



Practical Rationality and Ethics

Basic Terms and Positions

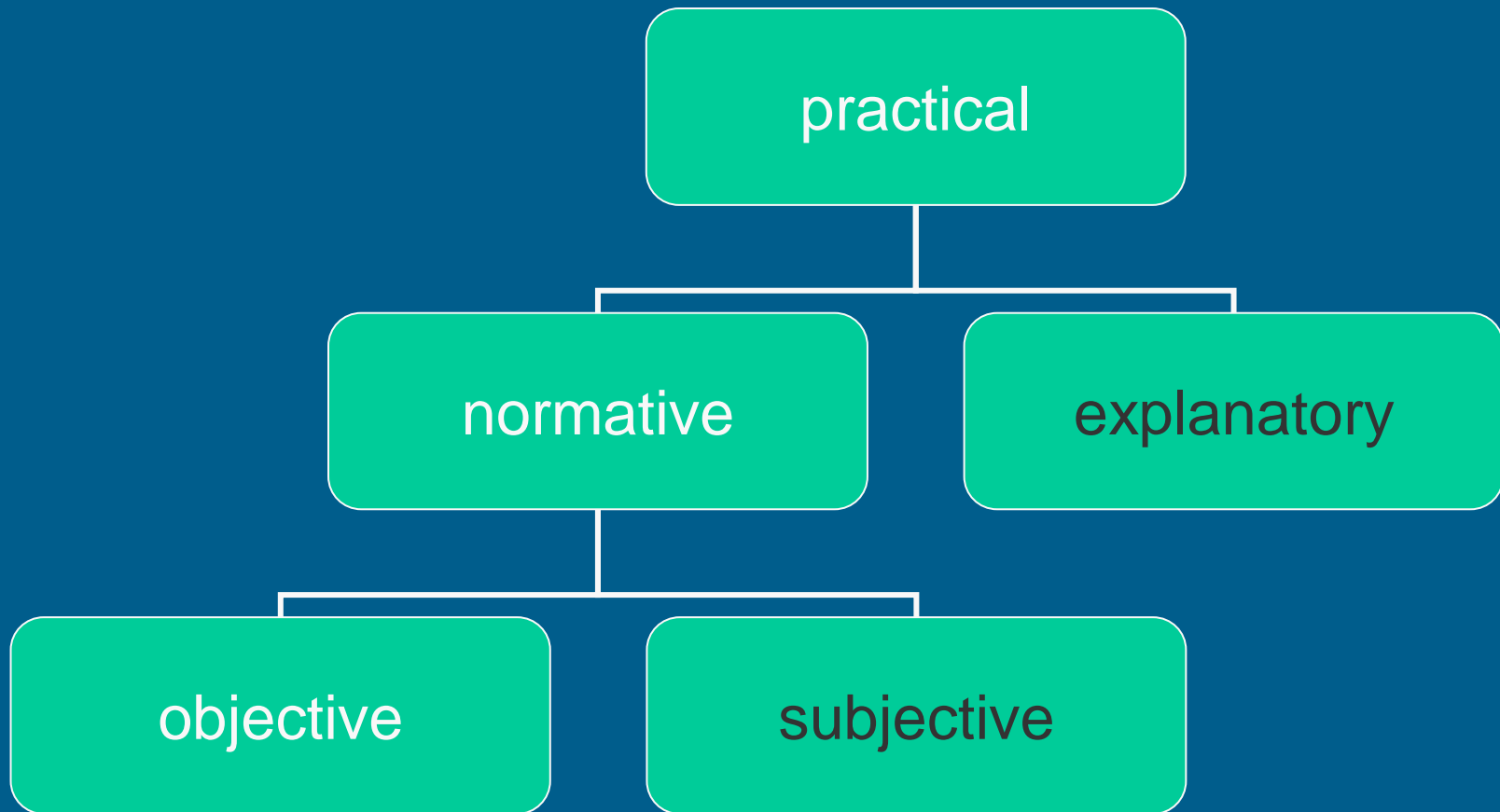
Practical reasons and moral “ought”

- Reasons are given in answer to the sorts of questions ethics seeks to answer: “What should I do?” “How should I live?”
- Moral ought-judgments are often read simply as ascriptions of reasons.
- At a minimum they supply reasons to act to at least *some* agents.
 - Cullity and Gaut phrase this cautiously in order to allow for a view on which an agent might coherently deny that morality gives him any reason to act [cf. Williams on reasons and motivation].
 - [On the view Gert and I favor, some reasons justify but do not require action, so such an agent might instead grant that morality gives him a reason but question whether he *ought* rationally to act on it, i.e. whether the reason rationally *requires* action.]

