irrational to deny the conclusion.

## 2 Closure for justification in practical reasoning

In line with what I have said in the previous section, I shall now propose a principle of closure for justification that succinctly states the *sufficient* conditions for having a justificatory reason for action. In short, this principle holds that if an agent has a justification for the premises of a piece of practical reasoning and he has a warrant for holding that these premises entail the conclusion of this reasoning, then he has a justifying reason for this conclusion.<sup>10</sup> In other words, I hold that justifying reasons are closed under logical implication.<sup>11</sup> Many authors think that we can enlarge what we have a reason for believing by accepting what is entailed by things we have reason to accept. Whether reasons are closed under deduction is an important epistemological question because many sceptical arguments depend on closure. Hence, much has been written about closure principles in theoretical reasoning. In the field of practical

<sup>9</sup>Practical reasoning need not be deductive. In reasoning under uncertainty, the premises provide only probabilistic support for the conclusion. But since I have restricted myself in this paper to reasoning under certainty, I shall concentrate on the deductive case, leaving a treatment of probabilistic reasoning for another occasion.

<sup>10</sup>It is important to observe that such reasons are so-called *pro tanto reasons*, i. e., reasons that can be outweighed by better reasons without losing their status as reasons.

<sup>11</sup>Strictly speaking, closure is a property of sets. Set  $A$  is said to be closed under a relation  $R$  if every element of this set is such that anything it is  $R$ -related to is a member of set  $A$ . For instance, the set of statements of a language is closed under finite truth-functional combinations because if we combine statements truth-functionally we get again a statement of this language.

reasoning, however, closure for reasons has (so far as I know) never been discussed, despite its importance for understanding the notion of practical reasons. In what follows, I shall therefore propose and briefly explain a principle of closure for justifying reasons in practical reasoning. Let  $P1, P2, \dots, Pn$  be the set of premises of a piece of practical reasoning and  $C$  its conclusion.

(CJR) An agent has, at  $t$ , a justifying reason for  $C$  if he has, at  $t$ , a reason for each member of the set  $P1, P2, \dots, Pn$  and has, at  $t$ , a warrant for believing that this set entails  $C$ .

This principle is a material conditional that states the sufficient conditions for justifying reasons.<sup>12</sup> Now I have some comments to make on both clauses of its antecedent.

The second clause of (CJR) states that an agent needs a warrant for believing that the premises logically support the conclusion. Since the logic of practical reasoning is contentious, it will be helpful to outline when, on my view, the premises of a practical argument entail its conclusion.<sup>13</sup> Like reasoning in general, practical reasoning is *valid* if, and only if, the set consisting of the premises and the negation of the conclusion is *inconsistent*. For definiteness, let me state this basic fact in the following principle of valid practical reasoning.

(P) A piece of practical reasoning that consists of the premises  $P1, \dots, Pn$  and the conclusion  $C$  is valid *iff* the set  $P1, \dots, Pn, \neg C$  is inconsistent.<sup>14</sup>

The key notion is now “inconsistency”, which may seem a suspect notion because it is not plain when the premises of a piece of practical reasoning and the negation of its conclusion are inconsistent. My next objective is therefore to explain when practical reasoning is inconsistent.

To understand the concept of *practical inconsistency*, we need to be clear that the premises and the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning are intentional attitudes (not statements or propositions). In our simple example, the premises are your beliefs that the eastern route leads to the peak, while the southern route leads to the glacial lake and your preference for standing on the peak rather than reaching the lake. The conclusion is your preference for taking the eastern route.<sup>15</sup>

But how can *different* intentional attitudes (beliefs and valuations) be inconsistent? Beliefs and preferences have *contents*, which I take to be propositions (for instance, the proposition that you are standing on the peak). The point to emphasize now is that a piece of practical reasoning is *not* inconsistent because its contents are inconsistent in the sense that it is impossible for all of them to be true. What renders practical reasoning inconsistent is rather a special *logical relationship* between the contents of its premises and the content of the conclusion.