[Normative practical reasons]

- Reasons are thought of as practical insofar as they give us reasons for action (vs. theoretical reasons, which give us reasons for belief).
- The reasons that concern us are normative, i.e. they justify action, answering the question “Why should I do X?” (vs. explanatory, answering “Why *did* I do X?”).
- They’re also objective, since subjective reasons can be understood in terms of objective reasons, as citing evidence for thinking they apply.
- [Note that Gert and I would prefer to say that the normative question also includes “Why *may* I do X?”]

Locating the relevant sense of reasons



[Reasons and rationality]

- A normative reason can be represented by a “that”-clause; other authors [e.g. Scanlon] describe (objective normative) reasons as facts or considerations counting for or against some action.
- C/G claim that rationality [as a property of agents] must be understood in terms of subjective normative reasons: as requiring an agent to be motivated to act in accordance with his subjective reasons (p. 2)
- We can only have reasons we might be justified in believing, so C/G offer a version of “internalism” that’s supposed to be acceptable to all positions: that a fully rational and knowledgeable agent who’s aware of a reason must be motivated to act on it (p. 3).
- [I call this “big-tent” internalism, but both Gert and I would reject it, holding that justification doesn’t entail requirement; or in my terms, one can rationally “discount” some reasons.]

[Interpreting internalism]

- [I read internalism as *requiring* that a rational agent be motivated by a reason he recognizes – taking G/G’s “would be motivated” as indicating a necessary connection.
 - Note that G/G themselves (along with other authors, following Williams) sometimes shift to talk of possibility: that a reason is by definition something that *can* supply motivation (cf., e.g., p. 4).
 - However, the weaker formulation seems to be annexed to a causal picture of motivation, so that the capacity to motivate amounts to the capacity to *necessitate* action. On that reading, all that justifies the switch to “can” is the fact that this causal capacity is activated only under certain conditions (if the agent is aware of the reason, fully rational, etc.).
- Note that “motivation” is typically understood to apply even to “pro tanto” reasons, considerations that may be overridden by opposing reasons – so that an agent who is “motivated” to act won’t necessarily act, or even *try* to act (or as some authors say, be “moved” to act).]

[Reasons and motivation]

- While the three standard views share internalism, they divide on the relation of reasons to motivation, as follows:
 - Neo-Humean: Normative reasons are *hypothetical*, i.e. dependent on the agent's actual motivation
 - combines internalism with Hume on motivation
 - basic motivational states are themselves neither rational nor irrational, i.e. they're "arational"
 - most obvious example = desires
 - Kantian/Aristotelian: Normative reasons are *categorical*, i.e. non-contingently applicable to us in virtue of
 - the nature of free rational agency (*Kant*)
 - human nature (*Aristotle*)

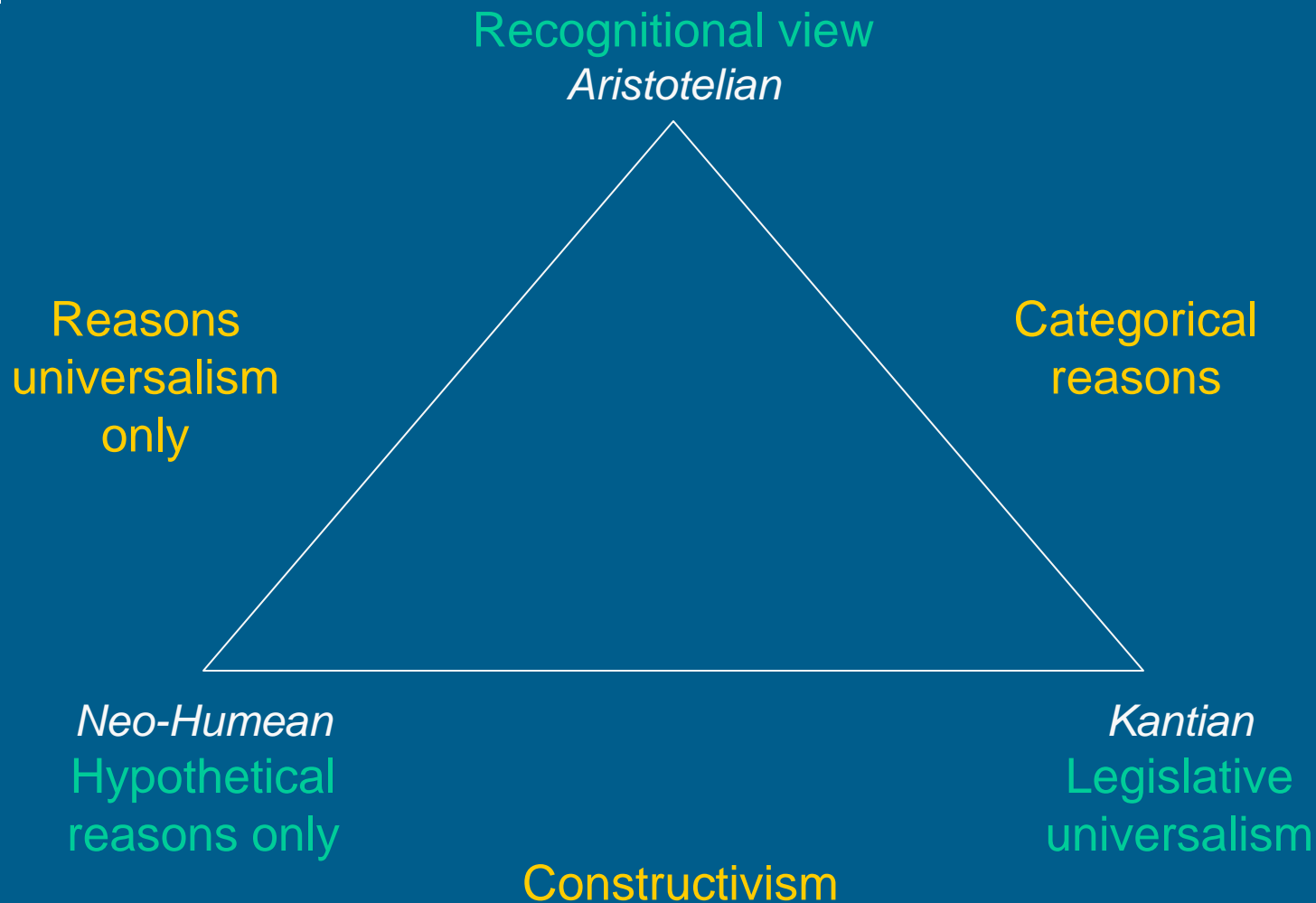
[Reasons and value]

- Another common assumption of all three standard approaches to practical rationality, besides internalism, takes attributions of reasons to imply corresponding value-judgments (p. 4).
- But views divide about the nature of the relation between reasons and value, and the role of practical reason (the mental faculty):
 - Aristotelian: The role of practical reason is *recognitional*, i.e. reason allows us to recognize whether an action is valuable, understood as a fact independent of rational choice).
 - Kantian and neo-Humean: The relation is *constructive*, i.e. the fact that an action is valuable is constituted by its being the object of a rational choice (for Humeans, choice under conditions of rational reflection [i.e. all-things-considered desire]).
- [Gert and I don't fit neatly into any of these categories; both of our views involve a "recognitional" element, but not as applied to a general notion of value.]

[Reasons and universality]

- A third assumption common to the standard views is *reasons universalism*: The fact that one agent has a certain reason means that everyone similarly situated does too.
- However, Kantians add a further requirement of *legislative universalism*: the agent must also be able to will that everyone similarly situated act on the reason in question.
 - [This seems to change the subject, though, from when we can ascribe a reason to someone to when we can *prescribe action* on it.]
 - We're no longer asking whether something counts as a practical reason, but rather whether a given practical reason is permissible to act on.
 - Might the switch rest on the assumption {questioned by Gert and me} that a reason always *requires* action (in the absence of equally weighty opposing reasons) – so that ascribing a reason to everyone entails the possibility of willing that everyone satisfy it?]