<sup>12</sup>Some authors propose closure principles that are *strict* conditionals. But these are unnecessarily strong versions and most philosophers formulate closure principles that are material conditionals.

<sup>13</sup>That practical reasoning can be valid is by no means beyond dispute. Many logicians and philosophers endorse it (e.g., Kenny, 1978 or Broome, 2001), but several writers have argued against it (e.g., Mitchell, 1990 or Searle, 2001). Since a consideration of this issue would take us beyond the confines of the present work and I have argued for the validity of practical arguments elsewhere (see Spielthener, 2007) I will not pursue this issue further here.

<sup>14</sup>This principle has been expressed in different ways. Richard Hare contends that “he who assents to the premises is compelled not to dissent from the conclusion, on pain of logical inconsistency” (see Kenny, 1978: 75). Searle holds that the acceptance of the premises of a valid practical argument “commits one to the acceptance of the conclusion” (Searle, 2001: 241). According to Gensler, inconsistency of the premises and the conclusion means that we ought not to combine accepting the premises with accepting the conclusion (Gensler, 1996: 16); and von Wright defined *entailment* between norms as follows: “A consistent set of norms entails a further norm if, and only if, adding to the set the negation norm of this further norm makes the set inconsistent” (Wright, 1999: 34).

<sup>15</sup>At this point I envisage the objection that on this view it is not any longer clear how practical reasoning can provide reasons for *action*. In essentials, my reply is very simple and runs as follows. If we have a *direct* reason for preferring  $\phi$ -ing to  $\psi$ -ing then we have a *derivative* reason for  $\phi$ -ing, provided that  $\phi$ -ing is an alternative (i.e., can be done by the agent if he chooses to do it). Similar views have been held by Broome (1999) and Searle (2001).

Leaving technicalities aside, I shall now try to elucidate this relationship by referring to our example. (i) Believing that you will stand on the peak if you take the eastern route, (ii) believing that you get to the lake if you take the southern route, (iii) preferring to stand on the peak and at the same time (iv) preferring to take the southern route is practically inconsistent. You would prefer doing something that logically entails an outcome you disprefer and you would disprefer performing an action that entails an outcome you prefer. I think upon reflection it is clear that a reasoner who holds (i) to (iv) is in a condition of mental incoherence that is analogous to theoretical inconsistency. Our example is a piece of valid practical reasoning because, given the premises, preferring not to take the eastern route (i. e., taking the southern route) is practically inconsistent.

The first clause of (CJR) states that an agent must have a reason for the premises. I have nothing to say here about the justification for the beliefs, which is a central problem of epistemology. But I wish to briefly explain how to give a justifying reason for preferences. This issue has received remarkably little philosophical discussion, although it can be said without exaggeration that the assessment of reasons for valuations is an essential component of the general theory of practical reasons.

According to (CJR), you have a reason for taking the eastern route if you have reasons (i) for your beliefs that the two routes lead to the peak and the lake respectively, (ii) for preferring the peak, and (iii) for holding that the premises logically support the conclusion. Call this  $R_1$ .

Suppose now that you are asked why you prefer the peak to the lake (which is here a query for justification not for explanation). Your reasoning for this *preference* has the same structure as your reasoning for the *action* of taking the eastern route. There is no mystery here because the conclusion of both pieces of reasoning is a preference. Let us assume you argue as follows: From the peak I can see a lush valley which I prefer to the lake scenery. If you have a reason for your premises and you are justified in holding that these premises entail the conclusion then you have a justifying reason for preferring the peak. Call it  $R_2$ . You have  $R_1$  if you have  $R_2$ .

Assume you are pressed further. You are asked why you prefer the valley to the lake scenery. If you argue that you enjoy watching the valley more than viewing the scenery at the lake and you have the required justifications then you have given a reason for this preference. Call it  $R_3$ . That is, you have  $R_1$  if you have  $R_2$  and you have  $R_2$  if you have  $R_3$ , and it seems that this chain of justifications has no end. One may object, therefore, that my account of practical reasons leads to an infinite regress. I will address this issue in the next section.