Standard “poles” of the debate



[Departures from Hume]

- **Neo-Humeans put desires in place of Hume's passions.**
 - However, this change isn't so significant, since both have world-to-mind fit.
 - In Hume's terms, passions are "original existences" [meaning that they don't purport to represent anything else].
- **But since Hume limited reason to discovery of truth or falsity, only truth-directed [i.e. representational] items, with mind-to-world fit like beliefs, can be assessed as rational or irrational.**
 - Since actions aren't truth-directed either, this makes Hume a skeptic about normative practical reasons.
 - Intuitively, though, it seems that we do assess actions and motives as rational or irrational; so here is where neo-Humeans significantly modify Hume's own view. At a minimum, it would be irrational to lack motivation to take the means to one's ends (cf. Korsgaard).

Origins of the contemporary debate

- Neo-Humeans essentially combine “big-tent” internalism with a roughly Humean account of motivation in terms of desires.
 - Most of them work from an *instrumental conception* of practical reason, taking certain ends as given by an original set of arational desires, and assessing other desires (and other motives and actions) as means to satisfying them.
 - In that sense, they take all normative practical reasons to be *hypothetical* – conditional on the agent’s desires (though the reasons don’t refer to desires as part of their content).
- However, Nagel uses cases where we have a reason *for* our desires that also serves as a reason for action to show that we don’t have to refer to *antecedent* desires in explaining action in terms of reasons, even assuming that action depends on desire.

[Categorical reasons?]

- Nagel's argument on desire is widely accepted as showing that general norms of practical reason can generate motivation.
- A prime example is the norm of instrumental rationality [= Kant's Hypothetical Imperative; cf. Korsgaard] that requires motivation to take the means to our ends. But while itself categorical, this yields only hypothetical reasons, i.e. reasons conditional on the agent's desires.
- Nagel also gives an argument for categorical-reason-generating norms such as moral norms: that to avoid "practical solipsism" we need to recognize others' pain or etc. as giving *us* reasons.
 - However, this is thought to be less successful. It's enough just to recognize others' reasons as reason-giving *for them*.
 - Moreover, Williams argues that the burden of proof is on those who accept categorical moral (or other) reasons.

[Williams's neo-Humeanism]

- Williams modifies neo-Humeanism by dropping the desiderative theory of motivation and strengthening internalism to require that motivation be *guided by* the reason in question, via processes of rational deliberation.
- A categorical reason thus would be one that would guide a rational agent's motivation no matter what motivation he began with – which Williams thinks impossible.
 - Williams expands the notion of rational deliberation to include a bit more than instrumental or means-end reasoning, e.g. imagining achieving an end (see list, p. 11).
 - But others argue that he still omits some essential elements: further ends (values that a well-brought-up agent would recognize, on an Aristotelian approach) and/or constraints (categorical norms of practical reasoning, on the model of the instrumental norm that Williams clearly accepts, but generating categorical reasons, on a Kantian approach).

[Elements of Aristotle's view]

- Aristotle's own approach depends on
 - understanding the human good in terms of a notion of human nature or the human function (*ergon*)
 - an ideal model of practical reasoning, the man of practical wisdom (*phronimos*), with virtues as discriminatory capacities, based on
 - the right desires, feelings, etc. , orienting him toward the good
 - an uncodifiable grasp of the particular facts about each situation
- As thus understood, values yield reasons independent of a given agent's actual motivational tendencies (as opposed to those of the ideal agent).

[Contemporary Aristotelians]

- Two contemporary authors either do without the notion of a human function or reinterpret it as evaluative rather than explanatory; but both face problems about relativism.
 - McDowell denies that ethics has any nonnormative base; the *phronimos*'s view of things isn't communicable or criticizable from an external standpoint, and the amoralist, though rational, is simply blind to certain values.
 - MacIntyre interprets the *ergon* as the point of human life, as determined by one's particular social context.
- Another author, James Wallace, draws an analogy to biological facts, as both explanatory and evaluative: the *ergon* amounts to the characteristic activity of a *healthy* organism in *favorable* environmental conditions, which he identifies with social life for humans. However, this view is also subject to problems.
- But the general Aristotelian approach depends only on taking reasons as based on *some* independent evaluative notion.

[Value and rationality]

[Note that what value is supposed to be independent of, on the recognitional account, seems to have changed in the course of G/G's discussion – from rational choice (p. 4) to actual motivational tendencies (p. 15).

- Their account of Aristotle on the human function makes it clear that he understands the good for humans *in terms of* rationality – albeit something more like rational activity than rational choice.
- But a recognitional account of rationality needn't therefore be viciously circular. It might instead treat value as inseparable from rationality but still as something we're capable of recognizing independently of attributing a reason to ourselves and deciding in light of it what to do.
- This links up neatly with Gert's approach, in fact – except that Gert bases reasons on the contrary notion, *irrationality*.]

Basic elements of Kant's view

- Kant gives various arguments for taking the Categorical Imperative as the supreme moral principle, subject to various objections, but his crucial claim for present purposes is that it's a requirement of practical rationality.
- This point apparently rests on substituting for his earlier foundationalism about reasons a view that identifies them as satisfying various formal constraints; reasons must be
 - shareable by all rational beings, and
 - autonomous, rather than imposed by external authority.
- However, Kant's derivation of the Categorical Imperative (see p. 22) rests on ascribing contra-causal freedom to the will, which means that contemporary compatibilists need to modify his argument.

[Contemporary Kantians]

- **Compatibilists can instead make sense of characteristic Kantian notions like deliberative self-governance as presupposed by practical rationality.**
- **So contemporary Kantians (e.g., Korsgaard, Wallace, Smith) defend categorical reasons on the basis of formal characteristics of practical reason, e.g. universality, impersonality, impartiality, and coherence, as needed to link it to theoretical reason.**
- **They seem at least to have shifted back the burden of proof by exhibiting the need to justify even the categorical instrumental norm (Kant's Hypothetical Imperative) that the non-skeptical neo-Humeans rely on.**
- **[Perhaps on those grounds, and also because Aristotelian views are understood as tied to virtue ethics, much of the recent literature on practical rationality has been a dispute over categorical reasons between the neo-Humean and Kantian poles of the debate.]**

Categorical status and “inescapability”

- [One might now look back to ask what was supposed to be accomplished by defending categorical reasons, as reasons independent of our actual motivation.]
- The point is to provide moral reasons with a kind of authority over individual agents that one can't escape by claiming ignorance of or indifference to them.
- But what does it mean for a reason to be “inescapable”?
 - It means that the reason applies to you, no matter what you think or want; but does that entail that you have to act on it?
 - If you have to act on a moral reason but don't, and not because of factual ignorance, does that just mean you're morally bad (Aristotle), or are you therefore *irrational* (Kant)?
 - In general, the stronger answers here depend on the assumption that reasons always *require* action – what Gert and I dispute.]



Practical Rationality and Ethics

Questioning
the Foundations

Challenging a common assumption

- The aim of much of the literature on practical rationality and ethics is to demystify moral “ought” and related deontic notions by interpreting them in terms of ordinary talk of reasons -- instead of ascribing them to intrinsic moral properties of acts, in the manner of intuitionism.
- But understanding moral “ought” as binding or inescapable would seem to depend on recognizing categorical (or in Williams’s term, external) reasons: reasons independent of desire, or the actual motivations of the agent. This is the source of the debate we’ve reviewed.
- A consequence of this approach would be understanding immorality, where it involves knowing but ignoring a categorical reason, as irrational – which to many of us seems counterintuitive, even if comforting to moralists.
- However, the approach depends on taking reasons in general as rational *requirements* – atc requirements, where they defeat any opposing reasons. This is a common assumption, but it looks odd in application to everyday nonmoral reasons, unless one assumes a rational requirement always to do what’s judged best. Apart from options of equivalent or incommensurable value, it leaves no room for familiar cases of *optional* reasons, reasons a rational agent might just ignore.

[My approach]

- I work from what I call a “critical conception” of [the function of] practical reasons, taking reasons *against* something as primary. In terms of Gert’s case on p. 537, that drinking coffee will make me uncomfortable later lodges a criticism of drinking it; i.e. it tends to rule out that option or disqualify it from consideration.
- A reason in favor of something, by contrast, tends to answer a (potential) criticism of some practical option and thereby render it eligible (Raz), or qualify it, for consideration.
 - Many grammatically positive reasons (most notably, requirements) imply significant criticism of alternatives, i.e. negative reasons.
 - Those that don’t (that imply only the trivial criticism that alternatives would keep one from acting on the positive reasons in question) I call “purely positive.” These amount to reasons that justify without requiring action (in a particular context).
- Purely positive reasons constitute one sort of optional reason, but it’s also possible to discount a negative reason.