### 3 The regress of reasons problem

The regress problem in practical reasoning is fairly simply put. It begins with some expressed valuation, e. g., “I want to buy sports shoes” followed by the question, “Why do you want to buy them?” The regress continues: *Because I want to exercise.* “And why do you want to exercise?” *Because I want to reduce my blood pressure.* “And why do you want to reduce it?” *Because I want to prevent a stroke,* and so forth. Since I hold that only reasons can provide reasons for a valuation or action, the structure of reasoning that I have outlined in the previous sections seems to give rise to such a (potentially infinite) regress. On this view, if you have a reason ( $R_1$ ) for the conclusion  $C$  this reason includes a preference for which you also need a reason ( $R_2$ ). This reason includes another preference for which you need a further reason ( $R_3$ ), and so forth. That is, there seems to be a regress from  $C$  to  $R_1$ , to  $R_2$ , to  $R_3$ , etc.

But let us have a closer look at this issue. Since (CJR) is a conditional, my account does *not entail* an infinite chain of reasons. That is, it does not follow that if you have a reason for  $C$  you have  $R_1$  and if you have  $R_1$  you have  $R_2$  (and thus if you have a reason for  $C$  you have



R<sub>2</sub>), and so forth. More importantly (and also due to the logical structure of the proposed principle), it is not entailed that if you do *not* have R<sub>2</sub> you do *not* have R<sub>1</sub> and thus you have *no* reason for C. But since the structure of justification is inferential, my account seems to imply that we have only *conditional reasons*. When we give a reason for C by appealing to R<sub>1</sub>, we have not yet shown that C is justified. We have only shown that it is justified *if* the components of R<sub>1</sub> are justified. The justification for C is conditional only. We have a reason for C if we have R<sub>1</sub>, which we have if we have R<sub>2</sub>, and so on. But if all justification is conditional in this sense, then we can never claim that an act is non-conditionally justified.

Authors distinguish three main types of justificatory theories that suggest solutions to this regress problem. *Coherence theories* allow a circling back upon valuations that have already been used in the justificatory chain. But many authors think that any such circularity is vicious (e. g., Klein, 1999). That is to say, it is commonly claimed that the chain of inferential justification must come to an end without circularity. If justification does not end somewhere it seems that our reasons are, in the end, ungrounded. This is the view of foundationalists.

*Foundationalism* is roughly the view that inferentially justified valuations (or beliefs) are based on foundational valuations (or beliefs) that cannot be justified by further reasons but can nevertheless provide reasons for action.<sup>16</sup> That is, the foundationalist strategy for responding to the regress problem consists in denying that justification can be circular and in claiming that there is a stopping point in the regress of reasons, namely so-called basic valuations (or desires).<sup>17</sup> These valuations are not based on any reasons and hence they are not rationally criticisable. We can, of course, examine the causes and consequences of such valuations but not the reasons on which they are based. There are none. Simple foundationalist views hold that *all* basic desires are reason giving. But this is implausible because whims (e. g., the desire for smashing a malfunctioning machine) and alien desires (i. e., desires that do not reflect an agent's true self; see Hubin, 2003) seem to be clear examples of basic desires that are *not* reason giving. Sophisticated foundationalists concede this, and there have been various attempts to distinguish basic valuations that provide reasons from those that do not (see e. g., Brandt, 1979; Hubin, 2003). But none of them has firmly established itself, and it is fair to say that foundationalist views of justification are still marred by the unresolved problem of basic valuations.

Some epistemologists, notably Klein (1999; 2004), have proposed *infinetism* to avoid the problems of coherentism and foundationalism. According to infinitism, the structure of justifying reasons is infinite because it neither allows circularity nor basic desires as regress stoppers. But also infinitism has been subjected to criticism (see Turri, 2009), and some authors think it is obvious that infinite chains cannot provide justification for beliefs or valuations.

Be that as it may, I think that the outlined theories are mainly of academic interest because under real-world circumstances we use more rough-and-ready procedures of giving reasons. In what follows I shall sketch a common-sense model of valuational justification that can provide a satisfactory solution to the regress problem. (Limitations of space prevent me from defending this view here.)

<sup>16</sup>This is not only the view of neo-Humeanism, arguably the most influential theory of practical reasons, but also of non-Humean foundationalists (e. g., Audi, 2001). Foundationalism has, however, attracted much criticism: With regard to *practical* reasoning for example from Parfit (2011) and with regard to *theoretical* reasoning from Klein (1999; 2004), whose critique is relevant to practical reasoning too.

<sup>17</sup>An illustrative example of foundationalist thinking was already given by Hume (1777): "Ask a man why he uses exercise; he will answer *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object" (Hume, 1777/1975: 293).

In everyday practical discourse, chains of justification are neither infinite nor is there any need to go up the chain until we reach so-called basic desires. Our chains of justification tend to be rather short. If Jones tells us that he wants to take up exercise we may want to know his reason for it. If he tells us that he wants to reduce his blood pressure we may still inquire why he has this goal. But if he tells us that lowering his blood pressure is necessary for maintaining his health, there will be *no need* for further reasons.<sup>18</sup> In our daily practical reasoning, we justify our actions (and valuations) to another person until we reach common ground, i. e., until this person *accepts* a consideration as a reason; and the action is then justified relative to this basis. We accept reasons for valuations (and actions) if we agree with the factor that has been given as a reason. For example, we accept keeping one's health as a reason for exercising if we concur (possibly with a reason) with this aim and (possibly justifiedly) think that exercise is a means for preserving health.

The point to emphasize now is that this view has two interesting consequences. First, accepting reasons stops the chain of reasons. It does so not because no further reasons *can* be given but because, in the circumstances, there is *no need* for further reasons. We do not have to postulate basic desires for which no further reasons can be given. Chains of reasons do not end because basic desires have been reached but because, in a given situation, we do not need further reasons. To clarify this point, we can adapt Karl Popper's view about scientific reasoning to our problem of practical justification. On this view, our justifications are like "piles driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or "given" base; and if we stop driving the piles deeper, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being" (Popper, 1968: 111). Should, however, a need for further justification arise (e. g., because new information becomes available), my account allows adding additional reasons at any time and it even permits that the chain of reasons becomes endless.

Second, accepting reasons also alleviates the problem of conditional reasons (see above). Suppose that Jones (elliptically) argues that he has to take up exercise (C) to reduce his blood pressure (R<sub>1</sub>). Smith wants to know why he wants to reduce blood pressure and Jones replies that he wants to prevent a stroke (R<sub>2</sub>). If Smith accepts R<sub>2</sub> as a reason for wanting to reduce blood pressure (and accepts that Jones has the required epistemic reasons) then he is on my account *inconsistent* if he does not accept that Jones has a reason for taking up exercise. That is, if Smith accepts R<sub>2</sub>, he is *irrational* if he does not accept that Jones has a reason for exercising. To be clear, I do *not* hold that Smith's accepting R<sub>2</sub> entails that Jones *has* a reason for exercising, I rather hold that Smith's accepting R<sub>2</sub> logically commits him *to accept* that Jones has this reason. Smith has to accept this because, on my account, R<sub>2</sub> (together with the epistemic reasons of R<sub>1</sub>) logically entails C (and accepting the premises of a valid argument while denying its conclusion is irrational). Jones' reason is therefore not only conditional. This point can be generalized. If A argues for a conclusion and B accepts a reason in the chain of reasons, then A can hold that B must (on pain of inconsistency) accept that A has a reason for the conclusion. This result, I think, is crucial because it shows how to respond to the claim that on the account presented here, we have only conditional reasons. We can provide reasons whenever we are challenged. But once an opponent accepts one of the reasons in our justificatory chain, he

---

<sup>18</sup>Justification is in this respect similar to definition. It may seem that defining is an endless process because the defining terms are themselves in need of definitions. But in practice, chains of definitions end (even if we do not just take some terms as basic). If you do not know what 'vixen' means and you are told that a vixen is a female fox, there is very likely *no need* for further definitions.

must, to avoid inconsistency, accept that we have a reason for our valuation. I don't think that a successful justification of an action requires something deeper.