[Gert's approach]

- Gert considers reasons independent of context and takes all of them to have requiring and justifying *roles*.
- They therefore have two different dimensions of strength – which means that common talk of action on the “strongest” reason is ambiguous and can’t support a notion of rationality (the particular point he’s arguing here).
- Instead, he interprets both measures of strength in terms of a *prior* notion of (“objective”) rationality:
 - requiring strength: strength in generating a rational requirement (ruling out alternatives as *irrational*)
 - justifying strength: strength as a mitigator of *irrationality*

More on justifying vs. requiring

- The requiring role of reasons involves making *alternatives* to the required act *irrational*, i.e. taking them out of the “rational” category, so that only the required act remains.
 - Within a given role the strength of reasons is determined by comparing how many reasons each “overcomes”: a stronger reason overcomes the same reasons as a weaker, plus more.
 - Cf. example of avoiding death vs. a hangover; the former (requiring) reason is stronger, since it overcomes the latter (one would put up with a hangover if it were necessary to avoid death = “the counterfactual criterion.”).
- The justifying role of reasons involves making an act *rational*, i.e. taking it out of the irrational category.
 - Gert limits altruistic considerations to this role within the rational domain, i.e. considered in rational terms.
 - They count as requirements only in a separate, moral, domain.

[The self-defense analogy]

- Self-defense serves as a familiar example from the *moral* domain of a reason with justifying but not requiring strength.
 - It doesn't generate a moral *requirement*; i.e., choosing to sacrifice yourself is morally permissible.
 - But it has enough *justificatory* strength to justify harm to others, even serious harm.
- The point of this example from a different domain is just to show that we ordinarily grant that the two measures of strength needn't co-vary.
- Within the *rational* domain, self-defense does have requiring strength, whereas our reason to avoid harming others has only justifying strength.

[Two dimensions of strength]

Gert takes reasons [in his book he specifies “basic” reasons] as facts about the likelihood of certain consequences of action, identified without reference to the context, e.g. what they’re reasons *for*.

- They therefore may be said to have stable strength values, regardless of the context – an assumption Gert defends against particularist objections in his final section.
- However, as we’ve seen, they have two *kinds* of strength, corresponding to their two roles: requiring and justifying.
- That these don’t co-vary is a result of the way the underlying notion of rationality is defined. According to principle P on p. 544, only harming the agent would make an act irrational (thus requiring alternatives to it); that it harms others would just make alternatives to it rational (and hence would merely justify alternatives).

[An example]

- Gert gives an example on p. 550 of prevention of lesser harm to the agent vs. greater harm to others:
 - Reason A: that buying a certain medicine would relieve a bad headache
 - Reason B: that donating the money to charity instead would relieve suffering on the part of many others
- A has greater requiring strength, whereas B has greater justifying strength.
- Gert says this means that you're not required to act on the requiring reason, but are justified either way you go.

[Gert's notion of rationality]

- Principle P's account of irrationality as harm to the agent without compensating benefit to anyone, is put forth just as an example of a notion that would keep the two strengths of reasons from co-varying.
 - Though his argument here doesn't depend on its substance, P is important to Gert's ultimate purpose of defending his father's moral theory, which works from a list of items counting as irrational.
 - It's meant to capture rationality in an "objective" sense (i.e. independent of the agent's state of mind), which Gert takes as the foundation of morality in his book, though he works from the subjective sense until ch. 7.
 - He understands the subjective sense as the sense related to proper mental functioning – in practical terms, a condition that would exempt an agent from moral/legal responsibility.
- P might be seen as supplying the "recognitional" element of Gert's view, by characterizing a fundamental kind of *disvalue*.

[The “balance” of reasons]

- According to the metaphor of a scale or “balance,” increasing the weight of one side would eventually make it outweigh the other.
 - Making an act optional (rationally permissible but not required) would just mean balancing the reasons for and against.
 - Adding weight to one reason and not others would ultimately yield a requirement.
- But Gert’s argument cuts against these points -- without the controversial claim that certain reasons are “incommensurable,” i.e. incomparable in weight.
- On Gert’s account comparison of strengths of reasons makes sense only if we specify what sorts of strengths we’re comparing.

[Gert's approach vs. mine]

- Gert thinks of a reason as a fact independent of context (e.g. what it's a reason for).
- He speaks of the requiring role of reasons in positive terms (though his definition makes it clear that it depends on ruling out alternatives).
- He treats morally requiring reasons in a separate domain from that of rational requirement.
- He bases his account of reasons on a prior notion of irrationality.
- He takes reasons and their strength(s) to be fixed independently of what we do (e.g. our decisions to set certain priorities).