I believe that this brief exposition of my account of valuational justification, incomplete though it is, can alleviate the philosophical worries engendered by the threat of an infinite regress of justificatory reasons. It allows us to give reasons whenever we need some, without being committed to the controversial claim that some valuations are foundational in the sense that no reasons can be given for them. The account presented here is also preferable to *infinetism* because it does not imply that the justificatory chain is infinite. As noted previously, it is controversial whether infinite chains can justify any valuation. According to my view, the process of reason giving comes to an end, possibly only temporarily, when "the piles are firm enough to carry the structure".

I think my account is also preferable to coherence theories of justification. I have already mentioned that these theories imply that the process of justification loops back upon itself, and that many authors consider this as unacceptable. Nonetheless, some authors have taken coherence theories to be central to justification in practical reasoning (e.g., John Rawls and his followers). The general appeal of coherentist conceptions of justification is that they do not require distinguishing between foundational and derived valuations. Justification is rather a matter of mutual support of valuations and beliefs. Unfortunately, however, authors in the field of practical reasoning have not provided the details necessary for their account to advance beyond the metaphorical stage. Some of the challenges that a coherence theory faces are the following. (i) We need to know when a set of preferences is coherent. But to the best of my knowledge, no plausible proposal concerning the precise definition of coherence of (sets of) preferences has been presented. (ii) Incompatible sets of preferences and beliefs can be equally coherent. If coherence is sufficient for justification then all these incompatible sets will be justified, which thoroughly undermines the plausibility of the coherence theory. (iii) Coherence admits of degrees. That is to say, sets of preferences can be more or less coherent. A coherence-driven theory of justification would require choosing the most coherent set. But according to Milgram, no comparative notion of coherence that is precise enough to give us a clear answer which preferences are most coherent has been developed. He therefore holds that "appeals to coherence are empty and the merits of coherence-driven accounts of practical reasoning cannot be assessed" (Milgram, 2001: 13). The coherence theory may represent an initially suggestive solution to the problem of valuational justification. It proposes a way of thinking about justification as arising from fitting everything together into one coherent view. But I think it is fair to say that currently, there exists no convincing account of coherentist justification in practical reasoning.

For these reasons, I hold that the model of valuational justification presented here is an improvement over its rival accounts. If an agent has provided reasons until common ground has been reached, he has done what we might realistically expect of him.

## 4 Conclusion

The question I have been addressing in this paper is "When does an agent have a justifying reason for action?" We have arrived at the following results: A piece of practical reasoning gives an agent a reason for action if he has a reason for its premises and a warrant for holding that these premises logically support the conclusion. Roughly, that is to say that justifying reasons are closed under logical implication. Contrary to how it may appear at first sight, this view need not give rise to an infinite regress of reasons. In everyday reasoning, the process of giving reasons ends if there is no need for further reasons because the contestants have

reached common ground. In addition, my account does not imply that justifying reasons are conditional reasons only because if a person accepts one link in a chain of reasons she would be irrational if she denied that the agent has a reason for action.

## References

- Audi, R. (2001). *The architecture of reason: The structure and substance of rationality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Beardman, S. (2007). 'The special status of instrumental reason', *Philosophical Studies* 134, 255–287.
- Bogdan, R. J. (1985). 'Cognition and epistemic closure', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 22(1), 55–63.
- Boghossian, P. (2001). 'How are objective epistemic reasons possible?', *Philosophical Studies* 106, 1–40.
- Boghossian, P. and Williamson, T. (2003). 'Blind reasoning', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. Supplementary Volumes* 77, 225–293.
- Brandt, R. B. (1979). *A theory of the good and the right*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Broome, J. (1995). *Weighing goods: Equality, uncertainty and time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Broome, J. (1999). 'Normative requirement', *Ratio* 12, 398–419.
- Broome, J. (2001). 'Normative practical reasoning', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 75(1), 175–193.
- Brueckner, A. (2000). 'Klein on closure and skepticism', *Philosophical Studies* 98(2), 139–151.
- Coffman, E. J. (2006). 'Defending Klein on closure and skepticism', *Synthese* 151(2), 257–272.
- Cross, C. B. (2001). 'The paradox of the knower without epistemic closure', *Mind* 110(438), 319–333.
- Feldman, R. (1995). 'In defence of closure', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 45(181), 487–494.
- Gensler, H. J. (1996). *Formal ethics*, Routledge, London.
- Gert, J. (2009). 'Practical rationality, morality, and purely justificatory reasons', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37(3), 227–243.
- Hubin, D. C. (2001). 'The groundless normativity of instrumental rationality', *The Journal of Philosophy* 98(9), 445–468.
- Hubin, D. C. (2003). 'Desires, whims and values', *The Journal of Ethics* 7(3), 315–335.
- Hume, D. (1777/1975). *Enquiry concerning the principles of morals* (3rd rev. ed.), L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Kenny, A. J. (1978). Practical reasoning and rational appetite, in: J. Raz (ed.), *Practical reasoning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 63–80.
- Klein, P. D. (1999). 'Human knowledge and the infinite regress of reasons', *Noûs* 33, 297–325.
- Klein, P. D. (2004). 'What "is" wrong with foundationalism is that it cannot solve the epistemic regress problem', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68(1), 166–171.
- Korsgaard, C. M. (1997). The normativity of instrumental reason, in: G. Cullity & B. Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and practical reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 215–254.
- Lenman, J. (2009). Reasons for action: Justification vs. explanation. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://www.stanford.edu/entries/reasons-just-vs-expl>, accessed 21 April 2010.
- McBride, M. (2014). 'Sensitivity and closure', *Episteme* 11(2), 181–197.

- Meiland, J. W. (1980). 'What ought we to believe?', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17(1), 15–24.
- Milgram, E. (2001). Practical reasoning, the current state of the play, *in*: E. Milgram (ed.), *Varieties of practical reasoning*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, pp. 1–26.
- Mitchell, D. (1990). 'Validity and practical reasoning', *Philosophy* 65, 477–500.
- Okasha, S. (1999). 'Epistemic justification and deductive closure', *Crítica* 31(92), 37–51.
- Parfit, D. (2011). *On what matters, vol. 1*, (edited and introduced by S. Scheffler), Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Popper, K. R. (1968). *The logic of scientific discovery*, Hutchinson, London.
- Raz, J. (1978). Reasons for actions, decisions and norms, *in*: J. Raz (ed.), 'Practical reasoning', Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 128–143.
- Russell, B. (1954). *Human society in ethics and politics*, Routledge, London.
- Scanlon, T. M. (2000). *What we owe to each other*, Belknap Press, Cambridge MA.
- Schroeder, M. (2007). 'Weighting for a plausible Humean theory of reasons', *Noûs* 41(1), 110–132.
- Searle, J. R. (2001). *Rationality in action*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Setiya, K. (2007). 'Cognitivism about instrumental reason', *Ethics*, 117, 649–673.
- Shemmer, Y. (2007). 'Desires as reasons', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75(2), 326–348.
- Spielthener, G. (2007) 'A logic of practical reasoning', *Acta Analytica*, 22(2), 139–153.
- Spielthener, G. (2012) 'Justificatory reasons for action', *The European Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, 8(2), 56–72.
- Turri, J. (2009). 'On the regress argument for infinitism', *Synthese*, 166(1), 157–163.
- Williams, B. (2001). Postscript: Some further notes on internal and external reasons, *in*: E. Millgram (ed.), 'Varieties of practical reasoning', MIT Press, Cambridge MA, pp. 91–97.
- Wright, G. H. v. (1999). Value, norm, and action in my philosophical writings, *in*: G. Meggle (ed.). 'Actions, norms, values: Discussions with Georg Henrik von Wright', de Gruyter, Berlin-New York, pp. 11–33.